

## The word of the cross, power and wisdom of God – A study of 1 Corinthians 1-4

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[...] Then, that being the case, do the margins, what is marginal and those marginalized not make up an important hermeneutic category? By all odds, they must become that category vis-à-vis the reality of a world that is fragmented into an increasingly deep two-tiered split between the center and the margins. If the testimony of the resurrected-crucified One; and the revelation of God's Love on the cross of Jesus are the core of the New Testament, aren't we being given a clear sign here indicating the marginal fringes as the viewpoint from which to see reality? That does not mean condoning what marginalized people engage in; or seeing it through romantic notions. It simply means the perspective from which reality is viewed: the perspective the cross of Jesus posits. Whoever sets out to look for the sign to that place will be accused of failing to properly grasp the greatness of a supposed general context, or the grandeur of the bright of the great; but it will be impossible for them not to hear the screams from the oppressed ones<sup>2</sup>.

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**RESUMO**

1 Coríntios 1-4 revela os problemas e as preocupações de Paulo com as divisões na igreja de Corinto. Estas divisões, descritas como “ciúmes e contendas”, aconteciam porque algumas pessoas estavam mais interessadas nas características dos líderes que veneravam do que na teologia que representavam. Estas pessoas também se opunham a Paulo (2.1-5; 3.5-4.21), e a “palavra da cruz” é a referência a partir da qual ele lida com estes problemas. A “discórdia” foi criada por pessoas que declaravam sua lealdade a diferentes líderes (1.11-12). A sabedoria, estimada pelos coríntios e, provavelmente, o critério utilizado na avaliação e compromisso com estes líderes, é uma categoria conceptual importante do texto. Há uma correlação entre estes dois fatores: as críticas apresentadas indicam uma atitude negativa para com Paulo e estão relacionadas com os valores e condutas das pessoas que instigavam a rivalidade que dividia a comunidade.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE**

1 Coríntios 1-4; sabedoria do mundo; palavra da cruz.

**ABSTRACT**

1 Corinthians 1-4 reveals Paul’s problems and concerns regarding the divisions within the church of Corinth. Such schisms, described as “jealousy and quarreling”, arose because some people were more interested in the traits of the leaders they revered than in the theology they represented. Those people also opposed to Paul (2,1-5; 3,5-4,21); and the “word of the cross” is the point of reference from which he tackles those problems. The “discord” had been sown by people professing their loyalty to different leaders (1,11-12). Wisdom – cherished by the Corinthians, and probably the yardstick employed in their assessment and commitment to those leaders – is an important conceptual category in the text. There is a correlation between these two factors: the criticism referred to suggest a negative attitude towards Paul; and it is linked to the conduct and values held by the people who stirred up the rivalry which split the community apart.

**KEYWORDS**

1 Corinthians 1-4; wisdom of the World; wisdom of the Cross.

1 Corinthians is a letter Paul addressed to a church which sprang from his own missionary work (Acts 18, 1-11). The church of Corinth was made up of people from different social groups and cultures; and in various parts of the letter, the pastoral correction he offers seeks to help its members to reach a better understanding of their faith, especially in regard to the issues involving the divisiveness in the community resulting not only from the diversity of people who made it up, but also from the very social standing of the Corinthians themselves. Some people had forgotten about their background; and now, as Christians, they thought they possessed wisdom and were entitled to dishing out their opinions about everything. Paul reminds them of their origin: “Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth” (1,26); and he wants to help them realize the greatness of the vocation of God. The society and the world see in them “foolishness and weakness” (1,27), and regards them as worthless people. However, God has chosen them to reveal His wisdom and His love: “But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are” (1,27-28).

