The Rod as Excommunication: A Possible Meaning for an Ambiguous Metaphor in 1 Corinthians 4.21

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Abstract
In 1 Cor. 4.21, Paul threatens to return to Corinth with a rod of discipline in order to deal with certain arrogant members of the Christian community. In addressing the passage, scholars generally gloss over the metaphor with little regard to its meaning. Those who do comment assume it refers to some kind of rebuke on Paul’s part but go no further in their interpretation. This article seeks to discuss the metaphor’s intended meaning, arguing that the rod comes on the back of two prior warnings outlined in 1 Cor. 4.14-20 and is itself the final act of discipline to divisive members of the church: excommunication.

Keywords
Corinthians, excommunication, metaphor, Paul, rod of discipline, 1 Cor. 1.10–4.21

Introduction
1 Corinthians 1.10–4.21 addresses a serious situation of divisions among the Corinthian Christians. Certain members of the Christian community have favoured Apollos over Paul on account of Paul’s perceived inferiority in regard

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to wisdom and eloquence. This has led to divisions in the community over their preferred teachers and, it seems, to open repudiation of Paul’s authority and status. This attitude towards Paul has very likely come from the members of the Apollos faction, who have deemed Paul to be inferior to their own preferred teacher. Paul thus responds to the divisions with the apology found in the opening four chapters of the letter, an apology primarily aimed at the members of the Apollos faction (Welborn 2011: 372).

In 1 Cor. 4.1, Paul employs the rhetorical device of periphrasis or ‘non-naming’ to confront the detractors who are sitting in judgment of him. He says, ‘this is how a person [i.e. you] should regard us (οὕτως ἡμᾶς λογιζέσθω ἄνθρωπος), as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God’. He then makes clear in 4.6 that the discussion in the previous chapters, particularly his use of numerous metaphors, was designed to prevent certain people from becoming puffed up (φυσιόω) over their favourite teachers. He then finishes the chapter with a warning in 4.19-21: if such people choose to remain puffed up, he will find out how they are talking (τό λόγος τῶν πεϕυσιωμένων) and return with a rod (ἐν ῥάβδῳ).

The question, however, is what exactly does he mean by ‘the rod’?

This metaphor is generally met with ambiguity among commentators. At times it is noted with no discussion. At other times it is suggested that ‘the rod’ implies some kind of discipline, suggesting that Paul is willing to punish the Corinthians in some way, but with no proposal offered as to what the punishment might be. Others attempt to locate its meaning in a more specific context. Ciampa and Rosner, for example, suggest that the rod refers to what OT wisdom believed a father should use to drive out folly from the heart of children (Prov. 22.15; 23.13-14), but they offer no literal explanations of what this discipline

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4. See BDAG, 81, for this rendering. For discussion, see Weiss 1910: 92. He stated long ago: ‘άνθρωπος kann natürlich einfach gleich τις stehen – ohne besondere Nuance, aber hier, wo bald darauf der Gegensatz άνθρωπος – κύριος folgt, hat es doch wohl den besonderen Akzent: er muß sich ja bewußt sein, daß er “nur ein Mensch” ist, der nicht ins Herz sehen kann und überhaupt nicht zum Richten berufen ist.’ In a personal correspondence, Welborn makes a similar suggestion: ‘In evaluating Paul’s use of conventional devices such as periphrasis, I think we should bear in mind that the letter of 1 Cor. 1.1–6.11 is a dynamic document in which Paul is seeking to dissuade the Corinthians from forming factions. Toward the end of Paul’s argument, as he grows more ironical, I think it is quite appropriate that he should avoid naming the principal characters involved in the formation of factions. The use of singular nouns and pronouns allows any reader to feel himself addressed in a general sense, but was probably intended to have a special resonance for that individual who was most conscious of his role in the formation of the Apollos faction.’
might be (2010: 196). Dutch deals with the metaphor at length, showing convincingly that the rod was to be understood in the context of discipline in paideia, concluding that it is a suitable response to educated elite who would be familiar with this kind of discipline in the gymnasium (2005: 261-78). Still in an educational context, Tucker argues that Paul’s language in 4.14-21 is intended to empower the ἐκκλησία while also subverting key educational aspects of Roman social identity (2010: 257-58). ‘Paul offer an alternative formation approach to the Roman concept of humanitas. He uses kinship-formation similar to Jewish teaching and learning discourse in order to transform certain aspects of educational life within the ἐκκλησία in Corinth’ (2010: 258). Tucker sees the rod in this context as the ‘stick of training’ referred to in Prov. 22.15. Paul is not threatening actual violence; rather, he is furthering his anti-Roman imperial polemic with a critique of paideia as practised among those in Corinth (2010: 266). Welborn compares the metaphor to Herodas’s play entitled ‘Schoolmaster’, which deals with an errant student whose father has failed in his attempts to teach the boy to spell and recite speeches. His mother takes the boy to the schoolmaster and convinces him that the only option is for him to beat the boy. In the same way, Welborn argues, the Corinthians are immature and have been inattentive to their studies, full of youthful arrogance. Paul’s solution is to send Timothy as the ‘schoolmaster’ in order to remind the Corinthians of his ways. But should they fail to heed Timothy’s instruction, Paul will come with the rod (2005: 87-89). Taken together, these studies make it clear that behind Paul’s metaphor there is some kind of intended discipline, but what it is is not certain.

