CHAPTER FOUR

JUDGMENT AND COMMUNITY CONFLICT IN 1 CORINTHIANS 3:5-4:5

The only references to the eschatological future that occur within the first major section of 1 Corinthians (1:10-4:21) are the announcements of divine judgment in 3:8, 12-15, 17, and 4:5. Do these appeals to future judgment have any coherence with one another, and what role do they play in Paul’s rhetorical strategy? To look at 1:10-4:21 from the vantage point of these future judgment passages might seem to be an inside-out approach. Yet I propose that our understanding of the function of these appeals is very much to the point in attempting to answer the three most vexing questions about 1 Corinthians 1-4.

First, what is the nature of the problem that Paul addresses in these four chapters? The four “slogans” of 1:12 are the usual starting point in responding to this question, with four major options possible:1 (1) Paul is warning against the phenomenon of factionalism in itself and does not make any theological or ethical distinctions among different groups;2 (2) Paul directs alternating attention to one party or another;3 (3) Paul is arguing against only one faction throughout 1:10-4:21;4 (4)

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1 Gerhard Sellin ("Das 'Geheimnis' der Weisheit und das Rätsel der 'Christuspartei' [zu 1 Kor 1-4]," ZNW 73 [1982], 69-70) identifies the first three options but does not recognize the fourth.
4 This is the most popular option; see Sellin, "Das 'Geheimnis' der Weisheit," 70; Hurd, The Origin of I Corinthians, 97-107. Some have seen the "Christ party" as the real problem: Lütgert, Freiheitspredigt, 89-96; Schmithals, Gnosticism in Corinth, 199-206. The most popular recent candidate is an Apollos faction: Sellin, "Das 'Geheimnis' der Weisheit, 71, 74-79; Richard A. Horsley, "Wisdom of Word and Words of Wisdom in Corinth," CBQ 39 (1977), 224, 231; Birger A. Pearson, "Hellenistic-Jewish Wisdom
Paul is defending his own apostolic authority against the rebellious Corinthians.⁵ No exegete can make an informed decision on this issue without taking adequate account of the judgment passages, since they are centered around Paul, Apollos, and those who build up or destroy the church.

The second question concerns the relationship between the two large themes of 1:10-4:21—wisdom and the factional disturbances. In what way is wisdom regarded by Paul as the cause of the dissensions?⁶ Most often this question has been approached from the history-of-religions perspective (for example, the possible Gnostic connection). I would prefer to look at the question from a rhetorical perspective. How does Paul use the wisdom theme to attack the problem of factionalism? The most crucial passages for this question are 3:18-23 and 4:6-8, texts which are closely connected with the appeals to future judgment. In what way does Paul’s future judgment language function as a weapon against Corinthian exaltation in wisdom?

The third question is closely related to the other two: what is the structure of Paul’s argument in 1:10-4:21? The many suggested outlines of this section differ quite radically over the place of chapters 3 and 4 in the flow of Paul’s discussion. It follows that there have been widely different assessments of the role of judgment language within the section as a whole.

1. The Rhetorical Structure of 1 Corinthians 1:10-4:21

There is almost universal agreement that the first major unit of 1 Corinthians runs from 1:10-4:21.⁷ After the opening address and thanks-

⁶ Sellin, ("Das 'Geheimnis' der Weisheit," 69) sees this as the crucial question.
⁷ Heinrici, Der erste Brief an die Korinther, 50-51; J. B. Lightfoot, Notes on Epistles of St. Paul (ed. J. R. Harmer; reprinted from 1895 edition; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 139; Allo, Première épitre aux Corinthiens, 6; Robertson/Plummer, First Corinthians,