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Rethinking Paul's Rhetorical Intentions: An Interaction with Ryan S. Schellenberg's *Abject Joy*

Trevor A. Clark

Gateway Seminary of the Southern Baptist Convention, Ontario, CA 91761, USA; trevorclark89@gmail.com

Abstract: Ryan S. Schellenberg recaptures a more human version of the Apostle Paul by challenging the mainstream understandings of boasting and joy as rhetorical. This essay, with reference to the concept of “rhetorical framing”, suggests that Schellenberg is right in what he affirms but wrong in what he denies and that a “strategic” understanding of boasting and joy language in Philippians is still possible, and no less human.

Keywords: Philippians; boasting; joy; rhetoric; Schellenberg; framing

1. Introduction

In what sense can the language of boasting and joy in Philippians be called “rhetorical”? In Pauline studies, the word typically means something more than the popular, negative sense found in such phrases as “empty rhetoric” or “merely rhetorical”¹. Rather, scholars have labeled Paul’s boasting rhetorical because it conforms to social mores of self-praise exhibited in the Greco-Roman rhetorical tradition and because it helps to accomplish his epistolary aims (Fiore 1985; Smit 2014; Aletti 2024; Bianchini 2024). A rhetorical use of boasting language in the senses just described is part of scholarship’s standard line on Pauline boasting—he boasts to beat his opponents at their own game and to reengineer the very concept of honor (Judge 1968; Forbes 1986; Harrison 2018). Just over a decade ago, Ryan S. Schellenberg challenged this understanding with the claim that *no, Paul actually boasts* (Schellenberg 2013).

Boasting and joy are related themes (Spicq 1994, vol. 2, p. 301). Therefore, it should come as no surprise that scholarly treatments of joy in the letter run parallel to those of boasting. Rejoicing, too, is said to serve Paul’s pedagogical purposes—he writes of joy to correct the Philippian’s grief, drawing on (and transforming) Stoic conceptions of emotion (Holloway 2017, pp. 33–35). Recently, Schellenberg has again countered that *Paul actually rejoices* (Schellenberg 2021). In his view, if the language of joy in Philippians is to be called rhetorical, it is a “performative rhetoric” (Schellenberg 2021, p. 147). Paul’s writing “[for]ges the very self it describes” (Schellenberg 2021, p. 143). That is, his confident expression of joy fosters the very experience of the joy he claims.

In attempting its own answer to the opening question, this essay interacts with Schellenberg’s work. Ultimately, it argues that, whilst largely right in what he affirms, he is perhaps wrong in what he denies. In particular, he rightly maximizes the embodied, emotional, and experiential realities that Paul’s language of boasting and joy signifies, but he perhaps too quickly minimizes the intentional arrangement of the discourse in those terms. The concept of “rhetorical framing” allows for compatibility between his and other approaches to Pauline rhetoric. But first, it will be useful to trace the contours of his argument.

2. Ryan S. Schellenberg’s *Abject Joy*: Paul, Prison, and the Art of Making Do

At the heart of Schellenberg’s project is a “Bourdeausian argument. . . the history of Paul’s emotions is a history of his body, which is also a history of his social interaction”



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(Schellenberg 2021, p. 177). Thus, he places an emphasis “not on the putative philosophical origins of Paul’s language, but rather on the particular social and somatic context in which it has taken root—namely, prison” (Schellenberg 2021, p. 133). This brings a focus on Paul’s body, which is a departure from the usual focus on his thought, and which also produces an appreciation of his letter in social terms—*social* in two senses: (1) his particular bodily suffering in the context of multiple imprisonments by local authorities attests to a less distinguished social location or status than scholars tend to imagine Paul inhabiting, and (2) we are in a better position to appreciate Paul’s relationships and his social interactions with those who care about his imprisoned body. Within this framework, Philippians is a revelation, a letter conveying not only Paul’s longings for a bodily status reversal at the coming of Christ (Schellenberg 2021, p. 89) but also the “emotional interdependence” or “intersubjectivity” of its author and recipients (Schellenberg 2021, pp. 152, 155). Schellenberg writes to correct the standard interpretation of Paul’s joy in prison, seeing that “Hagiographic impulses, a predilection for theological abstraction, and a Western fixation on altruism have conspired, I suggest, to obscure the shared affective benefits of Paul’s concern for the Philippians, benefits that accrue to Paul at least as much as to his addressees” (Schellenberg 2021, p. 152).

Abject Joy makes many of the same moves as its predecessor, *Rethinking Paul’s Rhetorical Education: Comparative Rhetoric and 2 Corinthians 10–13*. This is significant because, if boasting and joy are mutually informative themes in Philippians, and if Schellenberg already has rejected the former as an expression of Paul’s rhetorical strategy, then he is predisposed to do the same for joy (and boasting) in Philippians. It is worth noting just how deeply the similarity runs between the two works.

Rethinking Paul’s Rhetorical Education conveys the same interrelation of *soma*, social location, and social interaction (Schellenberg 2013, p.13). In both works, Schellenberg excoriates the portrait of Paul as a dispassionate rhetorical strategist (Schellenberg 2013, p. 2; 2021, p. 171). That is, a strategist who merely “uses boasting” (Schellenberg 2013, p. 121, quoting Watson 2003, p. 90; cf. 2016, p. 108) and “employs joy” (Schellenberg 2021, p. 14, quoting Holloway 2001, p. 17). He aims to recover a more human Paul (Schellenberg 2013, pp. 318–19; Schellenberg 2021, p. 14), and along with him, a more realistic appreciation of his letters as “artifacts of social practice” (Schellenberg 2013, p. 13) or “affective technology” (Schellenberg 2021, p. 177). In these letters, he finds Paul *gesturing* (Schellenberg 2013, p. 312; 2021, p. 54)—coming to grips with and constructing his own conflicted identity (Schellenberg 2013, p. 317; 2021, p. 176). These reappraisals arise from a comparative method that is analogical rather than genealogical (Schellenberg 2013, pp. 10, 310; 2021, pp. 152–53). Such comparisons run contrary to the apologetic strands of modern scholarship, which use the Greco-Roman rhetorical tradition as “a foil against which to highlight Paul’s moral and intellectual superiority” (Schellenberg 2013, p. 176), even as they use the prison experiences of his contemporaries as “a foil, emphasizing Paul’s admirable silence regarding his own suffering” (Schellenberg 2021, p. 104). These portrayals, which Schellenberg seeks to overturn, evince a tendency to view Paul as a moral exemplar and are perhaps indebted to Lukan hagiography (Schellenberg 2013, pp. 20–21; 2021, pp. 6–7)². Whether it is the accusations that Paul faces in Corinth or his multiple imprisonments at the hands of local authorities, the exigencies of Paul’s letters attest to a marginalized status (Schellenberg 2013, p. 307; 2021, pp. 58, 178). In sum, Paul’s rhetoric “is an abject rhetoric, characterized by insecurity and self-abasement—and vigorous bursts of defiance” (Schellenberg 2013, p. 7); his joy is an “abject joy” (Schellenberg 2021, p. 24).

