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THE RELEVANCE OF SYNERGOI THEOU (1 COR 3:5-9) IN AFRICAN CHRISTIAN MISSION

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the Pauline metaphor of *synergoi theou* (God's fellow workers) in 1 Corinthians 3:5-9, emphasising its significance for inspiring African believers to view themselves as valued partners in God's mission and fostering a sense of shared purpose and dignity. In this passage, Paul redefines the role of missionary leaders, specifically Apollos and himself, not as independent agents of spiritual growth but as subordinate labourers within God's sovereign, life-giving work. The metaphors of farming and house-building challenge human pride and rivalry by establishing that God alone grants growth, while human workers fulfil distinct, interdependent roles. This theological framework provides a corrective to several challenges facing mission in Africa, including the historical legacy of paternalism, fragmentation resulting from denominational competition, and the elevation of charismatic leaders over collective, Spirit-led ministry. The "fellow worker" identity affirms that African believers, missionaries, and local church leaders are co-labourers with God rather than passive recipients of foreign aid or hierarchical structures. It encourages a participatory and indigenous missiology that respects local agency, celebrates diverse gifts, and prioritises unity in diversity, reflecting the African philosophical ideal of Ubuntu, or interconnected humanity. In an era when mission is often evaluated by human achievement or institutional expansion, 1 Corinthians 3:5-9 calls the African church to humility, interdependence, and reliance on God as the sole author of transformation. Ultimately, the concept of "being God's fellow workers" grounds mission in Africa not in the strength of human partnership alone but in the grace of God, who invites His people to participate in His saving and redemptive work.

KEYWORDS: Fellow workers, mission in Africa, missiology, partnership, ministry

INTRODUCTION

The African continent holds a pivotal role in the contemporary history of global Christianity. Once primarily a recipient of Western missionary activity, Africa has emerged as a dynamic centre of Christian faith, marked by significant growth in adherents, vibrant movements, and a distinctive theological voice. However, African Christian mission continues to face substantial challenges, including the persistent effects of colonial missionary legacies, ethnic divisions, poverty, corruption, the spread of prosperity gospel distortions, and the ongoing need for contextualised, indigenous

leadership that addresses the holistic needs of African societies. In this context, the apostle Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 3:5-9 offer a relevant and enduring framework for understanding the nature, unity, and purpose of Christian mission. Paul refers to himself and Apollos as "God's fellow workers" (*synergoi Theou*), calling for a reorientation of mission theology and practice that emphasises collaboration, humility, eschatological hope, and a theocentric focus. For African Christianity, which often contends with competition, personality-driven leadership, and externally imposed models, the

“God's fellow workers” paradigm provides a biblical foundation for a mission that is cooperative, contextual, and faithful to the gospel. While this study draws significantly on the scholarship of N. T. Wright and James D. G. Dunn, as well as African theologians such as Kwame Bediako, John S. Pobee, and Lamin Sanneh, it also recognises alternative perspectives and scholarly debates. Some scholars, including Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and John H. Elliott, have raised questions about the limitations of Paul's mission paradigm, particularly regarding power, gender, and inclusivity. Additionally, voices within African theology such as Jesse N. K. Mugambi and Tinyiko Maluleke have critically engaged with Pauline models, arguing for a more radical contextualisation that moves beyond Western interpretive frameworks. These debates highlight the complexity of appropriating Pauline mission in the African context and underscore the need for nuanced, dialogical approaches. Engagement with these diverse scholarly perspectives informs the biblical and contextual analyses presented in this work.

This study investigates the relevance of 1 Corinthians 3:5-9 for African Christian mission through multiple hermeneutical perspectives. The primary methodology integrates historical-critical analysis with insights from postcolonial and African contextual hermeneutics, enabling critical engagement with both the original context of Paul's writing and its implications for contemporary African Christianity. In practice, the analysis begins by establishing the exegetical and historical setting of the passage using historical-critical tools, followed by a deliberate application of postcolonial and contextual lenses to examine how issues of power, agency, and indigenous voice manifest in both the text and the African context. Each interpretive move is carefully sequenced: the historical-critical approach grounds the text in its first-century setting, and, subsequently, postcolonial and contextual readings are introduced to interrogate how both colonial legacies and African experiences shape contemporary understandings and applications. This process draws on significant African theological contributions and ensures that both textual meaning and contextual relevance are addressed coherently and transparently.

The analysis begins with an examination of the historical and exegetical background of the passage, clarifying Paul's argument against factionalism and its theological implications. The study then evaluates the current landscape of African Christian mission, identifying key strengths and weaknesses. The principles of “God's fellow workers” are applied to four critical areas: church unity within a divided continent, the role of indigenous agency and leadership, the integration of spiritual and social transformation, and the eschatological vision that sustains mission. In practical terms, these areas can be addressed by fostering ecumenical initiatives that bridge denominational and ethnic divides, investing in mentorship and training programs to develop indigenous leaders who are both theologically grounded and contextually aware, designing mission strategies that combine evangelism with tangible responses to social challenges, and nurturing a communal sense of hope that orients mission efforts toward God's future. The central argument is that Paul's vision of co-labouring with God and with one another offers a corrective to both the colonial legacy of superiority and the contemporary tendency toward fragmentation, thereby promoting a missiology characterised by partnership, humility, and communal flourishing.

2. Coworkers in Pauline Letters

Paul, formerly known as Saul, was a Jewish persecutor of Christians who underwent a transformative encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus. After his conversion, he became a committed proponent of the Christian message and embarked on several missionary journeys to spread the gospel throughout the Mediterranean. The nature and implications of Paul's conversion continue to be debated among scholars. For instance, E. P. Sanders views Paul's experience as both a profound personal transformation and a theologically significant development in the early church's outreach to Gentiles. Conversely, some scholars question whether Paul's encounter should be classified as a call or a conversion within the framework of ancient Judaism. This ongoing scholarly debate provides critical context for understanding Paul's mission and his impact on the development of Christianity.

Throughout his missionary journeys, Paul established churches, authored letters to nascent Christian communities, and trained leaders to further the spread of the gospel. The concept of coworkers was integral to these efforts. In the ancient Greco-Roman world, philosophers and teachers, such as those in the Stoic or Cynic traditions, often gathered disciples who assisted with both instruction and daily affairs. Likewise, patronage systems featured patrons surrounded by clients who offered loyalty and assistance in return for support. Paul's approach to coworkers drew upon these Greco-Roman models but was adapted to advance the Christian mission. Paul's letters employ language and organisational structures reminiscent of philosophical or patronage networks. Yet, they emphasise mutual support, partnership, and shared labour in Christ. As a result, Paul's coworkers operated not simply as assistants but as partners who shared responsibility and a collective sense of mission across various communities.

Timothy is one of the most prominent coworkers referenced in the Pauline letters. Paul describes him as "my true son in the faith" (1 Tim 1:2) and "my beloved child and faithful minister in the Lord" (1 Cor 4:17). The Greek term *teknon*, translated as 'son' or 'child', signifies a close, familial relationship rather than a simple student-teacher dynamic, indicating a deep personal bond and mentorship. For the concept of coworker or fellow worker, Paul uses the Greek term *synergos*, particularly in relation to his partnership with Titus: "my partner and fellow worker" (2 Cor 8:23). In Greco-Roman contexts, *synergos* referred to collaborators who shared common work and purpose, rather than subordinates. These terms underscore the relational and participatory nature of Paul's network, highlighting both affection and equality in mission. Timothy, likely a young man mentored by Paul, became a trusted companion and coworker, responsible for delivering letters and overseeing the establishment of new churches. Another significant coworker was Titus, whom Paul also called "my partner and fellow worker" (2 Cor 8:23) and "my true child in a common faith" (Titus 1:4). As with Timothy, Paul applies both *teknon* and *synergos* to Titus, reinforcing the combination of closeness and mutual responsibility. Titus, believed to be a Gentile convert, accompanied Paul on missionary journeys,

helped found the church in Crete, and played a key role in raising funds for the church in Jerusalem.

