“THIS IS HOW ONE SHOULD REGARD US”: AN EXEGETICAL STUDY ON PAUL’S TREATISE TO THE CORINTHIANS REGARDING HIS RELATIONAL EXPECTATIONS WITH HIS SPIRITUAL CHILDREN (1 CORINTHIANS 4:1-21)

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Much church conflict could be mitigated if both the ecclesial leaders and congregational members were in agreement about role expectations and behavioral norms within their group. This study explores Paul’s expectations for leaders and followers as described to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 4:1-21. A synchronic hermeneutical approach is utilized, which incorporates elements of historical and social-identity perspectives into the examination of the argumentative and sensory-aesthetic textures of socio-rhetorical inner-textual analysis. Findings include expectations for (a) a steward, (b) apostles, (c) a father, and (d) the congregation. The study also includes discussion and recommendations for further research, including a comparison of ecclesial leaders’ selection criteria in contemporary settings with those found in Pauline settings, and development of a means to identify how many ecclesial leaders in formal positions of authority are functioning as spiritual parents within their respective congregation(s).

Both ecclesial leaders and members of congregations have implicit expectations of one another and of themselves. Unfortunately, these expectations are rarely communicated with one another, nor are the grounds for these expectations very frequently discussed. Much confusion and conflict in churches could be minimized if both the pastor and the congregation were able to understand and come to agreement...
regarding role expectations and the dynamics of their relationship. In an effort to begin this conversation, this exegetical research article examines Paul’s exhortation to the Corinthian congregation regarding his own expectations of their relationship with—and perception of—him and his ministry team, as described in 1 Corinthians 4:1-21. The research utilizes a synchronic approach to interpretation, beginning with historical and social-identity lenses, and progressing to argumentative and sensory–aesthetic inner-texture analysis using the socio-rhetorical approach. Ideological implications follow the research.

I. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

An overview of this passage presents several areas for exploration. The research attempted to answer inquiry into the significance and ecclesial leadership implications of Paul’s articulated expectations for (a) a steward, (b) apostles, (c) a father, and (d) the congregation. The methodology of the study addresses each of these areas. Too often, ecclesial leaders are viewed in nebulous terms, with vaguely articulated relational expectations. The nature of this inquiry challenges research and definition of these ecclesial roles to become more intentionally studied, and contributes to the extant literature by providing an initial framework for more specific descriptions of dyadic and group dynamics based upon ecclesial leaders’ roles.

II. METHODOLOGY

Due to the highly contextualized nature of this pericope, a synchronic research approach is utilized. Research therefore begins with a contextual framework examining the social concerns and influences within Corinth that precipitated this epistle, drawing insight from cultural and historical dynamics present in the city, and political and relational issues in the church. Jack Barentsen’s social identity perspective in Corinth is summoned upon to explore how the Corinthians’ group identity impacted leadership acknowledgement and relational expectations. After examining the contextual framework of the epistle, this study utilizes a socio-rhetorical approach to inner-textual analysis, exploring an operational definition of Paul’s expectations based on the

2 James E. Bradley and Richard M. Muller introduced this method to contemporary church historians, also terming it the “organic” or “integral” method. The synchronic method of research was initially developed by doctrinal historians who desired to expand the scope of insight provided by church historians. Adolf von Hamack and Reinhold Seeberg were the most prominent practitioners of this model, which integrates insights from multiple disciplines within a specific time period to gain a more holistic understanding of the history, in this case, within the Biblical text. See James E Bradley and Richard A. Muller, Church History: An Introduction to Research, Reference Works, and Methods (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1995).
dynamics found in each of the described roles specifically in the argumentative and sensory—aesthetic textures. Additionally, ideological texture analysis informs the findings to ascertain the ideological implications of Paul’s words on his own times as well as our own. All of these insights contribute to culminating insights into contemporary applications for both leader and follower role expectations and standards for treatment of one another within the ecclesial context.

III. CONTEXTUAL FRAMEWORK

To even a casual reader of the Corinthian letters, the tension between Paul and the believers in Corinth is evident. Despite Paul’s establishment of the Christian community in Corinth and raising up this collection of house churches on an extended missionary trip, it is apparent that his credibility and authority were being called into question in his absence, and factions and personal agendas were marring the church’s health and capacity to grow. Divorced from the relational and political interactions within the Corinthian church, one could misunderstand Paul’s words to be simply self-promotion, competition, and politicking—the very things that Paul himself preached against in this epistle. To fully appreciate the dynamics present in Paul’s epistle to the Corinthians, the historical and cultural setting must be considered.

