SHOULD CHRISTIANS BOAST?*

I. Howard Marshall

FOR MANY PEOPLE boasting and being proud are acceptable activities. People say they are proud to belong to a certain church because of the good things it does, or they are proud of their children because they have grown up successfully. The brochure of a conference announces that the institute where a society met “proudly hosted the annual meeting.”

Some biblical precedent seems to be present for talking this way. Paul apparently boasted that the Corinthian Christians were showing a spirit of generosity (2 Cor. 9:2; 2 Thess. 1:4 has similar language about the Thessalonian Christians), and he was worried lest their performance should not match the boast and the boasting should prove to be hollow (2 Cor. 9:3). Also he referred to the Thessalonian Christians as a crown in which he could boast or glory at the coming of the Lord Jesus (1 Thess. 2:19). And he said he would boast on the day of Christ that his work at Philippi had not been in vain (Phil. 2:16). If Paul could boast or look forward to boasting in this kind of way, then surely the activity is at least a neutral one.

However, a case can be made for the view that boasting is another “bad” word. Perhaps, of course, the word itself is not “bad”; the undesirable element may be a particular concept that is expressed by the word when it is used in certain contexts. That is, it gets corrupted by the company it keeps.

The word group for this topic consists of καυχάομαι, καύχημα, and καύχησις1 (together with ἐγκαυχάομαι2 and κατακανχαομαί3),

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1 Καύχησις is generally the action of boasting, whereas καύχημα is more often the basis for boasting or what is actually said in boasting.
2 This word is found only in 2 Thessalonians 1:4, where it expresses Paul's exultation in the Thessalonians' spiritual qualities.
3 This verb has the strong sense of expressing superiority to someone or some-
which occur sixty-four times in the New Testament. Nearly all of these are found in the writings of Paul. The majority of the occurrences are in 2 Corinthians, in which ten occurrences are in chapters 1–9, and nineteen are in chapters 10–13. This term, then, seems basic to Pauline theology and is used especially in the context of the controversy with the congregation in Corinth.

**SETTING THE CONTEXT: PRIDE AND BRAGGADOCIO**

A number of words that are similar to the words mentioned above are relevant to a discussion of the main word group. Terms expressive of pride and boasting are certainly used rather negatively. Paul wrote that love does not brag (περπερεύεται; 1 Cor. 13:4), a word that conveys the sense of arrogant speech about oneself, a trait that was recognized and condemned by moralists in the Hellenistic world. Braun notes that the term occurs in a letter that is generally opposed to the wrong use of rhetoric and wisdom over against the weakness seen in the preaching of the gospel. The phrase used here is part of a series of negative descrip-

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4 Or the number may be sixty-three, depending on the textual variant in 1 Corinthians 13:3.

5 The Pauline distribution is as follows: Romans, 10 times; 1 Corinthians, 10 times; 2 Corinthians, 29 times; Galatians, 3 times; Ephesians, once; Philippians, three times; 1 Thessalonians, once; 2 Thessalonians, once. The remaining uses are in Hebrews 3:6; James 1:9; 2:13; 3:14; and 4:16 (twice).


tions of what love does not do, followed by a list of positive actions taken by love. This negative evaluation is further seen in the way in which words for boasting and pride appear in lists of vices, both in the Gospel of Mark (Mark 7:22) and in the Pauline corpus (Rom. 1:30; 2 Cor. 12:20; 2 Tim. 3:2). Evidently arrogance does not keep good company.

A number of other words express arrogance, haughtiness, and pride. Some are concerned with the attitude in which a person thinks highly of himself or herself (υψηλά φρονεί, Rom. 11:20; hence the compound verb υψηλοφρονέω in 1 Tim. 6:17). In both cases the context shows that this wrong attitude is unjustified. Some words convey the idea that people have an exaggerated sense of their own abilities or achievements, so that what they boast about is often empty and without substance. Such words include κενοδοξία (Phil. 2:3; cf. κενόδοξος, Gal. 5:26). Such a boaster can be said to be puffed up like a balloon filled with air, a term used in 1 Corinthians 13:4 alongside περπερεύομαι but also found elsewhere (φυσιώ, 1 Cor. 4:6, 18–19; 5:2; 8:1; Col. 2:18; the noun φυσιώσις occurs in 2 Cor. 12:20). Possibly the verb τυφόομαι (1 Tim. 3:6; 6:4; 2 Tim. 3:4) also belongs here, but it is not clear whether it refers to being blinded or being conceited; in the Revised English Bible “pompous ignoramus” conveys the best of both possibilities.

