

## THEOLOGY AND LIFE

### ***PASTORAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE NEW PERSPECTIVE (PART 1 OF 3)***

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#### **SYNOPSIS**

Theology always works itself out in Christian practice. The theology of the new perspective as seen in Sanders, Dunn and Wright is a radical reinterpretation of reformation theology. Sanders has challenged how we understand Judaism and has redrawn the reformation view of legalism with his own description of Judaism as covenantal nomism. Dunn has suggested Paul's view of the Law was not negative or incoherent, but just steadfast in his rejection of a reliance on the social function of the law as boundary markers. And Wright argues that we have confused the gospel with justification which properly understood are unrelated.

When all of this theology is cashed in we are left with several testing pastoral applications. What is the gospel? Is justification forensic? On what basis can we pursue Christian unity? Can a Christian be assured of their salvation? Must we oppose all forms of exclusivism? All these questions and more flow out of the theology of the new perspective.

It is my belief that although there is much to be gained by studying the new perspective readings, there is also much that is unhelpful, and detrimental to Christian life and practice.

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Theologians of every tradition once again can be seen flocking like exuberant children to the once tired park of Pauline studies. Where once the park was passé, now it is considered the most interesting place to be doing New Testament studies. It's a place where N.T scholars are meeting afresh, where Pauline theology has a new edge, a new interest, as Dunn famously put it, a *new perspective*.

In these last two decades orthodoxy in Pauline studies has been challenged and, in the eyes of many, been correctly redrawn. The "new perspective" has impacted N.T studies in a profound way, particularly in the areas of Law and justification. It would be wrong to suggest that there are now

monolithic conclusions concerning justification and law in Paul, but it is true to say there is a broad agreement that the old reformation paradigm of understanding Paul (pejoratively [and incorrectly] called confessional Lutheranism) is historically and theologically inaccurate.

In fact, according to Sanders, Dunn and Wright (among others) the new perspective on Paul has at last freed the true message of the gospel (one of Lordship and inclusivism) from introspective and individualistic shackles of western Protestantism.

Yet, at the same time, the pastoral implications of the new perspective are slowly beginning to be understood. After all, theology inevitably and undeniably fashions Christian practice. In this essay, I want to briefly introduce the theology of the new perspective before evaluating the various pastoral implications for both Church and individuals.

## **WHAT IS THE DOMINANT CONTEMPORARY POSITION ON PAUL AND JUSTIFICATION?**

There is little doubt that the dominant contemporary position on Paul and justification is reflected in the writing of those scholars advocating the new perspective. Why is it new? Because it is a radical shift in our understanding of the historical and religious context Paul wrote in. Because scholars are now challenging and indeed, overturning previous assumptions held concerning the religious question of the Jews and important corollaries of Justification and the Gospel. And more.

F. Thielman writes:

It was frequently assumed among O.T scholars.... that at least from the period of the restoration of the Jews to Israel under Ezra, the history of Judaism was a story of spiraling degeneracy into legalism, hypocrisy and lack of compassion. Similarly, when Protestant scholars discussed rabbinic Judaism they tended to assume that Paul's polemic against Judaism, interpreted through the lens of Luther's reaction against Roman Catholicism, provided a sound basis for systematizing the religion of the Mishnah, Talmud and related Jewish writings of a later era.

F. Weber's popular description of Talmudic theology (1880) is typical. Keeping the many and peculiar commands of the law, said Weber, was the means by which the Rabbis believed salvation was earned. The ordinary rabbi, therefore, believed that the goal of the rabbinic religion was the search for reward on the basis of merit that God was a stern judge, and that approaching

death brought with it the fear of losing salvation due to a lack of merit.<sup>1</sup>

Consequently, this caricature of Judaism was imposed upon the N.T. with particular emphasis on the interpretation of Paul's theology. This according Dunn is where E.P. Sanders book, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* broke the mould of Pauline studies. Sanders basic claim, according to Dunn, is that the picture drawn of Judaism was not simply inaccurate or even false, but rather fundamentally mistaken.<sup>2</sup>

Many scholars have assumed an antithesis between Judaism and Christianity, as if it was works vs. grace. Sanders argued with great effect that the weight of rabbinic literature showed that salvation was not from meritorious works but by belonging to the covenant people of God. Sanders argued that covenantal nomism could best be described as getting in by God's grace (election) and staying in by obedience (with recourse to forgiveness through the sacrificial system).

