



## Free Speech in Pauline Political Theology

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Thy words, Stranger, lack a city.  
—Plutarch, *Life of Lysander*

Since we have such hope, we use much free speech.  
—St. Paul, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians*

### I. FREE SPEECH AND THE CHURCH AS *EKKLESIA*

Although it is generally recognized today that Paul's faith was not a religion of subjectivity, some may nevertheless object to the notion that the apostle's theology has a political dimension. Surely, it may be said, the sectarian communities which Paul nurtured with the stark contrasts of "outsiders" and "insiders" did not think that their task was to influence public policy in the cities of the Roman empire. While it is of course preposterous to think that the early Christians had Caesar's ear, influencing public policy is only one way of engaging in politics.

There is another way of being political: creating an alternative public space through speech.<sup>1</sup> This way has the possibility of unmasking and criticizing the injustice of the dominant political expression while anticipating, embodying, and

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<sup>1</sup>D. Georgi (*Theocracy in Paul's Praxis and Theology* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991]) also asserts that Paul's theology is political and describes the church as an alternative utopia. Nevertheless, I wish to draw a clear line between Georgi's position and my own. Whereas I emphasize the church as a place where deliberation occurs by all through free speech, Georgi thinks the Pauline letters are repositories of Paul's idea system which inverted the patriarchal God and promoted the value of solidarity. Not only do I disagree with his view that Pauline letters are codes to be cracked for the ideology they contain, I also question the value of solidarity when it is not accompanied by an even greater emphasis on free speech shared by all. Solidarity implies an underlying likeness and a willingness of the powerful to speak "on behalf of" the powerless. For a critique of solidarity isolated from rhetoric, see G. M. Simpson, "Theologia Crucis and the Forensically Fraught World: Engaging Helmut Peukert and Jürgen Habermas," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 57 (1989) 509-541.

proclaiming God's transformation of the whole of political life in church and society.<sup>2</sup> In this way Paul's letters were political. He did everything he could to persuade his hearers that the gospel of the death of Jesus and the resurrection of the humiliated and crucified One had deep implications for political life, since it carried the promise of a unified humanity.

It was not the case that Paul argued that unity in diversity is a worthy goal for enlightened minds to pursue or powerful generals to impose. Unlike some of the philosophers, he did not operate with an ideal of the unity of humankind based upon universal reason. Rather, his program

was a political *theology*, because he claimed that God in Jesus through the Spirit is creating a new human community through the proclamation of the gospel in which difference is not collapsed or intimidated into sameness but woven together in unity.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, unlike the philosophers of the first century who despised rhetoric for its claim to find truth within persuasion and who instead sought to undergird political and social institutions with eternal truths,<sup>4</sup> Paul relied heavily on public argumentation for the preservation of the communities.

There is no lack of evidence for a political framework in Paul's theology. One obvious place to look is the term *ekklesia*, which is generally translated "church" but to a first-century Greek speaker would have been heard as the assembly of free citizens called together to draw upon their right and obligation to speak freely and deliberate publicly matters of life and justice in their city.<sup>5</sup> Did Paul understand the church to be such a deliberative body which shaped its future through rhetoric? The very fact that he participated in this deliberation through his letters implies that he did, to say nothing of the fact that much of his writing utilized the classical techniques of deliberative rhetoric. New Testament scholars are just beginning to discover the intensity of mutual exhortation in the life of the earliest churches<sup>6</sup> and the importance of rhetoric in mission and community formation.<sup>7</sup> Paul himself in 2 Cor 5:11 summarizes his ministry in the words "we persuade people (*anthropous peithomen*)"—an appeal to one widely recognized definition of rhetoric in antiquity.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Like contemporary critical theorists, Paul presupposes an ideal speech situation in light of which he criticizes present social conditions. Among recent philosophers, this method of critique has been most ardently advocated by Jürgen Habermas. See T. McCarthy, *The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1978) 75-125, 272-357.

<sup>3</sup>E. Castelli (*Imitating Paul: A Discourse of Power* [Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991]) offers a radically different interpretation, since she detects in Paul's rhetoric the beginning of the master western narrative which reduces all difference to sameness. Although her insistence that Paul's letters were simultaneously political and rhetorical (an improvement over Georgi), her deeply suspicious hermeneutic, inspired by the work of Michel Foucault, reduces all claims of truth to moves for power.

