

A Rhetorical Reading of Galatians¹

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In the history of interpretation few documents in the New Testament have provoked more discussion, or have influenced the shape of Christian theology more than Paul's letter to the Galatians. Since Luther this document has played a central role in formulating the contours of Protestant thought. Consequently, a sea of writings -- commentaries, articles etc. -- has appeared attempting to comprehend the apostle's mind. One would think that everything possible has already been said about the meaning of this NT book. Yet, such is not the case, for a variety of reasons. New and better ways of interpreting ancient documents are surfacing in the latter part of the twentieth century; each generation must reinterpret the NT for itself, i.e., 'contextualize' the message of the gospel. Contemporary scholars are creatively challenging the Christian community with new ways of reading the text of Galatians as a means of contextualizing the document for our time. Just as the work of Ernest de Witt Burton on Galatians in the International Critical Commentary series established some important interpretative norms in 1921, the work of Hans Dieter Betz in the Hermeneia series set a new standard for interpreting Galatians in 1979 for the latter part of the twentieth century. No serious treatment of Galatians today can dare ignore this most influential commentary.²

A significant factor in the pivotal role of Betz's work has been his recognition of the literary aspects of the Galatians text -- as few previous commentators had done, especially in the English-speaking world. Two literary aspects have increasingly been recognized by recent scholarship on Galatians: the epistolary structure and the use of ancient rhetoric. The letter structure has long been acknowledged but often without awareness of the significance of that structure for interpretation. The Tarsus or Jerusalem debate on whether Paul worked out of his Jewish or Hellenistic heritages has frequently forced an either/or choice, without adequate allowance for a creativity that could blend together both aspects into a holistic approach. The latter presents a much better way of reading Paul.

The following outline attempts to capture both aspects of reading Galatians:³

Praescriptio	1:1-5	
Exordium	1:6-10	
The Body of the Letter		1:11-6:10
Narratio		1:11-2:21
Probatio		3:1-4:31
Exhortatio		5:1-6:10
Conclusio	6:11-18	

Praescriptio (1:1-5). Traditionally the ancient letter contained three elements in the "pre-writing": *Superscriptio* (who was sending the letter; 1:1-2a), *Adscriptio* (whom the letter was sent to; 1:2b), and *Salutatio* (greeting, 1:3-5). The Superscriptio in Galatians provides important clues regarding the emphasis of the letter. Typically Paul introduces himself by name, Παῦλος and by title of authority ἀπόστολος. The expansion element that follows is significant: "not by men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father who

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²I adopt a differing view of the epistolary setting for the letter. Betz argued for a "apologetic letter" view (Betz, *Hermeneia*, 14-15). Later scholars have more convincingly argued for a letter of friendship setting, i.e., Joop Smit, "The Letter of Paul to the Galatians: A Deliverative Speech," *New Testament Studies* 35, no. 1 (1989): 1-26. A most helpful non-technical interpretation of Galatians using this approach is Dieter Lührmann, *Galatians: A Continental Commentary*, transl. by O.C. Dean, Jr. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

³Notice especially the expansion elements in the Praescriptio and Conclusio as important signals of themes and emphases in the body of the letter.

raised him (i.e., Jesus) from the dead."⁴ This qualification of his apostleship immediately alerts the readers that the source and credibility of Paul's apostleship is going to be an important concern in the letter, as indeed it is, especially in the Narratio section of the body. Whether it rests on human authorization or divine commissioning is crucial to the reliability of the gospel message proclaimed by Paul.

The first part of the Salutatio is typically Pauline (1:3) in which Paul incorporated the traditional Greek and Hebrew greetings into a uniquely Christian greeting. The use of preformed Christian tradition in the expansion elements of 1:4-5 provide another significant signal: the very essence of the gospel message that Paul proclaimed. The atoning death of Jesus is the basis of our deliverance out of the age under the domination of the Evil One, all of which is accomplished by the will of the Heavenly Father. The preformed structure with the doxological ending (1:5) appealed to the readers to accept Paul's view as in line with that which the Christian communities celebrated and confessed repeatedly in worship; Paul was no corrupter of divine truth!

Thus before the reader / listener gets very far into the letter Paul has clearly signaled the two central issues at stake: his apostleship and the nature of the gospel.

