CHAPTER ONE

THE PLACE OF JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH IN PAUL'S THOUGHT: BASIC LINES OF INTERPRETATION

I. AN ORIENTATION TO THE PROBLEM AND THE METHOD OF THIS STUDY

What role does ‘justification by faith’ play in Paul’s thought? Does it express the heart and essence of Paul’s Gospel, as had been assumed in Protestant scholarship from the time of the Reformers well into the nineteenth century? Or is it a subsidiary concern, formulated merely for the purpose of answering the charges of Paul’s adversaries? Historical research into Paul from the post-Baur period until the present may be characterized by the various answers given to these questions. Moreover, despite the advances which the past 120 years have seen in the elucidation of Paul’s religious environment, scholars have not moved much closer to a consensus on how ‘justification by faith’ is to be interpreted.

The current disagreement over the importance of this theme to Paul stems in part from the tension between historical exegesis and theological interpretation. Striving to be true to both concerns has not proved easy, not only for those who have construed ‘justification’ as the ‘center’ of Paul’s thought, but also for those who minimize its role. Twice in the modern era of research into Paul, in the work of Baur and later in that of Bultmann, ‘justification by faith’ has been accorded a central position in Paul’s theology on the basis of an overarching understanding of human existence. But Baur’s idealistic conception of history as the progress of the collective human consciousness quickly fell away in the later nineteenth century, which saw an increasing interest in the concrete reality of the Hellenistic world as a basis for explaining Paul. And the post-Bultmannian era has seen the rise of dissatisfaction with the limitations imposed by an analysis of Pauline theology in terms of the self-understanding of the individual. For most interpreters, the jagged edge of Paul’s apocalyptic world-view, with its cosmic and universal dimension, is far too prominent to allow an existential reading of Paul.
Yet the alternatives to Bultmann's interpretation of 'justification' which have been offered have failed to satisfy the demand for a reading of Paul which is both historically accurate and logically coherent. Although it commands a very large following, we shall see that Käsemann's line of thought—in which 'justification' is treated as the pinnacle of an apocalyptically-oriented theology—carries some serious flaws. By positing a religio-historical background to Paul's understanding of justification (the apocalyptic motif of the 'righteousness of God'), Käsemann avoids the use of systematic abstractions for maintaining the centrality of the concept. Nevertheless, his attempt to gather the whole of Pauline theology under the umbrella of 'God's obedience-creating righteousness' glosses over some unexplained elements of Paul's thought.

Another difficulty inheres in the attempts of William Wrede, Albert Schweitzer, and E. P. Sanders to assert a 'participationistic' understanding of salvation as the central feature of Paul's theology. The formula of 'participation,' or 'being in Christ' as these scholars have presented it, cannot account for the paradox which exists between Paul's positive statements about salvation and the demands which he places alongside them. In so far as these scholars attempt to describe a theme which comprehends the whole of Paul's theology, they fail to reach their goal.

As these brief reflections indicate, the discussion concerning the place of 'justification by faith' in Paul's thought has been carried out largely in terms of a quest for a thematic 'center' from which the whole of Paul's theology may be deduced or explained. This statement applies not only to the various scholars named above, who have sought to show in one way or another that 'justification' or 'participation' ought to be regarded as the 'center' of Paul's thought. It also fits the various attempts to show that no coherent theological 'center' for Paul's thought may be found, and that instead Paul's 'experience of Christ' must serve as an interpretive Mitte. Such attempts inevitably fall back on systematic and deductive analysis of Paul's thought in order to highlight its 'self-contradictory' elements.

Many scholars, especially in North America, have rightly called into question attempts, past and present, to demonstrate or contest

1 See below, Section V and Chapter 2, Section II, Excursus.