

1 Cor. 4.18-5.13: A Rhetorical-Critical-Homiletical Case Study

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Introduction

The purpose of this study is not to engage in an in-depth exegetical study of the text of 1 Corinthians 4.18-5.13, but rather to demonstrate a rhetorical-critical exegetical approach to the literary genre of discourse literature rather than to a standard narrative text.¹ The operative value driving such a study is the notion that the form of the text should ultimately influence the final form of the sermon itself. This study will demonstrate that the use of rhetorical criticism for a non-narrative text can be useful for constructing a variety of participatory homiletical forms that replicate the rhetorical dynamics of the text.

The study will first examine the outer frame of the book as a whole and second will engage in a rhetorical-critical study of 1 Cor. 4.18-5.13. Finally the paper will conclude with a discussion of the potential implications for multiple point-of-view approaches to homiletics based upon such an approach. Beyond studying a different genre, this unit additionally serves as an illustration of the situational nature of the rhetoric Paul utilized within the book of 1 Corinthians as he dealt with a wide variety of pastoral and theological issues within the Corinthian church.

The account that the Corinthian church was guilty of tolerating gross immorality reached Paul by rumour and common report, and the text bears witness to his righteous indignation at the flagrant nature of the immorality.² The way in which Paul utilizes various rhetorical constraints in responding to this exigence establishes his vision of Christian community that involves a high level of group consciousness. His strategies in dealing with the issues at hand additionally sought to authenticate his status and role within a voluntaristic community.³ The following analysis of the contextual and rhetorical situation within this literary unit illustrates the ability of rhetorical criticism as an exegetical method that in turn can inform multi-vocal homiletical strategies. Such preaching forms are consistent with a values-based approach to homiletics that aims first to replicate creatively the rhetorical

¹ For an approach that combines rhetorical criticism and homiletics on a dialogic narrative text see for example Koptak's article "Rhetorical Criticism of the Bible: A Resource for Preaching," *Covenant Quarterly* Vol. LIV, No. 3 (August 1996): 26-37.

² Phillips, *Exploring 1 Corinthians*, 109.

³ Witherington, *Conflict and Community*, 152-153.

dynamics of the biblical text and second to construct participatory, dialogic and open-ended homiletics that are applicable to postmodern listeners.

Currently the liberating movement away from more traditional deductive, linear and propositional sermons has led to the exploration of inductive, evocative and transformational preaching forms. These new homiletical styles attempt to elevate the role of the listener from passive recipients to active participants.⁴ Contemporary preaching theory explores this situation, emphasizing a growing awareness of how people listen to a sermon.⁵ Postmodern and emerging congregations desire active participation rather than passivity, embracing collaborative preaching styles that do not close down interpretative options but rather open up the Word so that listeners can interactively participate in the making of meaning.⁶ One such possibility involves multi-vocal and multi-perspectival preaching that both listens to and honours various stories in their diversity. Such participatory preaching forms potentially engage hearers and enable them to make connections with their lives.⁷ Open-ended sermons do not state their points in so many words, thereby allowing the listeners to draw their own conclusions. Sermon form, therefore, is an essential component in the task of enabling listeners to participate actively in the communication event of preaching.⁸

The Outer Framework of 1 Corinthians

The study of this literary unit first begins with an assessment of the contextual situation of the outer frame of the entire book prior to moving to a close reading of the unit itself. Rather than focusing solely upon diachronic concerns related to historical context and source materials, such a reading utilizes a synchronic analysis that treats the entire book holistically as a literary unit in the attempt to discern the rhetoric of the book as a whole.⁹ The differences between the two approaches are revealed concerning the issue of the audience of the letter itself. Here the critic faces two possibilities in terms of the reconstruction of the audience. From a diachronic point of view one could engage in a historical investigation of such issues as: the legitimacy of Pauline authorship, the historical context of Paul at the time of writing, the historical and sociological contexts of first-century Corinth, the possible sources that make up the two letters and the possible rhetorical effectiveness of the letter

⁴ Smith, "Preaching," 91.

⁵ Duck, *Finding Words for Worship*, 46-47.

⁶ Craddock, *Preaching*, 195; Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God*, 36; Wilson, *Preaching and Homiletical Theory*, 31; and Sweet, *The Gospel According to Starbucks*, 84.

