

# **THE NEW PERSPECTIVE ON PAUL**

**REV. DR. JOHN A. SCOTT**



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**The** evangelical church in Britain today faces a great theological challenge, a challenge which goes right to the heart of biblical teaching – justification by faith alone in Christ alone. This new challenge has been dubbed by J. D. G. Dunn, ‘The New Perspective on Paul’.<sup>1</sup>

The New Perspective on Paul challenges and seeks to reshape our understanding of:

- justification
- the righteousness of God
- the preaching of the gospel;

and has some major pastoral and practical implications for:

- the doctrine of assurance and
- ecumenism.

So this is no side issue, nor just some curiosity for the academy to occupy its time. It is not just an idea that some liberals are playing around with but, through the works of Tom Wright, the current Bishop of Durham, this view is finding its way through to many at a popular level. Wright is a very skilful and readable writer and is producing a series of devotional commentaries of a Daily-Reading-Notes variety. In a few years time it will not just be ministers and elders who will be discussing this viewpoint. Many evangelical Anglican ministers in this country and an increasing number of Presbyterian ministers in the USA have ‘bought into’ this New Perspective, so I suspect that what we have today is perhaps just the tip of the iceberg.

The purpose of this paper is to help the reader gain an understanding of the New Perspective and to provide some appraisal to help develop a critical approach to this new teaching. This survey of the New Perspective on Paul will be divided into two parts.

- Describing the New Perspective and
- Responding to the New Perspective with some critical comment and analysis.

## PART I – DESCRIBING THE NEW PERSPECTIVE

Charles Dickens opens his *Tale of Two Cities* with these curious words, ‘It was the best of times, it was the worst of times’. Well which was it, best of times or worst of times? Perhaps Dickens’ point was that *we have to decide what we make of things*.

### What is at risk?

Is it the best of times or the worst of times for the Doctrine of Justification? In recent times this old friend has fallen on ‘Hard Times’. This doctrine of justification, that was once called the article upon which the church stands and falls, is in danger of being disposed of – the good news that God justifies sinners by grace through faith on account of Christ is at risk. Duncan says that this new attack (referring to the New Perspective) is ‘at the very least, undermining the definition of, and confidence in the historic Protestant understanding of the Gospel itself.’<sup>2</sup>

If the heart of the Gospel is under challenge is it the best of times or the worst of times? *We have to decide what we make of it*. When this doctrine of justification by faith alone in Christ alone was in the crucible at the time of the Reformation, there was great blessing for the church. It seems that in the history of the church our greatest creedal statements were hammered out on the anvil of controversy and dispute.

Have we in our day been faithful guardians of the truth, or have we fought ‘lesser’ battles leaving the core doctrines undefended and left the door open for an attack at the heart of our faith? Could it become the best of times as we are forced back to rethink and restudy and defend the glorious truth of justification?

### Who are the New Perspective people?

The New Perspective on Paul is not a group or a movement as such, but a perspective which is held by a variety of people and to varying degrees.<sup>3</sup> In fact, because this so-called new perspective so radically rewrites the Gospel it might make more sense to speak of the New Paradigm on Paul. If we try and fit the New Perspective in to our traditional understanding of the *ordo salutis* (the order of salvation) we find that the landscape of the Gospel has been so radically altered that our normal questions no longer make any sense. As one of the New Perspective people says, ‘we come to Paul with the wrong questions and wonder why he doesn’t give a clear answer’.<sup>4</sup>

The major exponents of the New Perspective are E. P. Sanders, J. D. G. Dunn and N. T. Wright. These men do not all agree but they have a lot in common. I don’t want to confuse this introduction to the New Perspective by too much interaction with the differences that exists within their camp. So I will be merging some of the views and using broad brushstrokes to try and get the general idea of the New Perspective across at an introductory level. Since Wright is seen as the evangelical among the New Perspective people, I will stay mostly with his interpretation. Wright does not approve of being lumped together with other New Perspective people. He expressed his frustration on this and other matters at a conference in Scotland where he attempted to defend his views. Wright<sup>5</sup> presented himself as a wounded man trying to defend his orthodoxy. Dunn<sup>6</sup> has, in recent times, responded in print, upset at the criticism of his New Perspective view. Perhaps the New Perspective people are showing signs of the very introspection that they accused Luther of experiencing, and the criticism upon which they base some of their speculation.<sup>7</sup> However much they plead that they are within the Reformed tradition, in other places they herald a Copernican Revolution in

