

Insidious Agreement

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I here wish to call attention to a device of argument for which there is apparently no term in classical rhetoric. Here is a passage from Ecclesiastes 11:9.

Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth, and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thy heart, and in the sight of thine eyes; but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgement.

This is cited by Fenner (1584) as an example of concessio: granting what will be hurtful to an opponent.¹ What interests me about this passage is not its hurtfulness, but its sidewise drift: it starts in one place (seeming to approve the pleasures of the young), but winds up in another (they will be condemned for enjoying them). The beginning is undermined by the end. The tactic of first establishing agreement with an existing situation, and then preaching something different, is common in the Apostle Paul.

Thessalonians. A compact example of initial praise followed by an exhortation to do better. The praise becomes, retrospectively, an implied censure.

1 Thess 4:1. Finally, then, brethren, we beseech and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that, as ye received of us how ye ought to walk and to please God, even as ye do walk – that ye abound more and more.

Philippians. That church did not have a theology of the cross; it had an earlier idea of Jesus, centering rather on his obedience to God. To urge obedience to himself, Paul quotes that hymn, but inserts, in passing, a reference to the theology of the cross:

[Php 2:8] And being found in fashion as man
He humbled himself
Becoming obedient unto death
(and that a cross-death!)²

Romans. Paul is addressing Roman Christians who regard Jesus as descended from David. He wants to get them aboard, and then update them theologically.

Rom 1:3 . . . who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, [4] who was declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead, even Jesus Christ our Lord.

Rom 1:3 invites the Roman Christians to feel that Paul agrees with them about Jesus. But in the next verse, 1:4, he inserts the Resurrection into the appeal. Paul could not care less about Jesus “according to the flesh,” that is, what Jesus was in his lifetime. To Paul, the only important fact about Jesus is his death and subsequent resurrection.

¹Sister Miriam Joseph *Arts* 382.

²From Hunter *Paul* 41 (based on Lohmeyer’s understanding of the hymn).

Corinthians. Sometimes the point of agreement must itself be elaborately established. In 1 Cor, that process occupies four chapters. 1 Cor first takes note of factions at Corinth, with no less than four contending parties:

1 Cor 1:12. Now this I mean, that each of you saith, I am of Paul, and I of Apollos, and I of Cephas, and I of Christ.³

Paul begins by eliminating *all* factions, including his own:

[1:13] Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized into the name of Paul?

And from that common position, he proceeds to argue himself back into the picture. After a somewhat wandering continuation, he resumes the theme of equality in Christ:

[3:21] Wherefore let no man glory in men. For all things are yours, whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death . . . all things are yours, [23] and ye are Christ's, and Christ is God's.

Finally, with the argument now at the level of Christ, we get this distinction:

[4:14] I write not these things to shame you, but to admonish you as my beloved children. [15] For though ye have ten thousand tutors in Christ, yet not many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I begat you through the Gospel. [16] I beseech you therefore, be ye imitators of me.

Primary respect is due to Paul, not his rivals. He is the *sole point of access* to Christ.

“My beloved children,” says Paul at 4:14. We may recall that Paul often speaks of himself, not only as the father, but sometimes even as the mother, of his converts:

- **1 Thess 2:7.** But we were gentle in the midst of you, as when a nurse cherisheth her own children . . .
- **Gal 4:19.** My little children, of whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you . . .

See again 1 Thess 4:1, above. But note that a mother, however gentle, has sole ownership. It is that position – the focus of indebtedness for the one addressed – toward which all these Pauline devices seem to be maneuvering.

If it were desired to add one more term to the Latin list of rhetorisms, I might favor *Obliquitio*. Sidewiseness. Unlike the treacherously cryptic oracles of Apollo at Delphi, *oblivitio*, in its crabwise way, is perfectly clear. It is perfectly clear at both its ends. It is just that those two ends are in different places.

Works Cited

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³I take the “Christ” faction as the Alpha Christians whose contact with Jesus' teaching went back to pre-Apostolic times. For this term, see Brooks **Two** 39. For pre-Apostolic propagation of the Word, see Brooks **Parables**.