

Leadership and Relationships according to the Apostle Paul

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ABSTRACT

The nature of the sources does not allow us to analyse and assess the leadership style of the apostle Paul with the parameters and tools used in leadership studies today. What we have is Paul's perspective and counsel on selected issues, not a comprehensive portrayal of his actual performance or an understanding of it. In addition, what we have defies empirical analysis. However, it is possible to read his letters from the particular perspective of *relational* leadership. Therefore, this article focuses on the way in which Paul, as the leading figure in what can be called the Pauline mission enterprise (a closely knit network of communities of Christ-believers, co-workers, mission partners and Paul himself) empowered and developed the congregations he and others had founded. To this end, Paul made use of several measures. He not only led people to Christ, but gathered them in congregations and stayed for longer periods of time to nurture the new believers. He shared his life and ministry with them, could characterise his relationship with them in affectionate terms, taught them carefully, implemented the necessary local structures and assisted in discovering and using the resources provided through the Holy Spirit. Paul was well informed about the congregations and saw to a steady flow of information in the "holy internet". Whenever possible, he re-visited the congregations and/or sent his co-workers when he could not do so himself or when others were more suitable. Last but not least, he wrote letters to address burning issues when he could not be there to do so in person. We owe a number of the New Testament's 27 writings to Paul's understanding of relational leadership! In this way, Paul can serve as a historical example of effective relational leadership in a Christian context. In closing, the article relates this portrayal to contemporary challenges and concerns in Christian leadership.

Keywords: Paul Apostle, relational leadership, leadership theory, Pauline studies, Acts of the Apostles

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INTRODUCTION

The apostle Paul appears in his letters and in the portrayal in the Acts of the Apostles in different roles. He comes across as a devout missionary, a forceful but also gentle pastor, an organiser of the collection for the saints in Jerusalem, an exegete and theologian, a mentor, a counsellor, a devout Jew and also as the leader of a larger network of communities and a larger group of people. Throughout the history of his reception in the Church and in scholarship, his different roles were recognised, appreciated and emphasised to various degrees. Here we focus on the latter aspect, *Paul as a leader*, although it is clear that this role cannot be separated from his other roles and functions. This focus is due to developments both in leadership studies of different kinds (McCauley & Douglas, 2004, pp. 85–115) and also in Pauline studies where scholars are increasingly studying what Paul says directly or implicitly on leadership (Clarke, 2023a, pp. 625–629) and also his own role in the network of which he is a major hub.

In this article we probe whether and to what extent the concept of *relational leadership* can serve as a fresh angle for examining the ancient evidence, and what insights this perspective provides. While there are a variety of definitions available (part of a larger theoretical discussion in leadership studies (Northouse, 2024), in addition to the more practical focus of many contributions), we start with the definition of relational leadership in the *Call for Papers* for the conference where this material was first presented.

Mainstream leadership theory emphasises how leaders use relations-oriented behaviours to recognise, support, develop, and empower their co-workers. Theories of servant and values-based leadership have further highlighted the moral dimension of leadership. The Christian tradition offers an even richer account of the moral principles and relational virtues critical for building strong and desirable communities. However, research should also identify the potential shadow sides of relational leadership, including the dangers of power abuse, groupthink, and destructive conflicts.

The following definition from the *Academy to Innovate Human Resources* website is more specific:

Relational leadership is a leadership style that focuses on *the importance of relationships* in guiding and motivating individuals or teams toward achieving goals. It emphasises building trust, fostering collaboration, and encouraging open communication among team members. Rather than focusing solely on task execution or hierarchical control, relational leaders prioritise creating an environment where everyone feels valued, heard, and supported. The relational leadership theory suggests that effective leadership is inherently relational, with the quality of relationships between leaders and followers being central to leadership success.²

We take our clues from here and focus on “the importance of relationships” in describing Paul’s leadership in various contexts and combinations. Leadership is commonly defined as the phenomenon of people following a leader. Peter Northouse defines leadership as follows: “Leadership is a process whereby an individual [in our case, Paul] influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (2016, p. 6). Our focus is not on all the relationships of Paul which can be identified in his letters and in Acts, but *on those relationships in which he appears*

² <https://www.aihr.com/hr-glossary/relational-leadership> (access 04.04.2025; italics mine); see also Clarke (2018); Hornstrup *et al.* (2012); Uhl-Bien & Ospina (2012) and Wright (2009) who draws significantly on Paul’s letters.

as a leader, in which he exerts influence on others. However, Paul's relationships in his role as a leader were embedded in his other relationships:

