



Apostle
of
Persuasion

Theology and Rhetoric in the Pauline Letters

James W. Thompson

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Contents

Abbreviations ix

Introduction: *Rhetoric and Theology in Paul* 1

1. The Rhetoric of Paul's Letters 19
 2. Paul and the Pharisaic Tradition 37
 3. Where Christian Theology Began: *Jesus and the Early Church* 57
 4. Paul's Ethos and His Theology 71
 5. First Thessalonians: *A Template for Theological Reflection* 101
 6. Christology and Persuasion 127
 7. Greco-Roman Values and the Theology of the Cross: *The Corinthian Correspondence* 143
 8. The Theology of the Cross and Justification by Faith 169
 9. Romans, the Righteousness of God, and the Defense of Paul's Ministry 185
 10. "Seek the Things That Are Above": *Persuasion in Colossians and Ephesians* 219
 11. Pauline Theology and Rhetoric in the Pastoral Epistles 247
- Conclusion: *Paul's Pastoral Theology* 267

Bibliography 273

Name Index 290

Scripture and Ancient Sources Index 293

Subject Index 305

Introduction

Rhetoric and Theology in Paul

Arthur Koestler once described a children’s puzzle from his childhood; the puzzle was a paper with a tangle of very thin blue and red lines. If you just looked at it, you couldn’t make out anything. But if you covered it with a piece of transparent red tissue paper, the red lines of the drawing disappeared and the blue lines formed a picture—it was a clown in a circus holding a hoop with a little dog jumping through it. If you covered the same drawing with a blue tissue paper, a roaring lion appeared chasing the clown across the ring. The puzzle is illustrative: you can do the same thing with every mortal, living or dead.¹

The multilayered drawing is an appropriate metaphor for the study of any figure of the past, as Koestler maintained. It is especially the case with the apostle Paul. N. T. Wright also illustrates the same point, but with different metaphors, recalling that “Water Lilies,” Claude Monet’s painting, employs layer upon layer and that no interpretation can limit itself to one layer. Wright offers another metaphor, imagining accompanying a song with only two or three strings and suggesting that many interpretations of Paul proceed as though his writings were a one-stringed instrument.² He has been described variously as a moral philosopher in the Greek tradition, a mystic, a rabbi, the founder of Christian literature, and a rhetorician.³ Because of these multiple dimensions of Paul,

1. Koestler, *Arrival and Departure*, 17–18. I owe the reference to Plank, *Paul and the Irony of Affliction*, 38.

2. Wright, *Paul and His Recent Interpreters*, 27.

3. Strecker and Nolting, “Der vorchristliche Paulus,” 713.

Wayne Meeks describes him as the “Christian Proteus.”⁴ But as Luke Timothy Johnson says, “Much more difficult is the question of what holds these dimensions together.”⁵ The task of this book is to examine the relationship between two layers in the Pauline correspondence: his theology and his rhetoric.

Paul the Theologian

Because of the importance of normative doctrine in Western Christianity, interpreters have described Paul as the first Christian theologian.⁶ Protestant churches in particular have looked to Paul as the source of timeless truths that can be applied in all ages.⁷ According to N. T. Wright, “Paul actually *invents* something that we may call Christian theology.”⁸ His letters include a discourse that is unprecedented in the Jewish and Greek traditions. He demonstrates an awareness of the rabbinic midrash homily (cf. Rom. 4:1–29; 2 Cor. 3:7–18; Gal. 3:6–29), employing Hillel’s rules for interpretation,⁹ but he rarely writes in this form. While he presupposes the story of God’s saving deeds, he does not write in narrative form. Although his letters—especially in the outer frame—follow the pattern of ancient letter writing, the sustained arguments in his letters have few parallels.¹⁰ Indeed, epistles are well suited for his engagement in a battle of ideas, for Paul can employ this literary form to engage in sustained arguments against his opponents. Like his philosophical contemporaries, he “destroys strongholds,” the arguments that are raised up by his opponents against the knowledge of God (2 Cor. 10:4).¹¹ Thus theologians of later centuries have looked to Paul as their model for theological argumentation and source of Christian doctrine.

If Paul is the first Christian theologian, however, he does not fit the Western understanding of thinkers who organize their thought into neat categories.

4. Meeks, “Christian Proteus.”

5. Johnson, “Paul of the Letters,” 72.

6. Wrede, *Paulus*, 101. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 1:187; Dunn, *Theology of Paul*, 2: “Paul was the first and greatest theologian.”

7. Thurén, *Derbetorizing Paul*, 5.

8. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1:xvi.

9. See the use of the rabbinic *qal wachomer* in Rom. 5:15, 17; 2 Cor. 3:7–11. The hermeneutic rule *gezera shewa* is employed in the midrash in Rom. 4:3–6. Rabbi Hillel developed seven rules of interpretation, two of which are mentioned here. *Qal wachomer* (lit., “light and heavy”) is the argument from the lesser to the greater, from a minor premise to a greater one. *Gezera shewa* (lit., “cut equally”) is the interpretation of one verse by a similar one.

10. See Fairweather, “Epistle to the Galatians,” 220, 224.

11. For the widespread use of the martial imagery to describe the philosopher’s task, cf. Epictetus, *Diatr.* 3.24.31, 34; Seneca, *Ep.* 59.6–8; cf. 64.3–4; 113.27–28; Philo, *Good Person* 15; *Confusion* 128–31. See Malherbe, “Antisthenes and Paul at War.”

Instead he writes occasional letters, responding to a variety of questions. His thoughts on Christology and soteriology, for example, are scattered among his letters in his responses to various issues. While he has been our primary source for Christian doctrines, he does not use the terms that later became the categories of dogmatic theology, and he never arranges those thoughts in a systematic way, as if they were discrete topics that could be separated from each other or from the situations in which he expresses himself. Paul, instead, writes letters, often in the heat of battle, over a period of more than a decade.

Obstacles to Writing Pauline Theology

Scholars who attempt to organize Paul's thought in a systematic fashion face at least three major obstacles. First, the fact that his letters are responses to the questions raised in his communities over a period of time limits interpreters' capacity for distilling the essential thought of the apostle. New issues in the churches call for new theological reflection. Topics that are the central focus of one letter are scarcely mentioned in others. The second obstacle is that the interpreter faces the apparent inconsistency in Paul's treatment of the traditional topics. For example, the expectation that "we who are alive . . . will be caught up . . . to meet the Lord . . . in the air" (1 Thess. 4:17) when the day of the Lord comes as "a thief in the night" (1 Thess. 5:2) suggests Paul's expectation of the imminence of Christ's return, while his desire to "depart and be with Christ" (Phil. 1:23; cf. 2 Cor. 5:1–10) appears to assume a return to Christ at death. Indeed, a primary reason that 2 Thessalonians is widely considered pseudonymous is that the extended period of time before the parousia envisioned in 2 Thessalonians conflicts with the imminent expectation in 1 Thessalonians. A comparison of statements about the end-time in Paul's letters will not yield a consistent eschatology.

Scholars have also observed other inconsistencies in Paul. Heikki Räisänen, for example, maintains that there is an inconsistency in Paul's statements about the law. Paul "states in unambiguous terms that the law has been abolished," but he also makes statements that imply that the law is still valid and even appeals to Old Testament commands.¹² Räisänen adds, "While generally holding fast to the divine origin of the law, Paul once in a heated debate also suggests that it was only given by angels and is thus inferior."¹³ Additionally, Räisänen and others argue that Paul's view of the destiny of disobedient Israel is inconsistent. In Romans 9, Paul resorts to the extreme explanation of a divine hardening that takes place regardless of human activity (Rom. 9:6–29),

12. Räisänen, *Paul and the Law*, 199.

13. Räisänen, *Paul and the Law*, 200.

whereas in the very next chapter he puts all emphasis on Israel's notorious disobedience. In chapter 11, at last, Paul definitely discards his predestinarian construction and replaces it with the statement that Israel's obduracy is of a temporary nature. But this runs counter to 1 Thessalonians 2:14–16 as well.¹⁴

The third obstacle faced by interpreters involves the determination of which letters are actually written by Paul. While issues of style and setting play a role in the assessment of Pauline authorship, finding coherence between the theology of the disputed letters and the seven undisputed letters raises the question, What is Pauline theology in actuality?

