

## THE SOCIAL BACKGROUND OF 1 CORINTHIANS 1-4

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**ABSTRACT.** The social structure of the Corinthian *ecclesia* is a reasonable cause for the dissensions that had occurred between her members. The people from the higher social strata of the church may have sought to advance their honor by desiring to extend their patronage over those teachers in the church that could help them in that regard. This situation was aided by the fact that the members of the Christian community have failed to allow the cross to redefine the new entity to which they now belonged. Rather, they perceived the Christian *ecclesia* according to different social models that were available at that time in the society at large: household model, *collegia* model, political *ecclesia*, and Jewish synagogue. As a result, the apostle Paul, in the first four chapters of 1 Corinthians, shows how the cross has overturned the social values inherent in these models. He argues that the Christian *ecclesia* is a new entity, with a unique identity, and distinct network of relations, which should separate those inside the Christian community from those outside.

**KEYWORDS:** networks, social structure, identity, *ecclesia*, Corinthians, dissensions, honor, shame, patronage, client

### Introduction

Dissensions in a church can have many causes. Invariably, there is also a social factor. More specifically, members of a church tend to think of the church and the relationships therein in terms of the social structures that they are used to in the larger society. This is also the case with the dissensions in the Corinthian church, an issue addressed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 1-4. Timothy Lim has observed that, 'It is difficult not to recognize that a sociological interpretation, not to the exclusion of but complementing the theological exegesis, is also needed, for Paul in this passage [1 Corinthians 2:1-5] employs terminology which traditionally belongs to rhetoric and appears to be distinguishing himself from the other preachers who were circulating in the Corinthian church' (Lim 1987: 137).

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Much has been written on 'the social setting of Pauline Christianity', to borrow the title of Gerd Theissen's foundational and influential book (Theissen 1982), and therefore, we will seek to paint only in broad strokes the sociological factors at work in the Corinthian church. In this regard, we will discuss issues such as the social structure of the city of Corinth and of the Corinthian church, the social networks extant in the Corinthian society at large and to which the Corinthian Christians belonged, and Paul's response to the Corinthians' confusion of the identity of the church with other networks which led to dissensions.

### **The Social Structures in Corinth and in the Corinthian Church**

Corinth was re-founded as a Roman colony in 44 B.C., after its destruction in 146 B.C. The new settlers belonged mostly to the *liberti* (i.e., freedmen) who were seeking to move upwardly in a culturally heterogeneous society that offered opportunities for social advancement (Robertson 2001: 88). Upward mobility in terms of social status was achieved by means such as wealth, family lineage, and cultural sophistication (Witherington 1995: 22-24). As such, the members of the *nouveau riche* sought to increase their honor and esteem in at least two ways (DeSilva 2000: chap. 2). First, they sought to enter into a patronage/client relationship with those of unequal status, which involved the offering of *beneficia* to their clientèle and the receiving of praise in return from the recipients of such *beneficia* (Chow 1992: chaps. 2 and 3), and the invitation of sophists to entertain their guests at a meal (i.e., *symposium*) with an *encomium* or other form of epideictic rhetoric (Witherington 1995: 191-95, 243-47). Second, the upwardly mobile persons also sought to advance socially by seeking to enter into friendships with equally status persons, which entailed certain established social expectations such as gift exchange (Marshall 1987: chaps. 1 and 2). Such a focus on enhancing one's status and increasing one's honor in the Roman Corinth led not only to competition for status and honor among people, which most often than not was associated with *hubris*, (Clarke 1993: 96), but it also led to a clearer distinction among social classes evident in the conventional social relationships and networks (Theissen 1982: 102).

