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Social Analysis of the New Testament and Hispanic Theology: A Case Study

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Introduction

For a student of the New Testament who is also Latino, recent developments in biblical hermeneutics, such as the social scientific analysis of the New Testament, along with the almost concomitant interest in articulating a North American Hispanic theology, make for some exciting scholarly opportunities. This essay attempts to explore potential correlations between these two areas. Specifically, I will pursue these connections by means of a case study in the apostle Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians and the problem of leadership in that community. Such a study will serve as a stepping stone toward relating New Testament social scientific analysis and Hispanic theology.

The impulses for this study are multiple and they serve to indicate how New Testament interpretation and Hispanic theology often relate to each other in instructive ways. This author, a New York City-born Puerto Rican, took a route in his Ph.D. dissertation studies that was influenced, on the one hand, by the social analysis movement in New Testament studies and, on the other, by his own experience as a Latino church and community leader. Thus, I begin this essay with a description of that journey. First, I will describe how work with inner city minority leadership influenced the selection of a Ph.D. dissertation topic in New Testament studies. Second, I will detail how New Testament social scientific methods became the vehicle for pursuing the topic. Afterward, I will apply these motives and the methods to another aspect of the topic—leadership problems in the Apostle Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. Using the latter as a case study, therefore, I will seek to draw some connections to the construction of a North American Hispanic theology, concluding that one of the means for this construction must be reading the Bible through Hispanic eyes,1 as well as through the eyes of the social sciences.


Scroggs, for example, argued that scholarship must move from merely studying the "theological and ethical affirmations" in the New Testament documents to an understanding of "the social reality of those making such affirmations."

Among the issues studied in this emerging approach was the question of the social status of the early Christians. From an early assessment that the first Christians belonged to the "socially depressed groups" of Greco-Roman society, the more recent movements of sociological analysis in the 1960s and 1970s posited a broader social class representation in Christian churches of the first century, especially in the Apostle Paul's churches, including Corinth, about which we read that "not many were wise, not many were powerful and not many were the well-born" (1 Cor 1:26). The "not many" implies that at least some in Corinth belonged to the more powerful social classes of the first-century Greco-Roman world. Moreover, this discussion of social classes and social status interested me because of my own questions with the social status of leaders within Pauline churches, motivated by the question of the social status of leaders within inner-city Hispanic groups. Here began the connection for me between Hispanic ministry and theology and New Testament social scientific interpretation.

Another aspect of social reality that the social scientific study of the New Testament posited was the issue of social conflict. Gerd Theissen, for one, argued as early as 1974 that the diversity within the early Christian churches, such as Paul's congregation at Corinth, inevitably lead to conflict, specifically in Corinth. Theissen posited that in 1 Corinthians we can see "a leading minority of upper-class Christians at Corinth, over against a lower-class minority." This had direct connection to my interest in leadership in the Pauline communities, for if conflict ensued between social classes in Corinth, it must have impacted the nature of leadership in this church community.

Indeed, the most fruitful works on leadership issues in Paul have been those that utilized social scientific approaches. One such work, Bengt Holmberg's Paul and Power, specifically addresses the related issue of authority in Paul's churches. Holmberg challenges those studies of Pauline leadership and authority that limit themselves to a theological approach: "The predominantly theological interpretation of early Christian history, concentrating on the history of ideas, needs to be balanced by a different approach. I have chosen to interpret the data with categories taken from sociology, a field of scholarship seldom used by New Testament scholars."

Many more scholars now rely on social scientific study than when Holmberg first wrote these words. The approach took hold because of its "aim to show how the New Testament message is related to the everyday life and societal needs and contexts of real human beings" in the ancient world, which, of course, also represents the interests of sociology and other social science disciplines such as anthropology and social psychology. The goals of social scientific analysis of the New Testament—to study the daily social life and relationships of real human beings in the New Testament literature—motivated me in the study of leadership in the Pauline corpus because I wanted to explore the social status of the real life people who became leaders in Paul's churches.

In Bengt Holmberg's work, he applies a well-known sociological theory to the question of Pauline authority and leadership. Holmberg employs Max Weber's trilogy of authority types—charismatic, traditional, and legal—and relates these to the Pauline epistles. Holmberg

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Scroggs, "The Sociological Interpretation," 342, summarizing the argument of Gerd Theissen, "Social Stratification in the Corinthian Community: A Contrib-

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argues that the early Church experienced a shift in the style of authority that it practiced. Weber presented charismatic authority as that style of leadership which is based on “devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person” and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him.\(^9\) Holmberg posits that the charismatic authority type can be found in the Jerusalem and Palestinian wing of the primitive Church with that Church’s dependence on Jesus and the apostles.

