CHAPTER THREE

'JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH'
AND PAUL'S CONVERSION

I. THE AIM OF THE DISCUSSION AND THE PROBLEM OF
RECONSTRUCTING PAUL'S CONVERSION
FROM HIS SELF-REFERENCES

We shall see that Paul's references to his life prior to his faith in Christ cohere quite well with the 'pattern' of Judaism found in the Pss. Sol. Like the pious of the Pss. Sol., Paul regarded obedience as cooperative with divine mercy in securing salvation. In this respect, his preconversion views differed from the thought expressed in 1Q5, which despite its explicit attachment of salvific value to obedience, attributed the whole of salvation to the predestinating grace of God. Yet despite the place which Paul allowed to obedience in securing salvation, he, like the pious of the Pss. Sol., does not seem to have struggled over uncertainty with regard to his salvation. Nor is it likely that he boasted in the hope of salvation as a self-accomplishment.

This linking of Paul with the form of Judaism found in the Pss. Sol. reopens the possibility that his conversion involved a soteriological element. Our concern, therefore, in the following analysis is to explore the effect of Paul's coming to faith in Christ on his understanding of righteousness, and on the obedience to the Law which mediated it to him.

The legitimacy of the use of the term 'conversion' to describe Paul's coming to faith in Christ has been seriously questioned in recent years. Krister Stendahl, among others, has contended that it is better to speak of Paul's 'call' to Gentile mission, since Paul himself describes the beginning of his ministry in this manner.1 Paula Fredriksen (again with others) prefers to avoid the term because she views the change in Paul as a phenomenon internal to Judaism: Paul merely switched from one party to another.2 But

---

1 Gal 1:15, 16.
our study will confirm what Alan Segal has suggested, that Paul's belief in Jesus as Messiah was accompanied by an entrance into a new group, and a 'reconstruction of reality' on Paul's part. One must not fail to appreciate Paul's own judgment expressed in the classical texts on his conversion, that his coming to faith involved a radical transformation of his values. Failure to do so only forces one to look for an alternative cause for this change, for which, we shall see, there is no good evidence. Likewise, one should not overlook that in his letters Paul gives himself and his churches an identity independent of Judaism, despite the fact that in the middle of the first century Christianity was only beginning to emerge from the synagogue. For Paul, the eschatological community of believers in Christ, although a consummation of Jewish hope, is also a novum, composed of Jews and Gentiles. 'Conversion' therefore remains an appropriate term to characterize the new 'pattern of religion' which Paul adopted.

It is not necessary, and probably wrong, to think of Paul's conversion simply as a momentary, revolutionary experience. To make this statement does not diminish in the least the significance of the Christophany to which Paul attributes his changed life. It is merely an acknowledgment of what was almost certainly the case. The assimilation of the traditions of the early believing community and the emergence of a new constellation of beliefs must have required some time, even for Paul. It is important to bear this consideration in mind in order to avoid a false conception of the question facing us. The issue at stake is not whether or not Paul received the whole of his theology in a blinding flash, but whether his ideas on justification by faith were derived from and adopted with his coming to faith in Christ.

Along with the fairly regular appearance in the scholarly literature of articles and shorter discussions which wrestle with the

---

3 Alan F. Segal, Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), pp. 72–114, 285–300. Segal makes good use of sociological insights into conversion, but stresses community dynamics too strongly. As he acknowledges, Christianity was in a formative stage in the first century. Paul was one who shaped this community by his own theology and mission. See also B.R. Gaventa, From Darkness to Light: Aspects of Conversion in the New Testament (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986).

4 Gal 1:10–24; Phil 3:2–11.

5 On Paul's new identity, see Gal 3:14; 4:12; 1 Cor 9:19–21.


7 See Alan Segal, Paul the Convert, pp. 285–300.