

THE CHURCH OF PAUL AND APOLLOS IN CORINTH

A New Exegetical Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 1–4

by Ph. W. Dennis

December 2007

For L. L. Welborn

Department of Theology
Fordham University
New York

Introduction

Sometime after Paul left Corinth on the occasion of his first visit, Apollos, the Christian known for his eloquence and knowledge of Scripture (Acts 18:24), visited Corinth as well. Through his preaching, he added new converts to the church that Paul had founded—all well and good until a number of the original members of the church, those who had personally known and been baptized by Paul, began to distinguish themselves from this second wave of converts from Apollos' ministry. This move by Paul's first converts shattered the unity of the church by introducing social distinctions between the more senior and more junior members. Perhaps there is no longer Jew, Gentile, slave, or free in the church, but there were now people of Paul and people of Apollos, and Christ had been divided.

At this point, readers will already recognize that the way I am telling this story is significantly different than the way it has been presented in recent literature. Interpreters of 1 Corinthians 1–4 almost uniformly understand the section to be apologetic, Paul trying as best he can to defend himself against people in the church who are dissatisfied with his inelegant speech in comparison with Apollos' superior oratory and seeming wisdom.¹ In Corinth, all eyes are on Paul and Apollos, and these four chapters are Paul's chance to regain the loyalty that once belonged to him.

¹ According to Witherington, the Corinthians are judging Paul for his poor rhetorical ability compared to Apollos. Ben Witherington, III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), 95. Welborn argues similarly, saying that “the term ‘foolishness’, as it first appears in Paul’s argument, embodies the subjective judgment of a certain class of persons upon Paul’s gospel.” L. L. Welborn, *Paul, the Fool of Christ*, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series. Early Christianity in Context* (London: T & T Clark, 2005), 159. In another place, he has written that “some [among the Corinthians] have questioned Paul’s ability to impart hidden wisdom.” L. L. Welborn, *Politics and Rhetoric in the Corinthian Epistles* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997), 32. Similarly, Nils Dahl writes that the sayings in 1:12 “are all to be understood as declarations of independence from Paul.” Nils A. Dahl, “Paul and the Church at Corinth According to 1 Corinthians 1:10–4:21,” in *Christian History and Interpretation: Studies Presented to John Knox*, ed. William R. Farmer, C. F. D. Moule, and R. R. Niebuhr (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 322. So too Duane Litfin, *St. Paul’s Theology of Proclamation*, *Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series*, vol. 79 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 183. Litfin writes not of independence from but of a “repudiation” of Paul.

The aim of this paper is modest: to lay out the main lines of my interpretation as groundwork for a future, more thorough exposition of these four chapters. I have several coordinated theses, which together, I believe, make better sense of the text as a whole and eliminate specific exegetical difficulties that plague other alternatives currently on offer. They are (1) that the genesis of divisions in Corinth lies with Paul's converts, who introduce the sayings or slogans of 1:12 in response to a second wave of converts from Apollos' preaching; (2) that the sayings of 1:12 do not indicate the presence of factions or parties in any sense, but rather classes of individuals who distinguish between themselves on the basis of which apostle baptized them; (3) that accordingly, there may be instigators of this divisive practice, but there are no faction leaders; (4) that Paul urges concord between all Corinthian Christians with the example of concord between himself and Apollos, who are equal co-workers in the service of God to the Corinthian church. If the Corinthians truly carry on Paul's tradition, as many of them claim, they will do as Paul does, making themselves nothing and promoting the unity of the church with Apollos' converts.

In keeping with the preliminary and summary nature of this paper, I will restrict myself to interacting at a high level with the text of 1 Corinthians 1-4, to see whether these theses are coherent with what we read in the text, or if it lends them positive support. A more complete and detailed exegesis of the chapters and interaction with secondary literature, an examination of Paul's rhetoric, and the testing of my theses against social-theoretic interpretations and parallels in broader Greco-Roman culture will have to wait for the larger project. My concern in this paper will be to comment on the key areas underpinning a number of similar interpretations of 1 Corinthians 1-4, that it is Paul's self-defense against the Corinthians, whose overvaluation of wisdom leads them to exalt Apollos at Paul's expense. Those key areas are the

sayings of 1:12 and Paul's immediate response to them in 1:13–16, Paul's side-by-side examination of himself and Apollos in chapters 3–4, and his discourse about wisdom in 1:18–2:16.

The Sayings

I would like to begin with 1:10, which has been identified by Margaret Mitchell and others as the *πρόθεσις*, or “Thesis Statement to the Deliberative Argument.”² I accept Mitchell's argument about the deliberative character of 1 Corinthians 1–4 (and indeed all of canonical 1 Corinthians). The *πρόθεσις* names the topic and helps to identify what follows in chapters 1–4 as deliberative rhetoric, regardless of our view about the relation of canonical 1 Corinthians to the Corinthian correspondence as a whole. It is an appeal to unity and the putting away of *σχίσματα* in light of what Paul has learned from Chloe's people (1:11), namely that individual Corinthians claim to be “of Paul,” “of Apollos,” “of Cephas,” or “of Christ” (1:12).

Just how to interpret these sayings has been a source of contention among scholars. L. L. Welborn identified the sayings as belonging to a slogan formula whereby “[a] member of a faction, whether in the assembly, the theater, or the school, identified himself and expressed his adherence by means of a formula that consisted of a personal pronoun, the verb ‘to be’ (expressed or implied), and the genitive of a proper name.”³ If we interpret the sayings reported in 1:12 as analogues to the cheers of fans in attendance at the theater, then we understand that the people cheering do not have their attention on each other but on the performer (or apostle) they are cheering for, Apollos, Paul, Cephas, or, as it were, Christ. If performers are in competition with each other, such as in a gladiator fight, cheering for one person entails, at a minimum, not supporting the other, and in some contexts hoping for the

² Margaret M. Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), 198.

