

PASTORAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE NEW PERSPECTIVE

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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. New because it is a radical shift in our understanding of the historical and religious context Paul wrote in. New 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.

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."*¹

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 EP 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.²

Whereas, 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

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

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

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 lay 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"*³

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, *"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."*⁴

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.

³ EP Sanders

Paul and Palestinian Judaism (Fortress Press Minneapolis, 1977) pg 475.

⁴ EP Sanders

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

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!”*⁵

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.”*⁶

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 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.⁷

This reading of Paul legitimises 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.

⁵ Gerhard H. Visscher “Views regarding Legalism and Exclusivism in Judaism: Is there a need to reinterpret Paul?” http://spindleworks.com/library/visscher/NewLegalism.htm#_ftnref16

⁶ James G Dunn, Jesus, Paul and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians. (John Know Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 1990) pg 201.

⁷ James G Dunn The Theology of Paul the Apostle (Erdmans, Grand Rapids, 1998) pg 366.

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 apparently 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 its understanding in Protestant evangelical theology.

The post Sanders understanding of Justification is that of a replacement badge of covenant membership, that is primarily ecclesiastical and not soteriological. Justification then 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, *"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.'*"⁸

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 man is saved.⁹ *"For Paul, 'the gospel' creates the Church; 'justification' defines it."*¹⁰

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 how we relate to God, to the world and to one another. In short there are pastoral implications that flow from the new perspective, implications that need to be fleshed out in the life of God's people.

⁸ N.T Wright, What St Paul Really Said (Eerdmans, Grand rapids, 1997) pg 119.

⁹ N T Wright, Climax of the Covenant (TandT Clark, Edinburgh, 1991) pg 203.

¹⁰ N.T Wright, What St Paul Really Said (Eerdmans, Grand rapids, 1997) pg 151.

The Pastoral Implications of the New Perspective

The pastoral implications of the new perspective are not as well articulated as the theology, but yet are just as important. Sanders and Dunn allude to the implications but it is in Wright that they become clearest. In evaluating such implications I will draw primarily (though not exclusively) from Wright and his latest work *“What Saint Paul Really said”*. Wright more than any other is happy to cash in his theological chips explaining what he sees as the pastoral implications of the new perspective.

Our Understanding of the Gospel and the Great Commission

According to Wright *“the gospel is not an account of how people get saved. It is.... the proclamation of the lordship of Jesus Christ. If we could get that clear in current debates, a lot of false antithesis, not the least in thinking about the mission of the church, would quietly unravel before our eyes. Let us be quite clear. ‘The gospel’ is the announcement of Jesus’ Lordship, which works with power to bring people into the family of Abraham, now redefined around Jesus Christ and characterised solely by faith in him. ‘Justification’ is the doctrine which insists that all those who have this faith belong as full members of his family on this basis”*¹¹

For Wright the gospel is about a declaration, it is the announcement to the world, particularly the principalities and powers that their time is up. It is also God’s way of creating his Church, since when we declare the gospel, announcing Christ’s lordship, it demands an allegiance to Christ and therefore creates the Church. Moreover, it declares that men and woman everywhere should give up their idols and follow the true Lord, Jesus Christ. The Gospel is the message that *“the one true God has dealt in Jesus Christ with sin, death, guilt and shame, and now summons men and woman everywhere to abandon the idols which hold them captive to these things and to discover a new life, a new way of life, in him.”*¹²

What is not obvious in Wright’s definition of the gospel is how he understands that God has dealt with the issues of sin, death, guilt and shame. Wright is not perspicuous in how or in what way the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ has dealt with any of these issues so it is difficult to assess Wright with absolute certainty. However, as Robert Smith observed, *“...little is said about Christ coming between the sinner and God’s wrath. Consequently, gospel ministry for Wright is calling and helping people out of dehumanising effects of sin, rather than proclaiming an already accomplished redemption from sin’s condemnation.”*¹³

¹¹ N.T Wright, *What St Paul Really Said* (Eerdmans, Grand rapids, 1997) pg 133.

