Paul and gossip: a social mechanism in early Christian communities

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ABSTRACT
This study proposes that gossip played a considerable role in the tensions and misunderstandings surrounding the activities of Paul. Not only was Paul often a subject of gossip, but his handling of this very potent form of social interaction within the household context did little to abate the problems.

1 INTRODUCTION
Paul's career was marked by several conflicts. Communication (or the lack of it) plays a major role in such misunderstandings and tense relationships. In this study my aim is to draw attention to the role of one form of communication, namely gossip, in some of the situations that Paul found himself.

Professor J H Roberts, in various publications, prefers to emphasise the possible value of discourse analysis for proper understanding of the New Testament writings, although he acknowledges that other perspectives, such as narratology and sociology can provide valuable insights (e.g., Roberts 1992:2-5). Following up on his emphasis on the importance of context, on proper historical understanding (Roberts 1978:14-16), I want to show the interconnection of several approaches to the New Testament writings, by highlighting aspects of the social dynamics in communicative contexts.

It is remarkable how little use has been made of available research on gossip, despite its obvious relevance to understanding the social tensions surrounding Paul. The possible benefits for understanding aspects of the Pauline correspondence from the perspective of gossip is obscured, I think, by the attitude that such study would cast doubt on the supposed doctrinal elements in the feuds and quarrels reflected in Paul's letters. The opinion seems to be that the only worthwhile information must be information that deals with 'important ideas' (determined by whom?) and that the only good knowledge is that which is 'authorised' and 'approved' (by whom?).

Hannerz (1967:35) emphasises that what gossip does must necessarily be tied to the social context in which it occurs. Conversely, to describe a social context one must give attention to what gossip does in that community. By and large, New Testament scholarship describing 'social context' perceives the
'typical' social setting to have been one of big events, of major theological upheavals, of great men interacting. But that is not what life is like at all. 'Popular culture is so much a part of our daily existence that it is all but invisible. But, like other invisible forces, it loses none of its potency thereby.... In large part it defines the texture if not the fabric of our environment' (Bigsby 1976:vii).

2 CONFLICT IN THE PAULINE COMMUNITIES

One of the key issues in the Pauline letters is conflict, and almost every investigation into either the letters or the addressees of Paul's letters deals with it—usually under the rubric of Paul's 'opponents'. The following viewpoint is very representative:

Die für das Verständnis der Paulusbriefe wichtigste Frage ist die nach den Gegnern, gegen die Paulus in mehreren Briefen kämpft; denn die Argumentation des Paulus wird durch die jeweilige Front entscheidend bestimmt, und nur das Verständnis dieser Front ermöglicht es, die Gedanken des Paulus voll zu begreifen (Kümmel 1970:56).

Considerable insight has been generated by the 'quest' for Paul's opponents. The tendency is, however, to deal with the tensions and discord within the Pauline communities as about 'true doctrine'. Much of scholarship attempts to describe the conflicts in terms of a history of ideas. The assumption is that distinct groups, with a cohesive counter-theology opposed Paul's teachings. Consequently, the only worthwhile conception of Paul seems to be that of a man engaged solely in theological crisis and debate or in pious worship (cf Hock 1980:13-15, 51). Such a perspective leaves far too much of history out of the picture.

That is, though everyone may agree that Paul's opponents 'stand at the center of the issues involved' (cf King 1983:342), how they came to occupy that 'centre' is left undiscussed. Precisely how the tension between them and Paul manifested and functioned—particularly with regard to social dynamics—is often left undiscussed. Craffert (1992:7) reminds us that the idea of a theological or doctrinal crisis is a scholarly creation based on a specific interpretive tradition. Since Paul neither identifies any opponents nor unequivocally mentions any... [in GL], all scholarly attempts to construct their identity presuppose a specific socio-historical setting and communication situation... In short, given the state of the evidence, it needs to be pointed out that the assumed nature of the conflict more often than not reflects a particular communicative context.

Whatever else that 'communicative context' was, informal communication, daily talk, gossip, was undeniably part and parcel of it. This study suggests that some attention to the process of gossip could shed light on the conflicts and
tensions reflected in the Pauline writings. In doing this, I want to urge an attitude toward early Christian writings that stresses 'the folk' and the social dynamics of their everyday lives.

It would obviously be unrealistic to argue that 'doctrine' was the only disruptive force in early Christianity. In fact, as is well known, conflict and its causes in movements are quite complex (cf, e.g. Craffert 1992:228–239; 1994; French 1989; Kurtz 1983; Malina and Neyrey 1991), and yet very few studies have attempted to utilise the social dynamics of gossip events to understand aspects of the disunity, quarrelling and unhappiness among the Pauline communities.

Gossip, for instance, can be a potent means of social control, a way of fine tuning social relationships (cf Arno 1980). Various studies refer to the control of morals through a gossip network (Gluckman 1963:308, 312; Paine 1967:278; Bergmann 1993:120–134). The argument is not that gossip creates morality, but that it creates the appearance of morality. It motivates people to put up defences, to hide vices and to keep up appearances.

Conversation, daily talk, is part of impression management with which people define identities; hence gossip plays a major part in factionalism, conflict and power struggles (cf, e.g., Cox 1970; Layton 1971; Rasmussen 1991).

Much like Theissen (1982:44–54) argues, I want to emphasise the sociological and historical processes involved in theological and religious experiences. The point is not to reduce the phenomena we study but to understand them.