According to Weber, the opposite of charismatic authority is legal authority, which is based “on a belief in the legality of enacted rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue commands.”\(^8\) In his study, Holmberg suggests that such a description can be applied to the incipient institutionalized church reflected in the Pastoral epistles.\(^5\)

Moreover, for Holmberg, Weber’s concept of routinized charisma best explains how authority functioned in the churches of Paul’s undisputed letters. The second of Weber’s trilogy, traditional authority, rests “on an established belief in the sanctity of immemorial traditions and the legitimacy of those exercising authority under them [i.e., the traditions].”\(^4\) Somewhere between this dependence on traditions and the dependence on the charismatic leader lies the routinization of charisma.\(^5\) Indeed, Weber himself would argue that there is no “pure” charismatic authority. As soon as a charismatic group is established it moves toward some routinization or institutionalization in order to stabilize and thus survive.\(^2\) Holmberg argues that at the Pauline stage, before traditions (traditional authority) or rules (legal authority) fully set in (as in the Pastoral epistles), the charismatic authority of the Jesus stage is being routinized or channeled into the formation of house churches and the ekklésia during Paul’s ministry.\(^21\)

Furthermore, Holmberg adds his own term to the description of this process in Paul: “dialectical authority.”\(^22\) This term helps show that in Paul’s churches all Christians had responsibilities “in the building up of the church, in brotherly exhortation and correction, in discerning the truth of the Spirit, in caring for other Christians, in mutual submission . . .” but some had the responsibility of “being in charge.” “All Christians are responsible for and to a degree capable of performing these vital functions, but this never abolishes the need for special charges or offices which are expected to entail a great degree of responsibility and capability in these respects.”\(^72\)

Thus, according to Holmberg, the Pauline church emerges from the phenomenon of Weber’s routinized charisma to function with a dialectical authority of the responsibility of all and the charge, or leadership, of some.

Bengt Holmberg’s work contributed to my dissertation because he applied Max Weber’s social theory to the Apostle Paul and the issue of church leadership, particularly the issue of authority. However, Holmberg’s specific focus on the concept and practice of authority in the Pauline churches still left me with a keen concern for a broader perspective on the issues of power and authority in Paul represented in the concepts and practices of leadership in the Greco-Roman world. Leadership differs from authority, for in the words of one sociologist, “A leader can only request, an authority can require. . . . In leadership relation, the person is basic; in an authority relation, the person is merely a symbol.”\(^74\)

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3. However, Holmberg does not focus on the Pastoral because, as he states, to include the Pastoral in his study would significantly change his conclusions about the structure of authority in Pauline churches (Holmberg, *Paul and Power*, 4, n. 9).
4. See Margaret Y. MacDonald, *The Pauline Churches: A Sociological Study of Institutionalization in the Pauline and Domestic Pauline Writings*, Society for New Testament Studies, Monograph Series 60 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), which extends Holmberg’s suggestion about the Pastoral to a fuller study describing the social factors that made possible the movement from charismatic authority to legal authority in the Pauline and post-Pauline churches. MacDonald employs sociology of knowledge and the theory of institutionalization for her study (*Pauline Churches*, 10–18). She argues that in the church of the undisputed Pauline letters, the ground has already been set for the process of institutionalization that will culminate in the more static and hierarchical church of the Pastoral letters.
5. The difference between leadership style in the undisputed and disputed Pauline letters is an intriguing issue that merits further study.
10. Ibid., 199.
Therefore, I proceeded to explore the historical issue of the nature of leadership in the world outside the Pauline church, namely the Mediterranean world of the Roman empire in the first century C.E. For this, I needed to employ a social scientific approach to New Testament interpretation other than sociology: socio-cultural description.

However, the intellectual trip through Weber helped enlighten certain aspects of Hispanic-American reality, especially Hispanic-American religious reality. Typically, Latino churches, especially in our urban areas, tend to be charismatically-led churches, with a leadership that is grassroots, often lacking the academic credentials expected in North American society. Eldin Villanueva has outlined the history of sacrificial, grassroots leadership in the Hispanic Pentecostal Church of this century, for example, in his book *The Liberating Spirit.* Villanueva points out that the Latino church as a whole has been "a seedbed for community leaders," both ministerial and lay. Like few other places in the Latino community, the church has been the place where "the emerging leadership in the Hispanic community . . . has been nurtured." Villanueva asserts that "few institutions in society provide Hispanics the inter-personal and political skills that are nurtured in the minority church." A question that emerges from Villanueva's study entails the impact of the gradual institutionalization of the Latino church, particularly in the last thirty years. Are we still a seedbed for emerging church and community leadership? This is a concern for a Hispanic theology of leadership as well.29

### Social Description

Before moving on to new developments in my search for understanding leadership in the Pauline corpus by looking at a case study of one of Paul's churches (the Corinthian church), it is important to point out the additional step I needed to take in my dissertation study with regard to understanding the social world of the Apostle Paul. I needed a social description of Paul's world if I was going to understand the nature of leadership in that world. Historians describe Roman society as a highly structured, hierarchical social system with a few wealthy and powerful at the top and masses of the powerless at the bottom of a steep, social pyramid, with practically no social mobility.30 Access to power depended upon several well-defined criteria, namely, wealth, family origins, and occupation. Thus leadership and power were confined to those classes that already had such status elements as significant wealth, Roman senatorial or equestrian rank, and bloodlines to families with both wealth and rank. Ramsay MacMullen describes this picture as "a monopolizing of leadership by a narrow circle, generation after generation. . . ."31

This, in a nutshell, was the world of the Apostle Paul and his churches. How he and they addressed the nature of leadership within their Christian congregations in the midst of this world was the topic of my dissertation, by means of the study of one aspect of this issue, the commendation of leaders in the larger society and in Paul's society. However, one should note that, for the purposes of constructing a North American Hispanic theology, Hispanics in the United States are part of a society in which their access to the leadership ranks are also limited, albeit in more subtle ways than in the Roman society. Indeed, the struggle for access continues and should be a concern of Hispanic theology and ministry.