¹² N.T Wright, *What St Paul Really Said* (Eerdmans, Grand rapids, 1997) pg 157.

¹³ Robert S Smith *Justification and Eschatology: A dialogue with ‘The New Perspective on Paul’*.

This seems evident by the emphasis Wright gives to the challenge of the gospel to the socio-political powers. The gospel is about challenging the way of being human, a way characterised by love, justice and honesty as opposed to the powers of this world, that divide and manipulate people, keeping us at odds with one another.¹⁴ Therefore, Wright concludes that the gospel is in reality a challenge to the false gods of money, power and sex which is the way of powers and principalities but not of the gospel, nor the covenant community.

The gospel then, is not about individuals but about community, it's not about sins forgiven but having an allegiance to Christ. The gospel as Wright understands it, is understood through the hermeneutical lens of salvation history which necessarily refocuses us the corporate element in Paul's theology.

The benefit of Wright's approach is its corrective function to the overly individualistic approach to the gospel by many theologians. Although, as Mark Thomson comments *"It raises to prominence a number of themes which have been largely neglected in Protestant exegesis of the Pauline material... However, there is an increasing danger for the formulations of the new perspective to create unnecessary, and in the end, unhelpful, antithesis Critical for our present concern is the way in which the accent on the historical and corporate (covenantal) dimensions of Paul's thought is placed in sharp contrast with its individual and existential dimensions."*¹⁵

This can also be seen in Dunn who also emphasises the corporate nature of Paul's doctrine predicated upon a salvation historical reading of Paul's writings. *"... Paul's doctrine of justification by faith should not be understood primarily as an exposition of the individual's relation to God, but primarily in the context of Paul the Jew wrestling with the question of how Jews and Gentiles stand in relation to each other within the covenant purpose of God now that it had reached its climax in Jesus Christ."*¹⁶

Clearly then we see that rather than correcting an overemphasis of individualism, the corporate emphasis of the new perspective has very little to say on the issue of the individual and the particular salvific implications for him/her. Moreover, since the gospel is redefined in terms of the Lordship of Christ and the defeat of the powers, it has little to say to the individual. Particularly, on the purpose and sufficiency of the finished work of Jesus Christ for the salvation of sinners.

¹⁴ N.T Wright, (RTR, Supplement Series#1, May 2001) pg 129.
¹⁵ Mark Thompson, What St Paul Really Said (Eerdmans, Grand rapids, 1997) pg 154.
¹⁶ James G Dunn, Personal Assurance and the New Perspective (RTR, 53:2, 1994) pg 83.
 Jesus, Paul and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians.
 (John Know Press, Louisville, Kentucky,1990) pg 202.

Dunn and Wright seem awfully quiet on the question of how an individual might get right with God. Yet Surely the witness of Scripture teaches us that the finished work of Jesus Christ is the answer, it is through his life death and resurrection that all who would trust in him will be justified (saved). As Robert Smith as written, “*..the message of the gospel.. is a call to be reconciled to God on the basis of Christ’s saving work (2 Cor 5:20). In other words, the first demand of the gospel is not to do as Christ did, but to trust in what Christ did.*”¹⁷

Moreover, the implication of Wright’s emphasis for the great commission is that the message seems almost political or geared towards social transformation as opposed to being genuinely concerned with the redemption of individuals. Having said that, there is no doubt the great commission has social and moral implications but these are best understood as flowing out of the gospel and not confused with the gospel. After all, Jesus said he came to seek and to save.¹⁸ In his ministry his preaching was aimed at individuals as well as the corporate aspect.¹⁹ Paul too, preached a gospel that was fashioned by a concern for both the corporate and the individual concern.²⁰

In summary, we see that the gospel has been redefined to be a declaration of what God has done in salvation historical terms in accordance with his covenant faithfulness. The gospel now is primarily concerned with an announcement of the Lordship of Christ, which through believing, the Church is created. This corporate emphasis usurps the individual standing before God, leaving them with just the scanty message that they are presently members of the covenant community.

