

Chapters 10-13 form the third and final major section of this letter. In it Paul responds to challenges to his apostolic authority which he rightly understands as an attempt to undermine his gospel message. The critical nature of this battle points to the significance of the enemy which he describes and the importance of the weapons which he uses.

I. The challenge to Paul's authority

Paul's "defensive mode" is seen in the emphatic opening words, "now I Paul myself urge you", and in the switch to writing about himself and not including his associates.

1. The accusers

Paul is writing to the entire church to warn them, but refers to a much smaller group who are the actual accusers and who are influencing the larger body (vv 2, 6). Later he will refer to this smaller group as false apostles, agents of Satan, and deceivers (11:13-15; cf. 10:7; 11:23). They are apparently Jews (11:22) and as such may have taught some conformity to the Law.

2. The charges

To undermine Paul's authority and thus attain control in the church, his opponents brought various charges against him. (1) From earlier in the letter we know that they charge him with not being trustworthy. (2) Here he is charged with duplicity, i.e., acting one way when with them and a different way when gone. (3) He was charged with being weak (cf. 12:9-10; 13:3-4). (4) He will later be charged with being a lesser Apostle than the Twelve.

3. His defense

He admits to physical weakness ("in the flesh"). He is bold when absent in order not to have to be harsh when present (10:2; cf. 13:10). But he is ready to be harsh when he comes if necessary (10:6).

II. Understanding Paul's manner of warfare

Paul understood his ministry, both to non-believers and believers, as a type of spiritual warfare.

1. The enemy or opposition is pictured by Paul in this passage as "strongholds".

The word means "fortress" or "castle". He explains the strongholds to be human reasoning and philosophies which are elevated above divine revelation and are contrary to it. Cf. Colossians 2:8. It is interesting that Paul does not target the spirit beings that are part of the conflict, though such beings can be behind the philosophies that even Christians unwittingly accept. See 1 Tim 4:1-2. Such philosophies or reasoning can include various forms of legalism, worldly solutions (economics, education, health) to man's problems, or even theological systems.

It is a battle for our minds. Cf. 1 Peter 1:13; Romans 12:1-2.

2. Paul does not battle with weapons or tactics which arise from our sinful nature (flesh), but he uses weapons of divine power.

In verses 3b-4 the word "world" is actually "flesh" which is often used figuratively for our sinful nature. We do not wage war in a manner that arises out of our sinful nature or is accord with it. Cf. Gal 5:19-21.

Paul will admit to the inadequacy of his rhetoric, but that was purposeful in order that they rely on God's power and not man (1 Corinthians 2:1-5).

Paul explicitly states that he acts gently in accord with the example of Christ (10:1; cf. Matthew 11:29). Gentleness is a fruit of the Spirit.

This implies also what our weapons are not, i.e., not those things that arise out of our sinful nature such as anger, deceit, playing on jealousy, selfishness, or the pleasures of people.

Paul (and Peter) teach this manner of ministry elsewhere. Cf. 1 Thessalonians 2; 2 Timothy 2:24-25; 4:1-4; 1 Peter 3:15; etc.

Our warfare demands not only spiritual weapons, but the right spiritual weapons. The word of God used in the power of God, in accord with the character of God, will be the most effective weapon against the "strongholds" of wrong human philosophies.