Schellenberg has crafted a formula that works. The logic of the two monographs—though nearly a decade separates them, and though they consider different themes (boasting/joy), contexts (rhetoric/prison), and letters (Second Corinthians/Philippians)—runs nearly identically. This formula works, in part, because there is much truth in it. Focusing on Philippians, we need only reach for the nearest commentary to read that joy “is not the self-satisfied delight that everything is going our way, but the settled peace that arises from making the gospel the focus of life” (Thielman 1995, p. 72), that “we have diluted

the term ‘joy’ so that it often means ‘be happy’ or ‘have fun.’ . . . nothing is further from Paul’s definition. His joy is one with eschatological content, not fleeting emotion” (Cohick 2013, p. 164), or that Paul’s language of joy is shorthand for grief giving way to consolation (Holloway 2001, p. 79; 2017, pp. 33–35). Such transcendent descriptions might cause us to ask, with Schellenberg—did not the Apostle have *feelings*?

Inasmuch as Schellenberg leads us to recover a Paul with emotions, the work is not only right in what it affirms but is even welcome³. But is it right in what it denies? Can the language of joy and boasting remain truly emotional but still rhetorical, in the sense of furthering Paul’s authorial aims and even participating in an “epistolary strategy”? Has Schellenberg’s earlier treatment of boasting caused him to overlook this potential for boasting—and joy—in Philippians?⁴ The concept of “rhetorical framing” may help to answer these questions.

3. What Is Rhetorical Framing?

Schellenberg’s work evinces familiarity with the concept of framing, or at least with one of the seminal works behind the concept (Schellenberg 2013, p. 176; Goffman [1974] 1986)⁵. In his exegesis of Paul’s boasting in Second Corinthians 10–13, he notes that Paul uses the “framing device” of “the disclaimer” to show “that he is aware of the foolishness of his boasting” (Schellenberg 2013, p. 177). What Schellenberg does not see—what most interpreters have not appreciated—is that presenting issues in terms of boasting *is itself a framing of those same issues*.

That is, before asking whether Paul’s boasting is either foolish or ironic, we would do well to seek its significance *as boasting*: Why does Paul present the conflict between himself and his Corinthian opponents in these terms? For that matter, why does he present the strife among the Corinthians also in those terms, in First Corinthians 1–4? Why the climactic crystallization of the difference between himself and his Galatian rivals into the alternative between boasting in the flesh, or in the cross (Gal 6:11–18)? Why, in Romans, does he contrast his interlocutor’s “boast in God” *via* law (Rom 1–4) with the believers’ “boast in God” *via* Christ (Rom 5–8), and then juxtapose the divisive pride of the Gentiles (Rom 9–11) with his own boast to unite Jew and Gentile in Christ (Rom 12–16)? And why, returning to the letter at hand, Philippians, does he first characterize his relationship with his readers as one of mutual boasting (Phil 1–2) before rejecting outsiders as boasting wrongly (Phil 3)? In short, why take issues that are not in and of themselves boasting issues and treat them as if they are? Paul presents a diversity of issues in the same terms—the terms of true and false boasting.

Every day we speak as judges when we pretend to be only witnesses, presenting issues in certain terms so that our audience understands them in particular ways (Topf 2020, pp. 78–84). This is *framing*, a concept that scholars in the fields of psychology (Bateson [1972] 2000; Goffman [1974] 1986; with an emphasis on conflict: Wehr 1979; Drake and Donohue 1996; Rogan 2006; Tylim and Harris 2017), journalism and mass communication (Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Gamson 1989; Gamson et al. 1992; Entman 1993; D’Angelo 2002; Gitlin [1980] 2003; Kuypers 2006; see also the collection of essays in D’Angelo and Kuypers 2010 and D’Angelo 2018), and the study of social movements (Steinberg 1998; see overview in Snow et al. 2019) have discussed at length⁶. Though there are differences, these studies share the basic assumption that “facts have no intrinsic meaning. They take on their meaning by being embedded in a frame or storyline that organizes them and gives them coherence, selecting certain ones to emphasize while ignoring others” (Gamson 1989, p. 157). We can define a frame as a value-laden, culturally embedded concept or narrative that includes criteria for evaluating and reasons for responding to certain issues when those issues are presented so as to evoke that concept or storyline (cf. Van Gorp 2010, p. 88). As such, framing deals with the interpretive and motivational aspects of communication.

When an author “organizes the context” within which a particular event or issue is to be viewed, that organizational process and production can be termed “rhetorical framing” (Kuypers 2010, p. 300). Kuypers writes of this kind of framing, “When highlighting some

aspect of reality over other aspects, frames act to define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies" (Kuypers 2010, p. 301; cf. Entman 1993, p. 52). We should note that such framing is not always a conscious endeavor; it may be merely intuitive; yet, in many cases "the frame is consciously recognized and even represented in vocabulary" (Bateson [1972] 2000, pp. 186–87; cf. Nisbet 2010, p. 46).

Schellenberg draws our attention to two "means by which persons labor on their emotions. . . cognitive reappraisal and focusing on others" (Schellenberg 2021, p. 167, citing Gross 2014, pp. 3–20). His description of cognitive reappraisal mirrors those above of framing, being "not so much the interpretive creativity of any one individual as the activation of a cultural repertoire" (Schellenberg 2021, p. 167). He sees this strategy on display in Philippians 1:28–30, where Paul "describes the opposition he and his addressees endure as a sign of their coming salvation. . . thus echoing topoi that were already well established in Jewish discourse" (Schellenberg 2021, p. 167). Yet, Schellenberg prefers to take the language of boasting and joy in Philippians as a "socio-affective means of emotion regulation" over "cognitive strategies like reappraisal" (Schellenberg 2021, p. 169). But perhaps the latter strategy merits further attention. Especially, what if Paul engages in the latter (cognitive reframing) for the sake of the former (the good of the Philippians)?