In addition to Timothy and Titus, the Pauline letters mention several other individuals who collaborated with Paul in advancing the gospel. Phoebe, a deaconess in the church at Cenchreae, is identified in Romans 16:1-2 as a significant supporter of Paul and others. Recent scholarship debates the extent of Phoebe's leadership, with some arguing that the term *diakonos* may denote a formal office of deacon rather than simply a servant, and that she may have played a crucial role in delivering Paul's letter to the Romans and instructing the community. Similarly, Prisca (Priscilla) and Aquila, a married couple and fellow tentmakers, are described as "fellow workers in Christ Jesus" (Rom 16:3). Ongoing scholarly discussion addresses Prisca's leadership, with several scholars suggesting that her frequent mention before her husband may indicate her prominence within early Christian communities. These debates demonstrate that Paul's network of coworkers included women in significant roles, reflecting the diversity and complexity of early Christian leadership. Other notable coworkers include Luke, traditionally credited with authoring the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, as well as Aristarchus, Mark, Epaphras, and others, all of whom were essential to Paul's ministry. These coworkers provided practical assistance, supporting Paul in preaching, teaching, and financial matters. Individuals such as Timothy and Titus were instrumental in establishing and strengthening churches and in serving as messengers who delivered letters and updates to various communities.

Coworkers were essential in disseminating the gospel message, especially in a society where oral communication was the primary mode of information exchange. Trusted individuals capable of conveying the message accurately and passionately were indispensable. These coworkers acted as genuine partners in the mission rather than mere assistants. Scholarly perspectives vary regarding the exact nature of these roles. Some contend that Paul's use of 'coworker' differed by context and individual, encompassing relationships ranging from close collaboration to more hierarchical, delegated arrangements. Others suggest that Paul's inclusion of a diverse group of

coworkers addressed practical concerns, such as fostering local leadership and adapting to community needs, in addition to spiritual partnership. Despite these differing interpretations, there is broad consensus that coworkers were vital to Paul's mission. Furthermore, coworkers provided encouragement and support during Paul's trials. For instance, in Philippians, Paul notes that Epaphroditus risked his life for the gospel (Phil 2:30), exemplifying the commitment and dedication characteristic of all of Paul's coworkers.

In conclusion, the concept of coworkers in the Pauline letters encompasses more than the roles of assistants or disciples. These individuals served as trusted partners, collaborators, and fellow labourers in the spread of the gospel, making significant contributions to Paul's mission and the development of early Christian communities. Ongoing scholarly debates concern the precise nature of these relationships and the extent of coworkers' authority and independence across contexts. Acknowledging these unresolved questions underscores the complexity of Pauline scholarship and encourages continued investigation into these dynamics.

3. Exegetical Foundations of 1 Corinthians 3:5-9

Understanding the relevance of this passage for African mission requires an initial examination of Paul's original context and argument. Significant divisions marked the Corinthian church, as believers aligned themselves with various leaders: Paul, Apollos, Cephas, and even Christ (1 Cor 1:12). These divisions extended beyond theological disagreements and reflected deeper social and cultural tensions, including status seeking, rhetorical eloquence, and ethnic pride. Paul's response in chapters 1–4 constitutes a sustained theological critique of human boasting and a redefinition of authentic leadership.

In 3:5–9, Paul employs agricultural and construction metaphors to illustrate his argument: “What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters

is anything, but only God who gives the growth. The one who plants and the one who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labour, for we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.”

To interpret and apply these metaphors within the African context, this study utilises a historical-contextual and comparative hermeneutic. This approach examines Paul's use of everyday imagery in first-century Corinth and identifies parallels with contemporary African experiences of leadership, community, and mission collaboration. By clarifying both the original intent of these metaphors and their relevance to African realities, the analysis aims to establish a meaningful connection between the ancient text and current challenges and opportunities in African mission.

3.1 The Wider Context of 1 Corinthians 1–4

i. The Corinthian Problem

The primary issue facing the church in Corinth is internal discord coupled with harmony with the surrounding world. While the precise causes of this problem remain debated,¹ it can be attributed to the dominant culture's influence on the Corinthians.² Particularly significant are the cultural practices of status-enhancing affiliations and competitive boasting, both evident in 1 Corinthians 1–4.

These issues are not confined to the ancient context. Similar cultural forces continue to shape attitudes and behaviours within many modern churches. The tendency to align with influential groups or individuals, or to assess value based on social status or achievements, can foster divisions and competition within contemporary congregations, mirroring the situation in Corinth. Examining these parallels highlights the ongoing influence of cultural values on life and relationships within the church.

The Corinthians actively promoted status-enhancing affiliations, as demonstrated in 1 Corinthians 1:10–12. They formed opposing *schismata* (factions), with each group declaring its competitive *eris* (rivalry) against others: *egō men eimi Paulou* (I am of Paul), *egō de Apollō* (I am of

¹ Hans Windisch, *Der zweite Brief des Paulus an die Korinther* (MeyerK 6; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1924), 199.

² David E. Briones, *Paul's Financial Policy: A Socio-Theological Approach* (LNTS 494; London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 140.

Apollos), *egō de Kēpha* (I am of Cephas), *egō de Christou* (I am of Christ).³ Whether these slogans are interpreted through the lens of political alliances⁴ or the rivalries inherent in ancient teacher–pupil relationships,⁵ it is evident that associating with a high-ranking superior elevated the honour and status of the subordinate party in Roman Corinth. The Corinthians adapted this worldly practice by spiritualising it. They appropriated a common social custom—seeking status through association with prominent leaders—and applied it within a religious context by linking it to Christian figures. Instead of boasting about connections with influential citizens, they boasted about belonging to specific apostles or even to Christ. Spiritualising a worldly practice involves transferring the same underlying attitude or behaviour from secular life into the church and assigning it a spiritual significance.

Competitive boasting, on the other hand, whether in the political⁶ or rhetorical⁷ sphere, was a culturally acceptable means of broadcasting one's status-enhancing relationships. In return, one accrues more honour. To the apostle's great dismay, this worldly conduct made its way into the church.⁸ The Corinthians boast in their respected Christian leaders, as demonstrated by the party slogans in 1:12 and the call not to boast in humanity in 3:21 *hōste mēdeis kauchasthō en anthrōpois* (Therefore, let no one boast in humans). But not only that, but they also boast in their own accomplishments, in the cultural symbols of status: *sophos* (wise), *dunatos* (powerful), and *eugenēs* (wellborn) (1:26–28).⁹ This reading finds both support and debate among recent Pauline scholars. Some agree that Paul's critique is a response against cultural patterns of competitive honour in Roman Corinth. In contrast, others argue that his perspective on boasting should be seen more through the lens of eschatological reversal and

participation in Christ rather than as a simple cultural critique. My interpretation aligns most closely with those who see Paul deliberately contrasting worldly boasting in status and achievement with a distinctive Christian ethic rooted in dependence on God. And boasting in self and others inevitably results in disregarding the Giver of all things, God.

Their vital connection to the Lord is overshadowed by their desire to be well connected to high-status leaders in the church. God in Christ is the one in whom they ought to boast: *ho kauchōmenos en kuriō kauchasthō* (Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord, 1:31). He appoints their leaders (3:5) and gives them all that they possess as a gift (4:6). Yet their eyes are on humans rather than God, on the horizontal rather than the vertical. Paul's dichotomy between boasting in humans and boasting in the Lord functions both rhetorically and theologically. Rhetorically, he exposes the instability and insufficiency of worldly status for defining true worth. Theologically, he redirects the Corinthian community to root their identity and honour in God's action through Christ. So Paul draws a sharp line in the sand for the Corinthians. Either one's boast is *en anthrōpois* or *en kuriō*, in humans or in the Lord.

Because the Corinthians choose to boast *en anthrōpois*, which spawned the divisive acts of *zēlos* (jealousy) and *eris* (quarreling) in the church (3:3; see 1:11),¹⁰ Paul calls their behaviour *sarkikos* (fleshly) and worldly *kata anthrōpon peripateite* (according to human inclinations, 3:3). From his perspective, their lifestyle is entirely consistent with the cultural values of their day,¹¹ and he has no choice but to address them as *nēpioi en Christō* (infants in Christ, 3:1), the low status of the spiritually immature. “For when one says, ‘I follow Paul’ and another, ‘I follow Apollos,’ *ouk anthrōpoi este* (are you not mere men)?” (3:4), which is the

³ Andrew D. Clarke, *A Pauline Theology of Church Leadership* (LNTS 362; London: T&T Clark, 2008), 91–92.