Exordium (1:6-10). Usually at this point Paul would launch into a prayer (Proem) for his readers. This prayer consisted of first a word of thanksgiving for his readers, then a prayer of intercession for the needs of his readers. The Pauline Proems additionally identify the central motifs to be developed in the body proper of the letter. Galatians uniquely does not contain such prayers. Instead of beginning with "I give thanks to God for you...", Paul says, "I'm astounded that you..." At once his initial readers were put on notice that Paul was writing to them in a state of deep emotional agitation and concern. To the modern reader Paul signals the seriousness of the issues at stake in the letter.

The heart of Paul's agitation with the Galatians οὕτως ταχέως μετατίθεσθε ἀπὸ τοῦ καλέσαντος ὑμᾶς ἐν χάριτι [Χριστοῦ] εἰς ἕτερον εὐαγγέλιον, ὃ οὐκ ἔστιν ἄλλο (1:6b-7a). Although various interpretative issues surface, the essence of the matter was the Galatians' turning away from God in Christ into another 'gospel' that was false and thus a 'non-gospel.' This situation caused deep concern in Paul and prompted the sending of the letter. Therefore, the expansion of this core statement Paul intimates that this movement away from Christ is being caused by certain trouble makers (1:7). He positions himself against them by clever use of two types of conditional sentences that invoked eternal damnation as a prayer wish upon these trouble makers (1:8-9). Then he asserted his own stance of seeking only to please God (1:10), subtly implying the opposite of these trouble makers.⁵

The troubling problem among the Galatian churches was the presence of Christian teachers advocating a complete redefining of the gospel message. Their agenda was radical to the degree that it replaced the apostolic gospel message and thus placed in spiritual jeopardy anyone who bought into it. Paul reacted to this passionately! The modern reader should observe that this was not a difference of opinion over the peripherals of the gospel; no, it was a complete re-writing of the very heart of the gospel. This distinction is important to keep in mind.

By implication of the very existence of the letter as well as the strategy of argumentation within it, Paul sought to reverse the turning process in 1:6 so that the Galatians would reject the false gospel and reaffirm their stance in the apostolic gospel.⁶ How could this be best accomplished through a letter? Up to this point he

⁴English translations are those of the author unless otherwise specified.

⁵See 6:12-16 for an enlargement of this.

⁶Here the holistic view surfaces as the better reading of the letter. Paul summoned all his argumentative powers, both Hebrew and Greek, in order to persuade the Galatians to reaffirm their earlier commitment to the apostolic gospel he had initially proclaimed in their midst.

has signaled two crucial issues at stake: his apostleship and the apostolic gospel. These point the way to the first two major sections of the body proper of the letter: the narratio (1:11-2:21) defending his apostleship and the probatio (3:1-4:31) defending the apostolic gospel. The challenge before Paul was to appeal to the Galatians so as to pull them back into acceptance of these views. The clinching argument would become the appeal to proper behavior growing out of these views in the exhortatio (5:1-6:10), part three of the body of the letter. Paul's apostolic understanding of the gospel would not lead to moral perversion; to the contrary, a correct view of the gospel provides the only foundation to genuine morality, Anything else quickly degenerates into superficial legalism -- a lesson that Christianity has found very difficult to learn over the centuries.

Narratio (1:11-2:21). In ancient times one helpful way of arguing a view was to narrate events that supported one's position. This was Paul's strategy in the first major section of the body of the letter. This is done very graphically. First, the view is set forth (1:11-12) followed by five narrated events serving as proof of the view. This leads to the climactic point of 2:15-21, the propositio, that expands and develops Paul's view of the gospel. This section both culminates the first section and lays the foundation for the next section. In stating his view in 1:11-12, Paul brought together the controlling motifs of his apostleship, the gospel, and the Galatians. They had earlier heard this gospel preached when Paul first evangelized them. Now he reminds them of its exclusively non-human, divine nature: ὅτι οὐκ ἔστιν κατὰ ἄνθρωπον. In the supporting statements in 1:12, Paul weaves his apostleship and gospel into an inseparable form, as he restates the non-human / divine commissioning source raised first in the expansion of the superscriptio in 1:1 If the Galatians were to reject this message, they would be rejecting that which had divine origin; it would not merely be rejection of its human herald.