³ Welborn, *Politics and Rhetoric*, 16. Cf. Welborn, *Fool of Christ*, 230.

other's demise. Such cheering in a competitive context could be construed as an attack on the other person's supporters, leading to division. We are well familiar with such divisions today among sports fans and political partisans, just to name two examples.

Many scholars believe that the divisions in the church of Corinth pitted the supporters of Apollos against the supporters of Paul, in the manner that Welborn's research on theater cheers would imply. Litfin, for example, believes that the Apollos, Cephas, and Christ slogans are each a repudiation of Paul,⁴ and that there are really only two broad factions in Corinth, those for and those against Paul.⁵ Welborn argues that the Corinthian faction leaders are none other than the influential local Christians named in the Corinthian correspondence (Chloe, Crispus, Gaius, and Stephanas), who appropriate the apostles' names in an effort to legitimate their own power.⁶ They use their wealth, following a well-established pattern in ancient (and modern) society, to create factions dependent on themselves.⁷ Paul hints at this, Welborn maintains, in his remark in 1:26 concerning the circumstances of their calling,⁸ and again at 4:10.⁹ Margaret Mitchell agrees in substance when she acknowledges that the disparity in wealth between rich and poor likely contributed to the formation of the Corinthian factions.¹⁰

Mitchell, however—who wrote before Welborn published his discovery of the exact form of the sayings of 1:12 in Quintilian's writings—also suggests that the sayings employ genitives of possession or belonging that usually describe parent-child or master-slave relationships.¹¹ I

⁴ Litfin, *St. Paul's Theology of Proclamation*, 183.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁶ Welborn, *Politics and Rhetoric*, 24.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁰ Mitchell, *Rhetoric of Reconciliation*, 94.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 85. Cf. H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, New (ninth) edition with revised supplement ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), s.v. εἰμί c.II.d. and Herbert Weir Smyth, *Greek Grammar* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956), section 1301. She believes that Paul represents the sayings this way to caricature the childish behavior of the faction members, and that the sayings do not convey the actual sense of what the

would like to appropriate this possibility to argue for something Conzelmann suggested some time ago: “It may be that in Corinth this was a widely adopted view of baptism, namely, that baptism is the ground of a relationship between baptizer and baptized.”¹² In other words, the claimant to being “of Paul” is not necessarily making a claim about Paul so much as about himself. He is not cheering for Paul in competition with Apollos but is making a boast about himself in relation to other Corinthians. If there were no other indications of trouble in Corinth, such a claim to be “of Paul” might be understood simply as an inoffensive statement of fact. In light of the ζῆλος and ἔρις (3:3) exhibited by the Corinthian Christians, however, it is clear that these expressions of origin at least implied a second-order comparison of the apostles. As Mitchell puts it, “[T]he caricatured slogans and boasting amount to claims to a high pedigree or descent.”¹³ The boast is that being “of Paul” or “of Apollos” makes one Corinthian better than another in some sense, not just different. For that to be the case, either Paul or Apollos himself must be somehow better than the other, and in such a way that the benefits of that attribute can be communicated from person to person, if his merits are to be the basis for boasting by his followers. That said, we should not try to squeeze too much content out of the sayings themselves. Conzelmann’s judgment that we know nothing from them about what Paul’s people thought about Apollos, or vice versa, is essentially sound.¹⁴

Corinthians were saying. It is conceivable that this could be the case, but how could we ever know? All we have is Paul’s representation of the situation, which could be a complete fabrication, dead accurate, or somewhere in between. Whether we ourselves choose to believe or disbelieve Paul is a personal existential act for which we are responsible, but it has little to do with interpreting the text. Our best approach, in my judgment, is to interpret the text and accept the appearance as reality unless we have *extrinsic* evidence to the contrary. As for Mitchell’s suggestion, its fatal weakness is that it eliminates any logical connection between the reality of factions and Paul’s immediate reaction to the news, which is to give thanks for not having baptized more people (1:14–16).

¹² Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, ed. George W. MacRae, trans. James W. Leitch, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 35.

¹³ Mitchell, *Rhetoric of Reconciliation*, 216 n. 156.

¹⁴ Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, 34.

Even if the form of the sayings does not decisively settle the question of what the Corinthians meant by them, one piece of evidence in support of their use by individuals *individually* rather than in groups is the word ἕκαστος in 1:12. Interpreters have typically commented on this word only in passing, usually saying that it is an exaggeration and cannot refer to every single individual in the Corinthian church.¹⁵ While I agree that the word does not entail that every last person identified with Paul or Apollos, it does emphasize one thing that commentators have missed: the *individuality* of those claiming to be of Apollos, Paul, Cephas, or Christ. Ἐκαστος, of course, means “each one,” but if the emphasis does not fall on “each” in the sense of “every,” it at least falls on “one.” Paul does not say τινες ἐν ὑμῖν, as he does in 15:12, or τινες ἐξ ὑμῶν, both of which would emphasize the characteristics of a group, or individuals within a group. Those who boast that they are “of Paul” are doing so as individuals and not in adherence to a faction. That being the case, it follows that there can be no faction leaders, though undoubtedly someone is responsible for instigating and promoting this divisive practice.

