One of Paul’s early epistles, the book of Galatians captures a profound identity struggle in the early church. Would the young Galatian church continue in the gospel they first learned from Paul, or would they veer to a new course of faith? To keep the Galatian churches in line with the true gospel, Paul writes an autobiographical statement to bolster his credentials and demonstrate his apostolic authority. Typical interpretations of Paul’s narratio focus on the polemical elements. This paper will explore the social and cultural textures to find alternative elements. At the heart of Paul’s story, there is a testimony of transformation. Paul’s transformation story has profound consequences for biblical interpreters and ministry leaders today. This paper will conclude with a practical discussion for how Galatians 1 can enhance transformational leadership theory.

I. INTRODUCTION

Identity is crucially important to human beings. It is a cherished possession of the individual and is a unifying force that connects people into shared experiences. Even though identity is a fundamental necessity for the human condition, it can also complicate group relationships. Individuals, factions, and coalitions can have vast disagreements over identity. Whether it is Shakespeare’s dramas, or the political battles unfolding on Twitter, the question of identity can create enemies. The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra strike in 1996 illustrates a deep disharmony. When Mary Ann Glenn (2000) worked out of Emory University in Atlanta, she thoroughly detailed the chain of events that led a highly organized and collaborative musical group to delve into a disruptive strike. Glenn claims that the underpinning problems that led to the orchestra’s strike were deep disagreements over identity and the various ideologies for the symphony’s future (p. 286). “Will we be a world class orchestra for a world class city, or will be
whatever the budget can afford?” The irony of the strike is that even in a group that requires high levels of agreement and cooperation, a battle ensued with different voices fighting to orchestrate the identity of an orchestra.

The early Christians in the Mediterranean world faced similar challenges over identity and ideology. Sharp disagreements and religious turmoil vexed the early Christians with the question of what constitutes the faith and practice of following Jesus (Robbins, 1996). Paul’s epistle to the Galatian church serves as an apt example of this identity fight. This paper will exegetically investigate Galatians 1. The passage contains Paul’s rhetorical strategy for winning the identity conflict. Yet, that is not the most meaningful application of the text. The social and cultural textures not only reveal Paul’s unique identity and his personal story; the Scriptures also relay insight for leaders dealing with group identity issues. After the exegesis, this paper will discuss various ways to enhance and practice transformational leadership theory.

II. EXEGESIS OF GALATIANS 1

To comprehend the opening chapters of Galatians, this paper will utilize the socio-rhetorical method as prescribed by Robbins (1996). This methodology uses a process of examining various textures within the biblical Scripture. For the intent and purpose of this paper, the social and cultural texture will be brought to the forefront. Huizing (2011) concisely describes the social and cultural aspects as the texture that describes the contemporary context of the passage. Before the textures are explicated, a synopsis of the background to Galatians 1 will be considered. At the conclusion of the exegesis, various leadership principles will be extracted and measured for contemporary use.

Galatians Backstory

Many Christian commentaries date the Galatians epistle to the late 50s, perhaps making the letter one of the earliest of Paul’s letters (Keener, 2014, p. 518). In the course of Paul’s missionary journeys, he evangelized in the region of Galatia. The reason for Paul’s preaching in this region was due to the happenstance of an illness he suffered (Galatians 4:13). It is of great interest to note that the Galatians responded favorably to Paul’s message. If Paul was hampered in his public speaking by his sickness, the Galatians responded favorably despite his ailments (Keener, 2014). To contemporary expectations, public speakers should perform well by demonstrating a wide range of ability and substance in the speech act (Keener, 2014). Paul spoke a simple message of the gospel and credits the presence of the Holy Spirit as the catalyst for the Galatians coming to faith (Galatians 3:2-3). In the due course of time, Paul leaves the region of Galatia, but a new group of so-called Christian missionaries arrive.

There is much intrigue as to who and what these new missionaries are. Other than extrapolating information from Paul’s letters and Luke’s Acts, there are only a few facts that can be gleaned about them. What is certain is that Paul calls them various derogatory monikers and sets them up as a rival mission that preached a false gospel. Hardin (2014) describes three idiosyncrasies about these rivals: they were outsiders (not apart of the original apostles that Jesus commissions post resurrection), they
fervently and legalistically obeyed the Torah, and they sought to discredit Paul’s apostolic ministry. The main crux of the rivals’ ministry was to Judaize Gentile Christians by forcing new converts to adopt the rules and regulations of the Torah (DeSilva, 2004). Their teaching would include the enforcement of circumcision, Sabbath, and purity regulations. In effect, their message would state that salvation in Jesus requires participation with the Torah (Witherington, 1998).