There is an element of criticism here: The person has a self-estimate that goes beyond what is justified. This is seen especially in Romans 12:3, which refers to a person facing the danger of thinking more highly than he or she ought to think (ὑπερφρονέω). The self-description does not correspond with reality (1 Cor. 4:18–19).

Also a number of terms use the prefix υπέρ, all of which convey the idea of going beyond what is appropriate and justified. These include υπερηφανία (Mark 7:22), υπερηφάνος (Luke 1:51; Rom. 1:30; 2 Tim. 3:2; James 4:6; 1 Pet. 5:6); υπεραιρομαι (2 Cor. 12:7 [twice]; 2 Thess. 2:4; cf. ἐπαίρομαι, 2 Cor. 11:20); and υπέρογκος (2 Pet. 2:18; Jude 16).

Another “bad” word group includes ἄλαζονεία and ἄλαζών. The adjective occurs twice in lists of vices to refer to people who are boastful bragglarks (Rom. 1:30; 2 Tim. 3:2), and the noun is used to refer to human boastfulness in worldly life (1 John 2:16) and to the worldly things and plans in which people boast (James 4:16).

negative element is conspicuous.

From this analysis of the usage of these words a number of preliminary conclusions can be drawn.

First, boasting is often expressed in outward display and ostentation. It is very much a matter of speech, and the New Testament often refers to people speaking in this way (2 Pet. 2:18; Jude 16). It is therefore important to bear in mind throughout this examination that boasting is an activity that is normally verbalized and is not just a matter of inward feelings.

Second, frequently these words refer to people who are comparing themselves with others to the detriment of those others. Boasting is synonymous with commending oneself (εαυτούς συν ιστανόντων, 2 Cor. 10:12). It expresses an attitude of superiority over other people, and with this goes the tendency to treat them as inferior and to exert power over them, as with the man of lawlessness, who will exalt himself over everything that is called God (2 Thess. 2:4). This attitude is also referred to in 1 Corinthians 4:6.

Third, another important element is that the object in which one boasts is often that in which one puts confidence and trust. Zmijewski comments that “in boasting the individual declares what he relies on and what is his support in life, i.e. what his life is built on.” This is clear in Philippians 3:3–4, where Paul drew a contrast between “boasting” in Christ and putting one’s confidence in the flesh; the terms are closely related and indicate two different spheres in which one may place his or her confidence. Similarly in Hebrews 3:6 the writer spoke of holding on “to our courage and the hope of which we boast.”

Fourth, a powerful element of self-sufficiency and even complacency is implied in Paul’s chiding the Corinthian congregation for doing nothing about the case of incest in the congregation while being elated with their general situation (1 Cor. 5:2).

Fifth, boasting is often an expression of self-deceit, in which people have been blindly misled to a false estimate of themselves (Col. 2:18). However, on some occasions people boast about actual achievements and brag about what they have done.

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9 Bultmann says this element is primary in the Old Testament, Philo, and Paul (“καυχάομαι,” 649).
10 Zmijewski, “καυχάομαι κ.τ.λ.,” 278.
11 The break that is often thought to exist between Philippians 3:1 and 2 would disappear if it were possible for the verb χαίρω (“rejoice”) to have the nuance of “having joyful confidence in” the Lord (cf. Rom. 16:19; 2 Cor. 7:16; Phil. 4:4–7); Paul would then be contrasting this kind of confidence with confidence in the flesh.
Sixth, such boastful people stand in strong contrast with God, who opposes whatever is high and exalted among human beings. He resists the proud but gives grace to the humble (James 4:6; 1 Pet. 5:6, based on Prov. 3:34). "He has scattered those who show themselves proud in the thinking of their hearts" (Luke 1:51). What is "high" among people, whether in the sense that they are proud of it or simply consider it of great value, is an abomination in the sight of God (16:15). Such things may be deliberately opposed to God. This may well be the thought in 2 Corinthians 10:5, in which Paul said his purpose was to oppose every high thing (ὑψωμά) that is raised up against the knowledge of God.

Seventh, in the context of Christian faith human values are frequently inverted. According to James 1:9–10 the believer in humble worldly circumstances is to boast, that is, to rejoice in his high spiritual position, and the rich person should exult in his lowly position. This seems to mean that the rich person should be glad to see that his worldly position counts for nothing, because it is only by becoming humble that he will attain to true exaltation.