3 A MOST GOSSIPY WORLD

3.1 General comments

In antiquity, like today, gossip was mostly seen as a negative activity, something to be censured. From Jewish circles a number of scriptural sayings can be quoted. 'Do not go about spreading slander among your father's kin (and do not take sides against your neighbour on a capital charge)' according to Leviticus 19.16. Proverbs, in particular, have a number of things to say about gossip. 'A tale-bearer gives away secrets, but a trustworthy person respects a confidence' (11.13). 'Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman without discretion' (11.22). Or: 'A gossip will betray secrets, so have nothing to do with a tale bearer' (Pr 20.19).

Paul himself associates gossip with such serious transgressions as malice, envy, murder and deceit (Rm 1.29; 2 Cor 12.19). In 1 Timothy gossip is depicted as a feminine activity: the author of the letter dwells upon young widows who, besides their passions distracting them from supposed higher calling, also learn 'to be idle, indeed worse than idle, gossips and busybodies, speaking of things better left unspoken' when they go from house to house.
The remedy for these sinful activities, according to the author of 1 Timothy, is to marry again and have children; in addition such actions will prevent themselves from becoming objects of gossip (1 Tim 5.14).

Plutarch writes in his treatise Concerning talkativeness (Περὶ ἀδολεσχίας—Moralia 502-514) that speech, 'which is the most pleasant and human of social ties,' is made inhuman and unsocial by those who use it badly and wantonly (504.6). In many instances the 'unspoken word' has done greater service than the 'spoken word'; consequently, 'I think, in speaking we have men as teachers, but in keeping silent we have gods...' (505.8F).

Despite such sound insight, gossip permeated the communities of the ancient world. In courtyards, in the markets, in the gymnasia, when meeting one another in the streets and, of course, in the barber shops, people gossiped.

It is not strange that barbers are a talkative clan, for the greatest chatterboxes stream in and sit in their chairs, so that they are themselves infected with the habit (Plutarch, Moralía 509A).

Paul suggests that gossip is characteristic of 'gentile' behaviour but the rabbis knew otherwise. In the Talmud we find the following despairing comments: 'One who bears evil tales almost denies the foundation [of faith]', or, 'Any one who bears evil tales will be visited by the plague of leprosy'—discussing the 'deceitful tongue' (b. 'Arakhin 15b). The remedy for the evil tongue is, of course, study of the Torah.

We must bear in mind that the first century Mediterranean world was, to adopt the words of Schein (1994:139), a 'close' society—that is, a society in which people live not only 'towards' each other, but close to each other. In the crowded cities of the Roman Empire persons were never alone. Daily urban life in these cities was tantamount to being subject to constant surveillance—truly a 'close' society (cf MacMullen 1974:62; Stowers 1984:81-82; Veyne 1987:72-75). The many who lived in the tiny apartments of ancient cities, typically 'must have lived almost entirely outside [the] apartment, in the streets, shops, arcades, arenas and baths of the city. The average Roman domicile must have served only as a place to sleep and store possessions' (Packer .

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1. 'The gymnasium was like a second public square, a place where anyone could go and where activity was not limited to gymnastics' (Veyne 1987:21).
2. Rm 1.29. In his argument (Rm 1.18-32) Paul starts off by arguing for the ungodliness and unrighteousness of human beings, but from verse 21 further the point is very much an 'explanation' and 'illustration' of the wickedness of Gentile idolatry. See the discussion by Moo 1996:96-97. Paul is discussing 'characteristically Gentile sins; all of which deserve death' (Countryman 1988:110, cf 110-123).
3. Other rabbinic comment on gossip: b. Pesabim 113a, 118a; b. Mo'ed Qatan 18b; b. Sanhedrin 8a; b. 'Abodah Zarah 3b; m. Abot 1.5; b. Abot 6.5.
1967:87; cf Botha 1998:54-57). The counterpart of the many ‘little houses’ which could not possibly fulfil any social functions, must have been the role of the ‘big houses’, the houses belonging to the (wealthier) patrons and household-owners. In such houses, neither palaces nor yet mansions, were the only ‘general-purpose rooms’ to which urban people of the first century Mediterranean world could have access to. And, to make use of Ariès’ wonderfully evocative description of daily life in pre-industrial France, it is in these (few) rooms of the ‘big houses’ that people ‘lived’. ‘In the same room where they ate, people slept, danced, worked and received visitors’ (Ariès 1996:381).

In addition to the families occupying the house, their servants, employees, apprentices, teacher(s), secretary (-ies) and associates, must be added the friends, clients, relatives and protegés. Life in such houses in the world of antiquity, we must imagine, was one of a constant flow of visitors.

The latter apparently gave little thought to the hour and were never shown the door. In short, visits gave the impression of being a positive occupation, which governed the life of the household and even dictated its mealtimes. These visits were not simply friendly or social: they were also professional; but little or no distinction was made between these categories (Ariès 1996:380)

In the world under discussion most information consisted of oral communication, face-to-face talk. ‘These conditions fostered gossip, created a propensity to believe it (as there were no counter checks to information received through oral communication), and contributed to its power. Indeed, as in other “close” societies, gossip played a most powerful role’ (Schein 1994:139).