In the next section of this essay, I offer some new developments in my research in Pauline congregational leadership: the study of the Corinthian correspondence (1 Corinthians in particular) as a way of getting at Paul's response to the question of leadership and status. This research, even in its preliminary stages, should also provide us with a way of getting at our question of the correlations between social analysis of New Testament documents and constructing Hispanic biblical theology and hermeneutics.

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30 Ibid., 107.

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Paul was a city person. The city breathes through his language. Jesus’ parables of sowers and weeds, sharecroppers, and mud-roofed cottages call forth smells of manure and earth, and the Aramaic of the Palestinian villages often echoes in the Greek. When Paul constructs a metaphor of olive trees or gardens, on the other hand, the Greek is fluent and evokes schoolroom more than farm; he seems more at home with the clichés of Greek rhetoric, drawn from gymnasiuim, stadium, or workshop. Moreover, Paul was among those who depended on the city for his livelihood.30

Corinth was perhaps the best example of the urban reality of Pauline ministry. Classical Corinth lay dormant for one hundred years after its destruction in 146 B.C., until Julius Caesar rebuilt it as a retirement haven for his military veterans in 46 B.C.E. It therefore developed a reputation for having a mixed constituency with veterans and former slaves seeking refuge and economic development. As a port city on the Aegean sea, Corinth became economically prosperous and thus a noveau riche city. It was characterized by diversity in economies (tourism and service were its major commodities because of athletic games held there almost every other year), in socioeconomic classes, in races and in religions. Despite this variety Corinth, like any other Greco-Roman city, imposed limits on the inter-mingling of these various groups. Vocational, religious, and social associations met homogeneously—like with like—with the financial support of upper class patrons as their only official contact with persons of other social classes.31

Into this socially and economically diverse urban area, the Apostle Paul came in the early 50s to found the Corinthian church (cf. Acts 18:1-3, 12-15). Paul writes his first extant letter to the Corinthians, canonical 1 Corinthians,32 ostensibly in response to various problems that he hears about the church, both by means of oral reports and a Corinthian letter to him (1 Cor 1:10-12; 7:1; 11:18). The litany of problems is well-known: There is division in the church (1 Cor 1-4), sexual immorality (5:1-13; 6:12-20), believers taking other believers to court (6:1-11), misunderstanding about marriage, singleness, and asceticism (7:1-40), questions about what to do about food offered to idols (8-10), and women praying in the church without veils (11:2-16). There are abuses of the Lord’s Supper (11:17-34), abuses of the gift of speaking in tongues (12-14), and misunderstanding about the resurrection of the dead (15). In short, the Corinthian problems would have been enough to cause burnout for any modern-day pastor!

Further, factoring in material from 2 Corinthians, especially chapters 10-13, in which Paul fiercely defends his apostleship in the face of opposing leaders in Corinth,33 leaves one with the impression that Paul’s relationship with the Corinthian church was a stormy one, to say the least. However, precisely because problems of leadership appear in both 1 and 2 Corinthians, one wonders if leadership is not a core problem with this congregation, one that somehow impacts all of the other problems. In what follows, I will explore this possibility in a preliminary way by incorporating two social scientific theories into my analysis of leadership issues in 1 Corinthians. In this way, we come closer to the overall purpose of this paper, connecting the social study of leadership in a New Testament document to the issues and concerns of constructing a North American Hispanic theology.

1 CORINTHIANS AND SOCIAL STATUS

I think that an interpretive key to 1 Corinthians, as I suggested earlier, lies in 1 Corinthians 1:26, which indicates the social status of the members of the Corinthian church: “Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.” This is not just rhetorical flourish, but an indication of the social class diversity among the Corinthian church constituency. That not many were high status persons in the church means that at least some were. Thus, as Meeks describes it, in the Corinthian church we have a “mixed bag,” socially, economically, and politically.34 Moreover, given the strict division of classes in an ancient city like Corinth, we also have, again as Meeks describes it, “a violation of conventions.”35 To have an association, religious or otherwise, with constituencies from a variety of social classes violated the norms of Greco-Roman society. Did such a phenomenon, therefore, create, in the case of Paul’s Corinthian community, a church with problems? Two social scientific

30Meeks, Urban Christians. 9. The rest of this chapter on “The Urban Environment of Pauline Christianity” shows other urban aspects of Paul’s ministry.


321 Cor 5:9 indicates that 1 Corinthians is not Paul’s first letter to this congregation. See Witherington, Conflict and Community, 328–33, for a discussion of the history of Paul’s communication with his church at Corinth.


34Meeks. Urban Christians, 73.

theories, as they are applied to the Pauline correspondence, will help explore answers to this question.

**OUTLINE OF TWO SOCIAL SCIENTIFIC THEORIES**

Social scientific analysis includes applying theories from such disciplines as the cultural anthropology of Mediterranean societies today to the Mediterranean world of the first century. Among these theories are honor-shame values and patron-client relations.

In ancient society (as in many societies today), honor and shame were core values. Honor entailed society’s view of one’s estimation or worth. Perception and reality were blurred here, but such indicators of status as wealth, family lineage, connections with Rome (especially in the case of cities such as Corinth), and “cultural sophistication” all determined how one was viewed in the eyes of others and, therefore, determined one’s honor. Low status resulted in a low estimation of one’s worth—i.e., the opposite value of honor: shame.