soteriology. M. Mattison<sup>8</sup>, one of the New Perspective enthusiasts says, ‘In hermeneutical terms, then, the historical context of Paul’s debate lies at the very heart of the doctrine of justification in the church.’ By historical context, he means the version of historical context put forward by the New Perspective.

### **What is the New Perspective?**

The New Perspective people, such as Sanders, Dunn and Wright, say that up until their time the Apostle Paul has been completely misunderstood. Luther, Calvin, Hodge, Murray, Grudem – all wrong, they say.

What got Luther and Calvin off to the wrong start, they say, was that they took their battle against the works-righteousness that they saw in the Roman Catholic Church and they imposed the lines of that dispute upon the battle that they perceived Paul was having with the Judaism of his day. The result of Luther and Calvin’s alleged mistake – when you make works-righteousness the problem, when it is really not the problem, – is that the proposed solution of justification that you arrive at is an answer to a question that was never asked.

This Reformed emphasis, they claim, has shaped an individualistic preoccupation with sin, an introspective troubled conscience, and a limited focus on the radical, cosmic, eschatological scope of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This individualistic focus has led to endless wrangling about the righteousness of God, imputation, infusion, and the like – issues that should never have been given the time of day, all because of this faulty presupposition that the battle that Paul was fighting was a battle against the works-righteousness of the Jews of his day.

In the New Perspective view, Luther was the chief culprit<sup>9</sup> – a man who was

- the victim of his own paranoia
- entirely psychologically obsessed
- caught up in a morbid, introspective, westernised focus on his personal quest to find salve for his stricken conscience.

He set the church on a course of obsession with personal sin, of exploring the question, ‘If I can’t help myself how can I find help?’ Luther found what he was looking for in his creation of the doctrine of forensic justification. He became the founder of a legal fiction, where the righteousness of the judge gets somehow imputed or transferred to the account of the accused.

So you see, say the New Perspective people, if it hadn’t been for a sorry accident of history

- the battle with the Roman Catholic Church
- the new western philosophical man-centred focus

we might never have had the doctrine of justification by faith alone as we know it today in Reformed teaching.

So if the Reformers were wrong in understanding Paul as having a battle against works-righteousness, what according to the New Perspective people is the right way of understanding Paul?

### **Mind the Gap!**

Richard Gaffin summarises the efforts of the New Perspective agenda by saying that they attempt to:

- narrow the gap between Paul and the Judaism of his day, and
- widen the gap between Paul and the Reformation.<sup>10</sup>

***(a) How do they seek to narrow the gap between Paul and the Judaism of his day?***

The New Perspective people will acknowledge that Paul was in dispute with the Judaism of his day in his letters in the New Testament. So they say that since Paul is at odds with the Judaism of his day, if we really want to understand what he was getting at we have to turn to the literature of that day to find out what it was that the first century Jew believed.

That introduces us to a brand of Jewish religion that is called Second Temple Judaism, which runs approximately from the time of the return from the exile under Zerubbabel to AD 70 when we have the destruction of the Temple. Of course, the literature can run on for another century and a half. The literature of that period<sup>11</sup> includes religious commentaries on the law, clarifications of the law, journal articles, and the writing of secular historians. So you have to read half a millennium's worth of literature and then you can know the mind of the Jew of Paul's day and the '*pattern of religion*' that existed at that time.

Sanders is the one who shook the world of Pauline studies, back in the 1970's. But, in fact, he was not the first to come up with these ideas. Many commentators express surprise that it was Sanders work that set the world of Pauline studies on fire because these ideas had been around for some time.<sup>12</sup> One critic of the New Perspective says, 'The change in scholarly evaluation of ancient Judaism that E. P. Sanders brought about was an idea whose time had come.'<sup>13</sup> Having engrossed himself in a monumental survey of Second Temple literature, Sanders and his later followers draw a negative and positive conclusion from the research.

