THE OLD PERSPECTIVE ON SECOND-TEMPLE JUDAISM: COVENANTAL NOMISM, JUSTIFICATION, AND PERSEVERANCE

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INTRODUCTION

Beginning with the seminal work of E. P Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, in 1977,¹ there has been a concerted effort to redefine the Pauline references to the “works of the law” (mentioned explicitly five times in his epistles and implicitly several more times).² It is the contention of those in this movement (most notably beside Sanders are James Dunn and N. T. Wright) that the Reformers, in their reaction against the multi-faceted errors of Rome and, particularly, in their defense of the doctrine of *sola fide*, read too much into Paul, and that first century Judaism in general was, in fact, not legalistic or confused about the means of salvation; rather, the discussions about the works of the law are introduced by Paul to warn against a nationalistic interpretation of the Law that would exclude Gentiles. The “New Perspective”³ adherents hold that first century Jews understood that they were saved by grace but believed that following the ritual law was a token of their national election by God. These scholars then say that what Paul was arguing (in the terms “works” and “works of the law”) was that the “tokens” weren’t *limiters* of God’s grace and that His grace was available as well to those who did not adhere to ritual law (i.e., Gentiles). However, as this paper will show, Paul implicitly understood the potential misapplication of the Law as a supposed means of salvation and strove to present a

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³ Hereafter, “NP.”
gospel corrective that emptied the Law of any possibility of salvific content, and defined salvation rather in the context of faith in the gracious and finished work of God in Christ.

**Historic Perspective on Paul and the Law**

In order to respond to the charge brought by NP advocates that the Reformers’ understanding of Pauline theology vis-à-vis the “works of the law” was either novel and/or wrong, it is necessary to conduct a brief survey of the historical views of the Reformers to ascertain both their doctrine in this matter and their basis for it. Further, as the root of the NP charge against the “Old Perspective” on Paul is concerned with the doctrine of justification (a central element of the Reformers’ theology of the law), it is perhaps best to begin with an historic understanding of this terminology.

*Early Church Fathers*

Among the writings of the early church, two planks that would reappear in the Reformation centuries later are evident: justification (δικαιωσίας), understood in a salvific context, and that this justification is attained through the instrumentality of faith and not through works (whether material or moral). A cursory look at three early fathers will make this clear.

First, from the late first century, Clement of Rome wrote,

> We, therefore, who have been called by His will in Christ Jesus, are not justified by ourselves, neither by our wisdom or understanding or piety, nor by the works we have wrought in holiness of heart, but by the faith by which almighty God has justified all men from the beginning.\(^4\)

Thus, Clement, in discussing justification, excludes a number of means of attaining it, including “works we have wrought in holiness of heart” and plainly states that justification is,

rather, by faith. Similarly, Tertullian, writing against the heresy of Marcionism in the next century, discussed Paul’s reference to Habakkuk 2:4 in Romans 1:17:

“No, although the prophet Habakkuk first said this, yet you have the apostle here confirming the prophets, even as Christ did. The object, therefore, of the faith whereby the just man shall live, will be that same God to whom likewise belongs the law, by doing which no man is justified.”

Again, Tertullian clearly states that “no man is justified” by “doing” the law.

Finally, Augustine had much to say with regard to the theology of Paul, and of the Bible generally, as to the meaning of justification, and the efficacy of obedience to the works of the law to achieve it. Augustine understood Paul to teach that it was permissible for Jewish Christians to maintain their rituals and customs (though not permissible to press them onto non-Jewish Christians), all the while warning that such rituals and customs were devoid of any salvific content and maintaining that Paul proffered this warning as well:

In the case of the first Christians, who came to the faith as Jews, it was by degrees that they were brought to change their customs, and to have a clear perception of the truth; and permission was given them by the apostle to preserve their hereditary worship and belief, in which they had been born and brought up… But in the case of those who had no such training, but were brought to Christ, the corner-stone, from the opposite wall of circumcision, there was no obligation to adopt Jewish customs. If, indeed, like Timothy, they chose to accommodate themselves to the views of those of the circumcision who were still wedded to their old sacraments, they were free to do so. But if they supposed that their hope and salvation depended on these works of the law, they were warned against them as a fatal danger.