This is corroborated by Gordon Fee’s observation that Paul is still able to address himself to the whole church in a single letter, which would not likely be the case if there were hard lines of division between separate groups.¹⁶ This would also help explain the presence of Cephas’ name in 1:12, for whether or not Peter himself had been in Corinth, it is not at all unlikely that a traveling Christian who had been baptized by Peter might have been. Finding himself in a church where individuals identified themselves by the name of their baptismal “father,” the one who had converted after hearing Peter would have had to do so as well, or perhaps had the title “of Peter” imposed upon him. Even so, there would undoubtedly be no

¹⁵ Ibid., 33. Collins comments that the word underscores the fact of divisions. Raymond F. Collins, *First Corinthians*, Sacra Pagina, vol. 7 (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 1999), 79.

¹⁶ Witherington, *Conflict and Community*, 95, citing G. D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1987), 55ff.

Table 1. Paul's Appropriation and Modification of the Corinthians' Sayings

The Corinthians' Sayings (1:12)	Paul's Sayings (3:21b-23)	Observations
ἐγὼ μὲν εἶμι Παύλου, ἐγὼ δὲ Ἀπολλῶ	ὕμεῖς δὲ Χριστοῦ, Χριστὸς δὲ θεοῦ (3:23)	Same form, different content: they are "of Christ," who is "of God."
ἐγὼ μὲν εἶμι Παύλου, ἐγὼ δὲ Ἀπολλῶ	πάντα γὰρ ὑμῶν ἐστίν, εἴτε Παῦλος εἴτε Ἀπολλῶς εἴτε Κηφᾶς (3:21b-22a)	Same content, reversed form: they are not "of Paul," but Paul is "of them," and so is Apollos and Cephas.

more than a few of such Petrine converts, which would explain Paul's ellipsis of Cephas' name in 3:4 (though he mentions it again in 3:22), a form of synecdoche.¹⁷

Several verses that speak directly about the Corinthians' boasting add yet more weight to the thesis that the boasts are being made by individuals, and not parties, and that their boasting is meant to draw attention to themselves rather than to a comparison between Paul and Apollos. We see that the Corinthians are "boasting in men" (3:21), when in fact they should be boasting "in the Lord" (1:31). They are boasting as though they had not *received* whatever it is that they are boasting about (4:7), so the focus is on one of their own attributes. Most informatively of all, Paul thinks that the following declaration should assuage their envy: "For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas ..." (3:21b-22a). He goes on to say in verse 23 that ὕμεῖς δὲ Χριστοῦ, Χριστὸς δὲ θεοῦ. The parallelism of verses 21b-23 with 1:12 provides a significant clue to understanding the sayings in the latter verse (see table 1). The saying "I am of Paul" expresses a personal relationship with Paul by means of a genitive of possession, and we find the same pattern in 3:23: they are not "of Paul" but "of Christ"—all of them—and Christ belongs to God.

¹⁷ I myself used synecdoche on the previous page when I wrote "While I agree that [ἕκαστος] does not entail that every last person identified with Paul or Apollos ..." Even though I only named Paul and Apollos, I intended Cephas and Christ to be understood as well. This shows that it would be going too far to say that the omission of Cephas and Christ in 3:4 means that Paul originated those two sayings.

We must carefully notice how Paul modifies the sayings of 1:12 in this passage. Looking first at 3:23, because it is immediately more similar to the sayings of 1:12, we see that Paul maintains the *form* of the sayings from 1:12 but changes their *content*. He contradicts what the Corinthians are saying with a saying of his own: they are not of Paul or Apollos, they all together belong to Christ. In 3:21b–22a, by contrast, he has maintained the *content* but reversed the *form* of the genitive of possession. We find the same names as are used in the sayings of 1:12, but the relationship is reversed. It is not that one person belongs to Paul and another to Apollos, but exactly the opposite: both Paul and Apollos together with Cephas belong to the whole Corinthian church. This is, in fact, exactly what Paul has just argued in 3:5–9: the Corinthians belong to God because they are his field; both Paul and Apollos belong to all the Corinthians because God has assigned them to cultivate his field.

Paul's corrected saying in 3:21b–22a sheds much light on the nature of the sayings in 1:12, because by maintaining the content but reversing the form, we can see what Paul understands their sayings to mean. He tells them that *all of the apostles* belong to *all of them*. If this is an antidote to the divisions, which Paul obviously intends it to be, it follows that the poison it cures are boasts that Paul belonged to only some and Apollos to others. The Corinthians are pitting themselves against each other, not Apollos against Paul. The ones that claim to belong to Paul are the ones Paul baptized.

If the situation at Corinth were as it is often described, namely that the Corinthians were actively comparing Apollos and Paul and predominantly judging Apollos to be the better of the two, then Paul's generous statements in 3:21b–23 would be completely beside the point. It would not help to tell the Corinthians that Paul were theirs when most of them did not want Paul, or to tell them that Apollos were theirs when some of them did not want Apollos. No, the

Corinthians are not sitting as judges of Paul and Apollos, they are judging each other on the basis of a baptismal relationship with one or the other of them. The one who was baptized by Paul boasts in that fact and claims an exclusive and privileged relationship with Paul not available to Apollos' converts. Obviously, this does imply a limited judgment on the other apostle, but Paul cares much less about that (4:3-5) than about the Corinthians' turning against *each other* in setting up new barriers to Christian community. The whole church is served by both Paul and Apollos.

Finally, we should observe that Paul's ascription of the Corinthians' faith to both his own and Apollos' work (3:5) is evidence that Apollos had won new converts and that we are dealing with the converts of the two men dividing from one another rather than a bloc of Paul's converts becoming partisans of Apollos. Paul wants the Corinthians to understand that their church is not comprised of Apollos' people and Paul's people; the church *as a whole* is the product of both men's efforts under God's supervision. This point leads to the next key area of interpretation for understanding the divisions in Corinth, which is Paul's depiction of his relationship to Apollos in chapters 3-4.

