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## APOSTOLIC AUTHORITY IN 1 CORINTHIANS

If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you.

1 Cor 9.2

Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians<sup>1</sup> provides a unique and fascinating insight into the social realities and ethical pitfalls that enveloped one of the apostle's earliest and most cherished faith communities. Throughout its sixteen chapters, Paul's letter repeatedly attests to the conflicts that erupted within the church at Corinth and the volatility of the community's boundaries with the unbelieving world. The church's discord – apparent in political factions (1.10–4.21), civil litigation (6.1–8), libertarianism (6.12; 8.1–11.1), gender disputes (11.3–16; 14.33–6), segregated dining (11.17–34), and charismatic bias (12.4–31) – is indicative of the competitive and dissenting spirit that permeated the city's congregations. Furthermore, the high degree of *fragmentation* that plagued the community seems to have been fuelled intensely by its widespread *integration* with non-Christian society; indeed, there was almost no sense of separation between the church and the unbelieving world from which it was called.<sup>2</sup> An assembly obviously fraught with internal conflict, preoccupied with non-Christian ethics, and consumed with popular forms of education and leadership, the church in Corinth struggled perhaps

<sup>1</sup> The canonical 1 Corinthians was not Paul's initial correspondence with the Corinthian church (cf. 1 Cor 5.9–11), but this form of reference will be utilised throughout for the sake of convenience.

<sup>2</sup> As Barclay (1992: 57–8) has astutely observed, 'One of the most significant, but least noticed, features of Corinthian church life is the absence of conflict in the relationship between Christians and "outsiders". In contrast to the Thessalonian church, the believers in Corinth appear neither to feel hostility towards, nor to experience hostility from, non-Christians... Clearly, whatever individual exceptions there may be, Paul does not regard social alienation as the characteristic state of the Corinthian church.' Cf. de Vos (1999); Robertson (2001: 53–113). For the influence of non-Christian ethics on the Corinthian believers, see Clarke (1993); Winter (2000: x). For Paul's portrayal of the Corinthian church as an ideologically distinct community, see Horsley (2005); Adams (2000: 147–9).

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more than any other of the apostle's early faith communities to grasp and embody the new 'symbolic order' of Pauline Christianity.<sup>3</sup>

While the nature of the Corinthians' shortcomings distinguished them from Paul's other churches, it is the manner in which Paul utilised the gospel to remedy these complications that distinguishes 1 Corinthians from the rest of the Pauline corpus. First Corinthians reveals in a way unlike any other Pauline epistle the apostle's theology *in practice*, that is, the applicability of the gospel to real people and ordinary problems.<sup>4</sup> According to Gordon Fee, it is this ability of Paul to bring the good news to bear in the marketplace, to facilitate the message as it works its way out in the exigencies of everyday life, that demonstrates the 'truth[fulness] of his gospel', and finds unique expression in 1 Corinthians.<sup>5</sup>

### **Paul's apostolic authority**

Among the many ways that Paul applies his theology to the lives of the believers in Corinth, few are as prevalent and important in 1 Corinthians as the elucidation of apostolic power and authority.<sup>6</sup> As James Dunn maintains, 'The opportunity to compare Paul's theology and his practice, or, better, his theology in practice, is nowhere so promising as in the case of apostolic authority', and '[o]n the day-to-day reality of Paul's apostolic authority, the most instructive text is undoubtedly 1 Corinthians'.<sup>7</sup> The basis of Dunn's two assertions seems clear: the conceptualisation of apostles and apostleship was a matter of great concern between the Corinthian believers themselves, as well as between the church and its founder, and so much so that it was the first topic Paul sought to resolve in the letter (1.10–4.21), one he would soon revisit (9.1–27), and one that would eventually occupy further reflection in later correspondence (2 Corinthians). Clarifying who, or what, Paul and the other apostles were and how they were to be perceived was therefore a matter of real

<sup>3</sup> Horrell (1996: 53–9); cf. Tucker (2010).

<sup>4</sup> Barrett (1968: 26); Conzelmann (1975: 9); R. F. Collins (1999: 29); Furnish (1999: 122–3).

