

Subject **Church Growth
in the First
century**

Author R.W. Bromley

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‘On what principles did Paul conceive of and manage his continuing relationship with the “Pauline churches”? How does he seek to balance issues of authority and autonomy, tradition and innovation? Does Paul invent “apostleship” in the process?’

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1. Introduction

This study will show that while Paul had many factors that influenced his management of the churches he planted, the main principles were those values that he held precious and for which he stood. His methods and the tensions present cannot be easily resolved or systematised. It is my impression that the process was far more relational, more organic than we would like, hence making a tight analysis difficult and forcing us to live with an amount of ambiguity and tension.¹

2. Background Principles

In our discussion of the relationship between Paul and his Churches it is important to discuss some of the models that may have influenced the structure of the church community. These small groups were remarkable in a number of ways; Their ability to transcend the local expression, their continued link with Paul and the way they were willing to support one another. The following are useful in presenting background structures that influenced the shape of the relationship between Paul and the Churches.

2.1. *The household*

The first model under scrutiny is the household. Paul makes reference to households and specifically refers to them where a church meets on a number of occasions.² These are distinct from the wider church in an area that could assemble for larger gatherings.³ This is what Gulzow called the “basic cell of the church”.⁴ These groups were normally sponsored by the head of the household or his wife. This does not necessarily mean that the householder was a believer,⁵ though this was often the case. Also, not every member of the extended household necessarily became a believer.⁶ What we can say is that “the local structure of the early Christian groups

¹ Bornkamm makes a similar point discussing St Paul’s theology. Bornkamm G, *Paul*, (Hodder & Stoughton, 1969), p. 118.

² I Corinthians. 16:19, Romans 16:5, Philemon. 2, Colossians 4:15.

³ I Corinthians. 14:23.

⁴ Quoted in *The First Urban Christians*, Meeks W. A, (Yale University Press, 1983), p. 75.

⁵ See Romans 16: 10, 11, 14 & 15.

⁶ For example the case of Onesimus in Philemon

was linked with what was commonly regarded as the basic unit of the society”.⁷ The churches in the house have the advantage of being less visible, fit into the venue and of being a tight knit group.

While this is a basic building block, other factors were at play as well. In the household, the patriarchal head ruled. He sponsored the church that met and would have some legal responsibility for it. It is difficult to see how Paul, other delegates, and charismatic figures in the town or city would exercise authority over a church based solely on this form of community.

2.2. *The Voluntary Association*

With the growth of clubs, guilds, associations and burial societies in the Roman Empire it is not unrealistic to assume that Churches based themselves in some form on these. Especially as the Roman officials occasionally accused Christians of forming in this sort of group.⁸ Meeks details the numerous similarities between this type of club and the gathering of the believers. These clubs would have a rich patron who would be rewarded with inscriptions and authority in the club, potentially a tension point for any group that has a wandering apostle writing and visiting. Meeks points out that this may cause some form of slight to be felt by the patron.⁹ Paul addresses comments to the relationship the people have with one such patron.¹⁰ McCready clearly sees a strong link with the Ekklesia and the voluntary association.¹¹ There are however real differences with the church and the associations including the salvation and resocialisation necessary to join, the inclusive social structure with the inclusion of people from a variety of walks of life included, the lack of offices drawn from secular use, and the fact that these associations were normally self contained, the church had a clear sense of being part of something bigger.

⁷ Meeks W. A, *The First Urban Christians*, (Yale University Press, 1983), p. 75.

⁸ Meeks W. A, *The First Urban Christians*, (Yale University Press, 1983), p. 77.

⁹ Meeks W. A, *The First Urban Christians*, (Yale University Press, 1983), p. 78.

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians. 16: 15-18.

¹¹ McCleary W. O, *Ekklesia and Voluntary Associations*. An article in *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World*, Kloppenborg J. S & Wilson S. G, (Routledge, 1996), p. 69.

These clubs do give us an idea of a structure and they may have been formed in conjunction with the household model above. The leadership would have been on a more democratic basis, with elected members taking positions of responsibility, naturally under that watchful eye of the patron. However, no clue is given to their relationship with one such as Paul.

