Honor, Rhetoric and Factionalism in the Ancient World:
1 Corinthians 1–4 in Its Social Context

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Abstract

This essay suggests that the central element of the factionalism and strife evident in 1 Corinthians 1-4 is the lust for honor by members of the early Christ-movement at Corinth. While the last few decades have seen a proliferation of social-scientific approaches to biblical interpretation, many demonstrating the centrality of issues of honor and shame, the letter of 1 Corinthians has remained largely untouched by issues related to honor. Yet it presents a unique exposé of numerous and vital aspects of social life in the Greco-Roman world. By analyzing the issues of factionalism and rhetoric within the social context of the time, and doing so within the framework of the central import of honor, it is hoped that the essay provides an appropriate and compelling framework within which to view this section of Paul’s letter.

Key words: honor, shame, wisdom, rhetoric, factionalism

One of the most intriguing questions to be asked when studying the Pauline literature from a social perspective is, what happened at Corinth? For if Paul had been the founder and guiding mentor of the community for some long time, then why, between the time of his departure and the writing of 1 Corinthians, had social relations deteriorated so badly? And why were individuals, or some (or even many) in the community, now engaged in activities which the apostle could condemn only in the severest of terms: e.g., that someone should be handed over to Satan (1 Cor 5:5); that certain conduct was shameful or could destroy a fellow believer, or might be construed as participating with demons (1 Cor 11:6; 8:11; 10:20–21); that the community was setting its heart on evil (10:6); and bringing itself under judgement, sickness, and death (11:30)? It is a list of extraordinary concerns. What deleterious forces were at work that could precipitate such a wide-ranging number of critical problems?

It has been shown elsewhere that the social dynamics of honor and shame; that is, the love and lust for honor and status, had a significant if not primary part to play in many of the disparate problems encountered in 1 Corinthians (Mal-
na & Pilch; Finney). The contention of this paper is that this is certainly true of the factionalism evident in 1 Corinthians 1–4, a section that, for many exegetes, is a pivotal starting point in attempts to discern many of the social complexities evident in later sections of Paul’s letter.

A number of recent studies by Greco-Roman social historians have noted the pivotal significance of philotimia (the love of honor) in ancient life. Jon Lendon, for example, argues, “Honor was a filter through which the whole world was viewed, a deep structure of the Greco-Roman mind, perhaps the ruling metaphor of ancient society” (73). And Ramsay MacMullen notes of philotimia, “No word understood to its depths, goes farther to explain the Greco-Roman achievement” (125). Here he has in mind the “rich,” but philotimia was certainly not restricted to the elite (a point of some importance for this study). Dio Chrysostom noted that even slaves jockeyed with one another over “glory and pre-eminence” (Orations 35.41), and Columella advised that a farm manager could secure hard work from laborers by occasionally “admitting them to his own table and being willing to grant them prestige with other honors” (Agriculture 11.1.19). “There is no status so low,” observed Valerius Maximus (Memorable Doings and Sayings 8.14.5), “that it cannot be touched by the sweetness of prestige”; or, in the more poetic words of Horace, “Glory drags in chains behind her shining chariot the obscure no less than the nobly born” (Satires 1.6.23–24). In short, “The plebeian was as preoccupied with honor as the manumitted freedman, the patron, the woman as the man, the child as the adult” (Bar- ton 11, and see Joshel). There is little doubt that the Christ-movement at Corinth would have existed within this same social framework (Winter 2002a).

When we turn to Paul’s letter, attuned to notions of philotimia, the effects of the pursuit of honor and the social disruption that it may have caused become readily apparent. As will be shown below, this clear in the community’s reported quarrelling and factionalism in 1 Corinthians 1–4. But there was a further delicate issue to be resolved: the status of the community’s relationship to Paul himself, for the factionalism was undermining his apostolic credibility, with some of the Corinthians now openly rejecting his authority (Pickett: 130). Paul’s initial honor status was likely to have been unquestionably high. He was, after all, founder and leader of the community, and appears to have exuded both apostolic authority and a level of charismatic power (Polaski). But now, such authority appears to be neither unlimited nor widely recognized. It was restricted primarily by those in Jerusalem, by personal inadequacies on his own part, and later by other so-called super apostles who came to Corinth after him (2 Cor 11:5). Following his departure from the province the recognition of his authority was, it seems, increasingly undermined and was certainly rejected by those who were in competition with him. Hence, Paul’s letter attempts not only to bring harmony to a fractured community but also to improve his honor standing and re-assert his authority (Engberg-Pederson). But questions remain as to how and why such social disruption occurred.