4. Rhetorical Framing and Boasting: Salience and Story

Like a frame about a painting, a rhetorical frame highlights certain aspects of its subject, in a manner analogous to "agenda setting" (Kuypers 2010, pp. 299–300). This is called *salience*. What elements of a subject might the frame of *boasting* render salient in communication? The use of boasting language in ancient sources gives rise to at least three possibilities.

First, to label an utterance a boast can draw attention to the speaker's motives or *ethos*. This focus is frequently negative, such that to describe a person or group as boasting is to attribute to them excessive pride (Heckel 1993, pp. 153–57; Spicq 1994, vol. 2, p. 296; Gerber 2015, p. 221)⁷. Yet, boasting language also amplifies the sense of joy that characterizes relationships of mutual love and respect (Blois 2020, pp. 37–100), or the joy shared by a group following a triumph⁸. As such, the boasting frame amplifies the subjective elements of a social equation—used negatively to attribute excess, and positively for effusion.

Second, the designation "boasting" cues readers to inspect the matter or *logos* of whatever the author presents in those terms. Without attempting pedantry, the foundation of boasting meets critique or confirmation based on one or more of three criteria: its *reality*, its *realism*, and its *realization*. Various critiques of boasting in wealth illustrate the nuance. A boast in wealth might rest on an *unreal* foundation: "One pretends to be rich, yet has nothing" (Prov 13:7)⁹. Even where wealth is really had, our sources criticize boasting in it as an *unrealistic* appraisal of its value: "Look at all those things of which I have no need" (Philo, *Agr.* 62; cf. *Deus* 146; *Plant.* 64–65). Finally, many boasts are future-oriented, open to the objection that the object of boasting will remain forever *unrealized*: "Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money.' . . . As it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil" (James 4:13, 16). It is the connotation of *unreality* in the ancient world that renders boasting; in some cases, tantamount to lying (Pernot 1998, p. 117; Heckel 1993, p. 149)¹⁰, and it is the connotation of *unrealism* that makes it akin to insanity and drunkenness¹¹. Conversely, the designation "boasting", when used positively, draws readers' attention to what is real, realistic, and sure to be realized, as Philo describes boasting in God (*Spec.* 1.311; *Somm.* 1.246).

Lastly, the charge of boasting can imply a criticism of a speaker's manner or *pathos*. In view here is the obscenity of the speech, whether the boast is appropriate or inappropriate, rather than its truthfulness or the character of the speaker. Plutarch addresses himself to diffusing the odium of self-praise in *De Laude Ipsius*, the text that captures the bulk of scholarly attention concerning the context within which we should understand Paul's boasting¹². Despite the emphasis on *periautologia* in recent scholarship, a framing approach

to boasting considers the topic more a matter of his arrangement and presentation of the issues, *inventio*, than of style or *elocutio*—a difference in line with Paul’s actual usage of the term¹³.

At its best, to describe someone in terms of boasting connotes joy, soundness of mind, and security of possession—at its worst, rampant self-interest, ignorance, and a disconnect from social reality. Though boasting does not *mean* pride, folly, or narcissism, these qualities are part of the cognitive background, the network of associations, and the chain of reasoning that boasting language triggers. When meaning is constructed within the boasting frame of reference, these are some of the features that might be represented, metonymically; therefore, we might describe boasting as good or bad, true or false, appropriate or inappropriate, on the basis of the criteria latent in the boasting frame and apparent in the discursive context. Of course, not all these effects operate simultaneously, and the sheer fact of discursive effect does not equate to authorial intention. Only, conscious or unconscious, these are some of the interpretive options that the frame of boasting opens up.

In addition to salience, there is a narrative element to framing, which is true of the boasting frame. This storied logic is not unrelated to the concepts described above, for it is a story of pride giving way to humiliation and shaky foundations exposed as such. The relationship of boasting with judgment provides the basic contours of the storyline—a reversal in the status of those honored and shamed.

It is this story that Aristotle instantiates in recounting Amyntas’ murder (Pol. 5.8.10 [1311b.4–5]), as does Diodorus Siculus in his telling of Dionysius’ fall from greatness (*Bibl. hist.* 16.70.2–3), and Dio Cassius of Sejanus (*Hist. rom.* 58.11.1–7). Many stories evince the “well-known notion of divine vengeance for human arrogance, of tisis for hybris” (Most 1989, p. 130). It is this story that shapes many of the Aesopic fables¹⁴, and it is because he does not want this story to become his own that Pindar tempers his praise (*Isth.* 5.7–15; *Ol.* 9.38). Sappho taps into this narrative when she prays that Aphrodite silence the boast of her rival (Sappho, 15.9–10); as Demosthenes does when he predicts the censure of Aeschines as the jury renders its verdict, bound by conscience and oath to judge as the heavens would (*Cor.* 82, 217, 323–324); as does Socrates, when he envisions the status of philosopher and sophist reversed before the tribunal of Minos, Rhadamanthus, and Aeacus (Plato, *Gorg.* 523A–527E). Whether we look to the past with ancient historiographers, to the present with the moralists, or to the future with those who pray, predict, and petition, we see this narrative invoked. And because so much of this literature is instructive, what we have is not only evidence for a cultural narrative of boasting but an encouragement to appropriate that narrative for oneself.

The same can be said for Jewish sources, whether in the texts that recount Israel’s potential and Ben Hadad’s actual fall (Judg 9:2; 1 Kings 20:1–12, 23–33) or in the lessons of Proverbs (Prov 11:7; 19:11), the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs (*T. Reub.* 3:5–9; 4:4; *T. Jud.* 3:2–3, 8), and the philosophy of Philo (*Conf.* 118). Deuteronomy, the Psalms, and Jeremiah are of special importance. The climax of the covenant is Israel’s boast (Deut 26:19); their covenant failure is its forfeit (cf. 28:44). It is YHWH’s judgment that brings the nations over Israel, and the same judgment, visited on them, that brings her restoration (30:1–10; 32:1–43). In the Psalms, a veritable typology emerges of God silencing the arrogant speech of the wicked and establishing the boast of the righteous¹⁵. Finally, perhaps the most memorable statement on boasting (memorable, at least, to Paul) contrasts two types of boasting in the context of impending judgment (Jer 9:23–24)¹⁶.

