

New Perspective[s] on Paul

I. Background

- Arose in ranks of liberal protestants in context of Jew-Christian ecumenism after WW2 when huge sympathy for Jews over Holocaust [also ‘New Quest for historical Jesus’]; generally anti-Luther [tendency towards Anti-Semitism]
 - Dunn created the tag [1983] but ideas were earlier
 - G. F. Moore pre WW2 argued Judaism not a ‘works’—based religion
 - K. Stendahl [1980s?] – Paul not ‘converted’ (didn’t change his religion) but ‘called’
 - T. Donaldson [1990s?] – Pre-Christian Paul already preaching circumcision
 - But big names are Sanders, Dunn, and Wright
1. E. P. Sanders (*Paul & Palestinian Judaism: 1977*)
 - Judaism was grace-based
 - God’s covenant with Israel was law-based (hence covenantal *nomism*)
 - But this covenant was God’s ‘gift’, hence grace-based.
 - Israel ‘in’ the covenant by grace but ‘stayed in’ by works, judged by works
 - Gentiles attached to Israel as they become Christians.
 - So Christians also stay in by works, judged by works.
 2. J. D. G. Dunn (*Theology of Paul: 1998*) – Sanders outright Liberal; Dunn would claim orthodoxy
 - ‘Works of the law’ are the ‘boundary markers’ the covenant people wear
 - These are no more ‘legalistic’ than road rules.
 - Paul created ‘justification by faith’ as instrument to include *Gentiles*
 3. N. T. [Tom] Wright
 - [*What St. Paul Really Said; 2 commentaries on Romans; Fresh Perspective on Paul*]
 - Wright a defender of orthodoxy – deity of Christ; resurrection of Christ
 - Wright big on biblical theology (meta-narrative), as shaping exegesis
 - Critical of e.g., counting words (like ‘righteousness’, ‘justification’, etc)
 - Big meta-narrative idea is COVENANT (based on OT + DSS + inter-testamental, etc.)
 - ‘Faith’ (= *faithfulness* to Jesus) is the ‘badge’ the covenant people wear (creed, etc.)
 - Hence God justifies his covenant PEOPLE (declare them ‘in the right’ now against the last day).
 - Emphasis, therefore, is on the church
 - Strong hint that *the works of the justified* are to be judged for salvation
 - Hence a Semi-Pelagian anthropology – a qualified assurance
- ‘Thus, Paul’s righteousness/justification and ‘works of the law’ language for Dunn and Wright are primarily about how two different ethnic Christian groups (Christian Jews and

Christian Gentiles) get on as God's people and how they can eat at the same table. Righteousness/Justification is no longer how sinful human beings can stand before God – soteriology. For Dunn and Wright righteousness/justification language is about church relationships – ecclesiology.' (Jason Hoppa, *Essentials*, 2007)

II. Critique

1. Contra Sanders Judaism was 'works'-based (legalist) religion

- Series edited by Carson, O'Brien, Seifrid (Baker)
- Various [near] contemporary texts reveal *legalistic* outlook

Love is keeping [Wisdom's] commandments [=the Law].

Observance of her laws in the guarantee of immortality (Wisdom of Solomon 6:18)

Whoever honours his father *atones for his sins*,

And whoever glorifies his mother is like one who lays up treasure...

For kindness to a father *will not be forgotten*,

And *against your sins it will be credited* (Sirach 3:3-4,14)

Abraham was the great father of a multitude of nations,

And no one was found like him in glory:

He *kept the law* of the Most High

and was taken into covenant with him....

- Paul the *former Pharisee* saw himself as 'blameless' and 'righteous' due to law-keeping

Phil 3

4 Though I myself have reason for *confidence in the flesh* also.

If any other man thinks he has reason for *confidence in the flesh*, I have more:

5 circumcised on the eighth day,

of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin,

a Hebrew born of Hebrews;

as to the law a Pharisee, 6 as to zeal a persecutor of the church,

as to righteousness under the law blameless.

7 But whatever *gain* I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.

8 Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, *not having a righteousness of my own, based on law*, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith...

2. Contra new perspective scholars the idea of 'covenant' is not dominant in Paul. E.P. Sanders, famously made the 'covenant' with Israel the starting point for his reading of Paul. But Paul uses the word only five times (Rom 11:27; Gal 3:17; 1 Cor 11:25; 2 Cor 3:6,14) and none of these points to 'covenant' as the key word to explain the meaning of God-given righteousness. Thus 'covenant' and 'covenant inclusion' are not the right point of entry to ascertain Paul's mind on 'righteousness of God'.

3. Paul insists that Jews are *equal sinners* with Gentiles and are *justified one and the same way*:

Rom 3

23 since *all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

24 they are *justified by his grace* as a gift, through the redemption

which is in Christ Jesus...

29 Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also?

Yes, of Gentiles also,

30 *since God is one*; and he will justify the circumcised on the ground of their faith and the uncircumcised through their faith.

Rom 5

12 Therefore as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men *because all men sinned* ...

Acts 13:38-39

Let it be known to you therefore, brethren,

that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you,

and by him every one that believes is freed (justified) from everything

from which you could not be freed (justified) by the law of Moses.

4. Paul insists that *individuals* are justified.

Rom 3:28 For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law.

Gal 2:15-16 ...a man is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Christ'

Hence the great example of Abraham, 'father of us all

Rom 4:3 For what does the scripture say?

Abraham *believed* God, and it was reckoned to him as *righteousness*.

Rom 4:9-11 We say that faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness.

How then was it reckoned to him?

Was it before or after he had been circumcised?

It was not after, but before he was circumcised.