Approaches to Pauline Theology

In an attempt to overcome these obstacles, interpreters have employed a variety of approaches to the apostle's thought. Since most scholars have approached Paul from a confessional standpoint, the need for a constructive theology has made the discovery of a coherent theology in Paul an indispensable task. From Luther to the present, scholars have assumed a "canon within the canon," a center of Paul's theology. For Luther and his successors, justification by faith is the center of Pauline theology, and Galatians and Romans are the primary focus. But in recent years, alternative proposals have been made. Jürgen Becker argues that the cross is the center of Pauline thought and the presupposition for the doctrine of justification.¹⁵ For Michael Wolter, the center of Pauline thought "is the certainty of Christ-faith, that the God of Israel has acted eschatologically in Jesus Christ for the salvation of all humankind and that this event is made present in the Pauline gospel of salvation for 'everyone who believes' (Rom. 1:16)."¹⁶ James Dunn resists the image of the center but insists that Jesus Christ is the "fulcrum," "pivot point," and criterion by which everything is measured.¹⁷

While numerous approaches to Pauline theology have treated the apostle's thought without regard to the contingent situation of his letters, J. Christiaan Beker argues for the interplay of the coherence of Paul's thought in the context of the contingent situation, maintaining that the coherent center of Paul's theology is the triumph of God.¹⁸ For Udo Schnelle, "*The eschatological presence of God's salvation in Jesus Christ is the basis and center of Pauline thought.*"¹⁹ Thus the attempt to discover the center has not led to unanimity.

14. Räisänen, *Paul and the Law*, 264.

15. Becker, *Paul*, 289–90.

16. Wolter, *Paul*, 438.

17. Dunn, *Theology of Paul*, 722–23.

18. Beker, *Paul the Apostle*.

19. Schnelle, *Apostle Paul*, 389, Schnelle's emphasis.

Development in Pauline Thought

Because of these obstacles in ascertaining a coherent Pauline theology, scholars have proposed that Paul's thought develops over time, arguing that 1 Thessalonians is a statement of early Pauline theology and that the imminent eschatology of 1 Thessalonians recedes as Paul comes to grips with the delay of the parousia.²⁰ The absence of the major Pauline themes in the letter, including justification by faith and the problem of the law, is presented as evidence of early Pauline theology.²¹ As a result, Romans, commonly regarded as the last among the undisputed letters of Paul, is widely regarded as the mature statement of Paul's theology. Indeed, traditional Protestant scholarship has followed Melancthon's statement that Romans is the compendium of Pauline theology. Indeed, James Dunn's *Pauline Theology* is based on Romans because it represents Paul's mature thought.²²

While development in Paul's theology remains a possibility, the capacity of the interpreter to follow the lines of development is less likely. If we consider the span of Paul's life and ministry, 1 Thessalonians, written seventeen years after Paul's conversion, is scarcely early Pauline theology. Indeed, the span of Paul's letter-writing activity is less than that of his life between his conversion/call and the writing of 1 Thessalonians. Furthermore, no consensus exists on the sequence of Paul's letters. The dating of both Galatians and Philippians, for example, is disputed. Furthermore, the tracing of the development of Paul's thought ignores the dialogical nature of his letters as the response to questions that were asked. Therefore, the one-dimensional treatment of Paul as theologian fails to acknowledge the relationship between his theology and his mode of communication.

The Other Layers: Sociology and Rhetoric in the Study of Paul

Attempts to determine the center of Paul's theology treat Paul as a man of ideas, examining only one strand of the total picture of Paul. Wolfgang Stegemann comments on Michael Wolter's *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, saying that both Paul and his readers appear to be "disembodied" in Wolter's

20. Cf. Söding, "Der erste Thessalonicherbrief," 184. Schnelle, *Apostle Paul*, 190–91.

21. Schnelle, *Apostle Paul*, 188. See Becker, *Paul*, 3: "If we consistently keep the chronological and dialogical position of a letter in view, we will make observations indicating that from his calling until his entry into Rome as a prisoner Paul did not present the same unchanged theology. Rather, with all constancy in a few crucial basic issues, he went through a development that was influenced by his own experiences, by interaction with his churches, and by early Christian history in general."

22. Dunn, *Theology of Paul*.

book: “Their faith has little to do with their bodies and their social reality” but involves especially cognitive contents and problems.²³ A similar critique could be offered of other treatments of Pauline theology that have routinely examined his theology in isolation from the circumstances of his churches, his rhetorical needs, and his own understanding of his task. Major studies of Pauline theology, including those of Ferdinand Hahn,²⁴ James Dunn,²⁵ and N. T. Wright,²⁶ give no attention to the rhetorical dimension in Pauline theology.

In the last generation, scholars have focused on other layers of Paul’s letters,²⁷ moving beyond the traditional confessional issues to explore, among other topics, Paul’s relationship to the empire,²⁸ ethnicity,²⁹ and gender³⁰—the questions that reflect our own intellectual climate. But the rise of sociological and rhetorical criticism has raised the question of the relationship between Paul’s theology and his strategies for persuasion—two layers in the study of Paul. Krister Stendahl argues that the doctrine of justification by faith is not the center but is instead a means of defending the gentile mission: “The doctrine of justification by faith was hammered out by Paul for the very specific and limited purpose of defending the rights of Gentile converts to be full and genuine heirs to the promise of God to Israel.”³¹ Some have argued that Paul employs strategies of community building and rhetoric to advance his theology, while others reduce his theology to strategy. For example, Francis Watson argues that “Pauline texts become much more readily comprehensible when one abandons this overtly theological approach.”³² He claims that Paul first preached to the gentiles as a result of the failure of his mission to the Jews: “Paul protests that his reasons for dispensing with the law are strictly theological ([Gal.] 2:15–5:11), but his own words in 1 Corinthians 9:21 and 10:32–33 prove that the setting aside of parts of the law was originally not a matter of theological principle but of practical expediency.” He adds, “To prevent their bitter experience of almost total rejection being repeated, they set aside some of the requirements of the law which would be most offensive

23. Stegemann, “Wie wörtlich?,” 196.

24. Hahn, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*.

25. Dunn, *Theology of Paul*.

26. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 2 vols.

27. See the surveys in Zetterholm, *Approaches to Paul*, and in Wright, *Paul and His Recent Interpreters*.

28. Cf. Horsley, *Paul and Empire*.

29. Cf. Hodge, *If Sons, Then Heirs*.

30. Cf. Ehrensperger, *That We May Be Mutually Encouraged*.

31. Stendahl, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles*, 2. The departure from the traditional Lutheran and evangelical view of justification as the center of Pauline theology was anticipated by Schweitzer, *Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, and Wrede, *Paul*.

32. F. Watson, *Paul, Judaism, and the Gentiles*, ix–x.

to Gentiles, and so ensured the success of their preaching. Paul's theological discussions about the law are therefore attempts to justify this essentially non-theological decision."³³ Employing the sociological categories of sectarian groups, Watson insists that the maintenance of the community as a distinct religious body requires an ideology legitimating its identity—that is, “a theoretical justification for its existence.”³⁴ Theology becomes strategy.

The rise of rhetorical criticism has also raised questions about the relationship between Paul's theology and his strategy. Scholars have increasingly acknowledged that Paul is not merely the source of disembodied ideas; his goal is to persuade the audience and affect their behavior. In the past generation, this relationship between theology and rhetoric has been a question of continuing concern.

The debate about Paul's rhetoric and theology begins with an examination of Paul's initial interaction with his churches. As one devoted to public speaking, he was naturally compared to the orators of his time by his converts, some of whom judged him “untrained in speech” (*idōtēs tō logō*, 2 Cor. 11:6; cf. 10:10). With his insistence that he did not employ “persuasive words of wisdom” (2 Cor. 2:4; cf. Gal. 1:10), he disavowed the practice that was the heart of ancient rhetoric.³⁵ Similarly, his denial that he employed flattery (cf. 1 Thess. 2:5) or attempted to please his audience (Gal. 1:10; 1 Thess. 2:4) distinguished him from the common perception of the rhetoricians.³⁶ His claim not to be among those who “peddle” (*kapēleuontes*) God's word (2 Cor. 2:17) echoes the criticism of the Sophists, who went about “hawking [*kapēleuō*] their doctrines to any odd purchaser who desire[d] them” (Plato, *Prot.* 313d). Indeed, Paul consistently refers to his public speaking in terms that are “decidedly nonrhetorical; rhetoricians did not use such verbs as *euangelizein*, *kēryssein*, and *katangelein* to describe their practice.”³⁷

Despite these disclaimers, Paul declares, “We persuade others” (2 Cor. 5:11). Indeed, this declaration introduces a dense argumentative section (2 Cor. 5:11–6:2) that is intended to persuade the Corinthians to “be reconciled to God” (2 Cor. 5:20). Thus persuasion plays a role in the letters. Paul develops theological arguments to state the implications of the gospel while

33. F. Watson, *Paul, Judaism, and the Gentiles*, 36.

34. F. Watson, *Paul, Judaism, and the Gentiles*, 20.

35. See Litfin, *Paul's Theology of Proclamation*, 262: “It was *πείθειν*, the calling forth of some particular judgment or verdict or conviction from the audience, that fired classical rhetoric.” See further discussion of persuasion (*πείθειν*) in chap. 2 of this study.

36. Cf. Seneca's *Votienus Montanus* in Seneca the Elder, *Controversiae*. “If you prepare a declamation beforehand, you write not to win but to please. . . . Your aim is to win approval for yourself rather than for the case.” Cited in Litfin, *Paul's Theology of Proclamation*, 86.