In a direct reference to Second Temple Judaism, Augustine further indicted Jews who thought to attain righteousness (i.e., justification) by the means of their works. He then clarifies that the Jews who had done so were not thinking that their salvation was contingent upon their

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circumcision alone (in other words, as an ethnic identity marker), but upon their adherence to the moral law of God:

But Israel, which followed after the law of righteousness, hath not attained to the law of righteousness. And why? Because they sought it not by faith, but as it were by works… Then are we still in doubt what are those works of the law by which a man is not justified…? …In this place, however, it is certainly not circumcision which they wanted to establish as their own righteousness, because God established this by prescribing it Himself… This then is the sole distinction, that the very precept, “Thou shalt not covet,” and God's other good and holy commandments, they attributed to themselves…

Thus it becomes apparent that, from its earliest scribes, the Church has always accepted a de facto presence of a works-righteousness, legal mentality that obscured the Jew from a proper apprehension of salvation by faith. While it was, of course, understood that there were Old Testament saints who were confirmed in the covenental community of God by means of faith, there was nonetheless a prevailing and pervasive attitude that strove to merit salvation by acts of self-righteousness which continued into Second Temple Judaism. This mindset, as well as the Pauline response to it, was revisited by the theology of the Reformation 1500 years later.

Reformers

Having ascertained the general tenor of thought on the matter of faith and justification in the early church, it is now necessary to determine whether the Reformation brought about a return to that earlier view or initiated a trajectory that carried it far afield from the nascent theology of the Christian church, for as Busenitz notes,

“it appears that the ax-head of NPP theology is aimed most directly at the roots of the Reformation. The Reformers and their sola fide teaching—the very core of the split with the Roman Catholic Church—are the focal point of the assault. The frontal attack seems directed primarily at Luther and Calvin, who, it is claimed,

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7 Augustine, A Treatise of the Spirit and the Letter, NPNF 1.05.50.
have misunderstood Paul's teaching in Romans and Galatians and have seriously misconstrued the doctrine of justification.\(^8\)

Thus a look at both Luther and Calvin is in order, though a brief one will do, as no one – least of all the NP proponents who lay the charge of misinterpreting Paul at the feet of the Reformers – questions the essence of the doctrine of *sola fide* as propounded by them.

Essentially, the Reformers believed that, in his discussion concerning justification and the “works of the law,” Paul is clearly delineating between two perceived ways of salvation (one false and one true). On the one hand was the plan that believed obedience merited salvation (i.e., salvation by works or “law”); while, on the other hand, was the plan that trusted in Christ alone by grace alone through faith alone. Arguably, the clarion bell of justification by faith was never rung more loudly than by Martin Luther who saw it with startling clarity. In fact, “No text was more central to Luther’s understanding of Paul”\(^9\) than Galatians 2:16 where Paul wrote:

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…\text{nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified.}
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For Luther, this verse unambiguously taught that Christ is the object of faith, and that we are “justified,” or placed in a right relationship with God by means of that faith and pointedly *not* by observance of the “works of the Law.” In the matter of denying the possibility of justification by works of the law, “Luther is never more eager or eloquent.”\(^10\)

Calvin’s views may best be ascertained from his definitions of the relevant terms. Regarding justification, he contends:


\(^10\) Ibid., 35.
Thus we simply interpret justification, as the acceptance with which God receives us into his favor as if we were righteous; and we say that this justification consists in the forgiveness of sins and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ.\(^{11}\)

This justification, he maintained, may only be laid hold of by faith. Discussing Paul’s contrasts between faith and the works of the law, Calvin wrote

Could he express more clearly than in this word, that there is justification in faith only where there are no works to which reward is due, and that faith is imputed for righteousness only when righteousness is conferred freely without merit?\(^{12}\)

There can be little argument (and, indeed, there is none) that Luther, Calvin, and their Reformational heirs believed that justification was, in Paul’s theology, a reckoning whereby God declares man acceptable as if he were righteous, yet this righteousness they believed was neither inherent nor infused within man, but was rather the imputed righteousness of Christ. Further, this imputed righteousness was not earned by any merit – whether ceremonial or moral – but was appropriated wholly on the basis of faith in Christ. Again, as this point is not in dispute by the NP, it will essentially be entered into the record as a matter of fact.

