

“The Untimely Born” (1 Cor 15:8): A Portrait of Paul Among the Corinthians

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Introduction

Paul, more than any other New Testament figure, portrays himself in various images among which is his description or rather appraisal of himself in 1 Cor 15:8 as “the untimely born” (*to ektrōma*). Here Paul likens himself to *ektrōma* in relation to other apostles who saw the Risen Christ and in response to the disparaging attacks he was receiving in Corinth in the course of his mission. The designation is not only specifically Paul’s, its usage is indeed limited to him and to this text in the whole of the New Testament. However, the word *to ektrōma* is not altogether lacking elsewhere. It occurs in secular Greek literature as well as in the Septuagint. Paul’s application of the term to himself here has awakened much interest. Indeed the text has a long history of interpretation. This article ventures to examine some of the mainline issues involved in the interpretation of the imagery of the “untimely born”. It also seeks to understand why Paul appropriates this enigmatic term in addition to his other self-designations. It is hoped that this will enable Paul reader today to appreciate even more this Apostle of the Gentiles “who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old” (Matt 13:52). First, let us now examine the origin and meaning of the word, *ektrōma*.

Meaning and Origin of the Term

The Greek *ektrōma* is connected with the verb *enktirōskō* “to have a miscarriage”,¹ or “to cause/ suffer abortion” which ultimately originates from the root *trōō* “to wound, injure, damage,” etc. Hence the term *ektrōma* evokes several ideas — untimely birth, miscarriage, abortion, abnormally born, “one who was born at the wrong time,” etc. In secular Greek, its use is traced back to Aristotle, who first employed it as a medical language to particularly denote a premature or still birth. In *de Generatione Animalium*, Aristotle points out that in cases of superfoetation, when the womb closes in the period of gestation, “the mother cannot bring the second embryo to perfection, but it is cast out in a state like what are called abortions”.² Here *ektrōma* is seen as “premature birth.” But the verb is understandably more common in the works of the Greek physicians like Hippocrates, Dioscurides, etc.

The term *to ektrōma* occurs also in the following passages in the LXX - Num 12:12; Eccl 6:3 and Job 3:16 (cf. Ps 58:9 [Eng 8]) - for stillborn or miscarriage by accident, such as induced abortion that results from a blow given to a pregnant woman (cf. Exod 21:22). In the above given LXX texts we see different perspectives. Job, in his pains and sufferings, wished he had been an untimely born, which dies as soon as it begins to live; for it never sees the sun. According to Qohelet, a child that is born to die immediately is born in vain; it departs in darkness; little or no notice is taken of it; and being an abortive, it has no name,

¹ Cf. Herodotus, III, 32.

² Cf. IV, 5, p. 773^b. Again, in *History of Animals* VII, 4 p. 585^a, Aristotle maintains that “an embryo conceived some considerable time after a previous conception does not come to perfection, but gives rise to pain and causes the destruction of the earlier embryo.”

or, if it had, it would soon be forgotten and buried in oblivion.³ Philo insists, while alluding to Num 12:12, that whatever the soul of a worthless person produces by nature cannot survive; it is abortive and immature.⁴

Since the use of the term *ektrōma* is reserved to Paul in the NT, it is most likely that he was influenced by his knowledge of the Greek OT and familiarity with secular Greek literature. Evidently, no one of the meanings of *ektrōma* is pleasant and positive. A still-born child, for instance, has no life, even right from the womb. This is why the danger associated with such a birth is great because the process of delivery could equally claim the life of the mother. From antiquity the imagery of the stillborn evokes the idea of human tragedy, resulting not only from the loss of the child but also the danger in which it places the life of the mother. In the case of the untimely birth, its survival hangs in a balance so also is that of the abnormally born. What then is peculiarly important in the meaning of *ektrōma* is its decisive feature, which according to Schneider is “the abnormal time of birth and the unfinished form of the one thus born.”⁵

There is no doubt that Paul was fully aware of the meaning of the term that he exclusively used in the NT and the implications it has when he applies it to himself. He knows that it carries a derogatory sense when applied to a person and that as every other self-deprecating word it puts the object to ridicule (cf. Ps 35:21; Job 16:10). Paul is also aware that any individual so depicted becomes an object to be laughed at rather than be sympathised or empathised with in a given environment (Ps 44:14; 80:7; Jer 20:7), a figure before whom people take their distance and shake their heads (Lam 2:15; Job 16:4).