37. Litfin, *Paul's Theology of Proclamation*, 184.

providing his community with arguments that they can then employ against opponents (cf. 2 Cor. 5:12). While his original preaching is an announcement of the good news, the letters both restate the original message and develop arguments consistent with his ultimate goal for his churches.

As interpreters since Augustine have noted, Paul argues with rhetorical competence. While we know little about his rhetorical training,³⁸ we recognize abundant evidence that his letters were not “boxes full of theology.”³⁹ As his opponents conceded, “His letters are weighty and strong” (2 Cor. 10:10). Scholars have examined both his arrangement and his style, demonstrating the coherence of his arguments and classifying stylistic features into rhetorical categories. Lauri Thurén has pointed out that Paul’s statements are not always to be taken at face value, for he speaks with irony (cf. 1 Cor. 4:8–9; 2 Cor. 11:20), frequently exaggerates,⁴⁰ and employs praise as a means of ethical persuasion. Paul’s task is not only to inform or to educate but also to affect the readers and to shape their behavior. Consequently, contradictory statements may be accounted for by differing persuasive tasks.⁴¹ Thus the relationship between Paul’s theology and rhetoric is a persistent issue in Pauline scholarship.

The traditional model approaches theology and rhetoric as separate disciplines. Many treat rhetoric and theology as rooted in the classic distinction between form and content, *res* and *verba*. One can change the form without changing the content.⁴² Johannes Weiss, who offered an extensive treatment of Paul’s rhetorical style, suggests that one should discern between rhetorical devices in a text and the “doctrine that is already fixed and pronounced.”⁴³ Rudolf Bultmann, who wrote both a study of Pauline rhetoric and the classic *New Testament Theology*,⁴⁴ assumed that theology was the content and

38. Cf. Hübner, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, 2:27. The question of Paul’s rhetorical education has been a center of debate. Porter, “Ancient Literate Culture,” 103, suggests that Paul went through Greek grammar school in Tarsus. Vegge, *Paulus und das antike Schulwesen*, 462, maintains that Paul was taught the *progymnasmata* by a teacher of rhetoric.

39. The expression is from Hartman, “Galatians 3:15–4:11,” 127.

40. Cf. Rom. 1:8, “Your faith is made known throughout the world” (AT); “You that abhor idols, do you rob temples?” (Rom. 2:23 AT). See other examples in Thurén, *Derhetorizing Paul*, 33–34. See also Cosby, “Galatians,” 296–300: “When Paul equates living under the law with slavery in Galatians 3–4, his stark assertions overstate his true attitude toward the law. Does the former Pharisee, who in another rhetorical context proudly claims that his righteousness under the law was blameless (Phil. 3:6), literally believe that living under the law is living under a curse?”

41. Thurén, *Derhetorizing Paul*, 181.

42. Lampe, “Theology and Rhetoric,” 90–91.

43. Weiss, *Beiträge zur paulinische Rhetorik*, 6.

44. Cf. Bultmann, *Der Stil der paulinischen Predigt*; Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*.

rhetoric was the form. Unfortunately, most studies of Pauline theology do not engage in rhetorical analysis.

According to another model, Paul maintains a coherent set of convictions, but rhetoric and theology are interwoven in various ways. Paul is not an opportunist who changes positions to please his audience but one who employs rhetoric to defend the truth of the gospel. According to Jürgen Becker, Paul employs rhetoric primarily in polemical texts such as Galatians, where the needs of polemic prevent Paul from giving a well-balanced view of the law and faith.⁴⁵ Indeed, “Whoever wants to understand Paul must distinguish between his serious concerns and his polemical attacks.”⁴⁶ Similarly, J. Christiaan Beker, in distinguishing between the coherence and the contingency of Paul’s argument, maintains that Paul is a coherent thinker who holds a firm set of convictions while employing rhetorical devices to fit specific contexts: “Without a coherent center, Paul [would] degenerate into a purely opportunistic theologian, who, with the help of various rhetorical skills, adapts the gospel to whatever the sociological situation demands.”⁴⁷

Lauri Thurén recognizes the rhetorical dimension but argues that the interpreter’s task is to distinguish between the theology and the rhetoric of Paul’s letters. Taking Galatians as his example, he argues that the purpose of Galatians is not theoretical; it is to persuade the community to follow Paul, not the other teachers.⁴⁸ Consequently, Paul does not record all of his thoughts but presents a one-sided view for rhetorical effect.⁴⁹ The interpreter’s task, therefore, is to “derhetorize”—to separate the theological statements from the exaggeration and pathos that have a rhetorical effect.

By analyzing Paul’s letters in chronological order and by applying rhetorical analysis to each letter, Hans Hübner tries to illuminate the dynamic character of Paul’s theology. According to Hübner, theological thinking for Paul is theological arguing. Argumentation is the development of thought about theological questions, and in his argumentation, the apostle shows rhetorical competence.⁵⁰ “Theology is a process of developing convincing arguments in a specific rhetorical situation in which content of theological thought and contingent rhetoric are intertwined. Only the convictional core—the proclamation of the gospel of justification, for example—is not touched by rhetoric.”⁵¹

45. Becker, *Paul*, 303.

46. Becker, *Paul*, 304.

47. Beker, “Paul’s Theology,” 367–68.

48. Thurén, *Derhetorizing Paul*, 92–94.

49. Thurén, *Derhetorizing Paul*, 92.

50. Hübner, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, 2:26–27.

51. Lampe, “Theology and Rhetoric,” 94. See Hübner, “Die Rhetorik und die Theologie,” 168–69.

According to another model, theology and rhetoric do not relate as content and form. Rather, the theological content is part of the rhetorical means in persuading the audience.⁵² In examining the theology of Ephesians, Andrew T. Lincoln insists that the letter is not primarily focused on communicating coherent ideas. It is a letter written for pastoral purposes: “It achieves its purposes by rhetorical means, by adopting a strategy of persuasion. In his attempt to persuade, the writer constructs a symbolic universe, which the readers are expected to share to a large extent.”⁵³

Johan S. Vos recalls the ancient debates between the Platonists and the rhetoricians, comparing them with the contemporary discussion on the relationship between theology and rhetoric in Paul. According to the Platonists, truth exists apart from human opinions and the means by which truth is expressed. Platonists, then, distinguished between the *res* (the conceptual content) and the *verba* (the words) used to communicate the *res*.⁵⁴

According to the (neo)-sophistic view, truth is contingent, something the orator creates. Truth is “what communities are persuaded of at any particular time.”⁵⁵ Some scholars interpret Paul in Platonic terms, ignoring the rhetorical dimension of his arguments. Other scholars take a neo-sophistic view, interpreting theology as a form of strategy.

Paul, Persuasion, and the Goals of the Orator

For ancient orators, all strategies of persuasion were determined by the orator’s goal of gaining the appropriate result from the listeners: the acceptance of the argument. In the search for the center of Pauline theology, little attention has been given to Paul’s understanding of God’s *telos* for the world and humankind. With the exception of Philemon, all the undisputed letters, as well as Colossians and Ephesians, declare God’s ultimate purpose. Missing from the discussion of rhetoric and theology in Paul, however, is the apostle’s own understanding of himself and his goals, which he states on numerous occasions. Paul consistently announces the aims that govern his persuasion, both in summary statements of his ultimate ambition and in his prayers for the congregations. The *telos* of his ministry aligns with God’s *telos*, for he has been called to be God’s servant. The letters are not theological essays but his means of persuading the readers to reach that goal.

52. Lampe, “Theology and Rhetoric,” 95.

53. Lincoln, “Theology of Ephesians,” 76.

54. Vos, “Rhetoric and Theology in the Letters,” 172.

55. Guthrie, *Sophists*, 51.

Telos in Paul's Prayer Reports

The introductory thanksgivings, or prayer reports, provide an important indicator of the central concerns and telos of Pauline thought. Unlike the rare thanksgivings in Hellenistic letters,⁵⁶ Paul's prayer reports express gratitude for the community's moral progress from the time of their conversion until Paul writes ("from the first day until now," Phil. 1:5; cf. 1 Thess. 1:5–10; Philem. 3–5). Paul Schubert observes that an eschatological climax also appears frequently in the thanksgivings,⁵⁷ as Paul looks toward the end, reflecting his understanding of a community that is in the middle of a corporate narrative that stands between the past and the future under the power of God.⁵⁸

In his prayer reports, Paul describes the end of the narrative as "the day of our Lord Jesus" (1 Cor. 1:8), "the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:6), "the day of Christ" (Phil. 1:10), and the parousia (1 Thess. 3:13). Elsewhere in his letters, he speaks of "the day of the Lord" (1 Cor. 5:5; 2 Cor. 1:14; 1 Thess. 5:2), "the day of wrath" (Rom. 2:5), "the day when . . . God judges the secrets of the heart" (Rom. 2:16), "the day of Christ" (Phil. 2:16), or simply "the day" (Rom. 13:12; 1 Cor. 3:13), adapting the prophetic expectation of the day of the Lord to the hope of believers for the return of Christ. For Paul, the Lord is the exalted Christ, who will descend from heaven (1 Thess. 4:16; cf. Phil. 3:20; 1 Thess. 1:10). Living between the past of God's saving acts and the future day of the Lord, the community waits for the ultimate redemption (1 Cor. 1:7; Gal. 5:5; Phil. 3:20; 1 Thess. 1:10). Thus the church stands in the middle of a corporate narrative.