⁴ Margaret M. Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation: An Exegetical Investigation of the Language and Composition of 1 Corinthians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 68–111.

⁵ Bruce W. Winter, *Philo and Paul among the Sophists* (SNTSMS 96; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 43.

⁶ Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric*, 91–95.

⁷ August Strobel, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther* (Zürcher Bibelkommentare NT 6.1; Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1989), 39.

⁸ Timothy B. Savage, *Power through Weakness: Paul's Understanding of the Christian Ministry in 2 Corinthians* (SNTSMS 86; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 41.

⁹ Andrew D. Clarke, *A Pauline Theology of Church Leadership* LNTS 362; (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 97.

¹⁰ Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric*, 97.

¹¹ Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric*, 81–82.

apostle's way of saying, "Are you not utterly conformed to the world?"¹² In the end, Paul's spiritual assessment of the Corinthians is that they possess a culturally acclimatised faith and a culturally conditioned lifestyle, with two damaging effects: (1) they are captivated by horizontal relationships with human leaders of high spiritual status, to the point that they competitively favored one over against another, and (2) they have lost sight of their vertical relationship to God, his position as Lord over all.¹³ Seeking to be "under-apostles," they came out from under his Lordship.

This reading aligns with recent scholarship emphasising the extent to which the Corinthian community remained influenced by prevailing social hierarchies and honour-shame dynamics. Thus, my interpretation resonates with current debates that recognise Paul's concern with how cultural accommodation undermines spiritual maturity, while contributing to the ongoing discussion about the interplay between social context and ecclesial identity in Pauline theology. The question then becomes: how does Paul deal with this major problem?

ii. Paul's Theological Solution in 1 Corinthians 1–4

In 1 Corinthians 1–4, Paul challenges the Corinthians' conventional understanding of horizontal relationships by introducing a distinctive relational pattern within the divine economy.¹⁴ The term 'divine economy' denotes the manner in which God organises and governs relationships and roles between himself and humanity. Paul distinguishes between 'horizontal relationships,' referring to interpersonal connections, and 'vertical relationships,' which pertain to the relationship between individuals and God.¹⁵ Within this framework, God is presented as the ultimate source of all things. At the same time, human leaders function solely as mediators—this exaltation of God as the source is particularly evident in 1:4–9. Throughout the passage, Paul consistently attributes

all credit to God. God is explicitly identified as the recipient of Paul's gratitude ("Thanks be to my God," 1:4a), with the primary reason for thankfulness being "because of the grace of God given to you in Christ Jesus" (1:4b).¹⁶ Paul subsequently enumerates three divine acts performed among the Corinthians, each arising from this initial gift of *charis* (grace).

First, God spiritually enriched the Corinthians "in all speech and all knowledge" (1:5).¹⁷ Second, through the manifestation of these spiritual gifts, God confirmed the testimony of Christ among them (1:6), ensuring that they "do not lack" any gift as they await the revelation of the Lord Jesus (1:7). Finally, God will demonstrate his faithfulness by confirming them blameless until the end, solely because he has called them into fellowship with his Son (1:9). These actions illustrate five divine passives in the passage: the grace of God was given to the Corinthians (1:4), they were enriched in all speech and knowledge (1:5), the testimony of Christ was confirmed among them (1:6), they lack no spiritual gift (1:7), and they will be confirmed blameless in the end (1:8). In each case, Paul deliberately attributes the action to God,¹⁸ underscoring that God initiates and sustains every good within the community. Paul's gratitude for these divine acts, accomplished by God in Christ, affirms God as the supreme giver and essential source of all blessings to the community.

God's exclusive role as the source is further emphasised in 4:7. Paul asks, "What do you have that you did not receive? And if you indeed received it, why do you boast as if you did not?" This rhetorical questioning highlights the irony that all the Corinthians possess has been given by God, the supreme giver. Despite possessing God-given resources, the Corinthians boast in themselves and assert self-sufficiency, claiming to be the origin of divine gifts. Paul's pointed questions in 4:7 serve as a stern reminder that all gifts originate from God

¹² Bruce Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth: The Influence of Secular Ethics and Social Change* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 40–43.

¹³ David E. Briones, *Paul's Financial Policy: A Socio-Theological Approach* (LNTS 494; London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 159.

¹⁴ Briones, *Paul's Financial Policy*, 147.

¹⁵ Alexandra R. Brown, *The Cross and Human Transformation: Paul's Apocalyptic Word in 1 Corinthians* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 67 n. 5.

¹⁶ Peter Thomas O'Brien, *Introductory Thanksgivings in the Letters of Paul* (NovTSup 49; Leiden: Brill, 1977), 111.

¹⁷ BAGD, 416.

¹⁸ Divine passives are *dotheisē* (1:4), *eploutisthēte* (1:5), *ebebaiōthē* (1:6), *hustereisthai* (1:7), and *eklēthēte* (1:9).

alone. Recent Pauline scholarship has debated the implications of this passage for understanding divine agency and human participation. For instance, John Barclay emphasises the unconditioned nature of God's gift, while Beverly Gaventa focuses on the transformative quality of divine grace in shaping community identity. This analysis aligns with those who stress the priority of God as source over Corinthian self-assertion and further demonstrates how Paul's language precludes attributing spiritual status or accomplishment to human initiative. This emphasis recurs throughout chapters 1–4, whether referring to the gospel of Christ (1:18-25; 2:1-5), the Spirit (2:10-12; cf. 6:19-20), wisdom (2:6-7, 12), or salvation itself (1:21, 27-31; see 6:11). Paul emphatically declares that "all things" belong to God (3:18-23; see 8:6; 11:12).¹⁹

God is the source of all things, yet the gospel is distributed through Paul as a mediator. Scholars have advanced various perspectives on Paul's mediating role. Some emphasise the unique authority and agency Paul exercises as an apostle, suggesting that his role involves interpretive responsibility in addition to transmission. Others highlight his servanthood and self-effacement, contending that Paul deliberately minimises his own significance to direct attention to God. While God remains the ultimate source, Paul's mediation underscores both apostolic agency and humility. God commissioned Paul to proclaim the gospel in Corinth (1:17; see 1:1), the content of which is "Jesus Christ and him crucified" (2:2; see 1:17, 23), "the mystery of God" (2:1; cf. 4:1), and, paradoxically, the very "power and wisdom of God" (1:24). Upon hearing the gospel, the Corinthians willingly "received" (15:1) and "believed" it (3:5; 15:11). Their acceptance was so remarkable that Paul asserts they now "stand" (15:1) in the gospel and are being "saved" by it (15:2). To prevent being mistakenly identified as the origin of the gospel and exalted above the divine giver, Paul employs a slave metaphor in 4:1.²⁰

Paul is depicted as an *oikonomos*, or managerial enslaved person, on behalf of God. This metaphor emphasises his apostolic and intermediary role within the divine economy. In antiquity, an *oikonomos* was a trusted household manager, often an enslaved person, responsible for administering and distributing a master's resources among the family, dependents, and the broader community. Although entrusted with significant authority and decision-making, the *oikonomos* remained accountable to the master and was never considered the owner of the resources. In elite Greco-Roman households, this role could include oversight of finances, property management, distribution of rations to fellow slaves, or organisation of social events, all conducted for the collective benefit of the household. Paul's use of this figure signals both accountability to God and the humility required of an intermediary who does not act from personal resources.

In contrast, while secular *oikonomoi* might temporarily enjoy status or influence, their position was always defined by dependence on and loyalty to the true owner. Paul functions as an *oikonomos* by dispensing a unique commodity, *mystēria theou* (the mysteries of God). Through this metaphor, the apostle highlights God as the origin of the gospel and presents himself as the conduit through whom this divine resource is delivered.

3.2 The Immediate Context of 1 Corinthians 3:5-9

Following the emphasis on vertical and horizontal dimensions in 1 Corinthians 1–4, attention shifts to the central passage: 1 Corinthians 3:5-9.²¹ This section follows Paul's critique of the Corinthians' worldly boasting, in which individuals claim allegiance to either "Paul" or "Apollos" (3:4). Paul intentionally selects Apollos as a horizontal point of comparison to demonstrate the futility of pitting one servant of the Lord against another.²² Through this comparison, Paul redirects the Corinthians' focus vertically to God as the exclusive source of apostolic activity. Throughout 1 Corinthians 1–4,

¹⁹ Dale B. Martin, *Slavery as Salvation: The Metaphor of Slavery in Pauline Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 154.