Such a social stratification seems to characterize the Corinthian church as well. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Adolf Deissmann has concluded based on his analysis of the Greek used in the New Testament that the early Christians belonged to the middle and lower social classes (Deissmann 1927: 9). Since then, a 'New Consensus' (Malherbe 1977: 31) has formed which defends the idea that the Pauline congregations reflected a fair cross-section of urban society, including people from a relatively high social strata (de Vos 1999: 203; Gill 1993: 323-37). At least three pieces of evidence are set forth to support this assessment. First, it is argued that

most of the people in the Corinthian congregation mentioned by Paul by name are of 'high status inconsistency' (Meeks 1983: 73). Hans Dieter Betz may be correct to assess that at Corinth 'the Pauline mission had succeeded—for the first time, it seems—in winning converts from the better educated and cultured circles' (Betz 1986: 24). Second, the terminology of 1 Corinthians 1:26 used to describe the Corinthians at the time of their conversion carry indubitable social connotations and point to the fact that though the majority of the members were of low status, a few were from among the elite of society. Third, some of the Corinthian Christians regarded themselves as people who have acquired wealth and status since their conversion (cf. 1 Corinthians 4:10) (Barclay 1992: 57). That this is the case is evident from the fact that Paul expects the Corinthians to participate in the collection for Jerusalem (cf. 1 Corinthians 16:2) (Hall 2003: 76, 79), from the fact that some were involved in litigations against other brothers (cf. 1 Corinthians 6:1-8)—presumably the rich against poor brothers, since the poor, on the one hand, had no financial means to take the rich to court, and on the other hand it was socially improper and disadvantageous for the poor to do so (Winter 1991: 559-72)—and from the fact that Christians met for worship in house-churches, which had to be large enough to accommodate a congregation of 50 to 100 people (de Vos 1999: 203-5).

Based on these observations, it is argued that the social stratification of the Corinthian congregation was in part the cause of dissensions in the church. This is supported by reference, among others, to the conflict at the Lord's Supper between the 'have' and the 'have-nots' (cf. 1 Corinthians 11) (Theissen 2003: 377-81), to the disagreements between the 'weak' and the 'strong' concerning the food offered to idols (cf. 1 Corinthians 8-10) (Theissen 1982: 121-43), to the litigations between the rich and the poor (cf. 1 Corinthians 6) (Clarke 1993: 59-71), and to the dissensions of chapters 1-4 allegedly between the local leaders who competed for honor by offering food and lodging to different teachers who could enhance their status by entering into a patronage and/or friendship relationships (Theissen 1982: 54-57, 64).

This New Consensus has been recently challenged by Justin J. Meggitt, particularly in his book *Paul, Poverty and Survival*, arguing that the Corinthians were from among the 'poor' of the first century (Meggitt 1998: 179). Thus, he argues against the claim that there were any among the Corinthian Christians who were of the elite of society (Meggitt 1996: 218-23). However, while his criticism of the claim that Christianity was actually an elite movement is correct, few have embraced Meggitt's attempt to revive the Old Consensus (Martin 2001: 51-64). It is not the place here to rehearse the arguments and reactions to his claims, but suffice it to say that there is clear evidence in Paul's epistles, including 1 Corinthians, to support the claim

that the Corinthian congregation was heterogeneous, numbering among its members people from all social strata, even though we agree with David Hall that ‘any estimate of the social composition of the Corinthian church, or of the city of Corinth as a whole [...] is bound to be speculative’ (Hall 2003: 77).

Moreover, it is undeniable that the heterogeneous composition of the Corinthian congregation inevitably caused tensions in the church. However, it would be reductionistic to speak of a single ‘fault line’ (i.e., socio-economic) separating the Christians in Corinth (Martin 1995: 69). C. K. Robertson is thus right to characterize such an understanding as static, when in fact ‘there were more factors at work in Corinth than simply economic ones’ (Robertson 2001: 23). Thus, there is need of a more dynamic picture of the conflict in Corinth, which takes into consideration the multiple overlapping networks to which many in the church already belonged. As such, we concur with Robertson that ‘the interpersonal disputes in Corinth resulted from ‘an even more fundamental problem concerning perception’ of the church itself, as the Christian *ecclesia* became seen as one more relational system among other associations and networks’ (Robertson 2001: 54, 55-57). That this is so is hinted at in Paul’s accusation against the Corinthians that *kata anthrōpon peripateite* (cf. 3:4) and his stress on the unique identity of the church—*en christō*. This contrast can be fully grasped only when we compare the Christian *ecclesia* with other (secular) networks to which the Corinthians belonged and with which they presumably confused the new social entity—*ekklēsia tou theou* (Judge 1960: 216). Following Wayne Meeks and C. K. Robertson, we will explore four models which resemble the Pauline *ecclesia* in order to determine how belonging to any of these networks might have shaped the (worldly) thinking of the Christian Corinthians in regard to belonging to the Christian *ecclesia*.