3.2 Attitudes to gossip

Gossip was widely denounced. Clement of Rome, for instance, admonishes the Corinthian Christians:

> Let us exercise mutual tolerance of one another’s views, cultivating humility and self-restraint, avoiding all gossiping and backbiting, and be justified by deeds and not

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4 ‘A community at a low level of technology has rather low levels of information circulating within it, whereas a society which is highly developed technologically is inundated by communicators’ messages. Specifically, traditional societies rely on oral communications and have none of our mass media. Most of their populations are illiterate, whereas industrialization requires mass literacy. Most of their communications are private and person to person, whereas most of the communications circulating in industrialized society are mass-produced and impersonal....In the societies under review...communications percolate out in irregular fashion. If one were close to an important person, he would know far more of what was going on than would another man who was closer to the scene of the action but not well connected’ (Carney 1975:111-112; cf Botha 1992).
by words. For [Scripture] says, he who is full of words shall be answered in full measure. Does eloquence make righteous? A short life to any one born of woman is a blessing [since it provides less opportunity for talking too much]. Be weary of talking too much! (1 Clem 30.3-5)

Further on in his letter Clemens again urges that Christians should cast away from themselves 'gossiping and evil-speaking' (1 Clem 35.5). Clemens associates gossiping (πιθυριμούς) and bad-mouthing or slander (καταλαλιά) with abominable passions, detestable adultery and, his 'favourite' sin, pride. He also lists gossiping with wickedness (in general?), covetousness, strife, malice, hatred of God, arrogance and inhospitality.

This negative attitude is well attested. In fact, very few people seek or willingly accept the designation of 'gossiper'. Usually, the moment we recognise gossip, 'morality' kicks in and we either avoid, correct or censure the gossiping. Despite such moralising attitude, and the negative public image popularly ascribed to it, gossiping continues unabated.

Children, it seems, gossip practically from the time they learn to talk and to recognise other people (cf Fine 1977; Goodwin 1980; Schein 1994:143). Older people are widely considered to be notorious gossips. Through the ages, women have been accused of being natural gossips—a false and dangerously misleading popular conception.6 We all gossip, more or less, at one stage or another.7

5 The Talmudic comment, 'Ten measures of gossip descended to the world: nine were taken by women' (b.Qiddushin 49b), is quite typical of such stereotyping.
6 Men simply gossip about different things/persons than women; that is, the difference between the sexes lies in the subjects gossiped about, not in the general tendency to gossip (Nevo, Nevo & Derech-Zehavi 1994). Code (1994) maintains that gossip is only as characteristic of communication among women as it is of other oppressed groups. Rysman (1977) shows how gossip functions in female solidarity, and because female solidarity is frowned upon in male dominant societies gossip is seen negatively. See further Jones 1980; Collins 1994; Dorn 1986. Bergmann (1993:62-67) shows how the organisation of the division of labour contributes to the position of gossip producer.
7 All studies of gossip demonstrate its pervasive role in community life (cf, e.g., Gluckman 1963:308; Goodman 1994:1; Bergmann 1993:149). The maliciousness that is commonly attributed to gossip is an interesting social feature itself, and the popular moral bias with which gossip is commonly viewed limits proper understanding of the continuing and pervasive role of it. Indeed, if gossip were but slanderous stories that circulated without any grounds whatsoever for their existence, their presence would be evidence of unreasonableness and a sign of madness. They must then be the sociological counterpart of various pathologies (people would be universally malicious). The association of gossip with affliction and even destruction appears logical but is misleading—as is the association of gossip with lies. If gossip mainly conveyed false information, most people would not find it interesting. The sheer force of gossip, its ubiquitousness, its immense sociological importance and the seriousness with which it is taken by all people belie the popular conception. Ben-Ze'ev (1994) shows that gossip is an 'intrinsically valuable
Paul, who places gossip among such serious misdeeds as malice, murder and deceit, himself got involved with several gossip events that we know of. When certain reports reach Paul he is quick to evaluate and participate (1 Cor 1.11) in ‘news’ about absent others—clearly a gossip event is occurring. ‘Discussions’ of similar ‘reports’ (e g, 1 Cor 5–6) too should probably be construed as gossip.

In fact, Paul himself could discuss an absent third party evaluatively.8 In Galatians 2.11–14 Paul gossips about Cephas, evaluating his inconsistent behaviour in the controversy about gentile Christians living like Jews. Paul’s complaint serves a number of functions, but is an especially clear example of how character evaluation plays a role in leadership issues and in competition for loyalty.

3.3 What is gossip?

Plutarch complains that gossips pass up nearly anything beautiful or worthwhile so they can

spend their time digging into other men’s trifling communication, gluing their ears to their neighbour’s walls, whispering with slaves and women of the streets, and often incurring danger, and always infamy (De curiositate 9, Moralia 6.519F).

The implicit definition of gossip seems to be the repetition of hearsay with some moral connotation—supposedly the activity of an aberrant few. Yet gossip is among the most important social phenomena we can study. It is much more complex and far-reaching than is usually suspected, and can often be seen as a significant means of informal social formation and power. To understand the power and consequence of gossip one must recall the immense role of conversation in being human (Emler 1994:124–125).

The verb ‘gossip’ refers to a diverse range of behaviours all of which has to a greater or lesser extent some things in common (cf Abrahams 1970:290–291; Bergmann 1993:26–44). Two aspects in particular seem to characterise gossip. Gossip is personal, an ‘in-group’ activity: ‘To be able to gossip together, individuals must know one another’ (Yerkovich 1977:192; Bergmann activity’ with, typically, a casual and nonconsequential nature. Spacks 1985 has written eloquently on the essential humanness of gossip (see, e g, Spacks 1985:23), its ‘positive energies’ (258). Though gossip provides fertile ground for the exercise of many vices, ‘such faults can no more be held against gossip in itself than they can be held against love, marriage, or commerce, all of which notoriously provide opportunities for the deployment of the very same vices [such as malice, envy, prevarication]’ (De Sousa 1994:26). A readable plea for ‘treating gossip seriously’ is Sabini & Silver 1982:89–106.