Building on that, the basis of this paper is 1 Corinthians 1-4, a text which reveals Paul’s problems and concerns regarding the divisions within the church of Corinth. Such schisms, described as “jealousy and quarreling”, arose because some people were more interested in the traits of the leaders they revered than in the theology they represented. Those people also opposed to Paul (2,1-5; 3,5-4,21); and the “word of the cross” is the point of reference from which he tackles those problems. Paul admonishes the Corinthians “that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose” (1,10)<sup>3</sup>. The “discord” had been sown by

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<sup>3</sup> The language used by Paul, taken from political speech and treatises concerning political unity, is ripe with terms intending to advocate the unity of the community, among which we can highlight the appeal “to what is beneficial to the common good of the community” (6,12; 7,35; 10,23; 12,7; 10,33), the metaphor of the building (3,9-17; 6,9; 8,1.10; 10,23-24; 14,3-5.12.17.26) and of the body (12,12-26), one of the most common paradigms to describe agreement and the end of divisions in Greek

people professing their loyalty to different leaders: “I belong to Paul”, or “I belong to Apollos”, or “I belong to Cephas”, or “I belong to Christ” (1,11-12)<sup>4</sup>. Wisdom – cherished by the Corinthians, and probably the yardstick employed in their assessment and commitment to those leaders – is an important conceptual category in the text. There is a correlation between these two factors: the criticism referred to suggest a negative attitude towards Paul; and it is linked to the conduct and values held by the people who stirred up the rivalry which split the community apart.

### **“Jealousy” and “quarreling” within the Corinth church**

The “jealousy and quarreling” that split the Corinthian church apart and which were sparked by a people-centered rivalry are what Paul describes as behavior “according to human inclinations”: “For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations” (3,3). The behavior “according to human inclinations” is defined in terms of misconceptions Corinthians had about pastoral ministry, especially the ministries of Paul and of Apollos: “What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each” (3,5). For Paul, Corinthians did not grasp correctly what ministry meant; and behaved “according to human inclinations” (3,3). His critiques revealed the attitudes and behavior of his contenders, who sparked rivalries within the community and accused him of lacking rhetorical skills (1,17; 2,1; 2,4). There are other fault-findings made against Paul, such as his instability

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political rhetoric. The argument for “what is beneficial”, that is, what is aimed at the common good of the community also presents the forerunners and he himself as models worthy of imitation (forerunners: 10,1-13; 5,6-8; 10,18; 14,21; he himself: 4,8-13; 8,13; 9,1-27; 13,1-13). See MITCHELL, Margareth M. *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation. An Exegetical Investigation of the Language and Composition of 1 Corinthians*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992, p. 65-80.

<sup>4</sup> PICKETT, Raymond. *The Cross in Corinth. The Social Significance of the Death of Jesus*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997, p. 37-39; HORRELL, David G. *The Social Ethos of the Corinthians Correspondence. Interests and Ideology from 1 Corinthians to 1 Clement*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996, 112-117; MITCHELL, 1992, p. 81-99.

as someone who has “no certain dwelling place”, and who “worked with his own hands”(4,11-12). Paul does not disclaim the rightness of such criticism; and even ironically refers to the apostles as “the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things” (4,13).

Paul’s foes claimed they possessed “wisdom”, “power” and “honor”, and accused him of not having those features (4,8-10). The contrast presented by Paulo is markedly social: “We are fools for the sake of Christ, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute” (4,10)<sup>5</sup>. Such antitheses are related to the ironic depiction of the Corinthians made by Paul when he compared them with himself: “Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Quite apart from us you have become kings! Indeed, I wish that you had become kings, so that we might be kings with you” (4,8). This portrayal is indicative of the peculiar behavior of people whose elitism was predicated on social status<sup>6</sup>. Therefore, the criticism and conflicts presented emerged from a preferred choice for a leader who better embodied the qualities of wisdom, power and honor, the social values which determined the way they treated Paul and other Christian leaders<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> “Honor” and “shame” were key social values in the Mediterranean world. Thus, the antitheses “honorable”/“despised” and the ideas associated with them refer mainly to social status, and indicate the attitudes of some people towards Paul and the Corinthians from lower social strata. The antithesis “weak-strong” is of a social nature as well, inasmuch as it employs the language that indicated the status and value of people in their social context. See PICKEET, 1997, p. 42-43; MARSCHALL, P. *Enmity in Corinth. Social Conventions in Paul’s Relations with the Corinthians*. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1987, p. 210.