- Due to his Jewish descent, loyalty and obedience to the ancestral Law throughout his life, Paul was related to God. Through his encounter with the risen and exalted Christ, Paul was also related to God's Christ, Jesus of Nazareth, and to the Holy Spirit. Despite all the suffering which this would involve, Paul remained faithfully committed to the Christ who had commissioned him. He understood all his activities as leader and otherwise as part of "finishing my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20:24). From the very beginning it was Paul's aim to bring people to Christ. They were to believe in Christ and follow him, not his emissary. Jesus, and Jesus alone, was their saviour and was to become their Lord, not his servant Paul.
- Throughout his ministry, Paul was divinely affirmed. So, our emphasis on Paul as a relational leader in Acts must not distract from the emphasis on divine agency in Acts.³ Paul was and remained related in different ways to Israel, the people of God. Like other Jews and other Christ-followers, Paul felt bound by the Scriptures which provided crucial clues to his ministry and the leadership decisions that he took (Rom 3:2; 9:4; 15:20–21; Acts 13:47; Stenschke, 2024a, pp. 305–335). Because of these loyalties of Paul, our perception of Paul often neglects the fact that he had a physical family. After his calling he went back to Tarsus (Acts 9:30), where he originally came from (22:3). We do not know what role his family played during the years of his ministry in Syria and Cilicia (11:25–26; 15:23, 41) before being included in the mission emerging from Jerusalem (from Acts 11:25 onwards). When in trouble later in Jerusalem, he could count on support from his sister (23:16). His nephew played an important role in securing Paul's safe transferal to Caesarea Maritima (23:16–35).
- Paul kept a relationship with the Christ-believers in Jerusalem. According to the portrayal in Galatians and in Acts, Paul returned (at least) five times to the city (Stenschke, 2024b, pp. 93–119; Zeigan 2005). Other than during his last visit, when he *led* the delegation of the communities that he had founded, sent to deliver the collection for the poor Christ-followers in Jerusalem, Paul did not come as a leader or have any leadership role in Jerusalem.⁴ On his last visit, Paul was remarkably passive with regard to the Christ-believers of the city. On at least two occasions, Paul rendered a public account of his ministry among Jews and non-Jews (Acts 15:3–4, 12; 21:19). It can be assumed that he did so during his other visits as well. Paul promoted elsewhere what was decided in Jerusalem (16:4: "they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles") and readily agreed to the proposal of the local leaders (21:20–26).

³ Divine agency in Acts is rightly emphasised in the most recent major commentary on Acts by Walton (2024).

⁴ In his *mission work*, Paul served as the leader of "his" missionary team (see the instructive transition in Acts 13–14). Once communities of Christ-believers were established, Paul and his co-workers would serve as the first leaders until local leaders were established, see Acts 14:23. However, Paul's letters to some of these communities indicate that he continued to feel responsible for them. Even in Paul's relationships with his different "opponents" one could consider a "leadership-edge". His opponents would probably have questioned the legitimacy and nature of Paul's leadership; he certainly questioned their claim to lead his converts (astray); see the survey in Sumney (2023, pp. 739–748).

- Although not predominant in the portrayal of Acts, during these five visits to Jerusalem (and in his encounters and prolonged co-operations with believers from Jerusalem elsewhere, notably Barnabas and Silas during the first and second missionary phase), the Christ-believers of Jerusalem would have had some influence on Paul. They sought to achieve the common goal of honouring Christ and sharing the Gospel with Jews and non-Jews alike (to play on Northouse's definition: leaders influence "a group of individuals to achieve a common goal"). In that sense, Paul was also led by them and followed them.⁵

These brief reflections suggest that Paul in his leadership role was firmly embedded in a network of *divine and human relationships*. Paul was not "leading" in all his relationships and did not and could not insist on doing so ... perhaps a first important observation.⁶ In addition, Paul did not define himself exclusively through his leadership role. Primarily, he understood and presented himself as "a servant of Christ Jesus" (Rom 1:1)⁷, under obligation to fulfil the commission entrusted to him (1Cor 9:16).

In order to gain a full picture of Paul as leader, we would also need to examine Paul's understanding of his own calling, mission and place in salvation history: how he understood, defined and exerted authority among his associates and the churches which he had founded together with others (Best, 1988, pp. 73–95; Frey, 2018, pp. 115–142). It seems that for Paul, warm and affectionate relationships and his authority (and the authority of others, for instance, in Jerusalem) were not mutually exclusive. Ernest Best identified "two basic models used by Paul to portray his relationships to his converts, the reciprocal and the superior/inferior. ... A superior/inferior relation might suggest an authoritarian relation but it need not if its governing power is love. Whichever model controls Paul he always believes that he acts out of love for his converts" (Best, 1988, p. 29; see also pp. 17–18;). This also applies to his leadership. Here we focus on the reciprocal/*relational* aspect of what was a complex practice of leadership without denying that there are also aspects of "superior/inferior" in Paul's leadership.

In what follows, we cannot provide a comprehensive survey. This would require a monograph-length study. Rather we refer to representative examples in each category. In addition, we focus on the literary portrayal in Acts and cannot discuss its historical validity. We refer to all 13 letters of the *Corpus Paulinum*, regardless of past and current discussions of authorship.

Obviously, addressing a topic such as this the way I approach it (for instance, the selection and interaction with biblical passages), is determined by my personality, my limited

⁵ This aspect of the portrayal of Paul in Acts is related to the reversal motif which is prominent in Acts; see Walton (2024).

⁶ One other issue needs brief attention. In some cases, Paul, the leader, seems to follow a "human" strategy. For instance, he and the team of co-workers whom he leads simply follow the major traffic routes and seek to establish churches in major towns of the Hellenistic world (Paul's so-called "*Zentrumsmission*"; see Schnabel (2004, pp. 1421–1425). In other cases, divine intervention and direction feature prominently. For instance, in Acts 16:6–10, this is clearly indicated. Elsewhere this might also be the case without being explicitly mentioned. This observation also applies to Paul as a relational leader.

⁷ See Reeves (2023, p. 697). However, see the critical discussion in Clarke (2023b, pp. 962–964), who notes: "More recent representations of church leadership as servant leadership are ... unhelpful, in that servant leadership neither fully recognises a slave's subservience and complete absence of rights nor adequately captures *that God's appointed slave holds extraordinary, representative authority as his servant*" (italics mine). The preface to Romans combines Paul's servanthood with high claims to authority (Rom 1:1–7). It all depends on whose servant one is.

experiences as a leader, and a generous dose of my experiences as a follower (or somebody who has to be led) as well as my observations in church contexts and in the way leaders, their rises and demises, are portrayed in various Christian and secular media. The question could be approached in different ways and with different results.