Paul's strategy was to provide evidence of the non-human aspect of his contention; this could be accomplished by showing his independence from recognized Christian leaders. The touchstone of reference in each proof was the apostles in Jerusalem, strongly suggesting that his non-human references in 1:1 and 1:11 were not merely generic, but rather concretized in the personalities of Peter and other leaders in Jerusalem. This very likely infers that the trouble-makers in Galatia were claiming authorization from these Jerusalem leaders, and thereby they sought to undermine Paul's authority by pitting him against the Jerusalem leaders. Paul rejects this, but concentrates primarily on the divine commissioning of his apostolic preaching as the best appeal to the Galatians. The bottom line for any Christian minister is not whether the "powers that be" authorize him, but rather that God commissions and leads him

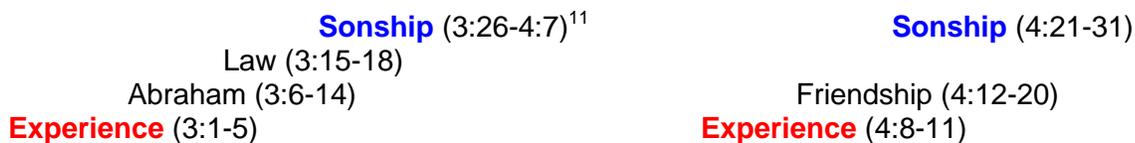
The non-human / divine origin perspective is evidenced in five episodes: **1** Paul's conversion and call (1:13-17); **2** his first visit to Jerusalem as a Christian (1:18-19); **3** his subsequent relation with the churches in Judea (1:20-24); **4** his later participation in the Jerusalem council (2:1-10); **5** his confrontation with Peter at Antioch (2:11-14). The modern reader must keep in mind that the slant given to each episode is to emphasize aspects that prove his non-human view in 1:11. Such understanding is essential in attempting to relate the details of these episodes to parallel accounts by Luke in Acts.⁷

The motif of independency from human authorization is central to the narration of each episode. Where the issue of the role of the Jewish Torah in salvation became central with the Jerusalem Council (2:1-10 = Acts 15:1-29), Paul's language intensified greatly reflecting the ardent emotional aspects of this issue earlier at Antioch and Jerusalem, Likewise it was at the heart of the preaching of the 'non-gospel' by the trouble makers at Galatia. In spite of the powerful language of independency permeating each episode, the modern reader should not take this to mean arbitrary confrontation and petty 'pot shooting' at established leaders. Relationship and mutual acceptance of respective callings from God stand as a powerful secondary theme in these episodes. Differences legitimately existed between Paul and the Jerusalem apostles, but through mutual respect of one another and agreement on the basics of the gospel they could work together for the advancement of the gospel message. This stands as the great legacy of this text to modern readers.

⁷Cf. 1:15-17 with Acts 9:1-19a; 22:6-16; 26:12-18. Gal 1:18-24 with Acts 9:19b-25, 26-31; 22:17-21 Gal. 2:1-10 with Acts 15:1-29.

In the climatic section of 2:15-21, the modern reader sees how skillfully Paul blended his narration of past episodes into the issue at hand in Galatia. Commentators have debated where to place the terminating quotation marks on Paul's speech to Peter begun in 2:14b. Should it be at the end of verse fourteen? At 2:17? Or, at 2:21? This modern dilemma for Bible translators did not exist for Paul. The transition from past to present was made in shifts of verb person and number: second singular 'you' in 2:14; first person plural 'we' 2:15-17; first person singular 'I' in 2:18-21. Increasingly the Antioch narrative fades into the background as the present Galatian problem moves to center-stage. But something else is taking place here. The rebuke of Peter's hypocrisy in 2:14 is predicated on mutual agreement between Paul and Peter on the essence of the gospel, οὐ δικαιοῦται ἄνθρωπος ἐξ ἔργων νόμου ἐὰν μὴ διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (2:15-17, 16b).⁸ Both leaders stood together on that point. Now what implications were contained in that agreed upon understanding of the gospel? Paul illustrates these by setting himself up as an example in a 'straw-man' situation -- an illustration that intimated Peter's hypocrisy, and that of the Galatians' as well.⁹ To adopt patterns of conduct based on 'law' rather than 'grace' would stand as a repudiation of the gospel once accepted.¹⁰ It would entrap one back into the impossible legalism from which the gospel had provided deliverance. Such conduct would be quite foolish! Paul recognized this and vowed he would never fall prey to it! And neither should the Galatians!