Negatively, Sanders would say that the church was wrong to ever think that Paul was attacking Pelagianism in the Jews of his day, because the literature of Second Temple Judaism provides no evidence of Pelagianism in the thinking of the Jews in Paul's day. So, according to Sanders, when Luther and Calvin opposed the Pelagianism that they saw in the Roman Catholic Church and read this into Paul's battle with the Pelagianism that he saw in the Jews of his day they were wrong – there is no sign of Pelagianism in the literature of Second Temple Judaism. Westerholmsays that 'Sander's monograph begins with a massively documented attack on the "Lutheran" understanding of the Judaism in which Paul was fostered, then proceeds to make the claim that distorted views of Judaism have led to distortions of Paul's thought.'<sup>14</sup>

Because this is such an important point to their argument, let me quote from Wright. In this post-Sanders age he says, 'It is, therefore, no longer possible to speak as though Judaism were simply Pelagianism in ancient dress. If we are to discuss the differences between Christianity, in any of its early forms, and its parent society and religion, we must do so with more historical awareness and sensitivity.'<sup>15</sup> Wright<sup>16</sup> says, 'I am convinced, Ed Sanders is right: we have misjudged early Judaism, especially Pharisaism, if we thought of it as a version of Pelagianism.' So the New Perspective negative comment is that we are all wrong in the way we thought of Paul.

Positively, what they find in the Second Temple Judaism literature is what they call 'covenantal nomism'. That is a kind of covenantal law keeping. According to Sanders, covenantal nomism differs from legalism as the law keeping is seen within a covenantal context. The Jews, they say, believed that they get into the covenant community by an act of God's electing grace and they stay in by doing good works. Of course, their obedience is not all good obedience so there is the possibility of finding grace in forgiveness and still keeping your place in the covenant community.

To recap the New Perspective view,

- The negative point – Paul is not dealing with a problem of works righteousness. This raises the question, ‘what was Paul then dealing with?’ because all agree that Paul has some sort of dispute with his fellow Jews.
- The positive point – the Jews of Paul’s day were very interested in covenant and covenantal nomism.

What is the outcome of these two discoveries, one negative and one positive? This is their construction.

I emphasise and repeat these two points because upon these two points the whole edifice of the New Perspective has been built.

In order to provide some idea of the edifice that is constructed from these two foundational points I will summarise the New Perspective scheme and here I will rely largely upon Wright.<sup>17</sup>

In the reconstruction of Paul’s historical context – or in the quest for the historical Paul – the New Perspective people say that Paul, being a man of his day, had, like many of his contemporaries, jealously guarded the boundaries of who exactly was part of the covenant community. This was a ‘Jews only’ club. The Jews were exclusively the people of God. They identified themselves exclusively by their badges of identity, the works of the law that included: circumcision, dietary laws and observance of religious festivals. These ‘*works of the law*’<sup>18</sup> identified them exclusively as the covenant community.

Paul sought to hasten the day of the great eschatological age<sup>19</sup> when the covenant God would declare his righteousness (by God’s righteousness is meant his covenant faithfulness)<sup>20</sup> and would, in an act of forensic justification, show once and for all who exactly were God’s covenant people.<sup>21</sup>

So ‘The key thing which Paul was converted from was exclusivism, the understanding that God only had dealings with those who possessed the Law of Moses.’<sup>22</sup>

But before Paul’s conversion (or perhaps his new calling)<sup>23</sup> he saw that these Christians were surely a distraction, and out of zeal for the Torah and his covenant God, Paul sought to stamp the Christians out of existence. But in his encounter with the resurrected Christ Paul discovered that he had missed a beat in God’s programme. Paul learned on that Damascus Road day that God had, in Jesus, done for the Jews in the middle of time what Paul expected he would do at the end of time.<sup>24</sup>

After this encounter with King Jesus, Paul could carry on his programme but he had to see and recognise at least three things:

- that this national exclusivism was wrong
- that Christ was at the centre of what God was continuing to do for his covenant people
- that this national pride made no sense at all in the scheme of things

Paul learned that national exclusivism was wrong. This is the point that he had to teach the Jews of his day. The covenant community is for the Gentiles as well. This is what Paul is working on in his dispute with the Judaizers – nothing whatsoever to do with works-righteousness.

