

## WAS PAUL SINCERE? Questioning the apostle's ethos

Dr Lauri Thurén  
Åbo Akademi, Inst. för exegetik, Finland

---

### Abstract

*'By the appeal we make... we are not trying to trick you' (2 Cor. 2.17); 'We speak with sincerity' (1 Thess. 2.3-5). For centuries, Paul's readers have accepted frequent assertions such as these at face value. Paul is regarded as an unpretentious writer, whose statements on theological matters honestly reflect his true convictions. As Rudolf Bultmann put it: 'Wie er schreibt, so ist es gemeint.'<sup>1</sup> However, already Paul's first opponents accused him of dissimulation. 2 Cor. 1.13-18 refers to criticism of the Apostle's sincerity,<sup>2</sup> and the whole of 2 Cor. implies that Paul was accused of being 'a sophist and fraud'.<sup>3</sup> There are many other sections, where Paul seems to be 'charged with altering his message to please his constituency'.<sup>4</sup> Although none of these verses definitely proves the existence of such charges, they all point in the same direction. It would be odd, if Paul defended his sincerity on these occasions, unless it was challenged. And something must have prompted these accusations. First we have to ask, what does it mean to be sincere, free of deceit. The nature of a text can be illustrated with a scale. At one extreme, we have an author who totally ignores the needs and expectations of his audience and states only the bare facts. At the other, the author deliberately adjusts everything he says to suit his readers, being ready to compromise his own position in order to gain acceptance or to provoke a desired reaction. Every author can be placed on this scale. Somewhere there is a point, after which the author can be assessed as unreliable and dishonest. Thus our question is: where in the scale should Paul be placed? This article claims that modern literary and rhetorical approaches raise anew the old question about Paul's sincerity. They also provide us with new tools for treating the problem. The question affects especially the study of the Apostle's theology.*

### 1. Attempts to criticize Paul's ethos

In modern exegetics the intriguing question about Paul's general trustworthiness seldom occurs. In 1939, WL Knox claimed that Paul was indeed opportunistic in his theology.<sup>5</sup> 'Any system of thought and language that expressed the position of Jesus as the Lord was equally acceptable.'<sup>6</sup> In practice this meant, that after recognizing the Palestinian version of Christianity as unconvincing to the Gentiles, Paul modified his theology in order to suit new

---

1 Bultmann 1976,39.

2 'We are not writing to you anything different from what you read or from what you can recognize' etc. According to Chadwick (1954/55,262-63 and Martin 1986,19-20), Paul is here accused of deliberate obfuscation or of saying the opposite of what he had in mind.

3 Thus Betz 1986,40.

4 Thus Bruce (1982,27), who enumerates Rom. 1.14; 1 Cor. 4.1-4; 9.16.17; 15.9,10; Gal. 1.10.15-17; 2.7-10.

5 Knox 1939; reprinted 1961.

6 Knox 1939, 178.

requirements. This view resembles a modern sociological explanation for the development of Pauline theology by F Watson.<sup>7</sup>

However, although disastrous for Paul's reputation as a proper theologian, Knox's thesis does not *per se* indicate or even claim that Paul was not sincere or *serious*, as H. Chadwick rightly notes.<sup>8</sup> Chadwick himself comes closer to our question in an article about 1 Cor. 9.22. He raises the question, whether the Apostle 'was not so much concerned about the *truth* of what he said, but only with *gaining* his hearers'.<sup>9</sup> Chadwick refers to several verses indicating that such allegations were often made by Paul's opponents.<sup>10</sup> Paul reacted strongly simply because the accusations contained 'some element of truth'.<sup>11</sup>

Chadwick seeks support for the thesis in Paul's statements on marriage in 1 Cor. 7, on libertinism in 1 Cor. 6, on *gnosis* and on spiritual gifts.<sup>12</sup> He concludes that 'Paul had an astonishing elasticity of mind, and a flexibility in dealing with situations requiring delicate and ingenious treatment', reducing 'to an apparent vanishing point the gulf between himself and his converts'. Paul radically differs from the defenders of orthodoxy, who try to distance authentic Christianity from any sectarians.<sup>13</sup>

Chadwick adds, that his notions about the nature of Paul's thinking have far-reaching importance.<sup>14</sup> However, perhaps due to the lack of suitable methodology in studying Paul's techniques of 'gaining his audience', Chadwick's thesis has had little effect on the scholars, although it has not been properly refuted either.

## 2. Paul's own confession

In fact, we do not need external accusations, whether ancient or modern, to charge Paul with adjusting his proclamation and theology according to the needs of his audience and purposes. For as Chadwick suggested, there are enough confessions made by the Apostle himself. Already in many minor instances Paul has an exaggerating style,<sup>15</sup> let alone some more subtle and sophisticated rhetorical devices and modes of expression, which indicate that he was not always frank with his readers.

I start with the section mentioned by Chadwick. In 1 Cor. 9.19-23 Paul probably defends himself against accusations of opportunism and explains: 'I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some', and gives five examples of what he has become although he is not such: A slave to everyone, a Jew for the Jews, having the law for those having the law, not having the law to people not having the law, weak to the weak.<sup>16</sup> This

7 Watson 1986.

8 Chadwick 1954/55, 276.

9 Chadwick 1954/55, 261.

10 Chadwick 1954/55, 262; cf. footnote 4 above.

11 Chadwick 1954/55, 263.

12 Chadwick 1954/55, 263-70.

13 Chadwick 1954/55, 275.

14 Chadwick 1954/55, 275.

15 Some examples: 'We *always* thank God for *all* of you, mentioning you in our prayers, we *continually* remember your work...' (1 Thess. 1.2-3); 'I will not venture to speak of *anything* except what Christ has accomplished through me...' (Rom. 15.18; cf. also 1 Cor. 2.2); 'You have all you want... you are kings... we have been made a spectacle for the whole universe' - the whole of 1 Cor. 4.8-13 is written in these terms.