**Factionalism and Strife in Corinth**

The initial problem that Paul attempts to counter is that of the congregational factionalism outlined in 1 Corinthians 1:10ff. Much scholarly discussion has focused upon questions of a theological nature, and many have sought to locate the source of the divisions in conflicting theological ideologies or agendas. But there are numerous problems inherent in such an enterprise and the attempt to discern the doctrinal differences among the disparate groups has not only been somewhat fruitless but is now largely abandoned (Schrage: 38–63). More recently, many are now analyzing the context of the letter with a view to articulating the factionalism from a variety of first-century social perspectives (so, Marshall).

Theissen, Meeks, and others have demonstrated that the conflict may have a wider social dimension, with the intense rivalry perhaps involving a cross-section of people from different socio-economic and/or cultural backgrounds. But to view the quarrelling, partisanship, and many of the other internal problems within the community from a perspective of philotimia has not yet been considered, yet is entirely reasonable. Hence, it need not be assumed that the various problems at Corinth stemmed from only a few individuals or a single minority group (so, Fee: 8). Indeed, except for a few instances where Paul shifts to the second person singular, perhaps with a specific person (or persons) in view, the entire letter is written in the second person plural. (The puffed-up in 1 Corinthians 4:18–19; 8:1 are certainly a particular group of people, whether the same group in each case is a moot point, but the same term is also used of the whole congregation in 1 Corinthians 4:6 and 5:2.)

Paul’s appeal for unity in 1 Corinthians 1:10 is paralleled
with that in 4:16 (perhaps forming an *inclusio* around these significant chapters). He indicates the source of the internal problems within the community: “there is strife among you” (1:10–11; the quarrelling and selfish rivalry are *among* the Corinthians, not at this point between Paul and the group), which has led to divisions and schism. He returns to the same idea at 1 Corinthians 3:3 when he notes the “jealousy and strife among you,” and again at 1 Corinthians 11:18–19, where there are “schisms and factions among you.” As is well documented, such terms have a long history in speeches, political treatises and historical works dealing with political unity and factionalism, and which are often, as here, intertwined with social issues and motivations (Welborn; Mitchell). The Greek term for schism, *schisma*, was used metaphorically of political division or of civil strife within a community (Herodotus, *Histories* 7.129; Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History* 12.66.2). Clement employs similar terminology in his epistle to the Corinthians when he speaks of the “detestable and unholy schism… strife and anger and dissension and divisions and war among you” (1 Clement 1.1; 46.5). It appears, within the wider context, that Clement has in mind not so much a religious heresy or a harmless clique, but factions engaged in a struggle for honor through power and status (1 Clement 47).

So, too, in his study of the Greek term *hairesis* (division, faction) within a wide range of ancient literature, Marcel Simon suggests that the cause of factionalism does not necessarily derive from points of doctrine, but may be “simply a matter or personal rivalries and matters of prestige and honor” (109). Interestingly, many of the terms employed here are paralleled in a prayer of Dio Chrysostom, who invokes the gods on behalf of his city, 

That from this day forth they may implant in this city a yearning for itself, a passionate love, a singleness of purpose, a unity of wish and thought; and, on the other hand, that they may cast out strife and contentiousness and jealousy, so that this city may be numbered among the most prosperous and the noblest for all time to come [*Orations* 39.8; italics mine].

