

IMPORTANT RHETORICAL FEATURES OF THE LETTERS OF PAUL

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The rhetorical analysis of the New Testament is “the process of examining the modes and effects of literary arrangement.”¹ In other words, we examine *how* a given author arranged or organized his text, and *what the intended impact* of this arrangement was upon his audience. Does the overall beauty of it aim to stir their emotions? Does the author base an appeal on the integrity of his character? Does he mean to inform their understanding and convince them with logical proofs?²

Rhetorical analysis concerns itself, then, with forms and the functions of those forms in engaging the listeners/readers. As such it is closely related to the newly emerging discipline of *discourse analysis*, which focuses our attention on how the text works in larger units of thought beyond a sentence and clause level. In addition, discourse analysis asks questions like, “How does the author signal his themes to his readers (i.e., signal *prominence*), and how does he weave those themes together into a coherent whole (i.e., achieve *coherence*)?”³

The relevance for a preacher who wants to “preach the text” is immediately evident. We want our preaching to be filled with what the biblical author is “really” saying. But too often our text studies are restricted to single words or phrases. We can so easily major in minors. We fail to consider how those phrases fit into and are part of the whole of a biblical author’s argument. We miss the great themes of a book and fail to see how our particular section fits into developing those themes. As we grow in our appreciation for the style and beauty of the divine author, we cannot fail to pass along a sense of it to our own listeners. Our sermons will increase in their depth and richness.

¹S. E. Porter, *Vol. 25: Handbook to Exegesis of the New Testament*. New Testament Tools and Studies (Leiden, New York: Brill, 1997), 219.

²This kind of analysis is nothing new. Luther kept a book of Quintilian’s *Institutes* at his bedside, it is said. Rhetorical studies were very much in the air during the era of the Reformation and Luther often employed the tools of rhetorical analysis (broadly understood) to understanding the biblical text. See, for example, LW 12:7, 14:88, 15:74, 16:3,286, etc.

³For a little more on this, see Kenneth Cherney, Jr., “General Linguistics and Some Exegetical Fallacies,” in *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 106, no. 3 (Summer 2009): 173-185.

In outlining the following aspects of Paul's writing, I do not mean to suggest that a preacher has failed in his exegetical task if his final sermon is not informed by a careful study of all the features listed below. I know how busy you are! But often we make the perfect the enemy of the good. Begin somewhere, perhaps best by simply reading the text aloud in the original (see point 3 below, "Oral Patterns"). Then, as you have time and inclination, begin to explore some of the other dimensions of Paul's letter writing, such as attending carefully to the original context of an Old Testament allusion or quotation and reflecting on how it works in Paul's text (see point 9 below, "Saturated with Scripture"). Or consider how Paul opens a particular letter with an address and thanksgiving. Compare with his other letters. Look for themes that will continue to resound in what is to follow (see point 2 below, "Transforming Forms").

The Form of the Letter

Thomas Long describes the letter form in general as speaking to an absent friend as if he were present—a way of being there and not being there at the same time.⁴ The definition points to a communication in which we will expect to see the letter writer's personality shine through in his words. And that's exactly what we do see in Paul.

After a careful study of the ancient letter and its rhetorical functions Heikkei Koskenniemi identifies three of them on prominent display in Paul's letters:

1. **Philophronesis**: denotes the desire of the sender to establish, strengthen, or restore his personal relationship with his recipients. One will note this rhetorical function at work in phrases that evoke and express a friendly relationship, for example, "Dear Fred" or "Cordially yours." What distinguishes Paul's letters from the rest is the way that "Paul's [expression of his] relationship to his letters' recipients usually points beyond itself to their common relationship in Christ."⁵ Examples of such greetings:
 - $\chi\acute{\alpha}\rho\iota\upsilon\varsigma$ becomes $\chi\acute{\alpha}\rho\iota\varsigma$
 - Philippians 1:5 . . . your partnership in the gospel . . .
 - Romans 1:8 First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world.
2. **Parousia**: establishment of presence, the sense that the letter is to bridge the gap of separation between writer and reader—it

⁴Thomas Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1988), 107ff.

⁵Long, *Preaching*, 114.

brings something of the sender into contact with the recipient and makes one aware of the presence of the person in the letter.

- 1 Corinthians 5:4 When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present . . .
 - 2 Corinthians 10:1 By the meekness and gentleness of Christ, I appeal to you—I, Paul, who am “timid” when face to face with you, but “bold” when away!
 - Galatians 5:2 Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all.
 - Galatians 6:11 See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand!
3. ***Omilia*** and ***dialogus*** is the creation of a dialogical, invitational mood; it attempts to include the reader, saying what they say in a dialogic fashion and with the readers’ attitudes and feelings in mind.
- Romans 7:1 Do you not know, brothers—for I am speaking to men who know the law—that the law has authority over a man only as long as he lives?
 - 1 Corinthians 15:1 Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand.
 - 2 Corinthians 3:1 Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you?
 - Galatians 3:2 I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard?
 - Philippians 4:3 Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.

Paul’s occasional use of the diatribe style might also be included here. See below under 5.