The reason these three texts are particularly important lies in the fact that they are picked up and employed as a frame of reference in other works. Ezekiel 16 picks up the boasting language from Deuteronomy in its description of Israel’s judgment, and Sirach does the same in its vision of a restored community¹⁷. The LXX version of 1 Samuel 1:1–2:10 includes the verbiage of Jeremiah 9:23–24, highlighting the honor conflict between Hannah and Peninnah, and the *LAB* version of the same story casts Peninnah as one of the godless mockers of the Psalms, whose boasting God will silence (*LAB* 50:5). What we find are ancient texts not only *contributing to* a cultural understanding of boasting but *actively*

employing that understanding. When Paul writes similarly, he places the situations he faces within an established script of boasting and judgment, allowing him to assign motives to the actors, predict outcomes, and recommend courses of action.

5. Boasting, Joy, and the Boasting Frame

Before turning to the text of Philippians, it is worth asking how the description of boasting as a rhetorical frame compares with the prevailing understanding of Pauline boasting. The study of boasting in Paul's letters has passed through definite stages, at first revolving around the *question of consistency*, of whether his practice and prohibition of boasting prove contradictory. Studies from a psychological perspective find Paul inconsistent and take his boasting as evidence of incomplete conversion (von Harnack 1911, p. 143; Asting 1925; Dodd 1933, pp. 103–4; Callan 1990, pp. 16–50); those from a theological perspective see a paradoxical consistency (Bultmann 1964; Barrett 1986)¹⁸. The works of Judge (1968) and Betz (1972) ushered in the *question of context*—studies that located Paul's boasting in its social milieu, in relation to Greco-Roman rhetorical tropes and practices (Forbes 1986), the phenomenon of sophistry (Winter [1997] 2002), and the cultural values of honor and shame (DeSilva 2000; Watson 2002, 2016). It is this last item that prevails in scholarly discussions of Paul's boasting, notwithstanding a recent emphasis on the *question of corpus*, which considers the discursive role of boasting language in individual letters (Davis 1999; Donahoe 2008; Harvey 2016; Blois 2020; Kasih 2023).

Within the honor–shame framework, Paul's boasting is understood as a claim to honor (Moxnes 1996, p. 24). On one hand, his boasting serves as a point of interaction with the surrounding culture, which might even be glossed as a “boasting culture” (Harrison 2019, p. 19); on the other, this honor claim provides evidence for a theology of grace that runs contrary to contemporary notions of honor ascribed and achieved (Barclay 2015). Thus, Paul's boasting proves central to his task of community formation, for by it he keeps “believers' ambitions focused on securing their honor through pleasing God rather than by surrendering to society” (DeSilva 2000, p. 56).

Although Schellenberg distances himself from the strategic understanding of boasting that often accompanies honor–shame readings, it should be said that the honor–shame framework supports Schellenberg's notion of performativity in rhetoric. Inasmuch as the ancient self was “dyadic” (Malina 2001, pp. 60–67), Paul's attempts to promote a particular image of his enduring joy are not duplicitous, but authentic constructions of the self, rooted in social relations (Schellenberg 2021, pp. 148–49).

The honor–shame framework also coheres with the concept of boasting advocated in this paper. Boasting is a spoken act (having silence as its opposite; being evaluated according to its *ethos, logos, pathos*, etc.)¹⁹ and a social act (having shame as its opposite and glory as its fellow; occurring in contexts of comparison, etc.)²⁰. Taking these two descriptions together, boasting might properly be described as a speech act in the technical sense—it is speech that does something: it makes a claim to honor and invites public recognition. Honor–shame studies are particularly well-attuned to appreciate the intertwining of boasting with the contrast between divine and human judgment in Paul's letters, which is part of the narrative of boasting explored above, as a contrast between two different courts of opinion (DeSilva 2000, p. 56; Lau 2020).

However, a rhetorical framing perspective on boasting pays greater attention to Paul's *use of boasting language* as something different from his *acts of boasting* than standard honor–shame interpretations. The argument is that Paul does not boast every time he uses *καυχ*- or related terminology; rather, he leads his readers to understand a particular issue in terms of boasting, evoking the criteria of motives and matter (as seen above) and the narrative of boasting and judgment, in what might be called a “conceptual blend” (on which, see Coulson and Oakley 2005). Thus, although boasting and joy are not identical, Paul is able to treat them as mutually informative, bringing the frame of boasting to bear on his relationship with the Philippians, as seen below²¹. In the sense that it focuses on Paul's use

of language, a rhetorical framing perspective shares a greater affinity with the most recent wave of studies on boasting, referred to above as *the question of corpus*.

The rhetorical framing perspective also highlights what cognitive linguists call the “background knowledge” (Coulson 2008, p. 35) of a term or concept. The values of honor and shame are important and, in a sense, even govern the idea of boasting. Yet, as seen above, there are a host of connotations the charge of boasting might carry, for which it might be faulted, some of which are not captured in the current positioning of boasting narrowly somewhere between patronage and *periautologia*²². We cannot merely consign inappropriate boasters to the ranks of the dishonored, ranks with no distinctions in kind or degree. A synthesis of honor–shame and rhetorical framing perspectives would help us to see that there are a number of ways the charge of boasting might serve to impugn one’s honor. Thus, though the perspective offered here is presented as a correction to an imbalance in Schellenberg’s understanding, it is not simply a restatement of previous categories.

6. Boasting as a Rhetorical Frame in Philippians: Emotion and Cognition

But does Paul employ the boasting frame in Philippians? And if he does, does he do so intentionally? The pattern of true and false boasting in several of Paul’s letters, which we noted above, leads us to ask if similar dynamics present themselves here. In what follows, attention is given to the construction of mutual boasting in Philippians 1–2, the contrast between insider and outsider boasting in Philippians 3, and Paul’s boast that “I can do all things” in 4:13.