According to David DeSilva, Julius Caesar ordered the resettlement of Corinth in 44 B.C. after a century of lying in ruins. It became a formal Roman colony, which modeled every aspect of social and political life after Rome. Corinth’s status was elevated when it became the seat of the Roman proconsul who ruled the province of Achaea. The city’s identity was significantly shaped by the primary demographic who settled there: first, second, and third generation freed slaves from all over the Roman Empire, many of whom had grown rich through entrepreneurial exploits in various venues of trade. As a strategic port city between the eastern and western sides of the Roman Empire, ever-increasing wealth and power attracted artisans and craftsmen and other entrepreneurs. Competition for trade and political status was steep, and self-promotion was an integral part of the culture. Perhaps nowhere was this vigorous competition and self-promotion more evident than in the realm of argumentation and public speaking. Both public porticoes and marketplaces provided sophists (skilled and beguiling orators who trained others in their craft for money) a venue to demonstrate their ability to convince others and recruit new patrons. Just as they had in ancient

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4 Robbins, The Tapestry.
6 1 Cor 1-4.
8 Ibid.
10 DeSilva, An Introduction.
Greece, young social climbers who were vying for public office pursued sophists to train them in the art of argumentation and oration. This culture promoted by the sophists fostered an appreciation for the value of presentation, including posture, presence, delivery, and voice, often over the substance of the argument itself, and rivalries and divisions between followers of various orators was fierce. Orators discovered that political prestige and social power could be derived from collecting followers from among the Corinthian elites, so speakers used every public opportunity to argue and debate, to showcase their charisma and persuasive prowess and garner as many loyal adherents as possible.

These cultural influences shaped the collective identity of the people of Corinth, and provide no small insight into why Paul had stated that not many of the Corinthian believers came from backgrounds of prestige or power or wealth. It also informs the motivations behind the Corinthians' inclination to manufacture rivalries between Paul and Apollos when no historical account of any actual rivalry or competitive tension between the two Christian leaders exists.

**Social Identity and Leadership**

An understanding of the social and demographic background of Corinth suggests that the conflicts and challenges within the Corinthian church stemmed largely from personal and social identity issues. Although the Corinthian congregants had become Christians, this aspect of their identity was the newest, least familiar, and least defined to them. In comparison, they had been Corinthians perhaps their entire lives. This intimate connection with their identity as Corinthians, therefore, had seeped into their identity as Christians. Identity is a highly subjective entity, based on a perception of whom people believe they are. Although people’s sense of personal identity tends to be more constant, it is developed and shaped by the “cognitive, affective, and social interaction processes, occurring within particular cultural and local contexts.” It is an individual’s sense of personal identity that makes him or her feel distinct from others. Similarly, an individual’s social identity is based on (a) his or her sense of belonging to a group, and (b) the significance that he or she connects with this membership. As is true with individuals, groups gain their sense of distinction by comparing themselves

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12 DeSilva, *An Introduction*.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
15 1 Cor 1:26.
16 1 Cor 1-4.
17 DeSilva, *An Introduction*.
18 Barentsen, *Emerging Leadership*.
with various characteristics of other groups. As individuals identify with each other within the context of a particular social identity, they reinforce and continuously build a contextual sense of self, and define a set of acceptable behaviors within that group.\textsuperscript{21} People tend to perceive themselves to be somewhat similar to other members within their group, and distinct from members of out-groups. In this way, people receive specific behavioral and interaction-related parameters through their identification within the contexts of different groups.

Sometimes, however, the interests and expectations of one group trigger conflict with one’s obligations with another group. When this conflict becomes significant, the individual will choose to adopt the behavior and attitude of the group whose belonging is most necessary.\textsuperscript{22} Value and behavior comparisons are constant both within and between groups, to afford the individual and the group a sense of distinction and belonging. Groups and their members are therefore always judged in a comparative context, not simply based upon their inherent characteristics alone. Typically, the member or members that most clearly epitomize the group’s identity emerge as the leaders within the group.\textsuperscript{23}

From the perspective of social identity, leadership is more than simply exertion of general influence in order to help a group achieve common goals.\textsuperscript{24} It extends more deeply into the social influence process. A leader in this context is someone “perceived to be more prototypical and influential than other group members in a particular social context,”\textsuperscript{25} which enables this individual to “[empower] and [mobilize] other group members to solve collective problems or to attain collective goals.”\textsuperscript{26} A leader who embodies the values and behavioral standards for a group has credibility and influence because the group recognizes the leader to represent who they ultimately want to be, what they want to emulate. Thus, through example, the prototypical leader is able to enrich the agency of the followers to implement group goals, simply by exemplifying group values and encouraging followers to do the same. Instead of garnering power at the expense of follower agency, the opposite effect occurs: the group gains more power to mobilize collectively to reach common goals as the leader enhances their agency.\textsuperscript{27} As the group’s social power and influence increases, so does their access to resources.\textsuperscript{28} The members continue to grow in clarity in terms of who they are, unity in common purposes, and strength in their capacity to carry out their mission.

\textit{Social Identity, Agency, and Power in Corinth}

\textsuperscript{21} Barentsen, \textit{Emerging Leadership}.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{25} Barentsen, \textit{Emerging Leadership}, 54.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
The social identity perspective lends new insight into what was occurring relationally within the Corinthian church. In the first century, social identity was predetermined largely by ethnicity and family lineage, as well as one’s vocation, social standing, patronage, religion, and citizenship (both national and city). In such a deterministic environment, it was relatively easy for people to identify those with whom they shared a group identity, in which trust and support existed to reinforce the shared socially expected behavioral norms. Corinth was filled with people who knew exactly how to behave within the established social norms of each group that included them.