### The Household Model

The first model comparable to that of the Christian community is that of the household. Though the *oikos* was considered the ‘element from which a *polis* is made, so to speak the seed-bed of the *politeia*’ (Robertson 2001: 58) given certain rights that women, slaves, and clients enjoyed in the household, makes the *oikos* a unique social network. One aspect worth mentioning here is that of the concept of *paterfamilias* and the related concept of *patria potestas*. We will only mention here that contrary to some who believe that the father of a household acted like a tyrant, wielding power and discipline indiscriminately throughout the household, according to recent studies it has been shown that the father related to his children differently than to the slaves of his household (Clarke 2000: esp. chap. 5). This will prove to be crucial in understanding Paul’s use of the language of the *oikos* in 1 Corin-

thians 1-4 for his purposes. Moreover, the Pauline congregations met in the 'oikos of X' (see 1 Corinthians 1:11, 16, 16:15-16; Romans 16:5, 23) (Barclay 1997: 73), which carried with it the danger of confusing the structures of a household with those of the Christian *ecclesia*. Meeks explains:

The adaptation of the Christian groups to the household had certain implications both for the internal structure of the groups and for their relationship to the larger society. The new group was thus inserted into or superimposed upon an existing network of relationships, both internal—kinship, *clientele*, and subordination—and external—ties of friendship and perhaps of occupation. The house as meeting place afforded some privacy, a degree of intimacy, and stability of place. However, it also created the potential for the emergence of factions within the Christian body of a city... The household context also set the stage for some conflicts in the allocation of power and in the understanding of roles in the community... there were certain countervailing modes and centers of authority in the Christian movement that ran contrary to the power of the paterfamilias, and certain egalitarian beliefs and attitudes that conflicted with the hierarchical structure (Meeks 1983: 76).

Among the ways in which the Christian *ecclesia* may have been perceived by some of the wealthier people as a household network, was as an avenue for status advancement by means of patron-client ties. It was not unusual for literary men (e.g., poets, rhetors, etc.) to be the clients of rich people and some of the Corinthians may have perceived, for instance, Paul's rejection of financial support as a declaration of enmity, since his decision would have hindered their possibility for acquiring more honor (Chow 1992: 68-75; Stowers 1984: 64-73).

### **The Collegia Model**

The second model that may have influenced the thinking of the Corinthians is that of the *collegia*, or of the voluntary associations. Robertson rightly argues that 'the association was like a miniature *polis* in an era when the *polis* of old had been swallowed up by the empire' (Robertson 2001: 66). Membership in these associations was often based on ethnic connection, rank, office, and professions. Meeks and others have pointed out that the *collegia* were characterized by several elements: (1) they often incorporated persons who shared a common trade or craft being thus more homogeneous in terms of status; (2) they engaged in common meals which were graced with the oratory of guest rhetors and provided the necessary context for socio-economic advancement; (3) they participated in rituals and cultic activities; and (4) they were able to function because of the beneficence of wealthier persons who acted as patrons (Meeks 1983: 78-79; Clarke 2000: esp. chap. 4).