Questions for reflection

1. Preachers today often omit the salutation “Dear friends in Christ . . .” replacing it with an invocation, sometimes with nothing at all. Do you think this detracts from the *philophronesis* of the sermon? What are some other ways preachers establish and express their relationship with their listeners?

2. What are some ways that a preacher can practice *omilia* in his homiletical work? To put it bluntly: what are ways you keep your listeners involved in the message? Can you learn here from Paul?

Transforming Forms⁶

In one sense, the letters of Paul are similar in form to many Hellenistic letters of the time. They are composed of the following elements:

Opening

- a. The sender(s) is (are) named
- b. The addressees are named
- c. The salutation
- d. A thanksgiving

Body

- a. Instruction
- b. Exhortation

Closing (several common elements, not all in every letter)

- a. Travel plans
- b. Final prayer
- c. Prayer requests
- d. Greetings
- e. Final Instructions
- f. Autographed greeting
- g. A χάρις blessing

Scholars have noticed various *formulaic phrases* Paul uses in the body of his letters such as:

Disclosure formulas:

“I do not want you to be ignorant”

“I want you to know”

Request formulas:

“Now I exhort you”

“Now we ask you”

New topic markers:

περὶ δὲ τῶν . . .

Transition markers

λοιπόν —to sth new

(see BDAG 3b)

These can be helpful in distinguishing Paul’s outline, his progression of thought.

Aurelius Dius to Aurelius Horion, my sweetest father, many greetings. I make supplication for you every day before the gods of this place. So don’t be uneasy, father, about my studies. I’m working hard but getting some rest. It’ll go well for me. I send greetings to my mother Tamiea and my sister Tnepherous and my sister Philous. I send greetings also to my brother Patermouthis. . . . Gaia sends greetings to you all . . . I pray for your health, father.
Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 1206

⁶Adapted from Thomas R. Schreiner’s *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1990), 21-38.

	Acts 15:23ff	1 Thessalonians 1:1ff
Senders	Ac 15:23 Οἱ ἀπόστολοι καὶ οἱ πρεσβύτεροι ἀδελφοὶ	1 Th 1:1 Παῦλος καὶ Σιλουανὸς καὶ Τιμόθεος
Addressees	τοῖς κατὰ τὴν Ἀντιόχειαν καὶ Συρίαν καὶ Κιλικίαν ἀδελφοῖς τοῖς ἐξ ἔθνῳν	τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ Θεσσα- λονικέων ἐν θεῷ πατρὶ καὶ κυρίῳ Ἰησοῦ Χριστῷ
Greeting	χαίρειν	χάρις ὑμῖν καὶ εἰρήνη
Thanks- giving		Ἐὐχαριστοῦμεν τῷ θεῷ πάντοτε περὶ πάντων ὑμῶν μνείαν ποιούμενοι ἐπὶ τῶν προσευχῶν ἡμῶν . . .
Body	Ἐπειδὴ ἠκούσαμεν ὅτι τινὲς ἐξ ἡμῶν [ἐξεληθόντες] ἐτάραξαν ὑμᾶς λόγοις . . . ἔδοξεν γὰρ τῷ πνεύματι τῷ ἁγίῳ καὶ ἡμῖν μηδὲν πλεόν ἐπιτίθεσθαι ὑμῖν βάρος πλὴν τούτων τῶν ἐπάναγκες (vv 24-29)	Αὐτοὶ γὰρ οἶδατε, ἀδελφοί, τὴν εἴσοδον ἡμῶν τὴν πρὸς ὑμᾶς ὅτι οὐ κενὴ γέγονεν. . . .
Closing	Acts 15:29 Ἔρρωσθε.	1 Th 5:28 Ἡ χάρις τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ μεθ' ὑμῶν.

In another sense, Paul's letters are a "form transformed." That is to say, he takes the basic elements of the standard Greek letter form and re-imagines them completely to serve his purposes.

Consider for one thing the length of the letters. In the Graeco-Roman world, private letters averaged close to ninety words in length. Literary letters, such as those by the Roman orator and statesman Cicero and by Seneca the philosopher, averaged around 200 words. Since the usual papyrus sheet measured about 9½" by 11" and could accommodate 150-250 words depending on the size of the text, most ancient letters occupied no more than one papyrus page. But the average length of Paul's epistles (letters) runs to about 1,300 words, ranging from 335 words in Philemon to 7,101 words in Romans. Thus Paul's let-

ters are several times longer than the average letter of ancient time, so that in a sense Paul invented a new literary form, the epistle—new in its length, in the theological character of its contents, and (usually) in the communal nature of its address. Yet Paul's letters are true letters in that they have genuine and specific addressees, unlike the ancient literary epistles, which were written for general publication.