When a person unqualifiedly compares himself to an *ektrōma* it could imply that the person is decrying his loss of human dignity (cf. Ps 22:7 [Eng 6]; cf. also Job 25:6; Isa 41:14), and that he perceives himself as a nonentity rather than the once royal being whom God crowned with glory and honour (Ps 8:6; 21:6).⁶ In fact, some scholars situate the use of the word or other similar ones in the context of a curse directed to the enemy. For instance, the community praying for vengeance against the aggressor says: “As the untimely birth they will not see the sun” (Ps 58:9[8]).⁷ The whole gamut of meanings of *ektrōma* raises the question as to why this deprecating word should be associated with Paul, irrespective of who uses it, Paul or his opponent. The attempt to answer the question will later engage our attention in this essay.

History of Interpretation of Text

From the foregoing it is evident that it is elusive to obtain a clear-cut meaning of *ektrōma*. This is also reflected in the variant interpretations of Paul’s self-description in 1 Cor 15:8, thus leaving scholars with little or no consensus.⁸ The earliest allusion to the text among early Christian writers is found in the letter of Ignatius of Antioch to the Romans. Ignatius borrows Paul’s expression in 1 Cor 15: 8-9 to portray his “unworthiness.” “For myself,” he says, “I am ashamed to be counted as one of her members. I certainly do not deserve to be one, being the least of them and one that came to birth unexpectedly.”⁹ In the Apocalypse of Peter 11, *ektrōma* is interpreted in the sense of “to cast,” while Irenaeus (I, 4.7) defines it as “formless”. It was Eusebius of Caesarea who employs it to depict figuratively the nature of the children that the Church begets. As a virgin mother the Church brings forth both living and dead children, with those born dead representing Christians who did not confess their faith in times of persecution.¹⁰

³ Cf. Matthew Henry, “Commentary on Ecclesiastes,” in *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible. Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (LLC: Hendrickson, 1991).

⁴ Cf. Philo, *Allegorical Interpretation*, I, 76.

⁵ Cf. Johannes Schneider “Ektrōma,” *TDNT* II, 465.

⁶ Cf. F.-L. Hossfeld, E. Zenger, *Die Psalmen. Psalm 1-50* (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1993).

⁷ Gianfranco Ravasi, *Il Libro del Salmi II* (51-100) (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane, 1983) 170.

⁸ For full history of past exegesis of the text, see A. Fridrichsen, “Paulus abortivus. Zu 1 Kor 15:8,” in *Symbolae philologicae O.A. Danielsson octogenario dicatae* (Uppsala, 1932) 79-85.

⁹ Ign. Rom. 9, 2.

¹⁰ Cf. Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.*, V, 1.45.

Among modern commentators, J. Calvin and J. Weiss see the point of Paul's comparing himself to *ektrōma* in the suddenness or violence of Paul's conversion.¹¹ For H.O. Lange it is a reference to the comparative lateness of Paul's call or his adequate preparation compared with other apostles. Rather than communicating the idea of one who is born late, E. Schwartz maintains that *ektrōma* carries the sense of a birth that is too soon.¹² The bottom line for Shneider's interpreting *ektrōma* in the context of Paul's calling to the apostolic office is that it is something "forced as well as abnormal and extraordinary."¹³

One of the unresolved problems is to determine how Paul came to associate *ektrōma* with himself. Did he use it to himself provoked or unprovoked? Here, again, opinions differ. A. Harnack together with a good number of scholars¹⁴ surmises that Paul used a word of abuse, which was applied to him in a derogatory manner.¹⁵ In other words, Paul's adversaries called him an *ektrōma* in relation to the new birth,¹⁶ while according to J.J. Wettstein it was in reference to his diminutive nature.¹⁷