However, when Paul introduced Christianity to Corinth, he also ushered in a new social identity for converts. Christianity presented an entirely different form of community, including values and behavioral standards in visible conflict with many of those held by new believers within the context of their other social identities. Suddenly the rules of engagement were called into question; behaviors and attitudes previously unfamiliar to members were expected to become primary characteristics of members, embraced as the dominant values that would take precedence over those from all other social identities. Thus, the need for a “spiritual father” whom they could imitate emerges early on. Despite being empowered by the Holy Spirit, the new community of Corinthian believers had no local history to provide depth of context for this new social identity, and minimal resources to help members navigate the social pressures from their other identity groups, to de-identify from this new community. This demonstrates the intense psychological complexity of group identity and membership, as individuals interact with and process their multiple social realities, particularly in its developmental stages.

When 1 and 2 Corinthians were written, the church in Corinth had been in existence for approximately six years, so Paul and his missionary team had already navigated the choppy waters of initial formation and delineation of the group’s identity and establishment of expectations in terms of behaviors, values, and norms within the context of their own group. Now members of the Corinthian church were encountering conflict with the obligations and expectations of external groups that also laid claim to their personal identities in other contexts. Meanwhile subgroups within the Christian community (often based on identification with status, gender, or other groups outside the church) were creating tension and insecurity within the group’s own social identification. This resulted in shoddy and uncertain identity performance in the church, especially in the absence of their spiritual father. One of the most critical keys to interpreting the meaning behind Paul’s epistles to the Corinthians is recognition of the challenges addressed in the text as natural tensions resulting from early, rapid growth of

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29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
31 1 Cor 4:14-21.
33 Barentsen, Emerging Leadership.
the group.\textsuperscript{35} Paul’s intention in 1 Corinthians 1-4, then, was deeper than wanting to halt the factions within the church. Paul was attempting to demonstrate prototypical behaviors that would renew and reframe the church’s sense of social identity, and transform the way they viewed the conflicts that they were facing both within and outside their group.\textsuperscript{36}

IV. INNER-TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Inner-textual analysis of 1 Corinthians 4:1-21 attempts to answer the research questions surrounding the basic role-related expectations through the use of socio-rhetorical analysis in the argumentative and sensory–aesthetic textures.\textsuperscript{37} This exploration will lay the foundation for the following sections by clarifying Paul’s reasoning and basis for the differentiation of roles and relationships between leaders and followers. The first section examines the argumentative texture of the passage, followed by an exploration of the sensory–aesthetic textures found in the text.

Many scholars have held the popular assumption that Paul’s confrontation of the schisms and divisions in the church found in 1 Corinthians 1-4 were theologically based, namely that Paul’s gospel varied from what Peter and Apollos were preaching.\textsuperscript{38} However, Paul never contrasted his theology with any of the leaders he mentioned, nor did Paul attempt to compete with them for the Corinthians’ allegiance. Instead, Paul allied himself with Peter and Apollos, placing Christ as their highest example.\textsuperscript{39} The problem, according to Paul, was caused not by theology, but by jealousy, competition, and dissension—which members of the Corinthian church would have known were characteristics of Corinthian society at large. Greco-Roman politics was a world enmeshed in the perpetual striving of personal alliances in the familial, economic, and social settings, “constellated around a few men of noble houses who contended for power against the background of the class struggle.”\textsuperscript{40} The nature and prominence of the political dynamics of the culture was demonstrated when nearly 1,500 paintings of political posters were excavated from stucco walls on houses in Pompeii\textsuperscript{41} which were sponsored by private citizens. These posters imply vigorous popular participation in the political process, which was typical for Greco-Roman citizens. Friends and neighbors appear to have done most of the work on these posters, although the names of prominent trade groups such as goldsmiths and dyers seem to have sponsored some candidates as well. One characteristic that is

\textsuperscript{35} Barentsen, \textit{Emerging Leadership}.


\textsuperscript{37} Robbins, \textit{The Tapestry}.

\textsuperscript{38} For an extensive examination of this discussion, see Anthony C. Thiselton, \textit{The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text: New International Commentary on the New Testament} (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2000).

\textsuperscript{39} Barentsen, \textit{Emerging Leadership}.

\textsuperscript{40} Welborn, “On the Discord,” 91.

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 92; for more detail see also F. Abbott, “Municipal Politics in Pompeii” in \textit{Society and Politics in Ancient Rome} (New York: Scribner’s, 1916), 3-21.
blatantly absent are candidate promises, or mention of issues. Instead, the notices simply state the candidate’s name, the office he is pursuing, the name(s) of the sponsor(s), and a word that indicates support.\textsuperscript{42} This demonstrates the deeply personal nature of politics in the Greco-Roman world. Politics embodied and fueled the social identity process in every spectrum of society.

Paul’s letters must be considered in this light. The verses leading up to 1 Corinthians 4 were Paul’s attempt to point out the underlying problem within the church: believers were still identifying more with the values and expectations found within their social identities outside the church than those that were to typify the community of Christ’s followers. Thus, 1 Corinthians 1-4 was a confrontation of social phenomena that bore significant spiritual consequences.\textsuperscript{43}

**Argumentative Texture Analysis**

Since many scholars have been reluctant to consider its political elements, the way this passage relates to the remainder of the epistle has been puzzling to some.\textsuperscript{44} Consequently, this passage’s significance has at times been minimized as an illustration or appendix to Paul’s exhortations about divisions in the church.\textsuperscript{45} But 1 Corinthians 1:1-21 is an essential window into Paul’s relational expectations between himself and the Corinthians, as an examination of his arguments in this pericope will demonstrate.