<sup>6</sup> “You have all you want”, “you have become rich” and “you had become kings” made up a triad of the most common terms associated with *hybris*. The correspondence between wealth and excessive conduct characteristic of this tradition helps us pinpoint the social causes of the conflicts within the community and the attacks towards Paul. *Hybris* was linked to the ideas of honor and shame. Paul identifies some people from the church who considered themselves “strong”, who held social power; and for him, the discord in the community was caused by the abuse of social privileges and power by this specific group. See P. Marshall, *Enmity in Corinth*, 208-209; PICKEET, 1997, p. 45-47; WELBORN, L. L. Welborn, “On the Discord in Corinth: 1 Corinthians 1-4 and Ancient Politics”. In: *Journal of Biblical Literature* 106, 1987, p. 83-113.

<sup>7</sup> See CLARKE, Andrew. *Secular and Christian Leadership in Corinth. A Socio-Historical and Exegetical Study of 1 Corinthians 1-6*. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2006.

Paul was deemed as socially inferior by a minority group who used the “wisdom of this world” as a criterion for assessing the ministry (3,5-4,5)<sup>8</sup>. The criticism towards him involves social values contained in the antitheses: weakness-strength/power; honor-shame; wisdom-foolishness. Such wisdom, on which the attack to Paul was grounded, indicates an inflated consciousness which credited spirituality as the factor substantiating the alleged superiority of some people of the community. The criticism towards Paul, which indicates an arrogant attitude that cannot be dissociated from the social position of a minority, is evinced in the verbs “boast” (1,29.31; 3,21; 4,7; 5,6) and “puff up” (4,6.18-19); and the statement “Nothing beyond what is written” (4,6) is targeted at people who have gone beyond the limits of self-knowledge (4,7). The arrogance and conduct associated with it were common to the situation described in 1 Corinthians 1-4. This attitude sprouted from social values upheld by a minority who formed part or aspired to belong to the upper social strata of the Greco-Roman society<sup>9</sup>.

### **The “word of the cross”, foundation of Christian community**

The identification with different authority figures was one of the chief reasons for the divisions within the Corinth church. The people involved in the disputes became puffed up with pride, “in favor of one against another” (4,6). “Pride” is also revealed through other ethical problems addressed in other parts of 1 Corinthians (5,2; 8,1-13; 13,4). However, Paul challenges the system this kind of behavior is grounded on. He expands the discussion on the problem as he presents the foundation of Christian identity through some rhetorical questions: “Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” (1,13). The first question confronts the Corinthians with the consequences of the divisions; and the others pose a fundamental question: Was the vocation of the Corinthians the result of their

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<sup>8</sup> PICKEET, 1997, p. 53-54; MARSHALL, 1987, p. 387-390.

<sup>9</sup> PICKEET, 1997, p. 56-57; MARSHALL, 1987, p. 190-195.

identification with Paul or Apollos, or a consequence of Christ's death on the cross?<sup>10</sup>

Paul seeks to solve the problem of the schisms threatening the unity of the community by presenting the speech on Christ crucified. He reminds the Corinthians that it was in response to the word of the cross that they became those "who are being saved", and not those "who are perishing". The ecclesial identity of the Corinthians was a response to the "word of the cross", which was the foundation of their existence<sup>11</sup>.

