

# In Defense of the New Perspective on Paul

Essays and Reviews

Don Garlington

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*In Defense of the New Perspective on Paul: Essays and Reviews*

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For Jimmy Dunn  
Teacher and friend, who introduced me  
to a whole “New Perspective” on Paul



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## PREFACE

The following book is comprised of a series of essays and reviews that have been produced over the past several years, all related, in one way or the other, to the New Perspective on Paul (NPP). This “defense” of the NPP takes the form of a combination of exegesis and extended book reviews, in some cases with the two overlapping. The first chapter attempts an assessment of the NPP some two and a third decades after the appearance of E. P. Sanders’ *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* in 1977, as followed up by J. D. G. Dunn’s Manson Memorial Lecture, “The New Perspective on Paul,” in 1982. Its purpose is mainly to clarify what the NPP is and what it isn’t. Thereafter an exegesis of Gal 2:15-16 is presented, one that concludes that justification, in Paul’s thought, is linked to the theme of return from exile and liberation from the bondage of sin. Then in succession follow five review articles of volumes that, to one degree or the other, take exception to the NPP. Finally, Gordon Wenham’s *Story as Torah* is reviewed for its relevance to the current justification/sanctification debate.

The review articles attempt to interact with a representative selection of the vast amounts of literature that have been spawned by the NPP debate. Other notable works that have reacted negatively to the “Sanders/Dunn trajectory” (as termed by Moisés Silva) include: P. Stuhlmacher, *Revisiting Paul’s Doctrine of Justification: A Challenge to the New Perspective* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001), including the essay of D. A. Hagner, “Paul and Judaism: Testing the New Perspective;” M. A. Seifrid, *Justification By Faith: The Origin and Development of A Central Pauline Theme*, Novum Testament Supplements 68 (Leiden: Brill, 1992); A. A. Das, *Paul, the Law, and the Covenant* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2001); S. Kim, *Paul and the New Perspective: Second Thoughts on the Origins of Paul’s Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); S. Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The “Lutheran” Paul and His Critics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004). While these scholars are well worth pondering, especially as advocates of the NPP ought to strive to be as measured and nuanced as possible, sooner or later the various replies and arguments become repetitive and even top heavy. As it is, the reader will notice a certain degree of inevitable overlap between the separate essays.

In endeavoring to “defend” the NPP, the eight chapters of this book contain a common thread, namely, that the

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movement generically bearing this moniker is not inimical to most historical/traditional systems of soteriology. Bluntly put, there has been an unjustified, if not uncalled for, knee-jerk reaction on the part of many. Therefore, the following collection of essays and reviews seeks to redress the balance in favor of a more tempered approach to a highly controversial topic.

A couple of technical notes. For one, in order to facilitate the reading process, I have employed endnotes rather than footnotes because of the relative length of many of them, particularly in chapter five, where I have responded to the criticisms of D. A. Carson. For another, all abbreviations of primary sources conform to *The SBL Handbook of Style: For Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Early Christian Studies*, eds. Patrick H. Alexander, et al. (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1999). Secondary literature is cited in full, rather than by abbreviation.

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## THE NEW PERSPECTIVE ON PAUL: TWO DECADES ON

### *1. Introduction*

The so-called New Perspective on Paul (NPP) has been likened to a Copernican revolution.<sup>1</sup> Whether one is inclined to defend or assail it, the fact remains that Pauline studies will never be the same again. Some may try to ignore it, but apparently it is not going away, at least not anytime soon. And while many may wish that it would go away, it is my impression that much of the controversy that has surrounded the NPP is rooted in a visceral reaction on the part of various theological traditions. If any proof is needed, one need only peruse the various web sites on which is posted some very “emphatic” material indeed. The purpose of this essay, then, is to attempt to clarify what the NPP is and what it isn’t, and then to ask what kind of a future it may expect.<sup>2</sup>

Before proceeding, two qualification are in order. (1) I say the “so-called” NPP for at least two reasons. One, the NPP is like the New Hermeneutic—it isn’t that new any more. That the “perspective” is not so “new” is confirmed by the fact that certain scholars believe that we have now entered into the “post NPP era.”<sup>3</sup> Two, those of us who espouse one version or the other of the NPP like to think that the perspective is not so much new as a return to the “original perspective” of Paul in relation to his Jewish contemporaries. Thus, what to many may appear to be “new” is for others of us rather “old” indeed.

(2) There simply is no monolithic entity that can be designated as the “New Perspective” as such. It is surely telling that D. A. Carson, a noted critic of the NPP, acknowledges that it cannot be reduced to a single perspective. “Rather, it is a bundle of interpretive approaches to Paul, some of which are mere differences in emphasis, and others of which compete rather antagonistically.”<sup>4</sup> What goes by the moniker of the “New Perspective” is actually more like variations on a theme; and, in point of fact, this generic title is flexible enough to allow for individual thought and refinement of convictions. Consequently, the take on the NPP represented within these pages is quite individually mine. Though I am much indebted to E. P. Sanders, J. D. G. Dunn, and N. T. Wright for numerous insights, this representation of the NPP does not correspond precisely to any of these scholars.

