



THE BEREHA PAGE

“Examining . . . to see if these things are so” ~ Acts 17.11

Paul’s Personal Apologetic

David Anguish

F. F. Bruce begins the introduction to his *Defense of the Gospel in the New Testament* with the observation that “Christian witness in the New Testament called repeatedly for the *defence* of the gospel against opposition of many kinds—religious, cultural and political” (Bruce 1977, vii). In the body of the book, he demonstrates the range of challenges against which defense was needed, discussing opposition from unbelieving Jews, paganism, the Roman Empire, and the “Christian deviations” of legalism, ascetic gnosticism, antinomian gnosticism, and docetism (for more on the challenges they faced, see my “Defending From the New Testament,” [Berea Page 2/10](#)).

Not all the challenges had to do with the truthfulness of the claims generally or correcting distortions of it, however. Some attacks were more personal, aimed at the credibility of the witnesses. Paul’s defense (cf. ἀπολογέομαι, *apologeomai* in 2 Cor 12.19) in response to critics who were undermining his influence with the Corinthians is noteworthy in this regard and will serve as the case study that will be the focus of this discussion.

As is well known, after a series of visits and letters (cf. Carson and Moo 2005, 429–436), and the conciliatory mood that characterizes chapters 1–9, the tone of 2 Corinthians changes markedly in chapters 10–13 where Paul vigorously defends his ministry (Holladay 2005, 452–455). Although he never explicitly identifies his critics, he says some things that shed light on who they were and the nature of their attacks. They apparently claimed to be missionaries (the sense of ἀπόστολος, *apostolos* in the letter; cf. 8.23), but Paul characterized them as “super-apostles” (ὑπερλίαν ἀποστόλων, *hyperlian apostlōn*; 11.5; 12.11) and “false apostles” (ψευδαπόστολοι, *pseudapostoloi*; 11.13) who had questioned his motives and credentials and driven a wedge between him and the Corinthians. They claimed superiority to him as Christ’s messengers, based, in some measure at least, on their Jewish credentials (cf. 11.22–23). In reply, Paul charges them with preaching “another Jesus” and imparting “a different spirit from the one [the Corinthians] received” (11.4). He also says they were operating outside their designated territory, seeking to benefit from the “labors of others” (10.13–15).

In his defense, he references—and at times may be quoting—some of the things his detractors were saying. He was allegedly fickle, (cf. 1.17), bold when not physically present and writing letters, but timid when on the scene (10.1, 10). He was accused of “walking according to the flesh” (10.2), and of using crafty, deceitful methods with regard to the collection (12.16–18). For proof of these charges, the critics pointed to the fact that he had not accepted pay for his labors; therefore, his love of the church must be suspect (11.11). Jerome Murphy-O’Connor posits that this

charge may have had been rooted in the Roman patronage culture where “the litmus test of prestige and social standing was the size and number [and influence] of one’s benefactors.” Since the Corinthians were not financially underwriting Paul’s ministry, he must not have had much power and influence among them (Murphy-O’Connor 1991, 97–98).

Whatever the specific reasons for the criticisms, Paul understands that the legitimacy of his ministry is at stake. Is he in fact one of Christ’s (10.7)? What proof does he have that Christ is speaking in him (13.3)? Is he a genuine servant of Christ (11.23 and context)? As Holladay observes, “With such a frontal assault on the nature and authority of his apostolic ministry, Paul had no choice but to defend himself, and his remarks in chapters 10–13 constitute an apology that places it within the tradition of apologetic defense that goes back to Socrates’ defense of his behavior before his Athenian critics” (Holladay 2005, 453).

In 10.1–6, Paul introduces his rejoinder with strong military imagery designed to show how forceful he was in his campaign for “the knowledge of God” (v. 5). Throughout chapters 10–13, he remains forceful. He tells his critics that the next time he sees them, no one will think him weak (10.11). He declares that, far from showing a lack of love, his refusal to accept pay from the Corinthians was in fact evidence of his love for them (11.7–11). He labels his accusers false-apostles, deceitful workmen, and satanic in disguising themselves as apostles (11.12–15).

But he also shows restraint, grounding his defense in who could imitate Christ in his weakness, not who could demonstrate more strength. Perhaps in response to claims by the “super-apostles,” he declares that, while he too could do and had done “signs and wonders and mighty works” (12.12), he was “content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak,” he says, “then I am strong” (12.10). That statement summarizes his emphasis on the idea elaborated in 11.22–12.9 where he lists hardships he had endured for Christ (11.22–29), shows that this had been his lot from Damascus onward (11.30–33), and says that even his glorious experiences are best understood as evidence of his suffering and weaknesses (12.1–9).

The power-through-weakness theme elaborated in 11.22–12.9 first appears in his analysis of the war he was fighting that effectively serves as the heading to the defense section (10.1–6). We’ll look more closely at that statement in part 2.

Works Cited

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