Some who do offer a solution with regard to its meaning see it as a threat of rebuke. Kistemaker suggests that the rod refers to the spiritual power of Christ. As a representative of Christ, he has the capacity to be able to correct the people ‘with an authoritative Word of God’ (1993: 150). Similarly, Robertson and Plummer suggest that it refers to a ‘spiritual rebuke and discipline’ (1914: 92). In other words, by threatening to return to Corinth with a rod, Paul intends to assert his apostolic authority and pull the factional member(s) back into line. But given the severity of the division, is such a response adequate? A few scholars have gone as far as to suggest that Paul has something more severe in mind: excommunication. Schnabel suggests such a possibility. ‘Paul is perhaps thinking about exclusion of the Christians from the community who are responsible for the rivalries’ (2006: 268). Schnabel notes the severity of the situation in Corinth, that is, the potentially devastating consequences of such rivalries, as justifiable grounds for such a response (2006: 268). Kremer makes a similar suggestion, arguing that

8. Collins (2006: 202) is also unsure as to what it could be exactly, but notes the connection to the physical cane of the ancient school. Similarly, see Klaiber 2011: 73.
9. Similary, see Weiss 1910: 122.
the rod is a threat of Paul returning and exercising his authority in the same way that he exercises it in ch. 5 as well as 2 Cor. 2.1 and 7, and 13.2 (1997: 97). Zeller argues that it refers to ‘sharp disciplinary measures like the exclusion demanded in 5.1–5’ (2010: 196). Schrage also offers excommunication as a possibility, but notes that it could still simply refer to a rebuke (‘eine harte Strafpredigt’); he concludes that it is difficult to say for sure what Paul has in mind (2008: 364).

In seeking to determine Paul’s meaning, then, we appear to be confronted with two options. Clearly Paul intends to implement some kind of punishment; on the one hand, it might be as simple as a stern rebuke, but on the other hand, Paul may intend to go as far as removing the factional member(s) altogether. While its precise meaning will always be a matter of speculation, it is my contention in this article that a close reading of 1 Cor. 4.14-21 reveals clues that appear to shed light on the interpretation; specifically, what Paul has in mind is the excommunication of those responsible for the factions.

In this article, it will be argued that (1) excommunication was a common feature of ancient communities, both in the Graeco-Roman world generally and the Christian community specifically. It will then be shown that (2) a variation of excommunication based on Deut. 19.15 can be seen in the Christian community; that is, excommunication comes only after two prior warnings or on the basis of the testimony of three witnesses. This threefold process, it will be argued (3) can be seen in 1 Cor. 4.14-21. The first warning is the letter itself, which Paul intends as an admonition. The second warning comes with the sending of Timothy, who, I argue, has been sent to follow up the letter and, if necessary, further reinforce the admonition. The third and final warning is the rod, a metaphor for excommunication.

**Punishment under Roman Law**

In ancient Rome, there were two types of court system, the first of which was the private court (*iudicia privata*). These were places where the individual sought redress for individual wrongs; they were the place where individuals protected themselves, their property, and their rights (Riggsby 1999: 157). The second type of court was the public court (*iudicia publica*). These were the courts in which the whole community could seek redress for crimes committed against it. They dealt with crimes done to the community as a whole. This applied not only to crimes that affected a large number of individuals, but to crimes that were understood as inherently detrimental to the community as such (Riggsby 1999: 151), crimes that diminished the majesty of the Roman people (Riggsby 1999: 158).

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10. The main form of crime dealt with in these courts was *ambitus* (electoral bribery), *de sicariis et veneficiis* (murder), *vis* (assault, riot) and *repetundae* (extortion by provincial administrators).
The public courts existed for the good of the Roman people as a whole. In other words, the Roman criminal court system was primarily concerned with crimes that affected the community rather than the individual.

Punishment for these crimes was either pecuniary or capital; there was nothing else (Crook 1967: 272). The most common punishment for minor offences was flogging (Crook 1967: 274). In 2 Cor. 11.25, Paul says that he was the recipient of this punishment on three occasions (τρὶς ἐραβδισθην). We read the account of one of these instances in Acts 16, where Paul and Silas are severely flogged in Philippi. This sort of punishment was implemented by the lictors (ῥαβδοῦχοι; cf. Acts 16.35, 38), who attended the magistrates. The lictors were authorities who carried with them a fasces, a bundle of rods with an axe, and it was their task to carry out the sentences set by the magistrate (Tajra 1989: 11). Punishment by scourging could be used as a means of execution, as corporal discipline, and as prelude to execution following a sentence. Its overall intent was to serve as a warning to others not to do the same (Keener 2014: 2479).

Scourging could also vary in its severity. The law distinguished between a light, corrective beating (admonitio/castigatio) and a heavy, harsh verberatio (Keener 2014: 2479). In terms of the implement used, a free, non-citizen might receive fustigatio, beating with a rod or staff, depending on their status, whereas a slave could expect flagellatio, beating with a whip with pieces of iron or bone woven in, or attached to a spike (Keener 2014: 2479). These sorts of floggings were originally intended for slaves, but in the time of the principate, beating with a whip seems to have extended to include free people of lower status and non-citizens,11 including Jews.

Josephus recounts a disturbance in the city of Caesarea where a conflict arose between the Jewish population and the Syrian population. In order to quell the uproar, the magistrates had the troublemakers scourged (μαστίζω) with whips and also imprisoned.12 Josephus also mentions several occasions where Jews were flogged with whips as a prelude to crucifixion.13 Similarly, Philo recounts the treatment by Flaccus of the Jewish senate in Alexandria. Thirty-eight members of the senate were dragged from their homes and paraded into the theatre where they received such severe floggings (μαστίζω) that some died on the spot, and those who survived despaired of recovery.14 Flogging, in other words, was a common punishment for minor crimes; however, the majority of crimes in the public courts were punished with exile (Riggsby 1999: 7).

