THE POWER OF THE ABSENT FATHER:
A SOCIO-RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF
1 CORINTHIANS 4:14–5:13

Charles A. Wanamaker

ABSTRACT

In this paper I argue that the rhetorical situation that Paul confronted required him first to re-establish his authority with the Corinthian Christian community before turning to deal with the serious ethical problem found in ch. 5. Much of Paul’s argument in 1 Cor 1–4 is directed to this purpose, culminating in the metaphorical elaboration of the ancient household in 4:14–21 where Paul portrays himself as an absent father, his competitors for authority as guides and disciplinarians under his authority, and the Corinthians themselves as his children, some of whom were in need of disciplinary intervention. Having ideologically established the basis of his authority, particularly through the hierarchical dominance inscribed in the father-children metaphor in 1 Cor 4:4–21, Paul turns in 5:1–13 to deal with a serious ethical breach within the community. The paper throughout focuses on the argumentative character of Paul’s rhetoric and especially on the connection between the argument in chs. 1–4 and Paul’s rhetorical intervention in ch. 5 where he seeks to impose his disciplinary decision on the Corinthians with regard to a member of the community who openly engaged in gross immorality.

1. Introduction

Writing almost 40 years ago, Dahl (1967, 316) claimed that no certainty had been reached regarding the relation of 1 Corinthians 1–4

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1 It gives me great pleasure to offer this essay as a token of the esteem and appreciation that I have for Professor Bernard Lategan, both as a scholar and as a person. I have long considered Professor Lategan to be the doyen of New Testament studies in my adopted homeland of South Africa and have benefited immensely both from his scholarship and his friendship.
and the remainder of the letter. In an attempt to resolve this problem Dahl (1967, 329) himself argued that 1 Cor 1:10–4:21 was an apostolic apology and functioned within the structure of the letter “to overcome both false appraisals and false objections (regarding Paul), and to re-establish his apostolic authority as the founder and spiritual father of the whole church at Corinth” (my italics). Dahl (1967, 329–331) further claimed that the issues dealt with in chapters 5–6 were closely related to the criticism of Paul’s apostolic ministry and the factionalism that developed as a result of controversies around Paul among the believers in Corinth.

In one of the first major rhetorical studies of 1 Corinthians, Mitchell (1992, 16, n. 54) explicitly rejected Dahl’s view that 1 Cor 1–4 served as an apostolic apology. She claimed that 1 Corinthians is a piece of deliberative rhetoric and that 1 Cor 1:18–4:21 serves as a “prelude” to the specific advise that characterizes the three proof sections found in chapters 5–15 by censuring “the foolishness of the Corinthians’ factional behaviour”, while demonstrating Paul’s apostolic ethos as the Corinthians’ proper adviser and the recipients’ need for his advice (1992, 209–210). “Apostolic ethos as an adviser” seems to come some way short of Dahl’s understanding of the first section establishing Paul’s authority.

Castelli (1991, 91–111) has argued that Paul used the language of imitation and the father metaphor in 4:14–21 in a coercive manner to re-establish his authority with the Corinthians and force them to become self-regulating. Against this Witherington (1995, 145) claims that “Paul believes that his role and status are established by God”, and thus 1 Cor 1–4 cannot be “an apologia or an attempt to re-establish a lost authority”. Witherington implies that such an act would be beneath Paul’s dignity and opposed to his high ethical/theological stand. Given (2001, 94–95), however, is correct to criticize Witherington for his failure to recognize that without re-establishing his authority Paul could not hope to solve the problems that existed in the Christian community at Corinth, beginning with the problem discussed in chapter 5.

In this paper I will argue with Dahl, Castelli, and Given, among others, that Paul first seeks to re-establish his authority in 1 Cor 1:18–4:21 before in chapter 5 turning to specific issues whose solution hinge on whether the Corinthians accept his instruction (not merely his advise as Mitchell would have us to understand) as the founder and mediator of Christ to the community. As we shall see,