It is not difficult to see from this characterization how the Christian *ecclesia* could have easily been regarded as another *collegium* (Kloppenborg & Wilson 1996: 153-60). This can be seen, Robertson has pointed out, in the conflict between the 'strong' and the 'weak' in 1 Corinthians 8-10 over participation at certain banquets (Robertson 2001: 88-89). It can also be inferred from the fact that the Christians belonging to these *collegia* were used to a homogeneous, relatively equal status, gatherings, but when joining the Christian *ecclesia* some have presumably found difficulty with its heterogeneous composition, that is, fellowship with people of lower status. Moreover, some of the wealthier in the church may have sought to function as patrons or sponsors of different teachers for the purpose of enhancing their status and increasing their honor (Malherbe 1977: 88-89).

### **The Political *Ecclesia* Model**

The third model that may have influenced the Corinthians in their assessment of the Christian church is that of the secular (political) *ecclesia*. The *ecclesia* was the place where citizens assembled together to deliberate the needs and problems of the city. Robertson observes that, 'In the *politeia* itself or, more specifically, in the secular *ecclesia* or council, fellow citizens could (and often did) vie with one another for power and primacy... The same *ecclesia* which provided a channel for possible *koinōnia* between fellow citizens also acted as the battleground for their rivalries, disputes and mutual enmity' (Robertson 2001: 64).

L. L. Welborn has analyzed the conflicts in the Corinthians church through this political model. He has advanced the proposition that Paul's attempt to promote concord in the Christian assembly resembles the *homoioia* speeches delivered in the context of a political conflict (Welborn 1987, 86-88, 91-92). Despite the weakness of such background to the disputes in 1 Corinthians 1-4, it appears, as Robertson argues, that 'several members brought with them some of the patterns of the secular *ecclesia*, elevating Paul and other Christian leaders to something like demagogues' (Robertson 2001: 86).

This may not be surprising given the fact that, as Clarke points out, 'It is apparent that, from earliest times, the widely adopted designation of the Christian communities was that of 'church' (*ekklēsia*)... This choice of word may have raised problems for those Christians who, by virtue of their comparative wealth and social standing, were 'naturally' leaders in the local community and were expected to adopt similar positions of honor and respect within the Christian *ecclesia*' (Clarke 2000: 152). The Corinthians' complaint about Paul's apparent lack of eloquence in speech resembles the importance placed on oratory in the secular *ecclesia* (Clarke 2000: 153).

### The Synagogue Model

The fourth model that could provide some parallel (the most natural parallel) to the Christian *ecclesia* is that of the Jewish *synagōgē*. Two things are relevant to our discussion of the social background of the Corinthian disputes. First, 'the linkages between Jews in a city like Corinth were grounded in family or household relationships' (Robertson 2001: 68). Second, 'like their collegial counterparts, synagogues usually were composed of men only, although there was far greater diversity in the latter, both in terms of occupations and social status' (Robertson 2001: 68). There are thus evidences that Jewish synagogue organization was significantly influenced by surrounding Graeco-Roman culture, albeit maintaining some distinction' (Clarke 2001: 167). At any rate, the fact that at first the Christian communities intersected with the Jewish synagogues as far as organization, points to the fact that, 'for some of the first believers their long-standing continuity with Jewish tradition will certainly have suggested to them that elements of synagogue community life provided an appropriate model to adopt and modify' (Clarke 2001: 167). Among such aspects could be distinctions among persons of different class, gender, and economics.

### The Uniqueness of the Christian *Ecclesia*

From this survey of the four relational networks extant in parallel to the Christian *ecclesia*, it is plausible to claim that there was not only acquaintance with (in the sense that some of the Corinthians were members of these organizations), but also varying degrees of influence upon the Corinthian Christians as they thought about the new network they entered in as a result of conversion to Christ. The similarities between the Christian *ecclesia* and other networks may have been emphasized to the point of creating dissensions among the members of the newly formed social entity. It is for this reason that Paul felt the need to emphasize the unique identity of those *en christō*. Meeks has suggested that the early Christian *ecclesia* 'was all the old things that observers in the first century might have seen in it: a Jewish sect, a club meeting in a household, an initiatory cult, a school. Yet it was more than the sum of those things, and different from the mere synthesis of their contradictory tendencies' (Meeks 1983: 120). Thus, the fundamental problem of the dissensions in Corinth was the confusion of the Christians concerning the unique identity of their *ecclesia*. This unique identity is stressed by Paul throughout his Corinthian correspondence, including 1 Corinthians 1-4.