Exile could take one of two forms: relagatio, involving expulsion from Rome or the province; or deportatio, a more severe form of exile, involving loss of

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14. Flacc. 75.
citizenship and banishment to some specific remote place (Crook 1967: 272). Excommunication was generally applied to those that presented a threat to the broader community. We see this in numerous examples.

Velleius Paterculus tells the story of Publius Sulpicius, a tribune of the people and a man of high repute and great influence with the people, who was suddenly plunged into evil ways. He attached himself to Marius, a notorious character, and together with him proposed a bill that would abrogate Sulla’s command and entrust the Mithridatic war to Gaius Marius. Moreover, through emissaries of his faction, he secured the assassination of Quintus Pompeius, the consul but also son-in-law of Sulla. In response, Sulla assembled his army and returned to Rome. Having taken possession of the city, he exiled the persons responsible for the revolutionary measures.16

Exile also applied to those who were only perceived to be a political threat. Lucian recounts the exile of the philosopher Peregrinus, who, after arriving in Italy, fell to abusing everyone, and in particular the emperor, Antoninus Pius. At first, the emperor showed little concern about it; however, Peregrinus’s reputation grew among the people, and he started to attract a great deal of attention for his recklessness. Eventually, the city prefect banished him, saying that the city had no need of any such philosopher.17

On another occasion, Agrippina had Lollia, the ex-wife of Claudius, banished, the one whom she saw as her rival for the emperor’s hand. Agrippina arranged for her to be charged for traffic with Chaldaeans and magicians, and consulting the image of the Clarian Apollo for information as to the sovereign’s marriage. She was condemned by Claudius, who said that Lollia’s projects were pernicious to the state. She was ultimately punished with the confiscation of her property and expulsion from Italy.18

Again, Philostratus tells the story of Demetrius, who, while in Rome, entered the gymnasium of the bathhouse and, in the presence of Nero, declaimed a speech against bathers, saying that they were effeminate who defiled themselves. Demetrius was saved from summary execution, Philostratus tells us, on account of the fact that Nero was in his best singing voice that day. But Demetrius did not escape danger for his speech; Tigellinus, who had the command of Nero’s sword, expelled him from Rome for ruining the bathhouse with his speech.19

Exile could also be applied to those who caused physical harm to the body of citizens. Tacitus recounts the story of a certain freedman named Atilius, who built an amphitheatre at Fidena in order to give a gladiatorial show.

15. For various laws, see Dig. 48.22.
16. Velleius Paterculus, 2.19.1. He tells a similar story in 2.68.2.
17. Lucian, Peregr. 18.
18. Tacitus, Ann. 22.
19. Philostratus, Vitt. Apoll. 42. For a similar example involving Nero, see Tacitus, Ann. 50.
Atilius, however, neglected to lay the foundation in solid ground or to secure the fastenings of the wooden structure above. At the first show, people packed into the amphitheatre, resulting in a collapse that buried most of the spectators. In all, 50,000 persons were maimed or crushed to death in the disaster. As punishment, Atilius was driven into banishment.\textsuperscript{20}

Exile was also punishment for those who threatened to corrupt social morals. There is the well-known story of Augustus finding the two Julias – his daughter and granddaughter – guilty of every form of vice; as a result, he had them banished.\textsuperscript{21} In a similar context, Tiberius absolved a Roman knight from his oath that he would never divorce his wife and allowed him to put her away when she was found to have committed adultery with her son-in-law. At the same time, he punished others whom he deemed to be a threat to the moral stability.

Notorious women had begun to make an open profession of prostitution, to avoid the punishment of the laws by giving up the privileges and rank of matrons, while the most profligate young men of both orders voluntarily incurred degradation from their rank, so as not to be prevented by the decree of the senate from appearing on the stage and in the arena. All such men and women he punished with exile, to prevent anyone from shielding himself by such a device (Suetonius, \textit{Tib.} 35.1-2, trans. Rolfe).

In summary, Roman courts were primarily concerned with crimes against the community as a whole rather than the individual. Punishment for these could involve a fine or flogging, but in most cases it resulted in exile. This same concern for order and stability also extended to various groups within the community.

\textbf{Punishment in the Ancient Home, School and Association}

The ancient family was in many ways a mini-community; it was concerned primarily with social and physical reproduction, the transmission of property, honour and the family cult, and economic subsistence (Dixon 1992: 30). Children of low-status families would be expected from an early age to contribute to the family’s economic situation, while children of wealthy families would be expected to contribute to the maintenance or improvement of the family’s status (Dixon 1992: 109). A father’s absolute sovereignty over his family (\textit{patria potestas}), and particularly the power of life or death over the children, is well attested. Ancient law was designed to ensure that families retained responsibility for their members’ actions (Shelton 1998: 17). In both Jewish and Roman cultures a father

\textsuperscript{20} Tacitus, \textit{Ann.} 63.
\textsuperscript{21} Suetonius, \textit{Aug.} 55.1.
had the ability to punish with death those children who brought the family into disrepute. He had the power to expose new-borns, force children to divorce spouses, disown or sell children into slavery, or kill children whose behaviour displeased him. This power was absolute unless he either died or emancipated or married off the children (Dixon 1992: 40).

