

THE NEW PERSPECTIVE ON PAUL

A SUMMARY CRITIQUE

In recent days, the Christian Gospel has come under serious attack – an assault that attempts to redefine the Biblical understanding of how a sinner is made right with a holy God. In what is being called the “New Perspective on Paul,” serious scholarly debates have emerged as to whether the doctrine of justification by faith alone is central to salvation. Former stalwarts and defenders of the faith have capitulated to a view of salvation they once identified as liberal and heretical. The purpose of this short critique is to capture the main tenets of the New Perspective on Paul in summary form and to offer a brief guide to understanding why this movement (if it can be quantified as such) contradicts the Word of God. The New Perspective on Paul is hard to be quantified as a movement because not every proponent of it believes each tenet of doctrine as the others may, and therefore it can spread with greater anonymity and less accountability.

Proponents

1. **E.P. Sanders** – the Arts and Science Professor of Religion at Duke University has been characterized as the most influential scholar on Paul in the last 25 years, victimizes the Scripture with his higher criticism approach to inspiration¹ in which he asserts that certain Bible books (e.g. the Gospels) are inauthentic and tainted. He further separates the historical Jesus from the Jesus of faith, suggesting that the apostles revised their accounts of Jesus’ life and teachings to accommodate their own theology and glorify their hero. Sanders denies the deity of Jesus Christ and His Sonship, suggesting that Jesus was merely on intimate terms with God, not virgin born. He believed that Paul completely misunderstood Judaism and the role of the Law in the Jew’s life, and contradicted himself in his own letters, believing that Paul’s negative and incorrect thinking about the Old Testament Law was due to the fact that Judaism wasn’t Christianity. Sanders has even gone so far as to suggest that the whole concept of a Savior was only contrived by Paul after he became convinced that Jesus was one. He is therefore, an unbeliever and a heretic.
2. **James Dunn** – the Emeritus Lightfoot Professor of Divinity at the University of Durham, England operates from a higher criticism grid as well. He believes that Jesus’ theology cannot be derived from the Gospel records because, as Sanders’ argued, it is filtered and tainted by the writers who used Jesus’ words for their own purposes. Dunn denies the deity of Christ by attacking His preexistence and relegates the writings of Colossians, Ephesians, 1-2 Timothy, and Titus to either Timothy or some imposters.² Dunn accuses Luther of not only reading into Romans with gross exaggeration, but also of an evil Christian anti-Semitism. For Dunn, the doctrine of justification is something Paul used, not to describe how to be made right with God,

¹ Higher criticism is that field of study which presupposes the Bible is not the Word of God and must have other explanations for its origin other than divine inspiration. Therefore, the Bible cannot be supernatural.

² This allows him to justify his rejection of Ephesians 2:8-9 and Titus 3:5 as non-Pauline, and therefore unreliable in developing the New Testament Gospel.

but as a point of social unity between Jews and Gentiles. He is therefore, an unbeliever and a heretic.

3. **N.T. Wright** – the Bishop of Durham, who ranks among the highest of Anglican bishops, is the only one of the three proponents named who considers himself an evangelical. He has done some of the most persuasive work on the New Perspective on Paul and is most popular, because of his writing style. Heavily favoring such liberal unbelieving scholars as Rudolph Bultmann, Wright shares some of the same attitudes towards the New Testament books as Dunn and Sanders, especially the Pastoral Epistles and Ephesians. Wright also shares Sanders' quest for the real Jesus – the one denied us by the bias of the New Testament but found in extrabiblical Jewish literature of the first century. The Gospels, therefore, according to Wright, need to be decoded from their mythological language because they were either adapted from the original or invented to fit the needs of the audiences to whom the Gospel writers wrote. He is therefore, a staunch liberal with a serious antisupernatural attitude towards Scripture. His beliefs, which are compatible with Dunn and Sanders, and which are represented below raise strong suspicion as to whether or not he is a believer.