But it is not simply a matter of length. In a similar way, Paul explodes and expands the various elements of the standard letter form as well:

- For example, Paul's letters begin with the conventional naming of the sender and the recipients, but in a much-expanded form. Paul gives not only his name (and the names of any co-authors) but usually also describes his identity as servant or apostle of Jesus Christ.
- He also describes the recipients of the letter in Christian terms.
- Paul's standard greeting is longer than the traditional one word greetings (χαίρετε) and takes a clearly Christian form (e.g., Romans 1:7; 1 Corinthians 1:3; 2 Corinthians 1:2; Galatians 1:3).
- Just as standard Greek letters often included wishes or thanksgiving for the health and welfare of the sender or recipient, so Paul generally opens his letters with a thanksgiving for the recipients and their faith (e.g., Romans 1:8; 1 Corinthians 1:4-9; 1 Thessalonians 1:2ff).
- At the close of his letters, Paul sends greetings, again more extended than the concise "goodbye" or "farewell" which was customary, sometimes including a "doxology" of some sort—words in praise of God's glory—and generally ending with a form of what has come to be known as "the grace" (e.g., Romans 16:21-27; 1 Corinthians 16:19-24; Philippians 4:20-23).⁷

The interpreter needs to keep a careful eye on these transformed elements.

For example, a quick comparison reveals that Galatians is the only one of Paul's letters to lack a "thanksgiving." What does this indicate about his "mood"?

In addition, the opening and closing elements of the letter either foreshadow or recapitulate major themes of the epistle. As we've seen, they can disclose the kind of relationship the apostle has with his addressees, or the kind of connection he wishes to establish.

⁷David G. Horrell, *An Introduction to the Study of Paul* (London: Continuum, 2000), 47.

Compare and contrast the openings of Romans, Philippians, and Galatians.

- What can you deduce about the relationship between sender and addressees from what is said?
 - Looking just at the “thanksgiving” portion of the letters, what themes do you expect Paul to develop in Romans and Philippians?
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Oral Patterns⁸

Although it is very hard to estimate, some scholars put the literacy rate in the first century Roman world at somewhere around 15 percent. Palestine may have had a higher rate, as well as other pockets within the Roman Empire. It hardly matters. I have never seen an estimate of more than 35% in any particular area.

This means that writing was primarily a support of an oral culture. Texts were written to be read to hearing audiences. In fact, silent reading, even in private study, was not the common pattern we now accept as normal. This practice, as late as Augustine, was considered to be something of an anomaly.

What’s more, Paul was writing to entire churches. He could not and did not assume that his works were to be read silently. As he said to the Thessalonians, “I charge you before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers” (1 Th 5:27). Letters were as much oral performances as written documents. This demonstrates to us how important it is to *listen to the text*. We must read it aloud, no matter how much we may stumble at first. Start with a single selection of modest length and repeat it in your devotional reading daily for a week or more. Repetition over time will increase fluency. We will find ourselves becoming much more aware of the “sonic effects” of Paul’s writing, including his plays on words.

Read the following verses aloud several times. What quickly becomes apparent?

Philippians 1:3-4

Romans 12:3

As we become fluent through repetition in some larger chunks of Paul’s writing, we will discover that there are many other patterns of “oral” writing detectable in Paul’s letters, patterns that are fairly common in other cultures that are still primarily oral. In such cultures, speakers wish to find ways either to remember their words or to ren-

⁸A summary of John D. Harvey’s *Listening to the Text: Oral Patterning in Paul’s Letters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book Company, 1998).

der them more memorable for listeners. We can look at these as sort of “oral outlines.”

Some of the most prominent patterns are:

Chiasmus: ABBA (the order of elements is inverted)

1 Th 5:5

⁵πάντες γὰρ ὑμεῖς
 υἱοὶ φωτός ἐστε καὶ υἱοὶ ἡμέρας.
 Οὐκ ἐσμὲν νυκτὸς οὐδὲ σκότους·

Alternation: ABAB (interplay between two alternate choices or ideas)

2 Co 5:6-9

⁶Θαρροῦντες οὖν πάντοτε καὶ εἰδότες ὅτι
A ἐνδημοῦντες ἐν τῷ σώματι.
B ἐκδημοῦμεν ἀπὸ τοῦ κυρίου·
⁷διὰ πίστεως γὰρ περιπατοῦμεν, οὐ διὰ εἶδους·
⁸θαρροῦμεν δε καὶ εὐδοκοῦμεν, μᾶλλον
B ἐκδημῆσαι ἐκ τοῦ σώματος
A καὶ ἐνδημῆσαι πρὸς τὸν κύριον.
⁹διὸ καὶ φιλοτιμούμεθα,
A εἴτε ἐνδημοῦντες
B εἴτε ἐκδημοῦντες, εὐάρεστοι αὐτῷ εἶναι.

Inclusion—use of the same words to begin and end a discussion

Php 1:12-14

¹²Γινώσκειν δὲ ὑμᾶς βούλομαι, ἀδελφοί, ὅτι τὰ κατ’
ἐμὲ μᾶλλον εἰς προκοπὴν τοῦ εὐαγγελίου ἐλήλυθεν,
¹³ὥστε τοὺς δεσμούς μου φανεροὺς ἐν Χριστῷ
γενέσθαι ἐν ὄλῳ τῷ πραιτωρίῳ καὶ τοῖς λοιποῖς
πᾶσιν, ¹⁴καὶ τοὺς πλειονας τῶν ἀδελφῶν ἐν κυρίῳ
πεποιθότας τοῖς δεσμοῖς μου περισσοτέρως τολμᾶν
ἀφόβως τὸν λόγον λαλεῖν.