Consequently, Sanders then sought to answer the obvious question: If Paul is not railing against legalism, then how do you make sense of his writings concerning the law and justification? Sanders believed the solution was in Paul's thinking, which he described as moving from *solution* to *plight*.

For example Sanders writes:

Paul's logic seems to run like this: in Christ God has acted to save the world; therefore the world is in need of salvation; but God also gave the law; if Christ is given for salvation, it must follow that the law could not have been; is the law then against the purpose of God which has been revealed in Christ? No, it has the function of consigning everyone to sin so that everyone could be saved by God's grace in Christ.<sup>3</sup>

The implication of Sanders work was that in fact, there was nothing wrong or wanting in Judaism. Paul himself was racked with guilt looking for forgiveness. Judaism was not a wearisome burden of law suffocatingly heaped upon him, but rather he had come to believe that Jesus was the Messiah, and if he was the answer, then he needed an apologetic to explain Christ.

In *Paul, The Law and the Jewish People*, Sanders' offers this explanation:

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<sup>1</sup> F. Thielman, Dictionary of Paul and his Letters "Law". Edited by G. F. Hawthorne, R. P. Martin. (InterVarsity Press, 1993) pg.. 530.

<sup>2</sup> James G Dunn, Jesus, Paul and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians. (John Know Press, Louisville, Kentucky,1990) pg.. 184.

<sup>3</sup> EP Sanders Paul and Palestinian Judaism (Fortress Press Minneapolis, 1977) pg.. 475.

I have elsewhere written that his real attack on Judaism is against the idea of the covenant and that what he finds wrong in Judaism is that it lacks Christ. Perhaps putting the matter in terms of God's plan of salvation formulates those ideas in a more precise and more understandable way. What is wrong with the law, and thus with Judaism, is that it does not provide for God's ultimate purpose, that of saving the entire world through faith in Christ, and without the privilege accorded to Jews through the promises, the covenants, and the law.<sup>4</sup>

According to Sanders then, Christianity and Judaism are not that dissimilar, they are both religions of grace in which works are instrumental for "staying in" but not "getting in". Sanders argues, properly understood, there is no hint of self-righteousness or legalism in Paul's critique of Judaism. Quite simply, God's revelation of Christ in salvation history made it clear that "getting in" was now exclusively rooted in faith in Christ. As Gerhard H. Visscher observes, "The cleverness of this argument is that it, if it is true, we do not need to presume that Saul was dissatisfied with the law in his pre-Christian state, nor does Paul as a Christian need to maintain that Judaism is legalistic!"<sup>5</sup>

The new perspective has also been shaped by the influential work of N.T. scholar J.G. Dunn, who has built upon the Sanders' paradigm changing work. Dunn, like Sanders, believes that covenantal nomism is an accurate reflection of Judaism and Christianity but argues that Sanders has missed the opportunity to produce a more coherent picture of Paul and his conflict with some practitioners of Judaism. In essence, Dunn argues this is caused by Sanders' underestimation of the social function of the law in the life of Israel.