<sup>4</sup>See especially J. de Romilly, *Magic and Rhetoric in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1975).

<sup>5</sup>See W. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale, 1983) 108. For the origin in the ancient Greek city of other moral values important for early Christianity, see W. Meeks, *The Moral World of the First Christians* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986) 19-39.

<sup>6</sup>A. Malherbe, "'Pastoral Care' in the Thessalonian Church," *New Testament Studies* 36 (1990) 375-391.

<sup>7</sup>H. D. Betz, "The Problem of Rhetoric and Theology according to the Apostle Paul," in *L'Apôtre Paul: Personnalité, style et conception du ministère*, ed. A. Vanhoye (Louvain: Louvain University, 1986) 16-48; W. Wuellner, "Greek Rhetoric and Pauline Argumentation," in *Early Christian Literature and the Classical Intellectual Tradition: In Honorem Robert M. Grant*, ed. W. Schoedel and R. Wilkin (Paris: Éditions Beauchesne, 1979) 177-188.

<sup>8</sup>Cicero, *De Oratore* 1.31.138.

Let us assume, then, that Paul shared the classical ideal of a political body shaping itself through persuasive speech and not through violence or the dictates of an institutionalized hierarchy. Yet, if for Paul each community gathered in Jesus' name was an *ekklesia*, how did he avoid the classism and sexism of this social institution in which only citizens (freeborn males) were permitted to speak their minds, since only they, as I will point out below, possessed the right of free speech? Paul certainly could not avoid this issue, since, as recent studies of early Christian communities have emphasized, the churches were characterized by a high level of

social stratification.<sup>9</sup> Rather than a haven for the poor and oppressed, these churches were microcosms of society in the sense that, aside from the aristocracy, all levels of social and economic power were represented. The question must have been intense: Would all be allowed to speak?

This sociological profile of the Pauline communities accentuates the problem of access to free speech and helps us appreciate the theological dimensions of the issue. If the *ekklesia* of classical Athens is a model for the church in terms of its emphasis on free speech for the preservation of the community, would the church follow its model all the way and permit only the elite within the church to speak? Would the church take as its organizing metaphor the full-fledged city, where slaves, women, and foreigners labored without voice so that the free males could be at leisure (the root meaning of freedom) to express their thoughts and shape the community? Or would the Spirit free all and entitle all within the community to speak freely and to become the *ekklesia*?

How Paul argued against elitism within the church and opened free speech to all should be an important issue for those interested in discovering, interpreting, and finally confessing the apostle's political theology. I will confine my examination to a reading of 2 Cor 3:7-18, although the issue of free speech is found in the rest of this letter and in all of his writings.<sup>10</sup> This passage, however, provides the most extensive theological argumentation for God's liberation of speech in the Christian community. Here we find the classical association of free speech (3:12) and freedom (3:17). In order to grasp fully the theological character of the legitimation of free speech in 2 Corinthians 3, I will first sketch the place of free speech in Greek political and moral philosophy, arguing that Paul adopts, but, more importantly, also adapts the classical tradition.

## II. THE LEGITIMATION OF FREE SPEECH (*PARRESIA*)

In the ancient Greek city, free speech was the exclusive right of citizens. This meant that women, aliens, and slaves were not permitted to speak freely. We gain a sense of how important participation through speech in public life was when we observe that the loss of *parresia* was considered the most grievous misfortune that could be suffered by a freeborn male.<sup>11</sup> Without free speech one was reduced to the

<sup>9</sup>A. Malherbe, *Social Aspects of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 113-122.

<sup>10</sup>See S. Marrow, "Parrhesia and the New Testament," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 44 (1982) 431-446.

<sup>11</sup>Demosthenes, Fragment 21.

lot of a slave.<sup>12</sup> Freedom of action and freedom of speech were two sides of the same coin, but this coin could be possessed only by the citizens of the city.

