



Faith Pulpit

An Overview of the New Perspective on Paul

The New Perspective on Paul is a major deviation from New Testament teaching that is gaining in acceptance among writers and teachers, even among some evangelicals. In the July/August and September/October 2008 issues of the Faith Pulpit, Dr. Paul Hartog examined this teaching as it relates to the doctrine of justification. In this follow-up article, Dr. Douglas Brown, chair of the New Testament Department at Faith Baptist Theological Seminary in Ankeny, Iowa, presents a basic overview of the New Perspective, surveying the historical background, identifying the major figures in the movement, and clarifying what is at stake in the debate.

I have had a couple of opportunities to be on camera in front of a “green screen.” The camera captures your image and ignores the green background. It is a great experience because you can project yourself on screen into any number of backgrounds. At one moment you can be skiing in the Alps; the next, you can be surfing on the North Shore. You stay the same, only the background changes. This is the same technology that weather reporters use in their studios to show the weather map.

In an odd kind of way, the green screen illustrates what the New Perspective on Paul is all about. The New Perspective on Paul, however, is not really first and foremost about Paul at all. It is about Paul’s background (i.e., Second Temple Judaism). When you change the background on the green screen from mountains to ocean, people interpret the image in a completely different way. In a similar way, New Perspective scholars are reinterpreting Paul in a variety of different ways because their perception of his background of first-century Judaism has changed.

What Is the New Perspective?

In order to grasp the New Perspective on Paul’s Jewish background, we first need to understand a little bit about the Old Perspective. The Old Perspective was basically the product of Protestant scholarship (especially Lutheran) and was based primarily on later Jewish sources (such as the Talmuds, c. 4-5

century AD). It essentially portrayed first-century Judaism as a monolithic religion that was legalistic, devoid of grace, and dominated by fear.

The New Perspective methodologically limits the study of first-century Judaism to earlier sources (such as the Old Testament Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, Josephus, and the Dead Sea Scrolls). Instead of seeing Second Temple Judaism as a monolithic, legalistic religion, it is now seen as a grace-based religion with a variety of branches. The New Perspective renders null and void any attempt to portray first-century Judaism as a works-based, moralistic religion.

At this point the New Perspective may sound merely like an esoteric academic nuance. The conundrum is, however, that the New Perspective dramatically changes Paul's "green screen" backdrop. If Paul's Jewish opponents were not legalists, arguing for a works-based righteousness, then how should we interpret Paul?

What Is the New Perspective on Paul?

New Perspective interpreters of Paul are many and varied. To be sure, there is not one New Perspective on Paul, but a plethora of new perspectives. What is common to all of them, though, is that they are using this new understanding of first-century Judaism to refract their interpretations of Paul. We will limit our discussion to three key figures.

E. P. Sanders In 1977 E. P. Sanders published his seminal work, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Fortress). In it he dismantled the "old" view of Judaism and formulated what would be later called the New Perspective. He coined the phrase "covenant nomism" to describe the nature of Second Temple Judaism. Essentially this means that Judaism was a grace-based religion. Jews entered into the covenantal blessings of Israel by faith and God's grace.

Sanders also argued, however, that Jews within the covenant had to practice the Law to maintain their status. In other words, covenant nomism means that Jews "got in" by faith and "stayed in" by works. This transfer terminology of "getting in" and "staying in" is foundational to the New Perspective and is Sanders's major contribution to the debate.

Sanders's interpretation of Paul in light of covenant nomism is certainly novel and a bit disjointed. He argues that only after Paul became a Christian did he work out the "plight" of mankind (opposite of Romans, which is plight to solution). He more or less flattens Judaism and Christianity into equal religions because both are based on covenantal nomism ("getting in" vs. "staying in"). The dispute in Paul, therefore, is not between law and grace, or even between Judaism and Christianity, since both enter by grace and maintain their status by works. Rather, the dispute is that Gentiles do not have to practice the social distinctions of Judaism (circumcision, Sabbath keeping, and food laws). Finally, for Sanders justification in Paul's writings is a reference to entering the covenant people.

J. D. G. Dunn The second key figure in the development of the New Perspective on Paul is J. D. G. Dunn. In 1982 Dunn coined the term “New Perspective on Paul.” He attempts to correct Sanders’s incoherent view of Paul with a more consistent framework. For Dunn justification is not just “getting in” but also “staying in” as well as the future judgment. He explains Paul’s negative comments about the law not in soteriological categories but rather in social categories. In other words, Jewish Christians were misusing the law by forcing Gentile Christians to obey social barriers of Judaism (circumcision, Sabbath keeping, and food laws). Dunn interprets Paul’s “works of the law” in Galatians and Romans not as human attempts at gaining God’s favor but as the “social badges” or “boundary markers” of Judaism. Similar to Sanders, the controversy in Paul was that Gentiles did not have to observe the law to “stay in” the covenant. Thus, Paul was not battling legalism, but nationalism.

N. T. Wright The most influential advocate of the New Perspective is no doubt N. T. Wright. Wright, the bishop of Durham, is a prolific author and one of the foremost New Testament scholars in the world. While his major work on Paul is forthcoming, he just published a monograph called *Justification: God’s Plan and Paul’s Vision* in 2009 (IVP). This book was in part a response to his critics concerning his New Perspective interpretation of Paul’s doctrine of justification. Specifically, it was an answer to John Piper’s critique in his 2007 book, *The Future of Justification: A Response to N. T. Wright* (Crossway).¹ In his book Wright not only refutes traditional critics as “geocentrists” (a reference to people who refused to believe in the Copernican discovery that the Earth is not the center of the solar system) but also systematically and exegetically attempts to present his take on justification.