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### II. The New Perspective: What It Is And What It Isn't

#### 1. What It Is

1.1 The New Perspective is an attempt to understand Paul (and the NT generally) within his own context.

The actual phrase “New Perspective” was coined by J. D. G. Dunn, in his Manson Memorial Lecture of 1982.<sup>5</sup> Dunn bases his “New Perspective” on E. P. Sanders’ (re)construction of pre-destruction Judaism, as embodied in Sander’s epoch-making *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*.<sup>6</sup> As Sanders himself explains:

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 requires as the proper response of man his obedience to its commandments, while providing means of atonement for transgression.... Obedience maintains one’s position in the covenant, but it does not earn God’s grace as such.... Righteousness in Judaism is a term which implies the maintenance of status among the group of the elect.<sup>7</sup>

In another place, Sanders summarizes his position under the following points:

(1) God has chosen Israel and (2) given the law. The law implies both (3) God’s promise to maintain the election and (4) the requirement to obey. (5) God rewards obedience and punishes transgression. (6) The law provides for means of atonement, and atonement results in (7) maintenance or reestablishment of the covenantal relationship. (8) All those who are maintained in the covenant by obedience, atonement and God’s mercy belong to the group which will be saved. An important interpretation of the first and last points is that election and ultimately salvation are considered to be by God’s mercy rather than human achievement.<sup>8</sup>

Dunn further clarifies Sanders’ outlook:

This covenant relationship was regulated by the law, not as a way of entering the covenant, or of gaining merit, but as the way of living *within* the covenant; and that included the provision of sacrifice and atonement

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for those who confessed their sins and thus repented.... This attitude Sanders characterized by the now well known phrase “covenantal nomism”—that is, “the maintenance of status” among the chosen people of God by observing the law given by God as part of that covenant relationship.<sup>9</sup>

In the heat of the debate over these issues, and the inevitable confusion on the part of many, Dunn calls to mind that the phrase “covenantal nomism” does indeed consist of two parts: *covenant* and *nomos* (law).

It is important to note...that Sanders did not characterize Judaism solely as a “covenantal” religion. The key phrase he chose was the double emphasis, “covenantal nomism”. And Sanders made clear that the second emphasis was not to be neglected. The Torah/law was given to Israel to be obeyed, an integral part of the covenant relationship, and that obedience was necessary if Israel’s covenant status was to be maintained. Even if obedience did not earn God’s grace as such, was not a means to “*get into*” the covenant, obedience *was* necessary to maintain one’s position in the covenant, to “*stay in*” the covenant. So defined, Deuteronomy can be seen as the most fundamental statement of Israel’s “covenantal nomism”. Given the traditional emphasis on Judaism’s “nomism” it is hardly surprising that Sanders should have placed greater emphasis on the “covenantal” element in the twin emphasis. But in his central summary statements he clearly recognized that both emphases were integral to Judaism’s self-understanding.<sup>10</sup>

In short, the pioneering (ad)venture of Sanders, as championed by Dunn, Wright, and others, has argued powerfully that Jews of the Second Temple period (and beyond) were not Pelagians before Pelagius. The rank and file of the Jewish people operated with an intelligent consciousness of the way God’s covenant with them operated and of their place within that covenant. And while there may well have been exceptions to the rule,<sup>11</sup> the literature of this era is reflective of the sort of popular piety encountered by Paul in the synagogue and in the market place.<sup>12</sup>

But notwithstanding his substantial agreement with Sanders’ take on the Second Temple sources, it is Dunn who levels the criticism that “Sanders’ Paul hardly seems to be addressing Sanders’ Judaism.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, the Paul of Sanders takes

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his countrymen to task for precisely the same reason that Luther did! Dunn thus distances himself from Sanders' Paul by defining the apostle's phrase "the works of the law" not as a generalized principle of obedience for the purpose of earning salvation, but as those works done in response to the covenant in order to maintain the bond between God and Israel (the works of "staying in"). Dunn does maintain that "the works of the law" encompass the whole Torah, but within the period of the Second Temple certain aspects of the law became especially prominent as the boundary and identity markers of the Jewish people: prominently circumcision, food laws, purity laws, and sabbath.<sup>14</sup>

Dunn is frequently misrepresented on this point, as though he restricts "the works of the law" to the "boundary markers," without allowing that the whole Torah is in view when Paul employs the phrase. But just the opposite is the case. He states, in point of fact, that circumcision and the other ordinances were *not* the only distinguishing traits of Jewish self-identity. However, they were the focal point of the Hellenistic attack on the Jews during the Maccabean period. As such, they became *the acid tests of one's loyalty to Judaism*. "In short...the particular regulations of circumcision and food laws [et al.] were important not in themselves, but because they *focused* Israel's distinctiveness and made visible Israel's claims to be a people set apart, were the clearest points which differentiated the Jews from the nations. The law was coterminous with Judaism."<sup>15</sup> No wonder, Dunn justifiably issues a note of protest.<sup>16</sup>

Strictly speaking, then, the NPP has to do with the historical issue of Paul's relation to Second Temple Judaism, with special reference to his phrase "the works of the law." In short, the NPP seeks to understand the NT in such a way that *balances text and context*. To be sure, it is the text that receives the priority. But the NT was not written in a vacuum, and any reading of it has to be sensitive to the issues that were being debated within its own milieu, not ours. Before we ask what the NT *means*, we have to ask what it *meant*. In the end, it all boils down to the basic hermeneutical task of determining both the "meaning" and the "significance" (application) of the text.