RELATIONSHIPS IN WHICH PAUL APPEARS AS A LEADER

... AT LEAST ON SOME OCCASIONS

Our survey can be brief, as this aspect has been covered well not only in New Testament studies but also in Christian leadership studies which seek biblical “models” to follow (Clarke, 2023b; Wright, 2009). Some of the categorisation in what follows may simply be due to the nature of the sources at our disposal and the scarcity of occurrences of relational leadership. Likewise, it is difficult to determine whether and to what extent the insights that we have are representative of the larger picture of Paul the leader.

Paul and his close co-workers⁸

Paul’s relationships with his close co-workers are probably what comes to mind first when thinking of Paul’s relationships. Of the approximately one hundred people who appear in the context of Paul in his letters and in Acts, thirty-eight people can be identified as co-workers (Schnabel, 2004, p. 1425) who ministered with Paul, fulfilling different tasks. He recruited some of them (Acts 16:3), and others were seconded by congregations as their envoys (2Cor 8:23; Col 1:7; 4:12–13; Phlm 13) to support his ministry (Schnabel, 2004, p. 1441). Some of them worked with Paul for extended periods of time, such as Timothy and Silas, others for shorter periods and with a more limited scope, when it came to geographical area and type of assignment (Schnabel, 2004, pp. 1428–1438). With regard to the tasks that these *co-workers* shared with Paul, Schnabel notes:

The activities of the missionary team day in and day out, every month of the year, year in and year out, indeed represent “work” that often is difficult: continuously studying the Scriptures, proclaiming the gospel in public and in private, answering questions from the audience, caring for the new converts, interacting with local opponents, traveling to various cities, searching for living quarters for the members of the missionary team, obtaining food and drink. (Schnabel, 2004, p. 1436)⁹

They supported Paul in his vision and in the task assigned to him by the risen Lord; Paul did not misuse these people for his own purposes. When sent by Paul, they were not inferior substitutes for Paul’s own presence and ministry.¹⁰ Paul refers to them as brothers (1Cor 16:19–20; Gal 1:2; Eph 6:23–24; Phil 1:14; 4:21–22; Col 1:2; 4:15). Some passages indicate that they were far more than fellow “workers”, but also fellow believers for whose spiritual and

⁸ See the recent survey of the terminology and the different roles of those who ministered with Paul in Gooder (2023a, pp. 208–212) and Schnabel (2004, pp. 1425–1445).

⁹For their tasks in detail, see pp. 1439–1445.

¹⁰ See Schnabel (2004, pp. 1437–1439. “Hardly mere substitutes for the universally preferable Pauline presence, these envoys were consciously sent by Paul to play a complex and crucial intermediary role that he could not play, even if present himself” (1439).

physical well-being Paul was and remained deeply concerned. He knew of Timothy's health problems and advised him accordingly (1Tim 5:23). Paul informed the Philippians of the illness and recovery of Epaphroditus whom they had sent to serve with him (Phil 2:25–30). We will come back to this issue in the concluding reflections.

“Mission partners”

In addition to close co-workers among whom Paul primarily had a leadership role, there were others who were apparently independent but co-operated with Paul for various periods of time.¹¹ In this category are people like Prisca and Aquila, Andronicus and Junia (Rom 16: 3–4, 6–8), Barnabas, and Titus (2Cor 8), who played a crucial role in Paul's reconciliation with the Corinthians and in bringing the collection enterprise to completion there. One could also refer to the enigmatic Apollos who crossed Paul's path on several occasions and co-operated in some ways (1Cor 3:4–9, 22, Paul insists: “for we are God's fellow workers”, 3:9), but would not take orders from Paul, at least on some occasions: “I strongly urged him to visit you with the other brothers [who took orders from Paul, mentioned in 2Cor 8], but it was not at all his will to come now. He will come when he has opportunity” (1Cor 16:12). Whether, and to what extent, Paul had a leadership role in these relationships is difficult to determine. Probably that was the case in some of these relationships. Clearly it was not the case in all of them, as the example of Apollos suggests (Schnabel, 2004, 1431–1432). An interesting case-study is the portrayal of Paul's relationship with Barnabas in Acts 9–15 (Stenschke, 2010).

Other individuals

A larger number of individual Christ-followers appear around Paul who assisted him in one way or another. Although it is not clear whether, and to what extent, Paul “led” them, they were his sympathisers/followers and provided support to him (or were asked to) in one form or another.¹² In this way, they made his ministry and leadership possible. Whether and to what extent this was somehow organised is difficult to determine. Phoebe of Romans 16,1–2 served as a patron for Paul. The mother of Rufus had become (like) a mother to Paul as well, probably providing help and comfort (Rom 16:13). This designation of her implies an affectionate relationship. Philemon of Colossae was asked not only to prepare a guest room for Paul (Phlm 22) but also to send one of his slaves back to support Paul. Others also provided hospitality (e.g., Acts 16:15; 18:7; 21:16; 27:3).

