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Paul and Rhetoric Revisited: Reexamining Litfin's Assumptions on Pauline Preaching in 1 Corinthians

Timothy J. Christian

School of Christian Studies, Asbury University, Wilmore, KY 40390, USA; timothy.christian@asbury.edu

Abstract: In contemporary New Testament studies, the question of whether Paul employed Greco-Roman rhetoric in his writings and preaching remains contentious. A prominent critic of Paul's rhetorical usage is Duane Litfin, whose works, *St. Paul's Theology of Proclamation: 1 Corinthians 1–4 and Greco-Roman Rhetoric* (1994) and *Paul's Theology of Preaching: The Apostle's Challenge to the Art of Persuasion in Ancient Corinth* (2015), argue that Paul outright rejected rhetoric in favor of a straightforward proclamation of the gospel. Litfin asserts that Paul viewed himself as a herald rather than a rhetorician, that his preaching was devoid of rhetorical adornment, and that 1 Corinthians 1:18–2:5 represents a universal theology of preaching. Litfin further suggests that Paul did not employ rhetoric in his Acts sermons, thereby aligning his epistolary and Acts portrayals of Paul. This article critically evaluates Litfin's position by addressing five key issues. First, it challenges Litfin's claim that Paul rejected rhetoric generally, arguing instead that Paul likely repudiated sophistic rhetoric or ornate styles rather than rhetoric per se. Second, it disputes Litfin's dichotomy between heralds and orators, contending that Paul, identified as an apostle rather than a herald, was not bound by such a false binary. Third, it critiques Litfin's assumption that 1 Corinthians 1–4 serves as Paul's comprehensive theology of preaching, arguing instead that the passage is context-specific and not indicative of a universal preaching methodology. Fourth, it rejects Litfin's view of 1 Corinthians as an apology for Paul's ministry and style, suggesting instead that it addresses Corinthian divisions and promotes unity. Lastly, the article refutes Litfin's claim that Paul did not use rhetoric in Acts, highlighting that the rhetorical nature of Acts' speeches suggests otherwise. Ultimately, this article argues that Paul did not categorically reject rhetoric but utilized it in various forms to effectively communicate the gospel.



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1. Introduction

Many in NT studies today have been cautious to consider even the possibility that Paul used rhetoric in his writings and in his preaching of the gospel. One of the strongest proponents against Paul's use of rhetoric is Duane Litfin. His arguments first appeared in his 1994 published dissertation titled *St. Paul's Theology of Proclamation: 1 Corinthians 1–4 and Greco-Roman Rhetoric* (Litfin 1994). Then, in 2015, he revised, expanded, and renamed it *Paul's Theology of Preaching: The Apostle's Challenge to the Art of Persuasion in Ancient Corinth* (Litfin 2015). Ben Witherington III, R. Dean Anderson Jr., and Margaret M. Mitchell have briefly contested Litfin's view, but an expanded critique is pertinent (Witherington 2015, p. 71; Anderson 1999, pp. 245–48; Mitchell 1996, pp. 106–8). Litfin's major points are as follows. First, he asserts that Paul rejects Greco-Roman rhetoric outright,

specifically for preaching. Second, he maintains a strict distinction between heralds and orators/rhetoricians and contends that Paul is only a herald whose simple task was always and everywhere merely to announce the crucified Christ with no rhetorical adornment. Third, he suggests that 1 Cor 1:18–2:5 is Paul’s definitive exposition on his theology of preaching for all times, places, situations, etc. In short, Litfin views this almost as Paul’s systematic theology of preaching. Fourth, he supposes that 1 Cor 1–4 is Paul’s self-defense of his ministry and preaching style; an apology. Lastly, he claims that Paul did not use rhetoric in his preaching in Acts. Thus, there was no contradiction between the Paul of Acts and the Paul of his letters: both supposedly repudiating rhetoric for preaching. This article provides a critical assessment of Litfin’s assertions for the purpose of showing that Paul did not repudiate rhetoric but instead used and supported the use of rhetoric in both his writings and preaching.

2. Paul, Rhetoric, and Preaching

2.1. What Is Paul Rejecting in 1 Cor 1:18–2:5?

Litfin’s foremost claim is that Paul rejects the use of rhetoric not in general, but for preaching.¹ Moreover, he does not explicitly claim that Paul rejects rhetoric for his letters, but only for his preaching of the gospel.² Yet throughout his book, he vacillates between praising rhetoric, in general, while in the same breath disparaging it as innately manipulative, results-driven, and worldly. Ultimately, his overtones and subtexts suggest that he truly thinks that Paul outright rejects it and views rhetoric pejoratively.³

However, most interpreters of 1 Cor 1:18–2:5 do not see Paul as rejecting rhetoric in general, but rather a particular type of rhetoric. Some think Paul rejects sophistic rhetoric here, others an eloquent, grand style, and still others think he rejects some combination of the two. Most do not go as far as Litfin in purporting that Paul completely rejects rhetoric for preaching. Litfin’s view in this regard is an extreme, polar position. Gordon Fee, whom Litfin relies upon (for the apologetic nature of 1 Cor 1–4), says that Paul rejects the sophists because, ultimately, this type of persuasion insists upon the orator’s self-reliance (Fee 2014, pp. 94–97).⁴ Witherington views it as Paul rejecting sophistic rhetoric and that Paul, at the moment of preaching, used an unornate style, unadorned with “impressive verbosity” (Witherington 1995, p. 110).⁵ Keener too holds that Paul’s main rejection here was of sophistry (Keener 2005, pp. 34–37).⁶ Hays thinks that Paul here avoided “dazzling rhetoric or intricate wisdom” in the manner of his presentation of the gospel (Hays 1997, p. 35). In other words, Paul used a “simple and blunt” style of speaking when he first preached the gospel to the Corinthians, and, in a sense, Paul was rejecting or refraining from ornate rhetoric for evangelism (Hays 1997, p. 35).⁷ Winter suggests that Paul rejects sophistic rhetoric and an eloquent style in preaching. This plain style of preaching matches, he suggests, the humble message (content) of his gospel “of the humiliated crucified God” (Winter 2002, p. 164). Ciampa and Rosner echo Winter’s suggestions (Ciampa and Rosner 2010, p. 112). While they view Paul as a simple herald (and not an orator—like Litfin), they nonetheless contrast Paul with the sophists, not rhetoricians, in general, as Litfin does (Ciampa and Rosner 2010, pp. 113, 117).⁸ Garland does not make much distinction between general rhetoric and sophistic rhetoric, though the way he describes rhetoric is actually more precisely sophism. Particularly, he thinks Paul condemns “self-display” and “pompous speech” (Garland 2003, p. 82). He says that Paul “does not reject rhetoric or wisdom as such” (Garland 2003, p. 82). Yet later he sides with Hartman who asserts that Paul was an anti-rhetor opposed to being “self-important, competitive, or proud-hearted” (Garland 2003, p. 86). Garland’s interpretation suffers from his failure to distinguish sophism from rhetoric in general. Thiselton also thinks that Paul is rejecting a rhetorical style of “high-sounding rhetoric or a display of cleverness” for evangelism which was