Paul in Relation to Apollos, and Both in Relation to God and the Church

All of 1 Corinthians 1-4 centers on the divisions in the church that are expressed through the sayings of 1:12, in which individuals in the church associate themselves with the person responsible for their conversion and baptism. Since I have just presented evidence in support of my hypothesis about the sayings, I now wish to jump ahead to 3:5ff, where Paul and Apollos make their next appearance in the argument, to see if what I have argued about the sayings can be corroborated by, or is at least coherent with, what we read there.

Donald P. Ker, in a recent article, raises the question of how Paul wants the Corinthians to think of Apollos in relation to himself.¹⁸ He acknowledges that Paul, on the surface of his discourse, speaks of Apollos as a colleague and co-worker in God's service. Yet, Ker reads Paul's attack on wisdom in chapter 2 and his carefully considered use of Apollos' name in chapters 3, 4, and 16, as evidence that Paul wants the Corinthian Christians to revise their estimate of Apollos downward. Paul had to do this, Ker argues, not out of ill will toward Apollos, but because it was the best, or perhaps only, way to maintain the church's unity under his own leadership. Some members of the Corinthian church were making Apollos out to be superior to Paul, and such a stance would undermine Paul's special position as its founder, the seal of his apostleship (1 Corinthians 9:2). I believe that a careful reading of 1 Corinthians 3–4 clearly shows exactly the opposite, that Paul's portrayal of Apollos is entirely positive in those chapters and that he puts Apollos on par with himself at every point. There is, in fact, no evidence that in these chapters Paul wants to undermine Apollos.

At the beginning of chapter 3, Paul turns to consider directly the Corinthians' professed allegiance to himself or Apollos. Such partisanship Paul describes as "walking humanly" (κατὰ ἄνθρωπον περιπατεῖτε, 3:3) and being fleshly (σαρκικοί ἐστε). Nevertheless, since the Corinthian Christians ground their boasts in the qualities or practices of these two humans, Paul addresses the Corinthians on just this point, examining himself and Apollos side-by-side. Margaret Mitchell observes that the reference to infants in 3:1–2 is a way of censuring the Corinthians for their childish behavior, and it also alludes to their claims to be "of Paul" and "of Apollos," which sound like claims about their parentage.¹⁹ If they are being childish, boast-

¹⁸ Donald P. Ker, "Paul and Apollos—Colleagues or Rivals?" *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 77 (2000): 75–97. See also Joop F. M. Smit, "'What Is Apollos? What Is Paul?' In Search for the Coherence of First Corinthians 1:10–4:21," *Novum Testamentum* 44, no. 3 (2002): 231–51.

¹⁹ Mitchell, *Rhetoric of Reconciliation*, 85.

ing in their baptismal parent, then Paul now exhorts them to imitate that parent by looking at how he conducts himself in actual practice. Chapter 3, accordingly, sets up Paul and Apollos as examples for the Corinthians to follow (3:5–9) and then chastises them insofar as they are doing differently (3:10–23). It becomes clearer as Paul proceeds that the divisions in Corinth really had very little to do with Apollos and Paul but stemmed from the Corinthians themselves.

Observe the close parallelism between Paul and Apollos throughout chapters 3–4. First, we notice that in 3:5, the answer to Paul’s question about the role of Apollos and himself is that both of them are “servants through whom you believed, to each as the Lord gave.” We should not fail to notice that here he depicts both himself and Apollos as the agents of the Corinthians’ faith. As mentioned earlier, this is evidence that the conflict at Corinth does not concern Paul’s converts who have now become loyal to Apollos, but rather converts of both men, who claim to follow one or the other respectively. In 3:6–9, Paul then goes on to explain what he means when he says “to each as the Lord gave”: the Corinthians are God’s field, and Apollos and Paul are the farmers assigned by God to cultivate it. Each has a different role. Paul, for his part, planted the field, and Apollos watered it. Those are both coöperative activities, however, and neither would produce a harvest without the other. In other words, Apollos is not depicted as lending a hand even though Paul could do just as well by himself. Nor are Paul and Apollos cultivating separate fields side-by-side. They work successively but coöperatively. Sole responsibility for an essential function is ascribed to Apollos, and as a result of their joint efforts, God effects growth. The none-too-subtle point is that Apollos’ efforts are in complete harmony with Paul’s purposes, and vice versa.

In 3:7, Paul does expressly depreciate the importance of Apollos—though not of Apollos' work. This is no help to the hypothesis that the Corinthians or Paul, or possibly both, perceived Apollos as being in competition to him, because he depreciates himself right alongside Apollos. Neither he nor Apollos is anything. Each will receive his wages (3:8), since it is God who assigned them that work in the first place (3:5). Each of them is, in fact, doing no more nor less than what God has instructed. By attributing (1) his and Apollos' individual tasks, (2) the fruitful result of their combined efforts, and (3) the payment of their earned wages all to God, Paul emphatically directs the attention of the Corinthians to God, which goes back to his initial rhetorical question in 1:13: "Has Christ been divided?" Paul and Apollos both serve God, so if they are divided against each other, it implies that Christ is too. The relational emphasis in 3:6–9 is on God and the Corinthians: they are the field, God is their owner. Paul and Apollos are no more than hired hands—as such, neither has any abiding claim on their work product, which belongs to their employer—and both of whom work together in God's service. Paul does not compare himself and Apollos, he examines the two in relation to each other and situates them both in relation to God and the Corinthian church.