16 Cf. Marshall 1987, 300-17. Mitchell (1991, 134 esp. n. 416) and Schrage (1995, 347) rightly claim that the expression 'all things to all men' can be formulated by Paul himself. However, as such it could be an extreme version of the prior charges of being a chameleon. The apologetic nature of the whole section 9.19-23 supports this interpretation (cf. Hurd 1983, 128 and Berger 1984, 361). Therefore it is natural to think, that Paul is defending himself against charges, as he does in 2 Cor. (cf. Betz 1986, 40-47). Paul's only argument for saving his

indicates a pragmatic attitude to theology. And indeed, Paul goes on to maintain that one should run in such a way as to obtain the prize and not aimlessly (1 Cor. 9.24,26).

The same idea is repeated later: 'I try to please everybody in every way' (1 Cor. 10.33). While this general principle is hardly confined to separate issues, it implies that Paul heavily adapts his behaviour, speech, and even theology to the audience.<sup>17</sup> He even recommends a somewhat similar attitude to his audience in Rom. 14: One should abstain from one's own freedom from cultic rules in order to avoid hurting others.

In 1 Cor. Paul gives a practical example of this principle. One should not eat meat, which is explicitly said to be sacrificial. Although the idols are artifacts, they are real demons for people who believe in them (1 Cor. 10.15-33). Correct theological insights in this issue seem to be of little importance. Paul's practical flexibility and dynamics impel Conzelmann to expostulate that the Apostle's 'thoughts tumble over each other' and that he is 'seemingly' contradictory.<sup>18</sup> While having difficulty in perceiving a contradiction in 1 Cor. 10,<sup>19</sup> I however cannot deny that Paul's flexible principle here and in Rom. 14 is in diametrical opposition to his unconditional attitude to cultic matters in Galatians!

Sometimes Paul admits that he uses heavy rhetoric. When describing his own communication, Paul can speak of the rhetorical technique of *immutatio vocis* (Gal. 4.20) - modulation prompted by the desire to persuade. He also reveals some of his tactics: In 2 Cor. 7.8-12 Paul describes his risky rhetoric, which has succeeded: he has caused pain to Corinthians in order to win them. On the other hand, in 10.9-11, where he discusses the discrepancy between his epistolary and his oratorical presentation, he claims that he is not trying to frighten his addressees with his letters.

In 1 Cor. 14.16-17 Paul happens to reveal his pragmatic, functional view of praising the Lord. Praise is not merely a spontaneous expression directed to heaven; instead it has an immanent function: 'If you are praising God (only) with your spirit... you may well be giving thanks enough, but the other man (who does not understand) is not edified'. Thus God is praised in order to influence the hearers.

It is important to be aware of this attitude when interpreting Paul's own praise of God, especially in the opening sections of his letters. When establishing their role and meaning, we do not need to rely solely on their position within the typical *exordium* or letter-opening. Here we have Paul's own words about their purpose.

But more than that, in the above quotations Paul explicitly acknowledges that he is not completely frank or even theologically solid in his texts. His practical goals override strict theological positions, and in order to win over the audience great flexibility is allowed. Sometimes he can deny such opportunism, but he can also admit the accusations and just say

ethos is that his flexibility has a good purpose. This suffices to convince Mitchell that there is no insinuation whatsoever in Paul.

- 17 Conzelmann (1975,179) admits that 1 Cor. 10.33 'has the same sort of opportunistic sound as 9:20-22', but rejects the idea because of 'Paul's self-understanding as a whole'. He also refers to Paul's own defense: Paul claims to have a good purpose in his flexibility. I do not find these arguments convincing: maybe they just affirm an opposite view of the Apostle's 'self-understanding'.
- 18 Conzelmann (1975,172-72) on the other hand, recognizes the strong rhetorical colour of the passage (1975,174 n. 38).
- 19 It is hard to believe, that Paul's argument is based on a division between gods and demons, which are also dangerous (as e.g. Lang 1986,128 and Schrage 1995,444-46 claim). Why would he then allow eating of all meat unless it is specifically described as sacrificial (1 Cor. 10.25-28)? More likely, the section is a non-theoretical explanation of the disadvantages of sacrificial meat. Although the 'weak' individuals are wrong in principle, their salvation is not to be jeopardized. Therefore Paul supports their position and reminds the 'strong' that even they cannot totally master the situation.

that he has a good purpose after all. If this is true, does the theology of Paul need serious reconsideration?

What at least is required, is an adequate approach to the problem. We cannot read the Apostle's heart to assess his sincerity. Yet modern rhetorical criticism can lead us to a proper methodology.

### 3. Rhetorical criticism restates the question

Whereas Chadwick just referred to Paul's eagerness in 'gaining the audience', modern rhetorical criticism is designed to analyze how this 'gaining' takes place. Studying rhetorical devices and strategies in a text inevitably raises such questions as 'What does the author really think behind his rhetoric?' or 'Can his presentation be taken as representing his actual ideas?'