We have already pointed out some of the aspects that distinguished the Corinthian *ecclesia* from the various social networks to which some of the Corinthian Christians belonged, such as heterogeneity vs. homogeneity, equality vs. hierarchy, and inclusivism vs. exclusivism. In addition to these,

the unique identity of the Christian church can be gleaned from the terminology Paul uses to characterize the 'insiders', the church. David Horrell rightly states that, 'What seems clear is that the frequent use of *adelphoi* language reflects both an established designation for the members of the Christian assemblies and Paul's efforts to ensure that social relationships *en ekklesia* are structured in a manner appropriate to their description as groups of equal siblings' (Horrell 2001: 303). This equality is further emphasized by other designations of the members of the church such as *klētois hagiois* (1 Cor 1:2), without any differentiation of status implied in the terms. Moreover, the characterization of the leaders of the church as *diakonos* (and *hypēretas Christou kai oikonomos mystērion theou* cf. 1 Cor 4:1) has no parallel in the hierarchical structure of other relational networks (see Clarke 2001: 233-243). That Paul uses the term *ekklēsia* to refer to the Christian church is no indication that Paul thought of the Christian assemblies as modeled after the political assemblies. Rather, its background is most likely the Old Testament concept of the *qahal yhwh* as a sanctified assembly (Meeks 1983: 79).

It is for these reasons that Theissen characterized Paul's relationship to his members as 'love-patriarchalism', a term that preserves a certain stratified system in the church while distinct from that of the larger society by love (Theissen 1982: 107). Dale Martin has modified the term to 'benevolent-patriarchalism', in order to reflect the reality that Paul

maintained social hierarchy by urging the lower class to submit to those in authority and the higher class to rule benevolently and gently, accommodating its own demands in order to protect the interests of those lower down the social scale. Those of higher status might sometimes be encouraged to yield to those of lower status on a particular point; but within the context of benevolent patriarchalism this yielding was not to result in any actual status reversal or confusion. The upper class must continue to rule from a higher position of benevolent but firm strength (Martin 1995: 42).

Thus, benevolent patriarchalism 'was opposed, on the one hand, to the radicalness of democracy, which would dangerously turn the natural status hierarchy upside-down, and, on the other, to tyranny, which would endanger itself by inflexibility' (Martin 1995: 43). Paul's emphasis on the uniqueness of the Christian *ecclesia* must have meant more than the imposition of love or benevolence over the hierarchy characterizing the other relational networks. In Paul's view, it seems, the Christian church is a completely new entity, with new structures and relationships. In fact, as we will see, Paul's concern was that the Corinthians were thinking of the church in terms of another relational network. For Paul to preserve some of the hierarchical structures of the other relational networks in the church would render his argument for the uniqueness of the Christian *ecclesia* ineffective.

Besides the unique terms that Paul uses to characterize the ‘insiders’, he also designates the ‘outsiders’ in such a way that a distinction is clearly drawn between believers and non-believers. According to Meeks, terms such as *apollymenois* (1 Cor 1:18), *ho kosmos* (1 Cor 1:21), etc., are used by Paul as a ‘language of separation’, distinguishing thus the Christians from the non-believers (Meeks 1983: 94). Both ideas of ‘belonging’ and ‘separation’ perhaps can be best seen in the phrase ‘baptized *eis christon*’, alluded to in 1 Cor 1:13. Robertson argues that a

‘fence’ for the church was Christian baptism, which distinguished those who ‘were being saved’ from ‘the perishing’ (1:18). At the same time, baptism served as an ‘entrance gate’ into this Christian community. The key for Paul was that through this gate, one would enter a *new* and unique network in which distinctions of gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status were no longer relevant... The movement of a believer ‘toward a new orientation’ through Christian baptism at the same time meant ‘movement away from an old orientation’ such as societal distinctions of ethnicity and status (Robertson 2001: 119).