⁷ Duck, *Finding Words for Worship*, 48.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁹ Gitay, "Reflections on the Study," 216; Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 33.

upon the original readers or hearers.¹⁰ Conversely, by adapting a synchronic reading the critic could adopt a more literary and rhetorical approach, reading the text as a case study in terms of Paul's rhetorical strategies when dealing with a disunified and dysfunctional church. Such a reading, while not overlooking historical concerns or the historical context of the original readers, also involves the engaging the contexts of all later readers of the letter. This study of 1 Corinthians will adopt a complementary reading employing elements of both approaches, engaging with the historic audience, the rhetorical strategies located within the letter itself and all subsequent readers and environments unanticipated by the actual author.¹¹ Such a reading allows the preacher to draw dynamic equivalents from the context of the historical audience within the text to that of the contemporary situation.

Classen indicates that when analyzing NT letters rhetorically, the exegete should seek to identify "the writer's intention in directing it to an individual or a group of persons or even several groups."¹² In terms of the rhetorical situation the author uses his judgement by assessing a particular situation involving an exigence and the possible audience(s) involved. The author decides not only what to say but also exactly how to present it to the listeners in the particular circumstances in order to achieve the hoped-for outcome. Operative constraints guide the author regarding the choice of various rhetorical strategies that may or may not be effective in achieving his rhetorical goals and persuading the audience to act according to his aims.¹³ On the literary level of the book as a whole the overall rhetorical situation of 1 Corinthians reveals multiple exigences that Paul attempted to address throughout the letter. The situational nature of this discursive rhetoric allows the preacher to reconstruct elements of those dynamics for an audience, rather than adopting a more traditional propositional-deductive homiletical form that seeks to explain the text interpretatively to an audience. Moreover, an assessment of the widest possible literary context helps the preacher to locate smaller literary units contextually and understand the rhetorical function of the part in relation to the whole. Moreover, from a synchronic point of view, viewing the text as a literary unity helps avoid lifting passages out of context and establishes both literary and rhetorical perspectives of the book as a whole.

¹⁰ Marshall, Travis, and Paul, *Exploring the New Testament Vol. 2*, 74; Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 29-40. Some scholars believe, for example, that because of their apparent fragmentary nature both 1 and 2 Corinthians involve compilations from several Pauline letters that can be rearranged in a different chronology. Others doubt that Paul was the author of certain letters attributed to him.

¹¹ Tull, "Rhetorical Criticism and Intertextuality," 156.

¹² Classen, *Rhetorical Criticism of the New Testament*, 46.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 46; Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," 220.

An analysis of the rhetorical situation of 1 Corinthians reveals that the major exigence Paul faced consisted of a fissiparous church, deeply divided into a variety of schisms and factions (1.10-12; 3.1-9; 11.17-18). In short, dissension and disunity had infested the Corinthian church.¹⁴ This overarching exigence manifested itself in multiple specific issues, which included the following examples: splinter groups claiming to follow differing authorities such as Peter, Paul or Apollos (1.12; 3.4); a party spirit and associated spiritual attitudes (1.10-4.21); sexual immorality apparently tolerated within the church (5-6.9-20); litigation in the church (6.1-7); debates over the roles and status of singles and married, and questions regarding divorce (7); the issue of eating meat sacrificed to idols, Christian liberty and idolatry (8, 10); various attacks on Paul's apostolic authority (9); divisions between rich and poor at the Lord's Supper (11); debates over superior and inferior spiritual gifts operative within the church (12-14); the status of believers who had died prior to the resurrection (15) and finally the collection for the Jerusalem church (16). Paul's major concern was that all of these dissensions and divisions not only destroyed church unity but ultimately affected its missional role within the community, as its reputation and stance were potentially being perhaps irreparably damaged.

In order to achieve his rhetorical goal of defusing the debates and re-unify this fractious church, Paul made use multiple operative constraints as rhetorical strategies, involving for example: logical argumentation, sarcasm and irony (4.8-13); image and metaphor (5.6-8; 12.14-26); multiple quotations from Scripture (1.19, 31; 9.9; 14.21; etc.); argumentative and polemical statements (15.2, 36); rhetorical questions (1.13, 20; 3.4-5; 9.1-12, etc.); autobiographical reference (1.14-17; 2.1-5; 15.3-11); and finally quotations from secular proverbs (15.32-33). All of these rhetorical strategies were crafted to achieve his aims by persuading the audience to take the appropriate action and modify the various specific exigences addressed throughout the letter.

A final consideration concerns the rhetorical effectiveness of Paul's rhetorical strategies, which raises the question of whether or not Paul achieved his goal of re-unifying this schismatic church. 2 Cor. 1.12-2.12 appears to give evidence that his "painful visit" together with an earlier letter resulted in some positive outcomes within the church. However, the letter concludes on a doubtful note: Paul anticipated finding further schisms, fits of rage, jealousy, slander, gossip, disorder, debauchery and sexual immorality within the church on a future third visit (12.19-13.10). Clearly the relationship between Paul and the Corinthian

¹⁴ Calvin, *Commentaries on Corinthians Volume 1*, 22.

church involved great difficulty, and one must ultimately question the rhetorical effectiveness of Paul's advice to the church located within the literary unit studied below.

