

## “Put Up or Shut Up! Paul’s Ethos Assertions”

By Michael R. Cosby

Some of you, thinking that I am not coming to you, have become arrogant. But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power. For the kingdom of God depends not on talk but on power. What would you prefer? Am I to come to you with a stick, or with love in a spirit of gentleness? (1 Cor. 4:18-21)<sup>1</sup>

While growing up in the northwest part of the United States, many times I heard the challenge, “Put up or shut up!” Usually this meant “Either put up your fists and let’s settle this, or shut your big mouth!” When confronted with such assaults, I had to respond, because my honor was at stake. And, because “Put up or shut up” was usually spoken in a public context, I either had to defend myself or admit publically that I was backing down, which was very humiliating. Paul faced similar challenges to his honor, only the stakes were much higher.

1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians 10-13, and Galatians are basically “Put up or shut up!” letters. Paul’s defensive, highly confrontational language is his response to attacks against him and his gospel message. To his opponents and doubters, he is basically saying, “If you think that I am someone you can push around, you are very wrong. I’m ready to duke it out!” Such agonistic responses were typical in the Mediterranean world, especially in theological or political argumentation.<sup>2</sup> Name calling and character assassination were well developed art forms in the rough and tumble world of Greco-Roman rhetoric. The intensity of Paul’s sarcasm is not unusual. Note, for example, the way in which Cicero begins his speech Against Publius Valinius.

If, O Vatinius, I had chosen to regard merely what the unworthiness of your character deserved, I should have treated you in a way that would have been very pleasing to these men, and, as your evidence could not, on account of the infamy of your life and the

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<sup>1</sup>Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (1989).

<sup>2</sup>Luke T. Johnson, “The New Testament’s Anti-Jewish Slander and the Conventions of Ancient Polemic,” JBL 108 (1989) 419-41 and J. Roger Dunkle, “The Greek Tyrant and Roman Political Invective of the Late Republic,” TAPA 98 (1967) 151-71

scandal of your private conduct, be possibly considered of the slightest consequence, I should have dismissed you without saying a single word to you. For not one of these men considered it worth my while either to refute you, as if you were an adversary of any importance, or to question you, as if you were a scrupulous witness. But I was, perhaps, a little more intemperate just now than I should have been. For from detestation of you, in which, although, on account of your wicked conduct to me, I ought to go beyond all men, yet I am in fact surpassed by everybody, I was carried away so far, that though I did not despise you at all less than I detest you, still I chose to dismiss you in embarrassment and distress, rather than in contempt.<sup>3</sup>

The goal of such orations was to depict the opponent as deplorable and to establish your own virtues as a means of swaying the opinion of judges and juries to rule in favor you. In this persuasive aspect Paul's letters sometimes resemble court-room rhetoric, but we should be very careful in making claims that Paul follows either deliberative or judicial speech forms.

When under attack, Paul launches intense counter attacks. His tactic reminds me of advice my father used to give to me. "Son" he would say, "the best defense is a good offense." This sentiment would resonate well with Paul. He storms into the conflict, defaming his detractors and asserting his own superiority over them. However, his self-praise (or ethos argument) differs from that used by orators in law-court settings. For example, Cicero begins his defense of the poet Aulus Licinius Archias with the following ethos statement.

If there is any natural ability in me, O judges,—and I know how slight that is; or if I have any practice as a speaker,—and in that line I do not deny that I have some experience; or if I have any method in my oratory, drawn from my study of the liberal sciences, and from that careful training to which I admit that at no part of my life have I ever been disinclined; certainly, of all those qualities, this Aulus Licinius is entitled to be among the first to claim the benefit from me as his peculiar right.

He goes on to flatter the people who are judging the case.

... I, in a formal proceeding like this, and in a regular court of justice, when an action is being tried before a praetor of the Roman people, a most eminent man, and before most impartial judges, before such an assembly and multitude of people as I see around me, ... when speaking in defence of a most sublime poet and most learned man, before this concourse of highly-educated citizens, before this most polite and accomplished assembly, and before such a praetor as him who is presiding at this trial....<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>The Orations of Marcus Tullius Cicero, translated by C. D. Yonge (London: George Bell & Sons, 1891) 225-226 (online at <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?lookup=Cic.+Vat.+1>).

<sup>4</sup>The Orations of Marcus Tullius Cicero, translated by C. D. Yonge, (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1856) (online at <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?lookup=Cic.+Arch.+1>).