<sup>5</sup> Fee (1987: 16).

<sup>6</sup> Scott (2001: 3) defines *social power* as 'the socially significant affecting of one agent by another in the face of possible resistance'. In this investigation various forms of power will be identified. One such form is *authority*, which we understand to be an expression of what Scott refers to as *persuasive influence*, which involves 'processes of legitimation and signification that can be organised into complex structures of command and expertise' (17). It is by virtue of his position in the ecclesiastical structure that Paul issues the commands and possesses the apostolic rights which will occupy our attention in this study.

<sup>7</sup> Dunn (1998: 571–2).

urgency in Paul's rhetorical strategy as he undertook to direct the church toward ecclesial unity and Christian maturity. At the same time, because the letter is not as polemical as Galatians or 2 Corinthians, it provides an exceptional window into the power dynamics of an apostle playing a relatively unscripted role.

Inasmuch as apostolic authority remains a pertinent topic of study in Pauline theology in general and in 1 Corinthians in particular, the enquiry remains complicated in modern NT research by the multiplicity of scholarly approaches being employed. Not only do these different points of entry leave many interpreters with competing perspectives about the nature of Paul's authority and apostolic practice, but, as the following survey seeks to demonstrate, they too often fail to consider important hermeneutical factors relevant to interpreting Paul's discourses, including their socio-historical and rhetorical contexts.

#### Authority constructed

Numerous studies in 1 Corinthians have sought to illuminate the nature of apostleship and the authority Paul possessed by examining the theological implications of the many illustrative ways the apostle *constructs*, or *describes*, the apostolate. Countless studies, for instance, have investigated Paul's use of the title ἀπόστολος (1 Cor 1.1, 17; 4.9; 9.1–2, 5; 12.28–9; 15.7, 9), aiming to expose the nature of apostleship by deciphering the origin of the title. While a few interpreters have suggested that the Pauline concept originated in Christianity or Gnosticism,<sup>8</sup> a growing consensus of scholars – following the initial proposal of J. B. Lightfoot and its later development by Karl Rengstorf – suggest that Paul's particular brand of apostleship had its origin in Judaism and was in some way related to the office of the מליש ('delegate').<sup>9</sup> Going in a similar direction, Karl Sandnes has examined Paul's identification with the Hebrew prophets (2.6–16; 9.15–18), suggesting that Paul understood and portrayed his apostolic role as an extension of the OT prophetic tradition.<sup>10</sup> John N. Collins, on the other hand, has focused on Paul's use of the term δίκωνος (3.5), arguing quite controversially that Paul's metaphor depicts the apostle as an embassy from God to the church, rather than as a servile position as the term is conventionally understood

<sup>8</sup> For the apostolate as a Christian invention, see, e.g., Munck (1950); Ehrhardt (1953: 15–20). For its origin in Gnosticism, see Schmithals (1969: 98–110).

<sup>9</sup> Lightfoot (1865: 92–101); Rengstorf (1964: 407–45). More recently, Agnew (1986); Frey (2004: 180).

<sup>10</sup> Sandnes (1991: 77–130).

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to mean.<sup>11</sup> Stephan Joubert and Trevor Burke have independently targeted Paul's father metaphor (4.14–21), while Beverly Gaventa has concentrated on Paul's maternal language (3.1–2).<sup>12</sup> Finally, Zeba Crook, utilising the relational framework of patronage, portrays Paul as a client and beneficiary who out of loyalty labours to 'convert' other clients to his patron God (9.1, 16–17; 15.8–10).<sup>13</sup>