The most significant treatment of “mutual boasting” in Philippians 1–2 is that of Isaac D. Blois (Blois 2020), concentrating on Philippians 1:25–26 and 2:14–16. Most scholars, including Blois, interpret the relationship between these two passages as two halves of a single thought—the Philippians boast in Paul, and he in them (cf. Chaaya 2024). Another view is that they are two iterations of the same thought and that in each case Paul’s boasting is in view (Bosch 1970, p. 119)²³. In either case, the boasting in Philippians 1–2 is mutual, bespeaking shared glory. The only question is whether mutuality is explicit, as in the first option (the majority view), or implicit, with Paul’s boast accompanying the believers’ “progress and joy” (Phil 1:25) and their shining as glorious stars (2:15). Both readings preserve a sense of mutuality; therefore, we can set the question aside for our purposes here. Three observations can be made of this mutual boasting.

First, Paul’s language of boasting and joy provides a compliment to the central subject matter of these chapters, namely the relationship between Paul and the Philippians, whether present or absent (1:21–30; 2:12–18). It is a remembrance of this relationship that shapes his prayers (1:3–11), and in support of this relationship, he sends them news and hopes for news of them (1:12–20; 2:19–30). Boasting is not the central topic, but it is the complement Paul affixes to that topic; it is the predicate to the subject.

Second, the language of boasting functions climactically in these passages. This is true in terms of form (with boasting capping off the sentences in Phil 1:25–26 and 2:14–16, and with these passages bracketing the central theological section of 2:1–11), and in terms of content: boasting serves to amplify the relational, emotional, and honorific aspects of the letter. Te-Li Lau suggests that joy here is founded on the bedrock of honor, being “an emotion that one experiences when one is honored” (Lau 2020, p. 135). However, we might put it oppositely—Paul bestows or predicts honor bestowed on those who cause him joy. Whether now (upon his release) or later (at the return of Christ), Paul and his readers are united in celebrating victory—a victory in which each plays a part for the other (Blois 2020, pp. 115, 121).

Finally, according to Blois, the language of boasting situates the relationship between Paul and the Philippians within a particular, scriptural storyline. Blois successfully connects Philippians 2:14–16 to the “history of disobedience and eschatological restoration in Deut 26–32” (Blois 2020, p. 141). Furthermore, Paul’s allusion to Isaiah 49:4 in Philippians 2:16 shows that he imagines his vocation as part of this restoration, thus participating in the “tripartite matrix of honor flowing between Paul [the eschatological servant of Isaiah], the

Philippians [the renewed covenant community of Deuteronomy], and God/Christ” (Blois 2020, pp. 146–50, 153–54)²⁴. What matters to us is that boasting in this scriptural storyline is a boasting set against the horizon of judgment, as indicated above. For Paul to invite his readers into a relationship of boasting is to invite them into a relationship that rests upon divine judgment in the face of unjust human judgment. Perhaps one reason Paul presents their mutual joy as mutual boasting is for just this reason—to testify that it is a joy that no merely human judgment will ever overturn.

The description of Philippians so far is of a letter that defines its community as a boasting community. This is part and parcel with boasting in the ancient world—the love between family members is described as boasting (Prov 17:6; Sir 9:16; 30:2), the patriotism of citizens in the same terms (Diodorus Siculus, *Bibl. Hist.* 17.101.2; *Schol. in. Il.* 1.2.96; Jdth 15.9). Philippians 3 only advances this relational focus, as it takes the boasting shared by Paul and the Philippians in chapters 1–2 and sets it against the boasting of outsiders²⁵. That he wants this conversation understood in terms of boasting is especially seen in Philippians 3:3–8, a passage *Abject Joy* does not address²⁶.

The literary juxtaposition in this section is an act of definition, which brings both an encouragement and a challenge to his readers. Paul associates true boasting with “worshipping in the Spirit” and differentiates it from “trusting in the flesh”. The characterization of the life of faith as a life of boasting brings attention to the *matter* of boasting, and the question that Paul seems to answer in relation to the matter is what comprises *realistic* grounds for boasting (hence the preponderance of terminology dealing with cognition and evaluation; see Lau (2020), p. 129). What the outsiders consider grounds for glory are realistically grounds for shame (Phil 3:19). That Paul ascribes a heavenly reason to boast to himself and his readers is encouraging—it helps them to make sense of a present lack of status, to deal with the basic bodily and emotional suffering that accompany that lack of status. It is also a challenge—to press on and secure the prize in which one currently boasts (Phil 3:12–15).

The trajectory of boasting and rejoicing carries on into chapter 4, wherein the believers are instructed to “rejoice” (Phil 4:4). There is a return to the effusive intimacy of chapters 1–2 in Paul’s designation of the Philippians as “my joy and crown” (χαρὰ καὶ στέφανός μου, 4:1). Though it would be too much to assert a conscious connection on Paul’s behalf, it is telling for us to contrast the crown of 4:1 with the chains (τοὺς δεσμούς) of 1:13. Dio Cassius presents crowns (στέφανοι) and chains (δεσμά) as polar opposites (*Hist. rom.* 58.11.12). Interestingly, as Paul passes through the somewhat more cerebral (though no less personal) discussion of chapter 3, the reality that comes into focus is not the dishonor of prison but the joy his heavenly compatriots inspire.

And yet, the warmth of Philippians 4:1–9 appears to falter on Paul’s boast that he can do all things through Christ (4:10–20, especially 4:13)²⁷. The boast comes amidst his reflection on the support the Philippians sent to him. For Schellenberg, self-sufficiency is a posture necessary for Paul’s own survival in prison, and so he attempts a thanksgiving whilst seeking “to evade the impression of dependency” (Schellenberg 2021, p. 148). For others, Paul’s seemingly “thankless thanks” results from his navigating “the rocky waters of the social conventions supporting patronage and friendship” (Cohick 2013, p. 241), or because he exemplifies the Christian realization of a Stoic ideal²⁸.

What gives pause to these interpretations is not so much their implausibility (for surely Paul faced insecurities and social conventions, alike); rather, it is the apparent discrepancy between the joy preceding Phil 4:10 and the seeming indifference after. I would like to venture a hypothesis that has, to my knowledge, not yet been proposed. Yet, it is an interpretation that integrates two features of Philippians 4:10–20 that give the impression of Paul failing to appreciate the gift he has received: (1) the assertion of his contentment, which, put negatively, is the same as his not being in need (4:11, 17); and (2) his redirection of the gift from himself to God (4:17–19; on these two features, see Cohick 2013, p. 237, and Schellenberg 2021, p. 148). The hypothesis is that Paul promotes the boast of the Philippians.