Dio’s urging to unity and the rejection of strife and jealousy has but one aim, to see the community prosper and to see it honored. He is not urging concord as a value in itself, but sees it in relation to a wider social context, fundamental to which is the honor of the community seen through its wealth and splendor. Paul’s urging of unity upon the Corinthian congregation may be seen in a similar way, for within the wider social milieu, the factionalism and power struggles can be seen only negatively by outsiders, bringing into disrepute the community and the gospel.

Welborn (89–92) has noted that the partisan slogans of 1 Corinthians 1:12–13 reflect the principles at work in the establishment of ancient political parties and that throughout antiquity one way of experiencing honor in a group was to identify oneself with a figure regarded by the group as powerful. Indeed, ancient political parties were formed according to personal allegiances rather than specific policies. Personal loyalty to a man of higher status and honor became the basic relationship from which party identification developed, and the personal enmity between such men became the social reality behind the concept of factionalism. Parties were named after the *individuals* whose interests they served (the phrases “faction of…” and the “party of…” are evident in antiquity; Welborn 90–91).

However, the most thoroughgoing attempt to assess the underlying reasons for party factionalism is articulated by Aristotle, and here he is worth quoting at length:

And since we are considering what circumstances give rise to party factions and revolutions in constitutions, we must first ascertain their origins and causes generally. They are, speaking roughly, three in number, which we must first define in outline separately. For we must ascertain what state of affairs gives rise to party strife and for what objects it is waged, and thirdly what are the origins of political disorders and internal party struggles. Those that desire equality enter on party strife if they think that they have too little although they are the equals of those who have more, while those that desire inequality or superiority do so if they suppose that although they are unequal they have not got more but an equal amount or less (and these desires may be felt justly, and they may also be felt unjustly); for when inferior, people enter on strife in order that they may be equal, and when equal, in order that they may be greater. *The objects about which it is waged are gain and honor,* and their opposites, *for men carry on party faction in states in order to avoid dishonor* and loss, either on their own behalf or on behalf of their friends... the motives of gain and honor also stir men up against each other not in order that they may get them for themselves, as has been said before, but because they see other men in some cases justly and in other cases unjustly get-
ting a larger share of them. . . . It is clear also what is the power of honor and how it can cause party faction; for men form factions both when they are themselves dishonored and when they see others honored; and the distribution of honors is unjust when persons are either honored or dishonored against their deserts, just when it is according to desert [Politics 5.2.1–4 {1302a.16–1302b.10}; italics mine].

Aristotle clearly locates the predominant underlying reason behind party factionalism to be philotimia, and he recognizes that the “power of honor,” as a social prerequisite, places it above social concord and harmony.

While the political and civic contexts of the above examples obviously differ from those of the internal problems within the Corinthian congregation, the underlying framework of factionalism derived from the pursuit of honor demonstrates the same social reality (Engberg-Pederson: 561; Winter 2002a:x, 26–27). So, while Paul is responding to the internal divisions, he is also responding to the values that lie behind them, and it is not surprising to find that the factions in Corinth center on the four men whose reputations are of the highest regard: Paul, Apollos, Peter, and Christ. (There is no hint that the apostles were themselves personally linked to the partisanship done in their name—Paul’s affirmation of Apollos (1 Cor 3:5–9; 16:12) indicates the opposite.)

As noted, Paul’s status stemmed from his initial charismatic authority and demonstration of the Spirit’s power (through which the much sought-after spiritual gifts are manifested; 1 Cor 2:4–5; 4:19–20), and later by his powerful writing (2 Cor 10:10). But these were negated by physical attributes that may have appeared unimpressive (Malina/Neyrey), together with speech that was considered contemptible (2 Cor 10:10; 11:6). The second party claims to be “of Apollos,” whom Luke describes as one who is “learned,” “cultured,” or “skilled in words,” i.e. “eloquent” (Acts 18:24). Many no doubt found Apollos a refreshing change after an apostle who could be dismissed as a “fool” (2 Cor 11:16). And while Apollos’ original teaching or intentions cannot be determined, we can gauge that the Corinthian response to him was highly favorable (Chow 103–07; Ker). The third party was that centered upon Peter, the early leader of the Christ-movement, one of the first disciples, the apostle to the Jews (Gal 2:8), and perhaps the most significant of the pillars of the Jerusalem Christ-movement (Gal 1:18; 2:2).