However, matters were not always clear-cut. The sociological theory of status inconsistency suggests that although some individuals in a given society may have high marks in one status indicator (e.g., wealth, land ownership, occupation, etc.), they may have low status in another (e.g., gender, ethnic background, former slave status, etc.). Persons of such mixed social status may have had a hard time being and feeling accepted (having “ascribed honor”) in a society like that of the ancient Mediterranean world. Although they had money and land, they were not accepted among higher class groups because, for example, they lacked the correct ethnic background or they were former slaves.

Many of the people named in Paul’s Corinthian letters may very well have experienced status inconsistency. A prosopographic review of Corinthian names suggests a wide ethnic diversity, including Jews, such as Paul’s associates—Timothy, Lucius, Jason, Sosipater (Rom 16:21-23)—and Greeks, such as Stephanas (1 Cor 1:16; 16:15-18). The

leadership in Corinth also included a few apparently well-off individuals: Gaius, whose home was large enough for the entire church to meet (Rom 16:23; 1 Cor 1:14); Crispus, a synagogue ruler ( Acts 18:8; 1 Cor 1:14); Erastus, apparently a city treasurer in Corinth, mentioned in Romans 16:23 and in an inscription bearing his name and official title; and some independently wealthy women, including Chloe, who could send envos (“Chloe’s people”)—1 Cor 1:11—to inform Paul of the division in Corinth, and Phoebe (of Cenchreae, a port city of Corinth), whom Paul calls a diakonos of the church and a patron of his work (Rom 16:1, 2).

Anthony Blasi concludes from this inventory of Corinthian names that “the evidence points to a wide spectrum of exalted and humble positions held by Corinthian Christians, as well as to some ethnic diversity (Latin, Greek, Jewish).” Wayne Meeks posits that this mixed bag—which constituted a violation of conventions because women, freed persons, slaves (normally, all indicators of shame status in first-century society) mingled with male heads of household, patrons, and slave owners (high status indicators)—may have achieved some measure of status (and, therefore, honor) as a result of their involvement as leaders in the Christian movement. Despite high status in some categories (home ownership, acquired wealth and offices), some among the Corinthian Christians may have nonetheless experienced ongoing status inconsistency because of other categories (gender, slave status, type of work). Thus the Christian ekklēsia, this mixed bag which violated the conventions of homogeneity, was deemed an attractive alternative by them. The church gave the opportunity to belong and even exercise leadership in a community that accepted them despite the inconsistencies of their status. The church may well have become a place to find honor for some.

The other important social theory and ancient core value to factor into our discussion of the Corinthian situation relates to the practice of patronage. Patronage entailed the reciprocal exchange of goods and services between persons of higher and lower social status in order to achieve higher status (for both!) in society. Those with wealth, prop-

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erty, and status were sought by those with less wealth and status in order to secure client status with them. Clients, including freed persons, military personnel with little accumulated wealth, and the like, sought higher status by attachment to patrons, who had access to wealth, jobs, and other patrons looking for clients.

Patronage was pervasive throughout the Greco-Roman world, especially in a city like Corinth which drew so many people, particularly former slaves, in search of economic opportunity. To quote an older study on this phenomenon:

From the parasite do-nothing up to the great aristocrat there was no man [sic] in Rome who did not feel himself bound to someone more powerful above him by the same obligations of respect, or, to use the technical term, the same obesequiam, that bound the ex-slave to the master who had manumitted him.41

Corinth, as a city re-created in Rome’s own image, was full of this kind of search for status and honor via appropriate patron-client relationships.42 Indeed, the question of patronage may very well have been reflected in many of the problems Paul confronted in 1 Corinthians.

1 CORINTHIANS 1-4 AND THE SOCIAL STATUS OF PAUL’S LEADERSHIP

The first major section of 1 Corinthians (1 Cor 1–4) begins with the problem of division (1:10–12). What is the nature of this division? 1 Corinthians 1:12 seems obvious in its reference to a division over leadership: “What I mean is that each of you says, ‘I belong to Paul’ or ‘I belong to Apollos,’ or ‘I belong to Cephas’ or ‘I belong to Christ.’” Much has been written attempting to specify the nature of these Corinthian “parties.” Some have discussed four parties (of Paul, Apollos, Cephas, and Christ). Others have argued for divisions over three leaders (Paul, Apollos, and Cephas). Still others have suggested only Paul and Apollos, because the latter figures prominently in several passages later in 1 Corinthians. The idea that there are no factions and that Paul is speaking metaphorically has also been sug-

gested.43 In addition, most of these have suggested that the divisions entailed doctrinal issues.44

However, for a variety of reasons which I will outline in what follows, I believe that essentially the division in 1 Corinthians is between Paul and a core group of leaders in the Corinthian church. Their division is fundamentally tied to social issues, rather than necessarily only doctrinal matters, and that Paul’s argument in 1 Corinthians 1–4 lays the groundwork for his subsequent responses to the litany of Corinthian problems.45

First, after this initial reference to division over leadership, Paul immediately moves into a discussion of wisdom versus the gospel that uses some very particular images of status—“Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?” (1:20). As we have already seen, the Corinthians do not consist of too many of such individuals, although that implies that there are some (1:26). Paul sets up a dichotomy, therefore, between these who are and those who “are not” (1:27–28). Yet ironically, from Paul’s perspective, the “are nots” do have something to “boast” about because they have placed their trust in Christ (1:29–31). Thus, Paul begins to side, it seems, with those of lesser status in the Corinthian community in whatever division is taking place.