prevalent among the sophists (Thiselton 2000, pp. 208–9, 216). Blomberg too does not think that Paul’s rejection here should be seen as an absolute rejection of rhetoric in general, not least because Paul uses rhetoric to argue his points in 1 Corinthians and elsewhere (Blomberg 1994, p. 58). Collins also sees this as Paul refraining from rhetorical eloquence. Along with this, he rejects orators who sometimes even charged fees to their listeners: “Paul would have none of this” (Collins 1999, pp. 116–17). While Collins does not specify, this is precisely the *modus operandi* of the sophists. Many others have written on this subject and very few land with Litfin that Paul rejects rhetoric, in general, for preaching (Mihaila 2009; Pogoloff 1992; White 1994, pp. 105–6, 195–97).⁹ Rather, most interpret this passage as Paul rejecting either (1) sophistic rhetoric, (2) an eloquent, grand style of rhetoric for preaching, or (3) some combination of the two.

2.2. Are Heralds and Orators Mutually Exclusive? Heralds vs. Orators?

Litfin creates a dichotomy between heralds and orators/rhetoricians, which in my opinion is a false one.¹⁰ He labels Paul specifically as a herald, as opposed to an orator or rhetor.¹¹ Such a contrast is incorrect on several accounts. First, Paul never identifies himself as a herald (κῆρυξ) in 1 Corinthians, rather as an apostle (ἀπόστολος—1:1). This is how he addresses himself in all his letters. Moreover, it is only in the Pastorals where Paul identifies himself as a herald, but the authorship there is disputed and even if it is authentic, it is a decade removed from the Corinthian correspondences. While LSJ notes that κῆρυξ was “used interchangeably with ἀπόστολος,” (1) that was only for the classical period which had little bearing on the NT meaning, and (2) standard lexical entries for ἀπόστολος say absolutely nothing about an apostle being a herald (κῆρυξ) or heralding (κηρύσσειν) (Liddell et al. 1996; Danker et al. 2000; Friedrich 1965a; Merk 1991; Rengstorf 1964; Bühner 1990).¹² So, Paul is not a herald in the standard sense, and not even in the Greco-Roman sense (Friedrich 1965a, 1965b; Rengstorf 1964). Rather, Paul is ἀπόστολος and he identifies himself as such. But what does being ἀπόστολος entail? Is the matter one of heralding/preaching (κῆρυξ/κηρύσσειν)? Or is it a matter of evangelism (εὐαγγέλιον/εὐαγγελίζεσθαι)? I think the latter. In 1 Cor 1:17, Paul describes his primary role and purpose as an ἀπόστολος as evangelism (οὐ γὰρ ἀπέστειλὲν με Χριστὸς βαπτίζειν ἀλλ’ εὐαγγελίζεσθαι, οὐκ ἐν σοφίᾳ λόγου, ἵνα μὴ κενωθῆ ὁ σταυρὸς τοῦ Χριστοῦ.), not heralding (κηρύσσειν). In fact, heralds (κῆρυξ) do not evangelize (εὐαγγελίζεσθαι). While cognate words of κηρύσσειν appear in the verses following this purpose statement in 1:17—such as κηρύγματος (1:21), κηρύσσομεν (1:23), καταγγέλλων (2:1), and κήρυγμά (2:4)—these are all subservient to the notion of evangelism here. In other words, they explain Paul’s evangelism, not vice versa. As such, it is always possible that the differences in terms is one of stylistic variation. Nevertheless, usage of these words does not indicate that one is a formal herald. In fact, Litfin attempts to connect Paul with the OT prophets by purporting that both Paul and the OT prophets were heralds (κῆρυξ).¹³ However, OT prophets are not heralds (κῆρυξ), as there is no evidence in the LXX for this. Κῆρυξ occurs just four times in LXX (two from the Apocrypha), and this term does not identify prophets (Friedrich 1965a, p. 694). Even the verbal form (κηρύσσειν) does not have much association with the prophets or their prophetic utterances, but merely refers to one who calls aloud or cries out (Friedrich 1965a, pp. 697–714).¹⁴ As such, there was no Jewish notion or office of herald in the OT.¹⁵ Gerhard Friedrich writes,

the herald as we have learned to know him in the Gk. sphere finds no place in the biblical world. . .How alien the idea of the herald is to the Bible may be seen from the fact that there is no true word for it. (Friedrich 1965a, p. 694)

Litfin is simply incorrect about this information and erroneously connects Paul and the OT prophets to heralds. Certainly, there is a link between Paul and the OT prophets, but

heralding is not that link. Resuming the discussion of 1:17, it is crucial to note that the contrast here is not between evangelism and persuasion (rhetoric), or even evangelism and heralding, but evangelism and other ministerial rites (especially baptizing). Thus, Paul's task as ἀπόστολος is not to herald, and not even to baptize, but to evangelize (1:17; Friedrich 1965b, pp. 707–21).¹⁶ While Paul does proclaim/preach/herald (κηρύσσειν), he does so as an ἀπόστολος, not as a formal herald (κῆρυξ) in the Greco-Roman sense, as Litfin pegs him. Rather, Paul is an apostle (ἀπόστολος) whose primary task entails evangelism (εὐαγγέλιον/εὐαγγελιζέσθαι).