Probatio (3:1-4:31). With this foundation of apostleship and gospel laid, Paul focused his appeal to the Galatians more directly on them and their commitment to this gospel message. This section represents a greater blending of Greek and Jewish rhetorical styles, especially with the heavy use of OT citation to buttress his points. Paul's strategy begins with experience (3:1-5) and moves toward a climatic assertion of sonship on the basis of experience (3:26-4:7), Again he starts with experience (4:8-11) and moves toward the sonship assertion (4:21-31) The pattern can be charted somewhat as follows:



What is meant by the label "experience"? In both 3:1-5 and 4:8-11 the apostle challenged the Galatians to recall their initial conversion experience as pivotal to where they now are spiritually. In 3:1-5, through a series of probing rhetorical questions he reminded them of the faith basis of their beginning experience in the gospel. The alternative "hearing leading to faith" was pitted against "works of Law" Their initial experience was the former, not the latter now being argued by the trouble-makers in Galatia. That faith commitment had effectively brought them as far as they had progressed spiritually. Why now change boats in midstream?

Similarly in 4:8-11, Paul reminded them of the powerful transformation from paganism to Christianity that characterized that initial experience. Their present inclination to return to τὰ ἀσθενῆ καὶ πτωχὰ στοιχεῖα (4:8)

⁸Compare the earlier assertion of the core of the gospel in 1:4 from accepted Christian tradition. Paul employs skillful means to appeal to the Galatians to accept this gospel. It was generally accepted; it was mutually agreed upon by these two leaders, Peter and Paul.

⁹An implication of this strategy for the Galatians is that they could find their way back to consistent commitment to this apostolic gospel by following the lead of Peter, who ironically was being used by the trouble makers as the authority for the 'non-gospel' they were preaching.

¹⁰By this point the gospel has been described in three ways: sacrificial death of Jesus providing deliverance from this present age (1:4); justification by faith apart from works of law (2:16-17); standing crucified with Christ and living by faith (2:20-21). All three motifs underscore the richness of this spiritual experience in relation to Jesus Christ.

¹¹Betz argues persuasively for 3:19-25 serving as an excursus answering the related issue of the value and purpose of the Law in light of Paul's seeming rejection of it.

made adherence to the Law a reversion to their past paganism Thus in both sections Paul attempted to demonstrate that the present demands to conform to Torah stood in hypocritical contradiction to the way they had begun their spiritual pilgrimage in the gospel. If they would only think about beginnings, they would find insight for present directions!

In 3:6-9, the linkage of the Christian community to Abraham is set forth on the basis of a common faith experience. This was foreseen and established in the OT scriptures. Faith became the connection, not Law, as is set forth emphatically (1) in 3:10 -14 where being ἐξ ἔργων νόμου means condemnation and (2) in 3:15 -18 where the 430 years later given Law in no way changes the covenant promise made to Abraham and his descendants, the children of faith. Here Paul evidently is taking on some of the central arguments of the trouble-makers. With the OT itself he proves the impossibility of their stance and the correctness of his linkage of believers -- Jewish and Gentile -- with Abraham,

This leads to the crucial question in 3:19 Τί οὖν νόμος. Before climaxing his point of faith and Abraham, this question of the value of the Law must be addressed. Via the graphic imagery of prison and παιδαγωγός he asserts its fundamental role was to prepare the way for faith in Christ If the modern reader jumps from 3:18 to 3:26 the continuity of thought-flow will be seen bringing the issue set forth in 3:1-5 to its climax. 3:19-25 is important, but only as a side issue to prevent a charge against Paul as having absolutely rejected the revelation of God to Moses. The Sinaitic Code was significant, but not a means of salvation.

Thus in 3:26-4:7, Paul emphatically asserts regarding the Gentile Galatians: εἰ δὲ ὑμεῖς Χριστοῦ, ἄρα τοῦ Ἀβραάμ σπέρμα ἐστέ, κατ' ἐπαγγελίαν κληρονόμοι (3:29) The Roman aristocratic household with slaves and sons provides the reinforcing imagery of this sonship in 4:1-7. The Galatians' initial faith commitment legitimately linked these Gentiles to the divine covenant with Abraham and assures them of being in good standing with God. To interject the legalism of Law into the picture only messes things up; that the Galatians should consider when feeling pressure from the trouble makers!