While normally being socio-historically and exegetically focused, most studies investigating Paul's metaphorical representations of apostleship, however, neither seek nor are able to address what are arguably the most fundamental theological matters concerning apostolic authority: its basis, scope, purpose, and limits. However, this lacuna has in large part been filled by John Schütz, who was one of the first to address Paul's authority utilising modern theory. Combining detailed exegesis with sociology, Schütz demonstrated that Paul's conceptualisation of *apostolic* authority significantly varied from Max Weber's model of *charismatic* authority, since the apostle's authority did not rest on the legitimisation of others.<sup>14</sup> Instead, after examining a number of Pauline texts (including 1 Corinthians 1–4 and 15), Schütz reasoned that Paul's authority transcended the legitimating power of the community and rested on two 'figures of interpretation': (i) the *gospel*, itself 'a power or force in human affairs, the field or sphere in which those called by it now stand and through which they move to a future already adumbrated and in some sense present in the gospel'; and (ii) the *apostle* himself, whose power derives not from an institution – 'Paul does not regard apostolic authorization as a sometime thing, as a limited endowment of representative authority' – rather, as the apostle embodies the gospel in his life and ministry, his authority becomes 'inseparable from the whole of the person authorized'.<sup>15</sup> 'Hence, both the gospel and the apostle are manifestations of a single power and are "authority" in that sense.'<sup>16</sup> Deeply learned and nearly comprehensive in scope, Schütz's work remains a leading theological analysis of Paul's authority-concept.

Even Schütz's investigation, however, was not able to address every significant facet of Pauline apostolic power and authority, as he himself ignored how Paul's authority was actually exercised. That is to say, while Schütz's treatment provides an intriguing study on Paul's ideology of

<sup>11</sup> J. N. Collins (1990: 195–7). See in response Clarke (1999: 233–43); Hentschel (2007: 91–8).

<sup>12</sup> Joubert (1995); Burke (2003); Gaventa (2007: 41–50). Cf. Gerber (2005).

<sup>13</sup> Crook (2004: 155–69). <sup>14</sup> Schütz (1975: 268–9).

<sup>15</sup> Schütz (1975: 284). <sup>16</sup> Schütz (1975: 284).

authority, it remains one-dimensional insofar as it fails to analyse how Paul asserted his authority over his Christian communities.

#### Authority asserted

While the studies mentioned above have examined how Paul *constructed* apostolic authority, a number of other studies have sought to expose and evaluate how Paul *asserted* authority. Looking beyond Paul's apostolic representations, these investigations often utilise modern theory to detect, compare, and assess the use of power and authority in Paul's letters. Bengt Holmberg, whose analysis of the 'structures of authority' in the early church is now quite famous for helping to usher in an age of sociological exploration of the NT, is another who has left a massive imprint on the landscape of Pauline authority studies. Whereas Schütz examined Paul's authority as an ideological abstraction, Holmberg pursued the matter as a sociological reality, utilising 'concrete social facts' to establish what 'actually happened between Paul and his churches'.<sup>17</sup> Relying therefore on both Acts and the Pauline letters to supply his historical data, Holmberg compared Paul's power to the Weberian authority models and concluded that the primitive church operated under the influence of a complex structure of ecclesial power based mainly on charismatic authority, and contained mixed degrees of institutionalisation. Moreover, while Holmberg contended that Paul's Gentile mission was largely dependent on, though not subordinate to, the Jerusalem church,<sup>18</sup> he argued that Paul possessed a large measure of regional authority, having been superordinate to his missionary co-workers and having had the necessary leverage over the local churches he founded to admonish them and to expect from them financial support in return for preaching.<sup>19</sup> In fact, according to Holmberg, it was Paul's *over*-involvement in those churches that disrupted their development of local political structures (cf. 1 Corinthians 12 and 14).<sup>20</sup>

Although Holmberg's analysis yielded rich results, his methodology has been criticised by scholars reluctant to impose anachronistic and unsubstantiated models onto ancient texts.<sup>21</sup> There is, to be sure, much to be gained by using modern theory in the study of biblical literature. Theories, frameworks, and models can at the very least function as useful

<sup>17</sup> Holmberg (1980: 203), who charges Schütz and his methodological predecessors with committing 'the fallacy of idealism'.

<sup>18</sup> Holmberg (1980: 55–6). <sup>19</sup> Holmberg (1980: 70–93).

<sup>20</sup> Holmberg (1980: 116). <sup>21</sup> Judge (1980: 210); Clarke (1993: 3–6).