[mid-section]

Php 1:25-26

²⁵καὶ τοῦτο πεποιθὼς οἶδα ὅτι μενῶ καὶ παραμενῶ
πᾶσιν ὑμῖν εἰς τὴν ὑμῶν προκοπὴν καὶ χαρὰν τῆς
πίστεως, ²⁶εἶνα τὸ καύχημα ὑμῶν περισσεύῃ ἐν
Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ ἐν ἐμοὶ διὰ τῆς ἐμῆς παρουσίας
πάλιν πρὸς ὑμᾶς.

Word-chain—a frequent repetition of a given word and its cognates within a clearly defined context

Php 3:7-11

ἤ[Αλλ'] ἄτινα ἦν μοι κέρδη, ταῦτα ἤγημαι διὰ τὸν Χριστὸν **ζημίαν**.

ἁλλά μενοῦνγε καὶ ἠγοῦμαι πάντα **ζημίαν** εἶναι διὰ τὸ ὑπερέχον τῆς γνώσεως Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ τοῦ κυρίου μου δι' ὃν τὰ πάντα **ἐζημιώθην**,

καὶ ἠγοῦμαι οκύβαλα, ἵνα Χριστὸν **κερδήσω** καὶ εὔρεθῶ ἐν αὐτῷ, μὴ ἔχων ἐμὴν **δικαιοσύνην** τὴν ἐκ νόμου ἀλλὰ τὴν διὰ **πίστεως** Χριστοῦ, τὴν ἐκ θεοῦ **δικαιοσύνην** ἐπὶ τῇ **πιστει**,

τοῦ γινῶναι αὐτὸν καὶ τὴν δύναμιν τῆς **ἀναστάσεως** αὐτοῦ καὶ [τὴν] **κοινωνίαν** [τῶν] παθημάτων αὐτοῦ, συμμορφιζόμενος τῷ **θανάτῳ** αὐτοῦ,

μεῖ πως **καταντήσω** εἰς τὴν **ἐξανάστασιν** τὴν ἐκ νεκρῶν.

Ring Composition—‘A’ sentence + [interior section] + ‘A’ sentence. Speaker or writer returns to a previous point in the discussion, either concluding or resuming his train of thought. Unlike “Inclusion,” where there are correspondences with words, ring composition involves a similarity on the sentence level.

2 Co 2:13

οὐκ ἔσχηκα ἄνεσιν τῷ πνεύματί μου τῷ μὴ εὔρεῖν με Τίτον τοῦ ἀδελφόν μου, ἀλλ' ἀποταξάμενος αὐτοῖς **ἐξήλθον εἰς Μακεδονίαν**.

[interior section]—Paul's marvelous digression on the glory of the NT ministry

2 Co 7:5-6

Καὶ γὰρ ἐλθόντων ἡμῶν εἰς **Μακεδονίαν** οὐδεμίαν **ἔσχηκεν ἄνεσιν ἢ σὰρξ ἡμῶν** ἀλλ' ἐν παντὶ θλιβόμενοι· ἔξωθεν μάχαι, ἔσωθεν φόβοι. ἁλλ' ὁ παρακαλῶν τοὺς ταπεινοὺς **παρεκάλεσεν ἡμᾶς ὁ θεὸς ἐν τῇ παρουσίᾳ Τίτον**,

It is useful to become aware of these patterns because they serve as:

- the author's own way of designating subsections of his letters
- the author's own way of bringing themes of the letter into greater prominence.

Questions for reflection

1. Read Galatians 5:16-25 and study the patterns.
 2. Recall a recent sermon of yours: what features of orality did it display? How is writing for the ear a different deal than just plain writing? Why are such features of sermon writing important? (Here, reflect for a moment on how your sermons sound now as compared with your first efforts at homiletics).
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Word Order

Beginning Greek students, in order to understand the Greek, try to divest themselves of the rigid patterning that we require to make sense of English. The unfortunate fallout from this is that they begin to believe that word order “doesn’t matter” in Greek. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Normal word order for ancient Greek was Subject-Object-Verb (SOV). Under the influence of Hebrew, “the verb . . . occurs as near the beginning as possible, followed by personal pronoun, subject, object, supplementary participles.”⁹ What this means is that “normal” word order for most of the New Testament writings will be VSO or SVO more often than SOV.

Attending to word order is important as well for revealing where an author wished his readers to place the emphasis and to signal a change in subject or topic, etc. Generally speaking, pay attention to:

- words that have been *displaced* to the front or to the back—that is, found in some unexpected place and not in the usual order.
- More frequently it can be said that words occurring at the beginning of a sentence or phrase have greater prominence than those that follow.
- On occasion, however, an author will leave his weightiest words for the end of the sentence (in good, classical periodic style).

Question for reflection

If we grant that a preacher often uses his voice or gestures as the primary means to convey emphasis, can displaced words add to the effect? What is the standard English word order? How much can it be stretched?

⁹Nigel Turner, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1963), 347-348.