Paul learned that this national exclusivism was in fact nonsense, because, while the Jews had returned from exile, they were still in a spiritual exile.<sup>25</sup> But Jesus, on behalf of his covenant people, had faced the ultimate exile on the cross and having been raised from the dead he has returned from exile for his people. This is a victory and must be celebrated in the declaration of the Gospel – which is the great news of triumph that Jesus is Lord. God has taken this same Jesus that you have crucified and named him Lord and Christ.

According to Wright, this was the one big problem with the Jewish nationalistic boast: they were still in exile, not a physical exile (they had come back from Babylon), but they remained in the wilderness of exile spiritually speaking because they had no Temple and Israel did not 'rule the waves'.

When Paul was faced with the risen Christ on the Damascus Road he had to conclude that the nation's exile had reached its climax in the death of Jesus Christ. In Christ, Israel had been redeemed. It was altogether programmatically different from what Paul had expected but in Israel's greatest hour the Gentiles had to be summoned to join Israel in celebrating her day of deliverance. Paul's concern was not about sin, punishment and how to have a right standing before God. That is to individualize the issue. Paul's concern was with the covenant community. Wright says, 'Saul of Tarsus was not interested in a timeless system of salvation whether works-righteousness or anything else. Paul wanted God to redeem Israel.'<sup>26</sup> This triumph is not just exclusively for the Jews. In fact the nature of the triumph opens the door to the Gentiles. Part of the reason for the exile of the people of God was because of their failure to take the good news to the world. 'Fellow countrymen', says Paul, 'this is what you need to learn – national exclusivism is wrong'.

We come by faith, respond in faith to the Gospel, where the Gospel is the declaration that Jesus is Lord. It is by faith because that opens the door for Gentiles because if it were by the works of the law that would mean we were still adhering to the old national exclusivism. These works of the law are not good works but national boundary markers – things such as circumcision, dietary laws and Sabbath keeping.

Now note some of the key New Perspective points that have been touched on here.

1. Nationalistic Jewish exclusivism – that was the main issue that Paul had to deal with – not self-righteousness.
2. The righteousness of God – not a gift righteousness transferred – but God's covenant faithfulness.
3. Justification – a declaration to do with who really are the people of God.
4. The Gospel – the declaration that Jesus is Lord.
5. The dispute Paul has in Romans and Galatians is not works-righteousness but Jewish nationalism.
6. The faith message opens it up for Gentiles. Works of the law were used to confine the covenant community to the Jews. Works of the law were not good works but badges or symbols that identified those in the covenant community.

So in this new approach to the Gospel Paul is presented as a man within his Second Temple Judaism context. They seek to narrow the gap between Paul and the Jew of his day.

### ***(b) Broadening the Gap between Paul and the Reformation***

Wright attempts to show that the Reformation message is fundamentally different from the message that he says Paul would have preached.

In Reformation terms the Gospel has a narrower focus. This older theology, as he calls it, is concerned with the order of salvation. Traditional Protestant soteriology is focused on the plight of the conscience-stricken individual before a holy God. Wright says, 'The Gospel is supposed (by the older tradition) to be a description of how people get saved; a theological mechanism, whereby, Christ takes our sin and we his righteousness. Some others might say, Jesus becomes my personal Saviour, or I admit my sin, believe that Jesus died for me and I commit my life to him'.<sup>27</sup> That is what the Reformers and their successors understood by the Gospel.