Similarly, some authors conjecture that *ektrōma* is not the feature of Paul's conversion to Christianity or his apostolate, but a feature that depicted what Paul was before his conversion, namely "a non-human monster with no true life."¹⁸ According to Windisch, *ektrōma* refers to the pre-Christian attitude of Paul, "his judgment of himself in relation to his past."¹⁹ However, Fee thinks that this view is unlikely.²⁰ For Henry, "Paul resembled such a birth, in the suddenness of his new birth, in that he was not matured for the apostolic function, as the others were who had personal converse with our Lord." He was so to speak "out of time for it."²¹ Since Paul's self-description is not limited to the text of 1 Cor 15:8, we now examine in details this common feature in Pauline writings.

Paul and His Self-designation

Self-designation is a style of speech that goes far beyond the time of Paul in history. It is a genre found in both Biblical and secular literature. Often the metaphor is self-derogatory and deprecating, used to express a great sense of humility or unworthiness. In the Old Testament, for instance, Abraham calls himself "*dust and ashes*" while pleading with God against the judgement pronounced on Sodom (Gen 18:27; cf. Ezra 9:6). Bildad, in protest to Job's claim of innocence, depicts a mortal person (here Job) as only "*a maggot*" and "*a worm*" before the righteous God (Job 25:6). Isaiah overwhelmed at the scene of his call exclaimed: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for *I am a man of unclean lips*" (Isa 6:5). The psalmist in his lament describes himself as "*a worm, and no man*," scorned by men, and despised by the people (Ps 22:7[Eng 6]). In another instance he says: "I am reckoned among those who go down to the Pit; I am a man who has no strength" (88:4). "*Dead dog*" is a derogatory designation (2 Sam 16:9; cf. Matt 15:26) which many will not like to be associated with (cf. 1 Sam 24:15(14); 2 Sam 3:8). Yet Mephibosheth calls himself "*a dead dog*" while appreciating David's kindness to him (2 Sam 9:8).

¹¹ H. Müller, "Ekrōma," Colin Brown, ed. et al., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology (NIDNTT)* I, (Exeter, Devon: Paternoster Press, 1975) 183.

¹² Cf. E. Schwartz, *Nachrichten von der Kgl. Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen (NGG)* (1907) 276 n.1; also Johannes Schneider, "ektrōma," *TDNT* II, 466.

¹³ Cf. Johannes Schneider, "ektrōma," 466. As Schneider ("Ekrōma," 466 n. 10) points out, some scholars are agreed that the issue at stake is the abnormality of the process leading to Paul's calling to the apostolic office, which took place when the Risen Lord had ceased to manifest himself to the disciples.

¹⁴ They include, E. Fridrichsen, O.A. Danielsson, J. Schneider, J. Munck, G. Björck, T. Boman, C.K. Barret, F.F. Bruce, etc. Cf. H. Müller, "Ekrōma," 183; J. Schneider, "Ekrōma," 466-467.

¹⁵ Cf. H. Müller, "Ekrōma," 183.

¹⁶ See J. Schneider ("Ekrōma," 466) maintaining the view of J.A. Bengel.

¹⁷ Cf. H. Müller, "Ekrōma," 183.

¹⁸ J. Schneider ("Ekrōma," 466) citing Harnack.

¹⁹ H. Windisch, *Paulus und Christus* (1934) 144, n. 1; cf. Johannes Schneider, "Ekrōma," 467.

²⁰ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Wm.B. Eerdmans, 1987) 733 n. 101.

²¹ Matthew Henry, "Commentary on First Corinthians," in *Matthew Henry's Commentary, on the Whole Bible*, 1 Cor 15:8-9.