This interim period is a time of moral transformation, for Paul consistently expresses confidence (1 Cor. 1:8) or prays that his communities will be morally formed at the day of Christ. Paul uses a variety of synonyms, frequently terms with the alpha privative, to describe this transformed community.

Speaking to a deeply flawed community in Corinth, Paul expresses the confidence that God "will strengthen [the Corinthians], so that [they] are blameless [*anenklētos*] until the end at the day of the Lord" (1 Cor. 1:8). *Anenklētos*, a term used in the Septuagint only in 3 Maccabees 5:31, is a judicial image describing one against whom no one can bring charges (cf. Rom.

56. Contrary to the widespread belief that the thanksgiving was common at the beginning of Hellenistic letters, Peter Arzt has demonstrated that the thanksgiving was not a common component of the Hellenistic letter. See Arzt, "'Epistolary Introductory Thanksgiving' in the Papyri and in Paul."

57. Schubert, *Form and Function of the Pauline Thanksgivings*, 4–9; cf. Pao, "Constraints of an Epistolary Form," 123.

58. Pao, "Constraints of an Epistolary Form," 125.

8:33, “Who can bring charges against God’s elect?”⁵⁹ In Colossians 1:22, it is used synonymously with “holy [*hagios*] and unblemished [*amōmos*]” (AT), and in the Pastoral Epistles, the term is used for the requirements for Christian leaders (cf. 1 Tim. 3:10; Titus 1:6–7). Paul emphasizes that it is God who is at work to transform a morally deficient community into one that is irreproachable at the end (1 Cor. 1:8).

In Philippians, Paul adds a petition to his introductory thanksgiving (Phil. 1:9–11), praying that the community will be “sincere [*eilikrinēs*] and faultless [*aproskopos*] at the day of Christ” (Phil. 1:10). *Eilikrinēs*, literally “unmixed, without alloy,”⁶⁰ signifies the sincerity and purity of motive (1 Cor. 5:8; Plato, *Phaed.* 66) that Paul claims for himself (cf. 2 Cor. 2:17). With *aproskopos*, literally “without giving offense,”⁶¹ Paul elaborates on the meaning of these terms, indicating that the faultless behavior involves love that grows increasingly in full knowledge and discernment (Phil. 1:9), the capacity to discern the better things (Phil. 1:10), and a life that demonstrates “the fruit of righteousness” (Phil. 1:11 NIV). Indeed, as in 1 Corinthians, Paul is confident that the God who began a good work among the Philippians will bring it to completion at the day of Christ (Phil. 1:6) in a transformed community.

In 1 Thessalonians, Paul offers thanksgiving for the community’s moral progress in 1:2–10 and later prays to God that the Lord will cause them to “increase and abound in love for one another and for all” and that they will be “blameless [*amemptos*] in holiness [*hagiōsynē*] before our God and Father at the parousia” (1 Thess. 3:12–13). *Amemptos* is a common term in the Old Testament for the righteous person (cf. Gen. 17:1 LXX) and is especially prominent in the Wisdom of Solomon and Job. According to Wisdom 10:5, it is synonymous with *righteousness* (cf. Luke 1:6), and in Wisdom 10:15, it is synonymous with *holy*. Job was “blameless and upright” (Job 1:1, 8), unlike anyone else on earth. His blamelessness is a constant thread throughout the drama of the book (cf. Job 4:17; 9:20; 11:4; 12:4; 15:14; 33:9). Paul, prior to his conversion, was also *amemptos* in keeping the law (Phil. 3:6).

In the concluding benediction in 1 Thessalonians (5:23), Paul reinforces the prayer of 3:11–13, praying that God will sanctify the community wholly, that their “spirit and soul and body” will be “blameless” (*amemptos*) at the parousia. Thus, while they are incomplete in their faith at the moment (cf. 3:8), Paul prays that God will act to sanctify them in preparation for the end.

59. W. Grundmann, “ἀνέγκλητος,” *TDNT* 1:357.

60. BDAG 282.

61. BDAG 125.

As the two prayer reports in 1 Thessalonians indicate (3:11–13; 5:23), the moral formation that Paul describes is the process of sanctification. *Hagiōsynē* signifies holiness as a completed process (cf. 2 Cor. 7:1), the work that God has brought “to completion by the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:6), while the verb *hagiasai* (1 Thess. 5:23) points to the continuing process in which God is at work. This process is especially evident in the prayer that the Thessalonians “increase and abound in love for one another and for all” (1 Thess. 3:12) and in the instruction that the Thessalonians’ sanctification (*hagiasmos*) involves an appropriate sexual ethic (1 Thess. 4:3, 7). Thus just as God called Israel to be holy as God is holy (Lev. 19:2), Paul envisions a process in which the church, which lives in continuity with Israel, becomes what God intended Israel to be before the end.

Paul’s prayers probably also reflect Israel’s hope that a flawed people would ultimately stand before God as a restored and righteous community.⁶² Trito-Isaiah looks forward to the return from exile when the people will be righteous (*dikaioi*, Isa. 60:21). Zechariah promises a restored Israel in which the people will “speak truth to one another,” “render . . . judgments that are true and make for peace,” and “love no false oaths” (Zech. 8:16–17). Jeremiah anticipates a new covenant in which the law is written on the hearts of the people (Jer. 31:31–34), and Ezekiel anticipates a time when God will intervene to cleanse Israel and make them follow his statutes (Ezek. 36:25–27). Similarly, 1 *Enoch* 10:21 anticipates the time when “the children of the earth will become righteous, and all nations shall worship and bless [the Lord].” Like the prophets, Paul looks forward to the end of Israel’s narrative and the restoration of a righteous people from all the nations of the earth. In describing the telos of moral formation for his communities, Paul also encourages his communities indirectly to be shaped by his ethical vision.

Telos in Paul’s Pastoral Goals

Paul consistently announces his own pastoral goals, indicating that he is not only the herald who preaches where Christ has not been named (Rom. 15:19–20) but also the servant who anticipates presenting a sanctified people to God at the day of the Lord. He is God’s instrument for bringing God’s purpose for humanity to completion, and his goals align with the purposes of God. This alignment is evident in 1 Thessalonians, his earliest letter. Not only does he pray for a blameless people at the parousia, but he also expresses his mission to establish their moral formation. Using parental imagery (1 Thess.

62. See Chester, *Future Hope and Present Reality*, 1:325.

2:17; cf. 2:7–8), he declares that the church is his “hope or joy or crown of boasting” (1 Thess. 2:19) at the parousia and his “glory and joy!” (1 Thess. 2:20). This “crown of boasting” is apparently their blamelessness and holiness at the day of Christ (cf. 1 Thess. 3:13).

In Philippians, Paul prays for the moral formation of the community in 1:9–11 and then declares that his goal is that the community be “blameless [*amōmoi*] and pure [*akeraioi*] in a crooked and perverse generation” (Phil. 2:15 AT) and his “boast [*kauchēma*] on the day of Christ” (Phil. 2:16). *Amōmos*, which can be used for those who have no physical or moral defects,⁶³ is a term the Septuagint frequently employs for those who keep God’s commands. The psalmist speaks of those who “walk blamelessly” (Ps. 15:2 [14:2 LXX]; cf. 18:23 [17:23 LXX]; 19:13 [18:13 LXX]; 37:18 [36:18 LXX]; 119:1, 80 [118:1, 80 LXX]), and the wisdom literature speaks of those who are morally blameless (Prov. 11:20; Sir. 40:19; Eccles. 11:9). The term can be used synonymously with *righteous(ness)* (cf. Prov. 11:5; 20:7; Isa. 33:15). According to Ephesians (1:4), God’s plan from the beginning was a people that would be “holy [*hagios*] and blameless [*amōmos*]”; and Christ, as a result of his death (Eph. 5:27; cf. Col. 1:22), will present to himself a church that is holy (*hagia*) and blameless (*amōmos*).

Paul adds to *amōmos* in Philippians 2:15 the synonymous word “innocent” (*akeraios*), a term that was used for “that which is still in its original state of intactness” in reference to a country, city, or walls but then became used metaphorically for the moral purity⁶⁴ that should characterize his communities at the end (cf. Rom. 16:19, “guileless in what is evil”).