But really the good news according to Paul is the declaration that the long-awaited release

from captivity, the return from exile is at hand. The cross of Jesus stands at the very centre. The cross was the decisive victory over the 'principalities and powers'.<sup>28</sup> The death of Jesus had the effect of liberating both Jew and Gentile from the enslaving force of the elements of the world. The culmination of Christ's great act of obedience is the means whereby the reign of sin and death is replaced with the reign of grace and righteousness. Paul understands Jesus' execution as the moment when the Creator's love wins the victory over the rebellious creation. Jesus is king, Jesus is Lord.

According to Wright we are now in a position to understand justification properly, the way Paul intended. Justification is not how people enter the covenant, but the declaration that certain people are already within the covenant.<sup>29</sup>

Justification is more about ecclesiology than soteriology. When God declares in the favour of a person, he is acknowledging that the person is in the covenant community. Paul's doctrine of justification is about dealing with the problem of national pride, and attempting to stop grace being restricted to one nation.

What is the basis of this justification?

First, let me note for you that they view justification as having a present and future aspect.

**Justification now.** According to Wright Justification takes place on the basis of faith because true Christian faith – belief that Jesus is Lord and that God raised him from the dead – is the evidence of the work of the Spirit, and hence, the evidence that the believer is already within the covenant. This present justification is based on regeneration. Since you get in by grace and stay in by works, then future justification is based on sanctification. As Wright himself says, 'Present justification declares on the basis of faith, what future justification will affirm publicly... on the basis of the entire life.'<sup>30</sup>

The works of the law about which Paul has so much to say were not acts of works-righteousness. These were certain works that distinguished the Jew, like a kind of national badge, or boundary markers that identified them as Jews, such as circumcision, Sabbath keeping and dietary laws.

Justification in this context then is not about the pardon of sin and having the righteousness of Christ imputed to us. Justification is about a declaration about who is a member of the covenant community. Justification is a unifying doctrine that is concerned with the unity of Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians in the Church.

## **PART II – RESPONSE TO THE NEW PERSPECTIVE**

The New Perspective on Paul presents one of the most dangerous challenges to the message of the Gospel. The church should not underestimate the damage that this view can do. Before considering some of the criticisms it is perhaps worthwhile to consider some of the positive aspects of the New Perspective.

### **Positive aspects to the New Perspective**

#### ***(a) Rediscovering the doctrine of justification***

The immediate benefit from the teaching on the New Perspective is that it places the focus upon the doctrine of justification. Eveson describes the doctrine of justification as the neglected doctrine and refers to a warning that Alan Stibbs, then Vice-Principal of Oak Hill Theological College, gave in 1952, that the doctrine of justification by faith needed to be reinstated.<sup>31</sup> It seems that Stibbs' warning was not heeded but under this new and sustained challenge from the New Perspective we find ourselves forced into thinking hard about justification.

#### ***(b) Rediscovering the doctrine of covenant***

Wright's whole presentation of the gospel is covenantally structured. While traditional covenant theologians are not going to agree with everything he says about covenant, there are many helpful aspects of covenantal teaching that Wright brings out more clearly.

#### ***(c) Rediscovering the doctrine of the church***

In 1985 Peter Berger said that 'the concept of the "autonomous individual" is the strategically central component of the modern Western world.'<sup>32</sup> This has not been without its impact upon the church. Much of modern evangelicalism is shaped by individualism.<sup>33</sup> Good churchmanship is sadly lacking in our churches. Wright helps us to think about the concept of community. We have seen a resurgence of interest in a Reformed Soteriology but we need to see it in its setting of a Reformed Ecclesiology. Locating justification in ecclesiology as opposed to soteriology is a problem the way the New Perspective People do it, but this may make us think carefully about the calls for unity that we often hear based upon some basic points of soteriology to the neglect of ecclesiology. We could ask such questions as:

- Can we have a soteriology without an ecclesiology?
- What does it mean that the keys of the Kingdom were given to the apostles of the church?
- What does the Westminster Confession of Faith mean when it says that outside of the church there is no ordinary possibility of salvation?