The role of disciplinarian also extended to the teacher, who was expected to act like a parent. In fact, physical coercion was probably more common with the teacher than with the parent (Dixon 1992: 118). In ancient schools, it was not uncommon for students who were slow to learn or who misbehaved to be punished by beatings with one of several objects: a cane known as a ferule, a whip made of leather cords called a scutia, or a bundle of rods known as virgae (Bonner 1977: 143). This meant that, for most students, their experience of school was often one of brutal punishments. In fact, a popular saying in grammatical training was ‘he who has never received a beating is uneducated’ (Laes 2011: 141). Similarly, ‘work hard, boy, lest you be thrashed’ (Cribiore 2001: 69). According to many teachers though, it was a course in virtue to train the young to endure ‘full many pains and toils’. This might involve cold baths, whipping the boys, or even scraping their knees with a knife-blade. But in the event that the student did not heed the correction, their fate was expulsion.

Expulsion in schools was not unheard of and extended to both students and teachers. Libanius tells the story of how he came to hold a professorial chair at Athens. He says that the governor at the time demanded that the students there should not misconduct themselves at all. And as a result of rioting by the students, he dismissed their teachers as being no-good shepherds. For the most part, however, it was the task of the teacher to protect the class from potentially dangerous students.

A lengthy stele from Beroea offers a detailed outline of laws surrounding the gymnasiarchy. Side B of the stele lists numerous rules that the gymnasiarch is to uphold and stresses the obedience that the ephebes are to give to him or those he has appointed as a leader. In the situation where a law is violated, the gymnasiarch was to impose fines or floggings according to the person’s status. It was also the responsibility of the gymnasiarch to prevent certain persons such as slaves, drunkards or cripples from entering the gymnasium, very likely, out of

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22. For Jewish fathers, see, e.g., Deut 21.18-21. For Roman fathers, see, e.g., Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Ant. Rom. 2.26-27; Dixon 1992: 117-18; Saller 1999; Garnsey and Saller 2014: 136-37; et al. It should be noted, however, that despite being a reality in the Republic, the actual incidents of this sort of punishment in the Principate are rarely heard of (Crook 1967: 107).
24. Lucian, Nigr. 28.
25. Libanius, Or. 1.24-25.
fear of such types corrupting the youth.\textsuperscript{27} At the same time, any who insulted or physically abused the gymnasiarch were to be punished.\textsuperscript{28} Teachers, then, had an obligation to prevent potential threats from entering their class, but also to remove threats as well.

Libanius writes to the father of one of his students who has been punished with a flogging for misbehaviour. The father has demanded an explanation for Libanius’s punishment of his son; his response is informative:

Your correspondent who informed you about the strap and the beating ought to have told you the reason for the beating, too. In that case you would not have been so aggrieved as you now are: for it seems to me that you have taken offence not so much because your son has had a beating, but because you thought he never would have done except for some grave misconduct. But just listen to my attitude towards this matter: if one of my students conducts himself so badly that it cannot decently be mentioned, I expel him and refuse to allow my class to be infested by such contagion. Beatings however are employed against those who are idle in their studies. In the case of the first, I am afraid of the damage they cause, and so expel them; these last I waken up with the strap (Libanius, \textit{Ep.} 139.1-2, trans. Norman).

Finally, another context where we see communities administering discipline to its members is in the voluntary associations. These associations were set up by private persons for private ends and therefore came under private law; this meant that their internal organization and government was independent of the state. Social relations were strictly regulated, and internal disputes were settled by the community through various mechanisms such as fines, injunctions not to take other members to court, and the insistence on settling disputes within the association; all of this served to prevent conflict from reaching divisive proportion (Walker-Ramisch 1996: 133; Kloppenborg 2011: 214). Despite these rules, however, rivalries and factions were common, particularly around the meal, where seating arrangements and food portions served as indicators of status (Kloppenborg 2011: 211). In the event of such disruptions, or any other sort of slanderous or disruptive behaviour, offenders were punished with fines or expulsion.\textsuperscript{29} Two inscriptions from Liopesi outlining regulations for club admission and discipline demonstrate this. They stipulate that any member found to be fighting with

\textsuperscript{27} Cf. Miller 2006: 189. A similar oath is seen in a Macedonian inscription (Harrison 2009: 151).
\textsuperscript{28} Cf. Aeschines, \textit{Tim.} 12. Aeschines notes that the gymnasiarchs were, under no conditions, to allow anyone who has reached the age of manhood to enter the contests of Hermes together with the boys. He warns: ‘A gymnasiarch who does permit this and fails to keep such a person out of the gymnasium, shall be liable to the penalties prescribed for the seduction of free-born youth.’
\textsuperscript{29} For discussions of fines, see, e.g., Roberts, Skeat and Nock 1936: 41-42; Ascough 2003: 84-86; Venticinque 2010: 281-87; Perry 2011: 507.
another member will, in the case of the first inscription, either be punished with double blows or fined 25 drachmas and expelled from the club; in the case of the second inscription, any person who joined the fight is to be fined 5 drachmas, and the one who initiated it is to be fined 10 and expelled from the club.30

In other words, we see in these examples a significant concern to protect the morals of the broader community and to remove any potential or actualized threats. In all of these contexts, the punishment involved either flogging or exile. This same concern for community stability and attendant punishment is found in the early Jewish and Christian community.

Punishment in the Jewish and Christian Community

The Jewish community in many ways functioned in a manner similar to a voluntary association in that it was a self-regulating group within the broader city structure.31 Jews were permitted (to an extent) to administer their own punishments in the event of community disruption and group violations.32 As with the broader culture, flogging or excommunication was the common punishment, with the administration of this taking place in the synagogue (cf. Mt. 10.17; 23.34; Mk 13.9; Lk. 4.28-29; 12.11; 21.12; Jn 9.22; 12.42; 16.2; Acts 22.19; 26.11).