Other Rhetorical Features of Note

The Diatribe

Most scholars agree that Paul used a diatribe style in some of his letters. In Paul's case, the diatribe may have had its origin in his discussions with his fellow-countrymen, either in the classroom or the synagogue. In other words, it's not just a rhetorical feature intended to stimulate learning, but a conversation that has sprung out of real life situations. The characteristic feature of the diatribe is its conversational nature.¹⁰ The teacher (or writer) anticipates a possible objection or response to his argument, and puts the question or objection in the student's words and responds to it.

Ro 9:14 Τί οὖν ἐροῦμεν; μὴ ἀδικία παρὰ τῷ θεῷ; μὴ γένοιτο.

Ro 9:19-20 Ἐρεῖς μοι οὖν τί [οὖν] ἔτι μέμφεται; τῷ γὰρ βουλήματι αὐτοῦ τίς ἀνθέστηκεν; ὦ ἄνθρωπε, μενοῦνγε σὺ τίς εἶ ὁ ἀνταποκρινόμενος τῷ θεῷ; μὴ ἐρεῖ τὸ πλάσμα τῷ πλάσαντι· τί με ἐποίησας οὕτως;

Parenesis

The Pauline letters are awash in parenesis (i.e., exhortations). Indeed, some of the letters are best described as parenetic letters or letters of consolation and encouragement. For example, the whole of 1 Thessalonians can be classified as parenetic. In Romans the parenetical section (12:1–15:13) appears to be neatly separated from the earlier part of the letter. Parenesis should be considered, however, as an integral part of Paul's purpose in writing Romans, and exhortations are present in the earlier part of the letter as well (see Romans 6). Aune helpfully distinguished between letters that have a *parenetic* style, where the entire letter is marked by exhortations (such as 1 Thessalonians), and *epistolary* parenesis, which is found in the concluding sections of some letters.¹¹ For instance, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Colossians have a parenetic style. On the other hand, epistolary parenesis is found at the end of Romans (12:1–15:13), Galatians (5:13–6:10), Ephesians (4:1–6:20), and Colossians (3:1–4:6). A letter (e.g., Colossians) can possibly have both of these features at the same time, that is, a parenetic style and a concluding section of epistolary parenesis.¹²

¹⁰Other features include the use of the short simple sentence, ironical imperatives, parataxis, and asyndeton.

¹¹David Aune, *The New Testament in its Literary Environment*, 1st ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), 191.

¹²T. R. Schreiner, *Vol. 5: Interpreting the Pauline Epistles. Guides to New Testament Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Book House, 1990), 37.

Questions for reflection

Assess the following texts for their Pauline parenthesis:

Romans 12:1-2

Ephesians 5:21-33

Philippians 2:1-11

- Summarize: what is he urging his hearers to do/be?
 - How does he make his case?
-

“Occasionality”

Most commentators remark on the occasional nature of Paul’s letters. This means that most of Paul’s letters were written to address some specific need. While this is true, it can be overemphasized to the point where a person calls into question the legitimacy of deriving timeless doctrinal statements from letters that (in their view) were merely *ad hoc*.

This assertion can be refuted by making two simple points:

- a. From the very beginning, Paul was conscious of being an authoritative proclaimer and writer of God’s Word:

1 Thessalonians 2:13

And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard **from us**, you accepted **it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God**, which is at work in you who believe.

Καὶ διὰ τοῦτο καὶ ἡμεῖς εὐχαριστοῦμεν τῷ θεῷ ἀδιαλείπτως, ὅτι παραλαβόντες λόγον ἀκοῆς παρ’ ἡμῶν τοῦ θεοῦ ἐδέξασθε οὐ λόγον ἀνθρώπων ἀλλὰ καθὼς ἐστὶν ἀληθῶς λόγον θεοῦ ὃς καὶ ἐνεργεῖται ἐν ὑμῖν τοῖς πιστεύουσιν.

See also the opening verses of Romans and Galatians.

- a. From the very beginning Paul made provision for his letters to be solemnly read to the congregation.

1 Thessalonians 5:27

I charge you before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers.

Ἐνορκίζω ὑμᾶς τὸν κύριον ἀναγνωσθῆναι τὴν ἐπιστολὴν πᾶσιν τοῖς ἀδελφοῖς.

One might also mention the fact that letters sent in the ancient world, especially Paul’s, were not like emails. It must have taken Paul some time to plan what he was going to say. To write one of his letters required the securing of appropriate materials and a secretary who would not only write out Paul’s dictation, but also (very likely, as

this was a standard custom) make a copy of the letter. Paul had to find someone to take the letter to its recipients. And travel in the first century—while undoubtedly better than it had been in times past and would be in the future—was by no means quick and easy (see 2 Corinthians 11:26).

By comparison, consider the time and effort it takes to compose a text message. Even in our own era, a handwritten letter delivered by US Postal Service packs a bigger emotional wallop than an email. Or (what might be a closer equivalent) consider the symbolic and emotional significance of receiving a formal letter from President Schroeder if it were printed on bond letterhead and personally signed! Finally, even Paul's opponents had to admit that his letters were "weighty" (2 Corinthians 10:10).

At the same time it will often be helpful for us to reconstruct a scenario of "what was going on in such and such a congregation" as we read Paul's letters. We will base these reconstructions primarily on evidence from the Acts narrative and from the letters themselves. We may also use secondary source material from extra-biblical historical data, but care must be taken not to allow reconstructions based on this secondary material to "trump" or vitiate the plain meaning of the biblical text.