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heuristic tools ‘for the purpose of developing new approaches to and opening up new questions about early Christianity’.<sup>22</sup> Still, the criticisms directed against Holmberg’s analysis have served to remind interpreters of the need to verify interpretive claims and methodologies with sufficient historical data. As Holmberg himself remarks,

[A] detailed knowledge of the historical setting of the early Christians is indispensable for any historical reconstruction of their real life. Historiography cannot operate without historical data that can serve as evidence, nor can it neglect any available historical data, just because they cannot be easily fitted into one’s own outlook or ‘model’. Socio-historical fieldwork is what hypotheses, models, and theories work on and are constructed from. This means also that models or theories cannot substitute for evidence, by filling in gaps in the data, as it were.<sup>23</sup>

Future efforts to elucidate and appraise Paul’s apostolic authority must therefore situate Paul’s letters in their historical context and validate the use of modern theory and expectations with sufficient textual evidence.

This warning is particularly germane to critics who are expressly suspicious of the apostle’s exercise of authority and have sought to expose its suppressive nature without reconstructing the context in which it was employed. Graham Shaw, for instance, while conceding that Paul’s letters advocate liberation and reconciliation, aggressively argues that those tenets are wholly incompatible with the oppressive ethos of Paul’s political practice.<sup>24</sup> Paul’s assertion of authority is, according to Shaw, ‘complex but unrelenting’, as he manipulated churches to rely on him, all the while concealing his dependence on them and alienating those believers who failed to ally.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, Paul’s abusive exercise of power is to be credited to the apostle’s mistaken sense of authorisation: ‘the brittle, arbitrary and divisive nature of Paul’s leadership’, Shaw remarks, ‘is intimately connected with self-delusion about the resurrection, and a mistaken value attributed to charismatic phenomena’.<sup>26</sup> Targeting several Pauline letters, in addition to Mark’s Gospel, Shaw has particularly harsh words for Paul’s rhetoric in 1 Corinthians:

<sup>22</sup> Horrell (2000: 93). Cf. Esler (2000); Horrell (2009).

<sup>23</sup> Holmberg (2004: 269–70). Cf. Holmberg (1990).

<sup>24</sup> Shaw (1983: 181–4). Despite his criticisms of Paul’s assertion of authority, Shaw attempts to exonerate Paul’s intentions by conceding that the apostle was ‘learning to exercise freedom and love’ (184).

<sup>25</sup> Shaw (1983: 181). <sup>26</sup> Shaw (1983: 182).

This letter, which contains the most famous of all Paul's writings, the lyrical passage on love in ch. 13, is in other respects an exercise of magisterial authority. Its keynote is struck in the second verse – the Lordship of Christ. In the name of that Lord Paul demands unity and obedience. He is to be seen subduing critics, subjecting the faithful to his unsolicited censure, and giving firm rulings to their most intimate queries. It is a style that the officials of the Vatican can rightly claim as their own. It is perhaps a sign of Paul's confidence in the exercise of his authority that only a few verses of the letter are devoted to prayer. He briefly thanks God for the spiritual achievement of the Corinthians ... and declares his confidence that God will maintain their loyalty – sentiments which both confirm the Corinthians in their position of obedience and rule out of court the possibility of their defection. Here he needs neither to flatter nor cajole, and so he proceeds to command.<sup>27</sup>

Although Shaw's concerns are refreshingly candid, his rhetoric is habitually overstated and his analysis fails to place any of Paul's discourses in their historical context. As Dunn remarks with reference to Shaw's criticisms on 1 Corinthians, 'A fairer reading ... would be much more sensitive to the rhetorical character of the letter and to the social factors at play in Corinth, particularly when we cannot hear the other sides of the debates and do not know how much the issues were caught up in the social tensions of Corinth, not least between patrons and their clients.'<sup>28</sup>

Elizabeth Castelli's treatment of Paul's call to imitation (μιμήσις), while offering another stimulating appraisal of the apostle's 'strategy of power', ultimately suffers from a similar kind of contextual neglect.<sup>29</sup> Critical of past interpreters who 'either have ignored the implicit articulation of power present in the advocacy of mimetic relations or have rendered the power relationship unproblematic and self-evident',<sup>30</sup> Castelli has sought, on the basis of the theory of Michel Foucault, to expose the power buried in Paul's rhetoric by showing how the perpetuation of sameness was used to repress deviance and proliferate a single Christian ideology – Paul's own – with the ultimate consequence of monopolising truth and determining who would and would not be saved. Castelli's thesis has particular relevance for 1 Corinthians, where Paul's call to become his imitators surfaces twice in significant sections of the letter.