²⁰ John Goodrich, *Paul as an Administrator of God in 1 Corinthians* (SNTSMS 152; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 132.

²¹ David W. Kuck, *Judgment and Community Conflict: Paul's Use of Apocalyptic Judgment Language in 1 Corinthians 3:5–4:5* (NovTSup 66; Leiden: Brill, 1992), 165.

²² Kuck, *Judgment and Community*, 170.

Paul consistently differentiates between the origin of the gospel and its mediators. Recent scholarship on Pauline leadership and community identity, such as the work of Clarke and Horrell, has underscored Paul's rhetorical strategy for addressing factionalism and promoting a unified community ethos. The present analysis concurs with these studies in recognising Paul's deliberate redirection from human leaders to God, while further highlighting the relational dynamics—both vertical and horizontal—that shape apostolic authority and service within the community. As a result, Paul's approach challenges subsequent hierarchical interpretations of leadership by emphasising shared under God as the church's defining identity.

i. Paul's Theological Solution in 1 Corinthians 3:5-9

Paul introduces this section by asking, "What then is Apollos? What is Paul?" These figures are not masters to whom the Corinthians should pledge allegiance. Instead, Apollos and Paul are, foremost, God's *diakonoi* (3:5). Victor Furnish defines *diakonos* as an "apostolic task" that "is the service of God," emphasizing that the apostle serves a purpose greater than personal office or status.²³ In contrast, John N. Collins contends that the *diakon*-word group extends beyond meanings such as "messenger," "envoy," or "servant," and should be understood as "mediator," "middleman," or "in between person."²⁴ A balanced interpretation incorporates both perspectives: Paul depicts the apostles as humble servants and as mediators through whom the Corinthian community received the gospel. This synthesis affirms the contributions of both Furnish and Collins, recognising that Paul's use of *diakonos* integrates the servant role with a mediatorial function, particularly in light of the prepositional phrase *di' ōn episteusate*. The agricultural metaphor in 3:6-8 reinforces the servant aspect, as Paul and Apollos are likened to labourers in the master's field. Nevertheless, the prepositional phrase introduces a mediatorial nuance. They are *diakonoi di' ōn episteusate* (through whom you came to believe). Articulating this integrated view contributes to ongoing scholarly discussion by

demonstrating that Paul's language accommodates both themes, rather than requiring an exclusive choice between servant and mediator.²⁵

The phrase, *di' ōn* presupposes the involvement of three parties: a source, a mediator or mediators, and recipients. The specific entity transmitted through these "servants" is the gospel of Jesus Christ, which is received by faith. Collectively, God in Christ (the source) delivered the gospel through his servants (mediators) to the Corinthians (recipients). In response, the Corinthians placed their faith in the source of the gift (God in Christ) rather than in those who mediated it (Paul and Apollos). Consequently, the Corinthians should direct their faith and allegiance exclusively to the common Lord, not to the apostles.²⁶ Ultimately, it was "the Lord" who granted each apostle the role of *diakonoi* of Christ. Interpreting *diakonoi* as both servant and mediator has significant theological implications for apostolic authority and the development of Christian community in Pauline thought. By presenting the apostles as transmitters rather than originators of the gospel, Paul places clear limits on apostolic authority; their status is entirely contingent upon their relationship to Christ, the true source. This perspective discourages excessive loyalty to apostolic figures and redirects all allegiance to God. In terms of community formation, this understanding promotes a model in which ministry is a shared participation under divine initiative, fostering humility among leaders and unity within the congregation. Therefore, Paul's nuanced use of *diakonoi* affirms the essential role of apostolic mediation while safeguarding the primacy of divine agency in the community.

In 3:6, Paul employs a farm metaphor to illustrate the relationship among the source, mediators, and recipients. Just as servants plant and water crops for their masters, Paul planted. Apollos watered the church in Corinth (3:6), which he subsequently refers to as "God's field" (*theou geōrgion*, 3:9). The designation "God's field" emphasizes that, although Paul and Apollos labored, "God gave the growth" (3:6). As C.K. Barrett observes, "The creation and nurturing of faith [in the Corinthians] is the work

²³ Furnish, "Fellow Workers," 368.

²⁴ John N. Collins, "The Mediatorial Aspect of Paul's Role as Diakonos," *Australian Biblical Review* 40 (1992), 42.

²⁵ Donald P. Ker, "Paul and Apollos—Colleagues or Rivals?," *JSNT* 77 (2000), 85.

²⁶ Andrew Wilson, "Apostle Apollos?," *JETS* 52 (2013), 325-35.

neither of preacher nor of hearer, but of God.”²⁷ Scholarly debate centres on the extent to which Paul emphasises apostolic roles versus divine action in this passage. For instance, Anthony C. Thiselton contends that Paul downplays human effort to highlight God’s work, whereas N.T. Wright maintains that Paul still acknowledges human involvement, albeit as secondary to God’s initiative. The evidence in the passage supports the interpretation that Paul grounds the value of apostolic work in God’s activity, rather than in the achievements or authority of individuals.²⁸ Accordingly, in 3:7, Paul concludes that neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything; only God gives the growth.

In summary, Paul and Apollos possess no significance independent of God.”²⁹ They are neither the source of the gospel nor the primary reason for the Corinthians’ faith and growth; rather, they function as instruments of God. The only figure of true importance in this process is God (3:6-7),³⁰ as their efforts would be ineffective without divine involvement. While many scholars concur with this interpretation, some maintain that Paul and Apollos play a significant role as co-workers with God, suggesting a more collaborative dynamic. Nevertheless, the passage indicates that the work of Paul and Apollos is entirely dependent on God’s action, and their labour is effective only insofar as it aligns with God’s initiative in the growth of the gospel in Corinth.

Paul further develops both the vertical and horizontal dimensions of these relationships in 3:8. As previously noted, the Corinthians, by adopting a worldly perspective, set one *diakonos* (Paul) against another (Apollos). The term *diakonos*, commonly translated as “servant” or “minister,” underscores that their role is to serve rather than to seek status. Paul emphasises that distinctions between himself and Apollos are secondary to their shared identity as God’s servants. He addresses the division by asserting that the one who plants and the one who waters “are one” (*hen eisin*), indicating unity in service to the same Master. Nevertheless, Paul and

Apollos remain distinct, as evidenced by their separate tasks (3:6) and the individual reward each receives for their labour (*misthos kata ton idion kopon*; 3:8).³¹

Paul also employs the term *sunergoi* (3:9a), meaning “co-workers” or “fellow-workers,” to underscore collaborative efforts. Recent lexical studies have debated the nuances of both *diakonos* and *sunergoi*, with some scholars emphasising that *diakonos* denotes not only humble service but also commissioned agency within the early Christian community. Similarly, current scholarship suggests that *sunergoi* conveys mutual participation in God’s ongoing work, rather than merely human cooperation. While *diakonos* emphasises humble service, *sunergoi* highlights partnership in God’s mission. Despite these distinctions, both terms indicate cooperation toward a common objective. Ultimately, their efforts are significant only because God initiates and participates in the spread of the gospel.

A broader consideration of Paul’s argument in 1 Corinthians 3:5-8 reveals two main points: (1) the differences between Paul and Apollos are appointed by Christ himself (3:5b), eliminating any basis for favoring one over the other or viewing them as competitors; and (2) the Corinthians are instructed to focus on the Lord rather than his servants, as all are under his Lordship.³² Paul seeks to reorient the Corinthians’ perspective on relationships by emphasising God as the ultimate source and recipient of all things. This interpretation aligns with recent studies which argue that Paul’s primary concern is to redirect attention from individual leaders to God’s initiative. While some scholarship contends that Paul emphasises the unique roles of his co-workers, the present analysis underscores the overarching priority of divine agency in shaping the community’s outlook.

ii. *Sunergoi Theou* in 1 Corinthians 3:9a

The dual purpose of 1 Corinthians 3:5-8, as previously discussed, provides the context for examining 3:9a (*theou gar esmen sunergoi*). The

²⁷ Charles K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (BNTC; London: A. & C. Black, 1968), 85.

²⁸ Brad Bitner, *Paul’s Political Strategy in 1 Corinthians 1-4: Constitution and Covenant* (SNTSMS 163; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 288.