\textit{Post-Reformational Theologians}

Though there has not been much interaction between the NP and the theology of the post-Reformational period,\(^{13}\) it is helpful to briefly indicate that, within conservative scholarship, there was no significant alteration to either the doctrine of justification or the interpretation of Pauline references to the works of the law. In the seventeenth century, Calvinist Scholastic


\[^{12}\text{Calvin, ICR, 3.11.20.}\]

\[^{13}\text{Indeed, Wright makes this rather astonishing confession for one considered a preeminent scholar of Paul: “I am largely ignorant of the Pauline exegesis of all but a few of the fathers and reformers. The Middle Ages, and the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, had plenty to say about Paul, but I have not read it.” N. T. Wright, }\textit{Paul in Fresh Perspective}\text{ (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 13.}\]
Francis Turretin wrote concerning justification against the Roman Catholic doctrine of infused righteousness, but his words are also relevant to the matter at hand:

This word ought to be employed in the sense in which it was used by Paul in his dispute against the Jews. And yet it is certain that he did not speak there of an infusion of righteousness, viz; whether from faith, or from the works of the law the habit of righteousness should be infused into man, but how the sinner could stand before the judgment seat of God, and obtain a right to life, whether by the works of the law, as the Jews imagined or by faith in Christ.  

Thus, Turretin revealed a consistency in his understanding of the presence of works-righteousness of Second Temple Judaism. Likewise, in the eighteenth century, Princeton theologian Jonathan Edwards expounded upon Romans 4:5 and Paul’s discussion therein of justification:

It appears, that by him that worketh not, in this verse, is not meant one who merely does not conform to the ceremonial law, because he that worketh not, and the ungodly, are evidently synonymous expressions... The foregoing verse is, “Now to him that worketh, is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt.” In that verse, it is evident that gospel grace consists in the reward being given without works, and in this verse, which immediately follows it, and in sense is connected with it, gospel grace consists in a man’s being justified as ungodly. By which it is most plain, that by him that worketh not, and him that is ungodly, are meant the same thing, and that therefore not only works of the ceremonial law are excluded in this business of justification, but works of morality and godliness.

Here, as with Augustine, the point is made clear that the problem is not merely a belief in righteousness obtained through observance of ceremonial law, but a fuller theology of works-righteousness as a result of faithful obedience to the moral law of God. Thus, it is clear that the notion of justification as both a salvific term, and, more specifically, as a forensic term, remained the constant theme among conservative New Testament scholarship. The charge, then, that the Reformers were introducing something wholly novel in their understanding of this doctrine must

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be dismissed. The historic trajectory of Pauline theology implicitly understood Paul as writing against an obviously present legal spirit in Second Temple Judaism. Thus, in truth, the case of the NP must be lodged against two millennia of Christian scholarship.

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON PAUL AND THE LAW

The NP has many different voices. In fact,

[T]he plethora of new proposals spawned by this paradigm shift [NP] suffers as much from internal dissent as from external critique, since no consensus has yet emerged concerning the reason(s) why Paul actually rejected Judaism and the ‘works of the Law,’ nor concerning the actual meaning of ‘works of the Law’ in Paul's writings.¹⁶

Consequently, one cannot critique the movement as a whole as if it were a monolithic system. Still, certain observations may be made more broadly that address those issues upon which there is general agreement among NP advocates. For instance, most NP theologies take into account the interpretation of Second Temple Judaism as set forth by Sanders and thence dubbed “covenantal nomism.” Accordingly, there is fairly broad consensus with what this means to the Pauline discussions of justification, at least insofar as what Paul does not mean by the term.¹⁷ Finally, though there is some disparity in the development of this idea, the resultant NP doctrines of perseverance coalesce logically (if not admittedly) with one another after the dust of the theological minutiae has settled. Each of these three, then, covenantal nomism, justification, and perseverance will be considered in turn.


¹⁷ That being, of course, precisely what the Reformers said that he did mean; the NP is nothing if not unified in their rejection of sola fide, traditionally understood.
Covenantal Nomism

While there are a number of NP trajectories, for the most part they can all be traced back to Sanders’ interpretation of Second Temple Judaism. Dunn and Wright enthusiastically embrace Sanders’ thesis regarding Second Temple Judaism, though they diverge from his theology of Paul.\textsuperscript{18} Rejecting outright a Jewish idea of works-righteousness, Sanders argued that the Jews understood themselves to be situationally in a covenantal relationship with God and that the external ritualism and ceremonies were means of signifying that and, in some respect, maintaining it. He defined his view, known as covenantal nomism, as follows:

Covenantal nomism is the view that one’s place in God’s plan is established on the basis of the covenant and that the covenant required as the proper response of man his obedience to its commandments, while providing means of atonement for transgression.\textsuperscript{19}

Sanders, and later Dunn, rightly interpret the mood in Second Temple Judaism as one of desperately clinging to a national and ethnic identity in the face of the Roman oppression. As Abernathy summarizes:

During the crises of the Maccabean period the relation between covenant, election and law became an especially important part of Jewish self-understanding. Because of the threats to Judaism, the ‘boundary-defining’ nature of circumcision, food laws and Sabbath-keeping became increasingly important, to the point that the covenant promise and law eventually became too bound up with the ethnic identity of Israel.\textsuperscript{20}

However, the NP then takes this very real circumstance of practice and translates it into the very object of Paul’s theological treatises. They say that Israel understood herself to be in a covenantal relationship with God \textit{by grace}, and that they were responding \textit{in faith} by keeping

\textsuperscript{18} Wright notes that Sanders “see and argues for in Judaism what he misses in Paul: the covenant.” N. T. Wright, \textit{What Saint Paul Really Said} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 120.

\textsuperscript{19} Sanders, 75.

these “boundary-markers” that were the external signs of that covenant. N. T. Wright argues that, “Faith, not the possession and/or practice of the Torah, is the badge which marks out this family, the family which is now defined as the people of the Messiah.”\(^{21}\) In other words, these the “works of the law” were never understood as a means of gaining access to the covenantal relationship (that is, they were not viewed salvifically) but were understood, rather, as a means of identifying oneself as being a partaker of the covenant that had been accessed by grace and the covenantal faithfulness of God.

Consequently, Paul, principally in his Galatian and Roman epistles, was arguing that the external signs were not necessary for covenant identification, as Gentiles were now being admitted to the covenant (also on the same condition of faith). Thus, Paul was “not concerned with faith versus works, but with Jewish exclusivism.”\(^{22}\) His objection to maintaining these “boundary-markers,” then, was that they may be seen to imply that God’s covenant was narrowly confined along ethnic or national lines. According to the NP,

Paul's statements against trusting in the works of the law focus on the Jewish understanding of who could (or could not) share in their covenant-community. These Second Temple Jews were insisting on an exclusive Jewish membership in the covenant. Paul was addressing that issue, arguing that covenant-status was available to both Jew and Gentile through the Messiah.\(^{23}\)

While this system of thought is indeed well-developed and sensible as it stands, there are biblical passages that seem to stand in stark opposition to Sanders’ conclusions. Deferring to his faith in the higher-critical hermeneutic, Sanders simply chooses not to interact with those passages, declaring them inauthentic, writing, “Of the material which depicts legal conflict, what

\(^{21}\) Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective*, 113.

\(^{22}\) Abernathy, 141.

\(^{23}\) Busenitz, 248, emphasis in original.
actually goes back to the historical Jesus? I continue to think that relatively little does.”

Regarding Paul’s references to the “works of the law,” Sanders is even more explicit, saying that the apostle’s “diverse answers, when set alongside one another, do not form a logical whole.”

Thus, he concludes, for example, that Paul’s

…treatment of the law in chapter 2 (of Romans) cannot be harmonized with any of the diverse things which Paul says about the law elsewhere… [and Paul] goes beyond inconsistency or variety of argument and explanation to true self-contradiction.

Conversely, Sanders put considerably greater stock in what he saw in much of the Pseudepigrapha as a consistent theme of grace-based salvific language. Upon this framework, he developed his idea of covenantal nomism. However, though there are elements within the intertestamental documents that point to covenantal election and the mercy of God, Gathercole, Seifrid, and others have found and documented concurrent strands of language more consistent with works-righteousness and ultimate vindication on the basis of those works.

Schreiner concludes, “The point… is that Sanders overemphasized the theme of grace in Second Temple Judaism and underemphasized the importance of works,” and adds that, in considering the NP, it is wise to bear in mind that it “depends on the foundation that Sanders erected, but the foundation is not secure, and there is no consensus that it is correct.” Nevertheless, it is upon this foundation that NP has staked its claim to legitimacy.

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24 Sanders, 93.