Eighth, these passages indicate that the appropriate attitude has two sides. On the one hand a contrast is drawn between boasting and humility. This language indicates that what is wrong is the self-sufficiency and sense of achievement that are characteristic of the boastful person. In the presence of God such people should realize their unworthiness and their inability to save themselves. On the other hand the New Testament stresses love as the quality that is free from bragging and being puffed up with conceit.

Ninth, of course nothing is novel or peculiar about this New Testament attitude to boasting. The pejorative sense of words that refer to boasting is already found in Greek literature and the same is true of the Old Testament. The inspiration for New Testament thinking about boasting lies primarily in the Old Testament.

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12 This is the translation given in Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament, vol 3 (1993), 399
13 Louw and Nida, Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains, §§65 9 and §§88 208
14 Interestingly Gerd Theissen identifies "the two basic values of the primitive Christian ethic" as "love of neighbour and renunciation of status" (A Theory of Primitive Christian Religion, trans John Bowden [London SCM, 1999], 63–80)
16 Ibid., 296–98 Paul especially drew his inspiration and backing from Jeremiah 9 22–23 (cf Ps 44 8 and Prov 27 2)
Against this background the following discussion examines three epistles, Romans, 1 Corinthians, and 2 Corinthians, in which the primary word group is especially prominent.

ROMANS—BOASTING IN THE WORKS OF THE LAW

In Romans 2:17–24 Paul addressed Jews who rested on the Law and boasted in God (v. 17) and who also boasted in the Law (v. 23). They claimed to have a right relationship with God as His people because of their possession of the Mosaic Law. However, Paul suggested that, although they possessed the Law, they did not keep it and they brought God’s name into disrepute. Though they boasted in the Law, they failed to keep it. Here boasting carries a strong sense of trusting in something and placing one’s confidence in it. Because they had been given the Law, the Jews considered themselves God’s people. Boasting here signified having confidence in something. At the same time, they probably also felt superior to other people who did not have the Law, and therefore boasting has an element of comparison with others to their detriment. This form of boasting may sound all right because it is boasting in God, but in fact it is wrong.

Now there is a new way of salvation, witnessed to by the Law (i.e., by the Old Testament in its more prophetic role) but given apart from the Law. This way of salvation depends entirely on what God has done in Christ and it is a gift bestowed by Him on the basis of the redemptive sacrifice of Christ.

Having established this fact in a short, densely packed paragraph (Rom. 3:21–26), the very first question Paul asked was “Where, then, is boasting?” and his one-word answer is έξεκλείσθη (“It is excluded,” v. 27). And the reason it is excluded is that justification depends not on works of the Law but on faith. This point is then elaborated with reference to Abraham, who would have had grounds of boasting if justification had been by works, but not in the presence of God (4:1–2). This cryptic statement in effect says two things. First, if a person achieves something, then in a human context he can legitimately boast in it. People saved by their own obedience to the Law can boast about it, in the sense of claiming credit for it and perhaps trusting in it. Second, this does not apply, however, to Abraham, who believed in God and so was justified (Gen. 15:6). Paul deduced from this that Abraham was justified by faith and not by works. This confirms the fact that God does not accept the works of the Law as a basis for justification.

It seems Paul was saying two things here. One is that people do not in fact keep the Law; they break it at numerous points and
thereby are exposed as Law-breakers, since the person guilty of one breach is guilty of the whole. Paul's other point is that even if people did keep the Law perfectly, they still would not be justified, because justification is by faith and not by works of the Law. So Abraham had no grounds for boasting or confidence in the presence of God. Therefore boasting about works is excluded because Scripture testifies that Abraham and David were justified by faith and not by works and because no one has been able to keep the Law. The Jews in Romans 2 who boasted in the Law doubtless included an element of boasting in their own performance of it, but this was invalidated by their failure to refrain from such sins as stealing, adultery, and robbing of temples.

Paul wrote along a similar line in Ephesians 2:9, where he said that salvation is entirely through grace and not by works, so that no one can boast. This means that because salvation does not rest on works, no one has any opportunity to boast. It may also express God's intention that no one should boast in what he or she has done.

These statements about boasting pertain to that in which people put their trust for salvation and rely on, with some exultation in what they have achieved and probably some sense of superiority over other people, like sinful Gentiles, who have no such grounds for confidence.

