The Child in 1 Corinthians 13: A more excellent way
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As Paul attends to the discourses of status and valuation that preoccupied the Corinthian community, a few of our own cultural and symbolic status obsessions come to light. The discourses of rationalism, developmentalism¹ and spiritualisation have created a powerful cultural conversation which shapes Western identity and theology. These discourses provide philosophical structural terms in which we can find correspondence with the inhibitions of the Corinthian community. We recognise the seduction of cleverness, advancement and distillation where the imperatives of status and success overrule the ethic of love and being. We also become alert to the ways in which these strong discourses impinge on and determine some readings of the texts.

A steady progression towards ‘completion’ or ‘maturity’ or ‘perfection’, is inconsistent with Paul’s kerygmatic and eschatological anchors. In the present Paul knows only of Christ crucified – an event which has its own ‘completion’ (τετελεσται) as declaimed in John 19:30 – and the future to which he looks is the new creation of the eschaton. The process Paul describes in the interim is not one of maturation, so much as of dying. The cross of Christ determines the call to power in weakness. This model of ‘knowing’ God does not lend itself to interpretations in which apprehenders progressively mature. For all of us who still bear weakness, scars, failures, pathologies, patterns and burdens in our flesh, Paul preaches ‘the cross of Christ’ - a radically good news gospel. Our frailties are not immature weaknesses that we will progress beyond when we have enough faith or wisdom or mysteries revealed or spiritual enlightenment.

Against those who claimed knowledge and eloquence (the dominance of rationalism) the cross though folly is the wisdom of God, and Paul rejects loveless thinking.

Against those who claimed maturity and initiation into higher mysteries (the hierarchies of developmentalism), the cross bears the weakness of the crucified Christ, and Paul rejects rankings of gifts – all are equalised in the simplicity and demand of Love.

Against those who elevated ecstatic experience over embodied life (the distinction of spiritualisation) the crucified Christ is bloodied flesh, and Paul rejects discontinuity between theology and ethical practice.

¹ By ‘Developmentalism’ I mean particularly anthropological (Darwinian Developmentalism) and psycho-social taxonomies and stage theories. Still surprisingly dominant in thinking about children are Piaget, Erikson and Kohlberg, whom Fowler followed in offering ‘Stages of Faith’
It is not just that each of these taxonomic strands imposes a possibly loveless evaluative framework. It is the claim of any one frame over against another - speaking, knowing, having, doing – that disintegrates out personhood and or relatedness. The crucified Christ perfectly unites the en-fleshed experience (the whole of human life, from incarnation to death) with the most profound and eternal of spiritual ‘moments’. The model of child as the vulnerable relational agent in our midst does not replace the crucified Christ as the paradigm of grace, but gives a concrete and contingent model from which we might practice a ‘more excellent way’.

It is important not to romanticize, idolize or idealize childhood: there are real limitations, and self orientation is strong, for clear developmental reasons. However the self-orientation of children is not the same as the conscious selfishness of adults. We miss the opportunities offered in the paradigm of child if we assign adult meanings to child responses.\(^2\) We do well to remember that it is adults who cheat on their taxes, cheat on their spouse, who drive under the influence, who gamble their livelihood. Grown-ups are not so enviable. Both Paul and the Corinthians know this. A man has been sleeping with his father’s wife. The rich have been greedy eaters. Their sexuality is expressed abusively. They have been unable to settle their squabbles. They are adults who don’t know how to eat, sleep, dress, love, talk or shut up.

I Corinthians 13:1-3 sketches a grotesque caricature of an eloquent orator, a prophet initiated into the deepest of mysteries and knowledge, a miracle working giant of faith with resources for generosity and dramatic martyrdom who is tragically loveless. Paul exaggerates this extreme character in two directions – hyper-endowed with spiritual and human competencies and honour, but love/ἀγάπη impoverished. This is not a persona that simply requires the embellishment of love in order to fulfil the notion of τέλειος. The call of this passage is not to improve the quality of one’s spiritual gifts by adding love, in order to become mature. Transformation of a different kind is required.