As in 1 Thessalonians (3:13; 5:23), Paul associates the final outcome of his churches with sanctification. In summarizing his purpose in writing Romans as the apologetic for his ministry (Rom. 15:14–21), he describes himself in priestly terms, declaring that he is a servant (*leitourgos*) doing priestly service (*hierourgounta*) “so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified in the Spirit” (Rom. 15:16). Sanctification is the completed process that began with the gentile community’s baptism (cf. Rom. 6:1–21; 1 Cor. 6:11) and continued as converts yielded themselves to *hagiasmos* (Rom. 6:19, 22). His calling for the “obedience of . . . the Gentiles,” mentioned at the beginning and end of Romans (1:5; 15:18), is complete when Paul offers the gentiles as a sacrifice to God at the completion of his work.

Paul’s presentation of a blameless church is also suggested by his use of *paristēmi* (to present someone), which can be either a technical term for

63. Cf. Hauck, “ἄμωμος,” *TDNT* 4:830–31. In the Septuagint, it is most often used for physical perfection in a cultic sense—i.e., for the offering or the priest who is qualified to sacrifice.

64. Kittel, “ἀκέραιος,” *TDNT* 1:209.

presenting a sacrifice (cf. Rom. 12:1) or a legal term for presenting someone to a judge.⁶⁵ According to 2 Corinthians, “The one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also and present [“bring into his presence,” NRSV] us with you” (2 Cor. 4:14 AT) in the future. Paul is the father of the bride who betrothed his daughter and now protects his daughter in order that he may present her as a pure virgin to Christ (2 Cor. 11:2). Thus the final day is a time when a pure church will be presented to Christ.

Paul describes this completed task as his “boast” (*kauchēsis*, Rom. 15:17), a term that he employs frequently in describing his mission, along with the related term *kauchēma*, which is used for describing what one is “proud of.” In 2 Corinthians, his boast (*kauchēsis*) is that he has acted with integrity and sincerity (2 Cor. 1:12), and his goal is that the church will be his boast (*kauchēma*) and he will be theirs at the day of Christ (2 Cor. 1:14). Similarly, when he declares in Philippians his goal that the church be “blameless” and “without blemish” (Phil. 2:15 AT), he adds, “It is by your holding fast to the word of life that I can boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor in vain” (Phil. 2:16). This boasting is the equivalent of exultation and joy (Rom. 5:1, 10–11; 2 Cor. 7:4; 1 Thess. 2:19; cf. Phil. 4:1), especially the pride one takes in others. Paul boasts about his converts in the present (2 Cor. 7:4, 14–15, 16; 9:2), and he hopes that they will be his pride and joy at the end.

Despite Paul’s hope that God will complete his work at the end (Phil. 1:6) and that his community will be his “boast” at the day of Christ, he considers the possibility that he will have “run . . . in vain” (Phil. 2:16), a concern that he expresses frequently in the letters (cf. Gal. 2:2; 4:11; 1 Thess. 3:5). He therefore challenges the Corinthians not to “receive the grace of God in vain” (2 Cor. 6:1 NASB). Paul’s language echoes the words of the servant in Isaiah 49:4, who says, “I have labored in vain.” Thus, when Paul declares, “I fear that I have labored in vain” (Gal. 4:11 AT) and “I can boast . . . that I did not run in vain” (Phil. 2:16), he identifies with the servant, who has been called to restore the fortunes of Israel and be “a light to the nations” (Isa. 49:6). As Philippians 2:16 indicates, either Paul is the servant who will have a transformed and blameless community as his pride and joy (cf. 1 Thess. 2:19) or he will have run in vain. Elsewhere, using imagery from family life, he describes himself as the pregnant mother in the pangs of childbirth until the infant is “formed” in his churches (Gal. 4:19).

The consistent feature of Paul’s letters is ethical exhortation, which is anticipated in the thanksgivings and developed in the correspondence. He gives thanks for the Romans’ faith (Rom. 1:8), for the Thessalonians’ “work

65. BDAG 778.

of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope” (1 Thess. 1:3), and for Philemon’s love and faith (Philem. 5); and he prays for the moral progress of the Philippians (Phil. 1:9–11) and Thessalonians (1 Thess. 3:11–13). In his initial catechetical instruction, Paul is like a father, “urging and encouraging . . . and pleading” that his converts conduct themselves worthily of the God who calls them “into his own kingdom and glory” (1 Thess. 2:12). His correspondence is a continuation of his appeal for the community’s moral formation in preparation for the parousia (1 Thess. 2:19). The telos of Paul’s ministry determines his persuasive task, and theology and rhetoric are instruments for reaching that goal.

Theology and Rhetoric and Paul’s Persuasive Task

Because an understanding of Paul comes only when one can see more than one layer at a time, this book will demonstrate that theology and rhetoric are not alternative approaches to Paul but inseparable parts of his persuasion of others. While Paul’s knowledge of ancient rhetoric is a matter of debate, the analytical tools of classical rhetoric are useful means for examining his arguments.⁶⁶ Of the five dimensions of rhetoric (invention, arrangement, style, memory, delivery), I shall focus primarily on arrangement and invention (argumentation), the choice of arguments that support the basic thesis of the communication. This type of argumentation begins with the common ground shared by the speaker and listener in order to modify or confirm what the listener already believes. As one dimension of argumentation, persuasion involves changing the behavior of the listeners. According to Lauri Thurén, “In order to persuade, the author usually needs to give reasons for the change; to give such reasons and to justify them so that the recipients’ opinions are affected is called argument. It becomes persuasion if the goal is to create in the recipients a volition to act in some way.”⁶⁷

Paul engages in persuasion to shape the behavior of the listeners. He is not an opportunist but one who holds convictions for which he is willing to die. He articulates these convictions in fulfilling the telos of his work: the presentation of a transformed people to God. He elaborates on these convictions in a dialogue with his converts in response to their questions or misunderstandings of his message. Paul states these convictions in all of the

66. See Kennedy, *Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism*, 10. See also Schellenberg, *Rethinking Paul’s Rhetorical Education*, 185–99. Schellenberg analyzes a speech of Red Jacket, a Native American, describing his eloquence and demonstrating the use of rhetorical means of persuasion identified by the classical rhetoricians.

67. Thurén, “On Studying Ethical Argumentation and Persuasion,” 468.

letters as the foundation for his pastoral instructions. Indeed, theology is a dimension of persuasion as it serves Paul's pastoral purposes.⁶⁸

In chapter 1, I shall explore the nature of Paul's rhetoric, demonstrating that Paul both employs the rhetoric of his time and creates a new prophetic rhetoric. As an educated man, he is familiar with both ancient letter writing and oratory, yet his arguments and authority distinguish his communication from that of his contemporaries. Indeed, he created a new rhetoric.

Paul's arguments are based on premises that distinguish his persuasion. Consistent with his Pharisaic upbringing, he continues to hold to the basic narrative of the one God who chose Israel and promised to rectify the world's lost condition in a new covenant when God vindicates the faithful and punishes the wicked. These are convictions that he did not abandon. In chapter 2, I will explore these premises to his argument.

Paul also inherited premises from Jesus and the early church. From Jesus, he inherited the conviction that the new age has dawned and that the people of God live between the time of the coming of the kingdom and its ultimate realization. He inherited from the early church the basic christological and soteriological confessions that also became premises to his arguments. Chapter 3 is an examination of the premises that Paul inherited from Jesus and the early church.

In chapter 4, I shall explore the transforming event that reshaped Paul's most basic convictions and separated him from the Jewish community. He argues autobiographically and with a prophetic rhetoric that is rooted in the transformative event in his life. Like the ancient orators, he appeals to his own ethos, but it is an ethos that is shaped by the gospel. His understanding of himself is an important basis for his theology.

Paul's letters consist of theological argumentation as he reflects on the basic premises in dialogue with his communities. New rhetorical situations call for theological elaboration on various themes. In chapter 5, I will explore Paul's first letter (1 Thessalonians), noting the categories that Paul inherited and transformed in Christ. This letter is an appropriate place to begin not only because it is Paul's first letter but also because it is most clearly the continuation of his earlier catechesis. It does not offer an extended development of the major theological themes but alludes to all of the major theological categories as part of his catechetical work. He is apparently not arguing against misunderstandings but is employing theological categories as part of his effort at community formation. As the shape of the letter indicates, Paul employs theology as the foundation for persuading the community to

68. See Wischmeyer, "Themes in Pauline Theology," 285.

maintain appropriate behavior. I do not assume that 1 Thessalonians is an early stage in a developing theology but believe, rather, that it is an example of theology as catechesis. Subsequent chapters will demonstrate the process of theologizing in response to the issues in the churches.

In 1 Thessalonians, Paul assumes the christological confession that Jesus is the Son of God and Lord, placing Jesus Christ alongside God, but he does not develop the subject. While he never offers a detailed discussion of Christology, he elaborates on the subject most in Philippians, where the christological hymn is the premise of his effort at moral formation, and in the Corinthian correspondence, where it is the basis of moral instruction. Chapter 6 will explore the persuasive nature of Paul's christological claims.