²⁹ Barrett, *First Epistle*, 85.

³⁰ Clarke, *Pauline Theology of Church Leadership*, 241.

³¹ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 304-5.

³² Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 131.

central issue is whether this phrase should be interpreted as ‘fellow workers with God,’ ‘fellow workers in God’s service,’ or as ‘fellow workers with God and one another.’ The interpretation depends on how Paul’s use of *gar* (for) is understood in this passage. Specifically, the question arises whether *gar* provides the rationale for 3:8a or explains the broader argument in 3:5-9. Furnish contends that *gar* refers back to 3:8a, which, in his analysis, demonstrates that Paul is concerned about defining the relationship of the apostles to one another. They are not in competition for status. They are all *diakonoi*; they are all ‘equal.’ Here (3:9a) *sunergoi* has reference to the relationship between apostles, not the relationship of the apostles to God.

While Furnish’s interpretation is acknowledged, it is more precise to understand *sunergoi* in 3:9a as encompassing both vertical and horizontal dimensions. The passage demonstrates not only the apostles’ equality but also their collective dependence on divine action, as illustrated by the metaphor of planting and watering, which only God can make effective. Consequently, *gar* should be interpreted as explanatory for the entirety of 3:5-9, indicating that Paul envisions the apostles as collaborating both with God and with one another. This interpretation more accurately reflects Paul’s argument and underscores the significance of God’s role in the passage.

Furnish acknowledges a connection between the apostles and God in 3:5-8, emphasising ‘the absolute priority of God’s working and God’s power,’ and stating that ‘in God alone is the power that makes for growth.’ Nevertheless, his analysis primarily emphasises the horizontal dimension, translating 3:9a as ‘It is for God that we are fellow workers.’ In contrast, Conzelmann contends that ‘fellow workers’ refers to collaboration with God, rather than solely among the apostles. Fee maintains that Paul deliberately develops both perspectives, highlighting the unity of human workers and their complete reliance on God. Garland further observes that the grammar accommodates both vertical and horizontal interpretations. Collectively, these

perspectives demonstrate that 3:9a can be interpreted in multiple ways, with compelling arguments supporting both a singular and a combined understanding of the apostles as ‘fellow workers.’³³ In contrast to Furnish, *gar* should be interpreted as explanatory. Although scholars such as Garland and Conzelmann have contended that *gar* functions as either transitional or causal, aligning it more closely with 3:8a or 3:8b, the explanatory interpretation provides a more persuasive connection to the preceding argument. This reading clarifies the argument of 3:5-8. Two considerations support this position. First, *theou* occupies the emphatic position as a genitive of possession in 3:9: *theou sunergoi* (God’s fellow workers),³⁴ *theou geōrgion* (God’s field), and *theou oikodomē* (God’s building). This construction underscores the central role of God in Christ in 3:5-8,³⁵ identifying Him as both Lord of His servants and the creative and sustaining source of apostolic labor and the Corinthian harvest. Second, before introducing a new argument with the phrase “God’s building,” Paul refers to the Corinthians as *theou geōrgion* (God’s field), which presupposes the agricultural context of 3:5-8 and strongly indicates that *gar* extends beyond 3:8a or 3:8b.

But this does not entirely settle the issue. Many commentators who agree with the explanatory interpretation of *gar* still affirm an exclusively horizontal reading of *sunergoi theou* (fellow workers in God’s service).³⁶ They do so by insisting that the wider context is primarily concerned with the unity of Paul and Apollos.³⁷ Recent scholarship continues to debate whether this phrase denotes a purely collegial relationship among church leaders or also carries a significant vertical dimension involving God. Paul’s point, some scholars argue, is that he and Apollos are colleagues, not competitors. That is certainly true, but how does Paul drive that point home? Of all the possible ways, Paul chooses to triangulate the relationship of God, the apostles, and the Corinthians, placing God in the superior position as Lord over their labours. God in Christ is the Lord who appoints his servants to their distinct yet united tasks, even working through them (2 Cor

³³ Furnish, “Fellow Workers,” 369.

³⁴ Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 457.

³⁵ Weiss, *Der erste Korintherbrief*, 77.

³⁶ David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 113.

³⁷ Barrett, *First Epistle*, 86.

5:20) to benefit the Corinthians. Moreover, God in Christ is the only one who is anything (ti), because he is the essential party for gospel advancement to take place (3:7). Without God, there would be no growth (3:7-8).

Furthermore, God in Christ affirms his own gifts by rewarding the labour of each apostle (3:8). When the apostles' positions are examined in relation to God and to one another, it becomes evident that they exist under a shared Lord. Paul states, "He who plants and he who waters are one" (3:8), and previously, "Neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth" (3:7). These verses demonstrate that the apostles function as unified servants, rather than as rivals, operating under divine initiative. Paul thus establishes their unity as colleagues, not competitors, within this framework of mutual dependence. The vertical relationship with the ultimate Giver serves as the foundation for the horizontal bond between Paul and Apollos.

The phrase *sunergoi theou* warrants careful interpretation. As previously noted, it functions as a genitive of possession (God's fellow workers), similar to the subsequent genitival phrases (*theou geōrgion*, *theou oikodomē*). However, this does not imply that the focus is solely on Paul and Apollos, as suggested by Furnish's translation: "It is for God that we are fellow workers." Possession does not preclude divine action through human agency. The apostles, as *diakonoi* (servants), belong to God as their master, yet this does not prevent God from working through (dia, 3:5) his servants and, consequently, with them in the Corinthian context (3:6-8). Furnish's translation unnecessarily narrows the meaning of the *sunerg*-terminology and incorrectly presumes that the apostles can undertake apostolic labor independently of God, a notion refuted by 1 Corinthians 3:5-8. This issue has generated diverse scholarly responses.

Barrett contends that *sunergoi theou* most naturally means "God's fellow workers," while acknowledging the theological discomfort this interpretation has caused. Fee, in contrast, proposes that the genitive may denote belonging or agency, highlighting both divine initiative and human

instrumentality. More recently, Thiselton has examined both exclusive and inclusive readings, suggesting that Paul intentionally leaves the phrase open to multiple interpretations to encourage humility and a sense of shared purpose among workers. These perspectives illustrate the broader academic debate and underscore the complexity of the phrase. Conversely, it would also be misleading to limit *sunergoi theou* to the translation "fellow workers with God."³⁸

Many scholars respond to this with a deductive argument that supports the horizontal reading: if it is true that the apostles. Numerous scholars advance a deductive argument in favor of a horizontal interpretation: if the apostles are servants (*diakonoi*, 3:5) under God, they cannot simultaneously be fellow workers (*sunergoi*) with God (3:9). This reasoning correctly recognises that *diakonos* implies subservience and that a master-servant relationship, as depicted in 3:5, is strictly hierarchical. However, this argument incorrectly assumes that *sunergoi* necessarily refers to parties of equal status, which is an overly literal interpretation. Examination of the Pauline corpus demonstrates that Paul frequently applies the term *sunergos* to coworkers such as Timothy (Rom 16:21, 1 Thess 3:2), Titus (2 Cor 8:23), and others, who occupy various subordinate and collaborative roles. The term does not inherently denote equality of rank; instead, it signifies participation in a shared task, with the specific relationship determined by the broader context.³⁹ Even if one were to assume that the term implies equality, the structural hierarchy between Paul and Apollos would still require explanation. Paul explicitly asserts his priority as the community's founder (3:10), as their sole father in Christ (4:15), and as a model to imitate alongside Christ (11:1).⁴⁰ It is therefore more plausible that Paul uses *sunergoi* to express his unity with Apollos in the collective task of cultivating God's field in Corinth, as outlined in 3:5-8, rather than to assert strict equality between them.⁴¹

If this is the case, rejecting the vertical reading—defined as the interpretation of *sunergoi* in which one party is God and the other is a human participant, thereby establishing a relationship

³⁸ Barrett, *First Epistle*, 87.

³⁹ "Paul and His Co-Workers," 440.

⁴⁰ Jack Barentsen, *Emerging Leadership in the Pauline Mission: A Social Identity Perspective on Local Leadership*

Development in Corinth and Ephesus (Princeton Theological Monograph Series; Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011) 107-8.