#### ***(d) Rediscovering the cosmic scope of Redemption***

Wright is not alone in claiming that the Western Church has had a limited focus. Letham examines the relation between Christ and creation and also that between creation and redemption and complains that, 'These connections have frequently been overlooked in Western Christianity, which has instead concentrated its attention on personal individual salvation.'<sup>34</sup> Wright's approach will help us think of the scope of salvation on a much grander scale – the restoration of man with God, of man with man and man with creation in the new heavens and the new earth.

### ***(e) Rediscovering the doctrine of Eschatology***

Wright helps us escape from the perplexed question about ‘which millennialist scheme’, and helps us view the eschatological triumph of Christ and his Kingdom.<sup>35</sup>

The gains in the New Perspective are few but the losses are many and extensive.

### **The Problems with the New Perspective**

It is perhaps no surprise that the New Perspective has taken such a hold given the sheer volume of material that has come from Wright and Dunn. Not only do they publish the general principles of the New Perspective but also they do the hard work of producing scholarly commentaries on Romans that appear to back up by solid exegesis what they said they have discovered in their study of Second Temple Judaism.<sup>36</sup> In addition Dunn has produced an extensive scholarly work on the Theology of Paul.<sup>37</sup> Faced with such a volume of work and level of scholarship it is tempting for many just to accept their assertions. But the questions that we need to ask of this New Perspective are really quite simple.

- Did the Reformers really teach what the New Perspective people say they taught?
- Have you clearly understood what the Reformers were teaching?
- Is it possible to find a single pattern of religion in 500 years of history?
- Does all the Second Temple literature consistently say what the New Perspective people claim it says?

These basic questions lead us to explore the methodology that the New Perspective people use and it is at the level of their presuppositions that the weakness lies.

### ***(a) The method of reasoning***

**i.** A ploy that the New Perspective people use is to instruct us on what we as evangelicals believe. In any debate, it is a mistake to allow your opponent to tell you what you believe and then permit him to demolish his presentation of your view. In any debate, state your own view. It might surprise you that, as you think to formulate what you believe, how many gross errors there are in the way your opponent states your view. Duncan says, ‘If you don’t know what the Reformers said, then you are vulnerable to having someone else tell you what they said.... One of the reasons some students are attracted to this viewpoint is that they have never learned anything about these contextual issues except from the New Perspective people.’<sup>38</sup>

**ii.** To create the impression of having been completely comprehensive in assessing all the literature turns out not to be justified. Sanders didn’t consider all of the literature associated with the time. Venema says, ‘Though it hardly seems fair to fault Sanders for failing to consider all the sources in his remarkably extensive study of Second Temple Judaism, there are some noteworthy omissions in his work.’<sup>39</sup>

**iii.** It is also a mistake in methodology to assume that the formally stated position of a group always reflects the reality. Stott, in his assessment of the New Perspective, considers this point and concludes that, ‘Whatever we find in the writings of Second Temple Judaism may differ from the actual heart condition of individual Jews.’<sup>40</sup>

**iv.** We also need to be cautious about falling into the trap of stating what is at the centre of Paul’s teaching or the Bible’s teaching, whether that be covenant, presence of God, justification by faith, union with Christ, or Christ. We usually establish the case for a central theme by glossing over other important themes and we set ourselves up as an easy target.

**v.** The New Perspective’s historical reconstruction of Paul is their governing key for the interpretation of Paul.<sup>41</sup>

***(b) A Problem with misunderstanding theological terms***

Wright accuses the Reformers of presenting first century Judaism as Pelagianism. The debate should not be reduced to a mere splitting of Pelagius. What the Reformers opposed was not Pelagianism but semi-Pelagianism, a kind of mixture of grace and law. Covenantal nomism sounds so similar to Semi Pelagianism. It is hard to escape the cooperative synergism that is part of the very definition of covenantal nomism.

The Reformers didn't claim that Rome was Pelagian or that Judaism was Pelagian. In fact all Sanders' hard work and definition of covenantal nomism establishes the case of semi-Pelagianism in Second Temple Judaism.<sup>42</sup>

So Sanders needs to go back to the study and do more than show that the Second Temple Judaism literature does not contain the Pelagian view of salvation by works. He needs to show that Second Temple Judaism was not marked by any form of semi-Pelagianism.