The Corinthian correspondence responds to new issues, calling forth Paul's most extensive elaboration on the meaning of the cross and of Christian community. Paul has introduced creedal statements interpreting the death of Jesus (cf. 1 Thess. 4:14; 5:10) but has not developed them at length. Chapter 7 will treat the Corinthian correspondence as a window into Paul's soteriology and ecclesiology. Paul makes major theological arguments before describing the significance of theology for ethics.

From the beginning of Paul's ministry, he has welcomed gentiles but has not offered a theological explanation. Under the pressure of opponents, Paul offers the explanation in Galatians. Here for the first time he elaborates on justification by faith, a topic that he has introduced earlier but now develops extensively. Chapter 8 is an initial examination of both the conditions that led to Paul's articulation of justification by faith and the issues to which he responds as he persuades the community to reject life under the law and to maintain a life governed by the Spirit.

Romans is a further elaboration on justification by faith. Paul repeats some of the argument of Galatians and corrects misunderstandings of his earlier argument in a new situation. New questions arising from Galatians require Paul to articulate his anthropology, elaborate on the doctrine of the Spirit, and offer a theological discussion of the hope of Israel. This is the subject of chapter 9.

Most Pauline theologies treat only the undisputed letters of Paul. Chapter 10 will demonstrate the continuity between these letters and Paul in Ephesians and Colossians, and chapter 11 will examine the continuity between Paul's persuasive aims in the Pastoral Epistles and those in the undisputed letters. The conclusion will contain reflections on the place of rhetoric and theology in Paul's persuasive task, indicating that Pauline theology is a reflection on his basic premises in dialogue with the rhetorical situation.

1

The Rhetoric of Paul's Letters

Although the letter is a common means of overcoming the distance between the sender and the recipient in both Greco-Roman and Jewish literature, Paul is the one who made the letter the primary mode of communication. In the presence of his converts, he is a man of the spoken word, but in his absence, he writes letters (cf. 2 Cor. 10:10–11). While letters are embedded in the narrative, prophetic, and apocalyptic works in the Old Testament and Jewish literature, with Paul they become a new form of literature and a model for both canonical writings and the Christian literature of subsequent generations. Paul dictates letters, assuming that they will be read orally to an assembled congregation, maintain contact with his converts, reiterate earlier teaching, correct misunderstandings, and shape the behavior of his community. As the substitute for Paul's presence and the continuation of his earlier instruction, the letters play a vital role in his goal of presenting a blameless people to God at the parousia. This goal requires that he demonstrate his affection for his readers and respond to danger, often with extended theological arguments.

Interpreters have agreed with the author of 2 Peter, however, that Paul's letters are "hard to understand" (2 Pet. 3:16; cf. 2 Cor. 1:13). In the past century, scholars have recognized that a key to the interpretation of Paul's letters is the identification of the genre in which he speaks. While both Paul and his opponents identify his communications as epistles (cf. 2 Cor. 7:8; 10:9–10), the unresolved question is the relationship between Paul's epistles and the literary conventions of his time. Today scholars debate whether Paul's letters conform to the conventions of ancient epistles or of ancient rhetoric.

Epistolography and the Letters of Paul

A new era in the study of Paul's letters began with the publication of two books by Adolf Deissmann, *Bible Studies* and *Light from the Ancient East*.¹ Deissmann examines ancient papyrus letters and demonstrates that Paul's letters conformed to conventions of his time. The identification of the author and sender at the beginning of the letters is parallel to the beginning of a Hellenistic letter, and the expression of grace (*charis*) is a Christian adaptation of the customary greeting (*chairein*). Deissmann and others suggest that the introductory thanksgivings also conformed to ancient letter writing.² Like Paul's correspondence, ancient letters also concluded with greetings from acquaintances.

While Deissmann's discoveries demonstrate parallels between the frame of Paul's letters and the letter-writing conventions of his time, they do not provide significant insight into the body of the letters. In the 1970s, scholars examined other papyrus letters further in order to determine the generic characteristics of the body of the Pauline letter, observing other conventions in ancient correspondence.³ The disclosure form ("I want you to know"; "I do not want you to be ignorant") at the beginning of the body of Paul's letters (cf. Rom. 1:13; 2 Cor. 1:8; Phil. 1:12) also marked the beginning of the body of some ancient letters. Ancient letters also commonly included a request introduced by *parakalō* ("I appeal to you"), which consistently appears in Paul's letters.⁴ Besides these characteristics, however, scholars were unable to draw significant parallels between the body of the ancient papyrus letter and the body of the Pauline letter.⁵ Recent studies have also shown that the thanksgiving at the beginning of the letter was rare among ancient letters,⁶ and none involved gratitude for the readers' moral formation. Unlike Paul's letters, the papyrus letters were brief and private, not instruments for teaching and moral formation.

Since the 1980s, scholars have examined the ancient literary theorists and the model letters they provided, comparing them to Paul's letters. A handbook on letter writing, *De elocutione*, written between the third and first centuries BCE and falsely attributed to Demetrius of Phalerum,⁷ offers

1. Deissmann, *Bible Studies*; Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*.

2. Cf. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, 168; Schubert, *Form and Function of the Pauline Thanksgivings*, 180.

3. See White, *Form and Function of the Body of the Greek Letter*, 1.

4. Stowers, *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, 24.

5. See Classen, "Theory of Rhetoric," 27–36.

6. Arzt-Grabner, "Paul's Letter Thanksgiving," 143.

7. Malherbe, *Ancient Epistolary Theorists*, 2.

an excursus on writing in the “plain style.” The handbook then lists twenty-one types of letters, giving an example of each.⁸ Centuries later (between the fourth and sixth centuries CE), a handbook attributed to Libanius (*Epistolary Styles*) defines the letter as a written conversation with someone who is absent and lists forty-one types of letters. Scholars have identified several of these letter types with Pauline letters. Pseudo-Demetrius’s model of a friendly letter, for example, expresses the kind of intimacy with the recipient that is common in Paul’s letters. The model of a commendatory letter recalls recommendations in Paul’s letters (cf. Rom. 16:1–2). The consoling type also has points of contact with Pauline letters (cf. 1 Thess. 4:13–5:11). The apologetic type has been proposed as the letter type of Galatians, and Libanius mentions the paraenetic letter, which Abraham Malherbe proposes as the literary genre of 1 Thessalonians.⁹ However, while Paul’s letters have points of contact with these epistolary types, they cannot be identified with any of them, for Paul’s letters are much longer than the ancient examples. Indeed, several of these epistolary types appear in single Pauline letters, making the identification of the Pauline letter with any of them problematic.¹⁰

Paul’s letters have points of contact with other types of letters as well. Official letters, like Paul’s correspondence, were written by an authoritative person to a community and intended for wider dissemination. As in Paul’s letters, the senders indicated their authority, adding the title and position of responsibility, and often provided the names of cosenders. The authors issued directives, made announcements, and indicated that the message was intended for a distinct audience, all of whom were responsible to comply with the instructions.¹¹

The philosophical letter also offers some parallels. In the first century CE, philosophers employed the letter as an instrument for philosophical instruction. The letters of Plato and Aristotle were significant models. Letters were a means for philosophers to maintain contact with, and disseminate their teachings to, followers in distant places.¹² Several of the letters of Epicurus have survived in which the philosopher presented his philosophy. Preserved in Diogenes Laertius are letters epitomizing his philosophy (to Herodotus), summarizing his meteorology and his morality (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives*

8. Malherbe, *Ancient Epistolary Theorists*, 2.

9. Malherbe, *Letters to the Thessalonians*, 83.

10. Martin, “Investigating the Pauline Letter Body,” 195.

11. Stirewalt, *Paul, the Letter Writer*, 45–46; Aune, *New Testament in Its Literary Environment*, 164–65; Adams, “Paul’s Letter Opening and Greek Epistolography,” 37.

12. Eckstein, *Gemeinde, Brief und Heilsbotschaft*, 92.

10.34–83). A letter could include personal communications, teaching, or responses to attacks.¹³

Scholars have also shown parallels between Pauline correspondence and Seneca's letters to Lucilius. These letters contain Seneca's philosophy and consist of philosophical teaching followed by moral exhortation. Seneca presents his moral progress as an example for his pupil to follow.

While one may observe the parallels between Paul's correspondence and ancient letters, his letters do not fit into any category.¹⁴ They contain the personal warmth of the friendly letter, the authoritative quality of the official letter to multiple recipients, the extended presentation of his teaching comparable to the philosophical letter, and the hortatory dimension of the paraenetic letter. Within his letters are commendations (Rom. 16:1–2), expressions of consolation (1 Thess. 4:13–18), and mediation (Philemon), all of which have points of contact with ancient letters. These are only partial parallels, however. Nothing in ancient letter writing corresponds to the authoritative voice of Paul, who speaks not only for himself but also for God. He not only offers moral advice, like that of Seneca to Lucilius, but also declares the will of God (cf. 1 Thess. 4:3). In the letters in which he needs to assert his authority, he identifies himself as an apostle sent by God.¹⁵

Letters that respond to the questions and crises of the community are also unparalleled.¹⁶ Paul writes to the churches that he founded in a process of interaction over the issues facing the church. In some instances, he writes to reaffirm and encourage, and in other instances, he writes in response to crises that threaten his work. He writes with "anxiety for all the churches" (2 Cor. 11:28) and the goal of ensuring their ultimate transformation. In contrast, we know little about the interlocutors in ancient philosophical letters.