A different type of usage is found in Romans 5, which states that justified believers "boast" in hope of the glory of God (v. 2) and even "boast" in their afflictions because afflictions form part of the path through which they gain their certain hope of what God will do in them (v. 3). Here the meaning of the verb καυχάομαι tends more in the direction of rejoicing or exulting and having confidence. Justified believers are confident that their hope of sharing in the glory of God will be achieved, and so they can exult in it. When Paul said that believers exult in their sufferings, he was deliberately being paradoxical, showing that believers can rejoice even in something unpleasant because of its good outcome. In both cases the attitude is aroused by something outside of themselves and is therefore not a case of boasting in their own achievements.

Paul's use of the term in verse 11 fits in with this. Here he described how believers, having been justified and reconciled to God by God's action, can be certain that they will all the more be saved through Christ from the wrath of God at the last judgment. So they can boast here and now in God through Christ, through whom they have been reconciled. The sense is clearly that of rejoicing and having confidence on the grounds of what God has done and what they have received. This then is a proper kind of "boasting," ex-
pressing one’s confidence in God and the consequent rejoicing or exultation in Him and what He has done. In fact here it would be better not to translate καυχάομαι by “boast.”

Someone may think that his or her salvation in Christ is due to some personal superiority. In Romans 11:18 Paul addressed the Gentiles who have been grafted into the vine, which is Israel, in place of other Jewish branches which have been severed, and he warned them not to boast over (κατακαυχάομαι) the branches that have been cut off. They should not think that something they have done is the basis for their engrafting, which makes them superior to other people. This should become evident if they remember that they are supported by the trunk of the vine, that is, Israel, rather than that they support it. They are recipients, not actors.

In this same spirit Paul spoke of his own missionary work and said that he boasted in Jesus Christ in regard to his service to God (15:17). In a slightly difficult sentence he explained that what he was thinking of was what Christ had done in him to bring about the conversion of Gentiles. Hence it would seem that he was not boasting about what he himself had done or about the fact that God had chosen him to do perhaps more than what He had done through other missionaries. Instead he was simply saying that he had something about which he could exult, namely, Christ. Again the translation “boast” is inappropriate.

The risk here is obvious. Christians themselves may tend to tell what the Lord has done for them (Ps. 66:16) in such a way as to glorify themselves as people whom the Lord has blessed. It is relatively easy for believers to rejoice that they belong to the Lord. Others may talk about their own activities, and although they say, “Of course, it was God who did them, not me; I was only the channel,” they do say plenty about what this particular channel has done compared with other channels and so they draw attention to themselves.

Of course it is proper to be glad about what God has done. But that is so far removed from the normal content of boasting that it is best to call it by some other name; “rejoicing” (or possibly “exulting”) is probably the best alternative.

The evidence of Romans thus enables readers to trace what

17 Admittedly this proposal has two difficulties. The first is that to use other terms like “exult” when καυχάομαι is used in a positive sense is to obscure the contrast with the negative uses. The second difficulty is that the English word “boast” includes the idea of verbalizing the attitude, whereas such verbs as “exult” and “be confident” do not necessarily have this nuance. Nevertheless the use of some other term to translate καυχάομαι when it is used positively seems to be commendable.
Paul has to say about boasting on the basis of Jewish privileges, the exclusion of boasting on the part of the justified, the legitimacy of exulting in God and what He has in store for His people, and even the legitimacy of Paul’s rejoicing in what God had done through him.

1 CORINTHIANS—BELIEVERS AND THEIR GIFTS

In 1 Corinthians Paul was concerned with the attitude of Christian believers toward themselves and their spiritual gifts. Four themes in the letter can be traced.

First, God’s intention is that no one should boast before Him (1 Cor. 1:29). In this chapter Paul discussed the true way to have a right relationship with God in a world in which people think that their own wisdom or eloquence or even spiritual gifts are what matter. Human wisdom has revealed its own bankruptcy in that it failed to bring people to a true knowledge of God. God brings salvation through what seems foolish to sophisticated human beings, namely, Jesus’ crucifixion in weakness and shame. Moreover, God’s call has been extended to people despised in the world, the poor and the lowly, and they have found salvation. So salvation does not depend on people’s social class or wealth, or what they do or achieve, but on God. It follows that no individuals can claim credit for themselves if they are saved. Paul evidently envisaged that people can be saved through Christ and by faith in Him and yet be proud of that fact as if it somehow redounded to their own credit. This was a temptation into which at least some of the Corinthians had fallen. Some believers, having begun with the Holy Spirit, go on with the flesh (Gal. 3:3). This happened when some of the converts in Corinth boasted in their own spiritual gifts or achievements. This was misplaced because it implied that they were somehow responsible for them, whereas in fact whatever they had was what they had received (1 Cor. 4:7).