Another issue regarding this dichotomy is whether heralds were against rhetoric. Litfin assumes this but never cites evidence for this assumption. He assumes that since the herald cannot alter the form or content in which the announcement was given to him by his master that therefore no rhetoric is involved. But why must one assume that the master, king, or noble sending this herald with an announcement would not want their proclamation (κήρυγμα) proclaimed (κηρύσσειν) rhetorically? And what kings or nobles would want their messages declared with such dullness and dryness? Perhaps tyrants would not care, because they have absolute power and need no persuasion. But in the Roman period, the emperors were among the most rhetorically adept orators at the time.¹⁷ Would they, being highly trained and talented in rhetoric, have written their decrees and announcements without rhetoric? Of course not. Moreover, what would such a dull, unrhetorical announcement portray about the king? Certainly, this would convey that the king was inept to write or speak well, but this was not how those in power, who were the most highly educated in rhetoric, wanted to portray themselves. These would be the most likely to write their decrees and proclamations rhetorically, not the least of which to reinforce their own propaganda.¹⁸ Besides the rhetorical abilities of those who would have owned or employed heralds, what if the king or noble instructed his herald to proclaim the announcement in rhetorical dress? Would that not entail a rhetorical herald? Yes, heralds had to announce what they were directed to announce, and they had to remain faithful to the form and content in which it was given. But what if the form in which it was given was rhetorical? The heralds would then have to perform the announcement with rhetoric.

It is curious why Litfin (1) identifies Paul as a herald and (2) why he rejects Paul as a persuader. While Litfin often reads the situation of 2 Corinthians hindsight into 1 Corinthians (see Section 2.4 below), one passage that he left out is 2 Cor 5:11. Here, Paul states that he persuades humans (ἀνθρώπους πείθωμεν) in the context of his ministry and evangelism. In addition, πείθω occurs 22 times in the Pauline corpus. Paul himself persuades and is persuaded and convinced about many things. In fact, within the semantic domain of πείθω is πίστις. When people become thoroughly convinced and confident in something (πείθω), they believe (πίστις). It is not entirely evident to me why Litfin views persuasion and faith as mutually exclusive. In short, Litfin has not demonstrated why a dichotomy must exist between heralds and rhetors. His work is far from over here in demonstrating, with evidence, his claims about Paul being a herald and heralds being unrhetorical.

A final issue has to do with Litfin's results-driven (orators) vs. obedience-driven (heralds) distinction. In terms of his conclusion, that Christian preachers must be driven by faithful obedience to proclaim God's truth, Litfin is not off-kilter, especially from the Pauline perspective (e.g., Eph 4:15; 2 Tim 4). However, the problem is not with his conclusion, but with how he got there. It is fine that Litfin wants to make this point, but 1 Cor 1–4 is not the place to do it from. Second Timothy 4:1–5 is that place, assuming Pauline authorship. It is the clearest passage in the Pauline corpus (though disputed) where Paul tackles the issue of faithful preaching as he instructs Timothy to "Preach the word" (2 Tim 4:2). But 1 Cor 1–4 is not where Paul expounds upon obedience-driven preaching vs. results-driven

rhetoric. In fact, Paul's comments in 1 Cor 2:1-5 are but a brief, fleeting passage, here and gone in one breath. It is neither Paul's *modus operandi* nor his systematic theology of preaching. It is a minor point of reminder to the Corinthians of his first visit. If Litfin wanted to find a contrast in this passage, there are a plethora of others, but not of rhetoric vs. heralds, or results-driven ministry vs. obedience-driven ministry. For example, perhaps the most important contrast is between the wisdom of God (Christ) and the wisdom of the world. Litfin deems the wisdom of the world as rhetoric. Others say it was contrasted with sophistic rhetoric (see above). But the contrast between these wisdom traditions, in my opinion, does not have much to do with rhetoric at all. Rather, the contrast is between God and humans, (Holy) Spiritual things and worldly things (Inkelaar 2011; Davis 1984; Rosner 2011; Ciampa and Rosner 2010; Furnish 1999; Brookins 2014, 2024; Clarke 2006). Is the antithesis to Christ (God's wisdom) really rhetoric (the world's wisdom)? Reading beyond 2:5, one finds the partner to this contrast, namely, this worldly age and the rulers of this age (2:6, 8). In short, there are many contrasts in this passage, but Christ vs. rhetoric is not one of them, neither heralds vs. rhetoric nor results-driven ministry vs. obedience-driven ministry.

Moreover, Litfin wrongly paints rhetoric in a dark light as merely results-driven (Litfin 2015, pp. 259–84).¹⁹ Rhetoric was not all about results. It was art and beauty. In this sense, Litfin mistakes rhetoric for a science. For this reason, I think he is incorrect to use the term "The Grand Equation of Rhetoric" (Litfin 2015, p. 262). It is not math; it is art (Aristotle 1982; Quintilian 1960). It is about speaking well (especially Roman rhetoric) to the best of one's abilities to communicate clearly and articulately so that one's audience would understand what he or she was saying (Christian 2023; [Aristotle] 1936; Aristotle 1982; Cicero 1968; [Cicero] 1989; Quintilian 1960). A hope—not the one and only hope—of rhetoric was that the audience would listen and be on board with the orator (Murphy et al. 2014). That is not a bad or negative thing. Furthermore, it is not always the case that the audience listens, as Litfin portrays it to be.²⁰ But rhetors tried their best to communicate well and win over their audience. Why this is unfitting of an apostle according to Litfin is beyond my understanding.