Second, following this reference to “those who are nothing,” Paul begins to discuss his ministry in ways that show his style of leadership may be at the heart of the division in Corinth. Like the are nots, Paul’s ministry has been exhibited without lofty words or wisdom and in the midst of weakness, fear, and trembling (2:1–5). He contrasts human wisdom versus power of God, and human wisdom versus the Spirit of God (2:6–12). He contrasts spiritual people versus immature people (2:14–3:4). In each instance, the perception of foolishness in the eyes of

41Jerome Carcopino, Daily Life in Ancient Rome: The People and the City at the Height of the Empire (New Haven, Conn., and London: Yale University Press, 1940) 171.

42John Kingman Chow attempts to demonstrate the presence of patronage specifically in Roman Corinth, but much of his evidence is more empire-wide than Corinth-specific. See Chow, “Patronage in Roman Corinth,” Patronage and Power: A Study of Social Networks in Corinth (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992) 38–82.


45The latter point is argued by Dahl, “Paul and the Church at Corinth,” 48. In chapters 1–4, Paul attempts to “reestablish his authority as apostle and spiritual father of the church at Corinth.” The social aspects of the Corinthian problems are, of course, discussed extensively in the essays on Corinth in Theissen, Social Setting. In what follows, 1 attempt to tie these and other strands together, if only in a suggestive way, with regard to the leadership problem in 1–4 and the other problems Paul addresses in the rest of 1 Corinthians.
society belies the true wisdom and power that comes only from God’s Spirit.

In the context of this contrast, then, Paul again describes his leadership style, adding one of those mentioned in 1:12—Apollos. Paul and Apollos exercise leadership as servants, and not to enhance personal status (3:5-9). Service to God and God’s building—the church (3:10-17)—has priority over status-enhancing wisdom (3:18-23).

Thus Paul describes an approach to leadership that was quite distinct from what some Corinthians were used to seeing in the outside world and that some among them were trying to practice inside the church. Paul’s subsequent description of himself and his leadership in 4:1-13 demonstrates this further. He again uses servant language (4:1). He indicates a measure of attack (“judgment”) against his leadership (4:2-5) from some inside the Corinthian church community. Paul challenges these Corinthians that since he and Apollos are servant leaders, they should not be “puffed up” or “arrogant” about them, causing, thereby, a division between those choosing one or the other as their leader (4:6-8). Therefore, it does seem that some among the Corinthians cited Apollos in particular as a model leader for them. However, because of the way Paul elaborates on the nature of his own ministry, Apollos may have a following specifically because a group of Corinthians oppose Paul’s approach to church leadership.

Thus, Paul, while not opposed to Apollos per se, attacks in ironic tones, the type of leadership his apparent supporters espouse: “Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Quite apart from us you have become kings!” (4:8). Paul contrasts this triumphant view of leadership with apostolic leadership, which is full of hardship (4:9-13). In this passage, Paul refers to the wise and the fool, the strong and the weak, honor and shame. Thereby, he identifies his leadership as less honorable in the eyes of some Corinthians, precisely because of the hardships involved (hunger, beatings, homelessness, manual labor, etc.). Nonetheless, Paul asserts that God accepts his work and leadership, which, moreover, are worthy of imitation by all Corinthians (4:16).

Thus, this analysis of 1 Corinthians 1–4 seems to indicate that some Corinthians questioned Paul’s leadership because it did not reflect appropriate honor, which could, in turn, add to their own honor. There-fore, they sought other, more “honorable” leaders, like Apollos, perhaps for his Alexandrian rhetorical skills (Acts 18:24). While some Corinthians appreciated leaders who proclaimed the gospel as a great, new philosophy (1:17, 2:1-5), thereby lending honor in the larger society to its adherents, Paul describes a different type of leadership in 1 Corinthians 1–4, one that entails servanthood and confronts shameful hardships.

For the most part in 1 Corinthians 1–4, Paul seems to address the Corinthians as a whole, but, by the end of the section, his admonishment about appropriate understanding of leadership focuses on a select few among the Corinthians, those who may very well oppose his leadership: “But some of you, thinking that I am not coming to you, have become arrogant. But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power” (4:18-19). The language of arrogant (ὑποθέτοι) is typical of the attitude of hybris associated with those seeking high status at the expense of those below them. Thus, not only do we have indications of a core group of these arrogant people opposing Paul and his leadership in 1 Corinthians 1–4, but they could also be associated with the search for status through their exercise of leadership in the Corinthian church. Indeed, their exercise of status-seeking leadership could very well be tied to several of the problems we encounter in the rest of 1 Corinthians. In the necessarily brief and suggestive outline that follows, I will explore this possibility, and also how patron-client relations in the Corinthian church could be a source of the social conflict apparent in that congregation.

The Leadership of Patrons and the Litany of Problems in Corinth

Paul follows his discussion of the arrogant in 1 Corinthians 4:18 with a similar designation of those who are tolerating the man sleeping with his step-mother in 1 Corinthians 5: “And you are arrogant” (5:2). Could the same people who are the arrogant in their opposition to Paul be the same arrogant people tolerating immorality in their midst? An affirmative answer to this question would further suggest, moreover, a connection between the leadership opposition facing Paul in 1 Corinthians 1–4 and the problems which follow in 1 Corinthians 5–6, 8–10, and, especially, 11:17-34.

