

The New Perspective on Paul
A Historical, Critical, Appraisal
of a New Approach to Judaism and Paul

By Chris Reeves

Like the Athenians of Paul's day, many religious people throughout time, and some Christians recently, have been fascinated "to tell or hear some new thing" (Acts 17:21), as if that new thing was better or truer than the old things.

For example, from the 3rd through the 6th Centuries A.D., there was Neo-Platonism. In the 20th Century there was the New Age Movement. Among the denominations there have been such movements as New Divinity, Neo-Thomism, Neo-Orthodoxy, Neo-Pentecostalism, Neo-Evangelicalism and the New Morality (or Situation Ethics). In my lifetime there have been several new religious trends among certain brethren such as Neo-Calvinism, the New Unity Movement, and now, the New Hermeneutic (sometimes called the "Scholarship Movement").

"New" is not wrong if it comes as a result of God's planning (Rom. 6:4; 2 Cor. 5:17; Heb. 8:8; Rev. 21:1, 2). There is a time and place for new things in God's plan. "New" is wrong, however, if it comes as a result of man's planning. Someone has said, "If it is new, it is not true. If it is true, it is not new." The apostle Paul said the same thing long ago (Gal. 1:6-10).¹

With these words, I began a review of the New Hermeneutic that was circulating at that time (1993) among some members of Churches of Christ. Today, exactly 20 years later, I have been asked to review the New Perspective on Paul. Apparently, this "new thing" is circulating among some Bible students and teachers making my opening words 20 years ago fitting today. We must be careful not to be enamored "to tell or hear some new thing", even if that "new thing" is advocated by scholars who appear to be in agreement with us on certain biblical matters.

Seminary students for the past 35 years or so have been hearing much about the New Perspective on Paul from their scholarly professors. Pick up a recent Bible commentary (especially on Romans or Galatians)² or a New Testament theology textbook written by an evangelical scholar and you will probably read something about the New Perspective on Paul. Representatives of the New Perspective can be found in contemporary discussions of Paul,³ justification,⁴ and the role works in the final judgment.⁵ Some

¹ Out With the Old and In With the New: The Cry of the New Hermeneutic, 1

² Various elements of the New Perspective on Paul are incorporated into the Word Biblical Commentary series on Romans (Volumes 38a and 38b by James D.G. Dunn) and Galatians (Volume 41 by Richard N. Longenecker).

³ See Four Views of the Apostles Paul edited by Stanley N. Gundry and Michael F. Bird (Zondervan, 2012). Douglas A Campbell takes the "Post-New Perspective" view.

⁴ See Justification: Five Views edited by James K. Beilby and Paul Rhodes Eddy (InterVarsity Press, 2011). James D.G. Dunn takes the "New Perspective View."

members of local churches of Christ are also now beginning to hear about and interact with this New Perspective.⁶ What is the New Perspective on Paul (hereafter, NPP) and what are we to make of it?

My assignment in this paper is to sketch a brief overview of the historical development of the NPP. I will do this in the first part of my paper followed by my critical analysis of some of the key elements (and errors) of this view and my appraisal of the NPP.

New Perspective: Historical Developments

Paradigms: Old and New

The NPP has been described as “the loudest subject in Pauline scholarship today”.⁷ It has to do with how NT scholars understand the relationship of the average Jew to God and to the Gentile in Second Temple Judaism and Paul’s reaction to that relationship in his gospel. Second Temple Judaism (hereafter Judaism)⁸ includes 1st century Judaism – the Judaism of Jesus’ day and of Paul’s own upbringing.⁹ According to NPP advocates, the majority of Protestant NT scholars for the past 150 years have incorrectly viewed Judaism (specifically rabbinic Judaism) *primarily* as a religion of legalism (works of OT law-keeping combined with the keeping of Pharisaical traditions).¹⁰

It is argued by NPP advocates that Protestant NT scholars, borrowing their paradigm from Luther, believed that Paul reacted to this legalism with his gospel of grace and faith. These scholars, according to the NPP, incorrectly understood the Judaism of the 1st century to be *primarily* interested in securing (earning) salvation from God through obedience to law, or more specifically, through meritorious works of law-keeping instead of by faith. Thus, Paul’s gospel to the Jews was a gospel of grace/faith verses works. Paul was trying to convince Jews that salvation is by “justification by faith” (grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ) apart from “works of the law” (meritorious, legalistic works of the Law of Moses).