**“Servants and stewards:” Resisting the infiltration of courtroom drama.**

“This is how one should regard us: as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful” (1 Cor 4:1-2).\textsuperscript{46}

The significance of Paul’s identification with the roles of servant and steward are lost in contemporary language and culture, but to the Corinthian mind, this was a radical move. Corinthian society was marked by its frequent public use of the courts as a venue to engage in attacking political opponents and practicing their oratorical skills.\textsuperscript{47} Sophists would attempt to discredit one another to promote their own following, and gain patronage from those with high social rank and power.\textsuperscript{48} Such competitive, embittered exchanges would have been anticipated in the Corinthian mind, between the leaders within Christian circles, and the church members’ selection of parties in 1 Corinthians 1 demonstrates preparations for such a standoff. This text exposes the

\textsuperscript{42} Abbott, “Municipal Politics,” 12.

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{44} Welborn, “On the Discord.”

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{46} All scripture references are from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

\textsuperscript{47} DeSilva, An Introduction; Barentsen, Emerging Leadership; Welborn, “On the Discord.”

Corinthians’ intent to subject Paul to an “examination” of his qualifications in a sort of quasi-court.

**Changing the rules of engagement.** Paul’s argument began by removing himself from the platform that would require such an examination. Shunning the position of the Christian community’s patron, which would have bestowed upon Paul automatic position, status and power, and mandatory follower submission, Paul instead described himself and Apollos as farm laborers and household servants. In both cases, the field and the household were overseen by God himself: God gave the commands to the laborers in the field, and he was responsible for the harvest. Likewise, the mysteries that Paul and his companions stewarded did not belong to Paul, but to God. Paul held no personal claim over the truths he was entrusted, but instead directly reported to Christ to know how to serve the household of God with these mysteries. This position directly contrasted the sophists’ claim to be exclusive keepers of truth and persuasion, and eliminated the drive to garner followers on this basis.

“A small thing that I should be judged by you”: Accountability and power. “But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God” (1 Cor 4:3-5).

Paul’s identification with the lowliest servants and alignment with God as his judge stripped the Corinthian believers of their justification for judging Paul’s qualifications on two levels. First, people of lowly status and no political aspirations had no need to be scrutinized. Since they were not a threat to others’ position, laborers were free from being assessed by anyone but their masters. Additionally, if Paul saw himself as part of the slave class (with God as his master), he was excluding himself from the right to engage in the political machinery that defined the Corinthian social exchanges of the upwardly mobile. Assuming the humble status of a servant, laborer, and steward, Paul was excused from having his legitimacy placed on trial. Still, Paul acknowledged that God was his judge, and that he would need to be ready to answer to him, to be

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49 In 1 Corinthians 3:5-9, Paul insisted that both he and Apollos were simply servants who were assigned different tasks of an agrarian laborer, while God gave the increase.

50 1 Cor 4:1.

51 Ibid.

52 cf Phil 2.

53 1 Cor 4:3-5.

54 Welborn (“On the Discord”) demonstrated the practice of Roman and Greek societies to establish the credibility of leaders through the public examination (and often attack) of their credentials in public court proceedings. The Corinthian church appears to have been pursuing a similar model of operation, attempting to develop a quasi-court in the ecclesial setting. Welborn illustrated the connection between party contentions and litigation in a description of Greek and Roman trials that were designed for public political attacks. These trials, held in open public forums, included a wide latitude of pleading and evidentiary support, making the courts a prime venue for character assassination and the elimination of political competition. Cicero, Demosthenes, and Peithias eliminated many political rivals through their mastery of oratory persuasion in the court setting.
found trustworthy.\textsuperscript{55} Paul effectively disqualified himself from the status-grasping socio-political system of Corinth’s elite, de-legitimating the Corinthian believers’ drive to integrate this carnal practice of pitting leaders against one another into the Christian community. As a prototypical leader, Paul modeled for the Corinthians how to disassociate with this element of their cultural and social identity, helping them to reshape the rules of engagement with one another.

\textit{“Myself and Apollos”: Re-framing the conflict, re-uniting the community.} “I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another” (1 Cor 4:6).

In case the Corinthians were tempted to interpret Paul’s argument as permission to exclude only Paul from the forum of public scrutiny and party strife, Paul made it clear in this passage that his role identification as a servant and a steward applied to all leaders in the church. This meant that Paul’s articulated rules of engagement also applied to Apollos (who unlike Paul, was Greek and more closely emulated the Corinthian ideal of an oratory master—and possibly appeared more promising as a political candidate). Thus through verse 6, Corinthian believers were barred from attempting to mirror their secular culture by contriving factions and setting their leaders in competition with one another for prominence.