In all, perhaps what is most alarming about Litfin's mutually exclusive treatment of heralds vs. orators is that he cites no examples of ancient heralds to base his understanding of heralds and comparison with Paul. For his case to convince anyone, he must show evidence that Paul was only ever an unadorned, unpolished, and unrhetorical herald. Such evidence is lacking.

2.3. Was Paul Revealing His Modus Operandi or Is 1 Cor 1–4 Ad Hoc?

Another weakness of Litfin's argument is that he assumes too much of Paul in this passage. Much like those scholars of Romans who suggest that Rom 1–8 is the *magna carta* of Paul's theology, so Litfin assumes that Paul is laying out his systematic theology of preaching for all times and all peoples here.²¹ In fact, Paul is doing no such thing. This letter is *ad hoc* and must be read as such (Mitchell 2010, pp. 4, 66). He is not declaring how he preached the gospel every time, everywhere, and in every situation and location; a *modus operandi*. Rather, all that Paul is revealing in 1 Cor 2:1-5 is how he first preached the gospel to those at Corinth specifically (Acts 18). He says nothing about how he evangelized elsewhere, or gnominically how he always evangelizes. This was the mode that he used here when initially evangelizing the Corinthians; that is all that Paul is discussing. It seems that this unornate style was the best route for this audience, for as it seems, once another Christian preacher (Apollos) came along who preached in a different rhetorical style, this created some strife and boasting about human leaders and their rhetorical finesse. All that one can say concerning Paul's theology of preaching here is that this was how Paul preached during his first visit to Corinth. It says nothing about how he preached

elsewhere. We do not have one of those statements here such as, “this is the rule I set in all the churches” (1 Cor 7:17; 14:33). Litfin is making more out of this than Paul himself is revealing. He is addressing a specific issue (their divisions) at a specific point in time, and he is not expounding his doctrine of preaching at large in 1 Cor 1–4. As stated above, Paul’s comments in 1 Cor 2:1–5 are a brief, fleeting passage, neither a *modus operandi* nor systematic theology, but a minor point of reminder of his first visit to them within the context of correcting their issue of division.

Another issue is that Litfin does not clarify the term “preaching”. “Preaching” is almost as unclear a term today as “rhetoric” (though he does define “rhetoric”). What he fails to do is to show that what underlies “preaching” in 1:17 is the technical term for “evangelism/evangelizing” (see Section 2.2 above). Paul’s preaching at Corinth was not the same as modern preaching and homiletics. In fact, this was not at all what Paul was talking about in 1:17. “Preaching” (εὐαγγελίον/εὐαγγελίζεσθαι) for Paul meant “evangelism.” This is an important distinction that Litfin neglects to point out. Now since his letters provide us almost no insight into his evangelism strategies (with the possible exception of 1 Cor 1:17–2:5 or 2 Tim 4), there is simply too little data to construct a Pauline theology of evangelism from his letters. Where one should go in the NT to construct a theology of evangelism is the book of Acts. Scholars would debate, however, whether the theology of evangelism in Acts would be that of Paul’s or that of Luke’s. Undoubtedly, Luke portrays Paul his own way, and it is the task of historians to sort out the level of originality of Paul in Acts. But certainly, Acts is the place in the NT to discuss a full-blown NT (whether it is considered Lukan or Pauline) theology of evangelism, not one short (and interpretively nebulous) passage in 1 Corinthians.²²

2.4. Is 1 Cor 1–4 Paul’s Apology?

Another problematic assumption is that Litfin strongly urges that 1 Cor 1–4 is Paul’s apology and defense of himself, his ministry, and his preaching style to the Corinthians (Litfin 2015, pp. 141, 169, 172–73, 194, 198).²³ He is not the first to do so (Fee 2014, pp. 6, 89; White 1994, pp. 59–122). But this is problematic for several reasons, as many other scholars have noted before.²⁴ First, most rhetorical scholars identify 1 Corinthians as-a-whole as deliberative rhetoric, not judicial rhetoric (the rhetoric of defense) (Mitchell 1993, pp. 20–64; Witherington 1995, p. 46; Kennedy 1984, p. 87).²⁵ While it is possible to have a blending of rhetorical genres, which in fact we find in 1 Cor 13—an epideictic praise of love—most rhetorical scholars find no such blending here in 1 Cor 1–4. In fact, if 1 Corinthians is truly deliberative, then 1 Cor 1–4, which many suggest is the key thrust of the epistle (i.e., resolving divisions), must itself be a deliberative argument. That is in fact what 1 Cor 1–4 is. Here, Paul is not defending himself and his ministry, but rather he is correcting the Corinthians’ own divisiveness around human leaders. Paul, instead of promoting and defending himself (one of the groups in Corinth—“I am of Paul”), reminds them of how he avoided such a type of sophistic self-promotion when he first visited them and proclaimed the gospel. Thiselton notes,

[Paul’s] aim here is to expose the true basis and nature of Christian proclamation in contrast to the ‘self-presentation’ of the visiting sophist. . . The reference to the Holy Spirit contrasts not only with persuasive *linguistic* styles, but more especially with the *self-presentation* and *self-prominence* associated with the ‘presence’ of the sophist. (Thiselton 2000, pp. 208–9)

This fits the context of 1 Cor 1–4 much better than Litfin’s suggestion of this being Paul’s apology and self-defense. Paul was not defending himself as the best option (the “I am of Paul” group) among the Corinthian divisions. Rather, he was trying to level the playing ground and show that he, Apollos, and Cephas were all on the same side, “God’s servants,

working together" (1 Cor 3:9). His goal here was to convince them not to boast about human leaders: "For all things are yours, whether, Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God" (1 Cor 3:21-23). Paul did not promote or defend himself in 1 Cor 1–4; instead, he did the exact opposite by promoting God and boasting in God alone. Promoting himself would have only further enforced the Corinthians' divisions and boasting in human leaders. That was the wisdom of the world often seen in sophistry, namely, self-promotion through eloquent speaking and boasting through self-defense. Moreover, Paul was calling them to humility and cruciformity; in a word, abasement. He was calling them to live out the cross of Christ, to lower themselves and stop bickering about who the better Christian orator was. If Paul were then to start defending himself and his own approach to gain more followers back, then he would be doing the opposite of bringing unity to the community.²⁶ To suggest that Paul was defending himself in 1 Cor 1–4 is to miss his point entirely.