These questions spring from a new attitude to the text. In conventional exegetics, scholars often have a one-way model for communication, in which the author has in mind certain thoughts, which he then delivers to the audience through the text. The author informs them. The role of the text in this model is *static*. When using this model, it is convenient to make ideological or theological summaries: one selects a topic and gathers together relevant expressions from various texts by the author. When these thoughts are then matched by taking the context into account, viz. decontextualizing them,<sup>20</sup> the result is the actual theological view, which was in the mind of the author.

Rhetorical criticism, in turn, represents a *dynamic* view of the text. Similar to studies of language and communication, the static model is not seen as particularly useful. Like the idea of a 'literary' translation, it simply does not work in the real world.<sup>21</sup> Instead, scholars increasingly emphasize the pragmatic aspect; this view has in recent years attracted attention also among Biblical exegetes.

In this model of communication, it is acknowledged that through the text the author not only *informs* the addressees about his opinions. Instead, the goal is usually to *affect* the addressees, to provoke a response in them, viz. to modify their thoughts and actions. In this task, the text serves as a vehicle or tool, which should promote the goals as well as possible.

Within the medium chosen, diverse means are utilized. The ideological thoughts, the way they are presented, arranged, and emphasized are but a few such devices. Other factors are often at least as important. For instance, the style can greatly affect the addressees' thoughts and emotions, and even serve as one of the predominant devices of a text.<sup>22</sup>

The text does not function as one-directional communication. A more fitting term is *interaction*. For example, the different parts of the text affect the addressees envisaged by the author. This audience, in turn, affects the way the author can express himself in the latter parts of the text. Thus e.g. in the beginning of the letter he must be more cautious and positive, in the end more outspoken. Since different letters, e.g. Romans and Galatians, had very different goals, even the theology utilized seems to vary.

In a text-book the level of dynamics might be low and the persuasion is covert. It is my claim that the Pauline texts are essentially different, and by this not only the effect of the context is meant. Since Paul's communication was guided by efforts not only to present his

20 Scroggs (1988,18-19), however, expresses some doubts about such a procedure, but concedes that it is possible. See also Räisänen 1990,88.

21 See Breuer 1974; Warning 1975; Wuellner 1978,8-11; Combrink 1996,273-84. However, the change of paradigm, which took place decades ago in Bible translation and general literary studies, has not yet sufficiently affected the study of Biblical theology.

22 See Thurén 1995b.

religious ideas but also to use them in order to influence his audience, it is questionable, whether we can take Paul's expressions at their face value.

The goal of any of Paul's letters was hardly to let the addressees *know* what Paul thought or how he felt. Therefore we do not directly know what Paul thinks from what he says, nor can we easily draw a psychological portrait of him. Actually, the goal of Paul's texts was not to make his addressees *believe* what he wanted them to believe about his thoughts. It was far more practical: to persuade, to *modify* the addressees' thoughts, values, and behaviour. And in persuasion, almost everything is allowed.

If this can be demonstrated in Paul's texts, it means that the strategic goals and tactical moves<sup>23</sup> confuse and overstate the thoughts presented, as compared with neutral description. There he, just like any other author, utilizes devices on different levels - e.g. *insinatio* - to affect the addressees in the way designed. In front of another audience or in another situation he would express himself differently. Only when this is fully recognized, can we start looking for what he really means.

Observing the rhetorical aspects of Paul's texts does not necessarily solve the problems inherent in his texts; it is possible that the result is the opposite. However, if rhetoric remains on a 'contextual' level, identifying ancient rhetorical techniques in the texts, it like sociological criticism, avoids the core of the problem.

Many scholars actually limit the effect of rhetoric to this rather technical level. For instance J Becker, when studying theology of Gal., uses rhetoric only for formal observations.<sup>24</sup> Yet it is interesting to note that Becker later assesses the situation of Gal. as 'emotionally loaded' and rightly states: '*Wer Paulus verstehen will, muss also zwischen seinem Sachanliegen und seinen polemischen Attacken unterscheiden.*'<sup>25</sup>

When seeking sincerity, we must however go deeper, to the emotional level. But how can we know, whether Paul was actually carried away by powerful emotions? I have recently claimed, that in Galatians, Paul carefully produced a portrait of a furious apostle by using the appropriate rhetorical devices. Consequently emotionally loaded expressions in no way indicate that the author has lost control, on the contrary.<sup>26</sup>

But if Paul's theologically strange expressions have tactical goals, and if even his emotionally impressive statements are carefully calculated, rhetorical criticism reiterates the profound question already posed by Paul's antagonists: Is the man trustworthy at all? If he is too clever a rhetorician, his *ethos* comes under suspicion.

Especially in religious speech, the *ethos* is crucial. The conviction that the preacher earnestly believes in what he says is often more important than the contents of a sermon. Whereas Paul has sometimes obviously been misunderstood because overstatements were taken as his solemn beliefs, it is also fatal for his religious influence and theology, if he proves to be a sophist without any firm stand. If the man resembles a hero in a Hollywood film, who keeps an eye on his watch while kissing passionately, who can trust him in deep religious matters?

The task of a critic is to see beyond the rhetorical moves of the author, not to be subject to them. But then again, there is even a risk of being over-critical: If Paul really was so serious

23 It is typical of rhetorical studies to use military terminology.

24 Becker 1989, 288-94.

25 Becker 1989, 321. Thereby he wants to solve theological problems, such as the tension between utterances about the Torah in Gal. 3.19 and Rom. 7.12.

26 See also Thurén 1998.

that he almost went out of his mind, how should he have expressed himself in order not to pass as a mere rhetorician?