Donald Ker has argued that the planter has a greater claim on the work than the one who waters, since the planter works first and the waterer comes second.²⁰ In other words, by portraying himself as the planter, Paul intends to diminish the importance of Apollos. Ker has made an important observation that the first one on the job might think of himself as having more importance or authority than someone who arrives later. In fact, this is probably exactly what Paul's Corinthian partisans were thinking! It does not, however, follow that Paul was trying subtly to exalt himself at the expense of Apollos. After all, Paul reminds the Corinthians

²⁰ Ker, "Paul and Apollos," 86.

that he was the first to preach the gospel to them (2 Corinthians 10:14) and makes no secret of the fact that he wants to extend the range of his missionary activity to yet unevangelized lands (2 Corinthians 10:16). Furthermore, Paul is quite frank about the fact that he thinks of himself as a father to the Corinthian church, his beloved children (1 Corinthians 4:14–15).²¹ From these statements, it is clear that no one contends over the fact that Paul did indeed precede Apollos in ministering to the Corinthians. If he wanted to further emphasize that fact, he had no need to be subtle since he is not too modest to point it out anywhere else.

No, the effect of the farm metaphor is precisely to undermine not Apollos but the false impression that the one who works first has a greater claim on the work. In a remarkable display of apostolic concord, and in spite of his own temporal priority, he exalts Apollos as his equal and Apollos' converts as equal to his own, declaring that the Corinthian church as a whole exists because of the joint efforts of both (3:5). This is an important clue to the situation in Corinth: Paul's converts in the church at Corinth precede Apollos' converts in time just the way Paul himself preceded Apollos in ministering to the church; but, whereas the Corinthians create social divisions on that basis, Paul breaks down any would-be division between himself and Apollos. He excludes himself from any possible claim on the work by depicting himself as a wage earner: he does what God tells him to, and he receives due wages in return. His converts among the Corinthians should follow his example.

Paul further eliminates any difference between himself and Apollos when he declares that the two are numerically one (ἐν, 3:8). In the next verse, he goes on to state that he and Apollos are God's συνεργοί, which is the same word he uses to describe Silvanus, and Timothy,²² Titus,²³

²¹ He is sufficiently paternal to tell them that they are acting like children (3:1–2).

²² 2 Cor. 1:24; cf. 1 Thess. 3:2; Rom. 16:21.

²³ 2 Cor. 8:23.

Epaphroditus,²⁴ Clement,²⁵ Philemon,²⁶ Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke,²⁷ Priscilla and Aquila,²⁸ and Urbanus.²⁹ Some of those names are unknown from elsewhere, but the others constitute a “who’s who” of Paul’s close associates in his travels. Apollos is surely in good company when Paul describes him as a co-worker. Further, the *συνεργός* is the same kind of person that Paul instructs the Corinthians to subject themselves to in 1 Corinthians 16:16 (*ὑποτάσσησθε τοῖς τοιούτοις καὶ παντὶ τῷ συνεργοῦντι*). Regardless of whether Paul intends to stress equality between himself and Apollos in the word *συνεργός* or simply that God is working behind the scenes through them (that is, they are working together with God), the implication for Paul’s view of Apollos is the same in either case: God accredits the work that Apollos is doing, and Apollos enjoys parity with Paul himself.

Verse 9 concludes with a new image of the Corinthian church as God’s building, and it serves to introduce the metaphor Paul develops in the pericope we come to now, 3:10–15. Paul describes himself in verse 10 as a wise master builder (*σοφὸς ἀρχιτέκτων*) who laid the foundation of the Corinthian church. Is Paul congratulating himself? Pay close attention to how this phrase fits in with what Paul has already said. The wise master builder derives his status from what he builds, and in the case of Paul, the valuable, skillfully wrought foundation he laid is nothing more (nor less!) than Jesus Christ (3:11). Recall that in 1:17–31 and 2:1–5, Paul sets the gospel of Jesus Christ crucified in *opposition* to worldly wisdom, and in line with that point, he goes on to say that he determined to preach “nothing ... except” to the Corinthians, that is

²⁴ Phil. 2:25.

²⁵ Phil. 4:30.

²⁶ Phm. 1:1.

²⁷ Phm 1:24.

²⁸ Rom. 16:3.

²⁹ Rom. 16:9.

nothing except Jesus Christ (2:2).³⁰ Now here in 3:10–11, he describes himself as a “wise” master builder, who laid the foundation, which is none other than that little exception, namely Jesus Christ. This is a showcase specimen of literary irony. It continues the self-deprecating thrust of 3:5–9: he is only a wage earner who does the work the Lord assigns—not, in fact, a wise master builder as his converts among the Corinthians would like to imagine.³¹ Paul wants the Corinthians to think of him—and themselves—exactly opposite the way they do now.

Paul’s great skill as a writer and arguer is on display in the metaphor of 3:9b–10. As I said, the irony of 3:10 allows him to maintain the context of self-depreciation, in which he and Apollos are allied with one another in God’s service for the Corinthians and are nothing in themselves. By singling himself out as the oh-so-wise master builder, he is now also in a position to examine others side-by-side with himself *and* Apollos. Paul makes it clear that in this paragraph he is comparing himself with *anyone* that comes after him. He laid the foundation, anyone subsequent to him is building upon it. He takes it as a genuine possibility that some successors might build what is good, while others might build what is bad. The former will receive a reward (3:14), while the latter will suffer loss when their work is destroyed (3:15). Since Apollos comes chronologically after Paul in his relationship with the Corinthian Christians, Apollos does fit into this metaphor, but only as one instance of the class of person who comes after Paul, to build upon the foundation for better or for worse.

At this point in the passage, it is clearly understood from the farm metaphor that God is working through both Paul and Apollos in coöperation with each other. But what about the Corinthians? Are they also co-workers along with Paul and Apollos? The message is clear: if Paul and Apollos work coöperatively for the growth of the church, naturally their followers

³⁰ Οὐ γὰρ ἔκρινά τι εἶδέναι ἐν ὑμῖν εἰ μὴ Ἰησοῦν Χριστόν.