⁵ See *Four Views on the Role of Works at the Final Judgment* edited by Alan P. Stanley and Stanley N. Gundry (Zondervan, 2013). James D.G. Dunn takes the “New Perspective” view.

⁶ See the 2009 Florida College lecture given by David McClister titled “The New Perspective on Paul” and the article by Shane Scott on his website titled “An Introduction to the New Perspective” (<http://www.shanescottonline.com/2009/05/introduction-to-new-perspective.html>). There is also the mention of the New Perspective on Paul by Steve Wolfgang in his 2013 Florida College lecture, “Saved by His Life” (*Of First Importance: He Was Raised and Appeared*, 211-213).

⁷ Lars Kierspel, *Charts on the Life, Letters, and Theology of Paul*, 251.

⁸ Second Temple Judaism refers to the beliefs and practices of Jews from the time of Zerubbabel’s temple in 520 B.C. to the fall of Herod’s temple in 70 A.D. This time is also called the Inter-testamental period.

⁹ Paul writes how he “advanced in the Jew’s religion” (Gal. 1:13-14) and his position as a “Pharisee” (Phil. 3:4-6). See more on Paul’s upbringing below.

¹⁰ According to some scholars, “legalism” was not used as a term of criticism against Judaism until the 19th century. See Bernard Jackson, “Legalism,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 30 (1979): 1-22.

The general position of the NPP is that scholars for centuries have been wrong about Judaism and thus wrong about Paul. Michael B. Thompson writes:

Essentially the NP represents a ‘reformation’ of a few notions Christians have inherited primarily from the Protestant Reformation ... Scholars holding NP views do not see themselves as a particular religious movement; disagreeing among themselves about a number of interpretive details, they do not reflect any one particular theological persuasion ... The ‘New Perspective is therefore fundamentally a new perspective for non-Jews on biblical Judaism and the Judaism to which Paul was reacting in some of his letters, as well as a new perspective on Paul.¹¹

Michael B. Thompson goes on to summarize the “old” perspective this way:

1. Judaism was (and, by implication, is) a religion of merit, in which one *earns* salvation. 2. Like Luther, Paul was not satisfied with his inherited religion and wanted to find a solution to the problem of his inability fully to obey God’s demands; his broken relationship with God needed fixing. 3. Paul’s essential religion – his understanding of God’s character and his way of relating to Him – *fundamentally* changed when he became a Christian. Justification by grace through faith is something new that came with the person of Jesus. It is the centre of Paul’s theology, the heart of the gospel. 4. Paul’s focus in his writings was on how *individuals* can come to find acceptance with God. 5. Paul thought that faith and works, understood respectively as believing and doing, stand in stark contrast as two different principles. 6. Similarly, law (OT religion) stands in opposition to grace (NT faith).¹²

What has surfaced in the contemporary debate are four main points advanced by the NPP: 1) We have misunderstood Judaism. Judaism was *not* primarily about legalism, but rather about “covenantal nomism” (a Jew was “in” God’s covenant by his grace and a Jew “stayed in” that covenant by obedience to God’s law), 2) Paul did *not* confront legalistic, meritorious works in his letters, 3) the issue at hand in Paul’s day was Jewish social identity; i.e., does a Gentile have to be Jewish (be circumcised, keep food laws, celebrate the Sabbath) in order to be in God’s covenant? Paul says “No.”, and 4) Paul does *not* differ from Judaism as to the role of grace, faith, and works in salvation; faith and works are compatible.¹³

¹¹ The New Perspective, 4, 8.