Thus boasting about salvation is excluded. No one has anything to boast about, for salvation is all of grace. So if anyone boasts, he or she must boast in God (1:31).

However, this changes the character of boasting in such a way that it is no longer boasting. It has become something else. It means that believers express their gladness and exultation in what God has done and not in their own achievements. Or they rejoice in what someone else has done and not themselves. The feeling of pride in what they have done is not there; the accompanying satisfaction, the desire to tell other people about it, is there, but it does not contribute to their own status or self-satisfaction. The point is
summed up well in Philippians 3:3, where Paul said Christians exult in Christ and do not put their confidence in the flesh, in their own accomplishments, or in the things that the world counts as creditable.

Second, there is both a legitimate and an illegitimate form of boasting about other human beings. Throughout the first part of 1 Corinthians Paul dealt with empty pride; he described the Corinthians as "puffed up." Boasting in human congregational leaders is wrong (3:21; 4:6). Paul was referring here to pride in one missionary or church leader over against another; and people were pitting Paul and Apollos against each other. The implication is that this pride in leaders was also pride in themselves. Such boasting was a form of self-exaltation.

It is difficult for the supporters of a football team to be proud of their team without also being proud of themselves for being the supporters and perhaps claiming something of the credit for their victories on the field, thanks to their cheering from the bleachers. If people think that the leader they follow is better than the other leader, then it implies that they are better than the followers of the other leader.

Nevertheless a kind of καύχησις is appropriate. For example Paul rejoiced in his renewed contact with the congregation in Philippi. He would be there to assist in their "progress and joy in the faith," and because of this they would rejoice in Christ Jesus because of Paul's return to them (Phil. 1:25-26). Here Paul apparently meant that they would glory and exult in Jesus on the basis of what He would do for the congregation by bringing Paul back to them.

Paul himself expressed his καύχησις in the congregation, despite its problems. In 1 Corinthians 15:31 he commented that he died daily, just as surely as he boasted of the Corinthians in Christ Jesus. Though the Greek construction here is difficult, Paul probably meant that he had confidence in Christ Jesus concerning the congregation; he rejoiced in their spiritual progress and was confident of it because of Christ. He was suggesting that he could cheerfully die daily because he was so convinced that Christ would bring about the salvation of the people to whom he was a missionary.

This confident remark stands rather isolated because there was so much about the congregation that was open to severe criticism. They thought they were filled and rich and were even "reigning." So some of them were puffed up, apparently in favor of other leaders as if Paul were not returning to the church to call them to account (4:18). They were full of words but lacked the power that should result from the gospel (v. 20).
This boasting was going on despite a particularly blatant example of immorality. When Paul sarcastically referred to them boasting (5:2) and stated that such boasting is not good (v. 6), he perhaps meant that they were boasting about the immorality itself, like people who proudly boast that in the Lord they are free to live licentiously. But more probably he meant that despite the obvious evidence that all was not well in the congregation, they were nevertheless complacent about their general spiritual situation.

Third, Paul used the language of boasting with some embarrassment. In 1 Corinthians 9:15–16 Paul dealt with the fact that, although he was entitled to his wages as a preacher of the gospel, he had not asked for them and had chosen to preach without getting any support or reward from the people to whom he preached. His claim to do so amounted to a “boast,” and he was determined that no one should deprive him of the opportunity to boast by their providing support from the church. And yet he immediately added that if he preached the gospel, this was no ground for boasting. He was only doing what God had laid on him as a necessity, and therefore this was not a voluntary achievement for which he could claim credit. It is almost as if Paul could not on occasion avoid using the word “boast”; but he felt the instant need to qualify what he had said and thus remove any misconception. For him it was of crucial importance that he maintain his principle, and yet he had to insist that it was no credit to him if he did succeed in this.

Fourth, boasting is contrasted with love. In 1 Corinthians 8:1 and 13:4 Paul offered a solution to the problems of the Corinthian congregation. Again he stated that at the bottom of the troubles in the congregation was their stress on knowledge, which goes along with their emphasis on wisdom and rhetoric, which the apostle noted at the beginning of the letter. One manifestation of the problem lay in the attitudes of some of the congregation who saw no problem in Christians eating food that had been consecrated to idols. They claimed to do so on the basis of a superior knowledge that was not shared by everyone else, and they probably looked down disdainfully on those who did not share their insight. They were in danger of leading other Christians to sin by going against their own consciences. There may have been nothing wrong with the foods themselves, but for people who genuinely believed that it was wrong to eat them and then disobeyed their consciences in proceeding to eat, then those people’s action was a sin in that the motive was to disobey what they believed God was saying to do or not to do. But the “strong” Christians were proud of themselves and were puffed up against each other. So Paul said that knowledge went along with and caused this inflated sense of self-
confidence and disdain for others, an attitude in which they did not stop and think about the consequences of their actions.