Paul asserts that he wants nothing: “Not that I speak of impoverishment [ὕστέρησις]” (Phil 4:11). In the Pauline economy, “Need creates an obligation” (Taylor 2022, p. 357). If Paul were in need, the believers may have felt shame that they were unable, for such a long period, to support him. Moreover, by stressing his lack of need, Paul not only guards the Philippians from a sense of shame but *provides a context in which to construe the gift as a reason for them to boast*. A similar logic is on display in First Corinthians 9, where Paul avows that he is under obligation to preach the gospel (1 Cor 9:16; cf. Rom 1:14) and that therefore his foundation for boasting lies not in preaching but in laying down his right to financial support while doing so, voluntarily (ἀνάγκη, 1 Cor 9:17). The Philippians are in an equal-but-opposite position, wherein their giving and not their receiving is in question. If their gift were a response to Paul’s need, it would be, in essence, an obligation, and therefore not a reason to boast. Granted, Paul does speak of them meeting his need (χρεῖα) in times past (Phil 4:16), but this only underscores the interpretation offered here: Paul’s seemingly “thankless thanks” is a corollary to what we might call his *needless need*. As it is, since Paul presents himself as lacking nothing, he creates a framework within which he can not only free them from potential shame for having been unable for so long to support him but within which he might also style their gift as a voluntary offering (e.g., 4:17–19), an excess or effusion of grace. Paul’s rhetoric in Philippians 4:10–20, then, is not so much about Paul maintaining his honor (*contra* Schellenberg 2021, p. 142) as defending and even promoting theirs.

Although the language of boasting drops out of Philippians 4, the logic of boasting continues to operate in defining Paul’s response to the Philippians’ gift. Perhaps we should not take Philippians 4 as an example of boasting-as-framing in the same manner as chapters 1–3, but we may take it as evidence that the boasting frame was evoked in those previous chapters, as Paul continues to reason in line with it.

In this section, we have seen that Paul presents issues central to the letter to the Philippians in terms of boasting, especially bringing boasting to bear upon the related concept of joy. In chapters 1–2, Paul speaks of boasting to communicate the emotional depth and enduring worth of his relationship to the Philippian believers. In chapter 3, he employs the same framework of boasting to characterize the relationship between the Philippians and himself (jointly) and the world—the world’s is a false boasting, in contrast to their true boast in Christ. In chapter 4, though the language of boasting is absent, that of joy carries on and makes the sense it does within the framework of boasting established earlier in the letter.

The “big picture” of boasting in Philippians is of a set of interrelated contrasts: between true and false boasting, imitation and repudiation, and divine and human judgment. There are a number of *true boasts* in the letter: Paul’s and the Philippians’ mutual boasting (Phil 1:25–26; 2:14–16); their worship in the spirit and confidence in Christ (3:3–10); Paul’s assertion that he can do all things through Christ (4:13), and his praise of the Philippians following their gift (4:17–19). These true boasts shine in contrast to the quagmire of arrogance and depravity that Paul assigns to his opponents. Throughout the letter, true boasting is exemplified in Paul’s boasting. This is true in chapters 1–2 if Bosch’s interpretation of 1:26 is correct, and it is certainly true in chapter 3, regardless.

We should note that the contrast between true and false boasting rests on another distinction—that between human judgment and God’s judgment. There are two forms of this secondary contrast in the letter: that between persecution and vindication, and that between spiritual and unspiritual ways of thinking and evaluating²⁹. As Schellenberg writes, “Paul’s letter expresses both his confidence in the Philippians’ continued care and esteem and also a shared sense of displacement from the social order of which the magistrate’s justice serves as an emblem. Paul and his addressees are awaiting another, truer judgment; in the meantime, together they make the best of it” (Schellenberg 2021, p. 127). Also, in the meantime, according to Lau, “Paul’s readers would do well therefore to conduct their lives according to God’s mandate. It is this divine court of opinion, not society’s, that ultimately matters. . . . They are to reconfigure their value system so that it is

ultimately congruent to that of the gospel, not of the world" (Lau 2020, pp. 132–33). Within this framework, the imitation and repudiation of boasting is simply the assimilation of God's verdict to one's own, critiquing or confirming boasting inasmuch as it aligns with or correctly anticipates the judgment of God. Interestingly, this same intermingling of contrasts appears in some of the very sources considered above (e.g., Psalms, Jeremiah, Plato's *Gorgias*, Demosthenes' *De Corona*), which contribute to and employ the boasting frame.

It bears repeating that not all framing is a conscious activity. However, if, as many scholars maintain, the language of boasting held a negative connotation in the surrounding culture, then Paul's choice of words may represent a conscious alignment with the positive connotation of boasting in the LXX (von Harnack 1911, p. 144; Pernot 1998, p. 117 n. 64)³⁰. Furthermore, the fact that Paul treats diverse issues with the same general template of true vs. false boasting shows that it functions as something like a heuristic device where it occurs.

7. Conclusions

Philippians is not a letter about boasting; it is about Paul and the Philippians, the relationship between them, and the joy that relationship inspires. It is also about the factors that might threaten that relationship or the fruit it has borne—death, suffering, false teaching, and fighting. Yet, these issues are presented in relation to boasting. As a frame, boasting carries with it some ready criteria for evaluating the issues at hand. Putting things into these terms draws attention to Paul's positive motives and his opponent's allegedly hubristic ones, to his sound reasons for confidence, and to the judgment that will ultimately reverse the believers' experiences of honor and shame. In this case, discussing joy in tandem with boasting not only highlights the familial and effusive nature of that joy but also places the relationship between Paul and the Philippians within a storyline where divine judgment safeguards the intermingled joy and honor of the oppressed over and against that of the oppressors.

This reading is not really an alternative to Schellenberg's "performative rhetoric", but a redress of an imbalance. If Paul's choice of words is intentional, and in that sense rhetorical, it is not for that reason less emotional. Frames are felt. Schellenberg eschews the depiction that Paul "uses boasting" or "employs joy". But conceivably, Paul might use boasting *language*, might employ *the language of joy*. I do not think we should dismiss the original phrases for their awkwardness and infelicity if they are circumlocutions or shorthand for something more reasonable than the phraseology alone suggests.