Churches

In addition to these individuals, Paul had relationships with the congregations he had founded. The distinction is slightly artificial, as the individuals came from churches and were embedded in them. Paul was concerned about their well-being, yearned for them, prayed for them, longed for information and readily shared information regarding himself, the fate of the co-workers and other congregations (individual congregations of the congregations in different regions), saw to their spiritual well-being by addressing the problems he had heard of, and tried to visit them (see our analysis below).

¹¹ Schnabel (2004, p. 1428): “Other missionaries worked with Paul for a certain period of time but also worked independently of Paul as missionaries ...”.

¹² See also the enigmatic reference to Asiarchs, who were Paul's friends in Acts 19:31.

It is difficult to discern how Paul's claim to, and practice of, leadership of these congregations related to their local leaders, with whom the congregations also had relationships (and increasingly so as time went on and in the absence of Paul). This is so, because we have hardly any information in this regard and because the picture of local leadership in these communities is not uniform. We have some indication of leadership through elders (Acts 14:23). There were overseers and deacons in Philippi (Phil 1:1; see also 1Tim 3:1–13, Tit 1:5–16; Best, 1988, pp. 41–42; Gooder, 2023b, pp. 128–131). For the other congregations we simply do not know.

The Corinthian correspondence suggests that not all Christ-believers there saw themselves as followers of Paul (1Cor 1:10–4:21). While some were loyal to Paul, some confessed allegiance to Apollos, some to Cephas and others seem to have rejected human leadership altogether with the claim to follow (only) Christ (1:12). Therefore, not all would readily accept Paul's leadership and follow his instructions. When other early Christian leaders such as Apollos or Peter appeared on the scene (Acts 18:27–28; 1Cor 9:5), allegiances may have shifted for different reasons. Paul needed all his rhetorical skills as he sought to convince them to follow his instructions (Clarke, 2023a, p. 628: "Leadership by persuasion"). Whether the situation in Corinth was representative, it is hard to say. Paul's hearty letter to the Galatians suggests that he saw the rival teachers as a real threat to his gospel but also to his authority.

In the introduction, we have already referred to other relationships in which Paul played a role as a relational leader (God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit; his physical family; the Christ-believers in Jerusalem and in Judea) and which will have impacted his understanding of leadership and exerted their influence on him. This influence also applies to the co-workers, mission partners, other individuals and congregations where Paul was (or saw himself) in a leadership role: Paul had an influence on them, but they surely also had an impact on him, if only that he needed them and was dependent on them to a certain extent. While Paul would send his co-workers (or tried to do so in the case of Apollos, 1Cor 16:12), he would also be sent by them, for instance in delivering the famine relief collection from Antioch to Jerusalem (Acts 11:29–30) or in seeing to a solution to the conflict which arose in Antioch (15:1–5). Paul readily communicated the compromise which was reached in Jerusalem (15:22–16:4). Paul could disregard advice in some cases (21:8–14, "we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem", 21:12); in other cases, there seem to have been joint discussions and decisions (16:10: "concluding that God had called *us* to preach the Gospel to them").

THE NATURE OF PAUL'S RELATIONSHIPS¹³

The portrayal of Paul in Acts and in his letters provides some indication of what these relationships meant to Paul as a human being and in his role as a leader, and what constituted and helped to maintain these relationships. The following selection, far from complete, gives some indications. In each case, we note the potential implications for Paul's understanding and practice of leadership. Living and sharing in these relationships, whether in his role as a leader or not, meant for Paul:

¹³ In this section, I draw on my study *Übergemeindliche Verbindungen in den Briefen der paulinischen Mission: Vorkommen, Bedeutung, Funktion und Plausibilität* (2026); see also the classic study of Best (1988) and Burke & Rosner (2017).

- to share information about himself (past, present and future), his co-workers, the mission partners, other Christ-followers, individual congregations and the congregations of entire regions. In this way, Paul informed others of his travel plans and explained his intentions to them. A good example is 1Corinthians 16:5–9. Paul was not secretive or manipulating people through the availability or lack of information. He was transparent, which will have added to his trustworthiness.
- to inform them so that they could pray for him and for his ministry, as he would also keep them in his prayers (Weima, 2023, pp. 838–845; Wiles, 1978). Paul's relationships were characterised by mutual thanksgiving and intercession. James Dunn concluded with regard to Philemon 5–6 that "Paul must have had an extensive prayer list and presumably spent some time each day naming before God all his churches, colleagues, and supporters. This would help maintain and strengthen the sense of faith shared with 'all the saints'".¹⁴ Paul's prayers for the congregations together with his longing for information would have been *one* expression of his anxiety for the communities he had founded, as he refers to "the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches" (2Cor 12:28). Paul's relationships with his followers were carried and determined by prayer. Although impossible to measure, this practice will have impacted significantly on his task as a leader: were these the times when he received divine guidance, courage and endurance for his task? Would his regular prayers have reminded Paul of the nature of the people entrusted to him (as God's people, not his own), of their dignity but also of the limitations of his own task?
- to minister faithfully to the churches he had founded and the people he led in different ways. "The theological, ethical and spiritual consolidation of the churches was a fundamental concern to Paul".¹⁵ According to the portrayal in Acts 20:19–21, this endeavour included *humility* and *tears*, not shrinking from declaring anything that was profitable, *teaching in public and from house to house*, "testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ" (Stenschke, 2023). As a leader, Paul was not leading from a professional distance but involved emotionally ("tears"), he knew his people and spent time with them, in public and in their homes. He was willing to do so over longer periods of time. A crucial ingredient was the teaching of the core truths of the faith.
- to be concerned for his congregations (2Cor 11:28). This concern would lead to his own journeys and ministry in several congregations, the sending of one or more of his co-workers when he could not come himself or his visit would not be helpful, or the composition of letters to churches and individuals (see Barclay 2018). This concern also applied to his followers individually, as we see in particular in his letters to Timothy (see above for Paul's concern for Timothy's health), Titus and Philemon, but, for instance also in

¹⁴ (1996, p. 316); see also Arzt-Grabner (2003, pp. 123–135) and Moo (2008, p. 386) who writes "If Paul is not exaggerating in these verses (and we have no reason to think he is), they reveal a man who spent quite considerable time in prayer for Christians all over the Mediterranean world".