To connect Paul's self defenses too closely with the ethos sections of such Greek and Roman court-room rhetoric is misleading. He does not laud his character as a part of a speech designed to sway public opinion to favor his recommendations for a course of action. He asserts himself to be God's chosen apostle to the Gentiles, a man who has the authority to command obedience.

Orators use ethos arguments to try to convince their audiences to heed what they say while deliberating a case.<sup>5</sup> Paul goes beyond the standard ethos component of Greco-Roman oratory. He presents himself as more than just a credible witness or counselor; he is God's ordained apostle to the Gentiles, entrusted with the eternal gospel of salvation. His primary function is not to convince and cajole; it is to preach the truth and demand repentance.

The audiences Paul addresses primarily consist of his own converts, and he calls the wayward among them to return to the truth. He does not seek to give evidence that they should follow his teachings because of the brilliantly rational nature of his arguments or because of his oratorical genius. Indeed, he asserts exactly the opposite. Especially in 1 Corinthians he rejects human wisdom and oratory as the opposite of what should impress the Corinthian Christians. There is a kind of reverse ethos component to parts of his argument in this letter.<sup>6</sup>

### **"I'm an apostle, damn it!"—Ethos in 1 Corinthians**

In 1 Corinthians Paul addresses a somewhat hostile audience—people who are challenging his apostolic authority and his spirituality. So he comes out swinging. He begins by asserting his identity: "Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God ..." In the letter as a whole, he finds himself in the uncomfortable situation of having to defend the importance of his position on one hand, and, on the other hand, of needing to chide the Corinthian Christians for placing too much emphasis on loyalty to particular leaders.

These loyalties, with their attendant claims about the wisdom and virtuosity of selected leaders, caused factions in the church. To distance himself from the "wisdom of the world" that the Corinthians deemed so important (1:18-25), Paul insists that he refused to use persuasive rhetoric when he proclaimed the gospel of Jesus' death and resurrection (2:1-5). He devalues worldly wisdom, insisting that human knowledge is vastly inferior to God's knowledge. And he snidely indicates that the Corinthian Christians are mostly uneducated and ignoble anyway, so why are they acting as if they were otherwise?

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<sup>5</sup>The beginning of *De Corona (On the Crown)* by Demosthenes is a good example of self defense, where Demosthenes extols his virtues against the charges brought by Aeschines. See also his Letters I and II, which are largely self defense.

<sup>6</sup>Andre Resner Jr., *Preacher and Cross: Person and Message in Theology and Rhetoric* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999)105-128, explores this "reverse-ethos" argument by drawing a contrast between the normal societal ascription of respect given to those who are brilliant and eloquent—what Paul calls *kata sarka* "according to the flesh"—and the way of the cross.

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. (1:26-29)

Perhaps some would consider this a low blow, but Paul continues throwing verbal punches to subdue his opponents. In 2:6-16, he states as a matter of fact that he is a source of deep spiritual knowledge as opposed to worldly knowledge; his stature as an apostle gives credibility to his preaching. "We speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory" (2:7). Paul even claims that he has knowledge unknown to the spiritual rulers of the present evil age: "none of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (2:8). To paraphrase a bit, Paul seems to say, "Just who do you Corinthian new-comers think you are? I'll tell you who you really are. Babies in Christ! Infants who can't yet eat solid food! Worldly people who quarrel in their immature jealousies!" (see 3:1-4). They need to stop focusing on the eloquence of their human leaders and grow up into true spirituality.

Paul presses his attack with a combination of statements that both diminish his importance and exalt his authority. In 3:5-9 he insists that he is merely a servant of God. But he is not just any servant; he is a skilled, master builder who laid the foundational teaching of the Corinthian church (3:10-15). He has the authority to tell them what is true and what is false, and they had darn well better start listening.

Paul is frustrated with their foolish allegiances to various Christian leaders whom they consider more worthy, and he assails this tendency: "So let no one boast about human leaders. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all things belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God" (3:21-23). And he is so frustrated with their lack of respect for him as an apostle that he growls a "Put up or shut up" challenge:

but some of you, thinking that I am not coming to you, have become arrogant. But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power. For the kingdom of God depends not on talk but on power. What would you prefer? Am I to come to you with a stick, or with love in a spirit of gentleness? (4:18-21).

Paul is not only an offended spiritual leader; he is also a mad dad. "I am coming!" shouts the irate father, "And there will be hell to pay if you do not straighten up!"