³¹ *Pace* Welborn, who says that Paul’s use of the phrase σοφός ἀρχιτέκτων serves to distinguish him from other missionaries and apostles and subordinate their work to his. Welborn, *Fool of Christ*, 240.

must do the same. Anyone who claims to be building on Paul's foundation, his own converts from the earliest days of the Corinthian church most probably, should build something appropriate to the foundation that Paul laid, Jesus Christ crucified. Claiming to be followers of Paul, they should do as Paul does. The same, of course, goes for Apollos' converts.

The paragraph consisting of 3:16–17 presents a third metaphor. The Corinthian church is not only God's building, they are a very specific building: God's temple. Verse 17 makes a blanket declaration that anyone who destroys God's temple will be destroyed by God. Once again, there can be no doubt that Paul is not referring to Apollos, unless we are to suppose that the same man through whom God works for the growth of the church (3:7) is now being warned that God might destroy him. We should notice that Paul, who is well known for trumpeting his own calling as an apostle, freely elevates Apollos to that level alongside himself and Cephas (3:22). All three are stewards of God's mysteries (4:1). Both Paul and Apollos, as well as the other apostles, are subject to the same hardships for the sake of the gospel (4:8–13).

To this point, we have found no unambiguous evidence that the Corinthians were evaluating Paul negatively against Apollos, and in fact the evidence points in quite a different direction. The proposal that Paul himself thought negatively of Apollos, which would at least be a clue that such a situation might have been present in Corinth is also belied by the evidence and asks us to place great weight on reading between the lines, in opposition to what Paul actually writes. Perhaps the most crippling observation for that hypothesis is what Michael Azar, my own συνεργός in the theology department at Fordham University pointed out, that we know from Paul's account of his confrontation with Peter in Antioch that he is willing to name names when speaking against someone (Galatians 2:11ff).

The Wisdom Discourse

We turn now to Paul's wisdom discourse to see whether it coheres with the theses I have been arguing for or if it gives more direct support for the contrary view that the Corinthians were judging Paul negatively. I regard 1:13–17 as beginning Paul's formal response to the divisions in the church rather than as passing remarks before he begins the substance of his argument in 1:18. His first response, and the one that he thinks immediately ought to remedy the situation as he understands it, is to ask some particular rhetorical questions, first about whether Christ is divided, then about whose name they were baptized in. Then he gives thanks that he did not baptize more people. Unlike other interpreters, I do not detect an air of defensiveness in 1:18ff. It seems to me, rather, that Paul is experiencing the disappointment of realizing that his young children in the faith have grossly misinterpreted what they saw him doing, or at least misapplied his example to the new situation after Apollos arrived.

To remedy the problem, Paul takes them back to the beginning, to his first converts and the substance of his preaching. An analysis of the passage shows that it is structured in order of past-present-future time, as indicated by verb tense and temporal adverbs. The recollection of past events that begins in 1:13 continues through 3:2, at which point Paul takes up the subject of the Corinthians' jealousy and strife in the present. Then, in 4:7–8 Paul negatively summarizes the Corinthians' present condition in light of their past by asking what they now have (ἔχουσιν) that they did not receive in the past (ἔλαβετε). At the time of their call, few were noble, wise, or powerful (1:26), but *already* (ἤδη) they have become kings reigning with riches (4:8). Finally, in 4:14–21, the future is in view as he exhorts them to change their behavior and to prepare for him to visit them. Recognizing the time structure of the chapters allows us to

characterize 2:6–14 as an aside because it is not about Paul’s relationship to the Corinthians in real time, even though it serves a definite purpose in its own right.³²

Beginning with Paul’s first statement in response (1:13), the γάρ conjunctions in 1:17, 18, and 26 maintain the continuity of his thought through verse 31, and the additional καί (καίγώ) in 2:1 together with the reintroduction of aorist verbs shows that he is resuming the narrative begun in 1:13. The adversative conjunction δέ in 2:6 is where Paul intended to end the recollection about his stay with them, but after contrasting what he did teach them (1:18–2:5) with what he *might* have taught them or might still teach them (2:6–16), he briefly picks up the recollection again in 3:1–4 to demonstrate why he has not, in fact, taught them all that he might have. The conjunction οὖν in 3:5 signals that Paul is moving on from his account of the past to his exhortation in the present.

Having delimited the textual unit, can we determine what Paul is doing in 1 Corinthians 1:13–2:5? If the sayings of 1:12 do not represent opposition to Paul personally so much as the re-introduction of the kind of social distinctions that Paul opposes so vehemently (Galatians 3:28) into the Christian community, Paul must demonstrate to the Corinthians not only that he was not trying to win followers devoted to himself personally but explain to them what exactly he was proclaiming. Having misunderstood him, his converts are following the wrong exam-

³² I believe 2:6–3:4 serves several purposes. One is to “show up” Paul’s converts, who were claiming special knowledge or wisdom compared to those of Apollos, by making it clear that they have not been taught more than the ABCs—and they have not even mastered those (2:6–7; 3:1–4). Another is to re-direct them back to the ABCs, to Christ crucified as the source of wisdom, since it is the fact of the crucifixion that proves that the “rulers of this age” are not privy to God’s wisdom (2:8–9). Yet a third purpose is to emphasize that the Corinthians do not belong to Paul or Apollos, but to Christ, and it is from him that they will receive wisdom (2:10–16). I agree with Welborn’s analysis that Paul is addressing people who claim to have more knowledge than ordinary believers (οἱ πνευματικοί in his view, Paul’s converts in mine). Welborn, *Politics and Rhetoric*, 32, 34. Not to diminish the value and interest of his background research, I cannot agree with him that this section is Paul’s parody of himself and the other apostles in the guise of dispensers of hidden mystical wisdom to initiates. I understand Paul’s description of himself and the apostles as “stewards of God’s mysteries” (4:1) to be entirely serious and referring back to this section. Welborn, *Fool of Christ*, 190–91. Paul is telling them that there *is* more to learn, but it is found by apprehending what they have already been taught, and they have hardly begun to do that.