One of the reasons why Litfin reads 1 Cor 1–4 as a defensive apology is because, at large, he mistakenly reads 2 Corinthians into 1 Corinthians (Litfin 2015, pp. 230–35). Surely Paul is in all-out defense mode in 2 Corinthians (and might I add for different reasons), but not in 1 Corinthians. In this regard, Litfin relies too heavily upon Fee's judicial classification of the rhetoric of 1 Corinthians.²⁷ There is not a strong case that 1 Cor 1–4 is Paul's sustained attack on rhetoric and a defense of himself.

2.5. Does Paul Use Rhetoric in His Evangelism in Acts?

Lastly, Litfin does not think that Paul uses rhetoric in his evangelism (preaching) in Acts (Litfin 2015, pp. 307–14, 327–33).²⁸ However, many NT scholars, even Porter and those who hold his view that rhetorical criticism should not be used to interpret Paul's letters, do in fact find rhetorical criticism most appropriate for the book of Acts (Porter 2016; Schellenberg 2013).²⁹ Not only is Luke's Greek sophisticated, displaying rhetorical training, but many scholars of this guild note that in Acts we have the actual genre for rhetoric, namely, speeches (Keener 2012; Witherington 1998; Porter 2016; Kennedy 1984). Porter argues that rhetoric is only for speeches, and Acts has actual speeches. So even in Porter's view, Acts is the rhetorical critic's playground.³⁰ Moreover, classicists alike often note the commonplace for ancient works of historiography to contain rhetorical speeches (Christian 2023; Kennedy 1963, 1994; Thucydides 1972). Litfin actually examines some evangelistic speeches from Acts and concludes that they do not possess any rhetoric whatsoever (Litfin 2015, pp. 307–14, 327–33). This demonstrates either (1) Litfin's unawareness of current research on Acts or (2) his over-commitment to his own proposal that he refuses to let hard evidence shape his conclusions.

Moreover, if Litfin seriously holds that Paul via 1 Cor 1–4 rejects the use of rhetoric in evangelism (preaching), then he is advocating for a large breach in NT consistency between Luke and Paul because Luke portrays Paul using rhetoric in his evangelism in Acts (Keener 2012; Witherington 1998; Kennedy 1984). As just mentioned, Litfin purports that Luke does not portray Paul as using rhetoric in evangelism in Acts. However, the facts are that the Paul of Acts uses rhetoric in evangelism, and that if Litfin is correct that Paul outright rejects rhetoric for evangelism (if we were to give him the benefit of the doubt), then there would be a huge contradiction between Paul and Luke's portrayal of Paul.³¹ That is not something that I think Litfin would want to suggest.³²

3. Summary

To summarize the five points contra Litfin's view that Paul rejected rhetoric in 1 Cor 2:1-5, first, Paul did not reject Greco-Roman rhetoric outright for preaching, but rather he rejected either sophistic rhetoric or the grand, eloquent style for evangelism. Second,

heralds and orators/rhetoricians were not mutually exclusive in the ancient world, and Paul's contrast in 1 Cor 2:1-5 was not between heralding and preaching, but rather evangelism and baptism (1:17). Moreover, Paul was an apostle (1:1), not a mere herald who repudiated rhetoric. Also, even if he was a herald, that would not rule out rhetorical proclamations, since the master would probably require the herald to proclaim with rhetorical style. Third, 1 Cor 2:1-5 is not Paul's definitive exposition on his theology of evangelism for all times, places, situations, etc. Rather, it is a short passage in an *ad hoc* epistle reminding the Corinthians of how Paul first evangelized them. As such, it only reveals how he evangelized them, not how he always evangelized. A better passage to base a Pauline theology of evangelism upon is 2 Tim 4:1-5, though this is still too short. Fourth, 1 Cor 1–4 is not Paul's self-defense of his ministry and preaching style, but rather it is a deliberative argument urging unity. If he were arguing forensically for all of them to follow him instead of Apollos or Cephas, then that would negate his whole point here for them to stop boasting in human leaders (1 Cor 3–4). Lastly, Paul did in fact use rhetoric in his evangelism in Acts, as most Acts scholars note. As such, if Litfin is right about his interpretation of 1 Cor 2:1-5, then there would be a breach in consistency between the Paul of Acts and the Paul of his letters. This is not something that Litfin would want to support. In short, then, the Paul of Acts and the Paul of his letters both employ rhetoric in evangelism, though the latter specifically rejects sophistic or the grand style of rhetoric, at least during his first visit to Corinth.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, while many other scholars who reject the notion that Paul used rhetoric could have been discussed here, Litfin is one of the most wellknown and outspoken on this issue and his arguments are the basis for other scholars' rejections of Paul using rhetoric (Schreiner 2001, pp. 412–32; Brown 2014, pp. 108–11). Elsewhere, others scholars and I have refuted in detail Stanley E. Porter's views against Paul's use of rhetoric and his outright rejection of the historical method of rhetorical criticism (Christian 2023, pp. 50–80; Witherington 2015). So, to have Porter and Litfin refuted would be to dismantle the current major objectors to NT rhetorical criticism and Paul's use of rhetoric. Hopefully, this article has provided evidence sufficient for such a needed refutation of Litfin. As such, I conclude that Litfin's arguments simply lack evidence, whether from primary ancient sources, classical scholarship on rhetoric, NT scholarship, or simply exegesis of the Greek NT. In this article, I have attempted to demonstrate this lack of evidence and provide evidence that confutes his claims against Paul's use of rhetoric. Overall, NT scholars must revisit the plethora of evidence against views like Litfin's before discounting Paul's use of rhetoric, because much of NT scholarship demonstrates that Paul was not against rhetoric and that he did in fact use it to some degree or another.