Finally, there was the Christ-party. Of all the uncertainty with regard to the parties, the greatest surrounds this. Some see it as Paul’s invention intended to show the absurdity of the others (Pogoloff: 178f.; Malina & Pilch: 64). However, this is done with little exegetical detail. Fee (58–59) asserts that “the grammar of the passage seems to demand that there were in fact Corinthians saying such a thing,” and both Barrett (1971: 44–46) and Hays (23) demonstrate the viability of such a party. The reasons given for rejecting the Christ-party are conjectural, but on the honor-based reading here the presence of such a party would appear to be perfectly reasonable. Once the congregation began to quarrel about the honor-status of a number of “authorities” with whom they were attempting to identify, the presence of a party centered upon the figure of supreme status would be entirely expected. This group may have been attempting to rise above the quarrelling and jealousy of the rest (those boasting in mere men) but in so doing may have fallen into their own brand of elitism which made them little better than the others. Such a claim may have been coupled with pretensions to have direct spiritual access to Christ; but for whatever reason, Paul sees that when such partisanship becomes the rallying cry of one group, then Christ is de facto reduced to the status of one more “leader” within the community. However, despite Jesus’ superlative status, the manner of his death and the proclamation of a gospel that focused upon the cross may well have inhibited some from adhering to the Christ party. For such people, identification with one of the other leaders may have presented a better option.

From Paul’s perspective, Peter may have been a potential cause of dissension in Corinth, and probably a difficult relationship existed between them after the conflict at Antioch (Gal 1–2). Barrett’s arguments that Peter visited Corinth at some stage are persuasive (1971: 44; 1982). His thesis is not accepted by all (see Pogoloff 178f.; Horsley 34), but the fact that many simply dismiss the presence of a Cephas-party without engaging with Barrett’s thesis is somewhat surprising. (1 Clement 47.3 notes the presence of Cephas at Corinth.) For the purposes of personal identification with a figure of high status, however, the on-going debate over whether Peter had ever actually been to Corinth is somewhat irrelevant. The mere recognition of his high standing within the Christ-movement would be enough for men to want to associate with such a figure, whether they had met him personally or not. The histories of Greece and Rome (e.g., Herodotus, Livy, Plutarch) are replete with details of men of high
honor, especially military commanders, being able attract soldiers who had never met them personally (Demosthenes, 2 Olynthiac 17–18; Xenophon, Memorabilia 2.6.21). So, too, influential representatives of the Jerusalem apostles, not necessarily authorized by them, made their presence felt in a number of Pauline communities (Painter: 239).

In terms of relative values of honor, Paul would certainly have interpreted the support for others (particularly Apollos) as diminishment of his own. Although Paul places himself and Apollos as comparable (they are both servants of Christ laboring in God’s field, 3:6, 8; 4:1), this does not solve Paul’s problem of loss of honor, which he must attempt to regain. At the same time he must be careful, indeed subtle, with his admonitions, for in a sensitive situation open criticism of another may backfire, and Apollos was clearly held in high regard by many (Ker).

That the party-slogans had certainly arisen spontaneously and without any direct encouragement from the leaders whose names were being used is clear from the way in which Paul’s criticism is directed only towards the Corinthians themselves in rejecting their false estimation of the leaders. In light of Galatians, one can hardly argue that Paul would not have criticized another apostle in a public letter. But since Paul is able to address the whole congregation, such divisions should not necessarily be understood as suggesting that there were severe splits within the community. Rather, the letter indicates that these revolve around inchoate quarrels (1:11; 3:3), jealousies (3:3), and boasting, stemming from attitudes of partisanship, and that perhaps open division occurred only when the congregation met together as a whole (11:18; 14:33). Paul’s highly charged rhetoric is aimed at stopping the current partisanship from developing into overt schism and splitting the community, rather than indicating that it was already so.