The phrase “that you may not learn to go beyond what is written” (v. 4:6a) finds increased relevance in this context, because similar advice was routinely offered by leaders in the Greek and Roman communities who wanted to squelch factions, even outside the church:

Plato’s Seventh Epistle . . . warns the εταίροι that the evils of faction will not cease until they enact “common laws” by which all can abide (Ep. 7. 336d-337b). In the speech entitled περί πολιτείας, sometimes attributed to Herodes Atticus, the citizens are urged to put an end to factional strife by living “in accordance with the law” (κατά νόμον) instead of destroying one another “lawlessly” (παρανόμως, 17-18, 29).\textsuperscript{56}

While some may object that Paul’s verbiage refers to “what is written” (S γέγραπται) instead of “the law,” inscriptions of this precise wording have been discovered, documenting Greco-Roman parties who were willing to settle a dispute by living according to terms in a written agreement. OGIS 229 documented the resolution of a period conflict between Smyrna and Magnesia, when all the citizens of both cities swore by the following oath:

“I will not transgress the agreement nor will I change for the worse the things which are written in it . . . and I will live in concord and without faction” (καὶ οὐθέν παραβήσομαι κατὰ τὴν ὤμολογίαν ουδὲ μεταθῆσω ἐπί τὸ χείρον τα γεγραμμένα ἐν αὐτῇ . . . καὶ πολιτεύσο- μαι μεθ’ ὀμόνοιας ἀστασιάτως).\textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{55} 1 Cor 4:2.
Paul’s following clause “that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another” (v. 4:6b) further illustrates Paul’s desire to prohibit the Corinthians from factitious interactions with one another.\(^{58}\) In direct opposition to the prevailing cultural norm, Paul resisted any role that would require him to garner honor at the expense of a co-laborer in Christ. He stood as an ally with Apollos, united with all other Christian leaders, who went directly to Christ for legitimacy—not to the popular whims of the Christian community.

“Who sees anything different in you?” Reframing personal identities. “For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?” (1 Cor 4:7).

To prevent the Corinthians from interpreting Paul’s exhortation to mean that only the leaders were excluded from bitter rivalries and competition but there was still room to continue their factious behavior among themselves, Paul made it clear that radical reformation of the church’s social identification extended to the followers themselves. Corinth was embroiled with an intense constant battle between the grasping social elite and the exploited masses.\(^{59}\) All evidence seems to imply that the real impetus behind the system of factions within the Corinthian community was the material wealth and amassed resources of the social elite, and the dependence that it created.\(^{60}\) Complicating matters was the reality that the community of believers in Corinth was made up of people from both extremes of the social strata. For example, members of Chloe’s household mentioned in 1 Corinthians 1:11 may have included servants, hired freemen, and slaves, who trusted and supported Paul enough to report serious conflict to him. Yet many of the affluent elite also counted themselves as supporters of Paul, including Chloe herself; Stephanas, the community’s patron (vv. 1:16, 16:15); and Gaius, who served as “host” to (ξένος) to Paul as well as the “entire church” (Rom 16:23). And Erastus\(^{61}\) would have had the greatest civil power, both due to his material wealth and his position as the city treasurer who controlled the municipal disbursement of funding for streets and public places.\(^{62}\)

Paul stripped all Christian members of the elite of their right to create factions to elicit power, followership, and material dependence within the church. Like Paul and Apollos, no matter their standing outside the church, Corinthian believers could not claim that any position or power within the body of Christ came from grasping, competition, or personal merit. This, too, was a revolutionary reshaping of relational expectations by leaders of all the followers. Within the Christian community, influence among members was not to be obtained by means utilized in other Corinthian contexts; exploitation of fellow members of the family of God was thus prohibited. In terms of power and agency within the community, no one’s personal identity within the church could be defined in ways that would isolate or elevate them; social strata were to be

\(^{58}\) Welborn, “On the Discord.”


\(^{60}\) Welborn, “On the Discord.”

\(^{61}\) Rom 16:23; 2 Tm 4:20.

eliminated from the family of God. Paul had effectively made them all equal members of the family.\footnote{For additional descriptives of Paul's position regarding class distinction in the body of Christ, cf Gal 3:27-29 and Phlm 8-17.}
Sensory-Aesthetic Texture Analysis

Analysis of Paul’s use of sensory–aesthetic language allows further insight into Paul’s intent in writing this passage. This is particularly true in (a) Paul’s descriptions that compare the Corinthians’ status and treatment with that of his ministry team, and (b) the verbiage used when Paul discusses his parental relationship with the Corinthian believers. This section examines these two passages separately.

**You are held in honor, but we in disrepute: A painful contrast.** “Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings!” (1 Cor 4:8). Viewed within the context of the previous section, Paul’s exclamation of the Corinthians’ already having attained high status seems to imply a deeper question: What were they still grasping at? What more could they possibly want to gain? When they had already reached such high status in their other social contexts, why would the powerful among them be driven to strive for more, by dividing and exploiting others within the family of God? There also seems to be some irony built into these declarations, because it appears that Paul esteemed the Corinthians’ strength, wealth, and self-perceived greatness as the cause of strife and faction among them. In contrast, he vividly described the opposite stance of the apostles.