⁴¹ Clarke, *Pauline Theology of Church Leadership*, 93-95.

between unequal partners—on the mistaken assumption that *sunergoi* refers exclusively to parties of equal status is unwarranted. Bruce Metzger contends that this misunderstanding may have prompted copyists of 1 Thessalonians 3:2 to alter the original text. In this passage, Timothy is described as a “fellow worker of God” (*sunergon tou theou*). The scribes either “deleted the words *tou theou* or transferred them to qualify *tou euangeliou*, while others substituted *diakonon* for *sunergon*, most likely because they believed that *sunergos* necessarily implied equality.⁴² Theological reluctance to accept the notion that God and Timothy could be considered coworkers may have influenced these changes. This hesitation is evident in the work of modern scholars such as Martin Dibelius and Ernst Käsemann, who question whether humans can properly be called God’s coworkers and express reservations about adopting a vertical reading for this reason. To cite one example, Scott Hafemann, in speaking of 2 Cor 6:1, says:

To be God’s “fellow worker” (6:1) is therefore not to be God’s equal partner in the plan of salvation, but to be his dependent instrument through which the power of his grace and the promise of his forgiveness are illustrated and made known to others. We do not work with God; God makes his appeal through us. We do not contribute to God’s cause; we share with others what God has done for us, either through the pastoral ministry of being “Christ’s ambassador,” like Paul, or through living out the gospel as part of God’s people, like the Corinthians (see 2:5-11; 8:1-15; 9:6-15).⁴³

The solution to this theological problem, however, lies not in altering the text, as with 1 Thessalonians 3:2, nor in rejecting the vertical in favour of the horizontal in 1 Corinthians 3:9. The solution lies in a correct understanding of the term *sunergoi*. Lexical evidence from crucial resources such as *BDAG* (3rd ed., s.v. *sunergoi*) and key recent scholarship, including Fee and Thiselton, shows that *sunergoi* is not restricted to designating two strictly equal partners. Instead, the term broadly refers to individuals or parties committed together to a joint activity. In early Christian literature, as well as in

wider Hellenistic usage, *sunergoi* regularly designates co-workers who participate in a shared task for a common goal without implying parity between the participants.⁴⁴ This understanding of *sunergoi* certainly makes room for God as the divine party within human labours, but is it likely to be the case? Does *sun in sunergoi tou theou* refer to Paul’s collaborating with God and Apollos?

In this instance, a both-and trumps an either-or reading. It is important to note that leading proponents of the vertical reading, such as Barrett and Conzelmann, argue that *sunergoi tou theou* refers primarily to Paul and Apollos working with God, emphasising the divine-human partnership. On the other hand, scholars like Wolff and Schrage defend the horizontal view, interpreting Paul and Apollos as co-workers in the service of God, with the emphasis on their collaborative mission. The latter does not sufficiently explain the text in light of the context. By itself, the vertical reading (fellow workers with God) overlooks the emphasis on the unity of Paul and Apollos as colleagues rather than competitors in 1 Corinthians 1–4. Conversely, the horizontal reading (fellow workers in the service of God), by itself, tends to downplay God’s critical role in and through Paul and Apollos’ gospel labours. A both-and reading is preferable: Paul and Apollos are fellow workers with God and with one another, as this approach preserves both the theological centrality of God and the literary emphasis on apostolic unity, thus providing a fuller explanation of the textual and contextual evidence.

This rendering better captures the meaning of *sunergoi theou* for the following reasons. First, the contextual markers of 2 Cor 5:17–6:1 (God as source, apostles as mediators) appear in the wider and more immediate context of 1 Corinthians 3:9. Methodologically, this study prioritises the immediate literary context over broader Pauline usage, based on the principle that the closest context provides the most reliable guidance to the author’s intended meaning. This approach is supported by ongoing scholarly debates, with critics such as Furnish insisting that “this passage (1 Cor 3:9) offers a good example of the principle that the immediate context and not an author’s usage

⁴² Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration* (4th ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 337-39.

⁴³ Scott J. Hafemann, *2 Corinthians* (NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 263.

⁴⁴ *EDNT*, 3:304, s.v. συνεργός

elsewhere must be decisive for one's translation."⁴⁵ Thus, while I have considered Paul's usage elsewhere (2 Cor 6:1; 1 Thess 3:2), my argument is fundamentally grounded in the contextual relationships evident in 1 Corinthians 1–4 and the immediate context of 3:5–9. This confirms the presence of a triangular relationship between God, the apostles, and the Corinthians, with the gospel of God streaming through divinely appointed mediators.

Second, if *gar* in 3:9a is explanatory and strongly connects this verse with 3:5–8, we should assume that the key terms describing Paul and Apollos and *sunergoi* are, as Wolf-Henning Ollrog explains, “virtually identical in meaning.”⁴⁶ Those who want to draw a sharp distinction between the two terms claim that they depict two distinct relationships. In other words, *diakonoi* portrays the vertical relationship the apostles have under God, while *sunergoi* expresses the horizontal relationship between Paul and Apollos. Recent studies have challenged this strict dichotomy, suggesting that the boundaries between *diakonoi* and *sunergoi* in Paul's letters are more fluid and often overlap in their depiction of apostolic function. But as we have shown, this argument rests on the false assumption that *sunergoi* necessarily indicates equality between two parties. Instead, it is better to understand *diakonoi* and *sunergoi* in roughly the same way: they describe the apostolic, mediatorial role that Paul and Apollos play between God and the Corinthians. This is strongly supported by the relational dynamics in 3:5–8. Clearly, God (the Master) coworks with Paul and Apollos (his servants) for the sake of the Corinthians. God coworks with them in the sense that he works through them.

Lastly, other instances of *sunergos* in the Pauline corpus disclose the triangulated relational pattern found in 2 Cor 5:17–6:1 and 1 Cor 3:5–9. It may be helpful to quote E. Earle Ellis's synthesis of *sunergos* in Paul:

Itinerant workers are co-workers “with God” (1 Cor. 3:9; 1 Thess 3:2) “in Christ” (Rom 16:3, 9; see 1 Thess 3:2), of Paul (Rom 16:21; Phil 2:25; Philem. 24), and for the Christian community (2 Cor 8:23;

see 1 Cor 3:9; 2 Cor 1:24). . . . These qualifiers indicate, respectively, whose work it is, the sphere and company in which it is done, and those who receive its benefits.⁴⁷

Without using the language of source, mediators, and recipients, Ellis nevertheless describes a three-way relationship. God is the source (whose work it is); apostles in Christ are mediators (the sphere and company in which it is done); and the Corinthians are the recipients of divine grace (those who receive its benefits). This is precisely how the apostles cowork with God and one another. This analysis builds on Ellis's observations by more explicitly foregrounding the relational dynamics among God, apostles, and recipients. While Ellis outlines these roles, the present study aims to clarify the methodological framework for identifying and interpreting this three-party structure across the passages under consideration. In doing so, it draws not only on explicit roles but also on narrative and linguistic cues that signal mediation and agency. In contrast, Ellis focuses primarily on the characterisation of the actors. This more nuanced reading seeks to bring greater attention to both the vertical (God to human) and horizontal (among human agents) dimensions of apostolic labour as co-working.

This relational pattern appears in other instances of the term *sunergos*. For example, in 1 Thessalonians 3:2, Paul describes Timothy as a *sunergon tou theou*, whom he sent to the church in Thessalonica to strengthen and encourage them in their faith. While Timothy is commissioned to strengthen the Thessalonians, Paul also declares that the Lord will strengthen their hearts (3:12–13; cf. 5:23–24; 2 Thess 2:17). This apparent tension has led to different interpretations of Timothy's role. Some have suggested that Timothy may be a coworker with Paul in a restricted human sense (see 1 Thess 3:2b), or that *sunergon tou theou* could be understood in a less direct theological sense, emphasising Timothy's agency alongside the divine, rather than as an instrument of it.⁴⁸ However, the interpretation that Timothy is God's coworker—that is, God works through Timothy as a conduit of divine grace and power—accounts for

⁴⁵ Furnish, “Fellow Workers,” 368.

⁴⁶ EDNT 3:304.

⁴⁷ E. Earle Ellis, “Paul and His Co-Workers,” NTS 17 (1970–71), 440 n. 1.

⁴⁸ Gary S. Shogren, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament 13; (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 136.