Although caution must be taken when using Acts’ description of Paul and his colleagues, in this case most commentators agree that the description of Apollos in Acts 18:24 fits with the exigence of 1 Corinthians 1–4. See, for example, Meeks, Urban Christians, 117–8; and, especially, Pogoloff, Logos and Sophia, 180–90, who shows the appeal of Alexandrian rhetoric as a status symbol.

As argued convincingly by Pogoloff, Logos and Sophia, 228-31.
In a study that explores these questions, John Kingman Chow employs the social theories of patronage and social networks to show how the immoral man in 1 Corinthians 5 probably belonged to the same social class as the arrogant and, therefore, the latter did not do anything about him because he was “one of their own”—a fellow patron. Obviously, Paul abhors this in the strongest of terms in 1 Corinthians 5:3-8. Moreover, as in 4:18, Paul seems to be confronted with a similar, or perhaps the same, group of opposing leaders.

Likewise, Chow shows how taking brothers to court in 1 Corinthians 6:1-11 was another instance of status-seeking by Corinthian patrons. For whatever reasons, some Corinthian Christians took fellow Christian brothers to court. In the Roman era, only the well-off typically sued others in a Roman court, and then they only sued those less well-off than themselves in order to ensure victory. Only the well-off could afford the courts and could afford to win in the courts. Furthermore, winning court cases was a sign of honor and added to one’s social status. In this instance, Paul, in ironic tones, suggests the shame (6:5a) and foolishness (6:5b) of those going to court. Thus, he denies them honor and wisdom, their most precious commodities as patrons.

Further, Paul appears to challenge these well-off Corinthian Christians initiating lawsuits with others, less well-off Christians to exercise a different type of leadership, one more comparable to Paul’s: “In fact to have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded? But you yourselves wrong and defraud—and believers at that” (1 Cor 6:7-8).

Paul’s earlier apostolic hardship list (1 Cor 4:9-13) sets the tone for this alternative approach to local church leadership, which perhaps entails shame rather than honor in the eyes of society, but nonetheless brings honor to God and the gospel, as far as Paul is concerned. “Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? . . . Do you not know that we are to judge angels—to say nothing of ordinary matters” (6:2-3).

Social network analysis theory posits that individuals in a given society may be linked to each other through a variety of intertwining social groups, rather than just one group. Moreover, it is in the correlation of these linkages which determines social behavior. Thus membership in a particular social class and in a particular religious association (e.g., the Corinthian church) at the same time (along with other memberships and associations) impacts behavior in a certain way. Network analysis studies precisely that linkage. See Chow, Patronage and Power, for discussion of the immoral man and possible ties to a powerful patron class in the Corinthian church, especially 1:9 for the specific connection between Paul’s arrogant opponents in 1 Cor 4:18 and the arrogant of 1 Cor 5:2.

A third instance cited by Chow of wrong-headed practices by powerful patrons in the Corinthian church entails the problem of food offered to idols (1 Corinthians 8-10). Gerd Theissen has pointed out that meat offered to idols (1 Cor 8:13) was a delicacy of which only wealthy patrons partook as a sign of honor. Perhaps it was the church leadership whom Paul, in ironic tones, called “persons of knowledge” (8:2) who partook of this meat and did so “at table in an idol’s temple” (8:10, 20-22). Chow shows how this could have been the practice of those same powerful patrons, who opposed Pauline leadership (1 Cor 4:18-19), allowed the immorality of one of their own (1 Corinthians 5), and took their fellow, but poorer, church members to court (6:1-11). Participating in temple district meals was a means of maintaining and enhancing social class networks, argues Chow, and therefore a matter of patronal rights and “business as usual.”

In his response to this problem in 1 Corinthians 8-10, Paul addresses the implications of the gospel with regard to business as usual among powerful patrons. The latter were in fact “sinning against their brothers and sisters,” to paraphrase Paul (8:12), and were refusing to acknowledge it. Paul’s response in 1 Corinthians 9 in particular provides further evidence that church leadership in Corinth has gone astray because of their efforts to enhance patronage networks in the world outside the church. On the surface, in 1 Corinthians 9 Paul provides merely an example of leadership that does not use its freedom in a way that would harm “the weak” (8:13; 9:1, 4-5). However, the rhetorical impact of the passage points to a defense of Paul’s leadership approach. Paul will not eat anything if it causes harm to a brother or sister. He will deny himself marriage and a salary, and would rather work at manual labor in order to preach the gospel at no cost to his audience. Ultimately, because of such a stance, the Corinthian patrons do not view Paul as a viable leader because he does not take their patronage, but rather works at menial, dishonorable jobs. Again, Paul presents a perspective of gospel leadership that entails hardship. In 9:27, he talks about “pummeling [his] body” so as not to be “disqualified.”

In short, Paul wants the Corinthian leaders who allowed immorality, initiated court cases, and participated in temple meals to pummel
their bodies, like he does, and not partake of those practices, which may have enhanced their status in the outside world, but did more harm than good to the gospel and the non-elite members of the Christian community. With regard to the temple meals, Paul writes, "You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons" (1 Cor 10:21). In other words, participation in God’s new community implies a different relationship to outside associations. Every believer, especially the leader, regardless of social status matters, must think first of one’s new associations and relationships within the Christian community. The believer must first consider the Lord’s Supper and whose body we eat then, which may be diametrically opposed to business as usual.