Finally, while Paul is writing truths that transcend specific times and places, no one would deny that some of what he writes is occasional or historically conditioned. To determine what is universal and what is historically conditioned in his letters, we must

1. Consider who is being addressed. Is the audience clearly limited?

2 Timothy 4:13

When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments.

2. Consider the rationale for the principle. Is it based on universals, or the circumstances of a specific situation?

1 Corinthians 11:1-16

¹Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ. ²I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the teachings, just as I passed them on to you. ³Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. ⁴Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. ⁵And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head—it is just as though her head were shaved. ⁶If a woman does not cover her head, she should

have her hair cut off; and if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut or shaved off, she should cover her head. ⁷A man ought not to cover his head, **since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man.** ⁸For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; ⁹neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. ¹⁰For this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head. ¹¹In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. ¹²For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. **But everything comes from God.** ¹³Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? ¹⁴Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, ¹⁵but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering. ¹⁶If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other (τοιαύτην συνήθειαν οὐκ ἔχομεν) practice—nor do the churches of God.

3. Does the context itself (wide or narrow) limit a command or an exhortation's scope?

1 Corinthians 7:8

Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I am.

But:

1 Corinthians 7:2

But since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband.

1 Corinthians 7:26

Because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for you to remain as you are.

Also relevant are the many other places in the wider context of the Pauline corpus and the rest of Scripture where there are much more positive assessments of marriage.

The Stories Behind the Words

I will confess that I've always found epistles much harder to preach than the gospels. St. Augustine speaks of the feeling a person has when he's preparing a text and his mind is filled with a rich sense of all the depth and possibilities of what one might say. Yet when it comes time to actually make the presentation, there is also this sense of mournful loss at never quite being able to put on paper what one

was going over in his mind. The latter seems so much more insipid. I've often had that feeling in preaching epistles.

Part of it, of course, is simply the complexity of the thoughts themselves. Unlike the gospels, where we are usually able to preach on a pericope that can stand quite nicely on its own, with epistles we are often slicing out a few verses from what may be an argument extending through several chapters. Furthermore, the gospels tend toward the concrete; Paul's letters, toward the abstract. The gospels are rich in narratives. The epistles are much more densely packed with doctrinal content.

There is a way, however, to make Paul more concrete, and that is to find the stories behind his words. What do I mean? First of all, there is *the story of the relationship between Paul and his original recipients*. Establish for your listeners the setting for Paul's words. Romans (winding up his missionary journeys in the east with the offering; hoping to use Rome as his base of operations for his next great venture: to preach the good news to people in the west); Philippians (the warm relationship that existed between him and these Macedonian Christians; the fact that he writes from prison); Galatians (Paul's horror at the infiltration of the Judaizers among these young Christians)—each of these epistles has elements of "occasionality" that can help us bring our exegesis down to earth.

Of course pastors have been doing this for years. Nevertheless I find setting the scene is an art too often neglected—particularly among the older pastors I hear. Maybe they assume we all know it as well as they do or have already heard it too many times.

Then, as Ben Witherington suggests, there is the "narrative thought world"¹³ that lies behind many of Paul's texts. Paul assumes a great deal of Bible background knowledge on the part of original readers. Romans 5 is unintelligible without an understanding of Genesis 1-3. Paul assumes we know precisely when, in the cycle of Abraham's stories, the words "it was credited to him for righteousness" occur. In fact, without an intimate acquaintance of the whole life and times of this "father of believers," we simply would not be able to grasp what Paul is saying in many places in Romans and Galatians.

What would a reader make of 1 Corinthians 10 if he was not familiar with the account of the Exodus and Israel's subsequent wilderness wanderings? A single phrase like ἐκ σπέρματος Δαυὶδ (Romans 1:3) evokes a whole complex of Old Testament history and prophecy. And we dare not forget why Paul does not re-tell the story

¹³Ben Witherington, *Paul's Narrative Thought World: The Tapestry of Tragedy and Triumph*, 1st ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994).

of Christ's life, sufferings, and death: he assumes his listeners are familiar with it.

In an age when knowledge of Bible history cannot be assumed, a preacher on the epistles must tease out the stories behind the words and recount them to his hearers.

There are other stories that also must be retold for the sake of modern listeners, stories of a bygone world and culture. They are drawn, for the most part, from urban life. They speak of idols and temples and slaves and masters and adoptions and travel and taxes and marriages and courtrooms and triumphs and emperors.

Question for reflection

What account(s) lie behind the following:

2 Corinthians 3:18 And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

Philippians 2:6-11 Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Is Paul Among the Orators?

It's been 30 years since Hans Dieter Betz applied lessons learned from the ancient rhetorical handbooks to his commentary on Galatians. It was his contention that Galatians was a species of *forensic* rhetoric. He then proceeded to classify various sections of the letter according to the standard *dispositio* or arrangement for a forensic speech. Since that day, many commentators have followed suit and found Graeco-Roman speech forms all over the Paulines. One would almost think that 1 Corinthians 1 and 2 had never been written, and that Paul was to be numbered among the professional *rhetores*.