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<sup>7</sup>One of the more eloquent and extensive arguments that 1 Corinthians functions as deliberative rhetoric is Margaret M. Mitchell's Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation: An Exegetical Investigation of the Language and Composition of 1 Corinthians (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991). See also Ben Witherington III, Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 39-48. My goal in this article is not to refute these arguments point by point but to follow a theme through Paul's letters.

<sup>8</sup>This assessment contrasts with the claims of scholars who take Paul's words literally. See, e.g., Resner i. Preacher and Cross

Lord. This is my defense to those who would examine me....” (9: 1-3). The rest of his argument in chapter 9 is designed to reassert his apostolic authority. The credibility of his demands are connected to his credibility as a person. This is not language designed to persuade people in a court of law; it is language calculated to restore honor to a religious leader.

The validity of his message does not rest merely in the credibility of his argument. It flows from his person, from his office. He is both humble and domineering. “For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me” (15: 9-10).<sup>9</sup> The gospel message is of paramount importance, and Paul is a God-chosen leader ordained to proclaim it. They are not to question him. They are to obey him.

### **“We are ready to punish every disobedience”: Ethos in 2 Corinthians**

When Paul dictated 2 Corinthians, he had not yet won his conflict with the rebellious Corinthian Christians. Although chapters 1–9 do not contain the same sarcastic edge found in 1 Corinthians, he nevertheless continues to defend his character and his actions. His initial, emotion-laden words on suffering and consolation (1:3-11) prepare the way for him to defend himself. His intense suffering, he claims, was for their benefit: “If we are being afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation; if we are being consoled, it is for your consolation, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we are also suffering” (1:6).

Some at Corinth had charged Paul with changing his travel plans without regard for their feelings and needs. In a defensive response he explains, “I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia, and to come back to you from Macedonia and have you send me on to Judea. Was I vacillating when I wanted to do this? Do I make my plans according to ordinary human standards, ready to say ‘Yes, yes’ and ‘No, no’ at the same time?” (1:16-17). His change of travel plans, he contends, was the result of his concern for them. “But I call on God as witness against me: it was to spare you that I did not come again to Corinth.... I made up my mind not to make you another painful visit” (1:23; 2:1). Quite to the contrary of their accusations, Paul claims that his deep love for the Corinthian Christians motivates his actions. He did not want to deliver another beating.

The difficulty he experienced with these people caused him intense stress. Paul’s emotional stability when he dictated 2 Corinthians was rather precarious. In fact, he seems to have been a basket case. He states in 2:4, “I wrote you out of much distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain, but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you.” He admits that he was so upset while waiting to hear the results of Titus’ delivery of the painful letter that he could not keep his mind on his work. Evidently, as the year stretched into

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<sup>9</sup>For examples of self-deprecation in rhetoric, see the opening sections of Cicero’s Oration for Sextus Roscius of Ameria and In Defense of the Proposed Manilian Law.

the fall and navigation across the Aegean became more precarious, he knew that Titus would have to return from Corinth via the land route through Macedonia.<sup>10</sup> So Paul left Ephesus and traveled north to Troas to meet him. He was so preoccupied with the situation at Corinth that he could not concentrate on evangelization at Troas. “When I came to Troas to proclaim the good news of Christ, a door was opened for me in the Lord; but my mind could not rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said farewell to them and went on to Macedonia” (2:12-13).

Paul experienced extreme relief when he met Titus in Macedonia, and his vulnerable account of his struggles seems far removed from the canons of deliberative oratory.

For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted in every way—disputes without and fears within. But God, who consoles the downcast, consoled us by the arrival of Titus, and not only by his coming, but also by the consolation with which he was consoled about you, as he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced still more. For even if I made you sorry with my letter, I do not regret it (though I did regret it, for I see that I grieved you with that letter, though only briefly). (7:5- 8)

When he learned that his painful letter brought the rebellious Corinthians to repentance, he quickly dictated 2 Corinthians and sent it with Titus and several other Christians south to Corinth to prepare for his own arrival (8:6, 16-22). His relief is quite evident in 2 Corinthians 1–9, and his words are far more conciliatory than those he used in 1 Corinthians.