Some people from the Corinthian church professed their Christian identity, but the values with which they discredited Paul and saw themselves as superior were the same values the Greco-Roman society used to classify people as weak or strong, honored or dishonored. Paul points out the inconsistency between Christian identity and the identification with the "wisdom of the world". He presents the paradoxical revelation of God's power in the weakness of the cross (1,18-25), inverting social values as he says that although the cross might denote "foolishness" and "weakness", it is power because of its efficacy for those who grasp its meaning. Paul reminds the Corinthians the power of God was shown in the vocation they received when he preached the gospel to them (1,26-31), an occasion when he did not use the "wisdom of the word"; as rhetorical eloquence was a display of a type of power which is not harmonious with the power of God manifested in the cross of Christ (2,1-5)<sup>12</sup>.

The difference between those two ideas of power is important because it is applied to the social elite of the Christian community in Corinth, whose notion of power was built from values from the Greco-Roman culture, and which discredited God's power mediated by the "word of the cross". Paul develops the distinction between those two notions

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<sup>10</sup> PASCUZZI, Maria. "Baptism-based Allegiance and the Divisions in Corinth: A Reexamination of 1 Corinthians 1:13-17". In: *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 71, 2009, p. 813-829; THISELTON, Anthony C. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. Grand Rapids, W. B. E. Publishing Co., 2000, p. 115-220.

<sup>11</sup> PICKEET, 1997, p. 61-62.

<sup>12</sup> The prestige ascribed to rhetorical eloquence was rooted in values cultivated by people who held powerful social positions. For Paul, however, power meant the conviction that God manifested Himself in the weakness of the crucified Christ (1,25). See THISELTON, 2000, p. 156-158; PICKEET, 1997, p. 63-65.

of power as he says there are two groups of people characterized by their eschatological fate, and who correspond to those two types of power: “For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1,18). He distinguishes those groups by their respective attitudes toward the cross. Judging the cross as foolishness originates from a perception linked to current social values, which exalted power and discredited weakness and shame. The “word of the cross” makes a distinction between “those who are perishing” and “those who are being saved”<sup>13</sup>.

Some people from the Corinth church acted according to the wisdom of the world, which was also the criterion they used to judge Paul<sup>14</sup>. “Wisdom of the world” is the way of viewing things which was typical of this specific realm of social and ethical conditions. It has nothing to do with knowledge; rather, it is linked to attitude. Paul discourages it because “the world did not know God through wisdom” (1,21). Jews and Greeks searched for a proof of the divine truth, and what makes their attitude worldly is that they expect God to submit to their standards: “For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom” (1,22). God dismisses the wisdom of the world because the knowledge of God, inherent to human beings, is perverted as people think they are able to tame it and seize it in images of creatures (Romans 1,18-24). The problem does not lie in imposing such criteria on God, but on the fact that the criteria stem from the “wisdom of the world”. The Corinthian Christians were not targeted by the negative criticism aimed at the world and its inability of knowing the God revealed in the cross (1,19-21), but some of them were still “people of the flesh” (3,1) and behaved “according to human inclinations” (3,3), that is, they were led by the “wisdom of the world”<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> PICKEET, 1997, p. 65-66.

<sup>14</sup> This ambivalent conduct might have been provoked by a merging of an identity steeped into values from the Greco-Roman social structure and a new consciousness mediated by the Christian symbolic system. The community of those “who are being saved” was counter-cultural; and Paul expected that their view of reality and corresponding norms and values opposed to the values of the larger society. Paul reminds the Corinthians of the eschatological fate of those who view the cross as foolishness, and rejects the wisdom underlying that judgment. See PICKEET, 1997, p. 66-67.

<sup>15</sup> CONZELMANN, Hans. *1 Corinthians*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975, p. 43-44; LAMPE, P. “Theological Wisdom and the Word about the Cross: The Rhetorical



The church of Corinth was built upon the preaching of “Christ crucified”. Then, Paul announces the content of the preaching and its foundation; and presents the values corresponding to it: “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.’ Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? (1,19-20). The cross is the judgment of God on the world and its wisdom, and “Christ crucified” is God’s wisdom and power(1,23-24). Wisdom and power redefined by the “word of the cross” are the core values highlighted by Paul, and the critical function of the theology of the cross is that it is the basis for denouncing values regarding it as foolishness. Paul seeks to preserve the “scandal of the cross”, so it is not hard to imagine the cognitive dissonance experienced by the social elite of the Christian community in Corinth<sup>16</sup>.