The Problem of the Lord’s Supper

Paul returns to a discussion of ritual eating and the Lord’s Supper in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, which represents the clearest example in all of 1 Corinthians of this division between the haves and have-nots as a source of the conflict in Corinth.56 Paul argues that the Lord’s Supper is for the whole community ("when you assemble as a church," 11:18), but once again powerful Corinthian patrons engage in business as usual. Class-specific meals are taking place (11:20-21).

The reference to "those who have nothing" signals that the rich members of the community (patrons) have their main meal; the poorer members of the community (clients and slaves) wait or come late, only to be denied a main meal and left with the actual bread and cup of the communion (11:21-22).

Paul offers the words of institution (the tradition) in order to remind the Corinthians of the true meaning of the meal (11:23-26) and to pronounce judgment (11:27-32) on those who would partake of the meal without considering the well-being of the entire community (referred to as "body" in 11:29).

From our perspective, Paul does not go so far as to completely break down long-held, deeply-seated social divisions. At the end of the passage he writes, "So then, my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. If you are hungry, eat at home, so that when you come together, it will not be for your condemnation" (11:33-34a, emphasis mine). Paul is concerned with the assembly of Christians as believers for worship, not with opening up the homes of the patrons to regular egalitarian meals for the entire community. He suggests that they have their class-specific parties at home, but not as part of what they do as a whole community in worship.

Nonetheless, while Paul does not go so far as to address all of the twenty-first-century hearts would like, he does challenge, to a certain extent, the typical patterns of ancient patronage and class division. Even for social unequals to celebrate a ritual meal around the same table in the same social space presented a radical departure from business as usual. Thus, as Chow suggests, in challenging immorality, litigation, and idolatry, Paul questions the status quo in Corinth and the socially powerful who maintained it and profited from it.57

Moreover, the point of all this is that the social and cultural analysis of honor-shame values and patron-client relations helps us to understand much of the dynamics that took place between Paul and the Corinthians, as reflected in 1 Corinthians. As Gerd Theissen suggests, with regard to the Lord’s Supper passage, the problems of 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 were not just theological (i.e., the meaning of the meal), but social as well, perhaps even predominantly social.58 Two different groups—rich and poor, patrons and clients—belonging to one single community or association, a rarity indeed in ancient Greco-Roman society, created an inevitable climate of conflict. This conflict impacted not just the practice of the Lord’s Supper, but other matters as well, and caused division among a core group of leaders seeking to use the Corinthian church experience for their own social status enhancement, and those whom they left behind, the “not many wise, powerful and noble” of this great Greco-Roman city.

The Corinthian Case Study: Conclusions

I would like to suggest, on the basis of these preliminary research efforts, that a social analysis of the New Testament in the case of 1 Corinthians can help us detect a key problem in Paul’s relationship with this church—a problem of leadership between Paul and the patrons. In Weberian terms, Paul was a charismatic leader who organized his gospel converts into communities of faith. The leadership of this community emerged naturally from the community’s own constituency, but some of those leaders, indeed a significant core, if not number, needed correction from their founder as to what was the appropriate nature of leadership in a gospel community. Because Paul’s communities were from mixed social strata, problems arose in the ongoing relationships of the members of the community. Patrons behaved like patrons and expected clients to behave like clients. Paul argues that this was not necessarily so, especially because there is a heavenly patron to whom we all equally belong.

56See Theissen’s essay on the Lord’s Supper passage in Social Setting, 121-46.
58Theissen, Social Setting, 167-8.
Many questions remain, of course, for this case study. How do we understand unexamined passages in 1 Corinthians, such as 1 Corinthians 7 and the Corinthian questions about marriage? At least we know two things from that chapter which will not diminish our analysis about the social diversity of this community: There were slaves present in this community (7.21) and there were women who have joined the community without the consent of their husbands (7.10-11). These women were also apparently exercising ministry in the church (11.2-16). Paul puts some control on them in that passage (they must wear veils), but, mysteriously, seems to completely close them off from engagement in leadership in 14.33-36 with an injunction to silence.6 The whole issue of Paul’s treatment of women must be examined as part of any study on leadership in Paul, especially 1 Corinthians.

Second, how does the problem of speaking tongues in 1 Corinthians 12–14 fit into our argument about social status and leadership in Paul? Did the use (and misuse) of this gift have social status implications? Were the Corinthian patrons also claiming authority for themselves, not only because of their status in the outside world, but also because of their spiritual power, reflected in tongues-speaking? At the very least, tongues-speakers, regardless of their social status, abused their power because of tongues, regarding other gifts as less spiritual. In that way, tongues seems to have become another status-symbol among some status-hungry Corinthian believers. As elsewhere, Paul proceeds to stop status interpretations of spiritual gifts.62

Third, further research must address Paul’s responses to the problems of leadership conflict, if indeed these existed between Paul and certain powerful patrons in his Corinthian church. Moreover, if Paul challenges the leadership of some, who may very well have been persons of higher social status, does he, thereby, enhance the leadership opportunity within his church of persons from lower social economic classes? I suspect that Paul supports the leadership of the client classes in his church, over against the patron classes, because the former have proven to be correct about the matters which have been reported to Paul. It is wrong to tolerate division between rich and poor in the church (1 Cor 1:26-31), the immoral actions of a believer, regardless of his or her social standing (1 Corinthians 5), and to take other believers to court (1 Corinthians 6:1-11). It is wrong to partake of pagan ritual meals and abuse the poor at the Christian ritual meal. Those of lower social status were more readily forthcoming in questioning these matters and therefore Paul empowers them for leadership in unprecedented ways. However, such conclusions need further study and evidence, no doubt with the assistance of social scientific models of the New Testament interpretation.