Some evidence of tension appears in 3:1: “Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Surely we do not need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you or from you, do we?” But this is mild compared with 1 Corinthians, as is his statement in 5:11- 13: “but we ourselves are well known to God, and I hope that we are also well known to your consciences. We are not commending ourselves to you again, but giving you an opportunity to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast in outward appearance and not in the heart. For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you.” This response to an accusation by some of them that he is crazy receives only a rather mild, sarcastic response from Paul. He seems more relieved than combative at this point.

Paul deeply wants them to return his affection. He states in 6:11-12, “we have spoken frankly to you Corinthians; our heart is wide open to you. There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours. In return—I speak to you as to children—open wide your hearts also.” He implores them in 7:2, “Make room in your hearts for us; we have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have taken advantage of no one.” This is an important point for him to make, for in chapters 8–9 he feels obliged to pressure them to give generously for the collection for the saints in Jerusalem.

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<sup>10</sup>See F. F. Bruce’s reconstruction in *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 273-276.

Paul's own ethos, as well as that of his traveling companions, is an important part of his fund-raising message. By assuring the Corinthian Christians of his impeccable character, he reassures them that he is taking great care to ensure that their money gets to the saints in Jerusalem. "We intend that no one should blame us about this generous gift that we are administering, for we intend to do what is right not only in the Lord's sight but also in the sight of others" (8:20).

Paul's conciliatory tone, however, evaporates in 10:1, replaced by sustained, harsh combativeness. Perhaps chapters 10–13 are part of the painful letter that Titus delivered to Corinth, and they were later appended to 1 Corinthians. If so, the sharp change in tone makes sense. Yet this conclusion is not assured. Some scholars point out a number of parallels in content between chapters 1–9 and 10–13.<sup>11</sup> Because exploring this issue lies beyond the scope of this paper, suffice it to say that Paul's pugnacious words in 10–13 exceed the sarcasm employed in 1 Corinthians. Throughout this section he bitterly criticizes his Corinthian opponents and defends himself.

He particularly resents their charges that he is a little wimp who writes tough letters but in person lacks the stature and speaking ability to defend himself.

I myself, Paul, appeal to you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ –I who am humble when face-to-face with you, but bold toward you when I am away!... For they say, "His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible." Let such people understand that what we say by letter when absent, we will also do when present. (10:1, 10-11)

Their criticism focuses on Paul's lack of eloquence, so in his battle for loyalty he turns this fact around in order to use it for his own advantage. He insists that he is a man of integrity, but his opponents are boastful impostors who primarily want to commend themselves. Sarcastically he says to the Corinthian Christians,

For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you submit to it readily enough. I think that I am not in the least inferior to these super-apostles. I may be untrained in speech, but not in knowledge; certainly in every way and in all things we have made this evident to you. (11:4-6)

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<sup>11</sup>See Witherington, Conflict and Community in Corinth, 429-432; and Frederick W. Danker, "Paul's Debt to the De Corona of Demosthenes: A Study of Rhetorical Techniques in Second Corinthians" in Persuasive Artistry: Studies in New Testament Rhetoric in Honor of George A. Kennedy, edited by Duane F. Watson (JSNT Supplement Series 50; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991) 270-280.

I will also continue... to deny an opportunity to those who want an opportunity to be recognized as our equals in what they boast about. For such boasters are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder! Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is not strange if his ministers also disguise themselves as ministers of righteousness.... I repeat, let no one think that I am a fool; but if you do, then accept me as a fool, so that I too may boast a little. What I am saying in regard to this boastful confidence, I am saying not with the Lord's authority, but as a fool; since many boast according to human standards, I will also boast. For you gladly put up with fools, being wise yourselves! For you put up with it when someone makes slaves of you, or preys upon you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or gives you a slap in the face. To my shame, I must say, we were too weak for that! (11:12-21)

Here we see Paul's sarcasm and irony at their very best. He follows these vehement words with a summary of his own accomplishments, providing a rhetorically effective list of his sufferings.

But whatever anyone dares to boast of—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast of that. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I. Are they ministers of Christ? I am talking like a madman—I am a better one: with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless floggings, and often near death. Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I am not indignant? (11:21-29)

The power of this paragraph lends credibility to the charge in 10:11 that “his letters are weighty and strong.”

And, of course, Paul does not stop there. In chapter 12, he expands his boasting to include a third-person account of his own visionary journey to the third heaven. Although the criticisms leveled by the “super-apostles” create tremendous stress for Paul, they also provide him with a somewhat forced opportunity to exalt his own virtues. Instead of boasting in his oratorical skills as they are doing, however, he boasts in his weaknesses. Suffering becomes for him a badge of honor.