Paul's thanksgiving directed to God rather than to Timothy in 3:9, thus emphasising that God is the ultimate giver. This reading is further supported by the surrounding context, where Paul maintains both the vertical and horizontal dimensions of ministry: the divine initiative at work through human agency. When Paul provides his second reason for sending Timothy to Thessalonica, he explains that he commissioned him "to learn about their faith, for fear that our labour would be in vain." Paul sends Timothy not to enjoy his own individual labour with God among the Thessalonians but to participate in a shared labour, "our labour". Paul and Timothy are fellow workers with God and one another (see 1 Cor 16:10).⁴⁹

Another example is 2 Corinthians 1:24. Paul says, "Not that we lord it over your faith, but we are fellow workers for your joy, for you stand firm in your faith." Almost every scholar endorses a horizontal reading of this text, identifying other apostles as Paul's coworkers.⁵⁰ Silvanus and Timothy are specifically mentioned in 1:19. But is there anything in the context that suggests God is working through the labours of the apostles? Colin Kruse is sceptical. He says that being "a fellow worker with God" is one possible option in 1:24, "but there is little in the immediate context to support that."⁵¹ Kruse's commentary on the immediate context, however, shows no interest in analysing God's role in apostolic labours.⁵²

Other scholars, such as Murray J. Harris, also give priority to the human dimension in interpreting 'fellow workers' but acknowledge the possible divine agency present in the broader context. On the other hand, Paul Barnett and Margaret Thrall argue that the language of co-working in this passage retains strong theological overtones and should not be restricted solely to human cooperation, noting its continuity with other Pauline texts that highlight divine-human partnership.⁵³ The diversity of perspectives underscores the importance of examining both the immediate and broader literary contexts to understand this motif adequately. But this is clearly implied in 1:19. When Paul describes

gospel efforts in Corinth, he implicitly depicts God working through the apostles on behalf of the Corinthians. He states, "For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, the one who is proclaimed among you through us, through me and Silvanus and Timothy, was not yes and no, but in him it is always yes" (1:19).⁵⁴

As in 1 Cor 3:5 and 2 Cor 5:20, the presence of *di hēmōn* implies the presence of three parties in the proclamation of the gospel at Corinth: God (source), the apostles (mediators), and the Corinthians (recipients). And what is it that God distributes through the apostles? 2 Corinthians 1:20 clarifies, "all the promises of God" in Christ, which always "find their yes in him." Since the promises of the gospel come from God through human agents, the apostles naturally utter their "Amen to God for his glory." Again, the triangular relational pattern appears in the context of 2 Cor 1:24, making it at least possible that Paul envisions being a fellow worker with God and others in this text, as he will do five chapters later (2 Cor 6:1).

A final example further illustrates this pattern. Paul refers to Philemon as "beloved and our fellow worker" (1:1; see also 1:24). Paul then thanks God in his prayers (1:4) because he hears about Philemon's faith in the Lord Jesus and love for all the saints (1:5).⁵⁵ Philemon's love, in particular, has brought much joy and comfort to Paul. This is evident when Paul tells Philemon, "the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you" (1:7). It is plausible that Paul, albeit implicitly, incorporates God into his relationship with Philemon as a fellow worker. The use of *dia sou* suggests as much. It is God who refreshes the hearts of the saints through the faith and love of Philemon, who is Paul's coworker as he is God's.

This consistent three-way relational pattern is theologically significant for Paul's understanding of ministry: divine agency is not seen as operating in isolation from human effort, nor is human ministry ever severed from its divine source. Rather, Paul envisions the church's life and service as a dynamic participation in God's ongoing work, where God

⁴⁹ Ellis, "Paul and His Co-Workers," 440.

⁵⁰ Adolf Schlatter, *Paulus, der Bote Jesu: Eine Deutung seiner Briefe an die Korinther* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1934), 485.

⁵¹ Barrett, *Second Epistle*, 84.

⁵² Kruse, *2 Corinthians*, 109.

⁵³ Barrett, *Second Epistle*, 87.

⁵⁴ Kruse, *2 Corinthians*, 104-8.

⁵⁵ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 387-89.

moves through human agents to accomplish his purposes in the community. Such a model underscores both believers' dependence on divine initiative and the dignity bestowed upon human workers, who are entrusted with mediating God's grace to others. Thus, Paul's ecclesiology is marked by an integrative vision in which God, ministers, and recipients are joined in a collaborative process, forming a community shaped by grace, service, and mutual upbuilding.

4. Some Theological themes from the Text of 1 Cor 3:5-9

i. Servant Leadership: Paul and Apollos are mainly described as "servants" (*diakonoi*). In Paul's letters, *diakonoi* refers to people who serve or help others, emphasising their actions rather than their status. Their authority comes from God, not from themselves. They act as tools for God's work, not as founders of separate groups. This view of *diakonoi* questions the rise of personality cults, which often happen in African settings when charismatic leaders become the main focus instead of Christ.

ii. Gifted Diversity in Unity: The roles of planter and waterer work together instead of competing. Both are important, but neither can succeed alone. The mission depends on people working together under God's guidance. Recent studies show that Paul, in 1 Corinthians 3, highlights how church members need each other's gifts, building unity through diversity. Scholars like Garland and Thiselton note that Paul addresses church divisions by showing that everyone who serves depends on one another and on God. This view challenges the belief that any one person, group, or mission can claim all the credit or authority.

iii. God as the Ultimate Agent: The phrase "God gave the growth" (*theos ēuxanen*) gives all credit to God. The verb *ēuxanen*, in the imperfect tense, shows that God's action was ongoing, not just a one-time event. This means God is the only true source and supporter of the church's growth. People do not have power on their own; their work matters only because God works through them. This view challenges the pride sometimes associated with church growth numbers or miracle stories in African revival movements and instead encourages humility and trust in God.

iv. Eschatological Reward: The phrase "each will receive his wages according to his labour" means

that God values faithful service, not human achievement. Scholars have debated what this reward means. Some say it refers to a future reward at the final judgment, while others think it is about God's approval now within the church. Most agree that Paul sees the main reward as something given in the future, based on God's grace rather than on what people achieve. The reward is about being faithful, not about numbers or visible results. This view sees mission as a long-term partnership with God, not just a short-term project measured by Western standards.

v. Corporate Identity: Believers are called "God's field, God's building." This means the church belongs to God, not to missionaries or pastors. This idea gives African churches a strong sense of ownership and dignity, as seen in movements like the African Independent/Indigenous Churches (AICs), where congregations took back control and worshipped freely. Leaders such as Simon Kimbangu in the Democratic Republic of Congo taught that the church answers to God, not to people, which helped create strong, self-led communities. In South Africa, the Zion Christian Church also developed a strong group identity independent of missionary control, demonstrating community leadership grounded in spiritual ownership. These examples show how churches built on Christ (3:11) foster a sense of belonging, dignity, and responsibility before God. This approach to mission focuses on God's rule, the teamwork of different workers, humble leadership, and the church's shared identity. It connects with African missiological models such as inculturation and the three-self paradigm (self-governing, self-supporting, self-propagating), which have shaped African church identity since the twentieth century.

While the three-self model has helped affirm African leadership, it sometimes risks creating exclusivity or raising local leaders in ways similar to the personality cults Paul warns against. Some mission strategies also focus too much on fast church growth and miracles. However, this passage points us back to long-term faithfulness and trust in God as the real source of growth. My reading supports local ownership but also questions mission methods that focus too much on leaders or numbers. For African Christianity, this passage is not just a text but a living example that calls for a renewed

vision of mission grounded in humility, collaboration, and God's ongoing work.

5. Relevance *Synergoi Theou* (1 COR 3:5-9) to African Christian Mission

A. Unity in Diversity: Overcoming Factionalism

The primary implication of Paul's argument constitutes a call to unity. African Christianity frequently experiences divisions based on ethnicity, denominational affiliation, and leadership loyalties. Pauline scholars, including Anthony Thiselton and Richard Hays, assert that Paul's language concerning unity in 1 Corinthians 3 challenges all manifestations of rivalry and division within the church. Hays contends that Paul's vision is radically inclusive, grounded in the common identity of believers in Christ. At the same time, Thiselton highlights the communal dimension of ministry and the risks of partisanship. Paul's assertion that "the one who plants and the one who waters are one" (*hen eisin*) eliminates the foundation for competition. In the context of African mission, this perspective affirms that no single church, movement, or leader possesses exclusive rights to the gospel. The expansion of the kingdom is a joint effort involving Catholics, Protestants, Pentecostals, and independent churches. Practical measures include interdenominational prayer meetings, collaborative mission initiatives, theological dialogue, and mutual accountability. The "Fellow Workers" model urges African Christians to perceive themselves as participants in a unified field and structure in which assorted gifts and traditions function as complementary elements.