Wright essentially accepts Sanders’s conception of covenant nomism—that first-century Judaism was a grace-based religion and that Jews believed entrance into the covenantal blessings was by God’s grace through faith. To Wright this point has been established and accepted by mainstream scholarship. Concerning the “works of the law,” Wright agrees with Dunn that Paul was referring to Jewish boundary markers such as circumcision, Sabbath keeping, and food restrictions.

Wright, however, breaks with Sanders and Dunn in his overall interpretation of Paul and specifically in what Paul meant by justification. Wright sees the gospel as the announcement of Jesus’ lordship, which works the power of God to bring people into the family of Abraham. Thus, the concept of covenant, (i.e., “God’s single plan, through Abraham and his family, to bless the whole world”) becomes a dominant theme in Wright’s discussion of justification.²

For Wright, justification is not actually part of the gospel (or at the heart of the gospel), but it is in fact a result of the gospel. He argues that justification is a declaration of righteousness but not as understood and articulated by the Reformers (such as John Calvin, Martin Luther, and Thomas Cranmer). He argues that justification is more like an acquittal for a defendant or a vindication of not being guilty. The traditional Protestant view is that God’s declaration of righteousness (i.e.,

justification) was the result of God imputing Christ's righteousness to the sinner at the moment of salvation. Wright categorically rejects the imputation of God's righteousness. He believes it to be a category mistake:

If we use the language of the law court, it makes no sense whatever to say that the judge imputes, imparts, bequeaths, conveys or otherwise transfers his righteousness to either the plaintiff or the defendant. Righteousness is not an object, a substance or a gas which can be passed across the courtroom. . . . To imagine the defendant somehow receiving the judge's righteousness is simply a category mistake.³

Instead of linking the "righteousness of God" to God's justice or moral uprightness, Wright believes it is a reference to God's covenant faithfulness.

Another wrinkle in Wright's view is that justification is not completed at the moment of salvation, but rather it is God's on-going declaration of one's status in the covenant community. He argues that justification is more a matter of ecclesiology than soteriology. Therefore, justification is initially when a Christian receives forgiveness, but it is then maintained through works and finally completed when the believer is vindicated at the final judgment. Thus, Wright argues for an eschatological dimension to Paul's doctrine of justification.

What Is at Stake?

The New Perspective on Paul represents a genuine paradigm shift in the field of Biblical studies. It does nothing less than overturn the Reformation. The Reformers' cry of "justification by faith alone" no longer stands unchallenged in Protestant circles. Specifically, New Perspective scholars reject the doctrine of imputation. Many who hold to the traditional view have recognized that this ultimately minimizes the death of Jesus on the cross.

Closely related to this idea is the very nature of salvation. G. P. Waters correctly contends that New Perspective scholars essentially reduce first-century Judaism and Christianity into semi-Pelagian religions.⁴ The result is that works become part of the salvation process. Sanders's charge that first-century Judaism is not legalistic becomes nothing but muddled once we see what the alternative solution is from the New Perspective. Undoubtedly New Perspective proponents confuse grace, merit, and works.

It is interesting to note also that Wright believes this new consensus on justification could well bring a renewed ecumenism to Christianity. The barrier of justification by faith alone no longer stands between the Roman Catholic and Protestant wings of Christendom. He writes, "justification by faith tells me that if my Roman neighbor believes that Jesus is Lord and that God raised him from the dead then he or she is a brother or sister, however much I believe them muddled, even dangerously so, on other

matters.”⁵

Finally, the authority of Scripture is at stake. Proponents of the New Perspective are heavily dependent upon their “green screen” background of Paul. In the opinion of some they have elevated this background to the point that it speaks louder than the Scriptures themselves. The Reformers’ cry of sola scriptura is being undermined.

Conclusion

Only time will tell how far reaching the New Perspective impact will be on the church. The battle is still primarily an academic endeavor at this point. But just as Martin Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses eventually transformed the church, so the New Perspective will trickle down into the pews. Today’s professors are training tomorrow’s pastors.

We already see the New Perspective impacting commentaries and background books. Dunn’s and Wright’s commentaries are readily available and could be used naively. In Scot McKnight’s commentary on Galatians in the NIV Application Commentary series his introduction and exposition reflects the New Perspective, but he does not really reveal how divergent his conclusions are from traditional views.

Pastors or lay people who are unaware of this doctrinal deviation could easily use New Perspective writings without even understanding what is at stake. At the very least, pastors and church leaders need to be aware of the ongoing debate and how theology is changing. Many scholars with a traditional view have mounted defenses against the New Perspective, but much more needs to be done.⁶

Works Cited

1. John Piper, *The Future of Justification: A Response to N. T. Wright* (Wheaton: Good News/Crossway, 2007). Interestingly both N. T. Wright and John Piper were scheduled to be main authors at plenary sessions of the Evangelical Theological Society’s annual conference in Atlanta in November 2010. Unfortunately Piper is now on sabbatical and will be replaced by Tom Schreiner, another well-known critic of the New Perspective.
2. N. T. Wright, *Justification: God’s Plan and Paul’s Vision* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2009), 67.
3. N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 98.
4. Guy Prentiss Waters, *Justification and the New Perspective on Paul: A Review and Response* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2004), 57, 58, 185-87.
5. See N. T. Wright, “New Perspectives on Paul,” Lecture at the Rutherford House Conference at http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright_New_Perspectives.pdf (accessed May 31, 2010), 15.
6. Most notable is the two volume set, *Justification and Variegated Nomism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001, 2004) edited by D. A. Carson, Peter O’Brien, and Mark Seifrid.

To learn more about the New Perspective on Paul, visit “The Paul Page” at thepaulpage.com. This website contains hundreds of articles, reviews, and books dedicated to the subject.

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