26 Ibid., 123, 147.


Dunn, for his part, agrees with and builds upon the covenantal nomism of Sanders, though he diverges from Sanders’ virtual abandonment of biblical inerrancy, and seeks instead to redefine the Pauline references to “works” to mean circumcision and kosher food laws, rather than carrying any soteriological import. He writes:

In my view, … ‘works of the law’ is precisely the phrase chosen by Paul (as either already familiar to his readers or self-evident to them in its significance), by which Paul denotes those obligations prescribed by the law which show the individual concerned to belong to the law, which mark out the practitioner as a member of the people of the law, the covenant people, the Jewish nation.29

This analysis fails at least in part, however, in light of Paul’s discussion in Romans 4 wherein he connects Abraham’s “work” (which occurred, of course, before the Mosaic law was given) with David’s (which followed the law). It is difficult, then, to square Dunn’s wholesale definition of “works” in Pauline theology with the writings of Paul, unless, of course, Dunn is prepared to follow Sanders off the ledge into the abyss of self-contradiction in Paul.

N. T. Wright has gained tremendous respect in evangelical circles, particularly for his work on the history of the Resurrection and against the Jesus Project; still, he is principally now a towering figure in NP theology and inseparable from it. Meadors comments on this connection:

Though his branch of the “Fresh” perspective shoots off in a direction distinctive from Dunn and Sanders, Wright considers Sanders’ view of covenantal nomism an established fact and a valid premise for understanding Paul’s theology.30

Or, as Hughes puts it, “If Sanders and Dunn can be compared to the root of the NP, Wright is the trunk of the tree.”31 So, while Wright is more popularly approachable and is often tacitly accepted as a card-carrying evangelical, a closer inspection of his theology reveals as

radical a departure from orthodoxy as the others. And here Wright provides an excellent segue into the discussion of justification. Following the precedent set by Sanders and drawing from a pseudepigraphal source (Qumran scroll 4QMMT) to make his case, he says,

‘Justification by works’ has nothing to do with individual Jews attempting a kind of proto-Pelagian pulling themselves up by their moral bootstraps, and everything to do with the definition of the true Israel.  

Justification

Compared to the NP on justification, the traditional definition, as was demonstrated in the discussions of the early fathers and the Reformers, may be summarized in this way: “Most believe that justification is a one-time act whereby a believer is declared righteous before God based on the imputed righteousness of Christ.” Regarding Paul’s theology, particularly in Galatians 2-4 and Romans 3-4, Sanders had a significantly different interpretation.

Concerning these passages, he writes: ‘The subject matter is not ‘how can the individual be righteous in God’s sight?’, but rather, ‘on what grounds can Gentiles participate in the people of God in the last days?’” With this, Sanders clearly delineates his view from that of the Reformers, whom he indicts as “reading into” Paul their own circumstances and the issues present in the date with Rome. He writes,

Luther, plagued by guilt, read Paul’s passages on ‘righteousness by faith’ as meaning that God reckoned a Christian to be righteous even though he or she was a sinner.... Luther’s emphasis on fictional, imputed righteousness, though it has often been shown to be an incorrect interpretation of Paul, has been influential.... Luther sought and found relief from guilt. But Luther’s problems were not Paul’s, and we misunderstand him if we see him through Luther’s eyes.

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33 Hughes, 266.


35 Ibid.
Wright adds his own contribution in saying that this historic Protestant view of justification “does not do justice to the richness and precision of Paul's doctrine, and indeed distorts it at various points.”\(^{36}\) And, responding to the claim that the central theme of the entire Roman epistle is justification, understood to mean a description of how persons become Christians, Wright asserts that “this way of reading Romans has systematically done violence to that text for hundreds of years, and that it is time for the text itself to be heard again.”\(^{37}\) Wright has much more to say on the topic of justification. In response to the Galatian passages (chapters 2-4) he contends: “Justification, in Galatians, is the doctrine which insists that all who share faith in Christ belong at the same table, no matter what their racial differences.”\(^{38}\) Expanding upon this idea, he argues that:

> Justification in the first century was not about how someone might establish a relationship with God. It was about God's eschatological definition, both future and present, of who was, in fact, a member of his people.... In standard Christian language, it wasn’t so much about soteriology as about ecclesiology; not so much about salvation as about the church.... Those who adhered in the proper way to the ancestral covenant charter, the Torah, were assured in the present that they were the people who would be vindicated in the future.... Justification in this setting, then, is not a matter of how someone enters the community of the true people of God, but of how you tell who belongs to that community... \(^{39}\)

However, as Busenitz observes,

> Jesus, explaining His parable of the Pharisee and the tax-gatherer, directly connects justification with soteriology, not ecclesiology. He remarks, “I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other...” (Luke 18:14). Romans 9:30-32 is equally definitive in its discussion of works-salvation within the teachings of Judaism.\(^{40}\)

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\(^{37}\) Ibid., 117.