By contrast love "builds up." This is the first use of this key verb in this letter, which refers to the way in which whatever goes on in a church meeting should promote and strengthen the faith of the members. Activities such as prophesying and even sharing words of knowledge are not meant to inflate the egos of the participants or to give them a sense of self-fulfillment. Instead those activities are to be gauged by whether they actually help the other people present. It follows that the motivation for such actions is love, in the sense of caring for the spiritual and physical welfare of other believers. Out of love springs the desire to care for others.

Thus an important antithesis is developed between knowledge and love, between boasting and building up. Love excludes the kind of boasting of which Paul was speaking. This is confirmed in chapter 13, in which Paul developed the thought of love as the cardinal Christian quality that was lacking in the Corinthian church. Love stood in antithesis to all that was wrong with the church; it was the quality which above all others should be sought after.

The Greek text of verse 3 is disputed. Does it read, "If I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I am nothing," or "If I hand over my body to be burned, but do not have love, I am nothing"? The reading is highly controversial, but opinion seems to favor the first of these readings with the word "boast." If so, this verse could be further evidence that Paul regarded self-sacrifice, with the aim of enhancing one's own reputation, as incompatible with love. Fee holds that "boast" has a good sense here; its object, he says, is something that one might do for the sake of the gospel, but even that counts for nothing if love is absent.

After listing a couple of positive qualities of love, that is, patience and kindness, Paul launched into a list of qualities that are incompatible with love and which its presence should inhibit. Some of these qualities, or rather defects, are directly relevant to the arrogant Corinthian spirit. These tie in with Paul's immediately preceding condemnation of envy and his immediately following con-

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demnination of unseemly conduct and self-seeking. These points attack the envy that is irritated when other people boast, and they address the impropriety of boasting and its self-centered basis.

Thus some ambivalence about boasting exists in 1 Corinthians. Some of the congregation were characterized by arrogance and pride in their own spiritual gifts or in the human qualities of their leaders (which is a form of self-pride). Such pride was empty because there was so much wrong with the congregation, and in particular such people fail to trust in God rather than themselves and they fail to love each other. Nevertheless Paul could assert his confidence in Christ and in the spiritual progress that he was helping to bring about in the congregation.

2 CORINTHIANS 1–9—BOASTING ABOUT OTHER BELIEVERS

The motif of boasting occupies much of 2 Corinthians. This part of the discussion can be divided into two sections dealing with 2 Corinthians 1–9 and 10–13, respectively.

BOASTING ABOUT PAUL

The legitimate use of the term καύχησις comes in 2 Corinthians 1:14, where Paul wrote that he hoped the Corinthians would be able to exult in him and his colleagues, just as he would be able to exult in them in the Day of the Lord Jesus. Evidently it is proper for believers to exult in one another as they see each other gain approval from God. Similarly, as noted earlier, Paul could describe the Thessalonian Christians as a crown in which he could exult or glory at the coming of the Lord Jesus (1 Thess. 2:19). There is thus a future activity, which is best described as rejoicing or exulting in someone else in the presence of Christ, a context in which human pride is excluded.

In this same context Paul boasted or exulted about himself because his conscience testified that he had conducted himself in the holiness and sincerity that come from God (2 Cor. 1:12). He insisted that he had behaved not by fleshly wisdom but by the grace of God. Thus he exulted in what God had done, but this time the exulting was in what God had done in his own life.

In 5:12 Paul engaged in some self-justification, but he claimed that he was not doing so for his own sake but so that the Corinthians might be able to “boast” about him over against those people who boast in the flesh. Clearly the thought is that they may have confidence in Paul and how he behaved when measured by God’s standards and not by worldly standards.
Similarly Paul encouraged the congregation itself by commenting on his confidence and exultation in them (7:4). The fact that he was confident about them and exulted in their Christian growth should urge them on to greater things. Here again is the collocation of confidence and exultation. This passage marks the climax in the process of reconciliation with the congregation and expresses Paul’s joy and relief that the situation of conflict had been resolved. At the end of the same chapter Paul noted how he had “boasted” to Titus about the congregation before his visit and now had not been put to shame by doing so (v. 14). He meant that he had expressed his confidence in the congregation to Titus, thus encouraging him that when he arrived to mediate between them and Paul he would probably be successful. If Paul’s confidence had been misplaced, he would have felt ashamed because his statements had not been confirmed by the realities of the situation. And in fact what Paul had said in this way to Titus had turned out to be true.