Yet the influence of the city on social life was doomed. As political power became more concentrated in the hands of the successors of Alexander the Great and eventually in Rome, daily life in the cities was determined less and less by the free speech of local citizens.<sup>13</sup> Free speech no longer found its legitimation in communal terms. Now philosophic discussions took up the theme that the legitimate basis of the philosopher's *parresia* was his *personal* freedom. The "city" becomes a metaphor for the wise person's moral virtue. For example, the Stoic philosopher Musonius Rufus, a contemporary of Paul, used the freedom of the Athenian citizen as a metaphor of the individual philosopher's moral independence, which in turn granted

*parresia*. The reasonable person

does not value or despise any place as the cause of his happiness or unhappiness, but he makes the whole matter depend upon himself and considers himself a citizen of the city of God (*polites tes tou Dios poleos*) which is made up of men and gods.<sup>14</sup>

Since the philosopher's charter of freedom in the city of God is written in his own soul, he can be deprived of his freedom by nothing external. The philosopher's *parresia* resides not in his political status but in his freedom from fear and his ability to make all things depend upon himself. Moral freedom at an individual level has replaced political freedom as the basis of *parresia*.

Free speech was legitimated also from the perspective of the benefits it bestowed on the common good. Free speech was the cornerstone of Athenian democracy, the goad which compelled citizens to do their duty, and the most effective means of preserving the city's safety.<sup>15</sup> Orators exploited the assumption that free speech was necessary for the well-being of the city. Isocrates was adept at portraying the benefits of his *parresia*.<sup>16</sup> He contrasts himself with flattering orators who speak for the pleasure but not the benefit of their hearers.<sup>17</sup> As a matter of duty he hides nothing and speaks words that may cause pain but in fact are aimed at the public's well-being:

It is, therefore, my duty and the duty of all who care about the welfare of the state to choose, not those discourses which are agreeable to you, but those which are profitable for you to hear. And you, for your part, ought to realize, in the first place, that while many treatments of all kinds have been discovered by physicians for the ills of our bodies, there exists no remedy for souls which are ignorant of the truth and are filled with base desires other than the kind of discourse which boldly rebukes the sins which they commit, and, in the second place, that it is absurd to submit to the cauteries and cuttings of the physicians in order that we may be relieved of greater pains and yet refuse to hear discourses before knowing clearly whether or not they have the power to benefit their hearers. I have said

<sup>12</sup>Euripides, *Phoenissae* 390-392.

<sup>13</sup>For the shift from cities to empire as the locus of decision making and the Stoic legitimation of this transition, see B. D. Shaw, "The Divine Economy: Stoicism as Ideology," *Latomus* 44 (1985) 16-54.

<sup>14</sup>Fragment 9. Text and translation by C. E. Lutz, *Musonius Rufus "The Roman Socrates"* (New Haven: Yale, 1947) 68-69.

<sup>15</sup>Demosthenes, *Orations* 13.15; 60.25-26.

<sup>16</sup>Isocrates, *Oration* 8.5,10.

<sup>17</sup>Isocrates, *Oration* 8.3-5.

these things at the outset because in the rest of my discourse I am going to speak without reserve and with complete frankness.<sup>18</sup>

This tradition of free speech in service of the preservation of the city was entrusted to

philosophers, but they lost sight of the public dimension. As the city was surpassed by larger political units and individuals were thrown more frequently upon themselves to define and live out the good, free speech was reduced to an ideal for the preservation of individual morality. Medical imagery underscores the movement of free speech from city to soul-care. The physician stands for the philosopher, medical instruments and drugs for bold words, incisions for hurt feelings, and physical healing for moral transformation.<sup>19</sup> The view that *parresia* healed erring individuals was as widespread as the notion of the philosopher as physician.

We have seen how during the decline of the Greek city-state free speech moved from the political sphere to the arena of soul-care. We have also seen how in this period legitimation of free speech ceased to be a matter of political right and the intent to preserve the city and rested instead on personal moral virtue and the intent to reform individual souls. In 2 Corinthians 3, Paul does two things. First, he restores the public dimension of free speech. Secondly, he finds the legitimation of free speech not in citizenship or moral virtue but in the transforming power of the Spirit.