If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. (11:30)

So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions,

and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.” (12:9-10)

He concludes his boasting with a sarcastic expression of frustration that they have forced him into it.

I have been a fool! You forced me to it. Indeed you should have been the ones commending me, for I am not at all inferior to these super-apostles, even though I am nothing. The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, signs and wonders and mighty works. How have you been worse off than the other churches, except that I myself did not burden you? Forgive me this wrong! (12:11-13)

His frustration also extends into the next paragraph:

I will most gladly spend and be spent for you. If I love you more, am I to be loved less? Let it be assumed that I did not burden you. Nevertheless (you say) since I was crafty, I took you in by deceit. Did I take advantage of you through any of those whom I sent to you? I urged Titus to go, and sent the brother with him. Titus did not take advantage of you, did he? Did we not conduct ourselves with the same spirit? Did we not take the same steps? Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves before you? We are speaking in Christ before God. Everything we do, beloved, is for the sake of building you up. (12:15-18)

Thus, Paul uses boasting about his own ethos as a means of arguing against boasting. He contends that such bragging is worthless, but he feels driven to engage in it because of the intense criticism that he is enduring.

Underlying Paul's argument in 2 Corinthians 10–13 is his firm belief that he as an apostle has both the right and the obligation to command them in what they should believe and how they should live. His identity even more than his argument forms the basis for his message. This is completely transparent in such passages as 13:2, “I warned those who sinned previously and all the others, and I warn them now while absent, as I did when present on my second visit, that if I come again, I will not be lenient.” Similarly, in 13:10 he asserts, “I write these things while I am away from you, so that when I come, I may not have to be severe in using the authority that the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down.” God gave him authority for building up the church, not for commending himself. But he vigorously defends his authority when he feels attacked. This is a fight, and he means to win it.

### **“I wish they would castrate themselves!” Ethos in Galatians**

Nowhere does Paul defend himself against attack more stridently than in his letter to the Galatians. Virtually the entire letter is a defense of his apostolic authority and the validity of the gospel he proclaims. Refusing to “shut up,” he engages in down-and-dirty verbal combat to regain the loyalty of his converts. In one particularly vigorous punch, he asserts, “Why am I still

being persecuted if I am still preaching circumcision? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed. I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves!" (Gal. 5:11-12). While many today may view this as crude,<sup>12</sup> Paul viewed it as effective in dismissing his opponents.

Ultimately, however, his argument in Galatians is that the truth of his gospel message depends on his integrity as a man and the apostolic office that God has given him. His initial greeting proclaims: "Paul an apostle—sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead" (Gal. 1:1). Those who oppose him and distort his gospel receive strong condemnation: "if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed!"(1:8).

To defend himself against charges that he preaches a deficient gospel, he explains how he came to have apostolic authority. Ultimately, his leadership position comes not from his own achievements but from divine appointment. Although he briefly explains that his own achievements under the law of Moses excel those of his opponents, this is not the real issue—God's appointment is.

For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. (1:11-12)

But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus. (1:15-17)

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<sup>12</sup>W. M. Ramsey refuses to understand Paul's use of *apokopto* as having the "foul" meaning of castration or mutilation, because such a "scornful expression would be a pure insult, as irrational as it is disgusting" (*A Historical Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. [London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1900] 438). See Heikki Räisänen, *Paul and the Law* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983) 76-77; Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches in Galatia* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979) 270 n. 164; James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (Black's New Testament Commentary; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993) 283 says, "There is something shocking about the vehemence of Paul's language . . . . For eunuchs were among the most despised groups of men in the ancient world (Josephus, *Ant.* iv. 290-1; Lucian, *Eunuch* 6). And self-castration was a feature of the cult of Cybele which had its home in Galatia; so that Paul's wish in effect was for the other missionaries to lapse into a form of paganism which could not but be thoroughly despised by Jews."

His authority comes not from learning all the correct points of doctrine from the Jerusalem apostles. Indeed, he asserts that the Jerusalem apostles contributed nothing to his doctrine. He did not learn it from them, although they did endorse it.

Paul's descriptions in Galatians of the other apostles are anything but flattering. When describing them he is very defensive:

And from those who were supposed to be acknowledged leaders (what they actually were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—those leaders contributed nothing to me. On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel for the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel for the circumcised (for he who worked through Peter making him an apostle to the circumcised also worked through me in sending me to the Gentiles), and when James and Cephas and John, who were acknowledged pillars, recognized the grace that had been given to me, they gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship, agreeing that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. (2:6-9)

He is also combative:

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction. And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?"