8 Adopting Gilmore’s (1978:92) elucidation of gossip as ‘critical talk about absent third parties’.
Gossip is essentially information about known persons (cf Bergmann 1993:54). The other aspect is that gossip is evaluative talk. It may be either positive or negative (cf Rosnow & Fine 1976:87), but it usually implies assessment, some moral characterisation, of the subject under discussion.

For the purposes of this study, gossip can be defined as 'spontaneous free ranging discussion between two or more persons about a third party external to the discussion group which centers on the party's personal characteristics, behavior, or associations and incorporates a critical element involving moral evaluation or judgment' (Allen & Guy 1974:247). I emphasise that my interest is not in defining gossip (for which see Bergmann 1993 chapters 3 and 4; Goldsmith 1989:164–166; Sabini & Silver 1982:89–93) but in some of the social dynamics involved in certain forms of daily conversation.

Without denying or diminishing the possible adverse and harmful aspects of gossip, we need to move beyond the so-called commonsensical bias to understand this phenomenon. Gossip is not necessarily negative or malicious. It 'was often motivated by a keen and healthy interest in one's neighbors or friends, in the affairs of one's prince or king, or by one's wish for a good time' (Schein 1994:145). Gossip can be a precious resource: people in businesses learn about their competitors; politicians require details about their rivals and supporters; citizens discover who are their friends and who their enemies, and so on... gossip can be useful: not only to uncover information, but also to promote, help, humiliates or criticize other people. (Zinovieff 1991:124)

Gossip is in a sense not different from simple word-of-mouth 'news' about what is going on; it is information-sharing which develops into evaluative talk, a form of 'information management'. 'In nonliterate societies, gossip is a method of storing and retrieving information about the social environment' (Levin and Arluke 1987:22; see also Cox 1970; Du Boulay 1974:201–229; Arno 1980; Paine 1970). Gossip is a dynamic process intrinsic to human conversation with a highly variable structure which searches for, exchanges and uses information about others (Yerkovich 1977:195).

3.4 Carriers of gossip

We often picture Paul's opponents to have been 'strangers', the 'other' in the community. We think of them as some concurrent group with 'radically' different notions. But social conflicts most often erupt exactly between not only 'equals' but especially among people close to one another. With regard to the family- and household-centred world of antiquity the following remark by Layton is particularly apt: 'But if it is true that it is kin and neighbours who
most often work together, it is also true that it is between these people that disputes most often develop: "Quarrels usually occur within families"...’ (Layton 1971:98).

The prime competitor—the first enemy—is frequently the person nearest to you in rank.... Those nearest are also those with whom you interact most frequently and, therefore, those with whom you are most likely to have a cause for contention. (Bailey 1971:19)

What Paul writes in admonishment to the Corinthians, namely that 'perhaps there may be quarrelling, jealousy, anger, selfishness, slander, gossip, conceit and disorder' (2 Cor 12.20) should he arrive, is exactly what the general situation in many a household was.

Obviously, when we ask about who possible gossipers were, the list is endless. One significant role, not mentioned by Paul (and usually ignored by studies of early Christian social worlds) is that of children. Children must have been ever-present in the contexts in which Paul and his followers and interested associates moved. When we imagine children in ancient cities we should not project our modern, structured and public systems onto their situation.

In a community without mass-media communication channels, we should imagine, pre-adolescent children play a vital role in the dissemination of 'news'. Somewhat analogous to the following description:

Children of this age group have full run of the community and enter any house without knocking. They are not as yet endowed with specific personalities by adults other than their own parents, and form more than anything else, simply a part of the background—the setting. Either alone or in groups, boys or girls come in without a word and take a seat... They require no acknowledgement... On their return home, they will be asked where they have been and what is "new", whereupon they will relate all they have heard and witnessed with remarkable detail. (Faris 1966:239-240)

The utility of children in the role of collecting 'information' cannot be underestimated; women could often not leave the house or did not have access to certain groups and/or events.

Knowledge about others is, as Bergmann (1993:57) reminds us, unequally distributed in society. The gossip producer is someone who is 'well informed' about the affairs of another or about events. A gossiper is someone who 'knows'—not as much as the person who knows everything about one's own affairs, but more than 'typical' knowledge. It follows that certain 'vocational groups' who can acquire information tend to be gossipers: people who, 'because of their daily contacts at work and encounters with other members of their social network, ...are very apt to be transmitters of information' (Bergmann 1993:66).
One can readily imagine the role that trusted slaves, or servants such as doorkeepers and porters could play in this regard. Plutarch, incidentally, notes that doorkeepers became necessary so that the 'busybody' (ό πολυπράγμον) might not discover a slave being punished or hear the maid-servants screaming (Moralia 6.516F—never mind the busybody, imagine the stories the doorkeeper could tell...). What is of relevance is to realise that servants in special positions were often caught between conflicting loyalties.

Bergmann argues that it is the inherently conflicting, indeed paradoxical loyalty structure of friendship and acquaintanceship that counts as the main source of energy for the communicative genre 'gossip' (1993:151). One is obligated to discretion towards one's friend. Yet, most people have to balance many loyalties; one is also obligated to inform, warn, consider and entertain—to trust—one's other friends. It is this contradictory situation that establishes and maintains gossip: 'the social form of discreet indiscretion' (Bergmann 1993:150-152).