### III. FREE SPEECH IN 2 COR 3:7-18

Modern exegetes have erroneously interpreted *parresia* in 3:12 as a reference to Paul's psychological disposition.<sup>20</sup> Thus, they have translated the verse in ways which obscure the claim that Paul makes about the rhetorical character of his mission and ministry practice. In this passage, *chresthai parresia* clearly amounts to speaking one's mind without fear, just as orators and political leaders of ancient Athens in *ekklesia* used free speech to save the city from imprudent action.

Our task is to determine how Paul returns free speech to a political sphere and how he speaks of his own free speech in a way that demonstrates to his readers that all in the church have access to it. According to 3:12, Paul bases his use of free speech on hope. This in itself is remarkable, since the reigning political philosophy of the day, Stoicism, regarded hope as a moral disease which the wise man removes from his soul.

The content of Paul's hope is developed in 3:7-11, and here we see the public focus of his argument concerning free speech. The dichotomy of letter and spirit which controls this portion of the argument is a political, not a hermeneutical,

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<sup>18</sup>Isocrates, *Oration* 8.39-41; trans. by George Nortin, *Isocrates*, vol. 2 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1982) 33.

<sup>19</sup>For the ubiquity of medical imagery in the moral exhortation of the philosophers, see A. Malherbe, *Paul and the Popular Philosophers* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) 127-130.

<sup>20</sup>Only W. C. van Unnik ("The Semitic Background of *parresia* in the New Testament," in *Sparsa Collecta II: The Collected Essays of W. C. van Unnik* [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1980] 293 n. 7) has examined the phrase *chresthai parresia*. Yet even he continues to translate "we are very bold." V. Furnish's insistence in *Anchor Bible (II Corinthians* [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984] 206, 230) to translate *chresthai* as "to act" is dubious, since it lacks strong and independent lexical support. John Chrysostom (*Hom. 7 in 2 Cor. 2* [J. Migne, *Patrologia graeca* 61.444]), on the other hand, recognized that Paul refers to the manner of his speaking.

distinction.<sup>21</sup> Ancient political writers pointed out that written law coerces<sup>22</sup> and cannot elicit justice in human communities.<sup>23</sup> In this tradition of political thought, the main point of 3:7-11 is the superiority of the new ministry based upon its source, the Spirit, and its effect, the creation of

justice. The contrast between a ministry which condemns and one which transforms is found in 3:9: *he diakonia tes katakriseos* and *he diakonia tes dikaiosunes*. Paul portrays his ministry as one which fosters transformation, unlike the ministry of the old covenant which kills and condemns. His confidence to use *parresia* is based, therefore, on his hope in the life-giving and justice-creating power of the ministry in which he participates.<sup>24</sup> He has returned free speech to public purposes: justice and life.

Since this eschatological hope in the Spirit's transforming power and purpose is the possession of all in the community without distinction, all are entitled to free speech. Paul drives this point home in 3:13-18. Here he treats the problem of shame and its relationship to freedom. It was widely recognized in antiquity that shame was the greatest enemy of free speech.<sup>25</sup> Paul argues in 3:13-18 that where the Spirit is, there is no shame, only freedom.

Moses' veiling himself suggests that he hides himself from a sense of shame,<sup>26</sup> since in ancient philosophy and literature there was a frequent connection between shame and concealment.<sup>27</sup> Bad conscience requires hiding.<sup>28</sup> Moses' inability to withstand the gaze of the sons of Israel and his wearing of a veil indicate his shame, a result of the old covenant (*to telos tou katargoumenou*) whose ministry condemns even the one who is its minister.

Nevertheless, the fact that Moses' veil is removed signifies an end to his shame, and he comes to exemplify freedom (*eleutheria*). The connection between Moses' unveiled face and freedom is made intelligible by the commonplace in philosophy, hellenistic Judaism, and early Christianity that freedom was dependent upon a good conscience.<sup>29</sup> Free speech, in turn, finds its legitimate basis in the

<sup>21</sup>The Pauline antithesis between letter and spirit should be understood in the light of widespread philosophic reflection on the nature of written law and its inability to bring about freedom. This approach is brusquely rejected by E. Käsemann ("The Spirit and the Letter," in *Perspectives on Paul* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971] 144-145). Yet other exegetes have seen the relevance of the distinction for the interpretation of 2 Cor 3:6. See especially S. Vollenweider, *Freiheit als neue Schöpfung: Eine Untersuchung zur Eleutheria bei Paulus und in seiner Umwelt* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989) 87-96, 265-269. For the ancient period, see John Chrysostom, *Hom. 6 in 2 Cor. 2* (*Patrologia graeca* 61.438-439).