The same motif of expressing confidence about other Christians is seen in chapters 8 and 9. In 8:24 Paul related how he was to send various brothers to the church, including Titus, to receive their collection for poor Christians in Jerusalem. He explained that since he had expressed his pride or confidence in the congregation to the messengers, they could be sure they would be welcomed enthusiastically. He appealed to the Corinthians to give proof to the messengers that what he had said about them was true.

Then in 9:2–3 Paul said he also boasted about the generosity of the Corinthians to the Christians in Macedonia. Again it would seem that Paul was thinking not of what he had achieved but of the way the congregation had behaved. In view of 8:1 he probably would have attributed this to God’s grace, which was cause for rejoicing. Paul was worried lest his boasting should prove to be hollow because people had not behaved in accord with God’s grace. Thus a human element is present in all this. It is not a case of “only God” at work, but somehow there may or may not be a human response to it. And Paul was not above putting a good example from one congregation before another in order to encourage the latter to emulate the former. Nothing is wrong with presenting a good example of what can be done through grace in the hope that the example will stimulate others to act in a similar way.
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group of opponents who claimed to be apostles of Christ and who questioned Paul's own standing as an apostle and his authority in Corinth. There may have been some kind of "parish" understanding, in which apostles had authority within the part of the mission field that was allotted to them, perhaps like the rough division between Jewish and Gentile missions assigned to Peter and Paul, respectively. Within his own "area" Paul had independent jurisdiction, and he would respect the mission areas of other apostles. Paul's opponents, however, seem to have been trying to muscle in on Paul's patch because they thought that what he was doing was inadequate. They boasted about their spiritual achievements by comparison with his. The problem for Paul was that this affected his status and his ministry among the Corinthians and therefore the matter could not be ignored.

Paul therefore could not avoid some self-commendation, an issue that had already arisen in 2 Corinthians (3:1; 4:2; 5:12; 6:4; cf. 7:11). His readers themselves should have sprung to his defense (12:11), and in the end it was not self-commendation that mattered, but the Lord's own commendation of His servants (10:18). Self-commendation is akin to boasting. Paul admitted that he might have given the impression of boasting too confidently about the authority given to him by the Lord, but he was quite sure that his confidence was not false (v. 8). But Paul insisted that, unlike his opponents, he would commend himself without comparing himself with other people and only with respect to the work he had done in the area allotted to him. He would not boast about work that he had done on a foundation laid by someone else (vv. 12–14). Nevertheless he hoped that as the faith of the Corinthians increased it would be possible for him "to be increased" beyond the sphere allotted to him and to go on to other areas to preach the gospel where Christ had not yet been heard of (v. 15). Here Paul followed the principle he set out plainly in Romans 15:20: "It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation" (author's translation). He repudiated boasting of work that had been done by someone else and claiming it as his own (2 Cor. 10:16). Nevertheless in the end what matters is boasting in the Lord, that is, boasting in what the Lord permits the missionary to do (v. 17).

In chapter 11 Paul stated that he was going to be a fool and indulge in boasting, so that on that level his audience could compare him with his opponents. In particular he repeated his claim that he had done his apostolic work without being a financial burden to the congregations; he had worked for his own keep or had
been supported by other congregations elsewhere. And he was determined that no one would be able to deny this (v. 10). So he went ahead and boasted in order "to cut the ground from under the feet of those who want an opportunity to be considered equal with us in the things they boast about" (v. 12, author's translation).

Paul then launched into what he again described as folly (though in 12:6 he said it was not entirely folly because he would speak the truth). If other people boasted in a worldly way, that is, in a fleshly way, he would take them on at that level (11:16–18). He began to give a list of his qualifications, ironically comparing himself as a Hebrew and servant of Christ with his opponents. But conscious that it was sheer folly to speak like this, he gave a list of his "achievements." This list, however, was not what he had been able to accomplish for Christ; it was a catalog of all that he had to put up with in suffering for the sake of the gospel, an extraordinary catalog of which readers otherwise would be ignorant. He then turned the tables on his opponents, boasting about his weaknesses (v. 30; 12:9), and he described how he had to leave Damascus ignominiously to elude capture. He said that he must boast, although it was not really profitable to do so (12:1), and he then spoke of visions and revelations in which others took pride.