The issue of justification, as such, was not on the original agenda of the NPP. But since the two have been merged in popular thinking, they will be considered together in this paper. However, it has to be clarified that there is no such thing as "the NPP position on justification." That is a misnomer.

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### 1.2 The New Perspective is rooted in the architecture of biblical eschatology

Though commonplace and hackneyed at this point in time, it is necessary to reiterate that salvation history transpires in terms of an *Already* and a *Not Yet*. The work of Christ has been *inaugurated* by his first coming and will be *consummated* at his parousia. This schema might appear to be too simple and too obvious to call for any comment. However, it is just this fundamental datum that has been either bypassed or suppressed in the contemporary debates respecting justification. On the part of many, there has been a failure to recognize that salvation is not finally complete until, in Paul's words, we are eschatologically "saved by his life" (Rom 5:10).

Rom 5:9-10 stands out as fundamentally paradigmatic for Paul's soteriology, and yet it has been surprisingly neglected in the whole "New Perspective" debate. According to Paul's formulation:

v. 9: if we have been justified by Christ's blood, then  
(how much more) shall we be saved from  
(eschatological) wrath.

v. 10: if we have been reconciled by Christ's death,  
then (how much more) shall we be saved by his  
(resurrection) life.

I have treated the passage elsewhere.<sup>17</sup> Suffice it to say here that the past redemptive event in Christ has given rise to hope in the believer, a hope which has as its primary focus the future eschatological consummation of the new creation. Or, as Neil Elliott puts it, vv. 9-10 "relocate the soteriological fulcrum in the apocalyptic future: the gracious justification and reconciliation of the impious is made the basis for sure hope in the salvation to come."<sup>18</sup> Paul thus polarizes past and future as the epochal stages of the salvation experience, with the assurance that although the consummation of redemption is still outstanding, the believer can take comfort that God's purposes cannot fail.

In this argument "from the lesser to the greater" (*a minori ad majus* or the rabbinic *qal wahomer*), Paul asserts that Christ's sacrifice must eventuate in the final salvation of his people in order to accomplish its goal. The salvific process is commenced with present justification, but it will not be consummated until we are finally saved. And "the process of consummating the work of salvation is more like an obstacle

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course than a downhill ride to the finishline. For the destiny of Christians does not go unchallenged in a world opposed to God's purposes. The powers of evil in the form of afflictions and trials threaten continuity in their salvation."<sup>19</sup> Thus, C. E. B. Cranfield's remark that deliverance from eschatological wrath is, in relation to justification, "very easy" fails to appreciate the formidable nature of the "obstacle course."<sup>20</sup> Given the "tribulations" (Rom 5:3) that attend the life of faith this side of the resurrection, the great thing, from the perspective of the present passage, is yet to be accomplished.

It is none other than this Already/Not Yet paradigm that underlies Paul's explicit statement that it is the "doers of the law" who will be justified in eschatological judgment (Rom 2:13; cf. Jas 1:22). Again, detailed commentary has already been provided.<sup>21</sup> It is only to be noted here that "doing the law" is tantamount to perseverance, in keeping particularly with Lev 18:5 and Deut 4:1, 10, 40; 5:29-33; 6:1-2, 18, 24; 7:12-13, all of which provide the semantic origin for Paul's own language (cf. Luke 8:15).<sup>22</sup> Scholars such as Yinger and Gathercole are quite right that the language is realistically intentioned and far from hypothetical: there is a phase of justification that is yet outstanding. As Brendan Byrne formulates the matter:

The process [of justification] is not complete. Though they [believers] stand acquitted in a forensic sense, the obedience of Christ is yet to run its full course in them; they yet hang with him upon the cross (Gal 2:19). The process of justification will only be complete in them, as it is in him, when it finds public, bodily expression in the resurrection-existence, the "revelation of the sons of God" (Rom 8:18-21).<sup>23</sup>

I hasten to add that synergism or some such notion of "contributing to salvation" is hardly in view; it is, rather, "righteousness," or the expected conformity of one's faith and life to the demands of the covenant. Klyne Snodgrass speaks pointedly to the issue:

It is not necessary to recoil from this idea in fear of some theory of "works righteousness" or in fear of diminishing the role of Christ in the purposes of God. Nor is there any idea of a "natural theology" in the pejorative sense of the term. The witness of all the Biblical traditions and much of Judaism is that none stands before God in *his or her own righteousness*. There is no thought in Romans 2 of a person being granted life because he or she was a moral human

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being, independent of God. The whole context of 1.18f. assumes the necessity of recognizing God as God and honouring him with one's life. The description of those who work the good in 2.7, 14-15, and 29 shows that the obedience is a direct result of the activity of God.<sup>24</sup>