The different factions, then, appear to be more concerned with the characteristic status of the leaders they venerate. The underlying search for status and honor found an expression in their desire to identify with, elevate, and make claims for status, on the basis of those figures of authority that demonstrate recognizable prestige and power. Welborn’s proposal that the real problem of partisanship being addressed in 1 Cor 1–4 is “a struggle for power” is certainly correct, although while he describes it adequately in terms of the language of ancient politics, he fails to locate its underlying basis in the intense rivalries for status and honor (87).

This is again drawn out in 1 Clement, which reminds the community of their factionalism in Paul’s day (“...you were partisans of Apostles of high reputation”) and he proceeds to castigate the current factionalism using the language of shame (47.4–7).

To summarize, Paul’s reaction to the partisanship is to critique all of it. He is certainly very careful to avoid giving the impression that he favors any one group; rather, he insists that the apostles are united (3:22–4:1), and lays particularly emphasis on the relationship between himself and Apollos as a model for the community. He also makes no identification with the Paul-group; indeed, he is more critical of these—his general reaction to the slogans is to begin to undermine those who use his name, or the name of the other apostles, and who attempt to set themselves apart from others (1:13; cf. 3:4–9; 4:6). If the Christ-movement was a union of several house groups that only periodically met together, such relative isolation may have allowed each group to develop particular emphases of thought or behavior and to identify with certain “authorities.” Such factionalism may have become entrenched despite (or even because of) being occasionally confronted by other opinions (Meeks: 76). Paul’s goal for the community may thus have been to solidify union among divergent house groups, rather than to preserve the congregation from serious schism.

Wisdom, Rhetoric, and Honor

Literature relating to rhetorical criticism and New Testament interpretation proceeds unabated at the present time (see Watson: 2006). However, an outline of the form and function of ancient rhetorical theory and its application to 1 Corinthians is not my goal here. Rather, of more relevance is a description of the close relationship between wisdom, rhetorical delivery, and philotimia.

The frequent occurrence of sophia/sophos (wisdom/wise) in 1 Corinthians 1–4 (twenty-seven times), which otherwise appear just ten times in the genuine Pauline corpus, is best explained by the assumption that Paul picked up on a key word of the Corinthians (cf. 1 Cor 3:18–21; 4:10). And to see a link between the Corinthians’ notion of wisdom and the evident partisanship, quarrelling and jealousy is within reason, because the two subjects are the primary topics of chapters 1–4 (cf. 3:18–22). Recent studies have demonstrated that throughout this section the term wisdom refers.
especially to both the possession of exalted knowledge and to the ability to express that knowledge in a powerful and rhetorically eloquent way (Mitchell; Pogoloff). This is especially evident at 1:17 and 2:4, where Paul first suggests that it is the notion of eloquent wisdom that is in some way connected to the internal quarrelling (Pogoloff: 210). Hence, the case has been persuasively made that much of the controversy in 1 Corinthians 1–4 may have been stirred up by the tendency of believers to regard Paul and other preachers as rhetors competing for public attention alongside other popular philosophers. What has been less appreciated, however, is the direct link between rhetoric and philotimia.

Rhetoric in the ancient world was the pinnacle of education (Habinek: 60). Together, eloquence and erudition were qualities supremely admired and much sought after, and for reasons that should be quite obvious and unsurprising. For their focus was upon the public esteem of the rhetor, esteem that brought immediate and abounding honor. This is evident in numerous ancient texts. Cicero claims, “If wisdom is present as the moderator of all things, then those who have attained it gain glory, honor, and prestige from it and also the most certain and safe defense of their friends” (On Invention 1.5). Likewise, Plutarch, in the Dinner of the Seven Wise Men (Moralia 149B), has Alexi demus state simply and unequivocally, “...I observe that all you wise men too make it your aim in life to have honor shown you.” And Quintillian asserts of eloquence, “that there is no other source from which men have reaped such a harvest of wealth, honor, friendship and glory, both in the present and to come...Wherefore let us seek with all our hearts that true majesty of oratory...of present glory and the immortal record of posterity” (Institutions 12.11.29–30).