Teachings

The basic complaint of the New Perspective on Paul is that modern day Christians have been hindered in their understanding of the Biblical doctrine of justification and the New Testament epistles that teach it, by the Reformation. Martin Luther, we are told, did more to harm the Gospel than help, because he read his quarrel with Rome into the Bible. Thus, Luther tainted modern Bible readers' conclusions about the true nature of Judaism in the first century, that it was a works-based religion of merit like Roman Catholicism. Thus, we are told, the Biblical teaching about salvation, in Paul's writings particularly, has been woefully misconstrued, and a majority of the New Testament neglected in its truly historical setting. Other extrabiblical documents dating back to the first century suggest that the religious climate of Jesus' and Paul's day was utterly unlike what we have historically understood, and therefore must be used to rediscover what Paul really meant by what he said.

The doctrine of the New Perspective on Paul can be summarized by the following – salvation is not about justification by faith alone, whereby the sinner is imputed the righteousness of Christ and forgiven his sin, it is about entering into and remaining in God's covenant community. In short, salvation is replaced by what is being labeled "Covenantal Nomism" – a person comes into a right relationship with God by hearing the message about Jesus (His cross and resurrection), believing that message, joining the Christian community through water baptism, and then sharing in its common way of life. Membership in the covenant is what provides salvation for the "believer." In order to remain in the covenant however, the believer must live a radically separate life yielded to the Lordship of Christ. Repeated or heinous sin removes a member from the covenant community and thus from the salvation which the covenant affords him. Simply summarized, the New Perspective on Paul offers a salvation that is based on 1) extensive participation in the covenant community of the YHWH's followers; and 2) radical

submission to the Lordship of Christ. Proponents of the New Perspective on Paul teach the following lies:

- 1. Judaism was not a works-based system of meritorious salvation at the time of Christ and Paul.** According to the New Perspective on Paul, certain historical writings from Bible times suggest that the Protestant view of Paul and the Jews of his day is in error, because it supposes that Paul sought to indict and condemn the Jew for his law keeping, works-righteousness. Instead we are told that the Judaism of Paul's day was healthy and robust, and any rebuke by Paul against those who held to the "works of the Law" served to quell the tendency of a small few to make dietary restrictions, circumcision, and Sabbath keeping binding on anyone who belonged to God's covenant. Paul therefore, is understood as correcting the Jewish believers who insisted that Gentile believers did the same in order to participate in the covenant community. Even the Pharisees themselves have been misunderstood and misjudged as a religion of self-righteousness – so we are told. Instead, ancient Judaism is said to have had a proper view of God's covenant, the requirement of obedience to the Law, and the final judgment, and since God had chosen Israel as His people, any physical descendent of Abraham before Christ's death and resurrection was a member of the covenant and therefore justified.
- 2. Man is not born with guilt or a sin nature as if imputed from Adam.** Sanders believes that Paul did not teach the doctrine of original sin, or that if he did, such a doctrine is not relevant to the subject of salvation. Dunn denies the doctrine altogether, suggesting that humans cannot be held responsible for the state in which they are born, or be held guilty for a starting point they did not choose. Wright teaches that the text of Romans 5:12-21 (which declares the guiltiness of all men because of Adam's transgression) is retelling the story of Israel. Thus man is not totally depraved, and possesses the ability to cooperate with the *infused* grace of God and thereby to produce the grounds by which he might please God and be justified.
- 3. Christ's righteousness is not imputed to the believer in salvation.** Because the imputation of Adam is absent in the New Perspective on Paul, so also the requirement for an alien righteousness is unnecessary. References to God's righteousness are expressions of His uprightness and faithfulness in honoring His covenant promises to those who are in Christ. Likewise, those who are righteous because of Christ are those who have entered into the covenant community through union with Him. Thus they are not declared righteous because they possess a gift of righteousness given to them by God through faith in Christ – they are declared righteous by God because they *are* righteous.
- 4. The death of Christ is about breaking sin's power, not the removal of legal guilt.** Depending on which New Perspective on Paul advocate you read, the death of Christ has little to nothing to do with the removal of sin's penalty for the one who trusts in Christ, but the breaking of sin's power over the life of the one who is "in Christ" so he or she can faithfully submit to His Lordship and thus possess the necessary resources to stay in the covenant. Sanders makes no connection between the