One may legitimately talk of obedience as the precondition of eschatological justification, or perhaps better, vindication. Yet "obedience," in the Jewish context, is but *faithful perseverance* and the avoidance of idolatry (the central thesis of my *Obedience of Faith*). At stake is not "works" in any pejorative sense, but one's loyalty to Christ from conversion to death. Such is of the essence of biblical faith. J. D. Crossan and J. L. Reed put it succinctly and well:

Faith does not mean intellectual consent to a proposition, but vital commitment to a program. Obviously, one could summarize a program in a proposition, but faith can never be reduced to factual assent rather than total dedication. Faith (*pistis*) is not just a partial mind-set, but a total lifestyle commitment. The crucial aspect of faith as commitment is that it is always an interactive process, a bilateral contract, a two-way street. Faith is covenantal and presumes faithfulness from both parties with, of course, all appropriate differences and distinctions.<sup>25</sup>

What counts for Paul is being and remaining in Christ.<sup>26</sup> If for the sake of a theological formulation we wish to categorize Paul's thought, then the "basis" of justification, now and in the judgment, is *union with Christ*.<sup>27</sup> I would hasten to add that obedience as the precondition of eschatological justification is no more radical than Paul's similar demand of confession of Christ as the prerequisite of final salvation (Rom 10:9-10).

A number of scholars, including Gathercole, believe that in both Jewish and Pauline eschatology there is a tension between election and grace, on the one hand, and final vindication according to works, on the other.<sup>28</sup> Yet Yinger's thesis is precisely that, in the Jewish milieu, there is no actual tension between the two categories; the tension exists only in the minds of Western (systematic) theologians. Ps 62:12, normally considered to be the source of Rom 2:6, actually says: "to you, O Lord, belongs *steadfast love*, for you requite a person *according to his work*." Apparently, the Psalmist is unaware of any "tension." Therefore, as far as *perseverance and works* are concerned, Paul's criteria for future justification are not at all

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different than his Jewish contemporaries. Nonetheless, there is one radical difference—*Christ himself* (see below).

A particular aspect of the Already/Not Yet framework of eschatology deserves special mention, namely, return from exile. The idea of a new exodus has hardly escaped the notice of scholars, but only of late has it received the recognition it deserves, particularly with the brilliant and influential work of N. T. Wright.<sup>29</sup> The return from exile motif informs us that there is to be a time when Israel's deliverance from bondage is complete, when Yahweh himself becomes the righteousness of his people (Isa 61:10; Jer 23:6; 33:16). In Paul and other NT writers, the prophetic expectation of Israel's return to the land is projected into the "eschatological now." This means that in one sense the exile is at an end, and yet in another it is not. Believers have been "liberated (literally "justified") from sin" (Acts 13:39; Rom 6:7, 18), and yet they await the final deliverance from the bondage of the old creation, the present evil age (Rom 7:14-25; 8:18-25; Gal 1:4). Given this backdrop to Paul, justification is by the nature of the case liberation from sin, not merely a forensic declaration.<sup>30</sup>

1.3 The New Perspective is in line with the character of a biblical covenant

Every covenant is established unilaterally by the sovereign grace of God; and yet the human partner to the covenant is far from a nonentity. Quite the contrary, both privileges and obligations are entailed in covenant membership.<sup>31</sup> It is just the Christian believer's fidelity to the (new) covenant relationship that eventuates in eschatological justification. Such is far from synergism or autosoterism, simply because the covenant is established by grace and maintained by grace. By virtue of God's free gift of Christ and the Spirit (e.g., Rom 5:15-17; 8:1-17; 2 Cor 9:15), the Christian is enabled to bring forth fruit with perseverance out of a good and noble heart (Luke 8:15). The believer's righteousness, therefore, is none other than his/her conformity to the covenant relationship and its standards.<sup>32</sup> This is *both* a righteousness that comes "from God" (Phil 3:9) *and* a righteousness that forms the precondition of eschatological vindication (Matt 12:33-37; Rom 2:13 [= Ps 18:20; 24; 62:12; Prov 24:12]; Jas 2:14-26). As Yinger has shown, the notion of an eschatological vindication based on the "works," or better, "the fruit of the Spirit" borne by the Christian (Gal 5:22-24) is simply in line with OT and Jewish precedents.<sup>33</sup>



## 2. What It Isn't

### 2.1 The New Perspective isn't an "attack" on the Reformation

The NPP is an attempt to understand the NT within its own historical context. Without in any sense attempting to despise or repudiate the significance of the Reformation, the NPP simply recognizes that the four hundred years prior to the NT era are more important than the four hundred or so years between the Reformation and us. For this reason, the NPP is a recognition that the issues that have arisen since the Reformation are not necessarily the issues of the NT itself. Luther's fundamental historical mistake was to assume that a direct equation could be drawn between the life and faith of Second Temple Jews and his perception of the Roman Catholicism of the sixteenth century, especially the brand of Catholicism represented by Johann Tetzel and the sale of indulgences. The NPP seeks to remind us that the Reformation itself was precisely spearheaded by a desire to bypass centuries of tradition and return to the original source documents of the Christian faith.