Christian theology has taken many questionable turns - left and right. We have celebrated the economy, the academy, the military and culture, and in the process we have affirmed slavery, the oppression of women, the deprecation of various ethnicities, and the marginalisation of the poor. In the past century, as literacy and education have become more and more accessible to many in the West, we have begun to see illiteracy as a social marker. ‘Pre-literate’ and ‘post-literate’ persons, who are mostly in the outer decades on our age spectrum, are widely assumed to have little contribution to make to society, and this is frequently unchallenged within the body of Christ. Those whose cognitive development varies from the statistical norms

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\(^2\) Krister Stendahl, ‘The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West’ Harvard Theological Review, 56 (1963):199-215. Stendahl exposes the Western application of individual conscience on the writings of Paul, obscuring a collective agenda within the text. This is partly the result of a developmentalist agenda within the history of theology and biblical scholarship
are similarly marginalised in our so-called ‘competency based’ functionalist economies. In this picture frame, the “Jesus” we imagine in worship is almost exclusively an adult male in his thirties, a reasonable reflection of the proportion of attention given in narrative to this age in the gospels, but highly problematic if this personification becomes paradigmatic for discipleship.

We must be careful to acknowledge all of the players on Paul’s board. Easily, these texts can be misused to aid one high-profile talented bloke in pulling the rug out from underneath another. Perhaps it started like this as a power struggle between powerful male leaders: Apollos, Paul, Cephas, Stephanus.\(^3\) How do we hear the voice of Chloe and her people signalling distress? (1 Corinthians 1:11) Perhaps they are the voiceless, and the collective appealing against the preoccupations of the rock stars with themselves and their own concerns.

Paul places the image of the child in the midst (ἐν μέσῳ)\(^4\) of this divided and competing community. Perhaps his action reminds us a bit of Jesus, placing the child amongst the disciples arguing over who is the greatest.\(^5\) The gift of the child in 1 Corinthians 13 is that it provides a positive model for us. There is likely no argument against the destructive power of individual ego flexing and social orders based on any criteria of competence functionality or individual condition. But what are we to do instead? In choosing the child, the question of status, is replaced by the question of relationship.

From Paul’s childhood terminology we do not receive an alternative imperative\(^6\) to reorientate around a confined idolisation of a childhood state, but an inclusive relational ethic of love. Broad dimensions and a multiplicity of modes are affirmed by the universality, vulnerability and non-utilitarianism of childhood. Not all of us will become useful, not all of us will become clever, not all of us will become adults. And we are many kinds of child.

Paul offers himself in reflection as a vulnerable but thinking, perceiving, communicating, relating child - a positive model, and an anticipation of completion in the future of God – and a demonstration of faith (I am not self reliant), hope (I am not yet perfect) and love (but my reality is other-oriented and defined within God).

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\(^3\) Women may be tempted to ask, with Beverly Roberts Gaventa ‘Is this just a guy thing?’ This is her starting point for reading the circumcision culture-wars of Galatians. [Interpretation 54 (2000) 267-278].

\(^4\) As Paul and his Colleagues placed themselves as children in the midst of the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians 2:7 ἄλλα ἐγενήθησαν νήπιοι ἐν μέσῳ ὑμῶν).

\(^5\) Mark 9:36; Matthew 18:2. ἐν μέσῳ αὐτῶν (but not in Luke 9:47 παρ’ ἑαυτῷ)

\(^6\) Elisabeth A. Castelli, ‘Interpretations of Power in 1 Corinthians’ Semeia 54 (1991): 197-222. Castelli critiques the conditions of power operating in the Corinthian discourse which assert Paul’s voice as a ‘powerful and authoritative agent in the text’. This sensitivity is important, and while Castelli works in exclusively adult (mostly sexualised) terms in her reading, her purpose is to ‘create space’ for ‘the more muted subjugated discourses’ (204), and I would submit that the positive valuation of the child as relational qualitative model is one such voice.
In examining and re-integrating the terms νήπιος and τὸ τέλειον in 1 Corinthians 13, and in the context of other related Pauline usage, we can see their contribution to a positive model for the new community of the cross of Christ. Paul builds a preferred typology using the terms child, spirit, perfect and love. He does this; not using direct antonyms, for this would simply exchange one system of status for another, exchanging white for black, when Paul is seeking neither shade, nor grey, but poly-chromatic diversity. False dichotomies of spirit and flesh, child and mature, milk and meat are re-arranged. Classic status indicators — strong over weak, wisdom over folly, possessing over emptied, honour over shame, free over slave, and death over life — are inverted. We begin to identify how various discourses of power and status of our own culture—rationalism, developmentalism and spiritualisation — are subverted by this vision of the child in the midst.

While the reiteration of Paul’s catch phrase ‘the cross of Christ’, so resounding in the opening chapters of 1 Corinthians, is not audible in chapter 13, the typology of weakness, embodiment, folly and limitation of the child, sounds no dissonance against this theme. And this is a theme which will again be picked up in Chapter 15, and, like the eschatological vision projected through the child of no reputation in Chapter 13, will embody the fulfilment of Christ crucified.
Bibliography


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