Paul hurls a second missile at the Galatians from the launchpad of experience in 4:8-11 The appeal to conversion experience here concludes with Paul's pressing their relationship with him both then and now. Throughout the letter he has appealed to the sensitivities of the Galatians by pushing them away and pulling them toward him.¹² Here marks the turning point from pushing them away to pulling them back. His fussing at them now shifts into images of confidence and warmth. A father wisely uses bonds of relationship with his children to encourage them to do what is right!

This provides the basis for Paul's lengthy appeal to friendship in 4:12-20. A triangle of relations is set up: Galatians to Paul; Paul to Galatians; Galatians to trouble makers; trouble makers to Galatians; Paul to trouble makers. By reminding the Galatians of their fervent love for him initially he presses them to renew that warmth now. The trouble makers are 'courting' the Galatians (4:17) but with improper motives. Thus the Galatians should reject their advances. Paul is the affectionate one with proper motive; in fact, his affections are more than a 'suitor's', they are those of a mother giving birth. The Galatians will hopefully recognize who genuinely cares for them. A lesson modern readers should heed in relating to spiritual leaders today!

Paul moves again to the sonship issue in 4:21-31. The same route of connection to Abraham as the means to sonship is asserted. This time, though, Paul employs a peculiar method of argumentation to the modern reader, an allegory.¹³ The sons of Abraham, Ishmael and Isaac along with their mothers, provide the

¹² |→ "I am shocked that you..." (1:6); |→ "O stupid Galatians, who has bewitched you... (3:1); |→ "I'm afraid I've wasted my time messing with you" (4:11); ←| "My children, whom again I suffer the pains of birth over... (4:19-20); ←| "You were running well" (5:7); ←| "I am persuaded of you in the Lord that you won't be otherwise minded" (5:10).

¹³In modern literary terms, the label typology is more accurate than allegory. The Greek word for allegory (4:24) was broad enough to carry this meaning.

typological pattern for Paul's emphasis. By an untraditional association of the synagogue tradition with Hagar and Ishmael and the Christian community with Sarah and Isaac the theme of sonship via divine promise is linked to believers -- an assertion made before in 3:26-4:7 In the second emphasis here Paul uses this motif to prepare the way for the third major section of the body proper, 5:1-6:10. Sonship means freedom, versus slavery through legalism.

Exhortatio (5:1-6:10). The structure of Paul's approach is as follows: the axiom of freedom in Christ with a positive/negative admonition to stand in this freedom. This foundation is then expanded and developed in three subdivisions (5:1,2-12; 5:13,14-24; 5:25,266:10) that build on each other while advancing the application of freedom. Notice the beginning structure for each section:

(1) 5:1

τῇ ἐλευθερίᾳ ἡμᾶς Χριστὸς ἠλευθέρωσεν·
στήκετε οὖν
καὶ
μὴ πάλιν ζυγῷ δουλείας ἐνέχεσθε

(axiom)
(admonition +)

(admonition -)

(2) 5:13

Ἵμεῖς γὰρ ἐπ' ἐλευθερίᾳ ἐκλήθητε,
ἀδελφοί,
μόνον μὴ τὴν ἐλευθερίαν εἰς ἀφορμὴν τῆ σαρκί,
ἀλλὰ
διὰ τῆς ἀγάπης δουλεύετε ἀλλήλοις

(axiom)

(admonition -)

(admonition +)

(3) 5:25

εἰ ζῶμεν πνεύματι
πνεύματι καὶ στοιχῶμεν

(axiom)

(admonition +)

In the first subdivision (5:1-12), Paul applies this axiom/admonition structure to the issue of circumcision and Law obedience. In strong language, he presents the Galatians with the option: either Law or grace (5:2-6). They must decide on one or the other; the option of the trouble makers of both Law and grace is rejected as false. In 5:7-12, he appeals to them to choose grace by expressing confidence in their past track record and for the future. He comes down extremely hard on the trouble makers as the cause of the problem with the Galatians. Thus the seriousness of the issue of the non-gospel by the troublemakers is underscored. It's decision time for the Galatians! Freedom involves responsibility. The Galatians must take their stand.