For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men. We are fools for Christ’s sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things. (1 Cor 4:9-13)

Not only did Paul and his colleagues refuse to be held in high social esteem or attempt to compete for power and influence, they allowed themselves to be held in disrepute. Instead of referring to the apostles as the spiritual elite, Paul described them as being the “least of all” (v. 9); instead of fighting for a position of honor in the public courts, the apostles were made a public spectacle (v. 9). Instead of fighting for their rights as contenders for their personal kingdoms, the apostles esteemed themselves as sentenced to death (v. 9), as those who would rather allow themselves to be thought fools for Christ than to bitterly fight to be seen as wise (v. 10). Here, Paul modeled his own challenge to the Corinthian believers who were routinely taking one another into the courts, publicly discrediting and exploiting one another through oratory prowess, when he said: “To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded? But you yourselves wrong and defraud—even your own brothers!” (1 Cor 6:7-8). Indeed, Paul and his colleagues demonstrated their preference to do this very thing rather than exploit or hurt a member of God’s family through public humiliation.

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64 For full context, see 1 Cor 6:1-8.
Further, the apostles would rather suffer physical lack, or work with their own hands to obtain physical resources, than receive resources that could place them at risk of becoming entrapped in the corrupt social system at work in Corinth (vv. 11-12).\(^65\) Paul and his ministry team had determined that they would respond to the Greco-Roman challenge to compete for position through the factional system, by responding in the opposite spirit: “When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we entreat” (vv. 12b-13a). This practice led to the founders of the Christian church in Corinth being regarded by Corinthian society as leadership failures, or more pointedly, “like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things” (v. 13b). Yet Paul and the apostles counted all societal position and influence as lost, for the sake of the freedom to preach the gospel without compromise.\(^66\)

“I became your father . . . be imitators of me”: Reframing social identification. “I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children” (1 Cor 4:15, 16).

A dramatic shift in tone occurred here. Before discussing the reason for this, let us consider all that Paul had accomplished leading up to this passage. He had stripped himself and all ecclesial leaders of any platform that would provide any justification for creating factions within the church based on allegiance to specific leaders, he had delegitimized the socio-economic elite class’s efforts to set up an internal quasi-court system for vetting faction leaders or a class system within the church that would mirror the realities of exploitation and contention found in other Corinthian social contexts, and he had modeled a lifestyle that shunned every method of personal and group advancement that was familiar to the Corinthian people. Essentially, Paul had completely disoriented the Corinthian believers in terms of their ability to identify appropriate rules of engagement with one another and their leaders. Within the single social identity context that was mandated to take precedence over all others, the behavioral norms and expectations had been abolished, along with its members’ known means of assessing leaders appropriate to delineate and develop these norms. Paul clearly recognized that the Corinthians needed a new way to develop values and behavioral standards within their group, so he provided them with an entirely new framework for understanding their relational dynamics. With this abrupt change in tone, Paul demonstrated that the church was not a political system of rivaling factions. The church was a family, Paul was their father, and they were his dearly loved children (v. 14).

The images and feelings that Paul’s words invoke here are dynamically significant. First, he stressed that his motivation in admonishing the Corinthians so strongly was not to embarrass or shame them,\(^67\) as was the practice of orators debating in public forum. Instead, despite Paul’s obvious and vocal disagreement with their...
behaviors and attitudes, he addressed them as his ἀγαπητὰ, or his “beloved, esteemed, dear, favorite, worthy of love.”

In the midst of conflict, Paul’s words illustrate a heart for the Corinthians full of profound affection and compassion, familial intimacy, and parental care. This imagery and its implications intensified and expanded in the verbiage that followed: “For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (v. 15). Paul distinguished himself from all other ecclesial leaders here: he had not simply taught the Corinthians, he had become their father. This parental distinction could not be bought or hired; it could only earned relationally. When Paul refers to fathering others in the faith, he has invested aggressively in their spiritual development, and in nearly all cases, he himself had been instrumental in his spiritual children’s initial commitment to becoming Christians in the first place.

In their moment of disorientation, Paul provided them with a safe point of relational reference, a means to begin to regain their bearings. In essence, Paul said, “I know you feel lost, but I am your father and I am here for you. I will not leave you disoriented and humiliated.” He provided an entirely new framework upon which social identity could be built.

This new framework for social identity, however, also presented a new set of behavioral expectations: “I urge you, then, be imitators of me. That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church” (vv. 16-17). Paul possessed an intimate parental relationship with the Corinthians, stemming from his role in their coming to Christ, as well as six years of spiritual parenting interaction with them. Based on this parental relationship (not simply his position as an apostle or his knowledge as a teacher), Paul urged the Corinthians to imitate him. As a nurturing prototypical leader, Paul was both able and relationally qualified to model the attitudes, values, and behaviors that he expected the Corinthians to develop within themselves individually and corporately, thereby providing the social resources necessary to build an entirely new set of relational expectations within the group.

“Shall I come to you with a rod, or . . . in a spirit of gentleness?” The other side of parenting. “Some are arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power. For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power. What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?” (1 Cor 4:18-21).

Paul knew that he was responsible before God to spiritually parent the Corinthians, but the Corinthians still bore the responsibility of receiving his parental right to do so. This passage describes certain Corinthian members as being “arrogant” (vv.