### **The Cross as Marker of the Identity of the Christian *Ecclesia***

While all this terminology is used by Paul to clearly differentiate between the Christian church and the other relational networks, what gives the Christian church its unique identity is the cross (*ho stauros*). The cross points to a new system with new values. Robertson again is right to note that,

The cross—*ho stauros*—was offered here as the primary identity marker for those in the Christian *ekklēsia*... In essence, this ‘digression’ on *ho stauros* answered the unspoken query, ‘If Christians were the set-apart ones, from what were they set apart?’ For Paul, the cross created a new, all-encompassing dichotomy that effectively reconstituted the Corinthians’ relational universe, replacing the more familiar dichotomies of Jew and Greek (1:22-24), foolish and wise (1:26-27), weak and strong. Instead of multiple *overlapping* networks, now there were only two *mutually-exclusive* ones: ‘those who are perishing’ (*apollymenoi*) and ‘those who are being saved’ (*sōzomenoi*). The message of the cross was the instrument of ‘second-order change’, as it were, by which these two networks were distinguished one from another (Robertson 2001: 136-37).

He continues:

The cross stood, as it were, at the crossroads of their relational world: they continue to cling to a world and a *Weltanschauung* that was known and acceptable to them, or they could embrace the identity of those for whom Christ had died. The cross, therefore, served as a *divider*, marking those who looked to the crucified Christ as ‘the power and wisdom of God’ (1:24) as wholly set-apart from those whose faith still rested on *sophia anthrōpōn* (2:5)... The cross was also a *unifier* for those within the Christian network (Robertson 2001: 138-39).

By using the cross as an identity marker, then, Paul would remind the Corinthians of the re-socializing effect of the cross. As already underscored, the Corinthians were still marked by the social values of the surrounding culture, therefore Paul must emphasize again that the church is a 'community whose rules govern all departments of life and he expects the members to find in it their primary and dominant relationships' (Barclay 1992: 60). But how did the Corinthians view their new identity in light of the social background described above?

John Barclay, in a study on the social contrasts between the Christian assemblies in Thessalonica and Corinth, has rightly pointed out that whereas in Thessalonica the Christians suffered social conflict with the surrounding society, 'there are plenty of signs suggesting the social acceptability of the Corinthian Christians' (Barclay 1992: 58). Given their apparent lack of understanding of the impact of the cross and conversion upon their social relationships, they seemed to have continued to be fully integrated in society, being in good terms with the wider community. They saw no reason to break with the values and conventions of the larger society, presumably because they considered the Christian *ecclesia* as one among other relational networks. Thus, according to Robertson, 'the chief problem facing Paul was [...] the tendency on the part of many Corinthians to give priority to the claims and roles of their other, pre-existing networks rather than to those of the Christian *ekklesia*' (Robertson 2001: 97).

It is not as if Paul denied the Corinthians any contact with the society; the issue was rather that the Corinthians felt too much at ease and were too friendly to the larger society to the point of neglecting any boundaries or identity markers that separated them from the outsiders and united the insiders (Robertson 2001: 98). Meeks rightly characterizes the Christian community's interaction with others in society with the phrase 'boundaries with gates', the gates opening both ways. In other words, the gates were opened from the church toward the world in that the Corinthians remained part of the society but were also opened from the world toward the church through baptism. It is not surprising, then, that a tension existed 'between measures needed to promote a strong internal cohesion, including rather clear boundaries separating it from the larger society, and the intention to continue normal and generally acceptable interactions with outsiders' (Meeks 1983: 107).