### 2.2 The New Perspective isn't incompatible with the foundational concerns of the Reformers

The NPP is supportive of the central mottoes of the Reformation, among which are the following. (1) *Sola Fide*. Regardless of the NPP's distinctive definition of "works of the law," the root issue remains the same: only faith in Christ can justify and sanctify. Every other "gateway to salvation" is precluded.

(2) *Sola Scriptura*. The charge has been leveled, at least in some quarters, that this historical approach to Scripture is in danger of placing Jewish literature on a par with the canon itself. But precisely the opposite is the case: the object is to read the NT on its own historical terms and not those imposed by tradition, even Protestant tradition. It is in this regard that the NPP attempts to honor a frequently neglected motto of the Reformers—*ad fontes* ("to the sources").

(3) *Solus Christus*. This is the most important slogan of all. A historical, as opposed to a confessional, reading of the NT removes the stress from the "grace" versus "legalism" model and places it on the christological paradigm. It is not as though Paul and his Jewish opponents differed on the definition of such

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central issues as grace, faith, righteousness, and the relation of works to final judgment. Paul inherits these categories from the OT, as shared in common between him and his Jewish antagonists. The point of difference, rather, resides in *Paul's christology*, with all its manifold implications. It is *in Christ*, not the law, that one becomes the righteousness of God (2 Cor 5:21). At one time the righteousness of God was disclosed precisely in Israel's Torah;<sup>34</sup> but not any more, because "now," eschatologically, God's righteousness has been revealed in the gospel and through faith in Jesus Christ (Rom 1:16-17; 3:21-22). In contrast to so many of his Jewish peers (e.g., Sir 24:9, 33; Bar 4:1; Wis 18:4; *T. Naph* 3:1-2), for Paul the law is simply not eternal.<sup>35</sup>

All this means that even more basic than *sola fide* is *solus Christus*. For all that Protestantism has insisted that justification is the "article of standing and falling of the church" (*articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*), *christology* really is. *The church stands or falls with Christ*. The actual showcase of Paul's thought is *not* justification, as time-honored as that notion is in traditional theology. It is, rather, union with Christ or the "in Christ" experience. From this vantage point, Col 1:18 exhibits the very life blood of Paul's preaching—that *in all things he may have the preeminence*. At the end of the day, it is Paul's "christological eschatology" that demarcates him from his Jewish compatriots.<sup>36</sup>

Certainly, the core question in a document such as Galatians is not "grace" versus "legalism," after the traditional understanding. Rather, it is *the choice between Christ and the Torah*.<sup>37</sup> Beverly Gaventa says it so well:

Although the issue that prompts Paul to write to Galatian Christians arises from a conflict regarding the law, in addressing that problem Paul takes the position that the gospel proclaims Jesus Christ crucified to be the inauguration of a new creation. *This new creation allows for no supplementation or augmentation by the law or any other power or loyalty*. What the Galatians seek in the law is a certainty that they have a firm place in the *ekklësia* of God and that they know what God requires of them. It is precisely this certainty, and every other form of certainty, that Paul rejects with his claim about *the exclusivity and singularity of Jesus Christ*.<sup>38</sup>

That christology is at the heart of Paul's controversy with the circumcision party is underscored by the relation of the Messiah to the Torah in the theology of the latter. J. Louis

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Martyn very helpfully distills the thinking of the opponents as regards the Christ of the law. The Jewish Christian missionaries (the “Teachers,” as Martyn calls them) viewed Jesus as the completion of the ministry of Moses:

They view God’s Christ in the light of God’s law, rather than the law in the light of Christ. This means in their christology, Christ is secondary to the law.... For them the Messiah is the Messiah of the Law, deriving his identity from the fact that he confirms—and perhaps even normatively interprets—the Law. If Christ is explicitly involved in the Teachers’ commission to preach to the Gentiles, that must be so because he has deepened their passion to take to the nations God’s gift of gifts, the Spirit-dispensing Law that will guide them in their daily life.<sup>39</sup>

### 2.3 The New Perspective isn’t a conscious repudiation of the creeds of the church

The church’s creeds are to be used as any other tool of exegesis, but they are not effectively to be exalted to the status of primary authority. The NPP recognizes that the last word has not been said on anything. Methodologically, it is an endeavor to think in historical/biblical-theological categories, a *historia salutis* rather than an *ordo salutis*. For example, in Galatians, Paul’s discussion of faith and works is not topical but historical (e.g., 3:2-3 and 3:12).<sup>40</sup>

### 2.4 The focus of the New Perspective isn’t merely on sociology or the identity of the new covenant people of God

It is true that some exponents of the NPP have emphasized sociology to the virtual exclusion of soteriology, even in a letter such as Galatians. Yet a more balanced approach seeks to maintain that soteriology remains fundamental. It is certainly notable that Sanders himself thinks that “Paul’s argument [in Galatians] is not in favor of faith per se, nor is it against works per se. It is much more particular: it is against requiring the Gentiles to keep the law of Moses in order to be ‘sons of Abraham’.”<sup>41</sup> He adds further that “we have become so sensitive to the theological issue of grace and merit that we often lose sight of the actual subject of the dispute.” Thus, the subject of Galatians is “the condition on which Gentiles enter the people of God.”<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, much more is at stake than a sociology or group identity, one enclave distinguishing itself

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from another. If the topic under discussion is “how to enter the body of those who would be saved,” then “the topic is, in effect, soteriology.”<sup>43</sup> Charles Cousar speaks to the same effect: “The issue under debate, raised by the agitators’ demand for circumcision, was basically soteriological, how God saves people.”<sup>44</sup> See Acts 15:1.