A Rhetorical-Critical Reading of 1 Corinthians 4.18-5.13

Following the analysis of the outer frame of the entire discourse, the first step in a rhetorical-critical approach is to delineate the boundaries of the literary unit, recognizing as precisely as possible where it begins and ends.¹⁵ This illustrates that the critic can make use of diachronic critical methodologies, which are often helpful in delimiting the boundaries of literary units from a form-critical point of view. At this point two options present themselves regarding the division of this unit. Fee, Witherington, Phillips and Thiselton all establish the boundaries of the unit as encompassing 5.1-13, focusing upon the moral matter prior to moving on to the issue of lawsuits in 6.1ff.¹⁶ A second option is that of Calvin, who believed that 4.21 should have been made the beginning of the fifth chapter rather than as it is in current chapter divisions.¹⁷ The case can be made that the entire unit of 4.18-5.13 encloses a logical argument. As Paul discusses his potential visit in 4.18ff, in 4.21 he gives the Corinthians the choice as to what his coming visit might look like if they chose to heed or disregard his advice. The unit further displays linguistic connections as Paul characterizes the Corinthian audience as "puffed up" (εφυσιωθησαν, 4.18-19, 5.2) and as "boasting" (καυχημα, 5.6). For this reason this study adopts the second option and will treat the literary unit as encompassing 1 Cor. 4.18-5.13 (as further illustrated below).

The second step in the rhetorical-critical analysis is to evaluate the rhetorical situation.¹⁸ The rhetor Paul described the exigence he sought to address, which consisted of two elements: the first involved an apparent case of incest (or at the very least gross immorality, 5.1b). The second concerned the acceptance and tolerance of the situation of the Corinthian church, which seemed proud of their apparent open-mindedness (5.2, 6a). Paul argued that not even those within the secular world would tolerate such a situation; worse, the church was arrogant about it (5.1-2a). Both culprit and church were therefore guilty, and Paul

¹⁵ Muilenburg, "Form Criticism and Beyond," 57.

¹⁶ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 194; Witherington, *Conflict and Community*, 151; Phillips, *Exploring 1 Corinthians*, 108; and Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 381. Fee notes, however, that there are verbal ties between 5.1 and the previous section as noted by Paul's use of the term "arrogant" in both sections (194); Thiselton maintains that links readily emerge with this new unit and 1.10-4.21 because of the common issue of community divisiveness (381).

¹⁷ Calvin, *Commentaries on Corinthians Volume 1*, 136.

¹⁸ Here the study follows the basic model of Lloyd Bitzer as outlined in the article "The Rhetorical Situation," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1 (1968): 1-14.

“was astounded that such behavior could be tolerated for a moment.”¹⁹ Paul faced an apparently impossible exigence that would “seem to imply that these people thought that any kind of conduct was compatible with being a Christian.”²⁰

The third task of rhetorical criticism is to identify the stance or point of view of the rhetor. Within this unit the stance of Paul is certainly not that of a dispassionate spectator witnessing these events, but rather that of an active and authoritative participant in the exigence and its potential solution. In order both to authenticate his role in this crisis of authority²¹ and tackle the issue head-on, Paul makes it clear that he plans on visiting them to rectify the situation in person (4.19-20). In the meantime their actions decided exactly what that future visit might entail. The outcome depended upon their response, whether or not they took appropriate action to modify the exigence: he would either come bearing a whip or alternatively in a gentle spirit (4.21).

Such an active stance also reveals the constraints Paul utilized as rhetorical strategies for dealing with the exigence and to convince his audience to modify it. These strategies include the following: rhetorical questions designed to engage the audience (5.2b; 6b; 12a-b); passing judgement on the offender by proxy (5.3-4); use of the yeast metaphor to illustrate the pervasive influence of sin in the church (5.6b-8); reinforcing the command of an earlier letter (5.9); imperative statements (5.4-5; 11-12); and finally use of biblical citation as an additional authority (5.13b). As a final motivating factor Paul revealed the potential damage if the situation were allowed to continue (5.6), and upon this basis he used an imperative as his final rhetorical strategy, commanding them to expel the immoral brother from the church (5.2b-5; 13b). The focus upon the grave consequences of the wrongdoing of the church as opposed to the sins of the individual revealed that Paul was far more concerned with the church and its attitudes.²²

The final step in the rhetorical-critical process is to analyze the effectiveness of the rhetorical strategies used by the rhetor in achieving his goals. Scholars have been divided over this issue, but 2 Cor. 2.5-6 appears to give evidence that the Corinthians indeed followed Paul’s advice and expelled the sexually immoral man from the congregation. The matter could now be brought to an end following the successful application of church discipline, which apparently caused the offender to repent and to seek forgiveness.²³ As both passages

¹⁹ Phillips, *Exploring 1 Corinthians*, 109.