The various schema are of passing interest and since you will undoubtedly run across them in commentaries, I will briefly mention them here:

Beginning with Aristotle, the usual classification is into deliberative, judicial, and epideictic forms. *Deliberative* rhetoric was viewed as concerned with determination of the advantages of some future action; *judicial* rhetoric with the determination of

the justice or legality of a past action; *epideictic* with praise or blame of what was honorable or dishonorable.¹⁴

Major Divisions of a Formal Speech (*dispositio*):

1. *Exordium*—opening aimed at disposing the audience well to what follows
2. *Narratio*—explains the nature and background of the disputed matter
3. *Propositio/Partitio*—(part of or following the narration) lays out the proposition of speaker (and sometimes of the opponent)
4. *Probatio*—arguments supporting the speaker
5. *Refutatio*—disposes of opponents' arguments (sometimes included in the probation)
6. *Peroratio*—recapitulation of main points, a rousing close to arouse hearers' emotions in favor of the speaker

	1 Co	2 Co	Acts 17	Acts 24 Tertullus	Acts 24 Paul	Acts 26
<i>Exordium</i>	1:4-9		17:22f	2-4	10	2f
<i>Narratio</i>	1:11-17	1:8-2:16		5-6	11	4-21
<i>Propositio</i>	1:10	2:17	17:23b			22f
<i>Probatio</i>	1:18- 16:12	3:1-13:4	17:24-29	12-20		
<i>Refutatio</i>						25f
<i>Peroratio</i>	16:13-18	13:5-10	17:30f	8	21	27,29

But I rather doubt whether Paul had any kind of advanced formal training in rhetoric, and so I also doubt the validity of these various schemata as they are applied to Paul's letters. More and more scholars are casting doubt on these attempts to partition Paul's letters according to the standard rules of speech rhetoric.

In an article in the *Concordia Journal*, Mark Surburg sums up his case against the project.¹⁵

¹⁴George A. Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric and its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 7.

¹⁵Mark P. Surburg, "Ancient Rhetorical Criticism, Galatians and Paul at Twenty-Five Years," *Concordia Journal* 30, no.1 (January/April 2004): 13-39.

1. There were never any detailed systematic rules for letters and the ancient rhetorical handbooks make no connection between letter-writing and speeches.¹⁶ The letter writing tradition was essentially independent of rhetoric.
2. The majority of Hellenistic letters do not lend themselves to classical rhetorical analysis.
3. There is no agreement among the practitioners according to what species a given letter is to be classified. Galatians, for example, has been classified as forensic, epideictic, and deliberative. This raises all kinds of questions as to methodological soundness.

While the notion of classifying and analyzing Paul's letters in this way is misguided, Surburg does see value in an analysis which "make(s) us alert to the *topoi* used by Paul in the 'discovery' of his arguments. This allows us to hear them in the expected . . . fashion that first century listeners would have."¹⁷ There is also value in analyzing how various rhetorical devices (use of rhetorical questions, maxims) were used in Paul's context—both to see where Paul follows the form, and where he transcends it. Finally, style and ornamentation is another area where a study of first century rhetoric can help us better understand Paul. All of these basic conventions Paul could have picked up in the practical training he received when he was engaged in discussions in Greek-speaking synagogues. Having taught orally for over twenty years, he had to have learned a few things along the way.

In comparison with the classical rhetoric of his day, Paul's rhetoric can appear unpremeditated.¹⁸ This is because it flowed from his zeal for Christ and from his passion for that Truth revealed to him in a blaze of light. That's what gave him his voice. Like a bird can't help but sing on a spring day bright with blossoming hope, so Paul sings. "Theology is doxology," Martin Franzmann declared. To honor God truly, we must sing.

¹⁶This is not to say that "there was no contact between letters and rhetoric" (34). The epistolary genre was flexible, and one would expect some basic rhetorical conventions to be observed. "But the employment of specific techniques and devices is quite different from writing a letter according to a rhetorical species or [following a] *dispositio* order" (34).

¹⁷Surburg, "Ancient Rhetorical Criticism," 38.

¹⁸It would have sounded somewhat strange, in fact, to a classically trained *rhetor*. His "strangeness" consists among other things in this that his letters are almost completely free of the "taglines" of the great Greek authors. Standard Greek writing is peppered with such quotations and allusions. Paul's writing breathes with the ancient Scriptures of his people. In addition, Paul's writing lacks the balanced elegance of, for example, the epistle to the Hebrews. In Paul *asyndeta* abound. Yes, he's more than capable of a periodic sentence, but even these tend to lack the subordination and coordination techniques Greeks so loved.

As are all the New Testament writers, Paul is completely convinced that Jesus is the Messiah who came in fulfillment of God's ancient word to his people (see Acts 13:32-33; Romans 15:8). In fact, he claims the Old Testament as a thoroughly Christian book, written for us "upon whom the fulfillment of the ages have come" (1 Corinthians 10:11; see also Romans 15:4). We are hardly surprised, then, to notice that Paul's writing is simply saturated with the Scriptures. His Greek is redolent with Old Testament quotations and allusions.