But Sanders would have to do an incredible U-turn, because his description of covenantal nomism sounds so much like semi-Pelagianism that it might not be that unreasonable to argue that Sanders in fact unwittingly supports the Reformed argument.<sup>43</sup>

***(c) Ignoring Sola Scriptura***

The New Perspective people insist that, in order to understand Paul and do justice to what he really meant, we need a thorough knowledge of extra-biblical information. Under *Sola Scriptura*, have we not been taught the sufficiency of Scripture? The sufficiency of Scripture means that Scripture contains all the words of God he intended his people to have at each stage of redemptive history and that it now contains all the words of God we need for salvation, for trusting him perfectly.<sup>44</sup>

While our hermeneutical method includes the tool of grammatico-historical exegesis<sup>45</sup> we do not accept that we need an external framework either of covenantal nomism, Pelagianism, or semi-Pelagianism to understand what Paul was saying. Do 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century students of Second Temple literature understand first century Judaism better than Paul? C.K. Barrett remarks, 'He is a bold man who supposes he understands first century Judaism better than Paul did.'<sup>46</sup>

Whatever the usefulness and need for historical studies that place the Scriptures in their historical context, we have to take care that the tentative results of such studies do not inappropriately influence our interpretation of the biblical texts.

Do not allow historical studies to be imposed as a grid for reading the Scriptures. Our ultimate appeal is to Scripture. When we want to determine Paul's view of the Gospel, we must allow Paul's writings to have their say.<sup>47</sup> We don't want to read Paul against a philosophical Hellenistic background. We want to see him in the context of the whole canon. We don't want to read Paul against Second Temple Judaism. We want to read him in the flow of theology that comes informed with Old Testament covenantal understanding that blossoms in the light of the eschatological Christ.

***(d) Reductionist approach to Second Temple Judaism***

Many evangelical scholars are prepared to concede that there is warrant for Sanders' notion of covenantal nomism. However, Carson as one of the editors of *Justification and Variegated Nomism*<sup>48</sup> concludes in this way: (i) Sanders is not wrong everywhere, but he is wrong when he tries to establish that his category is right everywhere; (ii) Covenantal nomism is reductionist and also misleading. Deploying this one neat formula across literature so diverse engenders an assumption that there is more uniformity in the literature than there is.

Neusner and Chilton have criticised Sanders for reducing the complexity of first-century Judaism into ‘a single unitary, harmonious, and linear development.’<sup>49</sup> Stuhlmacher adds his voice of criticism of the work of Sanders

*As one can readily read in the profound work of Freidrich Avemarie, Torah and Life, and in his related essay ‘Election and Retribution’, Sanders has given a one-sided picture of the soteriology of ancient Judaism. Against Billerbeck’s thesis of Jewish works-righteousness, Sanders presents his thesis of a religion of grace. But as early as 1939 the Swede, Erik Sjoberg had already drawn attention to a fact that Friedrich Avemarie has now worked out in more detail. There are important rabbinic texts about the final judgment that do not allow us to speak simplistically about the principle of grace but rather require two optional views in rabbinic soteriology to be set side by side. In their deliberations about the final judgment, the rabbis proceed from both a principle of election and a principle of retribution. Their soteriology ‘is based on two contrary principles, between which there is no fixed relationship, so that they can constantly be brought to bear in different proportions, either with, against, or apart from one another.’<sup>50</sup>*

#### ***(e) Equating Second Temple Judaism with OT Theology***

The New Perspective people endeavour to equate the literature of Second Temple Judaism with the status of the literature of the Old Testament. If an exegete of Paul does not embrace the New Perspective they are accused of not understanding the need to see Paul as a man in context. Gaffin<sup>51</sup> says that in the New Perspective Old Testament roots and Second Temple roots seem to be interchangeable. Whatever Paul was before the Damascus Road experience, he certainly was a man of the Old Testament afterwards. As you read Wright you get the impression that there is an attempt by stealth to make you feel that if you are against their understanding of Second Temple Judaism you are against the Old Testament – a kind of Dispensationalist.