Paul’s argument is essentially a criticism of culture, expressed through the contrast between power and weakness (1,25). The cross was seen as foolishness because it symbolized weakness and shame<sup>17</sup>, but Paul inverts those values by identifying God’s power with the crucified Christ (1,22-23). The cross becomes wisdom and power of God. “Weakness” becomes “power”, and that paradox is defined in relation to the cross of Christ. The “power of God” is defined eschatologically, not sociologically. The social values which the foolishness-wisdom and weakness-strength antitheses denote are replaced by values centered in the cross. Weakness takes on a positive meaning; because it is in the cross – a symbol of weakness and shame – that God reveals his wisdom and power. The Corinth church was called into existence through the preaching of “Christ crucified” (1,23-25)<sup>18</sup>.

There is a correlation between the display of God’s wisdom and power on the cross, or the foolishness and weakness of God (1,25), and

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Scheme in 1 Corinthians 1-4”. In: *Interpretation* 44, 1990, p. 117-131; FEE, Gordon D. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. Grand Rapids (Michigan): W. B. E. Publishing Company, 1984, p. 72-74.

<sup>16</sup> PICKEET, 1997, p. 69; KÄSEMANN, Ernst. “O valor salvífico da morte de Jesus em Paulo” [The saving value of Jesus’ death in Paul]. In: *Perspectivas Paulinas*. São Paulo: Teológica/Paulus, 2003, p. 59-100.

<sup>17</sup> See HENGEL, Martin. *Crucifixion*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977.

<sup>18</sup> PICKEET, 1997, p. 71.

the social structure of the church in Corinth: “Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth” (1,26)<sup>19</sup>. The critical function of the theology of the cross is relevant, and the specificity of that social description suggests this message is incisive for the “wise” and “strong”, and there is no doubt they would understand the force of these statements: “But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are” (1,27-28). The Christian community was assembled by the “word of the cross”. This way, Paul confronts the “wise” and the “strong”, whose attitudes were the cause of discord in the community, with the social implications of the cross. The theology of the cross refers to the arrogance of this group, and its effects are expressed in the remarks: “so that no one might boast in the presence of God” (1,29), and “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord”(1,31), which make it clear that God discloses his wisdom and power in the cross, that he chooses weakness and foolishness of the world, destroying the foundations of human pride, especially the values underlying the arrogance of the Corinthians<sup>20</sup>.

### **The “word of the cross”, the preaching and the preacher**

1 Corinthians 2,1-5 elaborates on the implications of the “word of the cross”, but the emphasis is shifted from the preaching to the preacher.

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<sup>19</sup> The social position of most Christians in Corinth verifies Paul’s exposition of the word of the cross. The social stratification of the community worsened the dissensions within the Christian community; and the text legitimates theologically a community made up of people socially lower in comparison to few Corinthian Christians of a higher social rank. The people who society and the world regard as “nothing” are the representatives of the wisdom made known in the crucified Christ. See THEISSEN, Gerd. “Os fortes e os fracos em Corinto. Análise sociológica de uma briga teológica” [The weak and the strong in Corinth: A sociological analysis of a theological bout]. In: *Sociologia da Cristandade Primitiva*. São Leopoldo: Editora Sinodal, 1987, p. 133-147.

<sup>20</sup> PICKEET, 1997, p. 74; MARSHALL, 1987, p. 187; FEE, p. 84-88.