In reference to Paul, therefore, one would ordinarily say that Paul has no cause to adopt such a self-disparaging style of speech. He has all that it takes to hold his head high among his contemporaries. In Paul the three elements of the world's culture met —Roman citizenship (Acts 22:28), Greek culture, and Hebrew religion. As Saul, the Hebrew, he was of purest Hebrew blood (Phil. 3:5), a "Hebrew of the Hebrews," of the stock of Israel and of the tribe of Benjamin. Like every Jewish child too Saul was "circumcised the eighth day" in accordance to the law. He studied "at the feet of Gamaliel" who taught him "according to the perfect manner of the law of the fathers" (Acts 22:3; cf. 23:6). There Saul came face to face with the reality of strict pharisaic legalism that produced in his ardent spirit persecuting zeal against the Church (cf. Phil. 3:6).

Moreover, Paul's birthplace was a great advantage. He was born in Tarsus in Cilicia, a "no mean city." He himself puts it thus: "I am a Jew of Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no mean city" (Acts 21:39). Since he was from Tarsus, a city celebrated as a school of Greek literature,²² he acquired knowledge of Greek authors and philosophy that later became a great asset to his ministry (Acts 17:18-28). In addition to all this, Paul also learnt the Cilician trade of making tents (Acts 18:3); not because of a poor family background but in compliance to Jewish custom which "required each child, however wealthy the parents might be, to learn a trade."²³

His status and learning notwithstanding Paul adopts a new style of life after his conversion. In 2 Cor 12:5 we find a principle of life or rather code of conduct, which I suppose, forms the basis for Paul's numerous self-deprecating statements. It reads: "*I will not boast, except of my weaknesses.*" Hence Paul can afford to say of himself "I am carnal, sold under sin" (Rom 7:14); "I am the foremost of sinners" (1 Tim 1:15), and to exclaim in his bewilderment, "Wretched man that I am!" (Rom 7:24).

Paul is sometimes so overtaken by the disparaging things said about him or his own sense of humility and unworthiness that he equivocates. The man who claims "I think that I am not in the least inferior to these superlative apostles" (2 Cor 11:5; cf. 12:11) also says, "I am nothing" (2 Cor 12:11), "I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle" (1 Cor 15:9), "I am the very least of all the saints" (Eph 3:8). The polarization is even more prominent in 1 Cor 9:2 where Paul declares, "If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you." In 11:1 he insists, "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ." Sometimes Paul has an air of importance in such contrasting claims. He says: "Even if I am unskilled in speaking, I am not in knowledge" (2 Cor 11:6). "Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one -- I am talking like a madman" (2 Cor 11:23). Paul does not only state why he uses self-disparaging style of speech for himself but also the reason for accepting such language even if directed to him by detractors. "*I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for when I am weak, then I am strong*" (2 Cor 12:10).

It is likely that Paul first came to the knowledge of this style of speech through the Old Testament figures that used it. Nevertheless, he must have adopted it after he had been overwhelmed by the grace of conversion,²⁴ and realised the folly of his persecuting²⁵ those "who belonged to the Way" (Acts 9:2). In a way Paul employed *ektrōma* to express and appreciate in all humility his nothingness before God. In his own words: "I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth" (Acts 26:9-11; cf. 1 Tim 1:13).

Historical Background to Use of *ektrōma*

²² Cf. Strabo, in C. Müller, ed., *Geographi Graeci Minores*, 1:14.

²³ See "Paul," in Fausset Dictionary. Electronic edition (trans. International Bible Translators (IBT), Inc., 1998

²⁴ For the impact of the Damascus event on Paul's choice of self-deprecating portraits see Acts 9:3-5, 17; cf. 18:9; 22:14, 18; 26:16.

²⁵ Cf. Acts 8:3; 9:1; 22:4; Gal 1:3, 23; Phil 3:6.