This affirmation of soteriology as lying at the root of Galatians is a necessary corrective to N. T. Wright’s otherwise excellent treatment of justification and righteousness language in the NT. Wright is insistent that justification, and consequently the subject matter of Galatians, does not tell us how to be saved; it is, rather, a way of saying how you can tell that you belong to the covenant community, or, in other words, How do you define the people of God?<sup>45</sup> To be sure, such issues are to be weighed in light of the covenant context of “the righteousness of God” and similar ideas. On this Wright is undoubtedly correct. Galatians does indeed address the question, “Who is a member of the people of God.”<sup>46</sup> Likewise, it is true that “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, as together they wait for the final new creation.”<sup>47</sup>

That much said, it must be countered that Wright has constructed a seemingly false dichotomy between the identity of the people of God and salvation. Sanders is closer to the mark: Galatians has to do with how to enter the body of those who would be saved. This means that to belong to the new covenant is to be among the community of *the saved*.<sup>48</sup> And justification does, in fact, tell us how to be saved, in that it depicts God’s method of saving sinners—by faith in Christ, not by works of the law—and placing them in covenant standing with himself. If justification is *by faith*, then a method of salvation *is* prescribed: one enters into the realm of salvation *by faith*.<sup>49</sup>

### 2.5 The New Perspective isn’t a denial that in the theology of Second Temple Judaism works count in the final judgment

Apart from earlier researchers, we are indebted to Yinger and Gathercole for establishing beyond any reasonable doubt that the obedience of the people of God is the *sine qua non* of a favorable verdict on the day of judgment.<sup>50</sup> Gathercole’s book in particular serves as a useful and welcomed corrective to an imbalance on the part of some practitioners of the NPP. It is true, as he notes many times, that there has been a tendency to play up sociological matters (Jewish distinctiveness and self-

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identity) and to play down the Torah's own requirement that people really and truly "do the law."<sup>51</sup> Consequently, Gathercole is on target in his insistence Israel's boasting is grounded not only in election, but in actual performance of the law. To the degree that he has redressed the balance in favor of a reading of Judaism and Paul that more accurately reflects the actual data, we are in his debt.

The problem, however, is Gathercole's quantum leap from works as the precondition of final salvation to "earning salvation" or synergism.<sup>52</sup> Yinger, on the other hand, has rightly called attention to the continuity between Judaism and Paul as pertains to the relation of grace and works. Yinger rightly maintains that Paul and Judaism alike are no more "monergistic" or "synergistic" than each other. Indeed, Paul's stance toward works in relation to the final judgment is entirely consistent with Jewish precedents. Once again, in my estimation, the real point of contention between Paul and Judaism is christology, not the relation of works to judgment.<sup>53</sup>

### 2.6 The New Perspective isn't an attempt to exonerate ancient Judaism in every regard

The pioneering work of George Foot Moore and others might very well be susceptible to this charge.<sup>54</sup> By contrast, Longenecker's treatment of "The Piety of Hebraic Judaism" is a model of balanced scholarship.<sup>55</sup> He demonstrates, in the words of Israel Abrahams no less, that there are both "weeds" and "flowers" in the garden of Judaism, and that the elements of nomism and spirituality must be kept in proper proportion to one another.<sup>56</sup> My only observation here is that the "weeds" of this garden consists not of "legalism" as classically defined, but of Israel's idolatrous attachment to the Torah to the exclusion of Jesus the Messiah, who is the "end" of the law (Rom 10:4). The Jewish people have preferred to "maintain" their own righteousness rather than submit to God's latter-day righteousness as now embodied in Christ (Rom 10:3).<sup>57</sup> For Paul, such unwarranted and *uneschatological* devotion to the law is no less than idolatry.<sup>58</sup>

### 2.7 The New Perspective isn't a denial that there are schemes of self-salvation in various religious traditions

It goes without saying that Paul would have adamantly opposed any scheme of self-salvation based on human performance (Eph 2:8-9 and Titus 3:5 have direct applicability). Nevertheless,

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historically speaking, he has in his sights the works of fidelity to the Mosaic covenant (“staying in”) that would stand one in good stead on the day of judgment. In this regard, the Reformers were correct that if justification is not by Jewish tradition, then it is not by church tradition either: salvation is not by “religion,” however conceived. This is the hermeneutical “significance,” or application, of the historical principle at stake: only Christ can save, not religion, tradition, or any other extra-christological consideration.