¹⁵ Schnabel (2004, p. 1418); for a survey see pp. 1416–1419. Schnabel speaks of "Pastoral consolidation: encouragement of the Christian communities" (1416). He writes: Paul's missionary praxis consisted not solely in the evangelistic proclamation of the Gospel to Jews and Gentiles and in the establishment of churches. There is a third phase of Paul's missionary [ministry?]: the apostle consistently accompanied the local congregations on their way to dynamic maturity in which the creative energy of the Christian community finds expression in the fruit of the Holy Spirit (1416–1417).

Philippians, where Paul asks his “true companion” to help two women in the congregation to get along with each other (Phil 4:2–3).

- to minister with affection and love. Best writes: “Wherever we open his letters, they are full of expressions of love for their recipients (cf. 2Cor 2:4; 5:14; 6:11–13; 7:3; Phil 1:7; 4:1; 1Thess 2:7, 18). ... He often calls his converts ‘his beloved’ (1Cor 4:14; 15:58; Phil 2:12; Phlm 16).”¹⁶
- to include others, his co-workers and his churches, in his ministry. The co-workers travelled with Paul, performed the same tasks as Paul and co-authored letters with him. The churches were to pray, to receive and send him and the co-workers, to share the gospel in their cities and their surroundings and to contribute to the collection.
- to generously acknowledge and praise the contributions of others to the mission enterprise. Despite current tensions, Euodia and Syntyche have “laboured side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life” (Phil 4:3). Paul sends an unnamed brother to Corinth, “who is famous among all the churches for his preaching of the gospel” (2Cor 8:18). The believers in Macedonia and Achaia have contributed to the collection enterprise (Rom 15:26–27; 2Cor 8:1–5).
- to share in *mutual* ministry. Paul would not only visit his followers and minister to them with his gifts (“that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you”, Rom 1:11), but was also looking forward and expecting to be strengthened himself through others: “that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine” (Rom 1:12).¹⁷ This motive again appears at the end of Romans: “once I have enjoyed your company for a while” (15:24) and “I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company” (15:32). Paul was embedded in Christian communities and dependent on them – not only for their prayers or material support and the provision of co-workers – but also for encouragement and spiritual support. If Paul needed such ministry from his followers, this applies also to other leaders. Leadership is not a one-way street from superior leaders as ever-ready donors to inferior followers as mere recipients, but is based on mutuality. Leaders would do well to admit their needs and allow others to also minister to them.
- to not only request material means in support of his mission or the collection enterprise for Jerusalem, but also to offer payment for Onesimus’s wrongs (Phlm 18–19) or to work with his own hands so that he would not have to draw on the resources of others and to provide in this way also for those ministering with him (Acts 20:34; see also 1Thess 2:9: “We worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God”). Thus, there is also mutual financial support. Paul used his personal material means in support of others, of his followers.
- to be aware of and think of others also in passing on greetings (his own and those of others) and in receiving greetings as expressions of affectionate relationships over distance in order to maintain the network and relationships in this manner (see Weima 2010, pp.

¹⁶ (1988, p. 29); see pp. 30–31 for a summary of Paul’s concern for his converts, see the entire chapter, pp. 29–58.

¹⁷ See also Rom 15:29: “I know that when I come, I will come in the fullness of the blessings of Christ”.

307–345). For other leaders and in different contexts, it may not be greetings but other ways of indicating thoughtfulness and of maintaining relationships.

For our quest, it would also be worthwhile to survey the different *metaphors* which Paul uses and which are an expression of his understanding of his relationship with the communities he founded and sought to lead. Most prominent for our quest are his family metaphors which play a prominent role in 1 and 2 Thessalonians (Gerber, 2005; Burke, 2023, pp. 592–600; Reeves, 2023, pp. 696–697; Best, 1988, pp. 29–58, in particular, pp. 34–41). For example, Paul, Silvanus and Timothy write to the Thessalonians:

But we were gentle among you, *like a nursing mother* taking care of her own children. So being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also out own selves, because you had become very dear to us. ... For you know how, *like a father* with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God ... (1Thess 2:7–8, 11–12).