In the second subdivision (5:13-24), Paul advances the issue of freedom to deal with the role of the Holy Spirit in Christian behavior. Freedom is no license to sin; rather, it is the base of loving service to others. Verses fourteen and fifteen enlarge upon the negative/positive admonitions in verse thirteen in an a/b//b' /a' sequence.¹⁴ 5:16-24 provides the source for the difference between responsible and irresponsible use of freedom: the Holy Spirit. The role of the Spirit has frequently surfaced already in the letter in both salvation and Christian living,¹⁵ but now is more fully expressed as the decisive force in overcoming the power of the flesh. Here is precisely why there was so much at stake with the Galatians. To have chosen Law over grace would have cut them off from the Spirit of Christ who alone can make the difference between success and failure in

¹⁴Interestingly, Paul uses graphic language in the a//a' sequence: flesh//biting and gnawing on one another. In the b//b' section he sets forth the admonition to serve (b), then supports it with a scripture proof (b'). Thus, irresponsible use of freedom turns into the destruction of relationships; whereas responsible use leads to sacrificial service building up relationships.

¹⁵Cf. 3:2,3,5,14; 4:6,29; 5:5

coping with fleshly desires. This emphasis reaches a high point in 5:24: "Those belonging to Christ have crucified the flesh together with its passions and cravings."

In the third subdivision (5:25-6:10), Paul develops further the ethical implications of this freedom in Christ that unleashes the power of the Spirit in the believer. On the premise that we owe our spiritual life (both conversion and daily living) to the Spirit (5:25a), we are admonished to "get in step" (στοιχῶμεν) with the Spirit, i.e., walk in harmony with his leadership (5:25b). This has profound implications for the believer, both inwardly (attitude) and outwardly (actions).¹⁶ Failure (5:26) attitudinally ("vainglory"), goes hand in glove with wrong actions ("provoking one another, envying one another"). Positively, helpful ministry to the wayward brother depends on keeping careful focus on one's own vulnerability (6:1). Also, supportive ministry in carrying burdens depends on proper spiritual self-perception (6:2-5). Sharing with spiritual leaders stands as another implication of following the Spirit's leadership (6:6). Spiritual insight into the principle of sowing and reaping wraps up this section (6:7-10), again encompassing both inward spiritual perceptiveness and outward actions of good deeds toward others.

In the exhortatio Paul has advanced his appeal to the Galatians to reaffirm their commitment to the apostolic gospel by building his case on the principle of spiritual freedom obtained in Christ. This freedom is found only in Christ, not in any dilution of the gospel with legalism. The catalyst for proper conduct growing out of this freedom is not an externally imposed Law, but rather the vastly superior power of the Holy Spirit unleashed through the grace of God in Christ. The power of the Spirit is the ability to reshape the believer both inwardly and outwardly, something the Law could never do. Therefore the appeal of the troublemakers in Galatia to add Law to their version of the gospel was to gut the power of the gospel for transforming the believer's living. The gospel presented no danger toward lawless immoral behavior. To the contrary, it stood -- and stands -- as the only way to achieve genuine moral behavior.

Conclusio (6:11-18). By the time of Augustus in the ancient letter the conclusionary section normally contained two or three elements: health wish for recipients; word of farewell; a closing greeting preceding the first two. Paul expanded the pattern in this section more than anywhere else in the letter format with benedictions and/or doxologies replacing the health wish and other elements. In Galatians one finds an autographic postscript (cf. 6:1 which served to authenticate the contents of the letter actually written by an amanuensis. As part of this verifying process, the central issues of the letter were summarized by Paul in his own handwriting (6:12-16) with verse sixteen reaching a climax through the pronouncement of blessing upon all the Galatians who adopt the position Paul has advocated. Verse seventeen reasserts Paul's own genuineness as a spokesman for the Lord -- a major issue in the letter. Then verse eighteen contains the benediction typical in the Pauline letters, although some unique elements are present. Most interestingly, ἀδελφοί, found only in this Pauline benediction, concludes the letter with a touch of warmth and affection. The liturgical ἀμήν became the congregational affirmative response to the public reading of this letter.

¹⁶An alternative way of classifying Paul's thought structure here is self-esteem and stance toward others. A positive self-esteem goes with edifying ministry toward others; a negative self-esteem leads to destructive actions toward others.