This is a powerful social dynamic, and its workings cannot be predicted nor controlled. In an earlier study I draw attention to the importance of co-authors, secretaries and letter carriers in the production and dissemination of Paul's letters (Botha 1993:415-417). These same people probably played an enormous role in the to-and-fro of information between Paul and the various communities in which he worked. We might like to think of these people as single-mindedly devoted to Paul with absolute and blind loyalty, but they were not. Clearly not, judging from the many misunderstandings evident in the Corinthian correspondence, Galatians and 1 Thessalonians. It is realistic to imagine complex negotiations, difficult patrons, powerful skeptics, life-long friends, family bonds, and even survival strategies in the lives of these people: many discreet indiscretions.

3.5 The subject matter of gossip

Obviously, the subject matters of gossip are various and diverse. 'Within their communities, people gossiped about the most usual and trivial events, as well as about the most extraordinary ones' (Schein 1994:146). The arrival of travellers, for instance, surely drew interest. Paul travelled in groups.9 Not only the appearance of (another) travelling teacher, but also his companions were occasions for interest and possibly suspicion.

The popular image of gossip is that of an overwhelming interest in scandal, specifically with regard to matters of love and marriage. Veyne (1987:23) notes that in the Roman Empire rhetoric 'became a society game' and the education

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of young men consequently became an expression of the Roman 'taste for melodrama and sex'. In this sense gossip must have been (and probably still is, the world over) the most 'rhetorical' of activities.

One might not easily imagine people talking about Paul within the context of love and sex, but surely his ideas that it was 'good for a man not to touch a woman' (1 Cor 7.1), his celibacy and his not travelling with a wife as did other apostles (1 Cor 9.5) and his wish that 'all were as I myself am' (1 Cor 7.7) provoked more than a neutral comment. Especially, one can imagine, when Paul also urged partners to engage in sex regularly (1 Cor 7.5) and was not above adopting patronesses: Phoebe, for instance (Rm 16.2)\(^{10}\) or Lydia (Acts 16). Zealous persons always prompt evaluative discussion and Paul was 'a zealot fully and totally committed to the course to which he felt called by God' (Sanders 1991:13, 108).

Another topic of interest to people is that of origins: one’s family, parents, genealogy. 'Though we are quite indifferent and ignorant with regard to our own affairs, we pry into the pedigrees of others: our neighbour’s grandfather was a Syrian and his grandmother a Thracian...' (Plutarch Moralia 6.516B). At the time, perceptions of one’s role, status and honour were influenced by one’s roots, ancestry and genealogy—as shown by Malina and Neyrey (1996:23–25, 158–161).

It is therefore to be expected that Paul would refer from time to time to his background: his origins and genealogy. What is remarkable, however, is that he does so to people who already know him, his followers (or converts). 'Though, with Paul, overreaction is always possible, I still wish to argue that Paul's sensitivity, or oversensitivity, is explained, at least in part, by his opponents' sneering at his origins' (North 1996:462).

The issue, I suggest, is not so much Paul being attacked by so-called opponents, but that some of the people who had dealings with Paul remained convinced—for whatever reasons—that not everything was being revealed. People who knew him believed that there were some doubts surrounding these issues; possibly some 'secrets', which is exactly what generates gossip. It is also worth noting that Paul's response is not to refer to witnesses or evidence that can be checked, but to invoke God (Gl 1.20; 2 Cor 11.31). Paul's response is drastic: it forces one to the level of faith. Either one believes in God and hence Paul's version of his background or one challenges the 'God and Father of the lord Jesus who is blessed forever' (cf 2 Cor 4.2, 5.10–11, 11.11, 31). In all prob-

\(^{10}\) Προστάτις should be understood in the sense of 'patroness' (Sanders 1991:11 and especially Jewett 1988:149–155) On the role of Phoebe in Paul's correspondence with the Romans see Vorster 1991:204–205.
ability Paul's 'absolutising' of the issue contributed to the suspicion of a difference between the image projected by Paul and the 'real', private Paul.

North cites evidence to show that Paul's Cilician background was the issue: Cilicians are traditionally considered all to be liars, hence Paul's severe response.

Paul's conversion was construed as disloyalty and betrayal. His new attitudes towards ancestral institutions like circumcision and observance of the Law, as these related to Gentiles, only confirmed his fellow-Jews' judgment. His tortured relations with his new friends, e.g. at Corinth, were no better. Whether they were repeating what they knew the Jews were already saying or were proceeding independently with plenty of evidence of their own, the Corinthian Christians were ready to see in Paul's craft and guile, his taking advantage, robbing, wronging, and corrupting, simply the sort of thing one could expect to find in Cilicians. Like all men, but particularly so, they "were deceivers ever". (North 1996:462)

The evidence adduced by North, though impressive, is not fully persuasive and it remains doubtful whether it was Paul's Cilician background that was the problem. I do think that his basic insight is correct, however. Paul was a much discussed person, and his origins and genealogy did not really convince a number of people—probably exactly those whose opinions really mattered in many of the communities where he worked.

3.6 The power of gossip

Gossip can be a matter of life or death. People once gossiped about how adamant the rule of Dionysius, tyrant of Syracuse, was. The barber, in whose shop the conversation took place, bragged: 'Fancy your saying that about Dionysius, when I have my razor at his throat every few days or so.' Needless to say, the barber was promptly crucified when Dionysius learned of the remark (Plut Moralia 6.508F-509A).