#### 4. Betz' attempt to save Paul's reputation

The ideas that Paul was an opportunist or produced texts, which were excessively dynamic, can be refuted on the grounds that rhetoric was merely his tool, used for a limited purpose only. According to this position, the presentation of the plain truth was for Paul more important than the most effective persuasion, even though he honoured some basic rhetorical elements.<sup>27</sup>

In fact, one of the fathers of rhetorical criticism, HD Betz, claims that Paul had this to say about his relationship to rhetoric: Rhetoric should never override theology. According to Betz, Paul rejects empty rhetoric in 1 Thess. 2,<sup>28</sup> mere persuasion and magical manipulation in Gal. 1.10 and 5.7, and the latter also in 3.1; 4.7-8. Instead, Paul's argumentation is rational and presents the truth.<sup>29</sup> Betz, however, admits that even such contradiction is a typical rhetorical device.<sup>30</sup>

The nature of Paul's rhetoric is discussed thoroughly, according to Betz, in 1 Cor. In 2.1-12 Paul distinguishes between rhetoric of the most effective persuasion and the rhetoric demonstrating power and truth - a division known in ancient philosophical discussion.<sup>31</sup> For himself, Paul 'clearly' chooses the latter. In 2 Cor. 10-11, Paul defends his performance as a speaker: He is accused of lacking typical rhetorical virtues, *βαρυνς* and *ισχυρος*, but answers with marvellous sarcastic rhetoric, claiming to be a 'layman of speech'.<sup>32</sup> In the Letter of Reconciliation Paul however uses typical *protreptic* rhetoric, stating that his risky tactics have succeeded (2 Cor. 2.3-9; 7.8-13).<sup>33</sup>

Thus, according to Betz, Paul well knows the rhetorical techniques and traditions of his time,<sup>34</sup> yet clearly takes a stand against any persuasion which compromises the truth.

In my opinion, the arguments which Betz presents cannot be used in support of a low dynamic grade or sincerity on Paul's part, on the contrary. For if a rhetorician says that he is not trying to cozen his audience, is he to be trusted? This is what he was trained to say. As stated above, the very fact that Paul needs so forcefully to deny the persuasive and dynamic nature of his texts and its effect on his message, seems suspicious. Just consider the following examples, some of which are found also in Betz:

- 'By the appeal we make... we are not trying to trick you. On the contrary, we speak... not trying to please men but God... You know we never used flattery' (1 Thess. 2.3-5)<sup>35</sup>
- 'Christ did not send me to preach ...with wisdom of words' (1 Cor. 1.17; cf. also 18-25)
- 'When I came to you, brothers, I did not come to proclaim with eloquence... My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words' (1 Cor. 2.1,4)<sup>36</sup>

27 Further, it would be natural, if especially the canonical edition of his letters attempted to present his theology in such a manner, that they could be easily taken as binding on, and normative for, later Christianity.

28 Betz 1986,22-23.

29 Betz 1986,23-24.

30 Betz 1986,23 (*synkrisis*).

31 Betz 1986,36.

32 Betz 1986,41-43.

33 Betz 1986,45.

34 In his commentary on Galatians (1979), Betz himself however seems to know only the judicial rhetoric of the handbooks.

35 Bruce (1982,26-27) explains, that due to 'so many wandering charlatans' Paul had to emphasize his integrity, and that even Paul was frequently accused of opportunism, yet there was no reason for suspicion. Cf. also Morris 1959,70-74 and Holz 1986,69-77.

- 'We are not writing to you anything different from what you read or from what you can recognize' (2 Cor. 1.13)
- 'We are not *καπηλεύοντες*<sup>37</sup> God's message... but we speak with sincerity' (2 Cor. 2.17)
- 'I may not be a trained speaker' (2 Cor. 11.6; cf. also the accusation in 10.10).

Why does Paul emphasize, in different situations, the simple, frank, unrheterical nature of his presentation? Sometimes he claims not to be an orator at all, and where this would be too hard to believe, at least says that his texts include no *insinuatō* whatsoever.

Paul's claims hardly deal only with rhetoric in the technical sense. Probably the major issue is exactly what we are interested in: To what degree does the persuasive goal affect the way in which theological issues are presented? Paul emphasizes that - contrary to his opponents' - the success of his message does not depend on its form but on the power of God. While the latter is beyond the scope of our methodology, we have to examine the former.

The undermining of rhetorical capability or willingness to use standard conventions of communication must have a function in Paul's texts. I cannot help thinking, that denial of rhetorical tactics even in Paul is but a simple, common rhetorical device. A natural explanation is that an audience tends to be suspicious of rhetoric, or that they have too often noticed his techniques, or even that he has been criticized for them.

Modern scholarship has been able to demonstrate the use of typical devices and ancient rhetorical terminology in Paul's texts. Therefore, it is plausible that at least some of the original readers, not only Paul's antagonists, did the same. While manifest rhetoric does not work, Paul needs to guard himself<sup>38</sup> and explicitly depreciate his oratory, as the opposite anti-rhetorical examples show. Paul does not want to lose his ethos nor allow his essential message to be explained away. Therefore he claims that not everything he writes is mere rhetoric.

## 5. Not a smooth operator

Although the above quotations are not especially supportive of Paul's sincerity, it still remains possible that the Apostle actually saw himself as honest with his audience.