Unlike Peter, the supposed pillar, Paul stands rock-steady on the gospel. He does not vacillate on the truth. He does not modify his behavior to please representatives from Jerusalem who place Jewish customs over gospel principle. He does not back down because of fear. He boldly defends the position of Gentile Christians, refusing to impose on them any requirements other than faith in Christ. Because of the truthfulness of his character and the divine nature of his appointment, they may trust the truthfulness of his message. He is a fighter, and his use of Scripture fits into his battle plan.

Paul uses the Bible to continue his assault on the character and teaching of his opponents. Following his assertions about his own ethos, he provides "creative" explanations from Scripture to validate his position, liberally employing hyperbole in the process.<sup>13</sup> He calls the Galatians

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<sup>13</sup>For an explanation of Paul's use of hyperbole in Galatians, see my "Galatians: Red Hot Rhetoric," in *Rhetorical Argumentation in Biblical Texts*, edited by Anders Eriksson, Thomas H. Olbricht, and Walter Übelacker (Emory Studies for Early Christianity; Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002).

bewitched fools (3:1), says that all who rely on the law are under God's curse (3:10), equates living under the law with living under the elemental spirits of the world (4:3-10), and develops an allegory in which he equates law-abiding Jews with slavery: "One woman, in fact, is Hagar, from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children" (4:24-25). By contrast he equates Gentile Christians with freedom: "But the other woman (Sarah) corresponds to the Jerusalem above; she is free, and she is our mother" (4:26). His conclusion reveals his combativeness: "But what does the scripture say? 'Drive out the slave and her child; for the child of the slave will not share the inheritance with the child of the free woman'" (4:30).

Yet in the midst of his caustic explanation of theology, he appeals to his loving relationship with them as a further basis for believing his teaching (4:12-20). In this passage he reveals the pain of a frustrated parent: "My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you" (4:20). Why do they not trust him, their apostolic Father? Have they forgotten his ethos?

Although Paul's boasting is not as extensive as it is in 2 Corinthians 11-13, he does vigorously defend himself. And, as in 2 Corinthians, he condemns the practice of boasting.

See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand! It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh that try to compel you to be circumcised—only that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. Even the circumcised do not themselves obey the law, but they want you to be circumcised so that they may boast about your flesh. May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. (6:11-14)

In a somewhat grumpy conclusion, he ends by saying, "From now on, let no one make trouble for me; for I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body" (6:17). The veteran missionary apostle demands respect from his converts, is angry when he does not get it, and fights to regain it.

### **"As to righteousness under the law, blameless": Ethos in Philippians**

Unlike 1-2 Corinthians and Galatians, Paul's letter to the Philippian Christians is a warm response their generous financial support of him during a difficult time (4:10-18). He is on good terms with them and has little need to defend his apostolic authority, and even his unassuming greeting reflects this. "Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus..." (1:1). He does give instruction—what Pauline letter would be complete without that?—but the tone is warm and friendly. He appreciates the help they have been to him while he has been in prison. They are on his side, and he is not confrontational with them.

Nevertheless, when he speaks to the issue of circumcision, his words again take on the biting edge of a man who is defending himself. In response to his opponents' law-based "confidence in the flesh," he responds, "If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I

have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless" (3:4-6). But he immediately dismisses these accomplishments as having no adequacy for determining one's spirituality or authority:

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. (3:7-10)

After pointing out that his Jewish credentials surpass those of his critics, he quickly insists that they mean nothing.

Paul does not seem to feel the need here to defend his apostolic authority. He writes to friends, not to persuade them of the validity of his leadership, but to thank them for their support. They are on his side, and his appeal to his ethos is brief, more to make a point than to reverse a judgment. He seems confident that his audience will receive his words with great respect, and his rhetoric is subdued. Paul instructs; he does not criticize or use sarcasm to rebuff.

Paul's appeals to his apostolic authority vary with the extent to which he feels under attack. When severely criticized, he vigorously defends his position. When addressing a friendly and supportive audience, he focuses far less on his apostolic identity and accomplishments. But even to the most supportive groups, he uses his ethos as part of his persuasive base.