2.3. *The Synagogue*

An obvious model for Paul to adopt as a Jew with his background and upbringing, familiar to the Gentiles.¹² Also, this model would help explain the sense of belonging to something bigger that characterised both the church and the synagogue. The type of activities would be similar, worship, scripture reading, rituals, prayer and fellowship. Added to these would be the distinctive activities of the church, charismatic gifts, reading of letters, admonitions and the breaking of bread. Considering the number of other practices taken from the Jewish community, scripture and some parts of their belief system. It would not be unreasonable to think the synagogue model would influence the thinking of the Pauline church. Meeks points out that there is little evidence of material in the letters of a synagogue structure being applied by Paul.¹³ The terms of the leaders are different and the word synagogue is not used by Paul for the church. Finally it is worth mentioning that considering the problems Paul faced from Judaism with the Gentile converts, the use of a Jewish model may have been unwise.

2.4. *Patronage Models*

Drawing on II Corinthians¹⁴ Witherington suggests Paul looks to the model of patronage as binding him to his churches, expecting their loyalty and obedience.¹⁵ However, being a voluntary relationship it is fragile and cannot be relied upon if absent for any length of time. Paul's use of paternal language encourages relationship

¹² McCleary points out "Gentile who were attracted to early Christianity were probably familiar with synagogue organisations".

¹³ Meeks W. A, *The First Urban Christians*, (Yale University Press, 1983), p. 81.

¹⁴ II Corinthians 12:14.

over hierarchical understandings of authority and may give a hint to the tension Paul lives in his Apostolic role.

2.5. *Philosophic or Rhetorical Schools*

Meeks tells us that this is a model that the early Christian groups were often compared to,¹⁶ although others would point out that Paul does not seem to see his own work as a species of philosophy.¹⁷ The scholastic communities were similar to Paul's mission organisation. Teaching activities, instruction of converts, and the handing on of traditions. The Epicureans would evangelise and seek to create a sense of "family" among the members, which may have included people from a variety of social backgrounds. Epicurus also wrote letters to his groups to help maintain unity.

The problem is that while there is an element of scholastic effort in the works of Paul, it is not central in the Churches he founded. Secondly, Meeks points out the unusual nature of Paul's desire to plant churches independent of himself, yet linked by a stream of letters and delegates.¹⁸ This model may be influential, but doesn't do justice to Paul's mode of operation.

None of these models captures Paul's organisation of the church, but they do offer significant and helpful analogies that provide us with background to the structure and the exercise of power within the Church especially as we look at voluntary associations, which appear more similar to the Churches Paul established. What Paul created may have been a hybrid or something new, for while there are influences from all the above in the Churches established, there are also key principles that cannot be easily traced back to the above mentioned. McCready mentions four, a multi dimensional social status, an emphasis on intimacy, a familial structure, and

¹⁵ Witherington III B, *Conflict & Community in Corinth*, (Paternoster Press, 1995), p. 457.

¹⁶ Meeks W. A, *The First Urban Christians*, (Yale University Press, 1983), p. 81.

¹⁷ Mason S, *Philosophiai*, An article in *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World*, Kloppenborg J. S & Wilson S. G, (Routledge, 1996), p. 47.

¹⁸ Meeks W. A, *The First Urban Christians*, (Yale University Press, 1983), p. 82.

membership including involvement in education.¹⁹ What was important was “In order to persist, a social organisation must have boundaries, must maintain structural stability as well as flexibility, and must create a unique culture. The second factor, the social structure of the organisation, is concerned largely with leadership, the allocation of power, the differentiation of roles, and the management of conflict”.²⁰ It is to this that we turn.

3. Paul’s Core Principles in managing Churches.

It could be that Paul simply looked at models around him and brought together a composite of the Jesus tradition, the Synagogue and the voluntary associations into a home context. While I am arguing that they had an impact on how he managed his churches and perhaps on how outsiders understood them, allowing them to be “placed in Greco-Roman culture”,²¹ Paul has more fundamental core values that would have driven his pastoral authority. Wenham puts it like this, “Four words sum up Pauline ethics: Law, Spirit, Love, Jesus. For Paul the law of God, given by Moses, was the true expression of the will of God, but for Christians at least, it has been superseded by the coming of the Spirit, who produces love within the believer, in accordance with the teaching and life of Jesus”.²²

3.1. *The Need for Relevance*

Paul was deeply concerned with making the message relevant, as Sanders notes “Different questions, different answers”.²³ He interprets the law and teaching of Jesus to the Gentile converts. Paul is thoroughly Christ centred and aware of the Jesus traditions,²⁴ in Corinthians for example he writes on divorce, earning a living and the

¹⁹ McCleary W. O, *Ekklesia and Voluntary Associations*. An article in *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World*, Kloppenborg J. S & Wilson S. G, (Routledge, 1996), p. 70.