\(^{38}\) Ibid., 122.

\(^{39}\) Ibid., 119, emphasis in the original.

\(^{40}\) Busenitz, 248.
It is clear, then, that the NP, rooted in the covenantal nomism of Sanders, has developed a theology of justification that is radically—and unapologetically—opposed to the Reformation doctrine and, as has been demonstrated, opposed to the historic doctrine of the church from the first century. Thus they are, in essence, attempting to correct not only the Reformers, but all of Christian history that has predated them. Westerholm accurately assesses the only available options which NP advocates have consequently presented for consideration:

It is possible to hold, with the new persepectivists, that Judaism was not legalistic while still holding, with the “Lutherans” that Paul thought it was; Paul, then, we must conclude, was wrong. The solution is enticingly simple, though the implication that we are in a position to correct Paul’s understanding of first-century Judaism is at least startling, if not (as some would insist) grossly improbable. More commonly it is held that Judaism is not legalistic, that Paul had been misread when he has been thought to reject it in those terms, and that the error is to be attributed to Luther and his heirs, whose views of Judaism we need not scruple to amend.41

Some, as was seen in Sanders, dismiss the legal texts as unauthentic. Others, particularly Dunn and Wright, argue that Paul was right, but wrongly understood (again, by two millennia of theologians—though they only admit to a quarter of that). Whichever option is chosen, however, the various NP theologies eventually merge back together in the way that covenantal nomism issues forth in the doctrine of perseverance.

Perseverance

In assessing covenantal nomism, Meadors concludes that it ultimately “refers to the maintenance of status, not attainment of it.”42 This conclusion is borne out by Sanders, who wrote that “the intention and effort to be obedient constitute the condition for remaining in the

41 Westerholm, 178. Westerholm uses the term “Lutherans” generally to define the historic doctrine as espoused by Luther.

42 Meadors, 6.
covenant, but they do not earn it.”

Hughes provides a helpful synopsis of this system that explains how it affects one’s ultimate standing before God:

Being part of the covenant community (the church) does not guarantee the salvation of individuals, but it puts them into the right circumstances to be saved. Believers have the hope of future salvation as long as they continue to obey. In other words, one enters the covenant community by faith and stays in the covenant community by works... This means that Christians in the covenant community are under a bilateral covenant, entered by faith, but maintained by works.

The charge has also been leveled that Dunn rejects the doctrine of perseverance by faith. According to NP theology, a person is placed into the covenant community by faith, yet a failure to perform the works of obedience will nevertheless result in that person being found, ultimately, to be outside of the covenant community. In this sense, the resemblance to Roman Catholic theology becomes obvious. For Rome, an infant’s baptism provides entrance into the church, yet sacramental observance is required for final salvation. This is not to be confused with the Arminian view of salvation being potentially lost upon a loss of faith or an outright rejection of Christ; rather, this system (NP) requires works of obedience in order to be finally saved. The system may thus be distilled as justification by works. For while NP purports to hold to a doctrine of justification by faith, what they really say is initial justification by faith and future justification by works.

Wright explains the position by positing a distinction between present justification (based on the covenant “identity marker” of faith) and future justification (staying in by works):

―Present justification declares, on the basis of faith, what future justification will affirm

43 Sanders, Paul and Palestinian Judaism, 180, emphasis in original.

44 Hughes, 270.

45 Mike Stallard, review of The Theology of Paul the Apostle by James D. G. Dunn, Journal of Ministry and Theology 2, no. 2 (Fall 1998): 232.
publicly…on the basis of the entire life.”\textsuperscript{46} And elsewhere, “[Justification] …is something which happens in the present time… as a proper anticipation of the eventual judgment which will be announced, on the basis of the whole life led, in the future.”\textsuperscript{47} Lest there be any confusion as to what Wright means here, he has helpfully spelled it out in even better detail as he discusses what he envisions Paul to have looked forward to at his death:

This is why, when Paul looks ahead to the future and asks, as well one might, what god will say on the last day, he holds up as his joy and crown, not the merits and death of Jesus, but the churches he has planted who remain faithful to the gospel. The path from initial faith to final resurrection (and resurrection we must remind ourselves, constitutes rescue, that is salvation, from death itself) lies through holy and faithful Spirit-led service, including suffering.\textsuperscript{48}