He received circumcision as a sign or seal

of the righteousness which he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who

believe without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them, and likewise the father of the faith

III. Implications of New Perspective Approach

1. Meta-narrative control exegesis

It is fundamental that we start with the text before us. We have the author's words on the page and we are able (to a degree) to work out what he attempted to convey to his readers at the time. If our author is hinting that his words must be understood in terms of some meta-narrative or overarching typology that, too, may be useful. I am thinking of Paul's reference to the exodus and years of pilgrimage in 1 Cor 10 or to his 'allegory' of Abraham's two sons in Gal 4.

Yet caution is needed. Paul usually sends a strong signal of an overarching story or pattern. To import a meta-narrative or allegorical interpretation of our own will likely deflect us from the point Paul is actually making in his text.

Appeal to meta-narrative (biblical theology) must not overturn authorial intent. The text is sovereign and must be the basis for any theological construction.

2. Emphasis is ecclesial rather than personal (for ecumenical motives?).

Because new perspective shies away from personal faith based on the once-for-all propitiatory death of Christ it appeals to those of liberal or 'catholic' persuasion. Is it ashamed of the cross?

3. Christian assurance ('peace with God') is qualified

Rom 5

1 Therefore, since we are *justified by faith*,

we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

9 Since, therefore, we are now *justified by his blood*,

much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.

IV. Justified by Faith

Four comments:

a) The word 'righteousness' and its brother word, 'justified' are law court words. For example, in 1 Cor 4:4 Paul speaks about the Corinthians' 'judgement' about his ministry where he says, 'I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted (Greek: 'justified').

Paul uses this language to describe the relationship with God of those who are (in Paul's words) 'in Christ', Christian believers. He says that they are 'justified' (= 'acquitted').

b) The passive voice means that if I am 'justified' it means that **someone else** has 'justified' me, and that someone else is God. So: to be 'justified' means to be 'acquitted', acquitted *by God*.

c) But how does God do this? God does this through an agent, and that agent is Christ, or more specifically 'Christ's blood [= death']. Twice in Rom 5 Paul uses the passive 'justified' (i.e., by God) – 'justified by faith' (5:1) and 'justified by his **blood**' (5:9).

d) It is sometimes argued that 'justified by faith' should be understood as 'justified out of faith' i.e., 'out of the faithfulness of Jesus, rather than by the faith of the individual in Jesus. This may be an instance where we agree with what is affirmed but reject what is denied. We affirm that we are 'justified by - or out of - the faithfulness of Christ' in his obedience in death to the Father's will. But we reject the proposition that this excludes that we are 'justified by faith'. Think for example of Rom 3:26 – [This] was to prove at the present time that [God] himself is righteous and that *he justifies him* who has faith in Jesus. The individual is justified by his/her faith in Jesus based on Jesus' own faithfulness in life and death.

V. The Incident at Antioch.

Let me conclude by a brief reference to a watershed event in early Christianity, the Incident at Antioch (Gal 2:11-14).

The ones Paul opposed surprises us, with notable leaders, Peter and Barnabas. These were Paul's opponents in Antioch.

The 'incident' at Antioch occurred *ca.* 48 and is also mentioned in Acts 15:1-2 and Gal 2:11-14 (with further discussion in Gal 2:15-20).

At the time the mixed assembly of Jewish and Gentile believers in Antioch shared table fellowship, including at the Lord's Table. But then a bombshell came in the arrival of 'certain men...from James' as Paul puts it (Gal 2:12), the effect of which was that all the Jewish believers, including Peter and Barnabas, 'drew back and separated themselves' and would no longer eat with the Gentile believers.

Paul strenuously opposed those who said

'no circumcision no salvation' (so, Luke in Acts 15:1-2);

'no circumcision, no table fellowship' (so, Paul in Gal 2).

According to this new teaching the common ground on which Jewish and Gentile believers must stand for salvation and fellowship is male circumcision. Without male circumcision of Gentiles, there is no salvation and no eating together

So how did Paul respond? He wrote:

15 We ourselves, who are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners,
16 yet who know that a man is not justified by works of the law
but through faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus,
in order to be justified by faith in Christ, and not by works of the law, because by
works of the law shall no one be justified.

20 I have been crucified with Christ;
it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me;
and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God,
who loved me and gave himself for me.

21 I do not nullify the grace of God;
for if justification were through the law, then Christ died to no purpose.

We note, firstly (once more) that Paul is referring to the 'righteousness before God' of *individuals* ('a man is not justified by works of the law' [e.g., circumcision] but through faith

in Jesus Christ [or the faithfulness of Jesus Christ]); and secondly, that he is speaking of himself, Peter and Barnabas as *Jewish* individuals. I make this point once again against those 'new perspectivists' who propose that 'justification by faith' was Paul's theological solution to the problem of the inclusion of the Gentiles, inferring (or asserting) that Jews were already 'in' the covenant and in no need of God's righteousness.

Paul is arguing that due to sin both Jews and Gentiles stand in need of God's righteousness, available only through the redemptive, accursed death of the Son of God on the tree. In Rom 3:9 Paul states that 'all' (that is, Gentiles and Jews) are 'under sin', that is, controlled by sin (as members of the lost tribe of Adam). As lawbreakers under the curse of the law, both the circumcised and the uncircumcised, find one and the same means of redemption, through the One who gave himself for sins, Jesus Christ the Lord (Gal 1:3; 2:20).

VI. Finally

The true church of Jesus Christ is composed of those who do not trust in themselves that they are righteous but who say, 'On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is shifting sand'. The Christ on whom we stand, is Christ crucified and risen, in whom alone we believe for our eternal salvation.