ple. Paul's aim was not to win their accolades through eloquent speech and then to initiate them into the circle of his devotees by administering baptism to them (1:17). He simply wanted them to hear, believe, understand, and live the gospel of Jesus Christ crucified. He has to demonstrate this to them before he can urge concord, lest he be suspected of saying one thing and doing another. Since those who claim to belong to Paul ostensibly believe that they are carrying on his tradition, he must correct their false understanding and also re-establish his ethos, in order to advise them about how they should act.³³

We have in 1:26 another indication of what the sayings mean and a clue that Paul's followers are the instigators of the divisions. He uses circumlocution to remind them that at the time of their calling, few were wise, few were powerful, few were noble. That "calling" (κλήσις) here refers to the time of their hearing and responding to the gospel is clear from Paul's earlier use of the adjective κλητός in 1:1–2, 24.³⁴ Let us carefully follow Paul's argument. Responding to whatever sentiment lies behind the sayings of 1:12, Paul responds with thanksgiving that he did not baptize more people (1:14–16). He then sets up an antithesis between his baptizing and his preaching of the gospel during his time with them (1:17), and he depreciates the importance of his baptizing activity as secondary to his preaching. In 1:18–2:5, Paul reminds them that when the gospel was first preached to them—that is, at the time of God's call—few of them had any status from wisdom, power, or nobility (1:26). The implication is that, since baptism is a response to God's call, the Corinthians have no grounds to boast in Paul's baptizing them. God called them *in spite of* their low status.

The clue to the meaning of the sayings lies in the way Paul has structured his argument. He is glad not to have baptized more people because ostensibly that would have aggravated

³³ Mitchell, *Rhetoric of Reconciliation*, 209.

³⁴ Cf. 1 Cor. 7:21–22.

the situation. He addresses the problem by reminding them of their low status at the time of their call, which shows that the Corinthians thought of themselves as having a high status as a result of their baptism. The clue that it was Paul's converts who instigated the problem is found in Paul's first-hand knowledge of the circumstances of their calling. Since all of 1:13–2:5 recounts Paul's stay with the Corinthians, and since he recalls their low social status based on his own first-hand knowledge, it is clear that he is addressing himself primarily to his own converts, those "of Paul."³⁵ If he can correct the mistaken ideas of his own converts, he can end the divisions in the church.

The low social status of the neophyte Corinthian Christians comes into view again in 2:1–5. It is often assumed that Paul's condition is a result of persecution or perhaps his thorn in the flesh, but I think it is more likely that Paul mirrored the condition he found his audience in Corinth to be in. In a state of weakness and fear, they gladly would have attached themselves to a strong, wise, self-sufficient leader such as Paul might have come across had he chosen. Rather, he became weak that he might win the weak (9:22), not for himself but for the sake of the gospel (9:23), and so he was with the Corinthians in weakness, fear, and trembling. Paul's point here accomplishes three things: it reminds them yet again of their pathetic condition at the time of their call, in contrast to their present uppity behavior; it demonstrates that Paul's goal was not to attract a cult of personality, since he joined them in their humble condition rather than exploiting them in it; and he offers himself as an example of how they should behave toward each other, lowering themselves if necessary for the sake of building others up.

³⁵ This, coupled with Fee's observation noted earlier that Paul addresses himself to the whole church may be an indication that Apollos had succeeded in attracting comparatively few new converts. This would not be surprising given the long length of Paul's stay with the Corinthians (Acts 18:11). This might even suggest that the sayings of 1:12 are given in descending numerical order: Paul's people comprised the majority of the church, Apollos had a few, and there were a small number that had been converted by Cephas. I maintain, of course, that there was no Christ party, but that there may have been individuals who had correctly understood that they were being baptized into Christ and not as Paul's followers, and who refused to join in the prevailing madness, probably Crispus, Gaius, Stephanas, and Chloe. All this, of course, is nothing more than supposition.

Summary

In my exposition of 1 Corinthians 1–4, which has admittedly been carried out at an overview level rather than in the stony bedrock of exegetical or historical detail, I have shown how it is possible to understand the historical situation behind the chapters very differently than the main lines of interpretation offered in recent scholarship. Not only does the flow of thought through the whole unit cohere with my historical reconstruction, but we discovered details in each main section of chapters 1–4 that point to it.

When Apollos visited Corinth after Paul left, his preaching drew some new converts into the young church. Unfortunately, this was the occasion for the converts from Paul's original visit to stress their seniority and distinctiveness, perhaps even their superior wisdom, compared to Apollos' converts, as sophomores almost always do to the members of the freshman class they so recently left behind. When Paul learns of the situation in Corinth, he immediately writes in order to rectify the situation, and that is what we have in 1 Corinthians 1–4. After stating what he understands the situation to be (1:10–12), his first task is to correct his followers' misunderstanding of what he was doing in Corinth (1:13–2:5). Before he can censure them for how they are behaving now, he must demonstrate that he himself had not set the example of this behavior for them. He had not tried to win their approval, wooing them with oratorical grandstanding into becoming his personal devotees. On the contrary, he mirrored the weak and lowly state he found them to be in, and showed how in the gospel of the crucified Christ, even God himself had become weak and lowly for their sake. It is from understanding this fact that they will acquire true wisdom from God, and it is to him that they should be devoted. At present, however, none of the Corinthians is in a position to lord it over the others, for all of

them are like infants in their thinking and living (3:1–4). Their divisions are the clearest proof of that.