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Notes

- ¹ Litfin writes, "Paul rejected such teaching and the forms of wise discourse it produced as inappropriate for the preaching of the gospel. Unlike other critics of rhetoric, Paul nowhere suggests that Greco-Roman rhetoric was inherently unworthy or that it must be rejected in general. . .His argument is merely that these strategies are inappropriate for the purposes of preaching the

gospel” (Litfin 2015, p. 223). Later, he writes, “The affirmations of 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 constitute a repudiation of the dynamic of rhetoric for the purposes of preaching” (Litfin 2015, p. 225).

2 Litfin claims, “the fact that certain identifiable features of Greco-Roman rhetorical practice are found in Paul’s letters—or even, if it were possible to determine it, in his missionary preaching—is unsurprising, and certainly does not imply a contradiction with the disavowals of 1 Corinthians 1–4” (Litfin 2015, p. 304). But it is in fact contradictory to suggest that Paul rejected rhetoric for his gospel preaching yet then used rhetoric for his letters, especially when the content of much of his letters is his gospel. Paul even frames 1 Corinthians with his gospel, as Malcolm points out (Malcolm 2013). Elsewhere, Litfin says, “Dogmatic claims about contradictions between Paul’s argument in 1 Corinthians 1–4 and his practice as a preacher must be viewed with skepticism” (Litfin 2015, p. 40). Yet, his own claims here are actually dogmatic.

3 On the one hand, Litfin praises rhetoric: “At its best rhetoric was something powerful, even noble. It was that art that replaced violence and coercion in free societies: the art of persuasion through discourse” (Litfin 2015, p. 205). Also, he writes, “Our goal will be to focus on both the nobler and baser elements of Greco-Roman rhetoric as the mainstream of the ancient world understood it” (Litfin 2015, p. 45). He even claims not to reduce rhetoric to “techniques for manipulation”, yet he does just this throughout (Litfin 2015, p. 43). On the other hand, he assesses it as manipulative: “it is precisely this human dynamic—the dynamic of Greco-Roman rhetoric—that Paul is here disavowing. He is insisting that it would have been inappropriate for him to have depended on such a dynamic because in this way the results would have been rooted in his own facility as an orator, his own ability to adapt malleably to the rhetorical demands, his own capacity to manipulate the persuasive possibilities of the rhetoric situation so as to engender *πίστις* in his audience” (Litfin 2015, pp. 177–78). Elsewhere, he writes, “[The orator’s] task was so to discover and manipulate the mix of rhetorical possibilities inherent in the audience, subject and occasion that his purpose would be accomplished” (Litfin 2015, p. 113). Furthermore, he derides, “the purpose of the rhetorician’s art was to enable speakers to *have their way* with their audiences” (Litfin 2015, p. 74; emphasis added). In addition, he disparages rhetoric as “the use of human psychological techniques” (Litfin 2015, pp. 153, 159, 225, 301). He also describes the rhetor’s role as “forcefully” putting across logical arguments (Litfin 2015, p. 263). He continues by saying, “whether the results and means are or are not worthy, the persuader’s stance is inherently results driven. It is utilitarian, focused on bending the audience to the persuader’s predetermined purposes” (Litfin 2015, p. 315).

4 Fee writes, “But [Paul’s] preaching did not thereby lack ‘persuasion’. What it lacked was the kind of persuasion found among the sophists and rhetoricians, where the power lay in the person and his delivery” (Fee 2014, p. 94). Later, he clarifies, “What [Paul] is rejecting is not preaching, not even persuasive preaching; rather, it is the real danger in all preaching—self-reliance” (Fee 2014, p. 96).

5 Witherington writes, “Paul, like Isocrates and Cicero, is concerned to oppose Sophistic rhetoric that makes oratory an end in itself, divorcing it from philosophy or true wisdom. Thus, Paul’s opposition is not to rhetoric per se but to any form of speaking that emptied the gospel of its content and power and to any form of philosophy that did not comport with the counter-order wisdom Paul as a sage believed he had received through revelation and was called upon to dispense. These two things are what Paul means by merely human *sophia*” (Witherington 1995, p. 110). On Paul’s style, he writes, “Paul deliberately chose to present the gospel in this unpolished manner so that the Corinthians’ faith would be in God’s power, not in the power of human words or rhetorical skill. . . Paul deliberately decided to take up an anti-Sophistic strategy” (Witherington 1995, pp. 124–25).

6 Keener writes, “Rhetoric as the art of persuasion was easily subject to abuse if divorced from the speaker’s conviction that the subject of persuasion was true” (Keener 2005, p. 36).

7 Hays says, “[Paul] insists that it was the kerygmatic content of his preaching, not the manner of presentation, that won the Corinthians to the gospel” (Hays 1997, p. 35). Hays thinks the issue at hand is one of style.

8 Ciampa and Rosner write, “[Paul’s] failure to speak with *wise and persuasive words* turns the contrast between Paul and the sophists up to full volume. . . the sophist’s goal was persuasion by the manipulation of arguments and skillful rhetoric. Paul’s goal was the manifestation of God’s power in people’s lives” (Ciampa and Rosner 2010, p. 117; emphasis original).

9 Mihaila thinks Paul rejects sophistic rhetoric (Mihaila 2009, p. 119). However, White seems to align with Litfin that Paul rejects rhetoric and defends himself against Apollos’ followers (White 1994, pp. 105–6, 195–97). Pogoloff seems to think that Paul rejects rhetoric in general, not sophistic rhetoric’s mere form or style particularly (Pogoloff 1992, pp. 68, 127).