### **"My motives are pure": Ethos in 1 Thessalonians**

Paul does not open 1 Thessalonians by appealing to his identity as an apostle of Jesus Christ. He merely begins with "Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy." Furthermore, his thanksgiving section is positive and encouraging (1:2-10). Yet at the beginning of chapter 2, he suddenly becomes very defensive. Here he vindicates his virtue by insisting that he preached the gospel to them in spite of great adversity. Some have charged that he preached out of deceit or trickery and that he sought merely to please people in his gospel. He dismisses all such charges by appealing to his character.

Although some scholars argue that 1 Thess. 2:3-12 is merely a catalog of moral behaviors to imitate,<sup>14</sup> the examples they cite do not parallel what Paul states in this passage. Abraham

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<sup>14</sup>Abraham Malherbe, "Exhortation in First Thessalonians," *Novum Testamentum* 25 (1983) 238-256; and *Moral Exhortation, A Greco-Roman Sourcebook* (Library of Early Christianity; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), pp. 135-138. See also Stanley K. Stowers, *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (Library of Early Christianity; Westminster, 1986), pp. 25-26, 99-100;

Malherbe led the way in arguing that Greco-Roman lists of moral examples, which provide role models for ethical behavior, provide the background for understanding Paul's comments. Yet these arguments do not give adequate evidence that Paul is merely using a stock list of moral virtues as did some philosophers. The specificity of Paul's response to charges becomes clear in 1 Thess. 2:2, where he states, "but though we had already suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition." He is defending himself against specific charges, not giving a stylized list. This is further substantiated by his mention of his hard work in 2:9 as a response to charges against him, "You remember our labor and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God." Paul uses this statement to contrast his own diligent labor with the idleness of some Thessalonian Christians, whose actions he corrects in 4:11-12 and 5:14.

Paul also uses female imagery in 2:7-8: "We were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children," This does not fit the standard, male examples that Malherbe and others cite as evidence. Furthermore, Philip F. Esler argues that Malherbe distorts the intended meaning of the cynic philosopher Dio in a passage used to bolster his argument. Esler contends that Malherbe reads Dio anachronistically, separating Dio's words from his "conflict-ridden Mediterranean culture." His conclusion is revealing: "Malherbe essentially depends upon verbal similarity between a section of Dio Chrysostom's *Oration* 32 and 1 Thess. 2 without closely examining the meaning of the language in these distinct contexts."<sup>15</sup>

Although 1 Thessalonians is a warm and positive letter, Paul vigorously defends his credibility by defending his character in chapter 2. He connects the trustworthiness of his message to his own trustworthiness as a person. He has suffered physically and mentally for these people; he has never taken advantage of them. They can believe his teaching, because his character and his actions are impeccable.

### **"On some points I have written to you rather boldly": Ethos in Romans**

Paul is not nearly as pugnacious in Romans as he is in 1–2 Corinthians and Galatians, but this letter is also not as warm and friendly as the less formal epistles to Philippi and Thessalonika. Romans was delivered (probably by the deaconess Phoebe—16:1-2) to a city that Paul had not yet visited. Some of the Roman Christians, such as Priscilla and Aquila, knew him well, but many in the group had not yet met him. In part, his letter to this church is a personal introduction, in part a defense and explanation of his theology, and in part practical teaching on

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and Charles A. Wanamaker, [The Epistles to the Thessalonians: A Commentary on the Greek Text](#) (The New International Greek Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), pp. 91-108.

<sup>15</sup>[Galatians](#), New Testament Readings (New York: Routledge, 1998) 66.

how Jews and Gentiles can get along together in the church.<sup>16</sup> Although in some passages he is aggressive in his defense against the accusations of opponents, his words lack an overall sarcastic tone. Here the fight is more sophisticated than the street brawls evident in Galatians and the Corinthian epistles.

Paul's lengthy initial greeting establishes his apostolic credentials but is not defensive like the greeting in Galatians.

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son,... through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ. (1:1-6)

Introducing himself in a formal manner differs dramatically from addressing a confrontational letter to rebellious converts. Paul does defend himself, but not in a manner that might alienate his readers from him.

His ethos is important, but in Romans Paul's actual argument assumes much more of the focus of his words. Not until chapters 14–15 does he make it clear that he is addressing actual problems within the Roman church. The argument in chapters 1–8 is more philosophical, providing a longer and less emotional explanation of his theology than he gave in Galatians. He addresses issues more than individuals. On some occasions his words are defensive, but for the most part they are quite measured—at least for Paul.

