How Do We Define Pauline Social Relations?

Stanley E. Porter
McMaster Divinity College, Hamilton, ON, Canada

Introduction

I do not think that anyone will deny that Paul had a variety of social relations. Whereas it may once have been the case that Paul was seen as a lone pioneer of Christian missions, traveling alone to remote parts of the Mediterranean world in search of converts, those days are now long gone. We now realize that, even if Paul became the most prominent early Christian missionary, to the point of being considered by some the re-founder or second founder of Christianity because of his important interpretation of the work of Jesus Christ, he worked in concert with others. All of his church letters reflect that his ministry involved working alongside of or in conjunction with others—whether that took the form of including co-senders of letters, the mentioning of others either with him or at his letter’s destination, or even involvement in incidents, such as at Antioch on the Orontes with Peter and others (mentioned in Gal 2)—who were promoting the same cause. The personal letters likewise reveal a person involved in ministry with others, as he instructs his recipients regarding their own ministries. The book of Acts, which I take to be a reliable indicator of the mission-focused lives of several early Christian pioneers (though I do not use it extensively in this paper), shows Paul visiting cities with a variety of traveling companions and always returning to both Jerusalem, the center of the church, and Antioch, the center of his team’s missionary endeavors. The Pauline missionary endeavor was not a single missionary movement, but a missions cause, with Paul certainly its eventual leader but not its only active participant.

To speak even in these terms, however, is to speak too broadly, as Paul did not have the same kind of social relations with all of those with whom

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1 The notion is attributed to William Wrede, Paul (trans. Edward Lummis; London: Green, 1907 [1905]), 171. Wrede is, so far as I can tell, completely ignored by N.T. Wright, What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity? (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).
he was in contact. Whether we are reading his letters, ecclesial or personal, or following the narrative of Acts, we see that Paul entered into a variety of social relations with a wide range of people. Some of them were his constant companions, others were occasional companions, some were those with whom he was in conflict, others were those who were supportive of his work, while still others were those with whom he had only local or immediate contact. Such a variety of scenarios then raises the inevitable and obvious question of how it is that we determine and assess the variety of Paul’s social relations. In this paper, I wish to examine four major ways in which Paul’s social relations may be discussed: socio-historical, historical-textual, ecclesial, and linguistic. By examining the ways in which these relations are described and presented, I think that we can gain insight into two areas—the first is appropriate methodologies for discussing Paul’s social relations and the second is the nature, both in their distinctiveness and commonalities, of these social relations.

Socio-Historical Relations

The most well-known approach to discussing Paul and his social relations is the socio-historical one. This is not the place either to offer a full history of social-scientific approaches to the New Testament or to discuss the major approaches and schools of thought. These have been provided elsewhere in the length that is required. I think that here it is sufficient to note that one of the major developments within New Testament studies over the last forty or so years has been application of methods

2 I could also include Paul’s opponents, but I have dealt with them elsewhere, and what I have to say below can, in many if not most ways, be applied to them as well. In this series, see Stanley E. Porter, “Did Paul Have Opponents in Rome and What Were They Opposing?” in Stanley E. Porter (ed.), Paul and His Opponents (PAST 2; Leiden: Brill, 2005), 149–68, as well as other essays in this volume.