I begin with the extreme, and simple, charge made by Chadwick. According to him, Paul was a 'weathercock' trying to please his audience. Therefore, Paul did not seek confrontation with his audience.<sup>39</sup> However, is not this exactly what he does in the beginning of Galatians?

Paul first uses an unusual for him rhetorical technique of beginning a speech,<sup>40</sup> blaming his audience from the outset ('I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel' Gal. 1.6). Then he goes on to curse

36 I find it difficult to follow Schrage (1991,224-27.231-36), who like Betz (1986) argues that Paul here takes a stand in a discussion about the type of rhetoric appropriate in religious matters. What orator would admit basing his message only on good persuasive techniques? Yet Betz and Schrage do not deny the rhetorical character of Paul's statement, whereas other scholars naively accept Paul's claim. Thus e.g. Lang (1986,35-37) affirms: 'Paulus vertraute bei seine Predigt auf die Kraft des Wortes vom Kreuz, das keine Unterstützung durch rhetorische oder philosophische Kunstgriffe bedarf.'

37 The verb is *hapax Novi Testamenti*; it means some kind of adulteration of the product in order to make a better profit. See Martin 1986,49-50.

38 For another means of keeping rhetoric effective in the eyes of readers aware of standard eloquence, see Thurén 1995a.

39 This is what Chadwick (1954/55,275) denies when contrasting Paul with people, who close the door to deviationist sects 'with all firmness'.

40 See further Thurén 1998.

the antagonists, which were not theologically so far away from his own views.<sup>41</sup> Finally Paul expostulates:

‘Am I *now* trying to win the approval (πεινῶς) of men... Or am I trying to please men? If I were *still* trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ.’ (Gal. 1.10)

Contrary to Betz, I cannot regard this outburst as a philosophical statement in a discussion of two types of rhetoric.<sup>42</sup> Instead, two facts about Paul’s own attitude can be inferred.

First, Paul indirectly admits having sometimes used highly persuasive rhetoric, modifying his message - even the contents thereof - in order to make it more effective.<sup>43</sup> Even if the statement does refer to his antagonists’ accusations,<sup>44</sup> he does not totally reject them.

Second, Paul claims that he has defined for himself the limitations of rhetorical dynamics. In many cases he can be a Jew to a Jew and a Greek to a Greek (1 Cor. 9.20-21), but in the case discussed in Galatians such an adaptability would jeopardize his whole mission. Or so he at least wants his readers to think.

Thus it seems, that Paul’s habit of going to extremes in order to win the addressees’ favour and a ‘meeting of minds’ for the upcoming persuasion, does not *per se* signify an opportunistic attitude. Instead, Paul’s usual *captatio benevolentiae* serves as a useful tool, which he may in some instances reject. He can also become unexpectedly ‘irate’ with his audience when necessary.

The example in Galatians indicates that Paul did not want merely to please his audience. Instead, he used rhetoric as a means to win them over. He could dramatize the situation in order to incite his hearers. He attempted to widen the gap between the addressees’ slightly inappropriate thoughts and his own convictions. Such a technique is seldom used in rhetoric; it is a risky, but effective means of persuasion.<sup>45</sup> But is it ethical to pretend to be angry in order to affect the feelings of the audience?<sup>46</sup>

## 6. Sincerity behind rhetoric?

Although Paul does not always flatter his audience, this does not prove that he is sincere in his texts. Whereas cases, where Paul denies the use of rhetoric were not particularly convincing, he could convey a more frank impression, if he claimed that he is sincere, yet simultaneously utilized rhetoric openly in order to persuade.

In order to find such comments, we can look for theologically extreme statements, which Paul seems to use as an ultimate means of persuasion, and for his sore points. One could assume that at least on such edges, or limits of dynamics, Paul lays his cards on the table, viz. presents more than rhetorical figures. Thereby these would be especially interesting for

41 ‘If anyone is proclaiming to you a gospel contrary to that which you have received, let him be accursed’ (Gal. 1.9).

42 Betz 1986.

43 Cf. Ridderbos 1953,55-56:6, according to whom Paul ironically refers to the preceding verses; opposed by Betz 1979,56, who claims that Paul refers to his pre-Christian life. However, if Paul was criticized for his rhetoric, and he even admits being rather flexible in many cases, it is likely that he here draws the line on that custom.

44 See Ridderbos 1953,55-56; Guthrie 1973,64; Longenecker 1990,18. Betz (1979,55-56) doubts this, stating that ‘not every rhetorical denial is an accusation turned around’.

45 See Thurén 1995a,283-84; 1998.

46 Speaking of *ethos* and *pathos*, the alternatives - an orator manipulating the feelings of his audience and a speaker openly and passionately proclaiming his message - do not exclude each other. First, the limit is blurred. An orator can for example arouse himself in order to express genuine, yet conscious feelings. Second, even sincere emotions can be verbalized in conventional ways, which have been well learnt.



assessment of the overall sincerity of the Apostle, indicating that at least sometimes Paul says what he thinks.

These requirements are met, when Paul discusses one of the most painful issues for him, the fate of Israel, in Rom. 9.1-3:

'I speak the truth in Christ, I do not lie, my conscience bearing witness in the Holy Spirit... for I could pray that I myself be accursed (αὐθαίεμα)...'

The heavy expressions make one feel that the Apostle is speaking from his heart. If he is ever to be taken seriously, this is one such occasion. He even potentially risks his own relationship to God in order to convince the addressees of his sincerity.