Because of such relationships, Paul could “model” his leadership as he expected the leaders in the congregations to exercise influence by means of modelling. Andrew Clarke describes this approach to leadership as follows:

Church leaders, like the apostle, are ... to exercise influence by means pf modelling (Clarke 2008, 173–182; Barentsen, 112–140). Using the words *mimetes*, *mimeomai* (imitate, emulate), and *typos* (model/pattern/example), Paul repeatedly emphasises that learning and formation are achieved by close observation of good and bad examples (Acts 20:18; 1Cor 4:16; 11:1; Phil 3:7; 1Thess 1:6–7; 2:15; 2Thess 3:7–9; 1Tim 4:12; Titus 2:7). In recounting their mission to the people of Thessalonica, Paul draws attention specifically to the ways in which he and his fellow apostles made their impact, not simply as a consequence of the message they delivered and through powerful acts of the Spirit but also by clearly observable evidence of their life and character. Their apostolic ministry was characterised not by greed, flattery, or boastfulness but by the intimate, costly, and parental qualities of gentleness, affection, and urgent encouragement (1Thess 2:5–12). The Thessalonian believers then had a subsequent and consequent impact, not only across their own region but also further afield through their own example (1Thess 1:5–8; 2:13–14).¹⁸

CONCLUSIONS AND APPLICATIONS

Summary

Paul's claims and practices of leadership were deeply embedded in a network of relationships with his co-workers, mission partners, other individuals and congregations. In addition, Paul kept close to God and the risen Lord who had commissioned him and experienced the comfort and guidance of the Holy Spirit. He was embedded in relationships in which he, as far as we can tell, did not have a leading role, including his physical family and the apostles/Christ-

¹⁸ Clarke (2023a, p. 627); with reference to Clarke (2008) and Barentsen (2011). For Paul's appeals and attempts at persuading his audiences, see Best (1988, pp. 51–52).

believers in Jerusalem to whom he gave accounts of his ministry. In view of this, it is legitimate to refer to Paul as a *relational leader*, without excluding elements of other current leadership models in his leadership. Our brief glance at the portrayal of Acts supports the claim that the quality of relationships between leaders and followers are central to leadership success.¹⁹ Looking at Paul from the perspective of *relational leadership* allows us to see aspects which might be missed otherwise.

Paul's relationships to the people he led were characterised and maintained by generous sharing of information, mutual prayer, the willingness to minister lavishly and with emotional closeness, teaching (or using other gifts), genuine concern for groups and individuals, sharing his own tasks with others, the acknowledgement of the contributions of others, allowing for and sharing in mutual ministry, material support/the sharing of material means, and the exchange of greetings to maintain relationships over time and distance.

All this suggests that, in his leadership role, Paul was deeply "embedded" among the people whom he led. He was not one to lead from a "safe distance", one who, other than perhaps the immediate leadership team around him, lost contact with others ... and eventually with reality. Paul did not just "hang around" with the elders in Ephesus, but was concerned for the entire congregation (Acts 20:18–28).²⁰ Paul's embeddedness in these manifold relationships and the manner in which he defined and lived them was a significant factor which contributed to the *sustainability* of his ministry and mission enterprise.

Paul probably maintained these relationships out of conviction, perhaps also aided by the fact that he could simply not afford to do otherwise. He had to convince and win the support of entire congregations to accomplish the mission he had been entrusted with; he could not leave this task to others. When ministering in different places, Paul was – at least sometimes – dependent on the hospitality and provision of local believers. He worked with them (Acts 18:3); he shared his life with them and shared in their lives. This observation is a necessary and healthy pointer for leaders today. Leaders must not lose contact with the "rank-and-file" people whom they lead, be it their employees or people in their congregations. The danger of this development increases with the size of a company or a congregation.

Our understanding and any application of Paul's "leadership-methods" (or the like) also needs to consider the "material" constraints of Paul's ministry, including his leadership role. In all his leading (and strategic planning), Paul also had to take into consideration the limited finances which were at his and the congregations' disposal, the hardships, dangers, and availability of travelling in the ancient world (2Cor 2:12) and the limited means of communication, to name but a few factors. As these factors were not miraculously revoked for Paul, he and his colleagues were not supernaturally translocated to different places but had to travel like all other ancient travellers. Today's leaders would be wise in taking such constraints and other factors into account in developing and pursuing their visions and goals.

¹⁹ Drawing on the definition quoted above, see <https://www.aihr.com/hr-glossary/relational-leadership> (access 04.04.2025; italics mine).

²⁰ See Stenschke (2020a). In several of his letters there is a noted emphasis on "all" the local Christ-believers; see, for instance, Phil 1:1–8; "To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons" (1:1).

Paul's "use" of these relationships²¹

The *Call for Papers* to the conference also invited and allowed for critical questions, by asking "How should leaders, followers, and organisations handle power abuse and manipulation? What are historical examples of effective or problematic relational leadership?"²² This brings us back to the question of how Paul made use of the relationships he established and maintained for his purposes. It is difficult to find answers due to the scarcity of the sources. What we have are Paul's letters (even though he wrote some of them together with others) and the portrayal of Paul in Acts. While his letters contain some reflections on the nature and course of his ministry, there are few self-critical reflections of his role as a leader and his relationships with others. Acts is written by an ardent admirer of Paul, so, one can hardly expect a critical reflection in the portrayal in Acts. In exploring this question further, a number of "positive" factors need to be considered:

- While Paul had (for most of the time!) a robust self-consciousness and confidence and could exert considerable authority over people around him ("God's appointed slave holds extraordinary, representative authority as his servant" Clarke, 2023b, p. 964; see also Best, 1988, pp. 73–95)), one needs to emphasise that in his ministry he was not pursuing his own interests or purposes. Rather, he fulfilled the unique task he had been commissioned with by the risen Lord. For Paul, its faithful fulfilment over many years implied loss of status and power and a generous dose of suffering. Paul must have shared this vision with others in a way that convinced them to join him. It must have been attractive to them. Paul's commission became the "common goal" which he and his followers sought to achieve.²³ The supernatural affirmation which Paul received through signs and wonders (see the portrayal in Acts, also Rom 15:18–20) and the success which he had (at least in some places) will have added force to Paul's testimony. Some people did work with him over extended periods of time.
- Paul was careful not to exploit people financially or otherwise.²⁴ When he asked for contributions, the money was for missionary ministry or for others, like the impoverished saints in Jerusalem, not for himself: "I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel" (Acts 20:33). For longer periods, Paul seems to have provided for his own material needs by physical labour (Acts 20:34–35, 1–2Cor). When it came to his own needs, Paul could be frugal and modest (Phil 4:11–12). He did not simply buy a new cloak, but asked that the