10 Litfin says, “Paul’s goals as a missionary preacher were not those of the Greco-Roman persuader. They were the goals of a simple herald, goals that were dramatically different from those of the polished orators so popular in the Greco-Roman world of the first century” (Litfin 2015, p. 116). He also states, “[Paul] was simply an annunciator of this gospel. . . Paul seemed to conceive of these two persuasive dynamics—that of the rhetoric and that of the cross—as mutually exclusive. To embrace the one was to abandon the other. . . Paul feared that operating according to the rhetor’s dynamic would encroach upon the cross’s Spirit-driven power to create belief” (Litfin 2015, pp. 178–79). Moreover, he writes, “This ‘Pauline rhetoric’ involves taking the herald’s rather than the persuader’s stance” (Litfin 2015, p. 180). However, he clearly states that adaptation to one’s audience falls into the realm of orators, not heralds, and thus implies that it is not appropriate for heralds or Christian preachers (Litfin 2015, pp. 86–94). Yet he

later states, “Paul understood and embraced the responsibility of the herald to adapt himself to his audience so as to gain their hearing and communicate his commissioned message” (Litfin 2015, p. 284).

11 Litfin claims, “the essential form of communication they describe is very different from that of the orator; in fact, at its core it is the antithesis of rhetoric behavior. The best examples of this antithesis are the terms with the ancient herald: κήρυξ, κηρύσσειν and κήρυγμα” (Litfin 2015, pp. 184–85). He continues the contrast: “Unlike the orator, the herald’s task was not to create a powerful message custom designed to generate belief (πίστις) or persuasion (πεισμονή) in the recipients. The herald’s task was to convey as faithfully as possible the already-constituted message of another. . . Thus the herald’s task was essentially monological, a demonstration not of persuasive prowess but of faithfulness to the one who commissioned him” (Litfin 2015, p. 185). Thus, as a herald, “Paul’s approach focused on the straightforward announcement of the gospel” (Litfin 2015, p. 184). Also, “His assignment was simply to make Christ known, leaving it to the Spirit of God to take care of the rest” (Litfin 2015, p. 189). Furthermore, “[The persuader] is the backdrop against which to view the ancient herald” (Litfin 2015, p. 205). Actually, it was not as we will see below. Yet he summarizes, “The persuader’s stance is inherently focused on results. . . The herald’s stance, by contrast, is obedience driven” (Litfin 2015, p. 315). Litfin concludes, “Paul’s model is obedience driven rather than results driven. Both the persuader and the herald must set and reach for goals, but their respective goals are dramatically different. The persuader determined the result he was after and then ordered his efforts accordingly. Paul, by contrast, was determined to be faithful to his calling and then leave the matter of results to God. This dramatic paradigm shift, from *results driven* to *obedience driven*, is the fundamental difference between the *persuader’s stance* and the *herald’s stance*, between the *natural paradigm* and the *Pauline paradigm*” (Litfin 2015, p. 316; emphasis original).

While Litfin goes to great lengths to demonstrate that heralds are mutually exclusive to rhetors or orators, he nevertheless admits the rhetorical nature of heralds: “Even heralds, after all, benefitted from aspects of rhetorical training; they too were required to be effective communicators, and much of ancient rhetorical education would have been, and was, relevant to their task” (Litfin 2015, p. 298). This is an inconsistency in his argument.

12 First, see (Liddell et al. 1996, s.v. “κήρυξ”; Danker et al. 2000, s.v. “κήρυξ”; Friedrich 1965a, pp. 683–96; Merk 1991, pp. 288–92). Friedrich says that the classical meaning for κήρυξ has little to no bearing on the understanding of it in the NT: “The herald who plays so important a part in the Greek world is of little account in the NT” (Friedrich 1965a, p. 696). Second, see (Liddell et al. 1996, s.v. “ἀποστολεύς”; Danker et al. 2000, s.v. “ἀπόστολος”; Rengstorf 1964, pp. 407–45; Bühner 1990, pp. 142–46). There is no mention of a herald (κήρυξ) or heralding (κηρύσσειν) function of an apostle (ἀπόστολος) in these entries. Moreover, none of these articles in any way, shape, or form suggest that the antithesis to a herald was a rhetorician or orator. Litfin is mistaken on this point.

13 Litfin writes, “Paul’s rejection of the psychological dynamic of Greco-Roman rhetoric and his emphasis on straightforward proclamation cannot in the end be viewed in isolation. They must be understood against the background of the preaching of Jesus and the Old Testament messengers” (Litfin 2015, p. 286). Moreover, he wrongfully cites George Kennedy as claiming that Jesus and the OT were non-rhetorical heralds: “In this prophetic tradition God is the one who is at work; the speaker is merely a messenger. Even Jesus followed this pattern, says Kennedy, and so did the other apostles” (Litfin 2015, p. 285). But Kennedy was only saying that Paul’s rhetoric had a Jewish flavor and style from his rich Jewish heritage, and rightly so. He was not saying that they were purist messengers who had no rhetorical ornamentations (Kennedy 1980, pp. 120–32; Kennedy 1984).

14 Even in classical Greek, the verbal form does not precisely identify the activity or office of a herald (Friedrich 1965a, p. 697). Rather, it has a basic and general meaning of crying aloud, proclaiming, declaring, or announcing (Friedrich 1965a, p. 697).

15 Friedrich writes, “Against all expectation κηρύσσειν is seldom used of the proclamation of the prophets” (Friedrich 1965a, p. 701).

16 Friedrich writes, “[Paul] can use εὐαγγελίζεσθαι to describe his whole activity as an apostle (1 C. 1:17)” (Friedrich 1965b, p. 719).

17 Suetonius says this about Julius Caesar’s rhetorical skills: “Caesar equaled, if he did not surpass, the greatest orators and generals the world had ever known” (Suetonius 2007, Jul. 55).

18 Greco-Roman rhetorical theory included memory and delivery, which meant fluctuation of volume, the shifting and manipulation of emotions, and bodily gestures ([Aristotle] 1936; Aristotle 1982; Cicero 1968; [Cicero] 1989; Quintilian 1960). Thus, rhetoric was not just verbal style.