Scholars have made several propositions to account for the use of *ektrōma* in 1 Cor 15:8. The major ones can be grouped in two —those that propose that the word originates from Paul himself, and those that believe that it was from his opponents. The first view which has been partly discussed above totally agrees with Paul’s maxim, “*I will not boast, except of my weaknesses*” (2 Cor 12:5). Even if there were anti-Pauline sentiments, particularly from critics of Jewish descent in Corinth, Paul could equally have chosen to remain silent,²⁶ or use a more favourable and self-uplifting image than a disparaging one used by his opponents to counter their views. It is likely that Paul from his Damascus experience compared himself, a mysterious latecomer into the apostolic membership, to an *ektrōma* in contradistinction to the apostles and other representatives of the Christian community in Jerusalem, who were seen as the authorised and authentic witnesses. Rather than use the self-deprecating word to respond to his detractors and opponents, Paul employs it to underscore the favour of his call and the abnormal way in which he was let into the apostolic office. As Windisch would say together with Fridrichsen, *ektrōma* “is Paul’s judgement of himself in relation to his past.”²⁷

However, strong issues are raised by those who trace the origin of the word back to Paul’s opponents. But there is no consensus among them concerning who the opponents are. Are they Palestinian Judaizers, or Hellenistic Christians of Stephen party who were driven out of Judea into the Diaspora?²⁸ This has consequently led to different opinions as to what constitutes the matter of opposition. Kim has skilfully summarised the views into two, namely, those revolving around Paul’s “qualification” or / and his “competency” to be an apostle. With regard to the first, Paul is looked upon in contempt as “a self-made apostle who engaged in self-commendation” (cf. 2 Cor 3:1, 5; 4:2; 5:12; 6:4; 10:12, 18; 12:11).²⁹ Moreover, the justification for his apostolic qualification is based only on his visionary experience on the road to Damascus. Paul’s visionary revelation again cannot be subjected to any external proof and, therefore, does not provide enough criterion for claiming apostleship.

The criticisms concerning Paul’s “competency” found him badly qualified to be called an apostle. Paul was looked upon as “timid” when face to face, but “bold” when away, “weak” in general, and unimpressive in use of rhetorical powers. He was said to lack spiritual visions and revelations and, above all, spiritual power to perform signs and wonders and miracles. Contrary to the privileges given by the Lord on the Church’s support to ministers, Paul made a living with his own hands rather than claiming this support.³⁰ These issues were for his opponents a clear indication of his “incompetence” and therefore an *ektrōma* as far as apostolic office was concerned. Kim puts it thus: “What really led Paul to this line of apologetic was his opponents’ insinuation that in his past as a persecutor of the Church he was an enemy of Jesus Christ and of God, as well as their rejection of his claim to apostleship on the basis of the Damascus revelation of Christ.”³¹ Although the issues that led to the use of *ektrōma* by Paul are unresolved, it is still evident that they are localised specifically in the Corinthian Christian community from where the deprecating word *ektrōma* emerged as hapax in the NT.

Interpreting 1 Cor 15:8 in Relation to Paul

Our text reads: *eschaton de pantōn hōsperei tō(i) ektrōmati ophthē kamoi* “Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.” As one can observe, the verse is short and graphic, but pregnant with meaning. It consists of four key elements —1) an adverbial phrase *eschaton de pantōn* (last of all),³² 2) a

²⁶ Cf. Mark 15:3-5; Matt 26:62-63; John 19:9; also Isa 53:7.

²⁷ H. Windisch, *Paulus und Christus* (1934) 144 n. 1; also J. Schneider, *TDNT* II, 467.

²⁸ For more details see Seyoon Kim, “The Origin of Paul’s Concept of Reconciliation,” in Richard N. Longenecker, ed., *The Road From Damascus* (Grand Rapids: Wm.B. Eerdmans, 1997) 114-115.

²⁹ Cf. Seyoon Kim, “The Origin,” 115.

³⁰ Cf. S. Kim, “The Origin,” 117.

³¹ S. Kim, “The Origin,” 117; also 1 Cor 9:1; 15:8-10.