This is not the gospel of the N.T, which is a declaration that through the life death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, there is secured a redemption for the elect. The Gospel declares with absolute certainty through the finished work of Jesus Christ, he (Jesus) has secured reconciliation between God and sinner, therefore God calls all sinners to repent of their sin (rebellion) and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is particularly telling that in the Churches mission to make disciples there is no mention in Wright of individual repentance and trust in the cross work of Jesus Christ.

¹⁷ Robert S Smith Justification and Eschatology: A dialogue with ‘The New Perspective on Paul’.
(RTR, Supplement Series#1, May 2001) pg 129.

¹⁸ Lk 19:10

¹⁹ Lk 7:34; 19:1-10

²⁰ Romans 3:23; 10:1

Justification and The Finished Work of Christ

As a corollary of the gospel the issue of the doctrine of Justification is an important one. The new perspective scholars have argued that justification is not the gospel (Wright) and in fact, is not even dealing with matters of soteriology but matters of ecclesiology. There are obviously serious differences in how we are to understand the doctrine of justification.

Lee Gatiss underscores this when he writes, *“Luther declared that if the article of justification stands, the church stands but that if it falls, the church falls. Calvin called this doctrine “the main hinge on which religion turns,” while one of his successors at Geneva, Francis Turretin, declared that it is “of the greatest importance... the principal rampart of the Christian religion... This being adulterated or subverted, it is impossible to retain purity of doctrine in other places.” More recently, Reformed theologian Robert Reymond has written of justification that it is “the heart and core of the gospel” and that consequently, “great care must be taken in teaching this doctrine lest one wind up declaring ‘another gospel’ which actually is not a gospel at all.”*²¹

It seems to me that part of the attraction in redefining justification, as marking out those who are members of the Church, is its utility in breaking down the various barriers that separate Christendom. If Justification is not about how you are saved, then why should Roman Catholics and Protestants be divided?

Wright argues that justification should never have been central to the reformation debates, he concludes it is a doctrine that declares *“that all who believe in Jesus Christ belong at the same table, no matter what their cultural differences... Because what matters is believing in Jesus, detailed agreement on justification itself, properly conceived, isn’t the thing that should determine Eucharistic fellowship.”*²²

Wright continues, *“...one is justified by faith by believing in Jesus. It follows quite clearly great many people are justified by faith who don’t know they are justified by faith. The Galatian Christians were justified by faith, though they didn’t realise it and thought they had to be circumcised as well.”*²³

The implication for the advancement of the ecumenical cause is obvious. If the only gospel issue is believing in Jesus, then why are we separated? If justification by faith is about

²¹ Lee Gatiss Justified Hesitation? (The Theologian: The internet journal for integrated theology) http://www.geocities.com/the_theologian/content/doctrine/dunn.html

²² N.T Wright, What St Paul Really Said (Eerdmans, Grand rapids, 1997) pg 159.

the removal of exclusiveness then why argue about infant baptism, women in ministry or speaking in Tongues. Wright argues that since Justification is the affirmation that we are all one believing community, it therefore makes the barriers of race, class and gender irrelevant to membership or office in the covenant community.²⁴

In others words, like Dunn, the new perspective on justification is about the rejection of exclusivism. The implication that all Christians should similarly oppose all exclusivism is in my view unbiblical and goes beyond the Word of God.²⁵

Moreover, the argument that our differences on justification are not important or unessential seems to be contradicted by Paul himself who argues that anyone who preaches another view of justification is in effect preaching another gospel. Paul's response is emphatic, *"As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!"* Gal 1:9

As Robert Smith confirms, *"As far as Paul was concerned, the fact that his opponents believed in Jesus was largely irrelevant. Their denial of justification by faith cut them off from Christ and put them outside of Abraham's family and God's family (Gal 5:2-4; 4:21-31). Justification in Paul's estimation, is clearly worth fighting about and fighting for (Gal 2:11-14; cf Acts 15:2) precisely because it determines who is and is not 'in the family'."*²⁶

How then, can a less than clear understanding of justification by faith, be a true basis for unity. Surely, lasting unity is found in our shared confession that we are saved by grace through faith in the work of Jesus Christ. Anything less than such a confession is a flimsy basis for ecumenical progress.