In 3:8 he reveals irritation with those critical of his gospel message: “And why not say (as some people slander us by saying that we say), ‘Let us do evil so that good may come’? Their condemnation is deserved!” And in 6:1-3 he asserts, “What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” In such passages the criticisms of Paul's theology lie very close to the surface. But he takes them more in stride and uses them as a means of explaining his gospel.

Paul's ethos defense comes more clearly into view in 9:1-3, where he says, “I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit—I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh.” Here he shows his unselfish nobility, his willingness to sacrifice himself for the welfare of others. This is in keeping with his stature as an apostle of Christ, and that assurance permeates the confident words of this letter. He is not attempting to regain his standing with these people.

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<sup>16</sup>For a variety of interpretations of the setting and purpose of Romans, see Karl P. Donfried, editor, The Romans Debate, revised and expanded edition (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991).

He seeks to establish and demonstrate his authority as a precursor to his actual visit. This greatly diminishes the aggressive approach that so characterizes his Galatian and Corinthian letters. In those epistles his need to regain lost confidence produces a more caustic correspondence than does the need to make a good first impression.

With calm confidence Paul explains his gospel. Throughout the letter his authority is quite clear, but his leadership comes across more as an established fact than something he has to prove. For example, in 11:13 he says, "Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I glorify my ministry." He simply states it as a fact and goes on with his argument. In 12:1 he appeals to them "by the mercies of God" and proceeds to explain how they should live. No sarcasm. No irony. No belittling arguments to bring them in line. Just "Do the following. The apostle speaks."

With authority he explains how they are to live in fellowship with each other in chapters 14–15. His tone is firm but kind. When he speaks of writing boldly to them in 15:15, the contrast with his "bold speech" here and his manner of speaking in 1–2 Corinthians and Galatians is striking.

I myself feel confident about you, my brothers and sisters, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able to instruct one another. Nevertheless on some points I have written to you rather boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to boast of my work for God. For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to win obedience from the Gentiles, by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God, so that from Jerusalem and as far around as Illyricum I have fully proclaimed the good news of Christ. Thus I make it my ambition to proclaim the good news, not where Christ has already been named, so that I do not build on someone else's foundation. (15:14-20; note the similar content in 2 Cor. 10:12-18, delivered there with intense emotion)

Instead of flinging out such statements as, "You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?" (Gal. 3:1) or "Tell me, you who desire to be subject to the law, will you not listen to the law?" (Gal. 4:21) or "I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves!" (Gal. 5:12), Paul calmly provides his travel itinerary and requests that they pray for him (Rom. 15:22-32).

The extended greetings Paul offers in Romans 16 are an extension of his ethos. He demonstrates that he knows in person many of the Christians in Rome, and commending them by name further establishes his credibility with this group of Christians. They can attest to his trustworthiness, which further endorses the validity of his letter. Not playing the role of street fighter, he assumes a more dignified air in this more dignified epistle.

### **The Knockout Punch/Conclusion**

In Paul's verbal fights, his identity as an apostle plays a major role in his offense and defense. His letters do not function as Greco-Roman deliberative rhetoric. They are not efforts to persuade audiences to take a certain course of action by convincing them that it would be the most logical and beneficial to adopt. His confrontational letters function more to re-establish/regain his authority and demand obedience. In these epistles he often seeks not so much to convince as to command. In this regard his personal identity is paramount. The question "Is this course of action the most reasonable?" plays a secondary role to the assertion, "I am the apostle to the Gentiles, and I have divinely conferred authority and responsibility to teach the gospel of Jesus Christ."

In letters responding to friendlier audiences, when Paul does not feel that his apostolic prerogative is being challenged, he is far less insistent on his authority. He mostly treats his apostolic office as an assumption agreed upon by the majority of his readers. His commands are less harsh, his language less confrontational, and his demeanor less abrasive. Paul writes with greater dignity in Romans, greater warmth in 1 Thessalonians, and greater generosity toward opponents in Philippians.<sup>17</sup> His ethos is always important, but the amount to which he stresses it depends on the extent to which he feels under attack. He does not brag about his accomplishments unless someone is criticizing him for being deficient. When attacked, however, as he is when he writes 1–2 Corinthians and Galatians, he fights back. If someone says, "Put up or shut up," Paul comes out swinging, eager to deliver his hardest knockout punch.

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<sup>17</sup>At least Phil. 1:15-18. Phi. 3:2 is more cutting.