²⁰ Meeks W. A, *The First Urban Christians*, (Yale University Press, 1983), p. 82.

²¹ McCleary W. O, *Ekklesia and Voluntary Associations*. An article in *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World*, Kloppenborg J. S & Wilson S. G, (Routledge, 1996), p. 69.

²² Wenham D, *Paul*, (Eerdmans, 1995). p 224.

²³ Sanders E. P, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, (SCM, 1983), p. 143.

²⁴ Wenham’s main thesis is to substantiate this. Wenham D, *Paul*, (Eerdmans, 1995).

importance of eating food set before them, all traceable to Matthew's work, however, Paul wraps them up differently. Without spurning scripture or tradition Paul interprets in the light of the Spirit. This created a tension between tradition and innovation that it is hard to generalise about or give simplistic answers. Hence, Paul's "Law free preaching",²⁵ disturbed Jewish Christians.

Paul's role authorises him to be a "Christ appointed interpreter of the Gospel". Standing in the gap between Jewish and Gentile Christianity. Mediating the Jesus traditions to them, which he learnt on his first visit to Jerusalem.²⁶ Acting as a buffer, seeking to allow the Christians to grow, but protecting them from extremes of slavish obedience of law or unlicensed freedom, emphasising freedom with responsibility. "It is plain that Paul believed and taught that the law had been in a major sense abrogated by Christ",²⁷ and the Gentile believer was free from adherence to it. Yet he also taught responsibility, that the very freedom the believer has is now wrapped "in Christ" and there are obligations, personally and corporately.

3.2. An Example From I Corintian 9

Paul's more fluid interpretations constantly set him against Jews or Palestine Christians. He disturbed some Palestine apostles with his willingness to work in Corinth and hence set aside the teaching of Jesus on "charismatic asceticism",²⁸ interpreting in the light of the Spirit, within the context of others using this as an excuse to abuse what is intended as a privilege. This approach as is pointed out elsewhere,²⁹ means that one cannot easily systematise Paul as "Variety, mobility, spontaneity are so characteristic of Paul as to constitute part of the substance of his thought".³⁰ Rather, this was part of what he perceived his apostolic role to be.

²⁵ Barrett C. K, *The Sign of an Apostle*, (Epworth Press, 1970), p. 34.

²⁶ Bruce F. F, Paul: *Apostle of the Free Spirit*, (Paternoster Press, 1992), p. 266.

²⁷ Bruce F. F, Paul: *Apostle of the Free Spirit*, (Paternoster Press, 1992), p.198.

²⁸ Theissen G, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity*, (T&T Clark, 1892), p. 49.

²⁹ Kasemann E, *Perspectives on Paul*, (SCM, 1971), p. 138 - 40.

³⁰ Barrett C. K, *Paul*, (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1996), p. 56.

4. Paul's use of Apostleship

The framework within which Paul planted, led and managed the churches was one of Apostleship. A term originally applied to the 12.³¹ The Apostle is an “eye witness to the redemptive event”,³² who has been called to this special ministry of church planting.³³ “The distinctive features of Paul’s apostleship were direct appointment by Christ and the allocation of the Gentile world to him as his sphere of labour”.³⁴ Working within a Gentile context, Paul expanded the meaning of apostleship to fit this unique challenge. Specifically, the office was developed by Paul in the way the apostle related to the churches and the ongoing influence of the apostle as mediator, “he has an acute sense of authority and territorial rights over his mission field”.³⁵

Paul can look back to his conversion and sending³⁶, he can point to the Churches he has founded, thus detailing his authority in terms of an apostle, sometimes speaking in very strong terms³⁷. Yet in his writing there is another side, that of one who boast in his weakness, in Corinth doing the lowly work of an Artisan. Hock notes that “Paul came to understand himself as the apostle who offered the gospel free of charge”.³⁸

4.1. Apostolic Authority

4.1.1. How was Apostolic Authority understood?

There was obviously some understanding regarding the role and the sphere of influence of the apostle in both the mind of the apostle and the Church in relation to pastoral care and authority.³⁹ Perhaps part of the conflict outlined in Corinthians is due to changes in perceptions of this understanding.