Gossip can be a powerful social force in any society at any time, but to understand the potency of gossip in ancient society we must remember that in pre-industrial ages the chief source of vital information was oral narrative, a means of communication characterised more than any other by uncritical acceptance of what is said (cf Schein 1994:151). What Schein writes about medieval times is equally valid for antiquity:

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11 The evidence is cited from a wide range of authors, covering several centuries, but are mostly incidental remarks. Undoubtedly antiquity was characterised by local cultures sneering at 'others' (consider Tit 1.12: 'Cretans are liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons'), but 'there is no evidence in Paul's letters and only a little early evidence elsewhere that it was explicitly Paul's Cilician origins that were ever the cause of criticism of him'—as noted by North (1996:462) himself.
Since oral communication was the main method of passing information from person to person, there was no way to distinguish precisely between "gossip," "information," or "news." They were often and sometimes even maliciously and intentionally confused. (1994:144)

The power of gossip in first century Mediterranean urban society also arose from its social structure, which was highly hierarchic, with strict and well-defined codes of behaviour for the social classes. Schein's summary is, once more, apt.

Together, these factors—the credibility of oral information, the strict codes of behavior, as well as immobility and closeness of the relatively small communities—gave gossip great potency. Gossip was often accepted as truth, and, given the strict codes of behavior, gossip could destroy people's reputation and their position in society. Gossip spread to all members of the small, close communities of the Middle Ages, and often a consensual "group opinion" developed. (1994:151)

In a 'close' and predominantly oral society, gossip can destroy one's honour, reputation, and even one's life—and it should be greatly feared. Nevertheless, and in spite of repeated warnings and admonitions against gossip in the various genres of ancient literature, people from all walks of life gosiped.

4 THE TENTMAKER APOSTLE

Although some possible controversies relating to Paul as a subject of gossip have already been introduced, two related aspects require further elaboration. The first is the household context of Paul's 'ministry', the second is Paul's work as a tentmaker.

4.1 The private house as context for Paul's teaching

A number of remarks already made in this study remind us of the importance of the household setting for understanding the Pauline movement. The large private house, I propose, due to its social structure and community functions, provided the favourable conditions for the structural possibility for the seriality of stories which makes gossip possible. It is in the 'big houses' of the communities that Paul visited where we find the 'communicative context that invites serial transmission of news and stories that have to be discreetly withheld within other contexts' (Bergmann 1993:136).

To what extent did private houses provide the context for Paul's activities? Despite popular opinion, Paul had limited options when he

\[12\] With regard to the so-called house churches: Blue 1994; Craffert 1993; Malherbe
arrived in a city. He did not have the status, nor the reputation or recognised role which would enable him to be a public speaker: he was not invited by a ‘city’ to come and ‘evangelise’ them. Sometimes Paul used the synagogue; when he did, he (usually) encountered opposition. The synagogue must have been a locus for Paul to preach, where he by birth and heritage would have a recognised status (as a Jew). But being a Jewish Christian made him an ambiguous and controversial figure. But even Paul’s synagogue activities would have been within specific households: ‘Synagogues were, in short, household based (Jewish) communities’ (Craffert 1993:249).

In the case of a short stopover, lodging for Paul would be a minor concern. Either his travel companions would have assisted him or ‘elsewhere’ would have sufficed. For instance, at Philippi Paul stayed somewhere else before moving to the house of Lydia (Acts 16.15). Precisely where ‘elsewhere’ was we do not know; it could have been an inn, but gymnasia, temples and synagogues accommodated travellers (Casson 1974:209-218; Forbes 1945:35; Safrai 1976:943; Stambaugh 1978:585-591). When he intended to carry on missionary activity, as in the city of Corinth, Paul usually found long-term accommodation with someone sympathetic to his cause: Lydia’s house in Philippi, Jason’s house in Thessalonica for several months (Acts 17.5-6), Aquila and Priscilla’s house in Corinth for a year and a half (Acts 18.3, 11).

The private home provided Paul with the setting where an audience could be obtained and taught without the problems of presenting oneself to be judged by the criteria of public speaking. Homes were an important centre of intellectual activity and the customary place for many types of speakers and teachers to do their work. Occasional lectures, declamations and readings of various sorts of works often took place in homes.14 Such sessions might be continued for several days—Pliny mentions two or three days (Ep 3.18). These events were private affairs and audiences came by invitation. The point is that such homes were more than just a place to speak or an occasion for hospitality.

13 Though, clearly, not as often nor as consistently as Luke suggests in Acts. Luke has a special interest in portraying the Jesus movement as composed of pious Jews along with God-fearing Gentiles who are seeking the one God and that both groups can live alongside each other. See Stowers 1984:61-62. In this regard, Acts 20.20 is probably Luke’s most reliable characterisation of Paul’s activities: conversing and teaching in public and in houses (διηθετη και κατ’ οίκοις)—‘in public’ here refers to ἐν τῇ σχολῇ Τυραννου (Acts 19.9). The gymnasium and synagogue were, in the words of Stowers (1984:82) ‘places of ambiguous status for Paul’.

14 Cf Botha 1995:150-151; Sherwin-White 1966:116, 251. From many possible references I note the following: Epictetus Diss 3.23.23; Pliny Ep 3.18, 5.3, 8.21, 9.34; Dio Chrysostom Or 77-78.34.
The householder provided the speaker with an audience and social legitimation.

It is consequently no accident that patrons and households are so prominent in Paul's letters. The necessary invitations, sponsors, audiences and credentials to teach within a community could only become possible for Paul by means of patrons and (relatively) wealthy households (Malherbe 1983:45–59). When Paul says 'I baptised the household of Stephanus' (1 Cor 1.16, 16.15–16) the implication is clearly that the 'preaching' which led to these baptisms occurred in someone's house. In his letter to the Romans he mentions that Gaius is his patron; some Corinthian Christians met in Gaius' house (though Paul calls him host of the 'whole congregation', Rm 16.23).

Within these houses Paul probably lectured—not unlike a travelling sophist philosopher (on which see Hatch 1907:91–92)—and established a temporary school.