Paul then explains that he and Apollos are fully equal to each other in their ministry and that they work coöperatively, which implies that those baptized by each of them are also equal and should work coöperatively as well (3:5–9). In fact, neither of them is anything more than a human servant of God, so there is no ground for anyone to boast in them. Far from being true followers of Paul, however, anyone who is promoting or participating in the dissension is actually acting contrary to the example set by Paul and Apollos and building poorly upon Paul's foundation of the crucified Christ (3:10–15). More than that, he is *destroying* God's temple (3:16–17). To create difficulty for Apollos or his converts is to oppose Paul. If Paul is the builder, the one who destroys the building cannot be Paul's follower, nor yet a follower of God since Paul is God's servant. Paul again warns the Corinthians not to get above themselves in identifying with one person or another, which is out of accord with God's intent for them (3:18–23).

Finally, Paul moves with paternal earnestness toward the conclusion of the matter. He reiterates his and Apollos' unity before God (4:1–2), and that he cares nothing about winning human approval for himself personally in a rhetorical contest of any kind, in any setting, and neither should the Corinthians (4:3–5). In his devotion to God alone, he even disregards the judgment of human courts and rulers. The Corinthians were in a state of weakness and fear when Paul first came to them, but now their circumstances have changed and they jockey for position with one another (4:6–8). How different is Paul and Apollos' experience as apostles, who, caring nothing about winning human approval for themselves in any context, are condemned to death, subject to every hardship, and exhibited as laughingstocks before all the

world (4:9–13). Paul concludes the unit with an astonishing exhortation for them to imitate him in this (4:14–21)!

It is safe to say that Paul, who is trying to promote and demonstrate the unity of the church in the collection for Jerusalem, would be appalled if ἕριδες were to break ought between Christians of various places such that each one would disassociate himself from others by saying ἐγὼ μὲν εἶμι Κορίνθου, while another boasts ἐγὼ δὲ Μακεδονίας. In Paul's striving for unity, how much less could he tolerate the Christians in a single city creating unnecessary, artificial, and harmful divisions among themselves on the basis of who had baptized them. Apart from his own disappointment at their divisions, what if the other apostles in Jerusalem were to hear that Paul were baptizing people in his own name, or establishing his own groups of “followers of Paul” in contradistinction from other Christians? What consequences might that have had for his dealings with the other apostles, the collection for the Jerusalem saints, or his missionary endeavors in the future?

The interpretation I am proposing here comes with the added benefit of explaining Paul's lapse of memory about the specific people he baptized in 1:16. In saying that he does not remember who else he baptized—apart from the leaders, the very kind of person he urges the church to be subject to in 16:15–18—he disavows any special personal relationship with people who would use his name to create divisions in the church. He denies that he has recruited people to follow him in distinction from Apollos, and *ipso facto* he pulls the rug out from beneath those who would boast in him.

What we have discovered here may also contribute something to our understanding of the polarity between strong and weak in 1 Corinthians 8. We might expect, for example, that Paul's converts would have understood from his time with them that an idol has no real existence

and that they need not conform to Jewish scruples on the matter of idol meat, however little of Paul's theology they picked up along the way. Perhaps they were "the strong." The greater influence we see them exerting in chapter 8 could be due to their having more seniority in the church. We would not expect Apollos, by contrast, to emphasize freedom from the law to the same extent Paul does, so his converts fit the profile of the "weak," who were unsure whether they could eat idol meat without guilt. It would make an interesting study to see whether the alleged discrepancies between 1 Corinthians 8 and 10 could be explained as Paul's attempt to pastorally harmonize what he taught the Corinthians with what Apollos taught them, while maintaining his position of unity with his fellow apostle. In any case, it is abundantly clear just how vigorously Paul worked to maintain unity, not only between himself and Apollos, but between both their converts in the church he had founded in Corinth.

References

- Collins, Raymond F. *First Corinthians*. Sacra Pagina, vol. 7. Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 1999.
- Conzelmann, Hans. *1 Corinthians*. Translated by James W. Leitch. Edited by George W. MacRae. Hermeneia. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975.
- Dahl, Nils A. "Paul and the Church at Corinth According to 1 Corinthians 1:10–4:21." In *Christian History and Interpretation: Studies Presented to John Knox*, edited by William R. Farmer, C. F. D. Moule and R. R. Niebuhr, 313–36. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967.
- Fee, G. D. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1987.
- Ker, Donald P. "Paul and Apollos—Colleagues or Rivals?" *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 77 (2000): 75–97.
- Liddell, H. G., and R. Scott. *A Greek-English Lexicon*. New (ninth) edition with revised supplement. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996.
- Litfin, Duane. *St. Paul's Theology of Proclamation*. Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series, no. 79. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- Mitchell, Margaret M. *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991.
- Smit, Joop F. M. "'What Is Apollos? What Is Paul?'" In *Search for the Coherence of First Corinthians 1:10–4:21*. *Novum Testamentum* 44, no. 3 (2002): 231–51.
- Smyth, Herbert Weir. *Greek Grammar*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956.
- Welborn, L. L. *Paul, the Fool of Christ*. *Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series*, no. 293. Early Christianity in Context. London: T & T Clark, 2005.
- . *Politics and Rhetoric in the Corinthian Epistles*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997.
- Witherington, Ben, III. *Conflict and Community in Corinth*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1995.