CHAPTER SIX

THE CHARACTERISATION OF THE CHRISTIAN CALLING AS A RACE

1. The Right Christian Δρόμος

Up to this point the prime application in Paul’s use of the athletic image has been certainly to his own mission for the Gospel, and not to a general concept of the Christian life as a contest, parallel to diatribal thought. This has been seen to apply even where the Agon for the Gospel, including the Agon of suffering, is extended to include fellow-workers and fellow-believers, for this application is to be understood on the background of, and in connection with, Paul’s own contest.

Paul nevertheless still paints the life of every believer as a foot race, without reference to his own mission or office. The most obvious reference, that to I Cor 9:24f., requires careful treatment, as has been already shown. It may here suffice to repeat two main points. 1. Verse 24b, with its application of the image in τέχνων to the addressees presents not the paraenetic climax or scopus of the section, but belongs rather to the introduction of the image preparatory to the elaboration of the Apostle’s own Agon. 2. The entire reference to the athletic image, including the opening picture of the foot race, has as its tertium the necessity of ‘enkrateia’ and not only of maximum exertion. Again, the immediate point of reference is Paul’s own self-restriction in the interests of the Gospel. Nevertheless, the paraenetic implications for his readers and the relevance of the principle of ‘enkrateia’ to the discussion of the eating of meats offered to idols is apparent. Bearing in mind these two observations it is clear that we can say little more about the Christian ‘race’, on the basis of this passage, than the following: The life of faith is a forward movement, a progression towards a final goal (βραβείον v.24, στέφανος v.25). The effort of an athlete and his intentness are necessary to reach this goal. But to its attainment belong also self-restriction and renunciation. An ‘ethic of activism’ finds no basis here.

Nor is an ethic based on exertion to be found in the three other
passages which must here be mentioned. The use of τρέχειν in \textit{Rom} 9:16 is in this respect very significant: ἀρα οὖν οὗ τοῦ θελοντος οὐδὲ τοῦ τρέχοντος, ἀλλὰ τοῦ ἐλεοντος θεοῦ. Beardslee remarks that Paul’s “athletic metaphors usually emphasise the strenuous moral exertion which is necessary for victory, though once the metaphor is used to state precisely the reverse”—referring to the verse under consideration.\(^1\) But this statement is misleading, expressing at the most a half truth. The first half of the sentence is manifestly false, if we bear in mind the results of the previous chapter, while the second half requires modification, since \textit{Rom} 9:16 cannot be taken as expressing a negation of all earnest striving after righteousness—as little as Phil 2:12 can be taken as establishing human endeavour as the basis of salvation. Bengel has already given the best answer in his usually precise and pointed manner.\(^2\) It is only the desiring and striving of the self-sufficient man which possesses no validity before God. Over against the free but gracious will of God is placed the proud, self-confident will and striving of man looking to his own recourses.

Commentators correctly note a quiet reference to the popular picture of the foot race in the verb τρέχειν. Michel directs attention to the hellenistic ring of the verbs θέλειν and τρέχειν as characteristic for human effort and endeavour.\(^3\) This point largely counters Schlatter’s query as to the presence of an expressly athletic image,\(^4\) and is not invalidated by the Old Testament quotation (Ex 33:19) in the preceding verse. References to septuagintal language do not help to illuminate v.16 despite the striking formal resemblance to Eccles 9:11: ἐπὶ οὗ τοῖς κούφοις ὁ δρόμος καὶ οὗ τοῖς δυνάτοις ὁ πόλεμος.

\(^1\) W. A. Beardslee, \textit{Human Achievment and Divine Vocation in the Message of Paul}, p. 68.
\(^3\) O. Michel, \textit{Römerbrief}, p. 239. Th. Zahn, \textit{Römerbrief}, p. 450 note 5, also agrees that the athletic image underlies the use of τρέχειν even where the image is not developed; so also Sanday and Headlam, \textit{Romans}, p. 254. Michel (\textit{op.cit.}, p. 250) thinks that the picture of the foot race is again taken up in vv.30ff. While these verses are certainly to be interpreted on the background of the principle in v.16, it is not so certain that διώκειν has the same metaphorical weight as τρέχειν.
\(^4\) A. Schlatter, \textit{Gottes Gerechtigkeit}, p. 300: “Ob eine Erinnerung an das Stadion mitwirkt und Paulus den Frommen ... mit dem Wettläufer vergleicht, ist nicht gewiss. Der rennende Mensch kann auch ohne diese Vergleichung den Eifer veranschaulichen, mit dem der Mensch seinen Willen ausführt und erfolgreich zu machen sucht”.}