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# PAUL'S PERSPECTIVE ON ETHNICITY

*John E. Toews*

Two fundamental convictions shaped Paul's view of ethnicity. The first was that God's end-time Messiah had come in Jesus of Nazareth. The age to come had dawned. The final eschatological age had begun. Secondly, faith in the Messiah is the essential mark of belonging to the messianic people of God.

These convictions raised the question of the constitution of the people of God. Two specific questions emerged in the Pauline churches. First, do Gentile Christians have to become Jews to belong to the Messianic people? Specifically, do Gentiles have to be circumcised? Do Gentiles have to do works of law (e.g., circumcision, food laws, sabbath, all badges of Jewish identity)? Secondly, what happens to Jews who do not believe in the Messiah? What happens to the Jews as an ethnic people? What is the relation of non-believing Jews to those "in Christ"? These issues are addressed primarily in two letters, Galatians and Romans.

The issue in Galatians was, do Gentile Christians have to become ethnic Jews to be real Christians? The Jewish-Christian argument was that Gentile Christians must become Jews to be Christians. That is, Gentile Christians

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must do works of law.

Paul responded by asserting that all people — Jews and Gentiles — are made righteous with God by the faithfulness of Christ and by the faith response of individuals (2.15-21). This is the basis for receiving the Holy Spirit and for being made children of Abraham (3.1f). For a Gentile Christian to become an ethnic Jew to be a Christian is to endanger one's salvation. "In Christ" annuls the Jew-Gentile distinction in relation to salvation and inclusion in the people of God (3.26f.). There is a new relationship between Jews and Gentiles "in Christ". They are equal without one having to become the other. It is okay for Jews to be Jews, but not for Gentiles to become Jews.

Paul's message for the church today is that salvation and inclusion in the church is based solely on God's saving and incorporating action in Christ, and the faith response of men/women. Ethnic identity is a function of history. That identity is legitimate as long as it is not imposed on people of a different identity as a criteria for salvation and inclusion in the church.

The issue in Romans is the inclusiveness of God's eschatological righteousness. Is it for the cosmos or only for Israel? Paul's fundamental claim is that the eschatological righteousness of God is cosmic; it is for all peoples, especially for the Gentiles, in fulfillment of God's promises to the Fathers.

Jewish ethnic identity is a valid historical reality for Jews. Circumcision is of value if the law is obeyed (2.25). It is an advantage to be a Jew (3.1f.). God remains faithful to his word to the Jews despite Jewish unfaithfulness (3.3f.; 9-11). The Jews are made righteous on the ground of their faith rather than through their faith (3.30). God has not rejected Israel (11.1f.).

But Jewish ethnic identity is not a criteria for the eschatological right-making of the Gentiles. God's end-time righteousness is revealed in the world through the faithfulness of Jesus (3.21-31). Gentiles enter God's covenant peoplehood through the faithfulness of God in the faithfulness of Jesus, and the human response of faith. The Gentiles are now being incorporated into Israel in fulfillment of God's promises. The church is Jewish. It is build on the Jewish root in fulfillment of God's promises.

Jewish ethnic identity is an obstacle to inclusion of Jews in the new people God is creating in the world. The Jews are not accepting the faithfulness of Jesus as the revelation of God's

end-time righteousness, and as the grounds for the inclusion of the Gentiles. They have heard the gospel, but they have rejected it. But God has not rejected his people despite their rejection of Messiah Jesus. God will yet save Israel. That eschatological event will mean the reconciliation of the world.

Christianity is not a new religion; it is the fulfillment of Judaism. It is the creation of a new people, composed of Jews and Gentiles, in fulfillment of God's promises to Israel. In one sense this new creation is a third race; it is a new reality that is entered by faith (entrance requirement) and baptism (entry rite). It is the body of Christ.

Jewish ethnic identity has a place in the church and in the eschatological scheme of history. Unity "in Christ" does not undo ethnic differences. "In Christ" Jews remain Jews and Gentiles remain Gentiles. Romans II makes explicit that in the final eschatological reconciliation ethnic distinctions remain. Jews will remain Jews, as a people, when they are saved, as Paul himself continued to be a Jew (11.1). Paul did not think of salvation at the limit of history as involving the destruction of Jewish ethnic identity, but its enhancement. The Jew who becomes a Christian renounces nothing. He/she does not turn to another God. Rather, he/she experiences the fulfillment of the Jewish faith as promised in the scriptures. But Jewish identity is not a criteria for the inclusion of Gentiles into the people of God. The rules governing Jewish identity must be compromised for the sake of relationships with Gentile believers.

Paul's message to the church is that ethnic identity is a legitimate historical and sociological reality. But ethnic identity cannot serve as a criterion for inclusion in the church, or as a barrier in relationships among Christians in the church.