Schellenberg reads Paul's self-presentation as unfixed and his joy as "inchoate", seemingly rather than intentional (Schellenberg 2021, pp. 26, 127). In this essay, I have focused on joy's twin—boasting—to show that it might be too soon to jettison readings "of Paul's letters that find [their] coherence. . . in some organizing feature of its discourse, whether a putatively central rhetorical aim or a key ethical or theological motif" (Schellenberg 2021, p. 21). Schellenberg has identified real problems in standard readings of Paul's joy and boasting. Yet, inasmuch as he positions socio-affective interpretations over and against cognitive and persuasive ones, to that degree, he tacitly endorses the false dichotomy that has produced the very dispassionate reading of Paul's rhetoric that he seeks to overturn. Emotional experience and intentional arrangement do not stand in a converse relationship such that one can only increase at the expense of the other. A framing perspective does not contradict Schellenberg's "performative rhetoric", but it does allow for a greater degree of intentionality than he seems ready to permit.

Of course, it may also be too soon to attempt an advance from Schellenberg's work, which is well worth digesting. However, if this essay is a false start, I hope at least that it is a false start in the right direction. None of this is meant to reintroduce Paul as a rhetorical robot, a creation Schellenberg rightly dismantles; rather, I suggest that having intentions and allowing those intentions to shape one's discourse, is itself, a very human thing³¹.

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Notes

- 1 For a helpful discussion of the term “rhetorical” in New Testament studies, see [Litfin \(2015, p. 36\)](#) and [Weima \(2000, p. 124 n. 29\)](#).
- 2 Schellenberg returns repeatedly to the insufficiency of Acts’ portrayal of Paul: see discussion at [Schellenberg \(2021\)](#), pp. xi, 7, 8, 9, 25–27, 29 n. 15, 35, 45, 47, 51 n. 123, 55, 120–121, 174.
- 3 This is not to say that Schellenberg alone provides a truly emotional reading of the letter. There is probably more of this emotional appreciation in the commentary tradition than is let on. Jew writes of “the heartfelt emotions that arise from the close relationship that he enjoys with this community of believers” ([Jew 2020, p. 65](#)); see also the forthcoming work of Isaac D. Blois, *The Role of Emotions in Philippians: Discerning Affections* (LNTS). Also consider [Shantz \(2012\)](#), which Schellenberg cites approvingly.
- 4 An additional factor that Schellenberg fails to consider is the role of a scribe in the production of Paul’s letters. Would not the use of an *amanuensis* increase the likelihood of rhetorical devices that capture Paul’s intentions? However, the scribal factor is a bit beside the point in the present essay, which concerns Paul’s own tendency to address a variety of situations with the same approach—to present the exigencies of a situation as a choice between two kinds of boasting, one that aligns with or correctly anticipates the judgment of God, and the other that rests of mere or faulty human judgment.
- 5 There is also a more conventional use of the term “frame” in [Schellenberg \(2021\)](#), pp. 90–91.
- 6 Rhetorical framing also bears some similarities to that field of cognitive linguists called frame semantics, of which the seminal work is ([Fillmore 1976](#)), and which has been applied in New Testament studies with some success (e.g., [Stettler 2017](#)).
- 7 Ps 73:3–4/74:3–4 (LXX/MT); Plutarch, *Comp. Arist. Cat.* 5.2–3; *Aem.* 27.6; Diodorus Siculus, *Bibl. hist.* 4.74.3; Cicero, *Arch.* 11.27; Philodemus, *De sup.* 15.15–22; Dio Chrysostom, *Or.* 31.21–22; 77/78.24; *Schol. in Il.* 7.96. See also Philo, *Somn.* 1.130–132; *Post.* 48. Jdth 15.9; Sir 1:11; 30:1–3; Pindar, *Isth.* 5.50; Diodorus Siculus, *Bibl. hist.* 17.101.1–2.
- 8 Cf. the descriptions of the *pauper ambitiosus* in Quintilian’s *Institutes* (2.4.29) and *Rhetoric ad Herennium* (4.63–64); also Theophrastus’ vivid characterization of ὁ ἀλαζών who pretends to be rich (*Char.* 23).
- 9 Theocritus, *Id.* 5.77; Aeschines, *In Ctes.* 256; Athenaeus, *Deipn.* 2.39.e.; Cicero, *Off.* 1.137.
- 10 On the connection between boasting and drunkenness: Daniel 5:prologue (LXX); Diodorus Siculus, *Bibl. hist.* 15.6.3; *De sign. Il.* 8.231; 20.84; Dio Chrysostom, *Or.* 77/78.27. Aesop’s boasting lamp is “drunk on its own oil” (Perry 349 = Chambry 232 [The Lamp]).
- 11 For examples, we can look no further than the articles of Bianchini and Aletti appearing alongside this article in this very journal.
- 12 On these terms, see Cicero, *De Inv.* 1.7.9; Quintilian, *Int. Or.*, 3.3.1; [Franzosi and Vicari \(2018\)](#) discuss the overlap of frame analysis and classical rhetorical categories including *inventio*.
- 13 E.g., Perry 45 = Chambry 70 (The Two Oxen and the Axelrod); Perry 74 = Syntipas 15 (The Stag and his Reflection); Perry 281 = Chambry 20 (The Two Roosters and the Eagle); Perry 304 = Chambry 101 (The Fir Tree and the Thistle); Perry 413 = Syntipas 31 (The Olive Tree and the Fig Tree).
- 14 Occurring, for instance, in Pss 1–3, 5, 10, 17, 22, 31–32, 36, 50, 58–59, 63–64, 73–74, 89, 94, 97, 106–107, 140, 144, 149. Given this, it is true that “the significance of the Psalter for Paul’s boasting language has been overlooked” ([Bohlinger 2019, p. 128](#)).
- 15 There is also a relevant piece in Jeremiah 17:5–11 wherein the prophet appeals to divine judgment (carefully distinguished from human judgment in Jer 17:9) to vindicate his boasting in the face of those who hope in humankind.
- 16 Scholars have noted Sirach’s Deuteronomic outlook ([Witte 2012](#), pp. 112, 125).
- 17 Of course, there have been correctives along the way specifically to an overly theological understanding of Paul’s boasting (e.g., [Bosch 1970](#); [Gaventa 1985](#); [Thurén 2002](#), pp. 165–78; [Wilk 2010](#)).
- 18 Silence antonymous to boasting: Ps 31:2–11/32:2–11 (LXX/MT); Aesop, Perry 45 = Chambry 70 (The Oxen and the Creaking Cart); Perry 349 = Chambry 232 (The Boastful Lamp); Pindar, *Ol.* 5.51; *Nem.* 9.7; Aristonicus, *De. sign. Od.* 14.436.
- 19 Shame antonymous to boasting: Ps 96:7/97:7 (LXX/MT); Jer 12:13; 17:12–14; 27:11–12/50:11–12 (LXX/MT); 27:38/50:38 (LXX/MT); Ezek 16:37–39; Zeph 3:20; Aesop, Perry 281 = Chambry 20 (Two Roosters and an Eagle); Herodotus, *Hist.* 7.39.2; Lycurgus, *Frag. B.8*; Sir 10:22–23; James 1:9–10.
- 20 Thus, a rhetorical framing perspective on boasting is able to make sense of the mutually informative relationship between boasting and joy, which commentators frequently assume (e.g., [Schellenberg 2021, p. 176](#)). Though space prohibits a lengthier discussion, we can note a similar relationship between boasting and the theme of *hope* in Romans.
- 21 Any perspective carries the danger of reductionism or abstraction, and honor–shame readings are no different: “As with so many sociological models, the real question is not whether we are indeed being introduced to one aspect of ancient reality, but whether other aspects can be reduced to terms of it” ([Wright 2015, p. 252](#)). Not all honor–shame discussions of boasting avoid this danger