Yet the rhetorical devices and conventions are openly displayed. According to Dunn, conjunctions are omitted in order that the sentences might be read slowly and solemnly,<sup>47</sup> the double feminine nouns with a similar ending are chosen for aesthetical reasons,<sup>48</sup> the antithetical style and the additional phrases 'in Christ' and 'in the Holy Spirit' are designed to give extra weight.<sup>49</sup> Rhetoric is thus fully utilized, yet there is no sign of Paul not being deadly serious. On the contrary, the good rhetoric emphasizes that Paul wants to make his opinion absolutely clear because of the importance of the issue.<sup>50</sup>

Similar, albeit less extreme solemn oath formulas can be found - although in shorter forms - in many places in the Corpus Paulinum. The rabbis normally abstained from referring to God in such a manner; thus these expressions may have been weighty for Paul.<sup>51</sup>

1 Thess. 2.5,10	'God is our witness' <sup>52</sup>
Phil. 1.8	'God is my witness'
Rom. 1.9	'God, whom I serve with my spirit, is my witness' <sup>53</sup>
2 Cor. 1.23	'I call God as my witness'
2 Cor. 11.31	'The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised forever, knows that I am not lying' <sup>54</sup>
Gal. 1.20	'I assure you before God that what I am writing you is no lie'

When the formula was used later (1 Tim. 2.7), the divine aspect of the oath vanished.<sup>55</sup>

'I am telling the truth, I am not lying'

There is also the interesting claim in 2 Cor. 11.10, where not his faith, but especially his personal pride - another sore point in Paul - is placed in question:<sup>56</sup>

47 Dunn 1988,523.

48 Dunn 1988,522.

49 Dunn 1988,530-31.

50 I cannot follow Michel (1978,292), who sees in v. 2 'rhetorische Absicht' and 'persönliche Ergriffenheit' as alternatives.

51 Billerbeck 1922,330-32; 1926,26; cf. also Michel 1978,81; Hawthorne 1983,24. Dunn (1988,28) finds an oath referring to God also in T. Levi 19.3 and Josephus, De Bello 1.595, whereas Martin (1986,34) discovers this custom only in the OT.

52 Simultaneously (1 Thess. 2.3) Paul affirms that he is not trying to cozen the addressees, which at least partly is a rhetorical trick (see above). However, the appeal to God refers directly to the claim of not being greedy, which was an important issue for Paul. This combination of rhetorical manipulation and sincere statement resembles 2 Cor. 12.2-7.

53 Dunn feels that the style here is awkward and sincere, instead of being 'conscious rhetorical art' (1988,27). But if an awkward style sounds sincere, it serves well its rhetorical purpose. Cf. the pompous style of 2 Peter (Thurén 1996).

54 Bultmann 1951-52,219.

55 Cf. Dibelius and Conzelmann 1972,43.

‘As surely as the truth of Christ is in me, nobody in the regions of Achaia will stop this boasting of mine.’

In these expressions Paul goes to the limit at some points when affirming his sincerity. He swears to God calling him as witness and stakes his own relationship to Christ. This tone verges on blasphemy, when Paul in Gal. 1.8 exclaims:

‘But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be accursed (*αναθεμα*).’

Since Paul here first proclaims a conditional curse on himself, it is difficult to follow Longenecker, according to whom the second cursing of an angel from heaven is ironic, denoting Judaizers referring to the apostles in Jerusalem.<sup>57</sup> Betz is equally far off the mark in maintaining as ‘virtually certain’ that the Apostle refers to common ‘angelic revelations’.<sup>58</sup> The rhetorical effectiveness requires an escalating structure: It would be odd if Paul first (conditionally) cursed himself, but then went on to refer to some hazy angelophanies, which do not need to be taken seriously.

The escalating structure of the parallel Gal. 4.14 is more natural: ‘You welcomed me as God’s angel, as Christ Jesus.’ Correspondingly, in 1.8 Paul seems to regard the cursing of an angel from heaven as even more horrible (and effective) than cursing himself. Why? While God’s angel in 4.14 is almost identified with Christ, the angel from Heaven in 1.8 is hardly a satanic phenomenon, but a close representative of the Lord. Or even more, it is used as a way of avoiding a direct blasphemy as in 1 Cor. 12.3: ‘No one speaking in God’s spirit can say *Jesus be cursed* (*αναθεμα*).’

To speak of angels in order to circumvent God’s name is typical of Early Christianity, as a comparison between Mt. 10.32 and Lk. 12.8 demonstrates.<sup>59</sup> Paul is so certain about his Gospel, that not even God himself can change it. Thereby the two expressions in Gal. 1.8 become parallel: If the real Gospel turns out to differ from Paul’s version, he is cursed on two grounds. One could hardly imagine more weighty ways for Paul to emphasize his message. If the facts he thereby preaches are not true, there is not much left of his religion.

The above quotations show, that also in his texts Paul was ready to venture all when fighting for his cause. Cursing himself or Christ can hardly be only an insinuating device.

But how does this sincerity on some extreme occasions relate to Paul’s use of rhetorical gimmicks and manipulation of the addressees’ thoughts and feelings? The above quotations, albeit well designed, still seem to be straightforward. Yet we have elsewhere seen more insidious sayings by Paul. It would be good to see him combine both aspects: heavy rhetoric, which cannot be taken literally, and heavy theology, which is meant to be the exact truth.