The most distinguishing feature of Paul's letters is their length. While the sample letters prove useful for understanding specific sections of Pauline letter bodies, they do not provide a convincing parallel to the body of the Pauline letter. We have found no parallels to a letter written to a community and containing extended teaching and paraenesis. Indeed, Pseudo-Demetrius forbids letters that are overly didactic, maintaining that neither moral exhortation nor philosophizing is fitting in a letter: "If anybody should write of logical subtleties or questions of natural history in a letter, he writes indeed,

13. Eckstein, *Gemeinde, Brief und Heilsbotschaft*, 93.

14. Adams, "Paul's Letter Opening and Greek Epistolography," 38.

15. See Tite, "How to Begin, and Why?," 66, 75.

16. Cf. Pitts, "Philosophical and Epistolary Contexts," 277: "Seneca's correspondent, Lucilius, is referenced very little and, given the immense amount of material written to this young philosopher, one can gather only a few details regarding his life and situation."

but not a letter.”¹⁷ Nor do we find the personal engagement and interaction with a community that we find in Paul's letters. “Within these conventional structures, variously modified, Paul stretches the letter form almost to the breaking point. He writes elaborate theological arguments, personal appeals, denunciations, and ethical paraenesis, all designed to be delivered in speech to the assemblies of his converts.”¹⁸ According to Ryan Schellenberg, “Clearly, if Paul knew anything about conventional epistolary style, he flagrantly violated its strictures.”¹⁹ One cannot find ancient letters with corresponding length, genre, function, and communicative conventions.²⁰

Rhetoric and the Letters of Paul

Both Paul and his opponents insist that he is not a rhetorician (cf. 2 Cor. 10:10; 11:6). His denial that he persuades (1 Cor. 2:4; Gal. 1:10) or pleases others (Gal. 1:10; 1 Thess. 2:4) indicates his refusal to be classified among the rhetoricians. When he denies that he attempts to please (*areskein*) others, he assures his readers that he does not employ the tactics of the rhetoricians. In Galatians 1:10, he initiates the argument for his apostolic authority, asking, “Do I please people or God?” (AT). In a series of sharp contrasts between his proclamation and that of the wandering preachers in 1 Thessalonians, he insists that he does not attempt to please his listeners (1 Thess. 2:4) or flatter them as “a pretext for greed” (1 Thess. 2:5), a practice often identified with the Sophists.²¹ In denying that he pleases or flatters others for gain, Paul echoes the ancient debate between the Platonists and the Sophists. In Plato's *Gorgias* (462b3–465e6), Socrates draws a sharp distinction between the skills or arts (*technai*) that aim at excellence and those that are meant mainly to please.²² Paul's insistence that he does not “persuade people” also recalls the ancient criticisms of the Sophists. According to Socrates, “Then the case

17. *De elocutione* 232. See Schellenberg, *Rethinking Paul's Rhetorical Education*, 260.

18. Forbes, “Ancient Rhetoric and Ancient Letters,” 159.

19. Schellenberg, *Rethinking Paul's Rhetorical Education*, 260.

20. Thurén, “Rhetoric and Epistolography,” 145.

21. Cf. the speech by C. Claudius in Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 11.9.1: “I ask this, Appius, of you men who are at the head of the commonwealth and are in duty bound to consult the common interest of all rather than your private advantage, that if I speak some truths with frankness instead of trying to please you, you will not be offended on that account, when you consider that I shall not make my remarks with any intent to abuse and insult your magistracy, but in order to show in how great a sea the affairs of the commonwealth are tossed and to point out what will be both their safety and their reformation.” Cited in Fairweather, “Galatians and Classical Rhetoric,” 214.

22. Krentz, *Logos or Sophia*, 285.

is the same in all the other arts for the orator and his rhetoric: there is no need to know the truth of the actual matters, but one merely needs to have discovered some device of persuasion which will make one appear to those who do not know to know better than those who know” (459C [LCL]). That is, he rejects the claim, later made by Aristotle, that rhetoric is “the faculty of discovering the possible means of persuasion in reference to any subject whatever” (*Rhet.* 1.1.1).²³

Despite Paul’s claim that he is not a rhetorician, interpreters from Augustine to Johannes Weiss have analyzed Paul’s letters with the categories of ancient rhetoric.²⁴ Eduard Norden’s critique of Paul’s rhetoric in *Antike Kunstprosa* marked the end of the application of rhetorical criticism to Paul’s letters until the 1980s, when Hans Dieter Betz examined Galatians with the categories of Greco-Roman rhetoric.²⁵ Following Betz’s lead, interpreters have examined every letter in the Pauline corpus, using Aristotelian rhetoric.

Many scholars, noting that Paul dictated his letters for oral presentation, maintain that Paul argued his case with the tools of Aristotelian rhetoric. Because Paul’s letters are completely atypical in size, content, and style and are intended for oral presentation to an assembled group, they function as speeches. Thus many interpreters in the last generation have abandoned the attempt to classify Paul’s letters with any of the types suggested by ancient epistolary theorists and have focused on the categories of Greco-Roman rhetoric as the lens for reading them, thus identifying the species of the presentation and the analysis of the five categories of ancient rhetoric: invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery.

Aristotle identified three species of speeches (*Rhet.* 1.2.3). The judicial speech was intended for the law court and involved an assessment of an event in the past. The deliberative speech was intended for the democratic assembly and involved exhortation or dissuasion about a future decision.²⁶ The epideictic speech, concerned with praise or blame, was intended for the

23. Dio Chrysostom draws a distinction between the rhetoric of flatterers, who titillate the masses with mere demagoguery (*Nicom.* 38.1–3), and his own rhetoric. Cf. Theophrastus, *Char.* 2.13: “You will see the flatterer say and do things that he hopes will ingratiate him.” Aristotle, *Eth. nic.* 4.6.1: “In society and in common life and intercourse of conversation and business, some men are considered to be obsequious [*areskoi*, lit., “pleasers”].” Cf. also 2.7.13: “In respect of general pleasantness in life, the man who is pleasant in the proper manner is friendly, and the observance of the mean is friendliness; he that exceeds, if from no interested motive, is obsequious [*areskos*], if for his own advantage, a flatterer.”

24. On Augustine, cf. book 4 of *De doctrina christiana*; cf. Weiss, *Beiträge zur paulinische Rhetorik*.

25. Norden, *Die antike Kunstprosa*; Betz, *Galatians*.

26. Olbricht, “Rhetorical Analysis of 1 Thessalonians,” 224–27.

ceremonial occasion. While scholars apply these categories to Paul's letters, they have reached no consensus. Indeed, as in ancient rhetoric, more than one kind of rhetoric may be present in the same letter.

Rhetorical criticism of Paul's letters includes analyses of the rhetorical species, arrangement, style, and invention (argumentation). While these categories are derived from classical rhetoric, they can be applied to all speech, as George Kennedy maintains.²⁷ Thus we may apply Aristotelian analysis without assuming that Paul had formally studied rhetoric.

Identification of the species. Scholars have reached no consensus on the species of Paul's rhetoric. As Thomas Olbricht has demonstrated, the audience of Paul's letters bears no resemblance to the ancient law court, assembly, or public ceremony. Olbricht suggests that Paul's speech belongs to a separate category of "church rhetoric."²⁸ Ancient speeches have nothing parallel to the extended ethical exhortations in Paul's letters.²⁹ However, all of Paul's letters call for future action and attempt to persuade and dissuade; thus they have some functional similarity to deliberative rhetoric.

Arrangement. Rhetorical studies have given the most attention to the arrangement of Paul's letters, comparing them to the arrangement often proposed in the rhetorical handbooks. Rhetorical theorists suggest that the effective speech was composed of *exordium*, *narratio*, *propositio*, *probatio*, and *peroratio*. These categories are useful in the analysis of Paul's letters, although they cannot be pressed too far. Inasmuch as the thanksgivings at the beginning of Paul's letters introduce the topic and make the audience favorably disposed, they function as the *exordium*. The survey of recent events that frequently follows the thanksgiving has a functional similarity to the *narratio*. Paul then frequently follows with a thesis statement that will guide the argument (cf. Rom. 1:16–17; 1 Cor. 1:10–13; 2 Cor. 1:14; Phil. 1:27–30); this thesis statement functions as the *propositio*. The argument that follows functions as the *probatio*.³⁰ The *peroratio*, which concludes the speech with an emotional appeal and summation of the argument, has only "vague similarities" to the closing of a Pauline letter.³¹

While the presence of functional similarities among the parts of the ancient speech does not demonstrate Paul's conscious use of Aristotelian rhetoric,

27. Kennedy, *Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism*, 9–10.

28. Olbricht, "Aristotelian Rhetorical Analysis," 224–27. On the imprecision of these categories, see Forbes, *Ancient Rhetoric and Ancient Letters*, 145–46.