Connections to Hispanic Theology

This experimental, two-part journey through one Latino scholar’s research pilgrimage and social scientific exploration of 1 Corinthians, the latter a work very much in progress, must end by making some connections to the question of New Testament hermeneutics and the construction of Hispanic theology.

First is the fact of pilgrimage itself. As Justo González has argued, Hispanics affirm that much of our theology and biblical hermeneutics grows out of our journeys as exiles and pilgrims.63 However, I would like to further suggest that we not only perceive the issues of exile and pilgrimage in the Bible as the result of our own exile experiences, but that we also develop our hermeneutics and construct our theology through the experience of journey. My experience with African-American and Latino grassroots leaders prompted me to question leadership issues in Paul’s letters. Moreover, in describing the journey, I also hope to gain insight for all of us with regard to the practice of Latino hermeneutics, in this case through the use of social scientific models of analysis. Thus I believe that, for Hispanics, journey or pilgrimage is both a tool of inquiry and a vehicle for construction.

Second, social analysis puts us in touch with those concrete issues in the Bible that are closest to Hispanic experience. For example, the urban aspect of Corinth connects in many ways with the urban realities of many Latinos and Latinas. A social class understanding of 1 Corinthians 1:26 resonates with many of us: Hispanics are counted among the “least educated, the powerless and the ignoble,” of this society, those who are not (11:28) and have-not (11:22), the so-called weak of 1 Corinthians 8–10. Nonetheless, God calls upon precisely “those who are not to shame the strong,” and “to reduce to nothing things that are” (1.28). Hispanic theology must always be called upon to speak for the marginalized, and Hispanic hermeneutics sees its modus operandi in uncovering those truths about marginality and poverty in the Bible.64 Thus Hispanic interpreters often resonate with those pas-

60See Antoinette C. Wire, The Corinthian Women Prophets: A Reconstruction through Paul’s Rhetoric (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1990), who argues that the subject for all of 1 Corinthians is Paul’s problems with free, independent women and their leadership in the Corinthian community.


63González, Santa Biblia, 91–102.

64Again, as pointed out in González, Santa Biblia, 31–75.
messages about the poor and the oppressed and with social theories that help us understand those passages as well.

Thirdly, and related to the question of social theory, such values as honor and shame and patron-client relations also resonate with the experience of Hispanics. A fruitful avenue of study remains in how these values relate to Hispanic theology. The theory of status inconsistency is certainly a phenomenon to which Latinos and Latinas can relate. Living a bilingual and bicultural reality as we do, many of us have this sense of belonging to two worlds and yet not being comfortable in either one. That is a form of status inconsistency. Fernando Segovia describes it as the experience of the other.

We are always strangers or aliens, the permanent “others” both where we came from and where we find ourselves. As such, we find ourselves, always defined by somebody else—in our traditional world by those whom we left behind and in our present world by those with whom we live; silenced and speechless—without an authentic, self-conscious, and firm voice; and without a home of our own—excluded and condemned by such external definitions and such lack of voice.65

Moreover, I agree with Segovia that this sense of “otherness” must find its voice and identity in constructive and creative engagements, including the theological and hermeneutical enterprise. As Segovia suggests, because we have status, however inconsistent and lowly, in two worlds, we also know both worlds and “know how to proceed, at a moment’s notice, from one world to the next.”66

This is why I think, given our ease in two worlds, our status as others in both worlds, a Latino hermeneutics seeks to detect the sense of otherness in our biblical texts. Thus, I argue, for example, that divergent perspectives on leadership is at the core of Paul’s problems with the Corinthians. There is a sense of otherness in Paul’s attitude toward leadership with which the Corinthian patrons clashed, given their status quo attitude. My experience of the otherness of grassroots leadership in inner city black and Latino communities prompted me even more to see this phenomenon in the Pauline texts. Thus, to paraphrase Segovia, my otherness as reader resonated with the otherness of the biblical text on this matter of leadership and social status.

This brings me to my fourth and final point, which I have stated elsewhere in this paper: one of the projects for a Latina/Latino theolog—is to develop a theology of leadership for our churches and communities. As more and more Latinos have access to a measure of leadership status in this North American society, we need to exercise such leadership in the spirit of justice and liberation for those among us which this society continues to ignore and leave behind in its unjust status structures. Toward this end, we need a theology of just leadership and we also need continued efforts to mine the biblical text for models of servant leadership. As Segovia says, in biblical study we must employ whatever “literary and sociocultural methodologies” are available to us, as well as those sociocultural resources from our own social location, including our otherness.67 Latino and Latina leaders should always question society’s definitions of who and how one becomes a leader and what a leader is. That, I believe, is a Pauline legacy, and one worthy of further exploration in our biblical and theological work.

This concludes my modest effort, a work in progress, to describe one Latino’s hermeneutical pilgrimage, as well as make some connections of that personal and research journey to the ongoing project of constructing our own Hispanic theology.

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65 Fernando Segovia, “Toward a Hermeneutics of the Diaspora: A Hermeneutics of Otherness and Engagement,” Reading from this Place, Volume 1: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States, ed. Fernando Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995) 57–73, quote from 64.

66 Ibid., 65.

67 Ibid., 69–70.