<sup>27</sup> Shaw (1983: 62).    <sup>28</sup> Dunn (1998: 575–6).

<sup>29</sup> Castelli (1991: 15).    <sup>30</sup> Castelli (1991: 33).

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'Imitation of Paul in both contexts (4:16 and 11:1)', Castelli states, 'has to do fundamentally with the social arrangement of the Corinthian community (unity and identity) and always refers back to the singular authoritative model of Paul.'<sup>31</sup> But Castelli's insistence on Paul's manipulation of the Corinthians fails to account for how his call to imitation originally functioned in the letter, that is, as a pattern of suffering and of *sacrificing* one's authority, rather than *exploiting* it (cf. 4.9–13; 9.19). Castelli attempts to circumvent the matter of authorial intention by dismissing its accessibility to modern exegetes.<sup>32</sup> However, as Margaret Mitchell has noted, such neglect is at odds with Castelli's own rhetoric as well as the postmodern theory on which her thesis rests.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, once the socio-rhetorical context of 1 Corinthians is given fuller attention, it is plain that the Corinthians, not Paul, were those fixated on power.<sup>34</sup>

Sandra Polaski, who is also informed by Foucauldian methods of detecting power, analyses Paul's autobiographical discourses in order to move behind what Paul *states* about his power to identify what Paul *implies* about it. Even though she has no wish to apply a 'hostile reading' to the text, nor 'to vilify Paul's power claims from the outset', nor 'to dismiss them as deceitfully self-serving', Polaski openly employs a hermeneutic of suspicion whereby she attempts to detect in Paul 'evidence of power relations which the surface meaning of the text may mask'.<sup>35</sup> This leads her to investigate Philemon, Galatians, and Paul's references to the divine grace given to him (e.g. 1 Cor 3.10) in order to demonstrate how the apostle possessed a sense of revelatory authority which he used to persuade his audiences to obey. While he always afforded his audiences the opportunity to refuse, to do so would have been an affront to him and, just as Castelli observed, would have resulted in placement outside the ideological community.<sup>36</sup>

Whereas Shaw, Castelli, and Polaski have raised serious questions about the motives and effects of Paul's apostolic authority, other

<sup>31</sup> Castelli (1991: 114–15). See also Wanamaker (2003), who is indebted to Castelli's approach and further emphasises Paul's use of ideology to assert power.

<sup>32</sup> It is significant that Scott (2001: 2) notes how a 'power relation cannot ... be identified unless there is some reference to the intentions and interests of the actors involved and, especially, to those of the principal'.

<sup>33</sup> M. M. Mitchell (1992).

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Clarke (1998: 342–7); Copan (2007: 181–218).

<sup>35</sup> Polaski (1999: 21).

<sup>36</sup> Polaski (1999: 71): 'Paul moves from relationship-language that is already accepted by his readers ... to another set of terms, commercial, familial, and even corporeal in nature, which, taken together, describe a universe in which Paul is very close to God in authority.'



interpreters have suggested that the power relations operating between Paul and his communities were far more complex than some modern critics realise. Ernest Best, for instance, while recognising that Paul possessed authority derived from the gospel, argued that Paul only made claim to his apostleship and apostolic authority when addressing his relationship with other church leaders.<sup>37</sup> In so doing, Best attempted to mitigate the charge of Paul's abuse of specifically *apostolic* authority, insisting that Paul exercised authority over his churches only on the basis of his status as their *founder* ('father').<sup>38</sup> But Best's distinction between Paul's roles as apostle and church founder seems artificial; despite Best's attempts to do so, there does not appear to be any reason to separate Paul's apostolic and missional roles. Moreover, determining which role Paul occupies when he exercises authority over his converts seems to require evidence beyond what his letters provide.