²⁰ Marshall, Travis and Paul, *Exploring the New Testament*, 82.

²¹ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 195.

²² Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 195.

²³ Marshall, Travis and Paul, *Exploring the New Testament*, 96.

indicate, Paul's greatest concern involved the potential behaviour of the audience since this conduct was potentially damaging. This related both to the church internally in terms of unity and externally in terms of its mission within the community. Paul revealed that the reason he wrote to them was to see if they would stand the test and obey his injunctions, which apparently they did (2 Cor. 2.9). The application of strict community discipline made clear the limits of acceptable behaviour and established the moral boundaries of the community.²⁴ Having corrected their earlier clemency and carelessness, nothing now should hinder them from lifting up the downcast and repentant man.²⁵ Paul advised the church to extend their forgiveness to the outcast, reaffirm their love for him and welcome him back into the community (2 Cor 2. 7-8).

Homiletical Strategies

The next step in the process of the integration of biblical studies and homiletics concerns the formation of a homiletical strategy in order to present the findings of the rhetorical-critical reading of the text. The values-based homiletical approach advanced in this study maintains that in order to give the sermon integrity, the form of the text should ideally impact the form of the sermon, but not be slavishly bound in every case to replicate it. More important than replicating form is to discern what the text achieves rhetorically and then to design the sermon in such a way that it achieve similar ends.²⁶ The situational nature of the rhetoric in the unit allows the preacher to explore a multiplicity of homiletical strategies, all of which are designed to replicate the textual dynamics and therefore engage the listeners.

For example, even though the original genre is a discourse, the situational aspect of the narrative in a sense "tells a story." Thus one could make use of a narrative sermon since the above observations regarding the rhetorical situation demonstrated the involvement of three principal "characters." The first involves Paul the rhetor, second the man involved in the incestuous relationship, and third the audience of the Corinthian church. This situation gives rise to multiple homiletical possibilities that illustrate the rhetorical dynamics of the unit. One could construct a first-person narration delivered from any of the three points of view, or engage in a multiple point-of-view narration from all three characters' perspectives. Finally, one could design an interactive study assigning each character to a group of participants and engaging the groups to justify the particular actions of each character, and

²⁴ Witherington, *Conflict and Community*, 161.

²⁵ Calvin, *Commentaries on Corinthians Volume 2*, 109.

²⁶ Craddock, *Preaching*, 178, 179.

weighing up the rhetorical effectiveness of Paul's response to the exigence and the audience's reaction to it. The reality that churches today often exhibit such fractious characteristics must surely lend itself to a relevant discussion of the issues raised within this passage, and the apparent outcome as seen in 2 Cor. 2.4-9.

Furthermore, the preacher could also present the situational nature of the unit in terms of Lowry's "plot-like" narrative sermon style that portrays the conflict as a problem to be solved, either as a case study from ancient Corinth or as a narrative imaginatively retranslated into a current church context.²⁷ From a deconstructionist point of view, the preacher could facilitate a dialogue that "interprets interpretation" by identifying and then debating some of the various theological and leadership issues that arise from this passage. A fruitful discussion might involve whether or not Paul's apparently heavy-handed approach in dealing with this situation is appropriate today, or whether or not he should have chosen a differing strategy that may have been more effective. Additionally, the preacher could initiate a lively discussion examining how this passage has been variously interpreted within church tradition, or by various critical positions such as, for example, feminist, liberationist, post-colonial, reader-response or black theologians to name but a few. Such a multiple critical point-of-view discussion could certainly open up the possible interpretations of the passage at hand and ideally give the listeners new appreciation for different interpretative methodologies.

Conclusion

Although this list of homiletical possibilities is by no means exhaustive, regardless of the approach taken each preaching strategy attempts to replicate the rhetorical dynamics of the passage by revealing and exploring the forces at work regarding the situational nature of the rhetoric involved. By engaging within these various homiletical forms, the preacher need not preach the passage to the listeners in a traditional propositional-deductive-expository fashion, but rather can seek to involve the audience through a variety of participatory strategies. Ultimately the form of the text influences the form of the sermon in terms of its rhetorical strategies and dynamics, and moreover engages the listeners through a dialogic and participatory homiletic.

²⁷ Such an approach follows Lowry's narrative preaching model as articulated in his work *The Homiletical Plot*.