If one imagines Paul as the central figure in teaching activity which involved the household of Gaius, believers from other households, Paul's travelling associates and fellow workers and invited outsiders, one has a situation which is in many ways remarkably like the school in the home of Plutarch in Chaeronea. (Stowers 1984:69; on Plutarch's house-school: Barrow 1967:18–19; Russell 1973:13–14)

What exactly went on, or was said, when the various Christian groups in Corinth 'came together' (1 Cor 11:17–34) in the respective houses, must have been oft asked. For the insider, meeting in a private house is a reminder of their distinctness. Not so for the outsider.

Furthermore, Paul probably had little appreciation for (or understanding of) the subtleties and complexities of household politics and organisation. In the urban Mediterranean world familial love-patriarchalism placed a high value on hierarchy and on the obedience of women, children and slaves, frowning on any ethical radicalism (cf Meeks 1983:76; Theissen 1982:37). Paul's teachings probably—in various ways—led to many misunderstandings, which surely set the tongues wagging.

Though the influential householder/patron provided Paul with an audience, that audience remained in a very real sense the audience of the patron. Given the harsh social and economic circumstances of ancient urban life, clients, friends, families, associates and servants had little choice but to support and promote the interests of their patron(s).

It is quite clear that Paul sometimes did not really join the households that provided him with teaching and lecturing opportunities (particularly in Corinth and Galatia). Immediately, one can surmise, loyalty and friendship must have been issues. 'Friends have everything in common' was an important topos, and considered to be an essential feature of many a patron-client relationship (Hock 1980:56; O'Neil 1997:107–108). It is quite understandable that
some perceived in Paul's way of doing things a refusal of friendship. Yet, he unhesitatingly made use of the opportunities provided by these persons.

The complexities of (relatively short) participation in some households contributed to Paul's problems. 'Absence, acquaintanceship, and privacy', writes Bergman (1993:54), are the 'three constitutive features of the figure of gossip'. Privacy should be understood as distance or difference between projected life (by the gossipee) and perceived life (by the gossipers). Paul provided many with ample ground for suspicion. At the personal level, Paul was unimpressive—yet he made bold and awesome statements. He was a poor speaker but wrote letters with strong presence. His letters came from afar, where like a coward he could remain out of direct confrontation and still lord it over others. To some, his morality was questionable. He could not make up his mind whether to visit Corinth or not; he had favourite groups and neglected the Corinthians. He was crafty, full of guile, dishonourable, played up to his audiences, worldly, an imposter. He took advantage, robbed, wronged and corrupted (2 Cor 12.16-18; 6.8; 7.2).

4.2 Tentmaking

In addition to lodging, Paul also had to find work in one of the local tentmaking shops. The earnings from Paul's tentmaking would have gone for necessities: food, clothing, perhaps part of his householder's rent. Sometimes, Paul was not able to make ends meet. Despite long hours in the workshop, he was in want at times (cf 2 Cor 11.9, Phlp 4.12). Like any artisan Paul would have worked hard—day and night, amounting to exhausting toil (1 Th 2.9). Being itinerant, Paul could not establish a reputation of being successful at his trade, or accumulate some (modest) affluence. Though his work allowed him the claim of being self-sufficient, his claim could only be made at the cost of considerable deprivations and poverty (Phlp 4.12, 2 Cor 11.9, 2 Cor 6.10).

The greatest cost of his independence, however, was the hostility and contempt directed toward artisans in general (and Paul in particular) by representatives of the dominant ethos. In the social world of the cities of the Roman Mediterranean, trades carried certain stigmas. Workshops employed virtually no one but slaves and artisans were poorly educated with little time for philanthropy and the pursuit of other virtues.

15 'We can appreciate Paul's self sufficiency when we note how dependent on their families were the students who had left home and had traveled to another city in order to study with a philosopher; they regularly received provisions, mostly foodstuffs, from home and even had a family slave along to help support them... It was clearly difficult to live away from home and from one's source of income and support' (Hock 1980:81 n 50).
Stigmatized as slavish, uneducated, and often useless, artisans, to judge from scattered references, were frequently reviled or abused, often victimized, seldom if ever invited to dinner, never accorded status, and even excluded from one Stoic utopia.... Making tents meant rising before dawn, toiling until sunset with leather, knives, and awls, and accepting the various social stigmas and humiliations that were part of the artisans' lot, not to mention the poverty—being cold, hungry, and poorly clothed. (Hock 1980:36-37)

Paul's trade, and his continuing work, made his status problem more acute.

In other words, Paul's weak appearance was due in part to his plying a trade. In the social world of a city like Corinth, Paul would have been a weak figure, without power, prestige and privilege. We recall the shoemaker Micyllus, depicted by Lucian as penniless and powerless—poor, hungry, wearing an unsightly cloak, granted no status, and victimized. To those of wealth and power, the appearance (σχήμα) of the artisan was that befitting a slave (δουλοπρεπές). (Hock 1980:60)

What complicates matters is that while Paul refused to forfeit his 'independence', he also failed to win the unambiguous and full support of certain patrons (1 Cor 9.15-19; 2 Cor 2.17). Though Paul's choice may seem eminently sensible to us, it was not so considered by the Corinthians. Furthermore, Paul was also guilty of contradicting himself, accepting support from the Macedonian Christians. No wonder his initial defence (in 1 Cor) did not convince the Corinthians.