- (e.g., Wilk 2010; Harvey 2016). To date, the most helpful discussions of the criticisms that surrounded boasting and self-praise in Paul's world are (Heckel 1994) and (Pernot 1998), though the latter artificially separates boasting and self-praise.
- 23 The difficulties with the first view are primarily contextual, since "Paul's choice to remain with the Philippians in 1:25 is essentially an act that should bring Paul honor, but what we find in v. 26 is that it is the Philippians who also acquire the abundant boast resulting from Paul's choice" (Blois 2020, p. 120). Yet, Paul clearly holds a concept of mutual boasting (cf. 2 Cor 1:14), and already in the letter he has stressed the interconnected nature of his relationship to the Philippians. The difficulties with the second view are primarily syntactical since Paul describes the boast in 1:26 as both ὑμῶν and ἐν ἐμοί. However, we might, with J. Sánchez Bosch, take the former as an objective genitive and the latter as a dative of advantage or possession. In this view, the prepositional phrase ἐν ἐμοί functions identically to the ἐμοί of 2:16, and the syntax of Philippians 1:26 resembles 1 Corinthians 15:31 (τὸ καύχημα ὑμῶν | τὴν ὑμετέραν καύχησιν; ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ | ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ τῷ κυρίῳ; ἐν ἐμοί | ἦν ἔχω). On the ability of ἐν (+ object) functioning as a simple dative, see Robertson 1934 (1914), p. 588, who cites Philippians 1:26 as a possible example.
- 24 What one makes of Blois' depiction depends, in part, on one's predisposition for or against the methodology of intertextuality. I think Blois' proposal, especially the part on Deuteronomy, receives some support through a comparison of Paul and Sirach on the subject of boasting. Paul's use of boasting language, the καυχ- stem, is fairly unique among NT authors (he pens 58 of 64 NT occurrences of that terminology, counting 1 Cor 13:3); however, his usage does not stand out as unique against the Greek translation of Sirach (17 instances). Sirach's usage of καυχ- terminology owes, in large part, to its Deuteronomic outlook, perhaps attesting to its belief (not that texts believe) that it describes life for the restored community of Israel as predicted in the final chapters of Deuteronomy. To the extent that Paul and Sirach each share affinities with Deuteronomy, to that extent Blois' suggestion receives unlooked-for support. On the Isaiah passage, see the discussion in (Radl 1986).
- 25 Nikki (2019) provides an excellent restatement of traditional opinions within the framework of her argument that Paul envisions one set of opponents throughout the letter; by contrast, Ryan D. Collman (2023) suggests that the "we" who boast are not believers, generally, nor Paul and his audience, but rather Paul and Timothy, "the Jewish authors of the epistle" (p. 147). This view keeps in line Paul's normal usage of περιτομή as indicating Jewish identity. However, if the "we" may be defined by the actions they perform (e.g., worshipping, boasting), then, given the preceding context of mutual boasting, it seems best to take "we" as inclusive of the letter's author and recipients. Yet, even if Collman is correct, it is still the case that Paul's reflections on boasting in Philippians 3 are paradigmatic and instructive for his readers. That is, "Paul uses his own story to demonstrate how the Christ-gift forces a complete reassessment of value or worth" (Barclay 2020, p. 108). He specifically calls them to imitate his attitude (Phil 3:17). So, regardless of the identity of "the circumcision" in 3:3, what we have in chapter 3, following the construction of a mutual boast in chapters 1–2, is a contrast of that boasting to another kind of boasting, one "in the flesh", and one that is as typical of all believers as it is opposed to the outsiders. This contrast is a further expression of the solidarity Paul experiences with the Philippians—not only do they share the same boast, but they do in opposition to other forms of boasting.
- 26 This is especially the case if, as has been argued, Paul imitates the standard cultural resumes of the time (so Hellerman 2005). However, the similarity may simply be due to the fact that Paul also partook in this culture. Either way, he modulates the conversation into the key of boasting.
- 27 Asting (1925, p. 167) recognizes Philippians 4:13 as a boast. As Bosch (1970, p. 201) also notes, there are "modalidades existenciales del gloriarse cristiano, vistas en textos que cumplen la definición de καυχόμα, aun sin usar el término.
- 28 "Comparison of Paul's claim to be ἀπάρκης with Stoic discourses of self-sufficiency has long been a fixture of commentary on Philippians" (Schellenberg 2021, p. 138)
- 29 That these are different senses of judgment does not mean they should not be taken together, especially when it is true to Paul's usage.
- 30 The observation of a negative connotation of boasting language is a major plan of the argument in (Donahoe 2008).
- 31 At this point, we might ask why Schellenberg's analogical comparisons did not include more letters from the incarcerated of modern times, as opposed to ethnographies and memoirs. Here he is not well-served by the conflation of somatic realities and social interactions. Would such letters as those imprisoned fathers write to their children not exhibit the kind of intentionality in Paul's rhetoric that Schellenberg seems determined to avoid?

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