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No Noose is Good News: Leadership as a Theological Problem in the Corinthian Correspondence

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THE PURPOSE OF THIS ESSAY IS TO EXAMINE THE PAULINE UNDERSTANDING OF leadership in 1 and 2 Corinthians—both the character of leadership and its theological legitimization. This is a huge task, and so there must be a perspective chosen to limit the material under consideration while still providing easy access to the topic. That perspective here is to examine the way Paul opposes images of leadership commonly associated with Cynicism.¹

Why the Cynics as a point of comparison? Aside from the fact that Paul alludes to Cynic themes in his letters with some frequency, it is also the case that outside of the Pauline epistles Cynics figured prominently in ancient discussions

¹A similar method initiated by Abraham Malherbe has produced considerable exegetical and interpretive fruit. See his "Gentle as a Nurse": The Cynic Background to I Thess. ii," *Novum Testamentum* 12 (1970) 203-17, and *Paul and the Thessalonians: The Philosophic Tradition of Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

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The role of the leader implied by Paul's Corinthian letters is to prepare persons for public participation in the gathered community. Paul portrays himself as the community's slave, who thus makes others free for political participation.

of moral exhortation and political leadership.² Popular opinions about Cynics and their own views on the improvement of morals cannot be avoided when the topic of leadership in antiquity is addressed. Two themes associated with Cynicism will be highlighted in this investigation: the leader offers a noose (1 Cor 7:35) and preaches himself as the master of his hearers (2 Cor 4:5).

I. NO NOOSE: 1 COR 7:35

In 1 Cor 7:35 Paul reflects on the aim of his leadership in the Corinthian church. Modern translations of this verse have obscured a vivid image of pastoral leadership. Paul says that he has no interest in throwing a noose (βρόχος) on his readers who are struggling with the relation between erotic passion, self-control, and ecclesiastical participation. Readers of English translations have been deprived of the noose as a metaphor for the kind of leadership Paul cites as opposite to his own. Note how each of the following translations mishandles the phrase οὐκ ἵνα βρόχον ὑμῖν ἐπιβάλω:

RSV: not to lay any restraint upon you

NRSV: not to put any restraint upon you

NIV: not to restrict you

The KJV's "not that I may cast a snare upon you" is certainly better, since it indicates that in the original language Paul employs a metaphor for what his style of ministry seeks to avoid. Nevertheless, "snare" is the wrong image, because it evokes the cunning use of ropes and other materials for the purpose of trapping animals. We need to look elsewhere in order to understand the full force of Paul's principled refusal to employ the noose on his hearers in the Corinthian church.

Since in 1 Corinthians 5-7 Paul casts himself in the role of moral advisor and touches on commonplaces in ancient philosophical ethics, we would do well to look for the noose within the context of Greco-Roman traditions of moral exhortation.³ These sources reveal that the noose was a common expression stemming from the harshness of the Cynic philosopher who allowed no compromise in the struggle against passion in himself and in those people whose moral shortcomings he took in hand to correct.⁴

The Cynic philosophers Diogenes of Sinope (400-325 B.C.) and his successor Crates of Thebes (365-285 B.C.), whose reputations for severity in dealing with the passions were well known,⁵ have been associated with sayings in which they offer the noose as the only alternative to reason. Rational self-control or suicide are the

²See, for example, Dio Chrysostom, *Orations* 1-4.

³For passion as the key issue of 1 Cor 5-6, see B. Fiore, "Passion in Paul and Plutarch: 1 Corinthians 5-6 and the Polemic against Epicureans," in *Greeks, Romans, and Christians: Essays in Honor of Abraham J. Malherbe*, ed. D. Balch, E. Ferguson, and W. Meeks (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 135-143.

⁴Not all Cynics, however, fit this model of severity. Some were kinder in their approach toward human failings. For the division between mild and harsh Cynics see A. Malherbe, "Self-Definition among Epicureans and Cynics," in *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition*, ed. B. F. Meyer and E. P. Sanders (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 3.50-58.