5 PAUL AND GOSSIP

Gossip, as Emler (1994:135) notes, is a two-edged weapon. It 'offers scope to manipulate the reputations of others, but with risks to the self when such manipulation is too transparently self-serving or clumsy': '...the audience wishes to evaluate the credibility of what they are being told (Is this all true? Does this person know what he or she is talking about? Is he/she attempting to manipulate or mislead me?)' (Emler 1994:136).

In a way, that is precisely what Paul is attempting: to show or to convince that the 'others' are self-serving, they are clumsy, they are bad news. He tries to show them up as false confidants. What is remarkable, is the way in which Paul is doing this.

What I am suggesting, in brief, is that sometimes (most of the time?) it was not a case of Paul being attacked by heretics propounding a serious counter-theology, but one of someone telling Paul, 'they say that...'. And Paul did not or could not deal with that simple 'they say that...'. He took it all very seriously, far too seriously, and interpreted such common, everyday talk in absolute terms: he theologised his own life and work. Because he saw himself as a divine instrument, as God's representative (e.g, Gl 1.6-9, 15-16; 2.20; 4.14;
5.10), Paul was convinced that he had to force the conversation onto the level of ultimate choices. His drastic attempts of dealing with the 'others', those who 'say that...' convinced some, but clearly not everyone.

The continued functioning, the strategic survival of a household, is of considerable importance to its members. Gossip depends heavily on a shared history and common values among at least some part of every community (Abrahams 1970:300, Bailey 1971:8-9, Du Boulay 1974:210-211). Talking about the behaviour of other people is the means by which a group's opinion on moral behaviour emerges and then becomes a means for exploration and maintenance of group norms and expectations (cf Levin & Arluke 1987:79, 125-126). In fact, without hearsay and gossip the cohesiveness of groups of all kinds would probably be under pressure.

The subjects discussed or gossiped about commonly deal with the proper maintenance of the household and the appropriate practice of interpersonal relationships within the family and among friends. Talk about such matters constantly serves to remind those involved of the importance of the norms of the community, but also rehearses the necessity of working within the decorum system by which household and friendship networks are maintained (Abrahams 1970:296-297).

An important function of gossip is to clarify group membership. A gossip event involves at least three parties, and usually the first is implicitly seeking solidarity with the second against the (absent) third, thus re-affirming who is 'in' and who is 'out.' Often, a critical step in gaining membership in any group is learning its gossip (Gluckman 1963:314).

The gossip circle thus demarcates a group from all other groups which are not privy to its secrets. It does the same with individuals who are marked as outsiders because they are not given access to the group's gossip circle (Gluckman 1963:311-12). Insidership is characterised by the ability to gossip together: 'gossip defines a community' (Zinovieff 1991:123; Epstein 1969:124).

Those who push the boundaries of acceptable behaviour and 'identity' of their social group too far are quickly penalised by the gossip network (cf. Zinovieff 1991:122). This is what happened to Paul. He had little time for (or appreciation of) the many daily conflicts of relationships. The very loyalty structure of a community which holds it together is also the source of energy for gossip (Bergmann 1993:151).

Gossip, as moral assessment, also differentiates within a group. Leaders are identified as those who embody (and can articulate) group norms (Gluckman

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16 Gluckman 1963 is, in a way, the classic exponent of gossip as a mechanism of preserving social groups. His study is competently criticised by Bergmann 1993:144-146. Though Gluckman's functionalist perspective may be his Achilles heel, his study contains many relevant insights.
1963:307). Competition between leaders can take the form of gossip. As leaders talk about their rivals, and as followers pass along the gossip, factions owing allegiance to particular individuals begin to emerge.

This 'political' aspect of group interaction reveals that gossip partakes in 'impression management' (Cox 1970:88, 95-97; Paine 1970; Bergmann 1993:147). Gossip is manipulative talk, highly selective in terms of both audience and content. A gossiper can control who knows what. Particularly in societies where the spread of information depends on word of mouth, information and impression management becomes critically important to those in power or those seeking power.

6 CONCLUSION

Levy writes about historiography which does not take anthropology and psychological history (and sociology, I would like to add) seriously as 'a meditation of alien intellectuals on native intellectuals; a meditation on a world that never existed' and contrasts this with the anthropologists 'who believe that their own dirty, imperfect, confused, field community is an infinitely better clue to what really was' (Levy 1989:11). The reason I consider gossip an important facet of Paul's context is due to my conviction that our attempts at historical understanding should not be idealisations—nor should it distort real life. Too often we meet in studies of Paul and his world 'a purified fantasy world'. Our task is, among others, to 'filter social life into history' (cf Levy 1989:11).

It would be a serious neglect on our part to assume that the only speech genre related to power and context within early Christianity was Paul's letters. In this study a basic exploration was made of a very common feature of community life: informal communication, specifically gossip. It is clear that a number of issues, hitherto considered as exclusively theological (doctrinal) in nature, can be related to common, everyday interaction of the persons interested in Paul's message.

Instead of imagining a process guided by a few (heretically inclined) men challenging the great apostle who was preparing the great texts for church and seminary, we should probably think about urban folk, groups of ordinary citizens, particularly women, who with news and reports and imaginative tales judged and problematicised the provocative influence of the apostle to the heathen.

Most New Testament scholars have paid more attention to the texts than to the live processes by and through which those texts were produced. One sometimes has an uncomfortable feeling that New Testament scholarship tends to 'dehumanise' early Christianity. Since it is quite feasible and customary among
New Testament scholars to separate their 'reports' from the 'folk' and to spend endless hours dissecting and studying the resultant texts, it is indeed possible for us to overlook, or to avoid intentionally, those very dynamic human elements that make the field an exciting and worthwhile one to study in the first place.

WORKS CONSULTED


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