The evidence suggests that the Galatians took great sway to the rivals. At the outset of Paul’s letter, he immediately addresses this situation with emotionally charged expressions of shock and anguish (Wright, 1996). This situation spawned the necessity of Paul’s letter. The stakes are great; not only is this about recognizing the true leader of the church, but it is about the identity of the early church. If they continue to follow the teachings of Paul, then they would continue to experience the freedom of Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit. However, if they now turn and follow the rival teachers, which Paul dubs the agitators, they will have a different identity by becoming proselytized Jews. Galatians 1 can rightfully be understood as Paul’s confrontation, rebuttal, and mandate for imploring the Galatian church back to the true gospel.

**Social and Cultural Textures**

Robbins (1996) describes the social and cultural texture as a sociological and anthropological study of the Scripture passage (p. 71). This paper will systematically explore the language of Galatians 1–2, thereby ascertaining insights into the richly persuasive manners that Paul utilized to urge his audience to conform to the gospel. This method requires investigation beyond the mere background story; it requires keen awareness of the context and the polemical battle between Paul and the rivals.

Robbins (1996) suggests two avenues for apprehending this texture: Common social topics and specific social topics. Taken together, these topics inform the reader about the deep understanding and assumptions about the writer and audience that “reveal the religious responses to the world,” while the latter “exhibit the overall perception in the text of the context in which people live in the world” (Robbins, p. 71). We will first address the social and cultural texture that is woven throughout Paul’s writing and then we will turn our attention to the deliberative rhetorical strategy that Paul communicates to the Galatian church.

**Common social and cultural topics.** This subcomponent of the texture is the overall environment, or the general context, of the text. For the interpreter to ascertain the meaning of the common topics, it requires historical and anthropological research. In Paul’s writing, he repudiates the Galatians for following a false gospel and excoriates the false teachers. As he presents the true gospel, he uses terms that invoke imagery of honor. The concept of honor was extremely familiar across the first-century Mediterranean world.

DeSilva (2004) states, “Paul presented Christ’s crucifixion in terms of a benefactor who poured himself out completely in order to bring benefit to his clients. This terminology of ‘giving oneself,’ or ‘pouring oneself out’ is frequent in inscriptions honoring benefactors” (DeSilva, p. 497). The social glue that held a benefactor and the client together was the concept of honor, grace, and gratitude (DeSilva, 2004; Robbins, 1996).
In another sense, the rivals could have persuaded the Galatian Christians that, in order to display gratitude and honor Jesus for his gracious gift, they must honor God by following all the precepts of the Torah. In the traditions of Greek culture, it was ethically proper for the client to offer reciprocity to the benefactor by lavishly showing signs of gratitude (DeSilva, 2004). If there were a failure to return gratitude, the honor and the relationship would dissolve (DeSilva, p. 136). The rivals’ claim was that honoring God was tantamount to honoring the Torah. In Galatians 1:6-9, Paul clearly tells them that by following the Torah, they are, in actuality, abandoning the generous benefactor that saved them.

Specific social topics. Layered throughout Galatians 1 and Paul’s argument there are specific social topics. Robbins (1996) describes the specific social topic as the mode by which the specific Scripture relates and speaks about the world (p. 72). Leveraging the work of Bryan Wilson and Clifford Geertz, Robbins (1996) goes on to explain that the intricacies of the Scriptures’ response informs the interpreter of the culture of meaning, values, beliefs, and actions of the people within the text (p. 72). The taxonomy of responses is made up of seven differing types, with varying degrees for the view of the world and means for changing the world.

There is distinct evidence in Galatians 1:4 that presents a definite response to the world. Paul states, “…who gave Himself for our sins so that He might rescue us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father” (Gal. 1:4). DeSilva (2004) teaches that this verse introduces an apocalyptic framework, and it sees the world as a temporary phenomenon that is waiting for divine judgment and God to usher in a new age (p. 497). The rewards for the righteous may not be fully available until the new age. In order to enjoy the benefits of God’s blessings in this corrupt world one must trust in the work of Christ by faith (DeSilva, 2004).