²¹ This takes us to reflections on the ethics of leadership; see the survey of Northouse (2016, pp. 329–362). Northouse discusses the following principles of ethical leadership. "Ethical leaders respect others, serve others, are just, are honest and build community", pp 341–347; see also Price (2008 and 2020).

²² The *Call for Papers* refers to "potential shadow sides of relational leadership, including the dangers of power abuse, groupthink, and destructive conflicts". This aspect of relational leadership is included for good reasons, as Northouse (2016, p. 339) rightly notes that little attention has been paid to what he calls "the dark side of leadership".

²³ Thus the definition of Northouse (2016, p. 6).

²⁴ Northouse (2016, p. 339): "The dark side of leadership is the destructive and toxic side of leadership in that a leader uses leadership for personal ends. ... toxic leaders are characterised by destructive behaviours such as leaving their followers worse off than they found them, violating the basic human rights of others, and playing on their base fears". Destructive leaders have dysfunctional personal characteristics such as "lack of integrity, insatiable ambition, arrogance, and reckless disregard for their actions" (339). For the manner in which Paul's ministry was financed see Blanton & Pickett (2017), Little (2005) and Best (1988, pp. 97–106).

one he had left behind in Troas would be brought along (2Tim 4:13). Paul insisted on transparency in financial matters (Stenschke 2020, pp. 243–263; 2019, pp. 393–434).

- To a large extent, Paul was willing to share his ministry with others and delegate important tasks to them (see above). While in some cases this seems to have happened because Paul could not fulfil certain tasks himself, in other cases it seems different. Such sharing was not only the case when he was imprisoned and had no alternatives. Paul trusted others in difficult circumstances and was willing to let them pursue matters (the role of Timothy and Titus in seeking reconciliation with the Corinthians).

In addition, there are issues which might be “negative” factors:

- Some people ceased to co-operate with Paul. In some cases, the reasons are indicated. Whether these were the only reasons for such instances is not clear. John Mark left Paul and Barnabas in Perga and returned to Jerusalem (Acts 13:13). Paul and Barnabas separated before the second missionary phase (Acts 15:36–41). Silas did not join Paul on another journey. He is mentioned last in Acts 17:16, so it is not clear whether he accompanied Paul during the second missionary phase all the way back to Jerusalem (18:22). Paul had a sharp disagreement with Peter in Antioch (Gal 2:11–14; see also the situation sketched in 2Tim 4:9–21). Did some of the people whom we classified above as independent “mission partners” have their “experiences” with Paul and his manner of leadership and perhaps good reasons for not working with him or no longer working with him closely for longer periods of time? Did they feel that he was domineering over them (1Cor 16:12, “I strongly urged him ...”), even if with the right motivation? There is little doubt that Paul had an intense personality (Göttel-Leypold & Demling, 2005, pp. 125–148). However, other reasons, such as Paul’s contested way of including non-Jews into the people of God, or personal reasons, are as likely. There remains ample room for speculation.
- Despite warnings by prophets and fellow Christ-followers, Paul continued the journey to Jerusalem and was eventually arrested in the city. While provocative, in this particular case his travel companions followed him to the city (Acts 21:14–16). In other cases, those around Paul might have come to different conclusions when he acted in a similar way.

A brief glance at the “dark side” of leadership as described by Northouse is instructive. The “toxic triangle of leadership” as developed by Padilla, Hogan and Kaiser in 2007²⁵, consists of *destructive leaders*, *susceptible followers* and *conducive environments*:

- The available sources indicate that Paul was not a *destructive leader*, “characterised by having charisma and a need to use power and coercion for personal gains”.²⁶ As far as we know, Paul was not “narcissistic, and often attention-getting and self-absorbed”. He was not after personal gains.
- Padilla, Hogan and Kaiser differentiate *susceptible followers* as *conformers* and *colluders*. The *conformers* “go along with destructive leaders to satisfy unmet needs such as emptiness, alienation, or need for community. These followers have low self-esteem and identify with charismatic leaders in an attempt to become more desirable” (Northouse 2016, pp. 339–340). The *colluders* can be “ambitious, desire status, or see an opportunity for profit”

²⁵ I follow the summary by Northouse (2016, pp. 339–340); see Padilla et al. (2007, pp. 176–194).

²⁶ Northouse (2016, p. 339). Best (1988, p. 53 writes with regard to Gal 4:19 that “Paul’s labour pains did not lead to the implanting of his life in his converts but the life of Christ. ... Paul knows that his converts have been born to a life other than his own”, although Paul could present himself as a model for his converts to follow, pp. 59–72.

(Northouse 2016, p. 340). Following Paul and co-operating with him might have met, besides other earthly and eternal benefits, some of the needs of his followers as described here. Perhaps it is telling that the group of Paul's close co-workers included Timothy, a younger man with a perhaps difficult family background (Acts 16:1–3), who became like a son to Paul (2Tim 2:1), while his independent mission partners included two apparently older couples (Aquila and Prisca, Andronicus and Junia, see my survey 2009, pp. 145–194), an eloquent and educated Alexandrian such as Apollos (Acts 18:24) and a Roman citizen and established Jerusalem prophet such as Silas (16:37) who might not have accompanied Paul during the entire second missionary phase (see above).

