CHAPTER FIVE

THE APOSTOLIC AGON FOR THE GOSPEL

1. THE SELF-APOLOGE OF THE APOSTLE IN I COR. 9:24-27

The interpretation of this passage has often suffered from the outset by treating the verses as a separate unit of general Pauline paraenesis. Form-critical considerations would seem to support the view that they should be dealt with as a complete and independent unit. In his extensive work on the subject Martin Dibelius has shown that the form of NT paraenesis reveals, amongst others, the following two characteristics. The content is often not specifically Christian in origin, but rather reveals traditional material adopted by the Christian writers. The Stoa, and its literary medium, the diatribe, contributed much of the paraenetic material in the NT epistles.\(^1\) In the second place the paraenetic sections usually fit very loosely into their present context\(^2\) without adhering strictly to a logical sequence of thought, rather giving general injunctions which are already familiar to the readers.

It may be asked whether both these rules can be applied to our present passage. The above study of the tradition of the athletic image can hardly leave any room for doubt that I Cor 9:24ff., at least formally, carries on this tradition. The antithesis between the στέφανος φερτός and στέφανος ἀφετρός in v.25 certainly repeats a familiar contrast (whether applied to the Agon itself, or to the prizes to be won) which has been often noted in the examination.\(^3\)

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\(^1\) M. Dibelius, Der Brief des Jakobus (KEK), Göttingen \(^2\)1959, pp. 3-10, and his Formgeschichte des Evangeliums, Tübingen \(^3\)1961, pp. 239ff.

\(^2\) Although this applies primarily to those cases in which we find chains or series of paraenetic injunctions where a connecting theme is completely lacking; cf. Jakobusbrief, p. 7.

\(^3\) Cf. esp. Philo Migr Abr 6—even Pindar has not succeeded in making the wreath of glory ἀφετρός. The victors in the games are not those remembered in history. Note also Wis 4:2, I Pet 5:4 and J. Berach. 4.7d, and Seneca Ep. 78.16: “What blows do athletes receive in their face … Yet they bear all the torture from thirst of glory. Let us also overcome all things, for our reward is not a crown or a palm branch or the trumpeter proclaiming silence for the announcement of our name, but virtue and strength of mind and peace acquired ever after”. It is difficult to say whether the antithesis still contains
In addition the theme of ἐγχράτεια which has programmatic significance in the diatribe's picture of the sage's Agon, is also introduced in v.25 as the central point of the image. Even a change of pictures, as in v.26, is not foreign to the parallels in the diatribe or in Philo. Finally it is also possible to see in the introductory ὅσοι ὁδηγείν in v.24 one of the many forms of litotes popularly used by the diatribal writers to introduce an argument or injunction.¹

The last point already suggests that vv.24-27 belong more directly to 9:1-23 than to 10:1ff.² which continues the discussion on eating meat offered to idols. The second passage continues with a new motif (cf. πειρασμὸς 10:13) from the OT desert-wandering tradition. The γάρ in 10:1 is simply a loose conjunctive pointing to 9:24-27 as the transitional section between the two larger passages.

However such formal considerations do not alone justify the treatment of these verses as a separate unit of general paraenesis. J. Weiss has argued that Paul is often led beyond the practical purpose in hand "in the creation of pictures which have a meaning all of their own, and like independant mosaics project themselves out of the context".³ Yet even if we agree reassuringly with J. Weiss, and also with H. Lietzmann who remarks that our passage shows

the original polemical tone of the Stoic and Cynics, but it is at least certain that the verses cannot be understood as revealing Paul’s general attitude to sport, as in J. Hering, The First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians, ET: London 1962, p. 83: “the author would not have made this comparison if he had been strongly averse to sport”. (!) Nor can we say that Paul shows “a readiness to admire whatever was innocent and beautiful in human customs, when he wrote (sc. I Cor 9:24ff.) to his converts in Corinth” (F. W. Farrar, The Life and Work of St. Paul, London 1896, p. 699). Nor does the character of the image allow us to make any conclusions as to the relationship of the Corinthian Christians to the games, as does Schlatter, Paulus der Bote Jesu, Stuttgart 1962, p. 284. In all probability the Christians ceased to attend the 'sacred games', but these verses are anything but a practical directive in the Christian’s attitude to them.

¹ Cf. Epict. III 24,31: ὅσοι ὁδηγείν, δὴ τα στοιχεῖα τὸ χρήμα ἐστὶν; in Paul also in Rom 6:16, 11:2, I Cor 3:16, 6:3.9.15.16.19, 9:13; also τὴν ὃν in Rom 3:9, 6:15, etc. A similar formula is found with the use of ἀγνωσίᾳ in Rom 6:3, 7:1, etc., and of τὴν ἐποίησιν in Rom 3:5, 4:1, etc.; cf. Bultmann, TWNT I, p. 117, and Der Stil der paulinischen Predigt und die kynisch-stoische Diatribe (FRLANT), Göttingen 1910, pp. 13 and 65.
³ J. Weiss, Earliest Christianity II, p. 406, without, however, referring to I Cor 9:24ff.