



RESEARCH ARTICLE Section: *Literature, Linguistics & Theology*

## Dispute Resolution, Sexual Ethics, and Moral Accountability: A Socio-Rhetorical Analysis of 1 Corinthians 6:1–13 and Its Implications for Moral Formation among African Youth

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### ABSTRACT

This article employs socio-rhetorical criticism to examine 1 Corinthians 6:1–13, focusing on Paul's engagement with litigation, communal identity, and bodily ethics within the Corinthian church (Robbins, 1996a, 1996b). Drawing on Vernon Robbins' socio-rhetorical interpretive framework, the study explores the inner texture (argumentative flow, rhetorical devices), intertexture (Greco-Roman legal practices and moral discourse), and social and cultural textures shaping Paul's exhortation. The article then brings the Pauline text into critical dialogue with contemporary African contexts, particularly the moral challenges facing youth amid increasing litigation, moral relativism, sexual permissiveness, and weakened communal accountability. The study argues that Paul's insistence on internal dispute resolution, moral responsibility, and the sanctity of the body offers a robust theological and ethical framework for youth moral formation in Africa. By situating biblical ethics within African communal values, this article contributes to African Christian thought on moral responsibility, character formation, and the role of the church in shaping youth ethics.

**KEYWORDS:** Socio-rhetorical criticism, 1 Corinthians 6, African youth, moral formation, Christian ethics, dispute resolution

African Journal In Advanced Arts And Humanities

Volume 4, Issue 1, 2026

ISSN: 3005-4540 (Online)

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Submitted 29 December 2025

Accepted: 05 January 2026

Published: 19 January 2026

### HOW TO CITE

olagunju, olugbenga. (2026). Dispute Resolution, Sexual Ethics, and Moral Accountability: : A Socio-Rhetorical Analysis of 1 Corinthians 6:1–13 and Its Implications for Moral Formation among African Youth. *African Journal of Advanced Arts and Humanities*, 4(1). Retrieved from <https://journals.evonexpublishers.com/index.php/AJAAH/article/view/55>



Published in Nairobi by Evonex Global, an imprint of Evonex Publishers Limited

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## 1. Introduction

African societies are currently experiencing profound moral and social transformations, particularly among the youth. Rapid urbanization, globalization, digital media, legal pluralism, and economic pressure have reshaped traditional moral frameworks and weakened communal mechanisms of accountability. Within many African Christian communities, young people increasingly navigate tensions between biblical ethics, cultural expectations, and secular legal and moral systems.

The Corinthian correspondence offers a striking parallel to this situation. In 1 Corinthians 6:1–13, Paul confronts a community struggling with internal disputes, public litigation, moral compromise, and a fragmented understanding of Christian identity. His response is not merely juridical but deeply theological and ethical, rooted in eschatology, communal identity, and the redemptive significance of the body.

This study undertakes a socio-rhetorical analysis of 1 Corinthians 6:1–13 and explores its implications for moral formation among African youth. It argues that Paul’s vision of moral accountability—shaped by communal responsibility, transformed identity, and embodied holiness—speaks powerfully to contemporary African Christian contexts.

## 2. Methodological Framework: Socio-Rhetorical Criticism

Socio-rhetorical criticism, as developed by Vernon K. Robbins, examines texts through multiple interpretive “textures,” recognizing that meaning emerges from the interaction of rhetoric, social context, cultural assumptions, and theological claims (Robbins, 1996a). This approach is particularly suited to Pauline texts, which are simultaneously argumentative, pastoral, and socially embedded.

This study employs four major socio-rhetorical textures:

1. Inner Texture – the rhetorical structure, argumentation, and persuasive strategies within the text.
2. Intertexture – engagement with Greco-Roman legal practices, moral philosophy, and Jewish ethical traditions.
3. Social and Cultural Texture – the social dynamics of honor, shame, power, and community in Corinth.
4. Ideological and Sacred Texture – Paul’s theological assumptions about identity in Christ, judgment, and sanctification.

These textures provide a framework for interpreting Paul’s ethical vision and translating it meaningfully into African contexts.

## 3. Socio-Rhetorical Analysis of 1 Corinthians 6:1–13

### 3.1 Inner Texture: Rhetorical Flow and Argument

Paul structures his argument through a series of rhetorical questions (6:1–7), appeals to eschatological identity (6:2–3), and sharp moral exhortations (6:9–13). The repeated use of interrogatives (“Do you not know...?”) functions pedagogically, exposing the Corinthians’ moral inconsistency and calling them to self-examination.