Contests between poets, sophists, and rhetors involving demonstrations of such oratory and wisdom were common and highly popular, with the winners being accorded great accolades and public prestige (Winter 2002b). Philostratus could describe the popular rhetor Scopelian as the very model of the assured orator who appeared before his audiences, not “with the bearing of a timid speaker, but as befitted one who was entering the lists to win glory for himself and was confident that he could not fail” (Lives 5.19). Such contests also took place between cities with great civic honor resting upon the importance of being able to boast about having the greatest rhetors (boasting is, of course, a public claim to honor). For Isocrates, “Beautiful and artistic speech...is the work of an intelligent mind...and that this has proved itself to be the surest sign of culture in every one of us, and that those that are skilled in speech are not only men of power in their own cities but are also held in honor in other states” (Panegyric 48–50).

Ramsay MacMullen pertinently observes that throughout the histories of Greece and Rome, rhetoric was often a divisive factor amongst those who competed for status in the, “thirst for honor, the contest for applause” (62). And in his historical analysis of Greco-Roman rhetorical traditions, James Kinneavy notes, “The concept of rhetoric...dominated the schooling of the time in Greek and Roman education, and it was conspicuous in Jewish schools also. It was an oratorific concept, much more complex than just a combination of intellectual and emotional appeals” (20, italics mine).

Corinth would certainly have been caught up in the pattern of behavior that elevated those who were exceptional in oratory and eloquence (Lithfin: 189), and perhaps some in the city strove to become students of the renowned sophists and other rhetors. Dio Chrysostom, widely acknowledged as a great orator, records that when he visited a city he was “escorted with much enthusiasm and respect, the recipients of my visits being grateful for my presence and begging me to address them and advise them and flocking around my door from early dawn” (Orations 47.22). That said, he was critical of those who made a show of oratory above wisdom, and it appears that Corinth was a city especially known for such behavior. This is observed in Dio’s description of a trip made to the city by the orator Diogenes (perhaps a veiled allusion to Dio himself):

...the man of wisdom should take up his abode where fools are thickest in order to convict them of their folly and reprove them. So, when the time for the Isthmian games arrived, and everybody was at the Isthmus, he went down also....That was the time, too, when one could hear crowds of wretched Sophists around Poseidon’s temple shouting and reviling one another, their disciples as they were called, fighting with one another, many writers reading aloud their stupid works, many poets reciting their poems while others applauded them [Orations 8.9].

As in all rivalry over honor, such competition could become quite divisive, and a deep sense of partisanship could frequently arise. Plutarch notes that the wise man possesses the “superiority and influence so coveted” by others, and this...
superiority “in repute and honor” provokes jealousy in men of ambitious character (Moralia 485A–486D). A group attaching itself to a particular rhetor could be described as secta (“party, faction, sect”), and loyalty to such teachers and orators could be intense, provoking violent rivalries. Indeed, Dio Chrysostom (Orations 55.4) states that the definition of a disciple of such an orator or teacher was a zealot, and Philostratus relates that on one occasion the pupils of a sophist became so incensed at insults being heaped on their teacher that they ordered their slaves to beat a rival orator, who subsequently died (Lives 588).

One crucial feature in displays of ancient rhetoric was the power of the audience in determining the caliber of the wisdom being delivered, and, hence, the fate of the orator as a result (Quintillian, Institutions 2.7.5). Certainly, with the ascendancy of a more decorative style of rhetoric by the time of Paul, the orator became less concerned with the content of the message to be conveyed than with its poetic and creative elegance (and, naturally, with how it influenced his personal approval amongst the audience). That is not to say that the early Christ-movement in Corinth operated by precisely the same rules as the public square, but it may well have been difficult for a group to relinquish the role of arbiter where this role was the standard cultural expectation. Thomas Habinek sums up the connection of honor, public rhetoric and factionalism when he writes,

…the citizen who has mastered the art of special speech has little incentive to use it in such a way as to augment the honor of fellow citizens. Far from it, he seeks the aggrandizement of himself or his faction at the expense of others, unless he is speaking to outsiders as well, in which case he may seek to augment his community’s honor at the expense of theirs. Speechmaking becomes part of a culture of strategic performance in which observance of protocols of manliness and almost obsessive concern with the decorous presentation of the body mask an underlying and chronic anxiety over status…For all of rhetoric’s long-term function as a replacement or substitute for violent resolution of conflict, in the heat of the moment it tends to promote division, exclusion, and the maintenance of oppressive hierarchies, albeit through non-violent means [6; and see pp. 13–15].