From Paul's perspective, then, 'the Corinthians' boundaries were overly permeable or, using Meeks' terminology, the "gates" were open far too wide' (Robertson 2001: 28). The same conclusion is reached by the sociological exploration of the situation in Corinth by Timothy Carter as he reacts to J. H. Neyrey's conclusions (Neyrey 1986: 129-70). Carter states that '[t]he community in Corinth suffers from porous boundaries' (Carter 1997: 50).

Both Carter and Neyrey use Mary Douglas' 'Grid and Group' matrix to compare and contrast Paul's and the Corinthians' attitudes regarding the boundaries of the Christian community (Douglas 1982). According to Douglas, the horizontal 'group' axis measures the level of participation in a bounded social unit: low group indicates a high degree of individualism; high group indicates a high level of participation in a group. The vertical 'grid' axis measure the extent to which an individual accepts or rejects the prevailing symbol system of the surrounding culture: high grid means the individual shares the public system of classification; low grid means that this is rejected in favor of a private system of classification (Carter 1997: 46, 70). Contrary to Neyrey's conclusions, Carter rightly locates Paul in the 'high-group/low-grid' quadrant, while the Corinthians in the 'high-grid/low-group' quadrant of competitive individualism (Carter 1997: 47-48). In other words, while Paul proves to be highly involved in the Christian *ecclesia* and is determined to subvert the cultural values of the larger society by means of discourse of the cross, the Corinthians seem less concerned for the unity of their Christian community and all too ready to continue their comfortable integration within the *polis*. The distinction between Paul and the Corinthians, then, can be described in terms of 'two incompatible ways of perceiving and judging... It is important to note, however, that perception and judgment always presuppose values (i.e., criteria) in terms of which the perceptions and judgments are made, and these values are always, to some extent anyway, socially determined' (Pickett 1997: 64).

The situation among the Corinthian Christians can then be described as characterized by presence of conflict within the Christian community and a relative absence of conflict between that community and its larger social environment. Paul, on the other hand, sought to bring unity among those belonging to the Christian community and separation from the cultural values of the surrounding society. The contrast between Paul's stance and the Corinthians' is aptly described by Robertson: 'Theirs was a world of multiple networks... but Paul was calling them to something not of this world' (Robertson 2001: 98).

More precisely, what distinguishes Paul's and the Corinthians' perceptions concerning unity and identity is the degree of the impact of the cross upon culture and its values. Clearly for Paul, the cross and the cultural values are at odds, and that is why one may speak of the 'scandal of the cross' as characteristic of Paul's discourse on the cross in 1 Corinthians 1:18-25. Pickett is thus right to assess that 'Paul's argument in 1:18-25 is in substance a criticism of culture' (Pickett 1997: 70). Thus, by means of the discourse on the cross Paul addresses both the surface issue of unity and the more basic issue of identity—the boundaries of the Christian community. The function

of the cross in Paul's argument, then, can be seen as both deconstructive and constructive (Pickett 1997:214).

### Conclusion

The investigation of the social background of 1 Corinthians 1-4 has pointed out some important features that may shed light on the dissensions in the Corinthian congregation. First, the Corinthian congregation was heterogeneous, consisting of people of various socio-economic status, though the majority were of lower status, at least at the inception of the Corinthian ecclesia. Second, the Corinthian Christians were confusing the Christian *ecclesia* with other relational networks to which they concomitantly belonged, behaving thus according to the cultural values of the larger society. Third, by means of the discourse on the cross, Paul seeks to complete the Corinthian Christians' resocialization into the new entity—*en christō*—by presenting the cross as the identity marker for the Christian assembly. According to Paul, the cross, a symbol of weakness and foolishness, has a countercultural effect, overturning the social values of the *polis*.

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[This article is part of chapter 2 of Corin Mihaila (2009) *The Paul-Apollos Relationship and Paul's Stance toward Greco-Roman Rhetoric. An Exegetical and Socio-historical Study of 1 Corinthians 1-4* (LNTS 402). London: T&T Clark International, pp. 150-173. Used by permission from the publisher]