CHAPTER FOUR

GOD-LANGUAGE AND THE CHURCH OF JEWS AND NON-JEWS

In our preceding chapter we have seen that Paul used God-language to intensify conflicts with rival groups. In this chapter, we will study how he simultaneously turned this God-language inwards. He applies it to Christian communities in order to interpret their identity. Christian Jews caused the most pressing problem. Being Christians, but Jews as well, they stood in a double position where they represented a collective crisis of identity. More than non-Christian Jews, they were affected by Paul’s proclamation that salvation was for ‘Jews and Greeks’. We will argue that when Paul uses this phrase in conjunction with God-language, he intends to reinterpret the identity of Christian Jews and create a common basis for self-understanding among all Christians.1

This becomes apparent in Rom 3:29-30. The issue under debate is Paul’s practice of including non-Jews into his churches without circumcision. Paul raises this as a theological question—i.e., it is immediately related to the understanding of God. His main point is that God can no longer be described primarily in terms of his relationship with Israel:

Or is God the God of Jews only?
Is he not the God of Gentiles also?
Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one;
and he will justify the circumcised on the ground
of their faith and the uncircumcised through their faith.

In using the terms 'Ἰωάννης and ἔθνη in v. 29, Paul describes the world from a Jewish perspective.2 The world consisted of the Jews,

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the people of God, on the one hand, and of "the nations" (the Greeks) on the other. Paul accepts this division, but from the common faith in God he draws the conclusion that there is no distinction between circumcised and uncircumcised. The underlying conflict here is sometimes described in terms of "particularism" versus "universalism". Paul is considered to have brought the trend toward universalism within Judaism to its logical conclusion. However, this interpretation misses the point. From the prophets onwards, there was in Judaism an emphasis upon the proclamation of God as the God of the "nations" also. And, especially in apocalyptic literature, this was described not only in historical but also in cosmic terms. However, this "universalism" was tempered by the conviction that God had a special relationship with Israel, expressed through the giving of the Torah. The Torah, therefore, was the dividing line that God, the creator of the world, had set between Israel and other nations. It is this function of the Torah as dividing-line that is made obsolete when Paul says that God will justify the circumcised and uncircumcised "through faith". This "universal" statement in 3:30 is bracketed by two antithetical expressions in 3:28 and 31, contrasting "faith" and "law". Through these two verses we are able to define the issue at stake more clearly. Paul's mission broke down national barriers that were upheld by Jewish Torah-piety. On the other hand, his preaching created another division—between those who accepted the Christian kerygma and those who rejected it. Instead of the Torah as the dividing-line between Jews and non-Jews came faith in Christ, distinguishing believers from non-believers. Paul's conclusion that

3 C. H. Dodd, The Epistle of Paul to the Romans (London, 1934) 63. Käsemann (Römer, 97-98) makes a distinction similar to that between "particularism" and "universalism" when he describes Paul's argument too much in terms of a contrast between God the creator and the Rabbinic God of the covenant. However, Paul sees the contrast not so much between creation and covenant as between law and faith; cf. N. A. Dahl, Studies in Paul, 178-91, esp. 191; see further the criticism of Ch. Müller, below, 286.
6 H. Ridderbos, Paul: An Outline of his Theology (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1975) 340; "in this new concept of the people of God given in the revelation of Christ a new restriction and in a certain sense a new particularism is