When we turn to 1 Corinthians 1–4 it is clear that much of the above is evidenced within the Christ-movement, for in Paul’s view the community is guilty of having an element of misplaced pride over certain leaders which is resulting in divisive boasting. Their rivalry, jealousy and strife, appear to him to be typical of the wider social milieu— incontrovertible evidence that the Corinthians are acting in a “human,” fleshly way (1 Cor 3:3–4). And Paul claims that for him to have preached the gospel in a manner of rhetorical sophistication would have actually emptied or made void the cross of Christ (cf. 2:4–5). But in what sense would this occur? The issue, as demonstrated above, and as seen in 1 Cor 2:4–5, appears to center upon the form, not the content, of his preaching. That is, the proclamation of the gospel in rhetorical sophistication must be avoided lest it engender an inappropriate response in the recipients (2:5); for the listener may respond to the wisdom of men rather than to the true object of response—the cross of Christ, which is the power of God (1:18, 24; 2:5). Paul’s preaching did not lack persuasion; what it lacked was the kind of articulation found among the sophists and rhetoricians where the power lay in “presence” of the orator and his delivery.

Although Paul is likely to have had a basic training in rhetoric, Martin Hengel is probably correct when he asserts that it was “basically un-literary rhetorical training focused on speaking publicly in the synagogue” (58). By which he means that Paul demonstrates a lack of style compared to the Greek writers and lacks the form of classical literary models. But it is this style of Greco-Roman rhetoric that Paul categorically rejects, for he sees a radically different dynamic at work. It is precisely because of his lack of eloquence in his proclamation of the gospel of Christ crucified that its acceptance most fully demonstrates God’s power at work (1:18, 24; cf. Rom 1:16), and Paul seems to conceive of these as mutually complementary.

Further, there is the issue of the relationship between wisdom and the partisan quarrelling over the “authorities” of repute. Why, and in what sense, did each party praise its “own” apostle? Many scholars simply presume that the partisanship was a direct result of the competitiveness over relative values of “wisdom” accorded the different apostles as evidenced in their rhetorical ability. Peter Lampe, for example, uses such reasoning to state of the factions, “Because they apparently valued his ‘wisdom’… [the] party members praised the wisdom and theological perception of ‘their’ apostle” (118). The problem here is that neither Peter nor Jesus can be shown to possess such rhetorical wisdom of this
kind, and this may well relate to the swiftness with which these two figures are simply dismissed from a discussion of the partisanship as an example of Pauline hyperbole (so, Pickett: 128; Pogoloff: 178–80, 197; Welborn: 87). The contrast of the factionalism is thus seen by many to be solely between the parties of Apollos and Paul.

But the scenario may be better elucidated from the perspective of philotimia. The pursuit of greater honor had led the Corinthians to affiliate themselves to the named high-status apostles, and the ensuing partisanship had led to jealousy, quarrelling, and division, perhaps over the relative merits of each apostle, and over the “wisdom” of the groups who claim him as their “leader.” The obvious means of elevating one’s own apostle would then be to highlight the way in which he has ascribed/acquired honor and to focus primarily on those aspects that are most superior. The problem for the Apollos group would be that in general and in relative terms, Apollos may well have been considered as having the lowest status of the four named apostles. In attempting to overcome this imbroglio, the Apollos-group would certainly have to emphasize his most positive and easily recognizable attributes, which may correspond to those highlighted by Luke: his eloquence, his fervor in the spirit, his great learning, and his vigorous and successful defense of the Christ-movement in open public debate (Acts 18). As noted, these very attributes were, of course, honorific values associated with the philosophers, sophists, and rhetors. Simply in order to elevate their own apostle, the Apollos group would naturally want to compare all of the apostles with respect to rhetorical ability, something that would have been done as a matter of course within their social milieu. The emphasis upon the value of rhetoric may also have meant that the Apollos party was dominant in terms of size, and this would have enabled it to place the debate over the relative merits of the apostles onto an agenda which most suited them; i.e., in a direct comparison of rhetorical ability. Here, there could be little doubt that Apollos had the greatest status.

