

Paul's Use of Aristotelian Enthymeme's in New Testament Scripture:  
Turning "Head Knowledge" into "Heart Knowledge"  
By Kevin Jones<sup>1</sup>

A challenge for many pastor-teachers in leading a congregation in making the connection between "Head Knowledge" (Knowing scripture/spiritual knowledge mentally) and "Heart Knowledge" (The practical application of that knowledge to their life). Engaging an audience to participate in the learning process and actively participate in spiritual truth requires rhetorical tools that guide the audience to participate in the persuasion process. One such rhetorical tool is Aristotle's rhetorical syllogism or enthymeme, a type of syllogism that intentionally leaves out one or two parts of the syllogism requiring the audience to complete the logical process. By participating in the enthymatic process, a message recipient engages in the persuasion process and compliance gaining is increased.

When a rhetor uses an enthymeme and the recipient of the message participates in the process, they become more committed to the persuasion process and are more apt to apply the lesson to their lives (Gass and Seiter). In the New Testament, Paul engaged the enthymeme as a persuasive tool repeatedly. By looking at Paul's use of the enthymeme, insight is provided into how Paul engaged in teaching the early church. This essay will examine the use of the enthymeme by Paul in his New Testament writings by first, examining Paul's exposure to a rhetorical education; second, defining the enthymeme; and finally identifying enthymemes in scripture.

#### Paul's Exposure to Rhetoric

In Acts 22:3 Paul noted, "I am verily a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated under Gamaliel, strictly according to the law of our fathers."<sup>2</sup> This verse carries significant implications regarding Paul's education and New Testament writings. Even though few of his actual teachings have been preserved, Gamaliel held a reputation as one of the greatest teachers in the annals of Judaism. Gamaliel's influence on education at that time is evident in this summary, "When he died the glory of wisdom ceased...honor of the Torah

---

<sup>1</sup> Kevin T. Jones is an Associate Professor of Communication Studies at George Fox University. This paper is part of a much larger work where he examines the role of classical Greek philosophies on Paul's New Testament writing. Email: [kevinj@georgefox.edu](mailto:kevinj@georgefox.edu)

The author also would like to thank Richard Engnell for his valuable insight on earlier drafts of this essay.

<sup>2</sup> All scripture references taken from the New American Standard Version of the Bible.

ceased, and purity and piety became extinct” (Schechter & Bacher 559).

Additionally, Tarsus was a very important city in Paul’s day. A center of commerce, Tarsian merchants and others invested heavily in the education of Tarsian citizens, and no expense was spared in the recruitment of top educators from all over the Roman Empire (Wallace 4-5). As a result, Tarsus became known as a “university city” and was an ancient “ivy league” university. Historian Robert H. Gundry noted that the Greco-Roman education at the university at Tarsus “offered young men a place to study philosophy, *rhetoric*, law, medicine, astronomy, and mathematics” (Italics mine, 81-82).

In Acts 21, Paul spoke fluent Greek to the Roman military captain, Lysias, which indicates that Paul had been exposed to Greek learning at the university level. George T. Montague noted, “His (Paul) mastery of the Greek literary technique. . .and his occasional citation of Greek authors (Aratus in Acts 17:18, Epimenides in Titus 1:1, Meander in I Corinthians 15:23) are considered by some as evidence the he frequented the Hellenistic schools of rhetoric” (2).

In other words, Paul was trained by the best of the best in both Judaism and Greco-Roman knowledge. Like the Greeks, the Romans viewed rhetoric as a moral instrument for conveying truth to the masses (Golden 13). Therefore, when Paul began preaching and wanting to convey the truth of the gospel to the masses, it was second nature for him to use the tools of rhetoric he had been taught.

### The Enthymeme

At the heart of Aristotle’s theory of logical proof is the rhetorical syllogism or enthymeme, which is the very body and substance of persuasion (Golden 30). A logician employs a syllogism that uses true and valid statements that lead to necessary conclusions and is concerned with scientific proofs (Poulakos & Poulakos 115). The syllogism provides a major premise, a minor premise, and a conclusion. Each premise builds upon the other to develop a sound, logical conclusion. A commonly quoted syllogism is: All men are mortal (major premise); Socrates is a man (minor premise); Socrates is mortal (conclusion). Each part of the syllogism is factual and stands on its own merits.

While the syllogism is concerned with facts and scientific proofs, the enthymeme deals with probable knowledge. Humans cannot base all arguments on factual truth and many arguments must rest on opinion or probable conclusions. An enthymeme might proceed as

follows: All professors are arrogant (major premise); Dr. Jones is a professor (minor premise); Dr. Jones is arrogant (conclusion). The major premise is an opinion based on probable knowledge.