In comparing the new perspective on Justification with Paul's writing it seems we have no basis of unity apart from the finished work of Jesus Christ. Paul convictions about the efficacy of Christ's work can be seen the letter to the Romans *"Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!"*²⁷

²³ N.T Wright, What St Paul Really Said (Eerdmans, Grand rapids, 1997) pg 159.

²⁴ N.T Wright, What St Paul Really Said (Eerdmans, Grand rapids, 1997) pg 161.

²⁵ There are many area of Christian living where differences are God's will. For example the differences between men and women and their diff economic roles whilst enjoying ontological equality (Gen 1-2; Household codes etc)

²⁶ Robert S Smith Justification and Eschatology: A dialogue with 'The New Perspective on Paul'. (RTR, Supplement Series#1, May 2001) pg 129.

²⁷ Rom 5:9

Personal Assurance

Closely connected with the issue of Justification by faith is the issue of assurance of salvation. Since the reformation view of the forensic nature of justification lies as the bedrock of Christian assurance. To be justified is to have peace with God, our personal assurance of salvation is therefore predicated upon Christ's acceptable, meritorious and atoning work.

Carson laments, that this is in contrast with those who hold to the new perspective and its categories of 'getting in' and staying in'. "... *'getting in' turns on God's grace; 'staying in' turns on the believers obedience.... if accepted without qualification the implications for Christian assurance are stunning. Christian assurance becomes entirely hostage to Christian obedience, and is not established as a constituent element of saving faith itself.*"²⁸

The Reformers saw Christian assurance as an element of saving faith, since they believed that trusting in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sin and the declaration of righteousness secured our assurance. Indeed, Calvin ground Christian assurance on Christ alone.²⁹

Thompson also concurs that *"The Reformers understood personal assurance to be the existential edge of Justification by faith: Its reality and intensity are explained by the present in breaking of the eschatological verdict of God on the basis of his intervention in Christ. This is the meaning of Paul's declaration in Romans 8:1 "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus". ... Paul boldly proclaims the reality and basis of Christian confidence....we have peace with God, knowing the final verdict of God now, even while we wait for the redemption of our bodies.*"³⁰

Consequently, the new perspective presentation of the Pauline doctrine of justification undermines assurance with its reluctance to grapple with the personal and existential aspects of Justification, they do this by concentrating largely on the corporate and salvation historical understanding of redemption. In fact, Wright goes so far as to deny, *"one is justified or saved first and foremost as an individual."* For Wright, *"there is no such thing as an 'individual' Christian"*³¹ This does not sit well with the many references to salvation of individuals. Each Christian should be assured *"the Son of God loved me and gave himself for me (Gal 2:20)."*³²

²⁸ D Carson, Reflections on Christian Assurance, (WTJ 54 1992) pg 3.

²⁹ D Carson, Reflections on Christian Assurance, (WTJ 54 1992) pg 3.

³⁰ Mark Thompson Personal Assurance and the New Perspective (RTR, 53:2, 1994) pg 84-5.

³¹ N.T Wright, What St Paul Really Said (Eerdmans, Grand rapids, 1997) pg 159

³² Robert S Smith Justification and Eschatology: A dialogue with 'The New Perspective on Paul'.

Moreover, Wright, Dunn and Sanders all give (in varying degrees) the issue of sanctification or Christian obedience an instrumental role in the final eschatological vindication of God's people. That is, the new perspective theology drives the believer to find comfort and assurance in their own obedience as evidence of the Spirit's work and as an instrumental part of their ultimate vindication. They take their eyes off the work of Christ and place their hope in the work of their own hands, at least in part, since 'staying in' the covenant community is predicated on covenant obedience.