Paul’s apocalyptic verse touches upon a number of specific social topics. The Conversionist (Robbins, p.72) and the Introversionist (p. 73) responses see great turmoil in the world, and the individual human soul needs rescue from its peril. Knowing the rescue from the yoke of Torah law that Paul exemplifies in chapter 3-5, it is more likely that the Conversionist response fits the social and cultural setting of Paul’s writing. This view sees the corruption of the world reducible to the fact that people are corrupt (Robbins, p. 72). Salvation is brought about by a profound transformation of the individual. Knowing this as the frame of reference in Paul’s writing, this social and cultural topic may have been a continual question for the Galatian Christians (DeSilva, 2004).

The rival agitators may have taken advantage of this ongoing question. The Galatian Christians would wonder what is the best way to pursue this transformation and coupled with the idea of continual honor upon the benefactor. The agitators would claim it would be accomplished through obedience to Jewish custom (DeSilva, pp. 503-504). Paul’s counterpoint to the rivals’ answer will be paramount in the leadership section.

Paul’s rhetoric and argumentation. The exact teaching of the rival missionaries is unknown, but there is evidence within Paul’s writing that suggested they fired a number of attacks on Paul’s ministry. They most likely claimed that Paul received his commission from apostles in Jerusalem, thereby making him a junior rank leader.
(Gaventa, 1983). The rivals would also claim that Paul has failed to deliver the whole truth of God by failing to compel the Galatians to follow the Torah (DeSilva, 2004). According to their story, since Paul is a true apostle and he does not uphold the sacred Jewish traditions, the rivals could further accuse Paul of being a “people pleaser,” because Paul appeased the Gentile wish of not undergoing the painful ritual of circumcision.

Paul’s reputation is not the biggest thing at stake; these attacks set a new course for the identity and future for the Galatian church (DeSilva, 2004). Therefore, Paul must emphatically engage the church and meet the challenge of the rival teachers. To accomplish this critical task, Paul utilizes rhetoric and arguments that were common in his day. Keener (2014) describes Galatians as “deliberative rhetoric,” a strategy speaker would use to persuade changes in belief and behavior (p. 517).

Many commentators can prove that Paul used common rhetoric because of the clear signals in his wording and how he structures his writing. After his customary introductory greetings, Paul employs an exordium between 1:6-1:11 (Hester, 1984). The exordium is the beginning part of the argument. Paul’s major argument revolves around a narratio, the common expression for an autobiography (Hester, 1984). Using transparent language, Paul recounts his encounter with Jesus and decisively answers his rivals’ criticisms in verses 1:11-2:21. The exordium, according to Greek wisdom, plays an important role because it sets a foundation for the course of the speech and should psychologically frame the listeners to hear the main argument (Vos, 1994). In Paul’s argument, he immediately addresses the slander that he is a people-pleaser (Gal. 1:10).

Many commentators spend considerable length systematically charting the narratio as the argument to break the people-pleasing accusation. Keener (2014) understands Paul’s autobiography employing standard themes of demonstrating the upright character and conduct of the individual speaker (p. 521). But, in Paul’s argument, his narratio accomplishes multiple tasks (Gaventa, 1986). The first task is undermining the charge that Paul is not a fully commissioned apostle. Since Paul received his calling directly from a Christophany and divine revelation, he does not require validation from the church in Jerusalem (DeSilva, 2004). Vos (1994) renders Paul’s argument into a syllogism, which helps the reader understand the argument. For a gospel to be true it must not be of human nature; and a gospel that does not have a human origin cannot be of human nature. Since Paul’s gospel is divine, it is true. The reminder of this fact should restore his credibility, yet Paul’s story argues a more persuasive point.

Paul begins his autobiography by describing his young and intense zeal for the Torah and fulfilling all the traditions of his forefathers (Hester, 1984). So fanatical Paul was in favor of the Jewish way of life; he was driven to “persecute and destroy God’s church” (Gal. 1:13). He goes onto to say that he advanced beyond his contemporaries in the Jewish faith (Gal. 1:14). There is a subtle consequence in Paul’s ensuing conversion and calling on his way to Damascus. It not only serves as an example of God’s mercy and sovereignty (Gaventa, 1986), it also serves as an apt countermeasure to dismiss the Judaizing rival teachers. In effect, Paul is saying, “I was beyond the rivals in my passion and practice for the Torah, but God transformed me entirely, and I became a preacher of a Torah-free gospel” (DeSilva, 2004). By sharing his personal
story and how God challenged his former way of life—the very life that rival teachers are enforcing on the Galatians—Paul clearly shows the bankruptcy of the rivals’ teaching.

Along with exordium and narratio, we cannot deny the Aristotelian rhetoric concepts of ethos, logos, and pathos.