To hone the issue more precisely, Paul does combat a works-principle, but in the case of Israel these are the works of “staying in” rather than “getting in,” because the nation was already in the covenant and had an awareness of its election. The Jewish conviction was that one remained loyal to the covenant relation as exemplified by works and on that basis could expect to be vindicated in the final judgment as God’s faithful one. Over against this, Paul says two things: (1) the final judgment has already taken place in Christ; (2) Torah observance has nothing to do with it—only faith in Christ counts. On this construction, “grace” is set in contrast to “works;” but as regards Israel, the works are specifically those of *Torah*. Grace means that one is not obliged to observe the Mosaic system *in toto* to be regarded and accepted as one of Yahweh’s faithful ones. Gentiles do not first have to become “honorary Jews” in order to be “members in good standing” in the covenant community. *In Christ*, one becomes the righteousness of God by faith alone. This means that hermeneutical significance of “works of the law” is any religious system or tradition that would challenge the preeminence of Christ.

### *III. The New Perspective and Roman Catholicism*

Frequently, a comparison is made between the NPP and Roman Catholicism, normally in a decidedly antagonistic tone. In my view, this comparison is both right and wrong at the same time. But before proceeding, I would voice my opinion that labels such as “legalism,” “synergism,” and “autosoterism” have been very unfairly attached to Tridentine Catholicism. The ghost of Pelagius is too often and too unjustly trotted out as a legitimate grounding of the Catholic understanding of justification.

On the one hand, there are resemblances between the two, in particular the relation of faith, works, and final judgment. Catholic exegetes are quick to point out that the only place in the NT where the words “faith” and “alone” occur together is

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Jas 2:24: “You see that a person is justified by works and *not by faith alone!*” The point is well taken and needs to be pondered much more carefully by Protestant interpreters. If that had been the case, the supposed tension between James and Paul, especially on the part of Lutheran commentators, would have been eliminated altogether. This is not the place to argue in detail; just suffice it to say that James 2 and Romans 2 (not to mention Rom 4:18-25) are perfectly compatible if viewed *eschatologically*.<sup>59</sup> Both speak of a justification to transpire at the end of this age, and both are emphatic that works are not optional. Classic Catholicism and the NPP are in accord in this regard: while phase one of justification (the Already) is by faith alone, phase two (the Not Yet) takes into account the works that are the tokens of fidelity to the Lord and his covenant. For both, initial faith is complemented by the fruit that accompanies perseverance (Luke 8:15).

On the other hand, this agreement in principle has to be qualified in light of the place of tradition in Catholic theology. It is notable that Dunn’s book, *The Partings of the Ways*, was originally delivered as a series of lectures at the Gregorian Pontifical University in Rome. In the course of those lectures, Dunn paused to consider the place of tradition.<sup>60</sup> His immediate concern was that of priesthood in the Letter to the Hebrews in relation to the Catholic doctrine of priesthood. Dunn confesses to some bewilderment at the way the argument of Hebrews can be “so lightly ignored or set aside by those Christian traditions which wish to continue to justify a special order of priesthood within the people of God, a special order whose priestly ministry is distinct in kind from the priesthood of all the faithful.”<sup>61</sup>

Dunn concedes that an argument from tradition as over against Scripture can carry decisive weight. But to use Heb 5:1 to justify Christian priesthood in the manner of the Second Vatican Council, while ignoring the clear thrust and argument of the letter as a whole, seems to him to constitute a form of eisegesis and special pleading that cannot really be justified from tradition. He confesses to no quarrel in principle with tradition taking up and developing a possible but less probable interpretation of some text. But can it be justified in making doctrinal use of an interpretation that runs counter to the main point of the text itself? In this case, he remarks, it is no longer simply a matter of tradition interpreting scripture, but of “tradition riding roughshod over scripture.”<sup>62</sup>

If I may build upon and extrapolate from Dunn’s remarks, the difference between my version of the NPP and Roman

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Catholicism revolves just around the relation of tradition to final judgment (justification) by works. If my perception is correct, then what is stake in the latter's doctrine of judgment is not "good works" in the most generic terms, but a commitment to the Tridentine standards, including such articles of faith as papal infallibility, the mass, the sacraments, the perpetual virginity of Mary, and prayer to the saints. By contrast, the obedience of faith in Paul bypasses all forms of tradition, Jewish, Christian, or otherwise, and focuses fidelity solely and exclusively on Christ. The latter-day justification of the people of God hinges on union with Christ and the observance of all things that he has commanded the church (Matt 28:20), and nothing other than that. In short, what is required for a favorable verdict in the last day is allegiance to Jesus and *his law* (1 Cor 9:21; Gal 6:2). It is in this regard that the Reformers made a right application of Paul's denial that justification is not by "works of the law." That is to say, if justification is not by Jewish tradition, then it is not by church tradition either.

### *IV. The Contribution of the New Perspective to the Law/Gospel Debate*

The relation between law and gospel has been debated vociferously from the time of the Reformation. And while the debate will never end, at least I can say with some degree of confidence that the NPP has a decided bearing on the issues at hand.