⁵The popular view that Crates was gentle is not, however, found in the letters ascribed to him. This is puzzling. See, for example, Pseudo-Crates, *Epistles* 7, 16, 19.

only options. Diogenes Laertius, the third-century A.D. collector of the doctrines and life stories of famous Greek philosophers, reports that Diogenes “would continually say that for the conduct of life we need right reason or a noose (βρόχος).”⁶ Such a radical “either/or” is reiterated in one of the letters bearing Diogenes’ name. Speaking to all Greeks habituated to excesses of many sorts, Diogenes warns, “either learn self-control or hang yourselves.”⁷ Similarly, Crates was said to have “recommended to humans either a mind or a noose (βρόχος).”⁸ We see, then, in these examples that the noose condemns passion, forcing the person to choose reason’s promise of self-mastery, or self-inflicted death.

We have not yet cited instances in which erotic desire in particular comes into play as it does in 1 Corinthians 7. Two final examples demonstrate that Paul’s usage reflects an already existing pattern of radical alternatives in the harsh Cynic approach to moral exhortation. Clement of Alexandria reports that Crates initiated the idea that “the remedy for an insatiable drive to sex is hunger—or else a noose.”⁹ An epigram attributed to Crates makes the same point: “Hunger puts an end to love, or if not hunger time. But if neither of these put out the fire, the only cure left for you is the noose.”¹⁰ The image of the noose, then, encapsulates the Cynic treatment of passion in terms of personal victory or defeat.

Paul communicates to his readers in 1 Cor 7:35 that one of his goals is to differentiate his style of leadership from the Cynic obsession to secure the individual’s victory over passion. By denying any interest in the noose and moving quickly to a positive statement of the intent of his advice he gives us a hint of his theory of leadership. His stated aim is not to force his readers into a personal crisis but to make them ready for public participation in the church.

Unfortunately, the language which communicates this theory most powerfully, the phrase πρὸς τὸ εὐσχημον, is just as obscured in modern translation as Paul’s reference to the noose, with the result that the notion of “publicness” contained in εὐσχημος is not carried forward to the contemporary reader.¹¹ The root of the word, σχημ, indicates intersubjectivity, since it means “that which appears to the eyes.” Thus, it comes as no surprise that the significance of εὐσχημοσύνη/ἀσχημοσύνη in ancient philosophical ethics in general and in sexual ethics in particular comes from combining a social, relational dimension with the problem

⁶Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 6.24. Unless otherwise indicated, all texts and translations are from the Loeb Classical Library. In this instance I have slightly modified the translation.

⁷Pseudo-Crates, *Epistle* 28.6 (A. Malherbe, *The Cynic Epistles: a Study Edition* [Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1977] 123).

⁸*Gnomologium Vaticanum* 386 (L. Sternbach, *Gnomologium Vaticanum* [Berlin: De Gruyter, 1963] 146). Translation is mine. See also Pseudo-Crates, *Epistle* 7.

⁹Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 2.20.121.2. Translation is J. Ferguson, *Clement of Alexandria: Stromateis, Books One to Three* (The Fathers of the Church 85; Washington: Catholic University of America, 1991) 237.

¹⁰*Greek Anthology* 9.497. I have slightly modified the translation.

¹¹RSV and NRSV: “To promote good order.” NIV: “That you might live in a right way.” Again the KJV is superior, in this case because it retains the intersubjective dimension of *being seen*: “for that which is comely.”

of the control of passion. Εὐσχημοσύνη, rooted in the control of desire, is a matter of a person being well regarded by others and for this reason confident to participate in public speech interaction.¹² Decorum resulting from the control of erotic desire similarly creates confidence in the individual for public participation.¹³

By opposing the noose and stating decorum and participation as his goals for the members of the community, Paul communicates to his readers a theory of leadership. A leader works to increase the sense of honor and dignity among the members of the community so that they may have the confidence to engage fully in its public life. By untying the noose Paul intimates an understanding of leadership as the communication of the freedom for participation. He will develop this understanding of leadership at greater length in 2 Corinthians.

II. WE DO NOT PREACH OURSELVES...AS LORD: 2 COR 4:5

We turn from Paul's brief allusion to the noose to a far more complex and theologically rich treatment of leadership in 2 Cor 4:1-12. While in 1 Corinthians 7 the theme of leadership arises rather tangentially in the course of giving advice, in 2 Corinthians 1-7 it is *the* issue to which Paul devotes considerable rhetorical skill. One aspect of this skill is Paul's ability to put in the mind's eye of the reader the image of the harsh Cynic and to portray his own ministry over against the Cynic reputation for self-proclamation and domination.