³¹ Mark 3:13.

³² Ridderbos H, *Paul, An Outline of His Theology*, (Eerdmans, 1982), p. 449.

³³ I Corinthians 9:1 & 2, 15:8, 15.

³⁴ Harrison E. F, *Apostleship*, Article in Evangelical Dictionary of Theology. Elwell W. A (Ed), *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, (Baker Book House, 1984), p. 72.

³⁵ Christiaan Beker J, *Paul the Apostle*, (T & T Clark, 1980), p. 4.

³⁶ I Corinthians 1:17.

³⁷ I Corinthians 5:5.

³⁸ Hock R. A, *The Social Context of Paul's Ministry*, (Fortress Press, 1980), p. 68.

However, in I Corinthians the level of understanding and authority is not in serious question, otherwise as Witherington points out, Paul would have hardly have encouraged them to imitate him.⁴⁰ The relationship Paul has with his churches is based not on coercion but on “a belief in legitimacy shared by all parties”.⁴¹

Paul sees his authority as coming from God and is demonstrated but not derived by his words, deeds, lifestyle and converts. Hence to question Paul is to question Christ.⁴² He lays claim to obedience,⁴³ and is comfortable to speak as if the Lord.⁴⁴ He refers to rules and can almost sound threatening in his tone.⁴⁵ There is a self confidence in the leadership that accepts ones role as the receiver and bearer of the Gospel message divinely appointed with an ongoing responsibility for the Churches planted, however difficult that relationship is due to space and time.

4.1.2. How was Apostolic Authority reinforced?

4.1.2.1. The role of teacher

As the agent of Christ, Paul is instructor and facilitator teaching the church to live a pleasing life that can confront the dominant culture of the day. While holding on to the passed down traditions he has the role of contextualising it to the needs of the day. Developing what freedom in Christ means in the Greco-Roman culture. At times this is exhortation, in other situations there is a need for strong directive practical help. The authority is not for Paul’s own

³⁹ Montefiore makes an interesting aside regarding the synodical nature of the way Paul exercises authority. Montefiore H, *Paul the Apostle*, (Fount, 1981), p. 36.

⁴⁰ Witherington III B, *Conflict & Community in Corinth*, (Paternoster Press, 1995), p. 79.

⁴¹ Holmberg B, *Paul and Power*, (Fortress, 1980), p.192.

⁴² Witherington III B, *Conflict & Community in Corinth*, (Paternoster Press, 1995), p. 456.

⁴³ Romans 1:5, 2 Corinthians 2:9 Philemon 2:2

⁴⁴ I Corinthians 7:10.

gain, but rather pastoral care of the Church planted. The exercise of this role reinforces the apostle's authority.

4.1.2.2.The wider Church

By encouraging the Church to see itself of part of a bigger movement, Paul is able to not only encourage responsibility to the wider body, a sense of brotherhood and unity but is also able to reinforce his own role as apostle to these congregations. By appealing to teaching accepted by others⁴⁶ and rules he applies in all his churches.⁴⁷ “I Corinthians is partly an attempt by Paul to help the Corinthians see themselves as part of a larger entity”.⁴⁸

4.1.2.3.Autobiographical information

Paul releases snippets of autobiographical information through his writing, something never done without a purpose. He intends to be persuasive and add weight to his apostolic authority. Something he needed to do in II Corinthians where he defends his standing as an apostle.

4.1.2.4.Appointing Leaders

Paul appointed⁴⁹ and reinforced leadership. He was able to see the leadership vacuum in Corinth and seek to support Stephanas. This allowed him to have his person in place as well as supporting his own claim to authority.

4.1.3. How was Apostolic Authority exercised?

Paul is aware of the difficulties of being a trans-local pastor. He is absent for long periods of time, called upon to deal with the more complicated

⁴⁵ I Corinthians 1:18.

⁴⁶ I Corinthians 11:16.

⁴⁷ I Corinthians 7:17.

⁴⁸ Witherington III B, *Conflict & Community in Corinth*, (Paternoster Press, 1995), p. 93.