In the remainder of the narratio in Galatians 1:16-2:21, Paul continues to expound upon his story of next steps and his relationship with the leading church in Jerusalem. The major point Paul makes is that even though he is an apostle in his own right, not depending upon authentication of the apostolic pillars, he still has a collegial relationship with them, working together to advance the mission of God (DeSilva, 2004).

Leadership Principles of Galatians

Paul’s epistle draws out the frontline between the battle for leadership and identity of the Galatian church. At a prima facie reading, lessons for silencing ungodly opponents and persuading followers to remain on the straight and narrow can be easily gleaned and applied. Yet, if these are the only lessons that impact leadership practices, then there is great reason to believe the practitioner will fall short of Paul’s substantive example. As the social and cultural textures reveal, both Paul and the rivals address the Galatians’ heartfelt desire to participate with the divine. While the agitators would place a heavy yoke of Torah tradition on the believer, Paul offered the gospel story with the ensuing benefits of freedom in Christ and enjoying the presence of the divine by the Holy Spirit.

Commentators will often emphasize the purpose of the narratio in rebutting the agitator’s attacks of claiming that Paul is a people-pleaser. Paul’s response is typically understood as an intellectual judo move. By retelling his personal story of receiving his calling and commission directly from God and exposing the true history of his relationship with Jerusalem leaders, he demonstrates his independent authority and credibility to be a trustworthy spokesperson on behalf of the gospel.

If the interpretation only looks as deep as the conflict over leadership influence, there is a grave possibility that one would lose a unique leadership perspective in Galatians 1:14-16. The fact that Paul was a chief enemy of God’s mission must never be overlooked, but he was also radically transformed into a leader by God’s plan and grace. This personal transformation may hold the most appealing fact for the Galatians. Based upon the special and common social and cultural topics, these Christians were seeking transformation. Paul implores them to listen to him and follow his leadership for the very fact that he has experienced the transformative power of the gospel. Wiarda (2004) adroitly elaborates on this fact by stating that it is because of Paul’s testimony and example for demonstrating how the gospel works that makes him truly apostolic. Therefore, Galatians 1 promotes the following leadership principle: In order to transform the followers, the leader must first experience transformation and be willing to share that experience.

III. TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Transformational Leadership Theory has enjoyed great influence since the late 1970s. Leading transformational theory authors like Bass and Burns provided unique
insights into management that have affected how leadership is taught in business schools and how it is practiced in the business sector (Northouse, 2016). Transformational leadership is a comprehensive theory; it takes seriously the behaviors, competencies, and personality of the leader, but it emphasizes special care to the follower (Northouse, 2016; Yukl, 2012). Transformation is primarily targeted at the follower. The leader would ethically set out a course of action by using charisma and vision as well as embodying values to elevate the whole being of the follower (Yukl, 2012). Burns (1978) defines transformational leadership further by contrasting it against transactional leadership. He states that transactional leadership is the simple exchange between a leader and follower; it does not require the leader to have consideration into the well-being of the follower. Burns teaches that transformational leadership is far more complex because it seeks to promote the aspirations and motives of the follower with an eye to engage the whole person.

In practice, transformational leadership theory has many incarnations. The vast research and management philosophy of Kouzes and Posner serve as a solid example of transformational leadership (Northouse, 2016). Other examples of its praxis come from leadership guru Warren Bennis or from the research of Conger (Yukl, 2012). Common practices for implementing the transformational theory include: setting a compelling vision, appealing to relevant emotions, utilizing unconventional behavior, and demonstrating charismatic behaviors of sacrifice and confidence (Yukl, 2012). The overall thrust of charismatic leadership conveys the imagery of a highly charismatic individual that ethnically exercises influence and great sway over the culture and pathway of a group of followers.

IV. DISCUSSION

Affirmations

An interpreter could make a strong case that Paul exemplified many qualities of transformational leadership in his Galatians epistle. Paul does not shrink or cower back from the conflict, but confidentially addresses his audience with truth and perseverance. Furthermore, Paul’s chief concern is for the betterment of Christ-followers. There are many accounts in Paul’s life when he was publicly humiliated with verbal insult and physical violence. In the case of slander in Galatians, he was more concerned that his followers would abandon the true gospel than he was about his personal reputation. In the first chapter, defending his reputation was the solid way to ensure that his followers remained in the true faith. The sum of this evidence within Galatians suggests that the transformational leadership theory has much for which to be applauded and to be affirmed. The concern and servant-like care of followers is a valued principle that is found throughout the Old and New Testament.

