Horrell, David G.

The Social Ethos of the Corinthian Correspondence: Interests and Ideology from 1 Corinthians to 1 Clement

Studies of the New Testament and Its World


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This book is a revision of the author's Ph.D. thesis submitted to Cambridge University in 1993. As such it is thorough, focused, and has an excellent bibliography. Horrell seeks to apply the sociological insights of a single sociologist (Anthony Giddens, Fellow of King's College, Cambridge; since 1997 director of the London School of Economics) to a single church as known through its correspondence in the first century. He begins with an interesting and valuable overview of previous sociological treatments of NT texts. Then (in ch. 2), with Giddens, he rejects both the use of "models" and the attempt to find "laws" of social behavior. Instead he finds Gidden's "structuration theory" attractive. Thus he "conceives of Pauline Christianity as a symbolic order comprising rules and resources which are embodied in the lives of particular communities and which are taken up, reproduced and transformed over time" (p. 281). He notes that adding the dimension of time to the sociological approach effectively removes the distinction between sociology and history.

With his theoretical stance explicated, he moves on (in ch. 3) to consider the Corinthian community. He describes briefly the social structure of Roman society with particular attention to Corinth. He finds confirmation for the resulting picture in texts taken from 1 Corinthians: he identifies both socially powerful persons and socially weak persons in the Corinthian congregation. Their manner of celebrating the Lord's Supper reveals social stratification (1 Cor 11:17-33). It was the strong rich who claimed the right to eat "idol meat" and the weak poor who condemned and feared it (1 Corinthians 8-10). The rich brought suits in secular law courts against fellow Christians (1 Cor 6:1-8). There were congregational divisions (1 Corinthians 1-4), probably connected with socially prominent households.

Next (ch. 4) Horrell examines Paul's response to the Corinthian situation, that is, 1 Corinthians. He rejects the notion that Paul's attitude should be characterized as "love-patriarchalism," that is, support for the status quo. Instead he finds Paul repeatedly...
condemning the behavior of the Corinthians (mainly the powerful minority) and challenging them to follow Christ in his meekness (as Paul himself does).

Chapter 5 concerns the conflict reflected in 2 Corinthians stemming from Paul's alienation of the powerful by his humble apostolic lifestyle. (In an appendix Horrell defends his decision to take 2 Corinthians 10-13 as the "painful" letter written prior to 2 Corinthians 1-9.) Paul successfully defends his weakness as—ironically—his strength, and 2 Corinthians 1-9 reflects the resulting reconciliation.

Horrell then attempts (ch. 6) to connect the situation reflected in 1 Clement (ousted elders/presbyters) with that in 2 Corinthians 1-9. With commendable skepticism about what "Clement" knew (or what we can know) of the Corinthian situation, he shows the difference in attitude between Paul and Clement: the latter holds a more conservative, safe view of both church and political orders.

Chapter 7 is a summary of the book and an attempt to fit other post-Pauline texts into "trajectories." The book closes by commending Paul's stance to the modern world.

Horrell summarizes his work by saying that he has "sought to assess [Paul's] various writings in the light of the context which it addresses" (p. 233). Since, however, we know the text with a higher order of immediacy than its social situation, one would think that the reverse would be more reasonable: that one should come to a view of the context in the light of the writing. Further, Horrell's assessment of the text is curiously flat. If Paul says that the Corinthians are puffed up, then it is a fact that they are puffed up. The apostle speaks of those Corinthians who consider themselves to be "full, rich and living like kings" (p. 209), but these terms are, of course, Paul's value judgments. Horrell makes no allowance for Pauline hyperbole.

Many will applaud Horrell's conviction that the theological reading of the text needs to be balanced by attention to sociological issues. But it is the traditional, theoretical Paul that Horrell presents. Paul remains unchanged over time. He holds no embarrassingly primitive beliefs. The apocalyptic eschatology of 1 Corinthians is hardly mentioned. There is no mention of demons, baptism for the dead, or the possible lethal effect of the eucharist. There are no spiritual marriages in Corinth. One would never guess that Paul spoke in tongues (and presumably taught the Corinthians to do so).

It is puzzling why Paul's attitude toward money is such a problem for Horrell (p. 231). It is clear from Phil 4:14-18 that Paul gratefully accepted the unsolicited support of the Philippian congregation (cf. 2 Cor 11:9). But Paul would rather die than ask for money (1 Cor 9:15; 2 Cor 11:7-10; Phil 4: 17a). Although a key element in Horrell's reconstruction is Paul's "rejection of the Corinthians' financial support" and offense to the wealthy that
this rejection created, it is certainly not clear from the text that the Corinthians ever offered Paul money.

Similarly, Horrell attaches considerable importance to Paul's manual labor, asserting that Paul thereby expressed his solidarity with the "socially weak" majority of the Corinthian congregation and simultaneously incurred the disapproval of the "socially strong," thus creating conflict at Corinth. But without financial support it is hard to see what other option Paul had but to work.

Two final notes: (1) A word that should be forbidden in historical research is "necessarily." By saying that a view he wishes to dismiss is not "necessarily" the case Horrell seems to think that he has undermined its credibility, not acknowledging that the same can be said of any historical theory, however probable. The same ban should be extended to "prove" and "proof." (2) The footnotes are done in the modern social-sciences style: author's surname and date. The system saves an author labor but this labor is passed on to the reader, who has repeatedly to refer to the bibliography to identify the sources.