Sanders offers no Christian assurance based on Christ's finished work when he writes, "*It thus appears, that while Christians can revert to the non-Christian state and share the fate of unbelievers, there is no deed that necessarily leads to the condemnation of a believer, although Paul appears to waver with regard to food offered to idols.*"³³

Clearly, the obedience of the Christian is instrumental in whether there will be a favorable eschatological verdict. Consequently where justification by faith is at the periphery of Christian theology, Christian assurance is pushed to the periphery of Christian experience.³⁴ According to the new perspective, salvation is intrinsically uncertain (if not elusive) whilst it relies upon the instrument of our obedience.

In contrast, if salvation is indeed the work of a sovereign God in seeking and saving sinners, then the Christian has in the work of Christ all the assurance they need to be confident on that great day when they shall be revealed as sons and daughters of the living God.

That is not to deny that obedience to God which manifest itself in the fruits of good works can play some secondary place in encouraging the believer that the Spirit is working in and through them.³⁵ However, as the Reformers so clearly saw, it is the finished work of Jesus Christ that is the object of our faith and the ground of our salvation.

³³ EP Sanders

³⁴ Mark Thompson

(RTR, Supplement Series#1, May 2001) pg 134.

Paul, The Law and the Jewish People (Fortress Press Minneapolis, 1983) pg 111.

Personal Assurance and the New Perspective (RTR, 53:2, 1994) pg 85.

Conclusions

There is no doubting the new perspective has certain utilitarian benefits. First, according to New Perspective scholars it lends itself to greater Christian unity through the redrawing of justification so that the only criteria for unity is whether one believes in Jesus. In fact, if this is so, the ecumenical agenda should be set with urgency since our differences are not real or justified.

Second, the hurt and derision once felt by the Jewish people through the characterisation of Judaism as legalistic is overcome with the covenantal nomistic approach of the new perspective.

Third, if the gospel is understood primarily in a corporate sense and articulated as a declaration of the lordship of Christ challenging the socio-political powers to a new way of humanity, then much of the offense of the gospel will certainly be removed.

Moreover, there are many aspects of the new perspective that are helpful to our understanding of God's word. I would want to acknowledge the many correctives of the new perspective on Paul and justification. Sanders work in placing Judaism in its salvation historical setting and freeing us from the excesses of the so called Lutheran orthodoxy.

Also the emphasis of Wright and Dunn in placing justification by faith in a positive light and a reminder of its corporate usage in Paul's writings is certainly helpful for the western Church that can so magnify the existential elements of salvation that we often neglect the corporate nature of our salvation.

However, there are also many concerns with the pastoral implications of the new perspective theology. Most important, is that the gospel is refashioned in such away that it is divorced from justification by faith, and when the atoning work of Jesus Christ is no longer central to how individuals can be saved (declared righteous) then in my view we have another gospel. Consequently, there can be no real unity unless it is in our agreement on the importance, sufficiency and application of the cross work of Jesus Christ.

Moreover, the process of 'staying in' according to the new perspective obscures the issue of Christian assurance. Since the believer can only truly rest on the full, final and sufficient sacrifice of Jesus Christ, anything less is a sharp challenge to Christian assurance. Therefore,

³⁵ 2 Cor 13:10; Jas 2:2 etc

we must reaffirm the Reformers were right, assurance is predicated on a forensic understanding of what Christ has done for sinners in his cross work. Paul says 'If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead you will be saved' (Rom 10:9).

As Paul Barnett passionately concludes, *"The impact is intensified when we realise that Paul is speaking about individuals; the verbs 'you confess...you believe...you will be saved' are singular. As I confess Christ, believe in him, I will be saved. The time is foreshortened. It is as if I am in the Kingdom of God now, at this moment, immediately. This is God himself speaking, in his Gospel-word."*³⁶

³⁶ Paul Barnett,

Tom Wright and the New Perspective
(http://www.anglicanmediasydney.asn.au/pwb/ntwright_perspective.htm)

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