Thus, the charge of works-righteousness has been raised against this system and it would seem, by all accounts, that this charge has not inconsiderable merit. As Hughes notes, “if one is kept in the covenant community by works, this means salvation is by works.”\textsuperscript{49}

\textbf{Evaluation}

The adoption of NP views has led some to accept a gospel different from the gospel preached by the Reformers. Some have tried to argue that if one redefines justification, rejects imputation, rejects perseverance, redefines righteousness, and redefines the church, he hasn't changed the gospel.\textsuperscript{50}

As ludicrous as that may sound to evangelical ears, the fact remains that the NP does, in fact, radically redefine the gospel. Even were one to accept the foundational premise behind the idea of covenantal nomism – that is, that Second Temple Judaism was largely aware that true

\textsuperscript{46} Wright, \textit{What Saint Paul Really Said}, 129, emphasis added.

\textsuperscript{47} Wright, \textit{Paul in Fresh Perspective}, 57, emphasis added.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 148, emphasis added.

\textsuperscript{49} Hughes, 274.

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 269.
justification was by faith and not by works (their definition of justification set aside for now) – the ultimate resolution of NP theology logically demands a theology of works-righteousness. As Meadors notes, “Keeping/maintaining the covenant by works is in the end not appreciably different from entering the covenant by works, because both presuppose works as necessary for covenant blessing.”

Salvation by works is contrary to the biblical record overall, and to Pauline theology, in particular. The early church understood this. The Reformers understood it. Sanders’ attempts to modify it (and Dunn’s and Wright’s, as well) are erroneous and, ultimately, heretical because the understanding of Paul’s teaching on the Law as nationalistic and not legalistic leads to an association of the doctrine of justification with ecclesiology rather than soteriology. This leads to an understanding of salvation that has works as an essential component part.

Paul, in Philippians 3:6 declares himself “blameless” in regard to law-keeping. Yet he was not justified. If he is not here indicating that it was common to believe one would be justified under those circumstances (and he being a good Jew, a “Hebrew of Hebrews,” and a “Pharisee of Pharisees” would have been if any could by this means), the polemic in Galatians, and especially in Romans 10:5 is meaningless. His righteousness before conversion was his own rather than which comes through faith in Christ (Philippians 3:9). Indeed, “It is clear that it was a righteousness based on doing instead of believing. Faith stands in contrast to works as the pathway to salvation.”

It is always an undertaking of serious import and grave consequence to argue that the predominant course of the Christian church for hundreds of years has gotten it all wrong. In very

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51 Meadors, 14.

52 Schreiner, 146.
few instances, such as Luther against Rome, these corrective interpretations have been sound and have returned the church to a position more in line with the Bible. For the most part, however, attempts to effect radical change in central doctrinal points have ultimately been rejected as heretical. Docetism, Arianism, and Donatism come to mind. So to do what the New Perspective proponents have done, to suggest a radical realignment of the core doctrine of the church, sole fide, must either prove out as a legitimate corrective or as a heresy. As the interpretations of the Reformers have been shown to be consistent with the Christian tradition and, most importantly, with Scripture itself, the New Perspective must be rejected as being contrary to proper and right doctrine. What Paul really said was what the church, particularly the Reformers, thought that he said. To attempt to put words in the apostle’s mouth is to stand on the precipice of a slippery slope.

CONCLUSION

The New Perspective fails to take seriously the proclivity of all mankind (including, but certainly not limited to, Second Temple Judaism) to expect salvation to be somehow meritable. The notion of grace runs contrary to the sinful nature which exalts its own ability and therefore magnifies its inherent worth apart from Christ. The Jews to whom Paul was directing these arguments (against the law as a means of salvation) had abandoned the true faith of their fathers, who had trusted God and who had their faith credited with the righteousness of Christ. Paul is laboring with the countrymen he loves so dearly to convince them that there is no salvation apart from the imputed righteousness of Christ as a consequence of justification by faith alone. To rob Paul’s witness of this singular and supremely important truth, as the New Perspective hopes to do, is to do more than rewrite the history of Second Temple Judaism; it is to nurture in
contemporary souls the innate sense of self-righteousness that has, as its end, only the judgment and condemnation of a holy God who will only accept the righteousness of Christ.
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