Paul’s rhetorical climax occurs in verses 9–11, where he juxtaposes former identities (Thiselton, 2000; Hays, 1996). (“such were some of you”) with present transformation (“you were washed, sanctified, justified”). This identity shift grounds moral responsibility not in legal obligation but in redemptive transformation.

### 3.2 Intertexture: Greco-Roman Litigation and Moral Discourse

Public litigation in Corinth was embedded in a culture of honor, competition, and social stratification (Malina & Pilch, 2006; Bruce, 1971). Legal disputes often served as platforms for asserting status rather than pursuing justice. By condemning lawsuits among believers before secular courts, Paul challenges not law itself but the values underpinning its use.

Paul’s ethical discourse also interacts with Greco-Roman slogans concerning bodily autonomy (“All things are lawful for me,” v.12). He subverts these claims by reasserting divine lordship over the body and redefining freedom in terms of moral responsibility.

### **3.3 Social and Cultural Texture: Community and Accountability**

Paul envisions the church as a moral community capable of internal judgment and reconciliation. His critique reveals a breakdown of communal responsibility in Corinth, where individual rights overshadow collective integrity.

This communal emphasis resonates strongly with African moral traditions, which prioritize relational identity, shared responsibility, and restorative justice (Bujo, 1990; Bediako, 1995). Paul's model challenges both Western individualism and African societies where communal values are increasingly eroded.

### **3.4 Sacred and Ideological Texture: Eschatology and the Body**

Paul grounds moral accountability in eschatology: believers will participate in divine judgment (6:2–3). This future-oriented identity shapes present conduct. Furthermore, Paul's theology of the body (6:13) affirms its sacredness, opposing moral relativism and sexual permissiveness.

## **4. Implications for Moral Formation among African Youth**

### **4.1 Youth, Litigation, and Conflict Resolution**

African youth increasingly encounter formal legal systems for conflict resolution, often bypassing ecclesial and communal structures. Paul's emphasis on internal dispute resolution invites churches to reclaim their role as moral communities that model justice, reconciliation, and accountability.

### **4.2 Sexual Ethics and Bodily Responsibility**

The commodification of the body through media, economic hardship, and consumer culture poses significant ethical challenges. Paul's insistence that the body belongs to the Lord provides a theological foundation for sexual ethics rooted in dignity, restraint, and holiness.

### **4.3 Moral Identity and Transformation**

Paul's declaration that believers have been transformed counters fatalistic narratives that normalize moral failure. For African youth facing systemic pressures, this message affirms the possibility of moral agency grounded in divine grace.

### **4.4 Church as Agent of Moral Formation**

Churches must move beyond moral instruction to intentional moral formation through mentoring, communal discipline, and embodied practices. Paul's vision challenges African churches to become spaces of ethical apprenticeship rather than mere worship centers.

## **5. Contribution to African Christian Thought**

This study contributes to African Christian thought by integrating biblical exegesis with African communal ethics (Ukpong, 2000; Sanneh, 2003). It demonstrates that Pauline moral theology aligns with African values of relationality and accountability while also offering prophetic critique where those values are compromised. By engaging Scripture through socio-rhetorical criticism, the article models an interpretive approach that is both academically rigorous and contextually grounded, advancing African theological reflection on youth ethics.

## **6. Conclusion**

A socio-rhetorical reading of 1 Corinthians 6:1–13 reveals a rich ethical vision grounded in communal identity, eschatological hope, and embodied holiness. When brought into dialogue with African contexts, Paul's exhortation offers a compelling framework for addressing the moral challenges confronting African youth today.

The study affirms that moral responsibility is not merely imposed but formed through identity in Christ and participation in a community shaped by justice, reconciliation, and holiness. Such a vision remains vital for African churches seeking to nurture resilient, morally responsible youth in a rapidly changing world.

### **Statement on the Use of Artificial Intelligence**

*In line with the ethical guidelines and scholarly expectations of every standard Journal, this article was prepared with limited assistance from an artificial intelligence–based language tool used exclusively for language editing, stylistic refinement, and structural clarity. The conception of the research problem, the socio-rhetorical analysis of 1 Corinthians 6:1–13, the engagement with African Christian ethics, and all interpretive judgments and conclusions are entirely the author’s own. No artificial intelligence tool was used to generate original data, conduct exegesis, or determine scholarly arguments. Full responsibility for the integrity, originality, and academic content of this article rests with the author.*

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