Certainly, the attack on Paul’s apostleship appears to be the result of competitive jockeying for honor within the church on the part of at least some and perhaps even many of its members; and with it, a preference for leadership that better exemplified the qualities of wisdom and eloquence. On this reading, the primary resistance to Paul reflected in 1 Corinthians 1–4 was triggered by, and centered upon, negative responses to his public speaking by the Apollos group. This negative verdict of Paul—both his physical appearance and his speaking itself were deficient, even contemptible, by the sophisticated standards of the Greek rhetoricians—meant that Paul was perhaps an embarrassment. He fell woefully short by the stringent criteria of Greek eloquence, and some of the Corinthians may have found Paul’s all too public deficiencies a painful liability. These status-conscious Corinthians apparently harbored few reservations about rendering a negative judgment of Paul’s abilities as a speaker; they perceived him in much the same light as they perceived other itinerant speakers, as fair game for their evaluations. In short, there was little to commend him (Habinek: 65). It is likely that much of the underlying discontent and dissatisfaction with Paul emerged after his departure, for the reservations that some of the Corinthians may have had about Paul from the beginning—reservations about him personally (despite the fact that they found the gospel he preached worthy of acceptance)—became more pronounced. Within a climate of such partisanship, neophyte believers may not have had the insight to appreciate the radical paradox of Paul’s gospel, and instead gravitated to one of the other parties (particularly that of Apollos). It was perhaps inevitable that this valuing of status, and the symbols of status, had the potential to be imported into a believing community (Meeks: 51–73), although what is surprising is its destructive capacity.

Thus, in 1 Corinthians 1–4 Paul’s primary concern is to undermine the dominant Apollos party. He must do so in terms of their own agenda, by a critique of the merits of Greco-Roman rhetoric. But he must also undermine any agenda that divides the body of Christ. Paul does so with a general critique of those making honor claims which are not Christ-centered, for he asserts that such partisan behavior in “belonging” to men of higher status merely parallels their pagan cultural milieu (3:3–4) and demonstrates the Corinthians’ immaturity in the ways of God (they are “infants in Christ,” 3:1–4). In this way, Paul’s descriptive terminology of the wise for the Corinthians, points ironically to what they themselves purport to be the correct and most suitable pursuit of honor (1 Cor. 1:19–27; 3:10, 18–20; 6:5). Each group is praising its own wisdom in “recognizing” the putative higher status (in whatever way), of its own apostle. This is brought out most clearly in 3:18–21, “Do not deceive yourselves. If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. . . . So let no one boast about human leaders.” The deceptive cultural
constraints of philotimia are leading the Corinthians to employ human wisdom in developing associations with high-status apostles, leading to a situation of boasting (of self and of one’s apostle), and so of being “puffed-up” in favor of one and against another (4:6).

Conclusions

Many explanations have been offered for the factionalism evident in 1 Corinthians 1–4; yet all of them have missed the centrality of philotimia in understanding both what Paul says and how he articulates himself. For, as seen, honor was a central and vital element of the social context of first-century Mediterranean life, as Paul was all too well aware. He recognized, too, that this was the root cause of many problematic issues within the community: the factionalism and discord, negative attitudes to other members, and the rising tensions between himself and a certain section of the Christmovement. His attempt to stem the tide of such issues focuses upon an articulate attempt to undermine its central cause and to offer his own ministry as an appropriate model.

Works Cited


Note: All citations of ancient authors are taken from the Loeb Classical Library (cited above).