In 2 Cor. 11.24, Paul mentions that on five occasions he received the forty lashes minus one. In the Jewish community, a person could be punished for any number of violations of the Mosaic Law, ranging from mixing the different seeds in a field, to sexual sins, or to blasphemy (Bolton 2013: 367-68). If such a person was caught, their condemnation needed to be established by at least two witnesses along with proof that a warning had been issued. The person’s guilt was then to be determined by a judiciary of three judges (Bolton 2013: 368). In the event that he or she was found guilty, the punishment would be determined by the level of the crime as well as their physical stature, with the maximum punishment being forty lashes minus one (following Deut. 25.2-3) using a cowhide that was doubled and then redoubled. For those who wished to remain part of the community, they had no choice but to submit to such punishment, but for those who wished to leave, the community had no further hold on the person (Bolton 2013: 369).33

31. The extent to which the synagogue modelled itself on the voluntary association is a matter of debate and beyond the purview of this article. For discussion, see Baumgarten 1998; Fitzpatrick-McKinley 2002.
32. In civil cases, the Romans were quite happy for the Jews to administer their own justice (Oppenheimer 1998: 187-91; Williams 1998: 37).
33. However, according to the Mishnah, if the person administering the punishment goes beyond the prescribed amount of blows, they themselves would be exiled on the victim’s account (Bolton 2013: 367).
While corporal punishment such as flogging does not appear to be practiced in the Christian community, excommunication certainly was. However, unlike the broader ‘secular’ community, there was an added stipulation to the punishment based on Deut. 19.15, which states: ‘A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established.’ This requirement for two or three witnesses is seen in numerous examples. In Mt. 18.15-19, we find the following:

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

It is suggested that this final reference to treating the offender as a Gentile or a tax collector refers to excommunication.34

We see a similar process in Tit. 3.10. Here, instruction is given to the young minister regarding how to deal with a αἱρετικός, that is, one who causes divisions.35 In the context of Titus, it refers specifically to those who engage in, among other things, foolish controversies (μωραί ζητήσεις). Such persons are to be admonished (νουθετέω) twice and, should they fail to heed the correction, they are to be rejected (παραιτέομαι). Though this last term is somewhat ambiguous, it is taken by some commentators to signify the removal of a person from fellowship, in the same manner as 1 Cor. 5.1-5 (Knight 1992: 355; Towner 2006: 797).36 A similar command is found in 1 Tim. 5.19, which states: ‘Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses.’ The Christian community, in other words, seemed to adhere to a policy of two warnings followed by the expulsion of the guilty party. But could this be what Paul has in mind in 1 Cor. 4.21? One clue might lend weight to this suggestion.

In 1 Cor. 5.3-5, we read about a member of the Corinthian community who is guilty of an incestuous relationship with his stepmother. In 5.13b, Paul appears to invoke the excommunication formula of Deuteronomy, ‘Purge the evil person from among you’, as additional authority for his pronouncement of the

35. BDAG, 28. The term is also a cognate of αἵρεσις (faction/sect), a term Paul uses to describe the various groups in Corinth (1 Cor. 11.19).
36. Cf. BDAG, 764.
excommunication of the incestuous brother (Zaas 1984: 259). This example is informative for our present discussion as it brings the reality of excommunication within the orbit of 1 Cor. 4.21. Scholars note a clear rhetorical unity from 1 Cor. 1.1 to 6.11, to the extent that some even see it as a separate letter. These six chapters together give a clear indication that the divisions of 1.12 are in fact very serious, to the point that they are playing out in the courts (6.1-11). This occurs, moreover, in the midst of a culture strongly concerned with the protection of the community, and, in the event of factionalism or behaviour that threatened the community morally or politically, one in which the punishment was excommunication. Paul’s concern is clear when he states that any who cause such division will be destroyed by God (3.17).

Excommunication in Corinth is made explicit again a few decades later. In 1 Clement we find that some of the younger men have incited a revolt against the leadership of the church and have deposed them. Clement encourages the one or two involved to enter into voluntary exile and say to the community ‘if it is my fault that there are rebellion and strife and schisms, I retire (ἐκχωρῶ); I will go wherever you wish, and will do whatever is ordered by the people. Only let the flock of Christ be at peace with its duly appointed presbyters’ (54.2). It seems within the realms of possibility, therefore, to suggest that what Paul had in mind in 1 Cor. 4.21 was the removal of the offender, should that offender be found unrepentant after two initial warnings.

**Admonish Them: First Warning (1 Corinthians 4.14)**

In the overall section of 1 Cor. 4.14-21, Paul presents the Corinthians as his children. In referring to them in this way, Paul can utilize the inherent rights of an ancient father: he can admonish them (4.14), he can urge behavioural change (4.16-17), and if that fails, he can punish them (4.21) (Fee 2015: 199). In other

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37. In judging the offender, Paul appears to point to three separate parties who are all present at the trial: himself, present in spirit, the gathered congregation, and the Lord Jesus. These three parties, we might assume, are all acting as witnesses against the man. For the designation of the three separate parties, see Lindemann 2000: 125.

38. Some scholars have in fact argued that the rod of 4.21 actually points forward to this offender. They suggest that any form of severe punishment was not warranted from the situation outlined in the opening four chapters (Lindemann 2000: 118; Ciampa and Rosner 2010: 196). But as we have seen, in light of the seemingly common practice of excommunicating those who threatened community stability, such a punishment in the case of 1 Cor. 1–4 seems in keeping with the culture.