As for self-proclamation, examples are not difficult to find.¹⁴ Dio Chrysostom distinguishes himself from philosophers, presumably Cynic, who make themselves offensive to their hearers by preaching themselves: "Now the great majority of those styled philosophers proclaim themselves such (αὐτοὺς ἀνακηρύττουσιν), just as the Olympian heralds proclaim the victors."¹⁵

Paul goes on to say that he does not preach himself *as Lord*. This too touches very closely upon an important point in the popular stereotypes of Cynics: their reputation for enslaving hearers and acting as if they were masters (κύριοι).¹⁶ We find a similar allusion to Cynic domination when Paul vilifies the rival leaders in Corinth in 2 Cor 11:20 in what appears to have been their successful strategy of treating the congregation as slaves (καταδουλοῖ).¹⁷ In 2 Cor 4:5, then, Paul implies that his rivals preach themselves as masters of the congregation. This allusion to

¹²See W. Deming, *Paul on Marriage and Celibacy: The Hellenistic Background of 1 Corinthians 7* (SNTS Monograph Series 83; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1995) 206-207. For the public dimension and the relation to honor and shame, see Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1126b34; *Tabula of Cebe* 9.4; Epictetus, *Dissertations* 2.5.23; 3.22.2, 8, 15, 52; 4.9.9-11; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 1.103.

¹³Epictetus, *Dissertations* 4.9.3-5; Philo, *The Decalogue* 169.

¹⁴The Cynic reputation for self-preaching is not a groundless stereotype. See Pseudo-Diogenes, *Epistles* 7, 28.8, 46; Dio Chrysostom, *Oration* 9.11-13.

¹⁵Dio Chrysostom, *Oration* 13.11. See also Epictetus, *Dissertations* 4.8.26-29.

¹⁶For the reputation for domination, see Epictetus, *Dissertations* 2.12.24; 3.22.49; Lucian, *The Runaways* 12, 17; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 6.29-30.

¹⁷Note the accompanying terms in 11:13 and 20, all of which also can be documented as popular criticism of harsh Cynics.

Cynic behavior sums up the leadership style employed by his rivals and prepares for the second half of the verse in which Paul states his own theory of leadership in positive terms.

Paul does indeed preach himself, not as Lord, but as the community's slave (ἐαυτοῦς δὲ δούλους ὑμῶν). Aside from the content of this preaching, which we shall examine below, it is very significant that Paul retains the notion of self-proclamation as he presents his theory of leadership. He shares this point, at least on a formal level, with his rivals. This means that the question of the character of leadership is a theological matter on a par with the proclamation of Jesus Christ as Lord. "Preaching Jesus as Lord" and "preaching ourselves as your slaves" are two activities which, were it not for the attention Paul draws to his slavery in 4:5, we might rank hierarchically, thinking that to do so would preserve the unique saving work of Christ. In fact, in the syntax alone Jesus' lordship and Paul's slavery to the church have a deep correspondence, and while they must be distinguished they cannot be separated.

What connects the central claim of Paul's christology—Jesus is Lord—and the core image of his leadership—himself as the community's slave? To get at this question we must first take note of the way Paul associates Jesus as Lord with the creation of freedom in 3:17, a verse fresh in the minds of the readers of the letter: "The Lord is the Spirit, and wherever the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom (ἐλευθερία)." In 3:18 Paul goes on to define ἐλευθερία not as freedom from something (sin, for example) but freedom in political, or intersubjective, terms and thus freedom *for* participation in the community and transformation into the image of Christ through ecclesial relations made possible by the Spirit.¹⁸ Jesus' lordship creates freedom within the church. When Paul preaches Jesus as Lord he simultaneously proclaims the freedom that the Lord has communicated to the church through the Spirit.

Secondly, in order to see the correlation between Jesus' lordship and Paul's slavery, we must examine the ideology of the master-slave relationship in the ancient world. By referring to it Paul's hearers could have made sense of his assertion of his leadership as slavery. Since we, however, do not possess the same "common sense" as they did we must make an effort to understand slavery in its ancient context. It will become clear that it is not the case, as many interpreters assume, that Paul simply exhibits self-effacement or "Christian humility" when he calls himself the community's slave.¹⁹ Mere humility could never bear the theological weight that Paul claims his slavery carries when he ranks it with the preaching of Jesus as Lord. Nor did the ancients equate slavery with "humility" as a virtue. Rather, they conceptualized slavery in a socio-political dimension, and it is in this

¹⁸See D. Fredrickson, "Free Speech in Pauline Political Theology," *Word & World* 12/3 (1992) 345-351.