- Regarding the *conducive environment*, the authors note:

When the environment is unstable, the leader is often granted more authority to assert radical change. When there is a perceived threat, followers often accept assertive leadership. People are attracted to leaders who will stand up to the threats they feel in the environment. Destructive leaders who express compatible cultural values with followers are more likely to succeed. (Northouse 2016, p. 340)

This corner of the triangle is particularly difficult to assess. While the political environment was by and large relatively stable (from all we know) in the years of Paul's leadership (mid-thirties to late fifties of the first century) (Brandt, 2021), there clearly were threats and real dangers, as, for instance, Acts and 2Corinthians 11:23–33 indicate, for Paul, but also for his followers (Acts 19:29; Rom 16:7; 1Thess 2:14). We do not know how Paul's eschatology, influenced by early Jewish apocalypticism (see Goodrich 2023, pp. 34–42), impacted how Paul's followers perceived and assessed their environment and its threats. The cultural values of Paul and his followers would also have been shaped by the Christ-event and the teaching of the apostles.

With due care owing to the nature of our sources, one can conclude that while Paul could stand up for his convictions and be a strong leader on some occasions, he was *not* a destructive leader in the sense in which the concept appears in current leadership theory. He did not misuse his relationships to promote his personal gain and vision.

Examining Paul from the perspective of relational leadership adds significant aspects to the study of Paul in *New Testament scholarship*, where Paul is, up to this day, often understood more as a solitary figure than as an early Christian leader deeply embedded in manifold divine and human relationships. Taking full account of this network does not detract from Paul's merits and unique contribution to earliest Christianity and its nascent theology. Rather, it helps us to understand Paul's role and these merits better, to place them in the larger context and to get a more realistic picture of his life and ministry.

Examining Paul from this perspective also makes a significant contribution to *leadership studies*. The portrayal of Paul's leadership which we sketched underscores that leaders cannot achieve their goals on their own. Their leadership needs to be embedded in different human relationships and must take these relationships into account if leadership is to achieve its aims and to be sustainable. The portrayal can inspire leaders in the way in which they fashion and maintain their relationships with their followers. It also reminds leaders that, from a biblical perspective, the understanding and practice of leadership requires a firm mooring in relation to the divine. This crucial aspect of their leadership and Paul's example will help them to avoid the misuse of relationships in destructive leadership patterns such as being driven by personal gain of various kind.

... towards the present

While Paul was perhaps not or not only a relational leader according to current definitions of the concept, there is ample evidence that relationships and his embeddedness in such relationships were also important for Paul in his different leadership roles. Paul was not a “lone wolf” or freelance leader and would not approve of this idea. It is worthwhile for those who seek guidance from the Scriptures for their own ministry of leading to ponder and reflect on these aspects of his leadership:

- They do well to remember and to prioritise their relationship to God, Jesus and the Spirit, to keep their families in mind (and not dominate them), and to have relationships with people who are not their followers, but friends, and with people to whom they can and must be answerable for their ministry.
- They do well to invest in their relationships, be it to their close co-workers, to partners in a wider sense, to other individuals and to the congregations whom they lead.
- Like Paul’s, their relationships are to be characterised by generous sharing of information, mutual prayer, the willingness to minister lavishly and with emotional closeness, teaching (or using other gifts), genuine concern for groups and individuals, the acknowledgement of the contributions of others, the inclusion of others, allowing for and sharing in mutual ministry, by material support/the sharing of material means and by the exchange of greetings to maintain relationships over distances. How can all this, an almost superhuman task, be achieved? Acts 20:32, addressed to leaders, offers some clues: “And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified”.
- They should do all to avoid destructive leadership, that is, misusing their leadership role for personal gains, be they material benefits or otherwise, more subtly. Leaders who perform reasonably well should get some recognition and gratitude, perhaps even admiration and honour from the people they lead ... but should not be dependent on such rewards. Leaders must remember that they are called to serve God and people (for faithful service they will receive a *heavenly* reward!) and must not exploit others in doing so. In its very nature, *Christian leadership is not exploitative. It is not the followers’ purpose and task to meet their leaders’ material, practical or emotional needs.* Following these demands carefully has the side benefit of leaders not being as easily manipulated by their followers, as they are when they depend on their followers to meet their different needs.
- They must refrain from misusing/exploiting the needs and trust of susceptible followers.
- They must not exploit to their advantage the conducive environments in which they happen to serve or the cultural values which they share with their followers.
- As “destructive leadership will also thrive when the checks and balances of the organisation are weak and the rules of the institution are weak” (Northouse 2016, pp. 340–341), responsible leaders will respect and instil checks and balances and insist on their observance, not just when applied to others but also when applied to *themselves*. Responsible

rulers will strengthen the rules of the institution and ensure that they are followed ... for their own sake and for the sake of others.²⁷

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²⁷ A fine example is the regulations which were put in place in the Catholic diocese of Limburg, Germany, after the disastrous financial practices of a former bishop had caused serious damage, see <https://www.spiegel.de/panorama/bistum-limburg-setzt-aufseher-fuer-vermoegensverwaltung-ein-a-1093412.html> (access 14.04.2025).

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