19 Litfin even calls it “counterfeit results” at one point (Litfin 2015, p. 303).

20 By the way he frames this, he assumes that the audience automatically listens if the orator creates the exact equation. Yet Litfin is inconsistent because elsewhere he admits that the audience often would not listen to orators: “The rhetorical astuteness of first-century audiences meant that they were anything but compliant, malleable entities shaped at will by the orator. . . In short, the audience had it in its power to terrify and dominate the speaker if it cared to, a fact that was not lost on speakers” (Litfin 2015, p. 103).

21 Litfin writes, “Paul was forced by the situation in Corinth to explain and defend his *modus operandi* as a preacher” (Litfin 2015, p. 141). Moreover, he claims that this is “the true organizing topic of the passage: Paul’s defense of his *modus operandi* as a preacher” (Litfin 2015, p. 173). Again, “Paul’s goal is nothing less than to defend his *modus operandi* as a preacher” (Litfin 2015, p. 194). Litfin even goes so far as to say, “It is not too much to say that an entire philosophy of ministry is at stake here” (Litfin

2015, p. 199). Yet Litfin has pressed it too far. Paul is not expounding upon his *modus operandi* of anything here; rather, he is correcting a problem in the church at Corinth. All of Paul's letters are *ad hoc* and should never be considered systematic theologies or a *modus operandi*.

- 22 Though yes, Litfin does pull in 2 Corinthians too. But difficult, highly disputed passages are not the place to form a secure theology of anything. The meaning of ἐν σοφίᾳ λόγου (1:17) and ἐν πειθοῖ[ς] σοφίας [λόγοις] (2:4) is very difficult. Moreover, there is a rather difficult textual tradition to grapple with too. Passages with such obscure text critical issues are not ideal passages to base theology upon.
- 23 Litfin writes, "What is more important for our immediate purpose is that the apologetic nature of 1 Corinthians 1–4 be given due weight" (Litfin 2015, p. 169). He also calls 1 Cor 1:17–2:5 Paul's "vigorous defense of his preaching" (Litfin 2015, p. 172). Furthermore, he thinks that the Corinthians' "criticism of Paul's preaching" is "the issue that dominates 1 Corinthians 1–2" (Litfin 2015, p. 255).
- 24 Mihaila notes that Paul is not defending himself against the Corinthians' in favor of himself over Apollos and deems the relationship of Paul and Apollos as congenial (Mihaila 2009, p. 212). See also Garland who rightly contends that 1 Cor 2:1–5 is not Paul's defense (Garland 2003, p. 87). He suggests, "These comments should not be read as Paul's defense against those in Corinth who might have disparaged his deficient rhetorical style in favor of another who was more pleasing. . . He appeals to his first preaching in Corinth as a model of the wisdom of the cross in action, not as something he must now defend" (Garland 2003, p. 87).
- 25 To clarify, Kennedy thinks that 1 Corinthians is deliberative throughout with judicial digressions in 1:13–17 and chapter 9. But other than that, he deems it as deliberative (Kennedy 1984).
- 26 Unless of course the unity of the community was to be found in Paul himself, that is, that all should follow Paul. Some might make a case for this given his repeated exhortations to "Be imitators of me" (1 Cor 4:16; 11:1). But the example that Paul urges them to imitate is humility and laying down of rights for the sake of the other (1 Cor 9) which in fact is the example of Christ and his cross. Yes, Paul defends himself in 2 Corinthians because the situation is a Defcon One, where they all seem to be deserting Paul. Here, in 1 Corinthians, however, only "some" are apparently disinterested in Paul's leadership (1 Cor 1:12).
- 27 Throughout the book, you get the sense that he is heavily depending upon Fee and then Litfin finally quotes him: "Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 1:17–2:6, a passage that Gordon Fee describes as nothing less than 'the key theological passage to the whole of the Corinthians correspondence, arguably to the whole of the Pauline corpus'" (Litfin 2015, p. 198).
- 28 Litfin writes, "whether before a Jewish or Gentile audience, Paul functioned as a herald. In both settings his business is not Greco-Roman persuasion but the announcement or declaration (καταγγέλλειν) of a message (Acts 17:3, 18)" (Litfin 2015, p. 309).
- 29 Porter says, "I believe that his speeches in Acts can be analyzed rhetorically" (Porter 2016, p. 541).
- 30 However, Porter has some reservations because the speeches in Acts are often condensed speech summaries and sometimes are cut short prior to their ending (Porter 2016, p. 541).
- 31 But would not we expect Luke, a close companion of Paul, to portray Paul accurately? And if he does portray Paul accurately (using rhetoric), then what are we to make of Paul's statements about rhetoric here? I think there are two likely options. First, one could deduce then that Paul was only rejecting sophistic, overly ornate rhetoric. So then, if Paul accepts standard rhetoric, perhaps in a bland or plain style for evangelism, then this would explain why Luke portrays him as using rhetoric in Acts. Second, and this has not to my knowledge been suggested yet, one might conclude that due to the *ad hoc* nature of 1 Cor 1:18–2:5 that Paul only refrained from rhetorical eloquence when he first evangelized at Corinth specifically, and that this passage reveals nothing about how he preached elsewhere. This would account for both Paul's and Luke's information about Paul's approach to rhetoric. The latter is more likely due to the fact that Paul uses ornate Asiatic rhetoric in Ephesians and Colossians. For more on this discussion, see (Keener 2012; Witherington 1998; Kennedy 1984).
- 32 Here, I would add that overall Litfin's reading of this passage is based upon an overly literal and simplistic understanding of 1 Cor 1:18–2:5. He even admits this: "In my estimation, the so-called face value of Paul's statements deserves more credit than it sometimes receives" (Litfin 2015, p. 28). His footnote argues that this is not to be equated with literal interpretation, but that is essentially what it is.

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