69 Paul described Timothy (1 Cor 4:17; 1 Tm 1:2, 18), Titus (Ti 1:4), and Onesimus (Phlm 1:10) as his spiritual sons. In each of these cases, Paul had taken on these young men to mentor and disciple them, and then trained and released them into ministry in various capacities. Timothy and Titus became pastors in their own right (1 Tim 1; Ti 1) and Onesimus became a member of Paul’s ministry team (Col 4:9). Similarly, Paul also referred or related to the members of other congregations that he and his team had established and discipled as his spiritual children as well (cf Eph 1; Gal 4:19).
70 Barentsen, Emerging Leadership.
18-19) with their arrogance most evident in their boastful and presumptuous words (vv. 19-20). Considered within the context of the rest of this text, it appears that despite Paul’s obvious stance against it, these members were still attempting to impose their political agendas and recreate the social structures of Corinthian society within the context of the church, as if Paul were never going to challenge them (vv. 18-19). Because Paul is their spiritual father, he is vigilant to protect the church’s social identity from being defined by the Corinthian morals and behaviors, instead of those established by Christ’s law of love. 71 It was Paul’s relationship as the Corinthians’ spiritual father that both drove him to confront these who would attempt to exploit the others, and gave him the right to expect the Corinthians to allow him to confront so strongly.

Paul’s status as a teacher or an apostle was not mentioned in this portion of the passage. Although they remained a reality, these roles did not automatically merit the level of reciprocal trust and relational expectations associated with being the Corinthian members’ father who had demonstrated for years that he dearly loved them as his children. This is further demonstrated in Paul’s declaration that the Corinthians had many teachers (v. 15)—teachers who had obviously been unwilling or unable to confront and successfully correct these arrogant members—but they only had one father (vv. 15-16). The intense and intimate emotion that this passage invokes suggests that it was not his position, but the nature of Paul’s relationship, exhibited in faithful parental love, trust, and intimacy over an extended period of time, that justified Paul’s unapologetic stated intent to come “with a rod . . . or in a spirit of gentleness” (v. 21), depending on the social and spiritual condition of the group when he arrived. Fathers have both responsibilities and reciprocal expectations that no other leaders possess. This is why Paul was confident that the members who were attempting to assume a position of power and influence through lofty and arrogant words would easily be shut down when their spiritual father exposed and confronted the true nature of their efforts: “But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power. For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power (1 Cor 4:19-20). Paul’s entire life modeled his conviction that God’s leaders need not (and must not) rely on manipulative words or social grasping to gain power or influence. The power of God flowed through people who fearlessly modeled the heart and mind of Christ in the context of community, relationally shaping a Christocentric approach to social-identity development. This mandated Christ-following leaders to resist external pressures to measure success in their efforts by using a worldly political system.

IV. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Paul’s personal identity included identification with all of the distinctions and expectations found in the contexts of each of his social identities. Yet the values and behaviors crucial for Paul’s roles as apostle, steward, and father were never in conflict with one another because all of these roles were grounded in his identification with Christ. Yet each of these separate roles addressed different issues and needs within

71 cf 1 Cor 13.
the Corinthian Christian community. Paul’s role as an apostle demonstrated the inverted values of leaders with true power from God. Paul’s description of the apostles’ treatment and social standing may have caused those who were pursuing position within the church to second guess their pursuits based on the nature of leadership in the Christian community. Apostleship appeared to translate into a vigorous shunning of all political grasping, to the point of suffering lack, for the sake of staying uncompromised. Additional research is suggested to explore the contemporary application of this principle. What are the obligations of ecclesial leaders who find themselves in comparable roles to the apostle Paul? Is it possible for the demands of national and international-level ecclesial leaders to minimize or prevent conflicting demands of their ecclesial roles in the same manner Paul did, or do organizational polity or denominational structures inhibit apostolic leaders from having the same level of freedom?

Additionally, Paul’s role as a steward of God and a servant of Christ (1 Cor 4:1) demonstrated that Paul obtained his ultimate affirmation and legitimacy from being found trustworthy by God. As God’s household servant, Paul was not interested in earning their favor or passing their vetting processes. As with his apostolic role, Paul’s assumption of the role of steward disarmed the Corinthians from their capacity to subject him to their system of politically-based rule. Paul forbade the social elite among the Corinthian church members to establish a social identity system that mirrored the corrupt system in the city. The church, Paul insisted, was to be a safe haven for all members of society—rich, poor, slave, free, male, female—to come together as one without fear of exploitation, isolation, or exaltation based upon external affiliations. 72 A question emerges from this situation: have groups within the contemporary Christian community developed similar practices to the Corinthians by developing systems of vetting and hiring ecclesial leaders through political processes that are run by spiritually carnal and immature congregation members? If this is how some spiritual leaders are entering ecclesial leadership, how will they be able to navigate the challenge to then become spiritual fathers to the people who have legitimizing power over them?

This leads to the question of the role that spiritual maturity has in processing Paul’s approach in this passage. Paul’s words to the Corinthians were based on the maturity level of the people in that specific congregation, and must be viewed in that light. Despite the Corinthians’ self-perception and reputation for being wise, 73 Paul identified them as still being spiritual infants. 74 Although in the world many of them wielded power and made administrative decisions, these skills in the civil world did not translate into being capable of judging the credentials of their spiritual leaders. A compelling study could be to compare contemporary selection criteria of congregational leaders to those found in the Pauline epistles. How do the social identities and ideologies differ between congregations where business skills and

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72 DeSilva, An Introduction; Barentsen, Emerging Leadership; Welborn, “On the Discord.”
73 1 Cor 4:10-11.
74 “But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ” (1 Cor 3:1).
political power in external social identities are the primary qualifiers for congregational lay leaders, versus congregations in which congregational lay leaders are selected based on exhibiting prototypical Christocentric values and behaviors?