1 Corinthians 1,26-31 and 2,1-5 contain parallel arguments as these passages follow up the statements of 1,18-25. There is a correspondence between the preaching content and the social structure of the Corinthian church; and between the content and form of the preaching, including Paul's conduct, which again identifies the content of his preaching as "Jesus Christ, and him crucified (2,2): "And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God" (2,3-5). The contrast between "plausible words of wisdom" and "demonstration of the Spirit and of power" (2,4), "human wisdom" and "power of God" (2,5) echoes the "wisdom of God" and "wisdom of the world" antithesis. The experience of God's power, set against rhetorical eloquence, discloses Paul's view of the critical issue, that is, the origin of "jealousy" and "strife" in the church<sup>21</sup>.

The Christians who were "wise", "powerful" and from a "reputable family" assessed their own worth and of the other leaders according to Greco-Roman prestige standards; and considered themselves superior. In response to that attitude, Paul stresses his weakness and unimpressive speech, signs of lack of status in Greco-Roman society. The reversal of socio-cultural expectations involved in the description of Paul's apostleship and preaching style is in conformity with the subversion of human expectations and judgments God carries out in the cross of Christ. The social elite of the Corinthian community also associated the experience of God's power with the display of social power, especially when expressed through rhetorical eloquence. For Paul, however, the power of God mediated by the cross is the core of the dispute: "For the kingdom of God depends not on talk but on power" (4,20). There is a contrast between the revelation of God's power in the cross and the display of social power associated with the "wisdom of the word", but Paul is interested in the effects of the display of power of this world and God's power in the Christian community<sup>22</sup>.

<sup>21</sup> CONZELMANN, 1975, p. 53-54; FEE, 1984, p. 94-97.

<sup>22</sup> The Corinthians experienced the power of God when they were incorporated into the community of saints, but their orientation to power in the sense of status according to

Paul also presents his apostleship as an example for the solution to the problem of dissensions: “I have applied all this to Apollos and myself for your benefit, brothers and sisters, so that you may learn through us the meaning of the saying, ‘Nothing beyond what is written,’ so that none of you will be puffed up in favor of one against another. For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?” (4,6-7)<sup>23</sup>. He antithetically compares the privileged social standing of some people of the Corinthian church with his own standing as someone socially disadvantaged (4,9.13). In this sense, he recalls the opposition between the wisdom of God and wisdom of the world (1,18-25) and suggests the attitude of the world toward the apostles is consonant with its apprehension of the word of the cross as foolishness<sup>24</sup>. Weakness, folly and dishonor symbolized by the cross and disdained by the world are illustrated in the social makeup of the community and in the life of the apostle: “We are fools for the sake of Christ, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute” (4,10). The apostles refuse to reciprocate, and forgo their rights<sup>25</sup>.

Paul presents himself as someone whose weakness mirrors the weakness of the crucified Christ, and in accordance with the theology of the

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worldly wisdom standards had a destructive impact. The social structure of the community attested to the creative character of God’s power, but the dissensions revealed the pernicious effect of the values and wisdom of the world. See T. Lim, “Not in Persuasive Words of Wisdom, but in Demonstration of the Spirit and Power”. In *Novum Testamentum* 29.2 (1987), 137-149; PICKEET, 1997, p. 75-78; THISELTON, 2000, p. 217-223.

<sup>23</sup> Paul stresses the importance of his apostleship when he responded directly to the arrogance which brought about disunity, and presented himself and Apollos as examples of harmony and humbleness. By presenting the nature of ministry, he says that he and Apollo are only servants (3,5-4,5). This exhortation is the appropriate response to the contemptuousness and arrogance of the Corinthians. Thus, to achieve his goal Paul reminds the Corinthians about his “ways in Christ”: “Therefore, I urge you to imitate me. For this reason I am sending you Timothy, my son whom I Love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church.” (4,16-17). See MARSHALL, 1987, p. 205.

<sup>24</sup> PICKEET, 1997, p. 81-82.