Dunn argues:

The major exegetical flaw of Sanders' reconstruction of Paul's view of the law (and of course not only his) is his failure to perceive the significance of the little phrase 'works of the law'.... But by taking 'works of the law' as equivalent to 'doing the law' in general (the normal exegesis), he is led to the false conclusion that in disparaging 'works of the law' Paul is disparaging law as such, has broken with Judaism as a whole."<sup>6</sup>

The issue then is that of Israel's pride in their boundary markers. The sin of Israel was not self-righteousness, nor legalism, but rather *exclusivism*. And Dunn's revision of Sanders' thesis is that Paul didn't totally break with Judaism or the law but with the nationalistic and racial narrowness of those who maintained

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<sup>4</sup> E.P. Sanders

<sup>5</sup> Gerhard H. Visscher

<sup>6</sup> James G. Dunn,

Paul, *The Law and the Jewish People* (Fortress Press Minneapolis, 1983) pg. 47.

"Views regarding Legalism and Exclusivism in Judaism: Is there a need to reinterpret Paul?" [http://spindleworks.com/library/visscher/NewLegalism.htm#\\_ftnref16](http://spindleworks.com/library/visscher/NewLegalism.htm#_ftnref16)

Jesus, Paul and the Law: *Studies in Mark and Galatians*. (John Know Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 1990) pg. 201.

the necessity of adopting the covenant badge of Israel. Therefore, what Paul warns against is the tendency to maintain a distinctive other than Christ. Consequently, Paul argued against Jewish attempts to maintain their covenant distinctiveness from other nations and on Christian Jews attempts to force the Gentiles to adopt the same distinctiveness.<sup>7</sup>

This reading of Paul legitimizes Sanders' paradigm change and provides for a totally new approach to the question of Pauline theology. Sanders (and to a lesser extent Dunn) has to the satisfaction of most, established that Judaism was not profoundly legalistic, nor was it the source of self righteousness, but rather a religion based on grace and obedience. This then provides the basis for a re-reading of Paul on the issue of justification.

It is here that N.T scholar N.T Wright has made his most influential contribution to the new perspective on Paul. Wright, like the others, believes that the post-reformation view of righteousness and justification has more to do with the troubled soul of Martin Luther than anything taught by the Apostle Paul. According to Wright, the doctrine of justification by faith is wrong in both its place and understanding in Protestant evangelical theology.

The post-Sanders understanding of justification is that it is a replacement badge of covenant membership that is primarily ecclesiastical and not soteriological. Justification is a term denoting who is in the covenant, not how one enters the covenant. This contrasts markedly with the reformation view of justification, which is forensic in nature and is concerned with how the individual might get right with God. But Wright argues that the forgiveness of sins is the by-product of covenant membership as opposed to the direct result of justification. Justification then is a declaration, but not of righteousness, but of covenant community membership. In essence, it replaces the "works of the law" as the sign of who is actually in the covenant.

Accordingly, Wright says:

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 Sanders' term, it was not so much about 'getting in', or indeed 'staying in', as about 'how you could tell who was in.'<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, Wright's covenantal understanding of Pauline theology leads him to conclude that Justification is the declaration of covenant membership by God himself as opposed to the traditional individualistic interpretation of how a

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<sup>7</sup> James G Dunn

<sup>8</sup> N.T Wright,

The Theology of Paul the Apostle (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1998) pg. 366.

What St Paul Really Said (Eerdmans, Grand rapids, 1997) pg. 119.

man is saved.<sup>9</sup> “For Paul, ‘the gospel’ creates the Church; ‘justification’ defines it.”<sup>10</sup>

The work of the new perspective as articulated by Sanders, Dunn and Wright challenges the traditional understanding of the gospel, justification and faith. Inevitably and undeniably, theology works itself out in practice. It fashions our understanding of how we relate to God, both to the world and to one another. In short, there are pastoral implications that flow from the new perspective, implications that will be fleshed out in the life of God’s people who are exposed to it.

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<sup>9</sup> N T Wright,  
<sup>10</sup> N.T Wright,

Climax of the Covenant (T. and T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1991) pg.. 203.  
What St Paul Really Said (Eerdmans, Grand rapids, 1997) pg.. 151.