CHAPTER 4

Imitation and the Manifestation of God’s Ζῆλος in Weakness: Ζῆλος in the Corinthian Correspondence

In Chapter One, a preliminary consideration of the use of the ζηλ- word group in 1 Corinthians illustrated the usefulness of a monosemic account in Paul’s letters. In this chapter, I first examine the ‘shaping’ of the word group in 1 Corinthians (especially chs. 12–14) as it relates to previous interpretive solutions. Next I propose that the language of ζῆλος be considered in future studies of ‘imitation’ in Paul’s letters, given the clear linguistic and rhetorical/theological connections between overt references to mimēsis (μιμέομαι/μιμητής) in Paul (especially 1 Cor 4:16; 11:1) and Paul’s call to ‘emulate’ (ζηλόω) both himself and worthy pursuits (e.g., 1 Cor 12:31; 14:1, 12, 39; 2 Cor 7:7; 9:2). Finally, building upon these findings, I examine the implications of Paul’s reference to divine ζῆλος in the ‘bride of Christ’ metaphor in 2 Cor 11:1–4.

Paul’s Use of the ζηλ- Word Group in 1 Corinthians

There are seven occurrences of the ζηλ- word group in 1 Corinthians. My interest in what follows is not to provide a comprehensive treatment of all the issues that attend the interpretation of these verses, but to reiterate the usefulness of a monosemic reading and to draw attention to some neglected aspects of Paul’s rhetoric. The analysis is divided into three sections (3:3; 10:22; and 12:31–14:39).

1 Cor 3:3
In ch. 3, Paul addresses the quarreling and disputes that persist among the Corinthians:

όπου γὰρ ἐν ὑμῖν ζῆλος καὶ ἐρίς, οὐχὶ σαρκικοὶ ἐστε καὶ κατὰ ἄνθρωπον περιπατεῖτε;

For in so far as there is ζῆλος and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and living according to human inclinations? (3:3)
As we saw in Chapter One, Paul is here dealing with the claims and interests of the self, and the term ζῆλος participates in Paul's indictment of the Corinthians' behavior. Commentators have long noted the potent collocation of ζῆλος and ἔρις in four places in Paul's letters (Rom 13:13; 1 Cor 3:3; 2 Cor 12:20; Gal 5:20; cf. Phil 1:15 [φθόνον καὶ ἔριν]), in Greco-Roman literature (e.g., Aristotle, Rhet. 3.19.3), and in later Christian literature (e.g., 1 Clem. 5.5; 6.4; 9.1). Similar lists in Greek and Roman literature, sophistic usage of ζῆλος and ἔρις, and the concept of 'envy' in the ancient world are undeniably useful for understanding 1 Cor 3:3. As we have already seen in Galatians, however, interpreters too swiftly partition the occurrences of ζῆλος in Paul's lists of negative behavior from the other uses within a given letter.

From a relevance theoretic perspective, the text enacts certain 'strong' pragmatic effects on the word ζῆλος, in part by way of its collocation with ἔρις. In 1:11–12, Paul describes the ἔρις he is deeply concerned about, which

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1 See further LSJ, 689, and the texts listed by Margaret M. Mitchell, who stresses the political connotations of the word ἔρις in Greek literature (Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation: An Exegetical Investigation of the Language and Composition of 1 Corinthians [Louisville: WJK, 1993], 81–2).

2 See further Chapter Two on 1 Clement.

3 E.g., Isocrates, Ep. 9.8; Sophocles, Oed. col. 1234; Aristophanes, Thesm. 788; cf. Jas 3:16 (ζῆλος καὶ ἐριθεία). This is not to claim that Paul's usage should be identified with a particular literary form such as 'vice catalogue.'

4 One of Bruce W. Winter's central claims in his work on Paul and the sophists is that the language of ζῆλος and ἔρις in 1 Cor 3:3 is "clearly related to the sophistic movement" (Philo and Paul Among the Sophists: Alexandrian and Corinthian Responses to a Julio-Claudian Movement [2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002], 13; cf. 123–40; After Paul Left Corinth: The Influence of Secular Ethics and Social Change [Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2001], 160). See also Eng Hock Ng, who endorses Winter's view for his thesis that sophistic influence is at work also in the later chapters of 1 Corinthians ("Sophistic Influence: The Key to Interpreting 1 Corinthians 12–14" [PhD diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2012], 143), and Mark T. Finney's survey of the intense rivalries within sophistic circles (Honour and Conflict in the Ancient World: 1 Corinthians in Its Greco-Roman Social Setting [London: T&T Clark, 2012], 82–3).


6 Commenting on 1 Cor 3:3, Joseph B. Lightfoot writes: "It is instructive to observe how ζῆλος has been degraded in Christian ethics from the high position which it holds in classical Greek as a noble emulation (ἐπιεικές ἐστιν ὁ ζῆλος καὶ ἐπιεικῶν Arist. Rhet. ii.11), so that it is most frequently used in a bad sense of quarrelsome opposition" (Notes on Epistles of St. Paul from Unpublished Commentaries [London: Macmillan, 1895], 186). Similarly, although Finney's careful work on ζῆλος in 3:3 includes acknowledgment of Dio Chrysostom's definition of a disciple as a ζηλωτῆς (Or. 55.4; cf. 1 Cor 14:12), this connection is not considered in his treatment of 1 Corinthians 12–14 (cf. Honour, 82–3, 187–93).