This is actually done in 2 Cor. 12.2-7. First Paul boasts about ‘a man caught up in third heaven’, and *not* about himself. Then in 6-7 he then continues:

56 Martin (1986,347-48) finds the word ‘boasting’ ironical, and Forbes (1986,20) referring to ancient rhetorical conventions, argues that Paul’s ironical boasting is quite different: actual self-praise (which is meant to be taken seriously) was totally forbidden. However, it remains a fact that Paul *is* boasting. I regard the ironical style partly as a means of *praeteritio*, as is evident in 2 Cor. 12.6: I refrain from telling you that I have had great visions... This device is used when one definitely wants to say something despite the circumstances. Irony is then a typical feature. See Lausberg 1960, § 882-86. Forbes (1986,21) falls victim to this device. See also below.

57 Longenecker 1990,17.

58 Betz 1979,33.

59 According to Luke, The Son of Man will acknowledge people before God’s angels. This hardly means that the angels are seen as higher as the Son of Man. More naturally, Luke here avoids mentioning God’s name, as does Matthew. Cf. Dalman 1930,171-72.

'Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be foolish, for I would speak the truth. But I abstain so that no one will think more of me than what he sees in me or hears from me, even the extraordinary revelations.'

It seems clear that Paul speaks of himself, yet he explicitly denies it (5). The problem is not only that he speaks in the third person à la Caesar in *De Bello Gallico*. Paul is *explicitly lying* to his addressees. The contrast becomes even sharper, when Paul in verse 6 adds one of his oaths: 'I speak the truth.' Many theological and psychological suggestions have been made to explain, why Paul does so.<sup>60</sup>

However, here we have a simple *praeteritio* (I refrain from saying that...),<sup>61</sup> and it is difficult to believe that Paul's audience felt that the Apostle had deluded them, when they realized to whom he referred. As in any *praeteritio*, the use of the rhetorical device is so obvious.

To be sure, what Paul actually affirms when claiming to speak the truth is not the identity of the mystic. Instead he refers to the reality of his own experiences, and in the light of the whole letter, to his message in general. He wants to distinguish himself from his antagonists, who are labeled as unreliable.

The interesting feature in this passage is that Paul openly combines manipulation of the addressees by rhetorical moves with the claim that he is an honest and sincere preacher. Yet no sensible reader was supposed to find this contradictory. For a person with a natural, dynamic attitude to the text, these phenomena simply represent two distinct dimensions of communication.

The issue becomes problematic only when the texts are studied from the 'wrong' perspective, viz. the modern way of seeking theology in Paul, where his utterances are tacitly equated with paragraphs in a lawbook.

Another important means of investigating Paul's *ethos* is to study the coherence between his life and his teachings. Without going deeper into this vast area, we can state that the Apostle obviously did not spare himself when working for what he adjudged to be right. In his mission, the man was eager and serious.

But in being so eager, Paul allowed himself a full use of rhetorical *insinuatio*, tactics and strategy - he manipulated his addressees with best means available in order to reach his goal.

## 7. Call for a new way of reading Paul

Paul's use of rhetoric - when it succeeded - did not jeopardize his *ethos* in the eyes of most of the original addressees. They were simply guided in the direction intended by the Apostle, although some of the techniques were probably easily recognized. Only occasionally did the techniques fail, or were criticized by Paul's antagonists.

Obviously many of his original addressees interpreted his techniques in a positive light, since the letters were generally accepted and even later canonized. It is my claim that these addressees understood the dynamic character of Paul's texts. Despite some characteristic features, the rhetoric he used was conventional.

Yet Paul's rhetoric is problematic for us, who cannot identify with the original rhetorical situation in these texts. When wanting to be analytical, when attempting to understand the communication and interaction in the texts objectively, when seeking the theology beyond the texts, we do not wish to submit to the original manipulation. Thus the gap between us and the

60 For an overview, see Martin 1986,398-400.

61 Cf above.

original audience is not just merely external; the main difference consists in our attitude to the text. If already the Corinthian readers sometimes misunderstood Paul's rhetoric, how much greater (*gal wachomer*) is the risk with us!

Paul may be sincere, but perhaps not with us. We may expect him to write as a dogmatician or at least to be straightforward with his addressees. Starting with such presuppositions we find that the man is not only contradictory (something that was earlier explained with the word 'paradoxical') or ready radically to develop his theology to meet new social and cultural needs of his mission, but even more: insinuating, crooked, and dishonest.

This, however, does not force us to abandon our theological questions in order to understand Paul. We only need a better comprehension of his rhetorical techniques. Some of Paul's techniques are easily understood also by us, but I maintain that much has also been overlooked, resulting in misleading interpretations and - among some serious scholars - a deceitful picture of the man himself. In order to understand Paul as his first addressees did, and in order to perceive the theology behind his rhetoric, a correct insight into the persuasive qualities of his texts is needed.

One has to be suspicious. Instead of focusing on what the Apostle says, or imagining what he wanted to say, we need to find out, what kind of effect he aimed to produce in his addressees. Only thereby can his theological insights be assessed.

Finally, we may take a glance at one of the first guides to the study of Pauline theology, 2 Pet. 3.16. The author states that people who are ἀμαθεῖς, unlearned or uninstructed, easily distort Paul's thoughts with fatal results. What kind of instruction is meant? Is it 'instruction in faith'<sup>62</sup>, 'traditional teaching'<sup>63</sup> or 'instruction, which gives steadfastness'<sup>64</sup>? Or does the author refer to one of the most natural meanings of the word, namely basic instruction taught at school? In that case, he could well mean education in grammar and rhetoric.