⁴⁹ Acts 14:23.

issues, and being undermined by others in his absence. All this while seeking to contextualise the Jesus tradition into a sometimes hostile Greco-Roman culture. Humanly speaking he has very little authority, he does not pay the leadership. Some could say there is no reason that the churches should follow him. There is no penalty for leaving him. He has very little room to manoeuvre when things get sticky. In this context, Paul exercised his authority in the following ways.

4.1.3.1.Emissaries

The sending of Timothy and others allowed Paul to influence the congregation, encourage, discipline and report back on the situation in the church.

4.1.3.2.Letters

The use of letters acted as a bridge between the visits of Paul or his emissaries. It reinforced the relationship and allowed pastoral leadership to be exercised at a distance.

4.1.3.3.Discipline

Quite what form this took is unclear. There was excommunication, handing over to Satan, shunning as well as verbal discipline. Perhaps a more supernatural form of discipline is also implied when Paul's speaks of this.

4.1.3.4.Persuasion

While the language of Apostleship can seem authoritarian and hierarchical, there is a sense in which one feels that Paul is uncomfortable using it. The majority of his language is highly persuasive in nature. Imploring, appealing and urging. This is his preferred leadership style. He can either seek to be pervasive and to have a high level of influence or if that fails to make threats and possible separate himself from the group or individual. Between

these two extremes are very few options. Thus in the case of heresy or sexual immorality his tone needs to be larger than life as he is not able to be there in person. The necessity is to protect the flock means the tone needs to convey the urgency of the issue.

The church must continue to choose to respect his authority, the relationship they have is paramount. One of Paul's aims is to build up the Churches such that they are strong, this means allowing them to grow, to have their own leadership and to resolve their own issues. While there would never be a time when the apostle was not in relationship with the Church, the church must grow in autonomy to grow at all. However, Paul "exercises a permanent authority over the churches founded by him".⁵⁰ For Paul, they are eternally linked, the Churches being the seal of Paul's apostleship.⁵¹

4.2. *Balancing Autonomy with Authority*

As mentioned Paul, while setting up local leadership, never intended the Churches to be totally autonomous. His view of apostleship expected an ongoing relationship, which will change and mature but the link was a permanent one. In Corinthians Paul reinforces an ongoing link,⁵² although he encourages disputes to be handled by the Church locally. Later he is happy to accept their decision.⁵³ Wenham sees Paul as heavily influenced by Jesus here⁵⁴ looking to Matthew 18: 15 - 20. Paul endorses and encourages independence, while having an expectation of a level of dependence and relationship, almost as a right as the founder⁵⁵ and interpreter of the Jesus traditions to the Gentiles. He wants them to innovate, to contextualise their faith, he sees his

⁵⁰ Ridderbos H, *Paul, An Outline of His Theology*, (Eerdmans, 1982), p. 450.

⁵¹ I Corinthians 9:2.

⁵² I Corinthians 5: 3 - 5.

⁵³ II Corinthians 2:10.

⁵⁴ Wehham D, *Paul*, (Eerdmans, 1995). p 213.

⁵⁵ I Corinthians 9:1 & 2

apostolic role as allowing him to correct where they may be too traditional⁵⁶ or free⁵⁷ in that innovation.

5. Conclusion

Paul clearly felt a responsibility for the Churches he planted. In the best Jesus tradition this is seen as servant leadership. As the apostle to the Gentiles he stood as a guardian, seeking to protect them from the extremes mentioned above while contextualising Christianity within their Greco-Roman culture. For this Kasemann calls him “The most important reflective theologian in the new testament”. However, one feels that questions are unanswered. Paul’s interpretations seem subjective, “I, not the Lord” and “not I, but the Lord”. The authority and autonomy tension is real and perhaps unanswerable as it changes over the years as a church grows and matures. The tension between tradition and innovation continues today,⁵⁸ this is a contemporary task. Does Paul invent apostleship? No, however, he certainly alters it, not paid by or based in a specific Christian community as others were,⁵⁹ pushing its scope, and influence in the belief that it is the key role within the genesis of the Gentile church.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ cf For example the arguments in Galatians and the error with respect to old ways or relating to the law.

⁵⁷ cf. I Corinthians 11 where Paul details the appropriate behaviour in worship

⁵⁸ For example the work of Vincent Donovan with the Masai. Donovan V. J, *Christianity Rediscovered*, (SCM Press, 1982).

⁵⁹ Theissen G, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity*, (T&T Clark, 1892), p. 50.

⁶⁰ I Corinthians 12:28.

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