believer's pardon and the death of Christ. Dunn suggests that the death of Christ as that which pardons is merely a metaphor not grounded in reality, but instead that which brings about a break with sin in the believer's life. Wright does accept the concept of atonement, but only vaguely, without a transfer of Christ's righteousness, and primarily to deal with sin as a power, not as guilt to be remitted.

5. **Justification is an end times doctrine, not a salvation doctrine.** In the New Perspective on Paul, justification is God's declaration that a Christ-follower is indeed in the covenant community and will be declared righteous or right on the last day for following YHWH, the Father of Jesus, over against all other gods. Those who fall away before then, by failing to keep the Law and thus forsaking the covenant, these, out of disobedience, will not be declared as belonging to God or His covenant people at the judgment, but will be condemned. Therefore, final salvation is not secure for anyone, because justification is still forthcoming. Any references to justification mentioned in Paul that are not future represent either 1) God's recognition that believers are in the covenant community; 2) the process by which a believer is transformed and made more like Christ in obedience to the Bible as he presses towards the last day (i.e. his faithfulness to the covenant obligations); or 3) a declaration of God's intent to remain faithful to those who remain faithful to the covenant, and fulfill His promises to them. God's final declaration and vindication of the "faithful" depends on the totality of their lives lived in covenant faithfulness. Justification is therefore a process.
6. **"Faith" is not the means by which God justifies the sinner, but is the "faithfulness" by which the sinner remains loyal to his covenant obligations.** Exegetically, the Greek word *pistis* can mean "faith" or "faithfulness," depending on the context. According to the scheme of the New Perspective on Paul, because covenant faithfulness is central, Paul is understood to refer to the believer's faithfulness to God and the Bible, not the faith which is instrumental in bringing about the righteousness of Christ to the legal credit of those who believe. Stay faithful to God by obeying the Bible (with God's help), and you *will be* saved.

Critiques

A brief sketch of history shows that the New Perspective on Paul is hardly new. It is a repackaged version of liberalism that rejects the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible, and offers a salvation by works. Ironically, in attempting to defend the Gospel from Luther and his beef with Rome, New Perspective on Paul proponents have turned the Reformation on its head and have presented a "gospel" (Galatians 1:6-9) that equates with Rome at almost every essential. The implications of the previous six tenets of New Perspective on Paul theology are huge! Consider the doctrines that are attacked:

- Man is born without moral guilt or a sin nature!
- Justification is a process!
- Grace is infused into the life of the covenant member to enable him to enter and remain in the community of believers!

- Faithfulness, not faith is essential for salvation!
- Christ died to break sin's power, not to remove sin's penalty!
- Salvation begins, not by regeneration, but when the believer enters into the covenant community!
- Entrance into the covenant community is through water baptism!
- Assurance and security of salvation depends on whether or not one remains faithful to the covenant obligations and does not commit heinous or continual sin!

In response to the six major tenets of the New Perspective on Paul, I offer 7 critiques that I hope protect the Biblical doctrine of justification and the precious flock of God from this other gospel.³ The New Perspective on Paul:

1. **Elevates Historical Authority** – The appearance of extrabiblical, ancient documents have persuaded the New Perspective on Paul proponents that either Paul or we have misunderstood God's salvation plan in the Old and New Testaments. Such exaltation of apocryphal writings places an undue level of authority on those documents that is equal to or greater than the Scriptures. It is true that historical context is vital to correct hermeneutics, but given their commitment to higher criticism, the New Perspective on Paul advocates hold these documents in higher regard than God's Word. It has been shown that these documents flatly contradict the clear teaching of Scripture, but are regarded as authoritative, placing the integrity of the Bible into question.
2. **Undermines Scriptural Sufficiency** – Because of their antisupernatural view of Scripture, the presuppositions of New Perspective on Paul proponents begin and end with the impossibility or improbability that the Bible (especially the Gospels and Paul), by itself, can be trusted as the reliable record of truth. The Bible we are told, has mythological and metaphorical language that must be decoded in order to be rightly interpreted, all through the grid of the extrabiblical documents mentioned above. The Christian, indwelt by the Holy Spirit of God, with his Bible, is inadequate to know how to have a right relationship with God.
3. **Compromises Exegetical Integrity** – While proponents of the New Perspective on Paul would certainly disagree here, sound principles of hermeneutics and exegesis are violated in certain Scriptures, while other essential Bible passages are altogether neglected or relegated to some other field of theological study.⁴ The extrabiblical documents of the first century are read into Paul's epistles, words and phrases are given more than one meaning, and while detail is given to explain specific Scriptures, the relationship of those Scriptures to their immediate context is ignored.

³ For a detailed critique, read *Justification and the New Perspective on Paul* by Guy Prentiss Waters. Much of this paper was compiled with the help of this resource, and the Master's Seminary Journal, Volume 16, No. 2, Fall 2005.

⁴ For a detailed examination of New Perspective on Paul hermeneutics, read the chapter in the Master's Seminary Journal by Robert L. Thomas, *Hermeneutics and the New Perspective on Paul*, p. 293-316.

4. **Promotes Social Unity** – Promoters of the New Perspective on Paul suggest that the usage of justification in Paul's letters is primarily to unite Jew and Gentile factions of Christianity together, not to describe a believer's legal status before God. The main argument, for example, in Romans is not chapters 3-5, but 9-11, where the interaction between Jews and Gentiles within the covenant community is urged to be in harmony. Not only is justification eschatological in the New Perspective on Paul movement, it is also ecclesiological rather than soteriological. Justification is about getting along with one another, reducing the mission of the church to a social gospel. Moreover, it redefines Biblical community in terms that make one's salvation the burden of the rest of the community and their willingness to help encourage perseverance, so as to be saved in the end.
5. **Intensifies Individual Responsibility** – Since the emphasis on salvation rests with the covenant member to enter into the covenant and keep its obligations, the sinner is loaded with the burden to save himself and sustain himself through his own good works, which cumulatively determine whether he shall be justified before God at the end of all things. If he has appropriated the grace of God so that he has faithfully followed Christ, submitted to His Lordship, and not departed too often or too far from the Law of God, then he will be saved. If not, he will be condemned. Thus, ultimate salvation depends on him.
6. **Removes Gospel Centrality** – “The Gospel is not about salvation” argue the New Perspective on Paul backers, “confessing sin and believing in Jesus” but in becoming an integral part of the covenant community, which itself provides salvation. The gospel contains the facts of Jesus' death and resurrection, but is itself not what saves a sinner, we are told. Those who identify with Jesus and belong to the community of Christ followers are saved, and thus the essential truths of the Gospel are pushed to the periphery and made nonessential.
7. **Returns Legal Culpability** – Because the New Perspective on Paul teachers deny original sin as that which separates sinners from God and makes them sinners from birth, and because of the rejection of the imputation of Christ's righteousness to those who believe, the legal guilt before a holy God returns. Ultimately, the New Perspective on Paul does nothing to solve the sinner's sin problem, except that now he is encouraged to believe that he has a fighting chance if he tries hard enough to make his good works outweigh his bad, by God's infused grace. Guilt is not viewed as germane to Paul's soteriology, if present at all. But because the presence of sin remains, the guilt of that sin is absolved only in the penitent righteous acts of the sinner. Guilt, if it is acknowledged at all, is removed by good works, and the sinner still has a sin problem, for which he has no sufficient answer or solution.

Summary

The New Perspective on Paul is not only another gospel; it is the un-gospel. It is a message that strips the Old and New Testament doctrine of salvation of every essential component. Those who promote it should be lovingly and carefully exposed as false.