What is important to note about the enthymeme is that in an oral argument, not all parts of the enthymeme are present. Corbett noted, “Aristotle argued that the enthymeme must consist of fewer propositions than those that make up the syllogism” (30). Golden added, “Usually the persuasive speaker would omit one or even two of the parts of the rhetorical syllogism, for they already existed in the minds of the listener” (31). Using the three-part example above, a conversational enthymeme might be: Person A: “I’d like you to meet Professor Jones.” Person B: “No thanks, I don’t like arrogant people.” The major premise is never articulated but assumed by speaker B to be understood. This is how the enthymeme leads to a tentative conclusion from probable premises (Corbett 73).

Enthymemes are drawn from three different premises: probability, signs and examples (Golden 31). By probability, Aristotle meant arguments that are generally true and contain an element of cause. The sign is a proposition setting forth a reason for the existence of a particular fact and is either fallible (the conclusion does not establish with certainty) or infallible (when assumptions can be scientifically verified). Examples can be either historical or invented.

### Pauline Enthymemes

Throughout Paul’s New Testament writings, he used enthymemes to engage the audience in the persuasion process. For example, II Timothy 3:16 notes, “All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness.” The verse provides the major premise that scripture is God inspired and is good for life guidance. The non-present minor premise is “if this is true in general, it ought to be good for me as well.” The non-present conclusion that Timothy must conclude is “I, Timothy, must continue to study the scripture.”

Timothy is forced to make the connection between the general and the specific and in so doing, the argument invites Timothy to reaffirm his commitment to God’s program. Today, whenever a person reads this portion of scripture, they are also required to make the same connection thereby reaffirming the reader’s commitment to God’s program. Given Paul’s audience analysis (to Timothy, a believer), the enthymeme uses the premise of probability and

shows cause between being given scripture and what scripture is for. The “head knowledge” (God gave us the bible) becomes “heart knowledge” (I must study and follow the Word).

Another example of an enthymeme is found in Romans 10:17: “So faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.” In this section of Romans, Paul is attempting to convey to the Jews that they are special to God and salvation is available to them if they would just respond. Salvation is as close as hearing but hearing is not a simple task. The argument can be diagramed as “Faith cometh by hearing” (major premise) and “Hearing by the word of Christ” (minor premise). No clear conclusion is provided. The reader is required to complete the enthymeme. To obtain faith, a person must engage the word of God. Everyone (both Jews and Gentiles) can receive salvation by hearing. When the reader is left to make this doctrinal connection on his/her own, s/he not only participates in the persuasion process but also is more prone to connect and engage in the persuasive message. The “head knowledge” (faith and scripture are connected) becomes “heart knowledge” (I listened and responded).

A final example of an enthymeme is found in I Thessalonians 5:22, “Abstain from every form of evil.” The verse becomes the conclusion and the audience is required to provide the major premise (Nothing good comes from evil) and the minor premise (Evil can do nothing good for me), therefore, the conclusion (I must abstain from every form of evil). The audience turns the “head knowledge” (evil is bad) into “heart knowledge” (I must live apart from evil). The enthymeme is a sign that sets forth a reason (nothing good comes from evil) for the existence of a fact (abstain from every form of evil).

#### Conclusion

These examples are in no way exhaustive of Paul’s use of enthymemes. Publication limitations prevent more examples. However, what this essay has done is to show the connection between classical rhetoric and New Testament writings. Trained in the Roman educational system that was based on the Greek traditions, Paul used one of the most effective tools of persuasion, the enthymeme, upon which to build early church teaching of engaging the audience to connect head knowledge to heart knowledge.

## WORKS CITED

- Bible*. New American Standard Version. La Habra, CA: Lockman Foundation, 1973.
- Corbett, Edward. *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1975.
- Golden, James, Berquist, Goodwin, & Coleman, William. *The Rhetoric of Western thought. 7<sup>th</sup> Edition*. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt, 2000.
- Gass, Robert & Seiter, John. *Persuasion: Social Influence and Compliance Gaining*. New York: Allyn and Bacon, 2011.
- Gundry, Robert H. *A Survey of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994.
- Montague, George T. *The Living Thought of St. Paul*. Milwaukee: Bruce, 1966.
- Poulakos, John & Poulakos, Takis. *Classical Rhetorical Theory*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999.
- Schechter, Solomon & Bacher, Wilhelm. "Gamaliel I." *Jewish Encyclopedia* (2002): 558-560. [www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view](http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view).
- Wallace, Quency E. "The Early Life and Background of Paul the Apostle." *The American Journal of Biblical Theology* (2002): 1-23. [www.biblicaltheology.com/Research/WallacwQ01](http://www.biblicaltheology.com/Research/WallacwQ01).