

PAUL AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES
AS SOCIAL CRITICS
OF THE ROMAN STRESS ON *PERSONA*
A STUDY OF 2 CORINTHIANS,
EPICTETUS, AND VALERIUS MAXIMUS¹

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This dissertation explores Paul's approach to the social conflicts involving Christian identity in 2 Corinthians. In order to grasp the dynamics of 'social identity' in the world of the New Testament, this study examines the concept of *persona*, especially the Roman stress on *persona*, which denoted a person's identity in the Graeco-Roman social world in the first century AD. In addition, this study examines Paul's critique of social identity in light of two other figures—Epictetus and Valerius Maximus—and their critiques. All three social critics react against a conventional (or popular) view of *persona*, which is a large preoccupation with the superficial features that expressed identity and *persona* (e.g. rank, status, and eloquence). In the case of Paul, this study analyses the Corinthian correspondence, especially 2 Corinthians, to show that some of the conflicts in the Corinthian church resulted from the Christians' adoption of the conventional values of identity that were prevalent in Corinth. Paul's conflict with the Corinthians is clearly seen in their superficial assessment of his *persona* as lacking the appropriate credentials for an apostle (e.g. 2 Cor. 10:10). In order to combat this misconception of Christian identity in the church, Paul reacted to the Corinthians' conventional values of identity by promoting and projecting a subversive Christ-like

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identity, which is a visible embodiment of the dying and life of Jesus Christ.

In the introductory chapter, Chapter One, this study is explained to be interested in ‘social identity’—that is, an individual’s identity in society, and how that identity was perceived and used in social relations. In particular, this study is interested in looking at the social relations involving Christian identity. The introductory chapter also points out the significance and need of this study, since scholars of the New Testament and of ancient history have largely ignored the important ancient concept of *persona* which conveyed the notion of ‘social identity’ in the Graeco-Roman world. In particular, New Testament scholars have overlooked this social concept because they have not recognised a correlation between *persona* and πρόσωπον. The chapter additionally explains the method employed in this study to be a combined method of a social concept study, social history, and a heuristic comparison.

Since there is no substantial treatment of the concept of *persona* available, Chapter Two substantiates the social concept and demonstrates how it affected the majority of individuals in the Roman empire, regardless of their socio-economic status. This chapter begins by showing how the Latin term *persona* and the Greek equivalent πρόσωπον have a particular meaning of ‘social identity’. In a Roman context, there is a Roman stress on *persona* since the concept is formulated by the Roman social hierarchy and Roman law in order to designate one’s place and privileges in Roman society. This chapter, moreover, explores the concept of *persona* on two levels. First, the concept is seen as primarily an elite ideal which serves to portray and protect the honour and privileges of the elite. Secondly, the conventional outworking of *persona* in the early imperial period is considered to be a distortion of its ideal notions, since many individuals exaggerated and exploited certain status symbols that visibly expressed one’s social identity. As a result there was a large preoccupation with the shallow features of *persona* in Graeco-Roman society.

The remainder of this study, Chapters Three to Six, examines three figures—Valerius Maximus, Epictetus, and the apostle Paul—who offer reactions to the preoccupation with the superficial aspect of *persona*. Not only do they reflect on the common theme of social *persona*, but they offer a diachronic and geographic trajectory for this

study: Valerius wrote in Rome during the early first century AD, Paul lived in Corinth during the mid-first century and later wrote on a number of occasions to the church there, and Epictetus lived in Rome and then in Nicopolis in the Greek East during the late first and early second century. Since Valerius provides insights into the outworking of social identity in Rome, and Epictetus provides details of its outworking in the Greek East, the information gleaned from these two figures provides the necessary backdrop for understanding the social context of Paul's letters to the Christians in Corinth, which is a Roman colony in the Greek East.

In Chapter Three, the first figure, Valerius Maximus, is observed to be reacting against this preoccupation, since he considers it to be deviant behaviour that corrupts the traditional values of an ideal and honourable Roman *persona*. His work, *Facta et dicta*, is discerned to be a practical handbook that aims to restore the traditional values of Roman identity. Chapter Four examines the second figure, Epictetus, for his perception and critique of *persona*. In his work, *Dissertationes*, Epictetus is seen to be reacting against this obsession with the superficial side of *persona*, which he describes as an 'incurable fever'. He constantly shows the absurdity of being ambitious and intensely longing for superficial status symbols. More importantly, Epictetus inculcates his conception of the genuine aspect of one's identity, which is influenced by his Stoic philosophy and is focused on the inner person.

The third and final figure, Paul, is considered in Chapters Five and Six for his perception and critique of *persona*. Although some consideration is given to 1 Corinthians, the scope of the study is explained to be 2 Corinthians, since this letter has social data reflecting issues of social identity, and has the most occurrences of πρόσωπον in the Pauline corpus—some of which do communicate the sense of social identity and *persona*. One key verse is 2 Corinthians 5:12, in which Paul points out those in the church who boast in 'outward appearance' (ἐν προσώπῳ) and not in the heart (ἐν καρδίᾳ). In light of this verse and other details, this study suggests that the Corinthians have adopted the conventional values of *persona* into the church, and are also preoccupied with its shallow features. This conventional use of *persona* is clearly seen in their superficial evaluation of Paul's *persona* as lacking the appropriate credentials for an apostle. Paul reacts to the Corinthians' superficial perspective by denouncing the outward

elements of identity and emphasising the inward work of the Spirit in the Christian's heart (e.g. 3:1-3, 18; 4:6-18; 5:7, 12, 16-17). In addition to this internal dimension of Christian identity, Paul promotes an external dimension of Christian identity, which is based on and reflects the inward work of the Spirit, rather than superficial values. This Christ-like identity is understood to be a result of a visible transformation into the image (εἰκὼν) and person (πρόσωπον) of Christ (3:18; 4:4, 6)—that is, an embodiment of the 'dying and life of Jesus' (4:10-11). Thus, Paul promotes and projects this new Christ-like identity, which he claims to be the legitimate *persona* for an apostle. Significantly, this Christ-like *persona* subverts the Corinthians' conventional values of *persona* (2 Cor. 10–13).

Furthermore, Paul's critique of *persona* is assessed to be a sharp reaction against the conventional perception of social identity. His understanding of Christian identity inverts the conventional values of *persona*, since it is an embodiment of the image and person of the crucified Christ, who died a humiliating death on the cross. This study also heuristically compares Paul's critique to those of Valerius and Epictetus. Although all three are reacting against a preoccupation with the superficial side of *persona*, they are also seen to be promoting their own understanding of what they consider to be an acceptable *persona* for their audience. Valerius conceives it still within the Roman social structures, while Epictetus conceives it primarily in a philosophical (Stoic) understanding, and Paul conceives it in a religious (Christian) understanding.