

Grounds for Apostleship: Examining the Greek Text Behind Galatians 1:1

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Abstract

The Apostle Paul makes the point in many of his epistles that it is God who makes apostles through Jesus Christ based upon His own divine will and initiative, and that he, Paul, is a participant in, and a beneficiary of the will of God. This paper seeks to demonstrate this simple truth through a basic parsing of the Greek text. This important doctrine, often found in Paul's introductory statements, may be glossed over by many in a rush to examine more "exciting" material. As we parse the Greek language we are introduced to the grammatical importance of the genitive case in Paul's writings and common doctrinal themes associated with the call to apostleship.

For my text I have chosen to examine Paul's introductory statement to the churches in Galatia in order to demonstrate a basic foundational understanding of parsing and the basic impacts on biblical exegesis.

Paul begins his letter to the Galatian churches by writing: Παῦλος ἀπόστολος, οὐκ ἀπ' ἀνθρώπων οὐδὲ δι' ἀνθρώπου ἀλλὰ διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ καὶ θεοῦ πατρὸς τοῦ ἐγείραντος αὐτὸν ἐκ νεκρῶν... (Gal 1:1) My translation reads: Paul [an] apostle, not from men nor through man but through Jesus Christ and [of] God the Father [who] raised him from [the] dead.

The Apostle Paul is the subject, as indicated by the case ending for both Παυλος and αποστολος. Both of these terms are in the nominative, singular, masculine form. Paul is claiming divinely appointed apostleship as part of his identity. He continues by adding two qualifying statements relative to his apostleship in order to define the foundation of his apostolic office.

The first, “οὐκ ἀπ' ἀνθρώπων - not from men,” indicates that Paul did not receive his apostleship by means of, or as a result of, any plurality of men. We can make this deduction since ἀνθρώπων is rendered in the genitive, plural form. Paul builds on this statement by writing, “οὐδὲ δι' ἀνθρώπου - nor through man,” or “a” man, as ἀνθρώπου is here rendered in the genitive, singular form. The implication then, based on the preposition δια, is that Paul's apostleship was not established by means of or through any singular man or committee of men. The generality of the term ανθρωπος has a broader sense than simply a specific person, but can also denote mankind, or humanity. Paul is rejecting the notion that people, or mankind, can grant apostleship.

Rather, Paul claims that his apostleship is divinely appointed specifically through Jesus Christ, “ἀλλὰ διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ...” in which instance the proper noun Jesus Christ is found rendered in the genitive, singular, masculine form, indicating possession on the part of Christ. Paul further adds that God the Father also shares in this divine appointment, “καὶ θεοῦ πατρὸς τοῦ ἐγείραντος αὐτὸν ἐκ νεκρῶν...” This too is found agreeing in the genitive, singular, masculine form.

The term πατρὸς may appear at first glance to be in the nominative, singular form with the case ending -ος but this term must agree in case, number, and gender with the associated words θεοῦ and τοῦ. Upon further investigation we find then that πατρὸς is a third declension noun found in the genitive, singular, masculine form, derived from the term πατήρ, and it does in fact agree in this sentence. (Mounce, 2005)

Furthermore, Paul instructs the Galatians not only in who it is that possesses the authority to make him an apostle but calls to remembrance God’s singularly unique power through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead - ἐγείραντος αὐτὸν ἐκ νεκρῶν. Of note is the fact that the term ἐγείραντος, from the verb εγείρω - to raise up, is found in a peculiar aorist, participle form lacking any common hallmarks of the more common aorist verb, namely the ε- augment or the -σ(α) tense formative.

The aorist verb may be translated as a simple past action but the aspect for the aorist tense is technically undefined. Professor David Brewer explains that aorist verbs indicate that the author has chosen to represent a past action as happening in simple terms rather than elaborating. We also know that,

“The aorist tense is characterized by its emphasis on punctiliar action; that is, the concept of the verb is considered without regard for past, present,

or future time. There is no direct or clear English equivalent for this tense, though it is generally rendered as a simple past tense in most translations.” (Lexical Definition for Aorist Tense, n.d.)

In regards to Paul’s use of the term ἐγείραντος as a participle it is helpful to understand a lexical definition for a participle:

“The Greek participle corresponds for the most part to the English participle, reflecting "-ing" or "-ed" being suffixed to the basic verb form. The participle can be used either like a verb or a noun, as in English, and thus is often termed a ‘verbal noun.’” (Lexical Definition for Participle Mood, n.d.)

In Galatians 1:1, Paul uses this participle as a verb for which God is responsible. He also uses this action as a demonstration of divine authority that is inextricably linked to his own apostleship. Just as certainly as God “raised up” Jesus from the dead, God made Paul an apostle through Jesus Christ.

This is a recurrent theme in Paul’s writings to the churches. We find similar apostolic pronouncements to varying degrees in: Rom 1:1, 1 Cor 1:1, 2 Cor 1:1, Eph 1:1, Col 1:1, 1 Tim 1:1, 2 Tim 1:1, and Titus 1:1. Paul alludes to his apostleship by other means in the remainder of his writings sometimes utilizing terms like δουλος (slave), or δέσμιος (prisoner). These introductory verses in Paul’s writings share a strong commonality among them in underscoring Paul’s apostolic office as dependent on God’s will, authority, and commandment.

Romans 1:1 is a succinct example of this recurring theme: Παῦλος δοῦλος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ, κλητὸς ἀπόστολος, ἀφωρισμένος εἰς εὐαγγέλιον θεοῦ...

Paul, the subject (nominative, singular, masculine) is a servant/slave (nominative, singular, masculine) [of] Christ Jesus (genitive, singular, masculine), called (adjective, nominative, masculine, singular) an Apostle (nominative, masculine, singular), separated, into/to/for (accusative preposition) the gospel/the good message (accusative, singular, neuter) [of] God (genitive, singular, masculine).

By matching the case, number, and gender of each term we can see that Paul is the subject of this introductory statement, that Jesus Christ is the possessor of Paul's service, and that the gospel is the direct object into which Paul is called as an apostle.

Regarding Paul being κλητοσ (called) to apostleship, Thayer's Greek Lexicon adds depth to the meaning in defining this term as, "called to (the discharge of) some office κλητος αποστολος, i.e. divinely selected and appointed." (Thayer, p. 350, 1981)

We get the sense from the volume of Paul's writings that Paul was compelled to defend his apostleship quite a bit from the critical eye of others who would rather rely on appointment by a group of people than God's own appointment. Paul's introductory statements though, while sometimes overlooked in haste to examine "richer" material, bring us to an understanding of who it is that is responsible for appointing apostles.

In this way it is not the subject of the introduction, Παυλοσ αποστολοσ, that takes center stage in our doctrine but rather the associated genitive phrases. The genitive phrase, "...διὰ θελήματος θεοῦ," or some similar phrase, appears in many of Paul's letters as he introduces himself to the reader. (1 Cor 1:1, 2 Cor 1:1, Eph 1:1, Col 1:1, 2 Tim 1:1) This phrase may be rendered: through (genitive preposition) [the] will/desire (third declension noun, genitive, singular, neuter) [of] God (genitive, singular, masculine). It becomes clear, as Paul was doggedly driving the point home over and

over again to various people groups that the will of God is the foundation for any apostolic calling or appointment.

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