If the last option is at least partly the case, 2 Pet. 3.16 acknowledges the nature of Paul's rhetoric, referring to inherent possibilities of misunderstanding. Then this statement serves as a warning against reading Paul with no or too little education and sense of rhetoric.

To sum up: Can we trust Paul? The answer is yes, if we fully recognize the gap between our questions and the rhetorical situation of the text. This does not mean that we are free to distance our interpretation from the actual sayings of Paul, nor does it make his texts more vague, on the contrary. The situation can be compared with Paul's language: His Greek was analyzed and translated long ago. The time is overdue to begin deciphering his art of persuasion, too.

---

62 Bauckham 1983,331.

63 Kelly 1969,373.

64 Reicke 1964,183.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

T. Levi

Josephus *Bellum Iudaicum*

Caesar *De Bello Gallico*

Cicero *De Inventione*

Bauckham, R *Jude, 2 Peter*, WBC 50, Waco: Word 1983.

Becker, J *Paulus: Der Apostel der Völker*, Tübingen: Mohr 1989.

Berger, K *Formgeschichte des Neuen Testaments*, Heidelberg: Quelle & Meyer 1984.

Betz, HD *Galatians*, A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches in Galatia, Hermeneia, Philadelphia: Fortress 1979.

-The problem of rhetoric and theology according to the apostle Paul, *L'Apôtre Paul*, ed. A. Vanhoye, BETL LXXIII, Leuven: Leuven U.P. 1986, 16-48.

Billerbeck, P *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrash*, vols. I and III, München: Beck 1922; 1926.

Breuer, D *Einführung in die pragmatische Texttheorie*, UTB 106, München: Fink 1974.

Bruce, FF *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, WBC 45, Waco: Word 1982.

Bultmann, R *Theology of the New Testament 1-2*, New York 1951/52.

- *Der zweite Brief an die Korinther*, MeyerK, Sonderbd., Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1976.

Chadwick, H 'All Things to All Men' (I Cor. IX.22), *NTS* 1, 1954/55, 261-75.

Combrink, B 'Translating or Transforming - Receiving Matthew in Africa', *Scriptura* 58, 1996, 273-84.

Conzelmann, H *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, tr. JW Leitch, Hermeneia, Philadelphia: Fortress 1975.

Dalman, G. *Die Worte Jesu 1*, Leipzig: Hinrich 1930.

Dibelius, M and Conzelmann, H *The Pastoral Epistles* (tr. P Buttolph and A Yarbro), Hermeneia, Philadelphia: Fortress 1972.

Dunn, J *Romans*, WBC 38ab, Waco: Word 1988.

Forbes, C Comparison, Self-praise and Irony: Paul's Boasting and the Conventions of Hellenistic Rhetoric, *NTS* 32, 1986, 1-30.

Guthrie, D *Galatians*, NCB, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1973.

Hawthorne, GF *Philippians*, WBC 43, Waco: Word 1983.

Holz, T *Der erste Brief an die Thessalonicher*, EKK 13, Zürich: Benziger 1986.

Hurd, JC *The Origin of 1 Corinthians*, London: SPCK 1965.

Kelly, JND *A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and Jude*, Thornapple Commentaries, Grand Rapids: Baker 1981.

Knox, WL *St Paul and the Church of the Gentiles*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1939 (repr. 1961).

Lang, F *Die Briefe an die Korinther*, NTD 7, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1986.

Lausberg, H *Handbuch der literarischen Rhetorik* (2 vols), München: Hueber 1960.

Longenecker, R *Galatians*, WBC 41, Waco: Word 1990.

Marshall, P *Enmity in Corinth: Social Conventions in Paul's Relations with the Corinthians*, WUNT/2, Tübingen: Mohr 1987.

Martin, RP *2 Corinthians*, WBC 40, Waco: Word 1986.

- Michel, O *Der Brief an die Römer*, Meyer K, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1978.
- Mitchell, M *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation*, HUNT 28, Tübingen: Mohr 1991.
- Morris, L *The First and Second Thessalonians*, NICNT, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1959.
- Räisänen, H *Beyond New Testament Theology*, London: SCM 1990.
- Reicke, B *The Epistles of James, Peter, and Jude*, AB 37, Garden City: Doubleday 1964.
- Ridderbos, HN *The Epistle of Paul to the Churches of Galatia*, NICNT, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1953.
- Schrage, W *Der erste Brief an die Korinther, 1-2*, EKK VII, Solothurn: Benziger and Düsseldorf: Neukirchener, 1995.
- Scroggs, R Can New Testament Theology be Saved? *USQR* 42, 1988, 17-31.
- Thurén, L Risky Rhetoric in James? *NovTest* 37, 1995a, 262-84.
- *Argument and Theology in 1 Peter: The Origins of Christian Paraenesis*, JSNTS 114, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic 1995b.
  - Style Goes Never Out of Fashion - 2 Peter reevaluated, *Rhetoric and Religion*, ed. T. Olbricht, JSNTS, Sheffield 1996: Sheffield Academic.
  - Was Paul Angry? Derhetorizing Galatians, *The Papers from the Pepperdine Rhetorical Conference*, ed. SE Porter and DStamps, JSNTS, Sheffield 1998 (forthcoming).
- Warning, R (ed.) *Rezeptionsästhetik, Theorie und Praxis*, München: Fink 1975; 1989.
- Watson, F. *Paul, Judaism and the Gentiles*, SNTS MS 56, Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1986.
- Wuellner, W *Der Jakobusbrief im Licht der Rhetorik und Textpragmatik*, *LB* 43, 1978, 5-66.