There are sometimes when we may be tempted to scratch our heads when Paul refers to a particular passage. Sometimes the problems are caused by the Greek being no match for the Hebrew original (Compare, e.g., 2 Corinthians 4:13 with the Masoretic Text. Is Paul basing his argument on a mistranslation?). At other times the connection between the words in their original historical setting and the use to which Paul is putting them is far from clear. As Peter informed us early on, there are some things in Paul that are "difficult to understand" (2 Peter 3:15-16).

The use of the Old Testament in the New is a major topic in its own right, and we can hardly take the time now to deal thoroughly with the issue. Suffice it to say that most of the "problems" disappear when we bear in mind two things:

1. Paul is often quoting not so much a "proof passage" but a proof *context*. The passage he quotes serves as a kind of marker of or (perhaps more accurately put) a gateway into the entire Old Testament context in which the passage is found. A careful study and comparison of Psalm 116 with 2 Corinthians 4:13, for example, will show that Psalm 116 is a wonderful example of the kind of confident faith under trial that Paul is talking about. It is always rewarding and homiletically enriching to study the contexts of Paul's Old Testament citations. In fact, if a preacher doesn't do so, I really wonder if he can be confident that he has completed his exegesis.
2. We have become so accustomed to citing Scripture as *proof* for the truth being asserted, or as the *fulfillment* of a particular prophecy, that we miss the fact that Paul sometimes simply alludes to the Old Testament in a *literary* way, to *illustrate* a truth being taught.

These categories are not as neat as one might suppose, however. Sometimes we may wonder whether Paul is simply alluding to an Old Testament Scripture, or actually seeing a typological fulfillment of prophecy. Nevertheless, simply reflecting on the question will be helpful for the preacher in gaining an under-

standing of Paul's depth of insight into the mystery of Christ.

Question for reflection

How would you classify Paul's uses of the Old Testament here: as a simple proof for the truth being asserted, a proof context, a fulfillment of prophecy, or as an illustrative allusion:

Romans 3:10-18

Ephesians 4:8

1 Corinthians 10:1ff

Romans 10:5-11

Romans 15:3

Genre or Genres?

And now, a final word about the letter genre itself. As we have seen—and perhaps especially under Paul's hand—it is an extremely supple and flexible form. Underneath the genre heading "letter," we can expect to see many sub-genres within individual sections. Consider, for example, the poetry of Philippians 2:5-11, the maxims and "faithful sayings" embedded in the Pastoral Epistles, the narrative contained within Galatians 1:13-2:21(?), the "allegory" of Hagar and Ishmael that begins in Galatians 4:21.

Each sub-form brings with it its own rules; that is to say, when we "read" poetry, we understand that we're dealing with a different kind of speaking than one will encounter when reading a narrative. Consider Philippians 2, for example. With the compressed phrasing and beautiful parallelism, Paul is doing more than dogmatically describing the two "states" of Christ. Filled with a sense of awe and wonder, he's composing a beautiful hymn of praise in which he expects the whole universe to join. As we prepare to preach on this text, doesn't it make sense to do more than simply mine it for theological paydirt? Shouldn't we also attempt to capture those accents of wonder in our own proclamation?

Furthermore, we do well to pay attention when Paul "mixes it up" between direct address, inclusive address, and personal appeal/declaration (you . . . we . . . I). It is well worth considering the function of his rhetorical questions. If he's not asking this question for information, then why is he asking it? To express irony? Incredulity? Or something else?

Conclusion

In this brief presentation, I do not pretend to have explored the full range of questions that might be asked as we attempt to analyze the rhetoric of Paul's letters. What I do hope is that I have pointed you in some directions that will be helpful to you as you prepare your sermons. My prayer is that as we increase in our appreciation for the style and forms of these ancient words, our insights will enrich and enliven our own sense of the possibilities of preaching from Paul's epistles.

Perhaps this may all seem too complicated so that it discourages you from even trying to think in these terms. I can only urge you: start somewhere. Don't give up. And I leave you with the words I referred to earlier, when St. Augustine was empathizing with a friend who felt his best efforts led to insipid results:

At the same time, you have made the confession and complaint that it has often befallen you that in the course of a lengthened and languid address you have become profitless and distasteful even to yourself, not to speak of the learner whom you have been endeavoring to instruct by your utterance . . . Indeed with me, too, it is almost always the fact that my speech displeases myself . . . When my capacities of expression prove inferior to my inner apprehensions, I grieve over the inability which my tongue has betrayed in answering to my heart.¹⁹

And I leave you with his own encouragement to keep at it:

But often the eagerness of those who want to listen to me shows me that my utterance is not so frigid as it seems to myself to be. From their reactions, I gather that they derive some profit from it. And I occupy myself all the more with doing what seems to help them . . . Even, so, on your side also, the very fact that persons who require to be instructed in the faith are brought so frequently to you, ought to help you to understand that your discourse is not displeasing to others as it is displeasing to yourself; and you ought not to consider yourself unfruitful, simply because you do not succeed in setting things forth in such a manner as you may want.

And so, *solī Deo Gloria!*

¹⁹*On the Catechising of the Uninstructed*. Available here: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1303.htm>.