It seems that the role of greatest significance in terms of potential for being an agent of positive change in social identity among the Corinthian church was the role of father. Paul’s assumption of this role as his defining relationship with the Corinthians in specific seems to be the impetus of his boldness in calling them to imitate him (vv. 14-16). For all Paul’s strong words, he did not assume he had the right to speak to them in this manner simply because he was an apostle or a teacher. The basis of his urgent exhortations, according to 1 Corinthians 4:14-15, was his father’s heart of love for the Corinthians. His parental responsibility also gave him the right to confront those who were challenging his directives to destroy faction in the church (vv. 18-21). The many teachers in their midst did not possess the power as leaders to engage with the Corinthians on this level, but their father did. Room for further research in this area includes a study to identify how many ecclesial leaders in formal positions of authority (e.g., teaching pastors, senior pastors, bishops, priests, etc.) are truly functioning as spiritual parents within their respective congregation(s). In congregations that do not appear to have a spiritual parent in a position of formal leadership: (a) Do mature spiritual parents exist elsewhere in the congregation? Where? How are they exercising this role? (b) How are congregations that do not appear to be able to identify spiritual parents within their community impacted by this lack? Are the people in formal positions still expecting the congregational members to respond to them as if they were being parented (e.g., attempting to assert the same level of intimate boldness as Paul did with the Corinthians), despite the lack of parental history or relational intimacy? How is this impacting the dyadic and leader–congregational dynamics?

As was stated in the beginning, much conflict could be avoided in churches if the leaders and the congregational members understood the roles and expectations that were present in their congregation. A need exists for additional research to be conducted that will find ways to assist congregations and their leaders in identifying the types of leadership roles that are operant and missing within their congregation—and articulating what relational expectations are appropriate for leaders and members, based on these findings.

Very little research has been conducted in the area of expectations between ecclesial leaders and members of the congregation, beyond studies of the qualifications for deacons and elders (1 Tm 3, Ti 1, and Acts 14), or contemporary (largely secular) organizational leadership theory-based studies conducted on churches. Exegesis-based study of the relational dynamic expectations in this context is lacking. This exegetical study opens up this new conversation in the field of ecclesial leadership. Additionally, this study could become the basis for either a qualitative or quantitative study of pastors’

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75 See also the nature of Paul’s appeal to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus in Phlm. Although Paul claimed he had the right to command Philemon to relate redemptively to Onesimus because Philemon was Paul’s spiritual son and he had led Philemon to Christ, yet he appealed to Philemon on the basis of love. This was the spirit of Paul’s approach to all entreaties to those he parented.
and congregants’ expectations of role and relationship with one another, comparing the findings with the description outlined by Paul.
V. CONCLUSION

This study explored the significance and implications of Paul’s articulated relational expectations in his exchange with the Corinthian believers in 1 Corinthians 4:1-21. Inquiry focused on the significance and implications of described expectations for (a) a steward, (b) apostles, (c) a father, and (d) the congregation. A synchronic approach was utilized to address the depth and complexity of the issues being examined. Historical and social–identity perspectives lent insight into the argumentative and sensory–aesthetic textures of the inner-textual analysis.

Both leaders and followers in the ecclesial setting may be challenged by the ideological implications of Paul’s exchanges in this text. Vernon Robbins described ideology as that which “concerns the particular ways in which our speech and action, in their social and cultural location, relate to and interconnect with resources, structures, and institutions of power.” Robbins’s description of ideology embodies the tensions that defined Paul’s interaction with the Corinthian believers in this passage. The argumentative texture of the passage illustrates the essential conflict between the Corinthian practice of groups using “resources, structures, and institutions of power” to manipulate and exploit the masses. Corinthian culture was infamous for intertwining faction into every sector of society. Everyone had a role to play, from the wealthy elite who created factions for the sake of fostering dependence upon them, to the orators who spent their lives exalting themselves and publicly deriding others to gain clientele and followers, to the lower classmen of limited means who attempted to gain social footing by waiting upon the sophists and patrons, down to the masses of laborers and slaves whose physical needs were constantly exploited as a means to gain greater power by those leading and feeding the factions. All aspects of life, all of one’s personal identity, were enmeshed within the context of these often battling social identities.

With the induction of Christianity, a new ideology was introduced that challenged the very fabric of the way Corinthian society functioned. Paul, the quintessential prototypical leader for the Corinthian church, modeled a rejection of established institutions of power, which based authority and influence upon competition for resources and reputation. Paul refused a position that placed him in any evaluative or practical dependence upon the whims or opinions of the Corinthian church. He referred to himself as God’s field laborer and household servant, thus disqualifying himself from the need to vet him as a person of prominence—and he applied the same standard to all of the apostles. By making himself answerable to God instead of the Corinthian political machinery, Paul was able to speak the truth without compromise and relate to all members without prejudice. For the present-day reader, the question remains whether the contemporary church will take Paul’s

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77 Ibid.
conversation with the Corinthians personally, and assess both leadership and congregational social identity in the light of the standards delineated in scripture.
About the Author

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