CHAPTER FIVE

JUDGMENT AND ESCHATOLOGY IN 1 CORINTHIANS
3:5-4:5: A PARENETIC ADAPTATION OF AN
APOCALYPTIC TRADITION

In order to gain a broader perspective on the function of Paul’s eschatological rhetoric in 1 Cor 3:5-4:5 it is necessary to compare his judgment language here with such language in other texts. This chapter begins by attempting to locate Paul’s judgment language in 1 Cor 3-4 within a functional typology of future judgment in Paul’s letters and other early Christian writings. Then these results will be set against the functional map which I drew in Chapters Two and Three of Jewish and Greco-Roman judgment traditions. Finally, I will use these findings to draw some conclusions about Paul’s use of judgment language in 1 Cor 3:5-4:5.

1. Survey of the Functions of Future Judgment Language in the Letters of Paul

Paul’s references to God’s future judgment can be divided into two major functional categories. The most frequent purpose for which Paul makes reference to God’s future judgment is to bolster his readers’ confidence in their ultimate salvation as members of the Body of Christ. This is a fairly standard component in Paul’s thanksgiving periods and in other contexts where he praises or prays for his churches.1 In most of these passages the emphasis is on the future moment of salvation, with the act of judgment itself only implied. Some texts use the cultic language of purity or blamelessness to express the confidence which the believers can have at the final day (1 Cor 1:7-8; Phil 1:10; 1 Thess 3:13; 5:23-24).2 Twice Paul assures his readers that they will be the occasion for his boasting at the last judgment (2 Cor 1:13-14; 1 Thess 2:19; see also 2 Cor 4:14). In Phil 1:6 Paul gives assurance that at the day of Jesus Christ the work begun will be found to be complete. In other texts the threat of condemnation is mentioned only as a foil for

1 On these passages see Synofzik, Die Gerichts- und Vergeltungsaussagen bei Paulus, 16-30.
2 See also Eph 1:4; 4:30; 5:27; Col 1:22.
the promise that Christ will bring the believers safely through the judgment
(2 Cor 1:9-10; 1 Thess 1:10; Rom 16:20\(^3\); 2 Cor 2:15-16; Gal 1:4\(^4\)).

In his elaborate argument concerning the status of Jews and Gentiles in the community of Christ in Romans 1-11 Paul makes rich use of future judgment language.\(^5\) The key idea is the impartiality of God’s judgment (2:6-8, 11-12, 16, 27-29)\(^6\), which places Jew and Gentile alike under the threat of condemnation (1:18, 27, 32; 2:1-3, 5-6; 3:5-6; 5:16, 18; see also 9:22). This in turn makes both Jew and Gentile equally dependent on Christ for future salvation (5:9-10, 16, 18; 6:21-23; 8:1, 33-34; 11:25-32; see Gal 5:5-6). So the ultimate point of all the judgment talk is once again the confidence with which believers in Christ can stand before God.

Implicit in such confidence in their final destiny is the knowledge that Christians as a corporate entity are distinct from the unbelieving world, which is destined for a judgment of destruction.\(^7\) This thought is the primary function of much Pauline judgment language (1 Cor 5:13; 6:2-3; 9:24-25; 11:32; Phil 3:20-21\(^8\); 1 Thess 5:2-5; 5:9).\(^9\) Even when judgment language is found in connection with a vice list this social function is still dominant (1 Cor 6:9-11; Gal 5:19-21; see Eph 5:5-6; Col 3:6). Even in Phil 1:28, where Paul announces God’s judgment on outsiders who oppose the Gospel, the object is primarily to underscore the distinctiveness of the Christian destiny. This same theme is given a much fuller treatment in 2 Thess 1:5-10 (which I take as possibly Pauline), where comfort and encouragement of believers is the purpose.\(^10\)

We can conclude that Paul makes frequent reference to future judg-

\(^3\) On this unique expression as a Pauline reference to the final consummation see Cranfield, Romans, vol. 2, 803; and Synofzik, Gerichts- und Vergeltungsaussagen, 25; see also Baumgarten, Paulus und die Apokalyp tik, 215-16. I find Synofzik’s (p. 25) idea that 1 Cor 10:13 and Phil 4:19 are similar assurances of eschatological salvation less persuasive.

\(^4\) Although the future time is not emphasized in these latter two texts.

\(^5\) On this see Synofzik, Gerichts- und Vergeltungsaussagen, 78-85, 97-104.


\(^7\) The typology of Synofzik breaks down at this point, for he assigns a parenetic function to many judgment passages without clearly recognizing that many of them use a general parenetic tone in order to underscore a distinctive Christian social solidarity.

\(^8\) See the comments of Wayne A. Meeks ("Since then you Would Need to Go Out of the World": Group Boundaries in Pauline Christianity," Critical History and Biblical Faith: New Testament Perspectives [ed. Thomas J. T. Ryan; Villanova: The College Theology Society/Horizons, 1979], 9) on this passage. The function is "to reinforce attitudes of loyalty and confidence within the Christian groups."

\(^9\) See also 2 Thess 2:12; Eph 2:3.

\(^10\) This is the conclusion of Roger Aus, "Comfort in Judgment: The Use of Day of the Lord and Theophany Traditions in Second Thessalonians 1" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Yale 1971), esp. 111.