<sup>22</sup>Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1.14.7; Ps.-Crates, *Epistle* 5; Philo, *The Special Laws* 4.150; Plutarch, *Life of Lysurgus* 13.1; Seneca, *Epistle* 94.37.

<sup>23</sup>Isocrates, *Oration* 7.41; Ps.-Heraclitus, *Epistle* 7.10; Dio Chrysostom, *Oration* 69.8; Plutarch, *Life of Solon* 5.2.

<sup>24</sup>For a recent treatment of the political consequences of Christian hope, see J. Moltmann, *On Human Dignity: Political Theology and Ethics* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 97-112.

<sup>25</sup>See, for example, Philo, *The Special Laws* 1.202-204.

<sup>26</sup>Origen (*Hom. 5 in Jer.* 8-9 [*Patrologia graeca* 13.305-308]) recognized the connection between veil and shame in 3:13. Although van Unnik ("With Unveiled Face," an Exegesis of 2 Corinthians iii 12-18" in *Sparsa Collecta I: The Collected Essays of W. C. van Unnik* [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973] 202) notes the association, he does not sufficiently explore the philosophic background. He gives extensive evidence of the connection in Jewish tradition in his "The Semitic Background," 294-304.

<sup>27</sup>Xenophon, *Agesilaus* 9.1; Plato, *Phaedrus* 243B; Philo, *Mut.* 198-199; Epictetus, *Diss.* 3.22.15-16. Paul reiterates the connection between shame and concealment in 4:2: *ta krupta tes aischunes*.

<sup>28</sup>Isocrates, *Orations* 1.16; 3.52; Philo, *Joseph* 68; *The Special Laws* 3.54; 4.6.

<sup>29</sup>Periander (Stobaeus, *Florilegium* 3.24.12) aptly puts the relationship: "When Periander was asked 'What is freedom?' he replied: 'a good conscience.'"

freedom granted by a good conscience.<sup>30</sup> The person having no cause to be ashamed was empowered to use free speech. In short, Paul's imaginative interpretation of Exod 34:29-35 serves to illustrate the freeing and transforming activity of the Spirit in the church where there is now no need for concealment, since "we all" (3:18) are being transformed into the same image, the Lord, at whom we gaze as if in a mirror.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

One of the pressing political needs of the church today is to imagine new ways for unity in the midst of cultural diversity, moral reasoning, and differences in race, gender, sexual orientation, and social class. Political theology should seek to bring about community in diversity without coercion, subordination, or the imposition of the liberal ideal of toleration, which is itself based upon the dangerous notion that we are all the same under the surface. In short, political theology must help us imagine the church as a place of speech, where *all* voices are free to make arguments, to seek to persuade others, and to receive evaluation as to whether that which is freely said promotes justice and life—all for the sake of the church's unity and mission and all without the threat of shame and exclusion.

Paul's political theology of free speech goes to the heart of the matter. All have a voice; no one may be silenced; no one may speak for someone else; and all speech must build up the community. As risky as it may sound, because of the hope in the Spirit's justifying and transforming presence, everyone in the church is entitled to speak with complete freedom. Because of the Spirit's granting of freedom, no one may be shamed into silence. Either local churches will embrace this theology and move forward in mission as communities of moral discourse (that is, really becoming churches in the Pauline sense of the word), shaping their futures through persuasion, or they face the possibility of dying away as they protect themselves from difference and conflict by stifling the voices of all the people—those who "with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another."

<sup>30</sup>Philo (*Every Good Man is Free* 99) remarks that "freedom of speech, genuine without taint of bastardy, and proceeding from a pure conscience, befits the nobly born."