Enhancements

Taking a cue from the exegetical insights, this work suggests three measures to increase the effectiveness of leadership theory. The first is quality principle: leaders
must first seek transformation of the self before they attempt transformation of the follower. The second is a strategic practice: be alert and recognize other competing charismatic leadership influences. Third, leaders must be attentive that the sought-after transformation is relevant to the follower.

As it was observed in Paul's autobiographical narrative, the zenith is the change or transformation that Paul experienced when encountering the risen Christ. After Paul experienced the Christophany, he retreated to Arabia for three years. N. T. Wright (1996) attempts to answer the question: “What was Paul doing in Arabia during this time?” Typical commentaries answer that Paul retreated into prayer and developed a sense of his evangelical mission during this time. Wright does not dismiss these answers, but he also contends that Paul was walking in the footsteps of Elijah, for Mount Sinai would be in the vicinity of Arabia. Just as Elijah retreated to the holy mountain to find strength and hear God’s direction for his ministry, Wright argues that Paul attempted a pilgrimage. Without further evidence, it may not be possible to locate Paul's exact whereabouts. For the intent of this paper, the location is not as important as the fact that Paul took time alone. We can safely assume that prayer, meditation, and an inward journey of transformation continued to take effect in Paul’s life since the Damascus moment.

Leaders need to take time and they need to take distance from the grind of work. This concentrated separation can afford internal transformation. Without the progressive improvement of skill, character, and belief, it will be extremely difficult for the leader to perform similar transformative practices on the follower. Just as a medical student undergoes an educational transformation before they are entrusted to operate and perform surgery on patients, it is paramount for leaders to undergo pathways of individual improvement. Self-transformation avoids Jesus’ old adage – ‘don’t try to take the spec out your followers eye before you remove the plank in your own!’

The second measure is a cognitive competence because it requires astute alertness to the environment of the follower. Leaders of all industries must come to grips with the fact that simple dyadic relationships between supervisor and subordinate, leader and follower, and professor and student are not connected in straight, neat lines. If leadership is marked by an ability to influence, then there is no straight pathway for leadership. This is due to the fact that anyone can influence someone else at any time.

If the rival missionaries never settled in Galatia, or if they were not able to influence and sway the opinion of Paul’s followers, then the epistle to the Galatians could be entirely different. Paul recognized that he is not the only charismatic leader, and he had to take deliberate measures to counteract negative influences impacting the followers. Just as the responsibility of the parent is to protect their children from harm, leaders have a similar—not tyrannical—responsibility to their followers.

Leaders must recognize the complex reality and systems of influence. But knowing the system is not enough, leaders must understand their own capabilities in integrating into the dynamic and often chaotic web of influence. Not just in the epistle to the Galatians, one of the tremendous leadership strengths of Paul was his relevancy to his followers. No matter the situation—or the individual, the household, or town—Paul had a gift for becoming “all things to all people” (1 Corinthians 9:22). Paul knew the social setting of the Galatians, and he was intimately aware of their longing for Conversionist strategy for living in the world. At each point of the letter, Paul’s words
carry significant relevance. Paul addresses the ministerial needs of his congregation (DeSilva, 2004).

Relevance is critical for contemporary leadership practice. In the ever-expanding “LinkedIn” world of employee training and personal development, not all transformation is relevant to the follower. There can be a thousand ways a follower can grow, but the growth that is valuable to them may only be a few of the many. Leaders need to take precautionary steps to ensure that their vision for transformation is relevant and aligned to the desires and dreams of the followers.

V. CONCLUSION

As an apostle appointed by Christ, Paul could have invoked rank and position to enforce his prerogative on the Galatian church. Rather, he argued with foes of the faith and demonstrated not only credentials, but also respect and credibility. Paul’s example should guide Christian leaders as they face similar conflict and as they attempt to transform their followers. To help prosper this ideal, this paper concludes with questions for further research and exploration. One intriguing area of further exploration within the socio-rhetorical method is to explore the dyadic relationship between Paul and the Galatians. Did the Galatians require a strong and present leader in order to continue in their identity as Christ-followers? And, how did Paul understand his unique identity? Did he believe that his personal encounter was meant to be a paradigm for Gentile Christians? Answering these questions will require further reflection and exploration into the mystery of Paul’s transformation. The irony of this further study parallels Paul’s invitation. Just as the Galatians were invited to know more about Paul’s backstory of transformation, they, too, would experience the transforming reality of the gospel. The invitation to know more is still open today, and the transformation is ready for all who will believe.

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VI. REFERENCES