29. See Classen, *Rhetorical Criticism of the New Testament*, 23.

30. See Porter, "Popular Rhetorical Knowledge," 110.

31. Porter, "Popular Rhetorical Knowledge," 110. The paraenetic sections of Paul's letters are unparalleled in ancient rhetoric.

they are useful categories for observing the progression and coherence in Paul's written communication.³² They have also offered alternative explanations to the theories of displacement in Paul's letters.³³ Attention to arrangement was an advance over the atomizing tendencies of form criticism and the search for the history behind the text. However, Paul's arguments do not always fit the parts of the ancient speech, and they should not be forced into these categories.³⁴

Style. From the ancient exegetes John Chrysostom, Jerome, and Augustine to contemporary scholars, readers have analyzed the style of the Pauline letters with the categories of ancient rhetoric, observing both the Greco-Roman and Hebrew features in his writings and classifying them with Aristotelian categories. This classification includes specific figures, tropes, and entire writings.³⁵ Scholars agree that, of the three styles in Greco-Roman classification—the grand, the middle, and the plain—Paul writes primarily in the middle style, although he occasionally approaches the grand style (cf. Rom. 8:31–39; 1 Cor. 13). Hebrew writings employ metaphor, parallelism, antithesis, and chiasm.³⁶ Contemporary scholars have identified Paul's use of metaphor, parallelism, antithesis, chiasm, irony, apostrophe, rhetorical questions, personification, hyperbole, *prosopopoiia*,³⁷ and numerous other categories listed in the handbooks.³⁸ These stylistic features are not mere ornamentation but actually advance the argument.

Invention. Invention involves finding the best available means of persuasion. Aristotle describes these arguments as proofs (*pisteis*) and distinguishes between the artificial and inartificial proofs. The latter are those that require no argument but depend on the contracts, oaths, and testimony of witnesses. Artificial proofs are those that require logical argument. These arguments have been limited to ethos, pathos, and logos. Scholars have analyzed Paul's arguments, pointing to parallels with ancient argumentation.

The argument from ethos appeals to the speaker's credibility. One of the most consistent features in Paul's argument is his argument from ethos. He

32. Porter, "Popular Rhetorical Knowledge," 110. Classen, "Theory of Rhetoric," 36–37.

33. Rhetorical critics have demonstrated the importance of the *digressio* in ancient argumentation. Thus passages such as 1 Cor. 9 and 1 Cor. 13, which interrupt the flow of the argument, are not evidence of displacement but of the *digressio*, the insertion of an independent section into a text that is thematically related to the subject (Cicero, *De or.* 3.53.203).

34. Cf. Classen, "Theory of Rhetoric," 35: "The classical orators follow a structure consisting of *prooemium*, *propositio*, *narratio*, *argumentatio* (*confirmatio* and *refutatio*) and *peroratio* when it suits their purposes, but only then."

35. D. Watson, "Style in the Pauline Epistles," 119.

36. For Paul's use of the characteristic Hebrew features of parallelism and antithesis, see the extended discussion in Weiss, *Beiträge zur paulinischen Rhetorik*, 6–40.

37. D. Watson, "Style in the Pauline Epistles," 133.

38. See the extensive catalog of figures in Porter, "Paul of Tarsus and His Letters."

regularly establishes his credibility before he challenges his readers to adopt his way of life (cf. 1 Cor. 2:1–5; 4:1–13; Gal. 1:10–2:21; Phil. 1:12–26; 1 Thess. 2:1–12). Indeed, 2 Corinthians is dominated by the argument from Paul's character, which has been occasioned by criticisms of his ministry (see chap. 4 below).

The argument from pathos is an appeal to emotion. Aristotle indicates that this is an effective argument (*Rhet.* 1.2.5). Paul regularly indicates his own emotions (cf. 2 Cor. 1:3–7; 2:1–4; 11:11; Phil. 3:18; 1 Thess. 2:17) and appeals to the emotions of his churches (cf. 2 Cor. 6:11–7:1).

According to the rhetoricians, the appeal to logos includes the use of logical deduction, including the enthymeme and the use of *exempla* (Latin for “examples”). According to the *Rhetoric to Alexander*, which is attributed to Aristotle, one delivering a deliberative speech should prove that the courses to follow are just (*dikaia*), lawful (*nomima*), expedient (*sympheronta*), honorable (*kala*), pleasant (*hēdeia*), and easily practicable (*radia parachthēnai*). Failing this, the orator should show that they are feasible (*dynata*) and unavoidable (*anankaia*).³⁹ Paul makes logical deductions, frequently using enthymemes, the argument from the lesser to the greater, and the argument from expediency. He also argues from exempla (*paradeigmata*), appealing to his own personal example, the example of others, and the exempla from Scripture. In Romans (4:1–25) and Galatians (3:6–29), he appeals to the example of Abraham. In 1 Corinthians, he recalls the example of ancient Israel (1 Cor. 10:1–13). He draws examples from law (Rom. 7:1–4), sports (1 Cor. 9:24–27; Phil. 3:12–16), agriculture (1 Cor. 3:1–9; 9:10), the military (1 Cor. 9:7), and the Roman victory processional (2 Cor. 2:14). Nevertheless, Paul's arguments would have been scarcely persuasive to an ancient audience, for they are credible only to the subculture that accepts his authority.⁴⁰ While he offers rational arguments, his appeal to divinely sanctioned apostolic authority and revelation set him apart from the orator of the Greek *polis*, who appealed primarily to the standards of rationality.⁴¹ The premises for his arguments belong to the subculture of his communities.⁴² He appeals to what only this subculture knows (cf. Rom. 2:2; 5:3; 6:3; 8:22; 1 Cor. 6:2–3, 9, 15), indicating that he shares premises with the community that would

39. Anaximenes, *Rhet. Alex.* 1421b. Cited in Fairweather, “Galatians and Classical Rhetoric,” 221. Cf. Philo in *Worse*: “Sophists . . . make our ears ache with their demonstrations of the social character of righteousness, the advantageous nature of moderation, the nobility of self-control, the great benefits conferred by piety, the power of every kind of virtue to bring health and safety.”

40. Fenske, *Die Argumentation des Paulus*, 26.

41. Fairweather, “Galatians and Classical Rhetoric,” 222.

42. Fairweather, “Galatians and Classical Rhetoric,” 236.

not have been acceptable to others.⁴³ Janet Fairweather speaks of this as “Christ-based logic.”⁴⁴

The foundation of Paul’s arguments is frequently derived from the Jewish tradition (cf. Rom. 2:2; 5:3; 1 Cor. 6:2–3). In other instances, the premises for his arguments are to be found in the early Christian kerygma (cf. 1 Cor. 15:3–58; 2 Cor. 5:14–21; 1 Thess. 4:14). Eschatology, Christology, ecclesiology, and other theological categories form the premises for his reasoning. Thus while ancient literary and rhetorical conventions provide helpful categories for analyzing Paul’s letters, they offer no parallel to Paul’s persona as the speaker and to the argument that he makes.

Although Paul has rhetorical competence, one cannot be certain where he learned his rhetorical skills, for his youth and his education are *terra incognita* for us.⁴⁵ No consensus exists as to whether Paul studied with Gamaliel, as Acts 22:3 suggests. While some maintain that the letters exhibit evidence of Paul’s formal rhetorical training, others argue that they reflect only a natural rhetoric that any educated person in the ancient cities would have absorbed.

Paul’s Authoritative Rhetoric

Paul speaks with a voice that is unparalleled in ancient texts. Unlike ancient orators, he addresses the assemblies that he has founded and nurtured. He speaks consistently with the tenderness and authoritative voice of a parent. His arguments are not frequently those of the Greek orator but of the apostle who speaks for God. Indeed, Paul identifies himself with the prophets, offering divine mysteries and demanding the obedience of his listeners.

Paul as Parent

At the conclusion of his extended theological response to Corinthian factionalism, Paul says, “I do not write this to shame you, but to admonish you as beloved children” (1 Cor. 4:14 AT). This passage suggests three dimensions of ancient fatherhood in Paul’s voice. First, Paul indicates the intimacy of a parent with a child. The readers are “beloved children” (*agapēta tekna*, 1 Cor. 4:14), whom Paul “fathered” (1 Cor. 4:15). Paul emphasizes the intimacy of the parent-child relationship (cf. 2 Cor. 6:11–13: “I speak as to children. My

43. Fenske, *Die Argumentation des Paulus*, 65.

44. Fairweather, “Galatians and Classical Rhetoric,” 236.

45. Hübner, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, 2:27.