¹⁹For insight into Paul's use of slavery imagery, see D. Martin, *Slavery as Salvation: The Metaphor of Slavery in Pauline Christianity* (New Haven, Yale University, 1990).

regard that we discover the key to Paul's theology of leadership and its deep connection to proclamation of Jesus as the freedom-creating Lord.

Slaves made masters free. The labor of the slave's body provided leisure (the original meaning of the word ἐλευθερία) for the master to participate in the city's assembly (ἐκκλησία) where, through speech and persuasion, the city's future was planned and enacted. The master-slave relationship was one of the key enabling social institutions of ancient democracies. Without a slave there was no possibility of freedom. Aristotle repeatedly called attention to the dependence of freedom upon the labor of another, the master upon the body of the slave: "Therefore all people rich enough to be able to avoid personal trouble have a steward who takes this office, while they themselves engage in politics or philosophy."²⁰ Paul does not enter into a debate concerning the justice of basing the master's freedom upon the slave's labor or whether this is an adequate theory of the relation between the social and political realms.²¹ He simply presumes this ideology for the purpose of providing an image of his own leadership. In sharp distinction from his Cynic-like rivals who seek to dominate the church, he becomes the community's slave and thus creates freedom for his hearers. We can begin to appreciate the deep correspondence between Jesus' lordship and Paul's leadership: both create freedom in the church.

2 Cor 4:10-12 states powerfully that Paul's slavery creates the community's freedom. Here the terms have changed from slavery/freedom to death/life, yet, since the slave through his labor bears in his own body the master's death and thus extends the master's life,²² the shift is not difficult to comprehend.

...always bearing the death of Jesus in our body in order that the life of Jesus might be made manifest in our body. For we who are living are always handing ourselves into death on account of Jesus in order that the life of Jesus might be made manifest in our mortal flesh. So that death is working in us but life in you.

The little phrase "on account of Jesus" (διὰ Ἰησοῦν, 4:11) links 4:10-12 with Paul's self-proclamation as the community's slave on account of Jesus in 4:5. Note that Paul's way of being with the community through his body both carries the death of Jesus and makes manifest the life of Jesus, with the result that life is created in his hearers, though it means death for him.

This sort of self-presentation, which seems to fuse the work of Christ and the work of the leader, must have either infuriated or utterly perplexed Paul's rivals. Paul's theory of leadership lacks clear boundaries between subject domains which one normally would think must be kept distinct and well-defined. Paul, however, reasons by means of images. He wants his hearers to understand one thing in terms of another, and therefore metaphor is at the heart of his project. For example,

²⁰Aristotle, *Politics* 1.2.23. Cf. 2.6.2; 2.8.5-6; 4.5.2-6; 6.2.1; 7.8.2-3.

²¹For a critique of the Aristotelian subordination of the social to the political, see R. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1983) 238-259.

²²I thank my colleague Gary Simpson for this insight.

Christ is the “image of God” (4:4), or in 4:6 “our hearts” become the location of God’s creative shining forth and the glory of God is found in the face of Jesus Christ. In fact, the “for” of 4:6 indicates that Paul’s willingness to proclaim himself as the community’s slave is based on God’s own will to have his glory found in the face of the freedom-creating Jesus Christ.

III. CONCLUSION

Comparison with Cynic stereotypes has helped us to see that leadership in the Pauline style is the preparation of persons for full and free public interaction in the assembly of those called into participation in the Son of God. In 1 Cor 7:35 we have seen that no noose is good news because Paul refused to limit the scope of his leadership to the individual and his or her passions. Instead, he approached the problem of passion from his concern for the individual’s public face and freedom in the assembly. In 2 Cor 4:5 Paul takes his theology of leadership to an even deeper level while maintaining the focus on freedom. He conceptualizes leadership itself as slavery and connects it to the freedom-bestowing work of Christ through the Spirit. Leadership in Paul’s hands becomes a theological issue because he recognized the church’s demise in domination by “lords,” and the security of its future in the presence of the Spirit and the freedom-imparting servitude of its leaders. ⊕