(1) The NPP suggests that the nomenclature of "law and gospel" needs to be abandoned in favor of "old covenant" and "new covenant." From the Reformation onward, interpreters have sought to perform a "balancing act" between the role of "law" and "gospel" respectively. On the one hand, it is evident that the believer is justified by faith apart from the works of the law (Rom 3:28; Gal 2:16); and that Christ is the "end" of the law (Rom 10:4; Gal 3:23-25). On the other hand, Paul believes that at least certain aspects of the law of Moses remain intact for the Christian (e.g., Rom 7:12; 13:8-10; Gal 5:14; Eph 6:1-3). Traditional approaches to the subject have sought to tackle the problem from the vantage point of the *loci* or a systematic theology. Yet while this avenue has yielded some fruit, it is essentially wrongheaded, because the Bible is simply not constructed in a topical manner. Its own method of organization is historical, not "systematic."<sup>63</sup> Therefore, the traditional contrast of "law and gospel" is more properly to be conceived as the contrast of two distinct covenants, "old" and



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“new,” as they assume their position along the timeline of salvation history.

Since “law and gospel” are more properly to be conceived of as “old covenant and new covenant,” the NPP seeks to focus attention on the salvation-historical significance of texts.<sup>64</sup> As the eye canvasses the time-line of redemptive history, it can be seen that “the law (of Moses) and the prophets” give way to “the gospel of the kingdom” (Luke 16:16; Matt 4:23; 9:35; 24:13). While this is not the place to engage the unity and diversity debate,<sup>65</sup> it may be said that enough diversity between “old” and “new” is in evidence to warrant the conclusion that “the law of Christ” (1 Cor 9:21; Gal 6:2) has displaced “the law of Moses.” It is in this sense that Paul writes that “the law is not of faith” (Gal 3:12). To say that the law is “not of faith” is to affirm that the law and faith belong to distinctly different historical realms: the former does not occupy the same turf in the salvation-historical continuum as the latter. This comes as no surprise given that Paul’s salvation-historical paradigm is established at the outset of Galatians 3, with the juxtaposition of “Spirit” and “flesh,” designating respectively the age of the Spirit and the age of the flesh.<sup>66</sup> For this reason, if one seeks to be justified by the law, one is severed from Christ and falls away from the era of grace back into that of the Torah (Gal 5:4).<sup>67</sup>

At variance with a number of NPP scholars, it is just because of this old covenant/new covenant schema that I would submit that Christ and his people have superceded Israel as the chosen people. As Wright puts it so insightfully, the NT represents the climax of a story, the story of Israel. The NT writers as a whole take Israel’s history and redraw it around Jesus and his people.<sup>68</sup> This has manifold implications for both eschatology and ecclesiology.

(2) By stressing the place of the NT within its own historical environment, the NPP endeavors to address the actual issues being debated in the first-century context. In brief, those debates centered particularly around the ongoing role of the Torah, the place of Israel in God’s redemptive purposes, and the admission of the Gentiles into the people of God. At heart, what demarcates the NT’s message to Israel is not the allegation that Second Temple Jews were attempting to “buy their way into heaven” by merit or any other means of self-salvation. Rather, by its insistence that Jesus of Nazareth is the purpose and goal of Israel’s history and Torah (Rom 10:3; Gal 3:23-25), *christology* is made the decisive factor: *what the people of Israel were seeking in the law is to be found in Christ*. Perhaps the most trenchant expression of this “Christ versus Torah”

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outlook of the NT is to be found in the Fourth Gospel. According to John 1:17, “The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” And even more striking is John 5:39: “You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf.” In essence, the NPP argues that justification and membership in the covenant community do not hinge on any set of traditional beliefs, religious or cultural.

(3) Because the NPP is rooted in the basic architecture of biblical eschatology, it serves to clarify that there is no tension between “law and gospel,” or “grace and works,” when both are assessed within the framework of a biblical covenant. In *qualitative terms*, as perceived by traditional systematic theology, “gospel” as good news is not to be juxtaposed to “law” as an alternate means to salvation. From beginning to end, it is grace that establishes the covenant and enables its participants to persevere and bear fruit (Deut 30:11-14; Luke 8:15). In simplest terms, this is the Already and the Not Yet of biblical redemption. From this eschatological perspective, it is by virtue of the twofold gift of Christ and the Spirit that individuals come to faith and then render to King Jesus “the obedience of faith” (Rom 1:5; 16:26). In Mosaic language, this is none other than the mandate of Lev 18:5 and Deut 4:1, 10, 40; 5:29-33; 6:1-2, 18, 24; 7:12-13 that Israel “do the law” and “live” as a consequence.<sup>69</sup> As such, the obedience expected of the church is none other than that demanded of Israel. If “doing the law” was the precondition of the Israelite’s enjoyment of life in the land, then no less is expected of the Christian believer, whose obedience is directed toward the Christ of the gospel (John 14:15; 15:1-11; Jas 2:18-26; Rom 2:6-11).

Traditionally, Protestant theology has had grave reservations about connecting works of any sort with the ultimate justification/vindication of the believer. Nevertheless, writing of Jesus’ own teaching on judgment, I defer to Scot McKnight:

Jesus should...not be made subservient to the Reformation; his theology stands on its own in its thoroughly Jewish context. Reformation theology needs to answer to Jesus, not Jesus to it. Jesus did not talk about earning salvation; he talked about what covenant members are obliged to do (or strive to do) if they wish to be faithful.<sup>70</sup>