<sup>25</sup> MARSHALL, 1987, p. 212.

cross, his example has both a critical and hortatory function: “To the present hour we are hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless, and we grow weary from the work of our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we speak kindly. We have become like the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things, to this very day” (4,11-13). He presents his ministry as a praiseworthy example; and the tone of reproach presented earlier shifts its mood to paternal concern: “Indeed, in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel” (4,15), urging them to imitate him. Paul’s apostolic existence conforms to the gospel he preaches (2,1-4; 4,9-13); and Corinthians should mould their lives after his example. It is not weakness, dishonor, lack of rhetorical eloquence, poverty and working with one’s hands – signs of an inferior social rank – that constitute his “ways in Christ Jesus” (4,17), but the self-disregard implied in his debasement<sup>26</sup>. Paul assumes the position of someone socially disadvantaged, exemplifying the same disposition Christ displayed by offering himself for all humanity. The Corinthians should follow Paul’s example, giving up their own interests so the problems with dissensions in the Christian community would be solved.

In sum, Paul’s argument in 1 Corinthians 1-4 is essentially a criticism of culture, expressed through the contrast between strength and weakness. For some people from the Corinth church, associating the powerful God with the weakness of the cross, and announcing power as weakness, and consequently weakness as power, was a great of fense. The cross was seen as foolishness because it symbolized weakness and shame; death on the course was shameful, and crucified people were stripped of their honor as well as of their place in society and in social memory. So, the stress placed on honor and shame, which were cardinal values in that culture, reinforces its modern value, as we live by an honor culture rather than by an efficiency culture. The alternative symbolic world the text points to is important for its rereading.

God rejects the wisdom of the world because the knowledge of God, inherent to the human being, becomes perverted as people think they are

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<sup>26</sup> PICKEET, 1997, p. 84; EHRENSPERGER, Kathy. *Paul and the Dynamics of Power. Communication and Interaction in Early Christian-Movement*. London: T & T Clark International, 2007, p. 117-136.

capable of harnessing it, seizing in images of creatures. The problem is not just the imposition of these criteria on God, but that, as Paul puts it, they belong to the “wisdom of the world”. His teaching denounces a type of theology that downgrades the Creator and reduces him to a creature which can be handled by the human being. The theology of the cross is critical; it unmask the wisdom of this world, as it is nothing more than an idol. Likewise, extolling the theological standing of people like Paul or Apollos is no different from the wisdom of the world. Therefore, the theology of the Corinthians, so self-enthusiastic and proud of possessing the wisdom of God, lies at the same level of the wisdom of the world, as it situated the people it exalted in the place of God Himself.

Paul makes a distinction between the effects of the display of power of this world and the display of God’s power in the Christian community. For Paul, power is not power-over or domination. The logical consequence of a definition of power as power-over is that violence is the ultimate form that power can take. Instead, power and authority exercised in communities of the Pauline movement were perceived as something to be lived out and experienced according to the values of the kingdom of God. Power is power-for, which means an empowering way so that the community’s “in Christ” identity may be transformed and their perception of power redefined in the context of the “weakness of God” which then is understood as “stronger than human power”. Paul sought to be consistent with the message of the cross, whose power subverts world’s wisdom, even if it were not successful in some groups of the church of Corinth. This project involves confrontations, and cannot be undertaken without running risks.

Christ is the foundation of the identity and unity of the Christian community and Paul’s greater good is Christ and his kingdom. Paul seeks to serve Christ in building his assembly of followers. As a pastor, he is supposed to admonish, encourage or discipline his communities, but his objective is not that these communities become or do something in or for themselves, but rather, that together they fulfill the fundamental goal of being in harmony with Christ and the demands of his kingdom. Thus, to ensure the growth and development of the community of faith, Paul seeks in a variety of ways to enhance the sense of belonging, to foster solidarity and harmony together in Christ. Building solidarity means

developing those communities as strong close-knit units that can survive despite all sorts of oppositions or even persecutions. Paul's concern with unity and growth of the community is an end which can only be explained as an attempt to live according to Christ and gospel demands, such as witnessing and evangelizing.

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