39. E.g., Welborn 2013: 229.

40. For discussion, see Welborn 2014.
words, this fatherly imagery puts Paul in a place of authority over the community and enables him to discipline them if necessary.41

He begins the section in 4.14 by noting that what he has said up to this point in the letter is not intended to shame the Corinthians, but rather to admonish (νουθετέω) them as his beloved children (πέντε ἀγαπητά). This admonition of the Corinthians within the context of a letter is in keeping with the rhetorical practices of his time. In rhetorical terms, admonition was an important part of all three types of oratory as well as epistolary theory. Aristotle says:

Now the employment of persuasive speeches is directed towards a judgement (κρίσις); for when a thing is known and judged, there is no longer any need of argument. And there is judgement, whether a speaker addresses himself to a single individual and makes use of his speech to exhort (νουθετέω) or dissuade, as those who give advice or try to persuade, for this single individual is equally a judge, since, speaking generally, he who has to be persuaded is a judge (Rhet. 2.18.1, trans. Freese).

Ps.-Demetrius designates admonition as a specific epistolary type (τύπος νουθετητικός). Admonition, he says, is the ‘instilling of sense in the person who is being admonished, and teaching him what should and should not be done’.42 Admonition then, was commonly applied through the use of a letter or a speech, making Paul’s use of it, in 1 Cor. 1–4, appropriate according to the rhetorical conventions of his time.

Admonition itself was a standard part of all ancient life, from a child’s education through to adulthood.43 This was no different in the Christian community. The fathers in Ephesus are exhorted to raise their children in the instruction (παιδεία) and admonition (νουθεσία) of the Lord. Similarly, Col. 3.16 says, ‘Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching (διδάσκω) and admonishing (νουθετέω) one another’. Admonishment in the Christian community was a major responsibility for the church leaders (1 Thess. 5.12); it was also a responsibility that extended to the community members, who are given the task of admonishing their brothers or sisters who are behaving inappropriately (1 Thess. 5.14; 2 Thess. 3.15; Rom. 15.14; Col. 3.16).44

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41. See, e.g., Burke 2003: 101-102; Schnabel 2006: 259. Admonition was primarily the role of the father (Barrett 1968: 115).
42. Cited in Malherbe 1988: 35.
43. For admonition in schools, see, e.g., Plato, Leg. 729C; Plutarch, Adol. poet. aud. 20C. For the same in adulthood, see, e.g., Dio, Or. 32.27; Plato, Prot. 323D; Resp. 399B; Demosthenes, Chers. 76; Philip. 73; Plutarch, Rect. rat. aud. 46A. Admonition was also commonly attributed to the teaching practices of philosophers. See Plutarch, Rect. rat. aud. 39A, 46A; Virt. prof. 82A; Dio, Or. 31.122, 33.10; Diogenes Laertius, Lives, 6.34-35; et al.
Admonition, in other words, was a common feature of ancient society, and it was seen as the appropriate means of addressing immature behaviour. This makes it the logical response to the Corinthian divisions. For Paul, the present divisions in Corinth are inappropriate and dangerous, and all those involved in their instigation are clearly a threat to the community. Such a person, Paul says, will be destroyed by God (3.17) (Collins 2006: 161).45 In keeping with the practice found throughout the New Testament, therefore, Paul writes this letter to address the situation. In his absence, the letter of 1 Cor. 1–4 functions as the first warning in the process of the Corinthians’ discipline (Collins 2006: 192).

**Timothy’s Visit: Second Warning (1 Corinthians 4.15-17)**

Paul then addresses the divisions directly in 1 Cor. 4.15b-16. Here he continues the paternal metaphor by stating that they do not have many fathers, but in Christ he became the Corinthians’ father (Lassen 1991: 130).46 In this way, Paul presents the Corinthians as a household with himself as the *paterfamilias*, whose role it is to maintain peace, order and concord within the household (Burke 2003: 107). As their father, Paul exhorts them (παρακαλέω cf. 1.10) to become imitators (μιμηταί) of him. One of the major roles of the ancient father was to present himself as the primary exemplar to his children (Burke 2003: 102-103).47 This command to imitation in fact summarizes the teaching and advice of the opening four chapters of 1 Corinthians (Ciampa and Rosner 2010: 187). That is, Paul sees his own life in Christ as the standard which the Corinthians should emulate. Specifically, they should imitate the unity demonstrated between himself and Apollos (Clarke 1998: 344). Moreover, they should imitate Paul’s overall humility in regard to the gospel. In doing so, they will see their present rivalries for the foolishness that they are and, as a result, cease in their factional behaviour.48 Finally, in presenting himself as a father to the community, he also availed himself of another role: the disciplinarian.

We have already seen that in both Jewish and Roman cultures a father had the ability to punish with death those children who brought the family into disrepute. Obviously, Paul does not intend to take it that far, but he is clearly prepared to punish the offender(s) if necessary. Lassen notes: ‘That Paul should have so

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45. Here Paul is very clear that anyone responsible for seriously harming the up-building of the church (i.e. through creating divisions in the community as indicated by the second person plural ‘you all are the temple’) will suffer a severe loss.

46. She noted that this sort of paternal imagery was commonly used to express the authoritarian roles of gods and political leaders, including the emperor, senators, the governor, and even a general to his troops.