In a curious figure of speech he boasted about a man who was caught up to heaven and said that he would boast about him and not about himself (v. 5). Yet it is quite clear that he was talking about himself (v. 7). What Paul seems to be doing here is admitting that he had visions but describing them in such a way as to say, "But I do not boast about these; I shall rejoice when other people have them, but it would be wrong for me to take that attitude toward my own experiences." All that he would boast about for himself was his weaknesses, and in describing his "thorn in the flesh" he pointed out the way in which it was revealed to him that God's strength comes in the midst of human weakness. Then he suddenly stopped, saying that he had been writing foolishly because his readers in effect forced him to do so. They ought to have been defending him to his critics rather than he himself having to do so.

In summary four observations may be made about this section. First, Paul did not believe in boasting about himself, but on some occasions he felt he was forced to do so. His concern was for the honor of the Lord, which was at risk in relation to his position and work, so there may be times when it is necessary for the Lord's servant to put the record straight. Second, when Paul did boast, he boasted in the Lord and in his own weaknesses, since these are the occasions in which he experienced the power of the Lord. He thus did not boast of his "strengths."
Third, Paul was conscious of the temptation to compare himself with other people or to boast of things that were not really his. According to Galatians 6:4 it is appropriate for people to have a ground for boasting in themselves but not with regard to another person. This means that people can exult in what God has done in themselves personally but not in a way that makes comparisons with other people, so that they think they are better than others.

Fourth, it is wrong to use the language of exulting in what the Lord does when one's motivation or the effect is really claiming some credit as the one through whom the Lord has chosen to work. Believers continually face the danger that legitimate glorying or exulting can slide over into arrogance and being puffed up. This is summed up in the contrast in Galatians 6:13–14 between those who boast in the flesh (in their human achievements) and those who are determined not to boast except in the Cross, by which they are crucified to the world. Similarly James 4:16 refers to people who boast arrogantly about what they think they can do, making their plans for the future without taking God's purposes into account. Such boasting is evil.

**SUMMARY**

What emerges from all this, especially on a practical level for believers? Zmijewski suggests that the verb καυχάομαι has two meanings, depending on the object. One is positive: "to take pride in"; the other is negative: "to brag." The former usage has the meaning of "to rejoice, exult or express confidence in someone or something." It would be better not to use the term "pride" (or certainly not the term "boasting") in that context since it is so open to misunderstanding.

The positive usage arises when one is rejoicing about other people and about what God is doing rather than about oneself or one's own successes, although believers can also exult in what God is doing in their own lives. The negative usage tends to be about oneself and to involve elements of comparison with other people. It may also be "empty" in the sense that the pride is misplaced, and it is always so when it takes place in relation to one's spiritual status and expresses self-sufficiency without the need for God and His grace.

Further, human boasting tends almost inevitably to involve comparison with other people and establishing one's superiority to

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20 Zmijewski, "καυχάομαι κ.τ.λ.," 278.
them. For the New Testament, however, there is an expression of joy and confidence in what God does in a person that involves no sense of superiority to or comparison with others. Yet the risk is particularly great even at this point. A person may be tempted to take the credit for what God does and to think he or she is better than others even when thinking of what God has done.

The New Testament teaching, then, is clear. There is a boasting in things human, and there is a rejoicing and confidence in God and what He does. The former is illegitimate and sinful, and the latter is appropriate and good. It follows that “boasting” is often used in a negative way, and even when it is being used in a positive way, a person runs the risk of that exultation or rejoicing sliding over into pride and comparison with other people.21 There is only one thing in which Christians can glory and that is the cross of Christ, by which they are crucified to the world and its standards and achievements (Gal. 6:14).

21 What is attacked may seem to be an unjustified pride, in which people's boasting is hollow and empty. But suppose a person has justified grounds for rejoicing and confidence, such as, for example, a talent a person has or an achievement he or she has accomplished. May one feel a sense of justified pride in such a case, because he or she has used and not neglected a talent or has been diligent in business or achieved something that is admirable and that makes life better for other people? And what about competitive sports and similar activities where the aim of the exercise is to see who is the “best” at playing the game? Are these ruled out for the Christian who is seeking to be humble? Paul’s answer would be that believers can be glad about what God has enabled them to do or be, but this is no reason for their feeling superior to other people. It may well be true that student A consistently gets better grades than student B, and therefore is better qualified for a particular job, and it would be foolish of a potential employer to ignore the difference. But this is no reason for supposing that A deserves greater honor than B, whether in the Lord or in the flesh.