Kathy Ehrensperger, followed by Adrian Long and Rick Talbott, has also given Paul's exercise of authority a sympathetic reading, attempting to explain how Paul used his authority constructively, that is, not to suppress his churches, but to empower them toward Christian maturity. While she grants that Paul and others in the early Christian movement exercised power *over* their communities and operated within an asymmetrical hierarchy, Ehrensperger places Paul's rhetoric into conversation with contemporary feminist theories of power in order to explain that Paul's authority, far from being domineering, had a transformative objective which sought to enable early believers to reach a status of maturity on a par with their leaders.<sup>39</sup> As Ehrensperger herself remarks, 'Paul emphasizes again and again that the aim of his teaching is to *empower* those within his communities to *support each other*. He acts as a parent-teacher using power-over them to empower them and thus render himself, and the power-over exercised in this role, obsolete.'<sup>40</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Best (1986: 8–12, 22).

<sup>38</sup> Best (1986: 22): 'There is no doubt Paul claimed to be an apostle, and that of the type of Peter. There is no doubt that he exercised authority. There must be doubt that these two ideas are necessarily related.'

<sup>39</sup> Ehrensperger (2007: 179).

<sup>40</sup> Ehrensperger (2007: 136, original emphasis). See also Adrian Long (2009: 56–147): '[W]hen contextualized within both the Corinthians' situation and especially within his self-presentation in the Corinthian correspondence, it would seem safer to find in Paul's claim to be the community's father a statement of power which is gospel-defined; which aims not at self-aggrandizement but at the edification of the community through service and love' (130). Moreover, Talbott (2010: 93–161) shows that Paul holds in tension the notions of 'kyriarchy' (structural power and superiority) and 'kyridoularchy' (exercising power on behalf of social subordinates so as to empower them), implementing a kyridoularchal vision in his churches while addressing with kyriarchical rhetoric those who failed

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Ehrensperger's approach involves analysing and re-evaluating many of the same metaphors and motifs examined by her predecessors, such as Paul's grace language, apostleship terminology, parental metaphors, and imitation motif. But although her exegesis is socio-historically grounded and her thesis about the empowering role of the apostolate deserves serious consideration, the assumption that the apostles sought eventually to eliminate the ecclesial hierarchy seems unwarranted. At what point was apostolic authority rendered obsolete, and was this goal actually achievable, or merely hypothetical? Ehrensperger simply goes beyond the evidence when she utilises her framework to impose this ecclesiastical goal.

Authority contested

In addition to considering the social context of power, one of the most significant complications with analysing Paul's power and authority in Corinth is that there existed within and without the community various contestants for power and various understandings of it. Reconstructing the competing power relations operative in the church is therefore an essential hermeneutical step in the interpretive process. Although there is certainly no consensus in modern scholarship about the precise social circumstances facing the community at the time 1 Corinthians was written, what is known (or hitherto found to be historically plausible) must be taken into serious consideration, especially when assessing Paul's power claims and assertions. As Dunn explains, 'Difficult though it is, the reconstruction of social context is necessary for any full understanding of the letter': 'as different reconstructions are proffered, or as different facets of the complex historical context of 1 Corinthians are illuminated, so different emphases and facets of the letter itself will be thrown into prominence (and others into shadow)'.<sup>41</sup>

Dunn's warning is particularly applicable in our case. Most would agree, for instance, that one of the major ethical failings of the Corinthian community was its preoccupation with personal power, exercised through honour, boasting, and patronage, and perhaps most apparent in the church's political, legal, and dietary disputes.<sup>42</sup> As L. L. Welborn

to align with his vision. But empowering others did not render one's power obsolete. As Talbott explains, 'Kyridoularchy did not necessarily require one to forfeit his or her status or economic means simply to identify with lower-status members. The object was not repudiating one's power but ascribing honor to others' (100).

<sup>41</sup> Dunn (2004: 296, 309).

<sup>42</sup> See, e.g., Chow (1992: 113–66); Clarke (1993: 59–107).