47. For discussion and primary sources, see White 2015: 172-77.

ended his lengthy discussion in 1 Cor. 1.10–4.21 with the father image of justice or moderation suggests that he is invoking an authoritative relationship over the congregation as its founding father’ (1991: 136). In other words, Paul first tells the Corinthians in 4.14 that his intention is to admonish them by his letter. He now points out in 4.15-16 that this disciplinarian action is in keeping with his role as their apostle and father. However, he is also aware that it is still only a letter, and as such, the discipline it intends to exact may not be received by those who are standing in opposition to him. Therefore, in order to ensure that it is, Paul tells the Corinthians in 4.17 that he is sending Timothy, his other beloved child (μου τέκνον ἀγαπητόν), to remind them of his ways.

**Timothy’s Difficult Assignment**

1 Corinthians 4.15-17 would appear to serve as a letter of recommendation for Timothy (Collins 2006: 198), who, I suggest, has the ominous task of following up Paul’s letter with disciplinary action (if necessary). Burke notes the significance of Timothy’s task:

Timothy’s role is strategic in that he is not only dispatched as Paul’s emissary but also as the embodiment of his ways. Given that Paul is no longer physically present with the Corinthians Timothy is Paul’s conduit and didactic tool, representing the apostle’s power and authority to the Corinthians (2003: 111).

Timothy has been sent to remind the church of Paul’s ways and, it would seem, to ensure that the letter has been received and understood; but in the event that it has not, Timothy must take further measures, forming the second warning in the disciplinary procedure.49 Two clues would seem to support this proposal.

First, according to 1 Cor. 16.10-11, in the timeline of the Corinthian correspondence, Timothy would arrive in Corinth after the letter’s arrival.50 Here, however, Paul expresses serious concern about the potential fallout that Timothy’s visit might bring. Paul warns the Corinthians that, upon his arrival, Timothy is to

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49. That Timothy has a disciplinary role has been suggested by Fee (2015: 210) who points out that the present letter as well as Timothy’s visit serve as the proper inducement to correcting their behaviour. We have already seen the argument of Welborn (2005: 89), who argues that Timothy has been sent as the ‘schoolmaster’ in order to remind the Corinthians of his ways. Should they fail to heed Timothy’s instruction, Paul will come with the rod.

50. For this chronology, see Barrett 1968: 116; Wolff 1975: 433; Kistemaker 1993: 601; Thiselton 2000: 375; Schnabel 2006: 264; Bruce 2006: 32-33; Ciampa and Rosner 2010: 188. Hence the ἔπεμψα is not to be taken as an epistolary aorist, but rather denotes the fact that Timothy is already on his way (perhaps to Macedonia and then to Achaia; see Barrett above) and will arrive after the letter (cf. Lindemann 2000: 115).
have nothing to fear, nor, Paul warns, should anyone treat him with contempt. This is in keeping with the expectations surrounding the treatment of an envoy.

As an envoy representing Paul, Timothy can expect certain treatment from the Corinthians. Margaret Mitchell notes that in first-century antiquity, the proper reception or rejection of the envoy entailed the corresponding reception or rejection of the one who sent him (1992: 645-46). It would have been well understood that the envoy must be treated according to the status of the one by whom he was sent as opposed to the status he individually holds (1992: 647). It would also be understood that the envoy had both the power and authority to speak on behalf of the one who sent them in accordance with their instructions (1992: 649). In other words, Timothy, as Paul’s envoy, possessed the same authority as Paul and was commissioned with the task of addressing the current situation in Corinth, albeit on Paul’s behalf. Paul’s concern for Timothy’s welfare would indicate that he has been given a tough assignment. It would not be a stretch to imagine that Timothy has been given the ominous task of admonishing certain arrogant members of the congregation, who presently have a negative attitude towards Paul.51

Secondly, Paul states in 4.17 that Timothy has been sent to remind the Corinthians of Paul’s ways. He considers Timothy to be an accurate representation of Paul’s own life and ministry, thus he holds him up as an exemplar. Presenting living examples of how it should look alongside admonition (1 Cor. 4.14) was a standard method of training. Plato says, ‘The most effective way of training the young is not (simply) by admonition, but by plainly practising throughout one’s own life the admonitions which one gives to others’ (Leg. 729C). Plutarch says, ‘Philosophers, at any rate, for admonition and instruction, use examples taken from known facts’ (Adol. poet. aud. 20C). Admonition was practised in the context of example and memory, suggesting that Timothy’s visit to remind them of Paul’s ways was in fact an admonition of their own present ways. Given the arrogance felt towards Paul at that particular time, this would not have been received well, hence Paul’s concern. Timothy’s role as Paul’s representative and disciplinarian, however, was appropriate. In metaphorical terms, Timothy was their older brother in the family or the more senior student in their class. According to Quintilian, it was easier and better for a student to imitate

51. The reason for Paul’s instruction with regard to Timothy is an issue of uncertainty in scholarship. For discussion of the alternatives, see Garland 2003: 758-60. Two possible reasons are suggested for Paul’s concern: first, perhaps Timothy, on account of youth or timidity, was inadequate for the task of confronting such people. Cf. Robertson and Plummer 1914: 391; Morris 1985: 231. Secondly, the Corinthians may take a negative attitude towards him because of his association with Paul. Cf. Horsley 1998: 223; Collins 2006: 596. Scholars make the connection between this request and 4.17, where the church is told that Timothy is coming to remind them of Paul’s ways, suggesting that such a task had risks due to the ill feeling of some towards Paul (Klaiber 2011: 279; Fee 2015: 907).
their classmates than their teacher.\textsuperscript{52} As one of his most trusted co-workers, Paul is clearly confident that Timothy’s example will reflect his own behaviour while he is in Corinth. As Ps.-Plutarch comments, ‘the memory of past activities serves as a pattern of good counsel for the future’ (\textit{Lib. ed.} 9F). Timothy’s task, it seems, is to follow up Paul’s letter and, if necessary, reinforce its admonishment.