³² Cf. Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 1979) 314.

singular definite neuter noun in dative form *tō(i) ektrōmati* (to the abnormal birth, miscarriage, abortion, untimely birth), introduced by an emphatic comparative particle *hōsperei* (as, as though),³³ 3) an indicative aorist passive 3rd pers. sing. verb, *ophthē* (to appear),³⁴ and 4) an adverbial phrase *kamoi*, (to me also), serving as indirect object to the verb *horaō*. Here Paul figuratively communicates much about himself in few words. There is no doubt that understanding the four key elements together will give a more comprehensive idea of what Paul wants to achieve with his self-derogation.

But the meaning of some of these phrases is highly contested by scholars. For instance, in what sense does Paul want his reader to understand the opening phrase *eschaton de pantōn* which literally means “last of all”?³⁵ The position of the phrase indicates its importance to the overall understanding of the verse. However, it must first and foremost be understood as referring to the subject matter of the immediate context of the text, namely, Christ’s resurrection and his appearances to witnesses. Here Paul does not only deal with the fact of Christ’s resurrection, but also provides a proof by enumerating the category of people to whom the Risen Christ appeared (1 Cor 15:5-7). The list of the witnesses runs from Cephas (v.5) through more than 500 other members (v.6) to James and then to all the apostles in v.7. Paul presents himself last in the list (v. 8) as “the least (?) of the apostles” (v. 9).³⁶

The question then is whether or not Paul uses the phrase in a temporal sense; in which case he will be dealing with the chronology of the appearances in vv. 5-8. In fact, it is not likely that Paul was just after arranging the appearances of the Risen Christ in the order of the time in which they occurred. As Schutz observed, the phrase is not used in temporal sense.³⁷ Kelly seems to have given an adjectival sense to the phrase when he interpreted it as meaning “least significant,”³⁸ Fee thinks that this sense will hardly obtain in the context of enumerations. Again while objecting to Jones’ interpreting the phrase as “last of all the apostles,”³⁹ Fee posits that the phrase “last of all” should be understood in an adverbial sense, meaning “finally”.⁴⁰

Taking the context of appearance as a key to the interpretation of the phrase it may be better understood in the sense of “eventually,” meaning not “finally” but “in the long run”. The phrase begins Paul’s portrayal of his unworthiness and deprecation, which he expressed both in the image of the “untimely born” (v. 8) and “the least of the apostles” of the following verse 9. Similarly, the self-disparaging word *ektrōma*, in its wide range of meanings, discussed above, portrays Paul as one humbled and overwhelmed by his experience on the road to Damascus. This experience because it came outside the “normal” time, that is, it “occurred after the time when such appearances were understood to have ceased,”⁴¹ can rightly be regarded as “untimely.” For this Paul’s detractors must have scornfully referred to him as *to ektrōma*, “the untimely born”, in the sense of a latecomer among the eyewitnesses of the Risen Christ. As the definite article (*to*) presupposes, Paul must have been well-known among not only his detractors but also the Christian community in Corinth by such a disparaging nickname.

³³ Max Zerwick and Mary Grosvenor suggest it should be read in a colloquial sense, “sort of”. Cf. *A Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1981) 528.

³⁴ This verb is derived from the indicative *horaō*, to see, observe, notice, etc.

³⁵ It has to be noted that the adjective *eschatos* has a wide semantic field, covering the sense of “last, final; lowest, worst, most insignificant,” etc. Cf. W. Bauer, et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 313-314.

³⁶ It is important to observe that the verb “to appear” occurs in all four verses to buttress the fact of the theme of the unit.

³⁷ Cf. Schutz, *Paul*, 104-106.

³⁸ G.B. Kelly, “He Appeared to Me,” in T.J. Ryan, ed., *Critical History and Biblical Faith* (Villanova: 1979) 108-135; 114; also G.D. Fee, *First Epistle*, 732 n. 98.

³⁹ P.R. Jones, “Last Apostle,” cited in G.D. Fee, *First Epistle*, 732 n. 98. Jones’ interpretation could imply Paul’s ranking or position; it has also a temporal / chronological sense.

⁴⁰ Cf. G.D. Fee, *First Epistle*, 732 n. 98.