This unity does not imply uniformity but rather a harmonious diversity, comparable to the body of Christ described in 1 Corinthians 12. The communal and interdependent values prevalent in African cultures render this Pauline vision particularly relevant. Nevertheless, it is essential to acknowledge the distinct historical and social contexts of Paul's era and contemporary Africa. Paul addressed an emerging Christian community within Greco-Roman society, where issues of ethnicity, power, and division manifested differently. In contrast, African churches confront challenges shaped by colonial legacies, postcolonial dynamics, and indigenous cultural traditions. Recognising these distinctions fosters critical reflection and

guards against the uncritical application of Pauline teachings, while still permitting their principles to inform innovative approaches. Achieving such unity necessitates deliberate efforts to overcome historical mistrust and personal ambition. When African church leaders embrace their roles as co-labourers with God and with one another, they can exemplify a unity that transcends ethnic and denominational divisions, serving as a prophetic witness in societies marked by fragmentation.

B. Indigenous Agency and Contextualisation

Paul's emphasis on differentiated roles, particularly the planter and the waterer in 1 Corinthians 3, affirms the distinct contributions of various workers. Within the Pauline context, the term "fellow workers" (*synergoi Theou*) encompasses both Paul and Apollos, accentuating their joint yet distinct ministries under divine guidance. The significance of this terminology resides in its rejection of structured hierarchies or rivalry; instead, Paul emphasises that both he and Apollos are subordinate to God and share equally in the task of fostering the community. This joint paradigm contrasts with contemporary tendencies toward partisanship or individualism and supports the principle that all forms of service are valued by God, regardless of personal status or background.

Within the African context, this perspective affirms the essential role of indigenous leaders and missionaries. Historically, Western missionaries often assumed the position of the "planter," relegating Africans to the roles of "waterers" or assistants. Paul's model, however, indicates that both roles possess equal value and are mutually dependent. By asserting that both the planter and the waterer "are one," Paul challenges longstanding assumptions of superiority or secondary status, both ancient and contemporary. This interpretive framework supports the application of the "fellow workers" concept to modern African leaders, recognising them not merely as recipients but as full partners and co-labourers in God's mission. The designation "God's fellow workers" thus encompasses all whom God calls, irrespective of origin, background, or tradition, and urges the church to honour the contributions of every faithful servant.

These insights have significant implications for leadership development. African Christians should

be equipped not only for evangelism but also for theological reflection rooted in their own cultural context. The “fellow workers” model promotes the creation of contextual theologies that engage with African realities, including kinship, ancestral traditions, suffering, healing, and community. It further advocates for the indigenisation of church structures, worship practices, and mission strategies. By embracing their identity as God’s field and building, African churches are empowered to assume ownership of the mission independently.

Furthermore, the passage serves as a reminder to African missionaries that their role is that of servants rather than masters. Such humility is particularly important in contexts where some leaders have exhibited authoritarian or exploitative tendencies. Authentic servant leadership acknowledges that growth originates from God rather than human effort. This perspective mitigates the risks of burnout, pride, and the temptation to manipulate others for personal advantage.

C. Holistic Mission: Integrating Spiritual and Social Transformation

Paul’s agricultural metaphor, “God’s field,” conveys a holistic vision. A field is not only a site for spiritual cultivation but also a space for growth encompassing all aspects of life. In the context of African mission, this metaphor advocates for an integrated approach that addresses both spiritual and material dimensions of human existence. Although the prosperity gospel is frequently critiqued, it underscores the necessity for the gospel to address tangible issues such as poverty, illness, and injustice, while avoiding reducing God to a mere instrument for personal gain. Concurrently, some scholars express concerns about the contextualization of Paul’s letters in contemporary Africa, suggesting that differences in historical frameworks and worldviews may lead to misinterpretation or oversimplification of his theology. Acknowledging these concerns is essential for responsible interpretation. Nevertheless, responsible contextualisation involves engaging these challenges critically, striving for both continuity with Paul’s teachings and sensitivity to African realities. This approach helps avoid superficial applications and instead draws upon enduring principles from Paul’s vision for holistic community transformation.

The “fellow workers” model promotes collaboration among evangelists, development practitioners, churches, non-governmental organisations, pastors, and educators. It recognises the mission of God’s Son as healing the sick, feeding the hungry, educating children, and championing justice. This comprehensive approach is consistent with the ministry of Jesus, who proclaimed the kingdom through both word and action. In the African context, where many individuals contend with daily life challenges, a mission that disregards physical needs remains incomplete. Conversely, a mission that overlooks the spiritual dimensions of sin, reconciliation, and eternal hope is similarly deficient.

Paul’s eschatological perspective, as expressed in the statement “each will receive his wages,” informs the concept of holistic mission. The ultimate reward is not immediate material prosperity but the fulfilment found in faithful service within God’s kingdom. This outlook sustains missionaries amid setbacks and disappointments and guards against the inclination to measure success by numerical growth, infrastructure, or influence. Instead, the main objective becomes faithfulness to God’s calling in all areas of life.

Although Paul’s vision of cohesion is broad, it does not require the relinquishment of essential doctrinal convictions. Throughout his epistles, Paul advocates for unity while simultaneously warning against false teaching, thereby demonstrating that authentic unity is anchored in the gospel. For African Christianity, this balance entails pursuing visible fellowship and cooperation where feasible, while also upholding theological boundaries that safeguard the core message of Christ. Consequently, Pauline unity promotes reconciliation and partnership, yet remains firmly rooted in shared faith and sound doctrine.

D. Eschatological Hope: Sustaining Faithful Witness

Paul’s conviction that “God gives the growth” creates a strong eschatological framework for mission. In the African context, in which progress may be gradual and challenges numerous, this hope is indispensable. It liberates missionaries from the expectation of immediate results and offers protection against discouragement when efforts appear unproductive. Ultimately, the growth of the

kingdom is the work of God, realised in accordance with divine timing.

This eschatological perspective also informs how African Christians engage with society. The assurance of God's ultimate victory motivates efforts toward justice and transformation, with the understanding that current struggles are meaningful. Furthermore, this outlook places human institutions and leaders in proper perspective; no political regime, church denomination, or missionary organisation constitutes the final kingdom. Only God's building will persist.

6. Conclusion: A Call to Collaborative, Humble, and God-Centered Mission

The relevance of God's fellow workers (1 Cor 3:5-9) for African Christian mission cannot be overstated. This passage offers a theological foundation that addresses the most pressing challenges of contemporary African Christianity: fragmentation, dependency, personality cults, and inadequate integration of spiritual and social concerns. Paul's vision of diverse servants united under God's sovereign care calls for a mission that is collaborative rather than competitive, humble rather than arrogant, holistic rather than reductionistic, and hopeful rather than despairing.

For African Christians, this means embracing their identity as God's field and building—not as appendages of Western missions or as isolated enterprises. It means recognising that every worker—whether planter or waterer, pastor or teacher, evangelist or social worker—is a “fellow worker with God.” This identity confers both dignity and responsibility. It frees them from the need to prove themselves and from the fear of failure. Ultimately, the Pauline model points to the centrality of Christ. In 1 Corinthians 3:11, Paul reminds the Corinthians that no one can lay a foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. All human labour—whether constructing with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, or straw—will be tested by fire. Only what is built on Christ will endure. For African Christian mission, this is both a comfort and a challenge. It calls for ongoing reformation, repentance from pride and division, and a renewed commitment to the gospel of grace.

As Africa continues to play an increasingly central role in global Christianity, the church on the continent has a unique opportunity to model a missiology that is faithful to Scripture, contextualised within its culture, and collaborative in practice. The vision of “God's fellow workers” is not a relic of the first century but a living word for the twenty-first century. This word can transform the African mission into a powerful witness to the unity, humility, and hope of the kingdom of God.

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