\textbf{The Rod: Excommunication (1 Corinthians 4.18-21)}

In this final section, Paul takes aim at his opponents. He says in 1 Cor. 4.18-20 that they have become puffed up (\textit{φυσιόω}) against Paul (cf. 4.6), believing him to be inferior to Apollos and thinking that he will not return. He says that he will return soon, however, and will find out not only the talk of these arrogant people (\textit{τό λόγος τῶν πεϕυσιωμένων}) but their power (\textit{δύναμις}). Paul now explicitly threatens a follow up with a demonstration of his authority. As Wanamaker notes:

In 4.18-20 his tone becomes menacing towards any in the community who dare to challenge him and his parental-like authority. The threat is directed towards those who pride themselves in their rhetorical sophistication and its concomitant social status and power (4.19), and in turn have apparently demeaned Paul for his lack of eloquence and social status (2.1-5). Paul invokes a powerful symbol, namely, the kingdom of God, to suggest that his \textit{δύναμις} has an altogether different basis from those who equate eloquence in speaking with power. In doing so, Paul legitimates and intensifies his own authority by subtly suggesting that his power is derived from the divine sphere, not the human sphere, unlike those whom he threatens (2003: 136).

Having made clear that he is ready and willing to challenge their perceived power, Paul then finishes the entire section in 1 Cor. 4.21 with the question: as their father, in what manner do they want him to come, with a rod (\textit{ἐν ῥαβδῳ}) or in a loving and gentle spirit? The question remains, however, what does he intend with the rod?

\textbf{The Rod as Excommunication}

Paul has already presented himself as the Corinthians’ father, with its attendant disciplinary component. By threatening the rod, Paul would certainly recall in the minds of some of the Corinthians the paternal ‘rod for correction’ of Prov.

\textsuperscript{52} Quintilian, \textit{Inst.} 1.2.26. Older students would also aid the teachers in disciplinary process. A gem, dating to the Graeco-Roman period, depicts a particularly vicious scene, where one schoolboy is stretched out over the back of an older boy while the teacher beats him with a whip (Beck 1975: image 275).
22.15 and 2 Sam. 7.14. But, as we saw above, the rod also finds its meaning in the disciplinary role of the schoolmaster, a figure familiar to some of the more educated Corinthians (Daube 1966: 67-68), and in the local magistrate, known to all in any Roman city. In other words, the ubiquity of a rod or a whip for correction suggests that Paul’s threat would surely bring to mind something more than merely metaphor, but to suggest that Paul would physically beat the Corinthians seems very unlikely. However, one more possibility looms large: in all of the above contexts, punishment with a rod or a whip was an alternative to excommunication. In the context of our passage, Paul clearly intended to correct the factional behaviour in some way, but could this really be what he has in mind?

By threatening the rod, Paul is addressing the arrogant person mentioned in 4.18, who is guilty of factional behaviour. To excommunicate such an offender is certainly fitting in a cultural context of excommunicating members of the community who pose a threat to its stability. A further clue to the suggestion that this signifies excommunication might be found in Paul’s alternative: should he come with a rod or in a loving and gentle spirit (ἐν ἀγάπῃ πνεύματί τε πραΰτητος)? For Paul, the best possible solution for the division is restoration and reconciliation within the community, not only to Paul, but to each other. This he makes clear right from the very start (1 Cor. 1.10):

I implore you brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you speak the same language and that there may not be divisions (σχίσματα) among you; but rather that you be restored and made complete (κατηρτισμένοι) in the same mind (νοῦς) and in the same judgement (γνώμη).

Paul believes that the solution to the church’s division is for them to be restored (καταρτίζω). We see similar language in Gal. 6.1. There Paul tells the community that if anyone is caught in sin, the ones who live by the Spirit (οἱ πνεθματικοί) are

53. As Myrick (1996: 167-68) notes: ‘Paul, in a fashion like that of the Jewish paternal tradition, demonstrates father-like manner by confronting, disciplining and testing his spiritual children who had veered from God’s will.’

54. Schneider (1968: 968) argues that it specifically refers to the Hellenistic as opposed to the Jewish teacher, who used a lash instead of a rod.


56. Fee (2015: 209) also notes that Paul has in mind the behaviours resulting from the division. That is, the rod of 4.21 also points to the next two issues addressed in the letter (incest and going to court) where we see excommunication being explicitly addressed. In these two cases, it is clear that the behaviour of the arrogant member(s) has influenced the rest of the community. In other words, Paul wishes to deal with those causing divisions that have led to immoral behaviour, behaviour that is tearing apart the community.

57. Translation mine.
to restore (καταρτίζω) that person with a gentle spirit (ἐν πνεύματί πραΰτητος).\(^{58}\) Paul says in 1 Cor. 1.10 that he wants them restored (καταρτίζω), then in 4.21 specifies that he wishes to do this in the same spirit as Gal. 6.1 (ἐν ἀγάπῃ πνεύματί τε πραΰτητος). The similarity in language between the verses would suggest that in both cases there is an intended restoration to the community; but in 1 Cor. 4.21 there is likely an opposite measure: removal from the community.

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