⁴¹ G.D. Fee, *First Epistle*, 733.

But Paul, contrary to the jest of his detractors, appropriated the deprecating word to express, though in a softened way,⁴² what the mercy of God could achieve in him. The echo of Paul's undauntedness is heard in his last emphatic and contrasting phrase *ophthē kamoi* "he appeared also to me," with air of pride and gratitude for his call. This then shows that when Paul uses *ektrōma* for himself he does so for reasons other than those of his opponents. It is for him a way to express the unique privilege God gave him to witness the appearance of the Risen Christ and to be reckoned as an apostle, even if he would only be called the least.

Significance of 1 Cor 15:8 in Our Context

The deprecating portrait of Paul in our text arises out of opposition and name-callings, partly, due to the misunderstanding between him and his opponents over the nature of his apostleship. Instead of Paul denying the obvious disparaging attacks of the detractors, he accepts their judgement, takes up their own language in a modified and reinterpreted sense and goes on to hold on to his claim on how he comes about to his apostleship. To be emphasised is that Paul takes serious the deprecating words of his opponents and adopts a new strategy for a response. He does not find irrational outburst of anger or accommodative silence the solution; instead he uses the best of his apologetics and polemics to confront his opponents, correct their misconceptions and define more clearly his own conception of apostleship.

Paul takes occasion of the opposition to rethink the image he had of himself before his conversion, resulting in making a humble digression concerning himself. Paul acknowledges that his experience en route to Damascus was a great act of God's mercy and thus sees himself as being highly favoured by God in this singular act. Yet he always endeavours to keep up a humble opinion of himself, and to publicly express it without regrets. Paul would want his reader to learn from his own experience and join him to say in unison, "'By God's grace we are what we are.' We are nothing but what God makes us, nothing in religion but what his grace makes us."⁴³

Thus Paul deemphasizes the essentiality of the individual disciple in preaching the gospel, since the gospel is not human wisdom. Paul's sensibility to this and his keeping humble and thankful by this conviction challenge us in our apostolate today. His low profile in Corinth amidst all oppositions does not make him achieve any less than the other so-called "super apostles." Rather as he confesses in his self-assessment: "his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God which is with me" (1 Cor 15:10). It is in this frame of mind that Paul urges his reader, "not to accept the grace of God in vain" (2 Cor 6:1). It is therefore evident that although Paul's self-deprecation in 1 Cor 15:8 lets itself to many interpretations, its one unforgettable lesson is that when pride is subdued, there is every reason to believe that the grace of God will triumph.⁴⁴

It is also pertinent to stress the need for the reader today to always keep in view the link Paul makes between apostolate and personal encounter with the Risen Lord in this text. For Paul that is what guarantees in the first instance the authority to preach the gospel and no human power or opposition can sever one from it.

Conclusion

This article has drawn attention to the fact that Paul, more than any other New Testament figure, portrays himself in disparaging images. His self-description in 1 Cor 15:8 as the untimely born (*ektrōma*) is only one of them. He used the image here in relation to other apostles to whom the Risen Christ appeared and in response to the disparaging attacks he was receiving in Corinth in the course of his mission. Ordinarily, one would say that Paul had no cause to adopt such a self-disparaging style, given his background and status.

⁴² That is the impact of the comparative particle *ōsperei* used in the sense of "sort of," "as though."

⁴³ Matthew Henry, "Commentary on First Corinthians," 15:8.

⁴⁴ M. Henry, "Commentary on First Corinthians," 15:8.

Nonetheless, he used it to respond to his detractors and opponents, who employed it to question his “qualification” and/or his “competency” to be an apostle. Above all, Paul used the image to underscore the favour of his call and the abnormal way in which he was let into the apostolic office. The way in which Paul deemphasised the essentiality of the human agent in Christian ministry reminds one of the self-emptying of Christ at the incarnation (Phil 2:5-8) and throughout his earthly ministry. Here lies the challenge of Paul’s self-deprecating portrait to the present-day minister and, indeed, Christian in his or her apostolate.