#### ***(f) The New Perspective presents itself as the missing link or hermeneutical bridge between the Old Testament and the New Testament***

The New Perspective seeks to fulfil the function that Acts of the Apostles serves. As Dennis Johnson, in his excellent book *The Message of Acts in the History of Redemption*, says: ‘Luke invites us again and again to walk back and forth across the bridge linking Old Covenant promise with New Covenant fulfilment in Christ.’<sup>52</sup>

The New Perspective people seem to think of themselves as having discovered some missing link between the Old and the New Testament, but the Canon provides its own bridge in the book of Acts.

#### ***(g) Change in the Gospel***

Duncan sums up the New Perspective’s new definition of the Gospel by saying that they make the gospel about the person of Christ rather than the work of Christ.<sup>53</sup> Wright teaches that to acknowledge Jesus as Lord makes you a Christian and by the declaration of the Gospel Wright means the declaration that that the crucified and risen Jesus is Lord.

#### ***(h) Its Attack on Luther***

Carl Trueman in his defence of Luther against the New Perspective’s character assassination of the Reformer says, ‘At the hands of the New Perspective, Luther appears to be the victim not of devastating scholarly critique but of negative sound-bites and tabloid

headlines.<sup>54</sup> Truman goes on to say that the New Perspective's 'portrait of the Reformer certainly appears persuasive and impressive, but that's because of the confidence with which it is presented to an audience whose culture generally considers novelty a good thing and tradition to be bad.'<sup>55</sup>

***(i) It doesn't Prevent anti-Semitism***

New Perspective people claim that the old view of accusing the ancient Jews of legalism can easily reinforce stereotypical and critical attitudes that give rise to anti-Semitic sentiment. Dunn in particular makes quite a thing of this and heralds how the New Perspective removes this negative casting of the Jews. The New Perspective people say in effect that the Jew of Paul's day is a good guy because he is not involved in works righteousness, so they lay claim to a more politically correct, more socially responsible viewpoint. They claim to have removed the stigma from the ancient Jew.

Without buying into this line of reasoning at all, but rather, borrowing from it to make a point – what is Paul saying then, according to the New Perspective, that is more socially responsible? Paul is not talking about stigmatizing the Jews with the nasty claim of works-righteousness at all. He is accusing the Jewish nation of national exclusivism, racial exclusivism, national prejudice, racial prejudice, which is not too many steps away from a charge of xenophobia and racism, if we want to be as culturally up to date as the New Perspective followers.

The New Perspective people have delivered the Jewish nation for ever and a day from anti-Semitism by lifting the charge of works-righteousness by replacing it with a charge that is tantamount to accusing them of racism. With friends like the New Perspective people, why would the Jews ever want enemies? If the New Perspective's line of argument is pursued, it would show how self-referentially absurd it really is.

***(j) Its Ecumenical agenda***

Wright brings out the ecumenical nature of his view of justification. Because his view emphasizes that Gentiles and Jews are included in the covenant community, he sees justification as the great ecumenical doctrine of the Christian faith.

One scholar states that the new perspective represents far more than a scholarly rediscovery of the real nature of Second Temple Judaism or the Gospel according to Paul. It is also a perspective born of desire to understand the gospel in a manner that is more congenial to the ecumenical emphasis and social agenda of contemporary mainstream Christian theology.<sup>56</sup> Duncan says that the New Perspective removes the theological impasse between Catholic and Protestant understanding of justification.<sup>57</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The evangelical church has not yet weathered the storm of the New Perspective. There are three clouds on the horizon. Dunn is planning to return to this subject after an absence of a number of years from the arena. Alister McGrath is revising<sup>58</sup> and updating his monumental two volume work on justification<sup>59</sup> to take account of the New Perspective. It is already seriously critical of the Reformed understanding of Justification. Tom Wright continues to write at a popular level.

Let this then become *the best of times* for the Doctrine of Justification by faith alone in Christ alone. Let us study it, defend it and preach it to the glory of God.

## Endnotes

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