¹² The New Perspective on Paul, 4-5. It is important to note here that I would take issue with Thompson’s basic caricature of the “old” perspective on all six points. I do not hold to these views about Judaism and Paul as worded by Thompson. Therefore, much of the attack of the NPP against the “old” perspective does not involve someone like me. Why would some Bible students be interested in the NPP when its attack is directed at things we (NT Christians) do not even espouse? The NPP seeks to completely revolutionize a caricature of Judaism and Paul that we (NT Christians) never had in the first place. The old adage, “I do not have a dog in that fight” would seem to apply here.

¹³ These four main points are summarized by Kent L. Yinger, *The New Perspective on Paul: An Introduction*, 30-31.

The question before us then is this: How have Judaism and Paul been interpreted through the centuries and has that interpretation been correct or incorrect? Is any degree of honing of that interpretation necessary? What paradigms (models) have been suggested through the centuries to understand Judaism and Paul? The long story of Paul's interpreters goes back to Thomas Aquinas and stretches forward to the present-day writings of N.T. Wright.

*The Emergence of a Paradigm*¹⁴

Early interpreters of Paul viewed Pauline theology differently.¹⁵ For example, Thomas Aquinas¹⁶ believed that man is saved by God's grace and that grace enabled man to be transformed to eternal life and to attain to good works which merit God's reward. Aquinas believed that this divine grace was absent during the period of the Old Law but it came in with the New Law.

Martin Luther (1483-1546), on the other hand, was in serious conflict with Aquinas on the matter of works that merit God's reward. In *Luther's Works*, he argued that no amount of works could justify man and save him from God's wrath. Luther argued that the primary role and purpose of the Law was to point out sin, but not to save.¹⁷ Mankind is saved by faith in Jesus Christ *and faith alone*. As for the Jews, Luther viewed Paul's statements about salvation by faith rather than by works to be leveled against the meritorious works of Judaism in Paul's day as well as against the works of the Roman papists' of his day.¹⁸ Some scholars today would describe what Luther did here as a "radical reinterpretation of Paul" and they are quick to point out that Adolf Hitler later used Luther's works to promote his extreme Nazi anti-Semitism.¹⁹

John Calvin, the younger contemporary of Luther, believed that the primary purpose of the Law was to reveal God's holiness and will. In his *Commentary* and in his *Institutes*, Calvin wrote about the divisions of Law (moral, ceremonial, judicial) and the functions of the Law (to point out sin, to restrain sin, to guide to God's will). However, Calvin did

¹⁴ My outline of Pauline interpreters here will follow closely the work of Magnus Zetterholm, *Approaches to Paul: A Student's Guide to Recent Scholarship*, 33-126. I am also indebted to Frank Thielman's survey of Pauline interpreters found in *Paul & the Law* (pages 14-47) in this section of my paper. Thielman starts with Aquinas and works up to Dunn but does not discuss the influence of N.T. Wright.

¹⁵ I refer here to "Pauline theology" accommodatively as modern NT scholars generally do. We must remember that Paul had no "theology", "view", or "paradigm" of his own as if he developed it himself. While modern, liberal NT scholars believe that Paul's views were his own, that is actually not the case. All of Paul's speaking and writing were done by divine inspiration and his gospel was given to him by Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 2:11-16; 14:37; Gal. 1:11-12).

¹⁶ See his work titled *Summa Theological*.

¹⁷ Luther was correct. See such passages as Romans 8:3; Galatians 3:21; and Hebrews 7:18-19.

¹⁸ See Luther's 1543 work titled, *On the Jews and Their Lies*. NPP advocates often talk about a "Lutheran Paul" or a "Lutheran Gospel" because they believe Luther's view of Paul in the 1500's was a Paul who was fighting the legalism of both the Catholic Church and Judaism. However, the historical evidence within Pauline studies shows that scholars much earlier than Luther held a similar view of legalistic Judaism. It is also interesting that Luther charged "Mohammedans" or Muslims with being legalistic just like the Jews (*Luther's Works* 26:396-397). Will NT scholars also look into the writings of the Islam to prove Luther wrong? Will NT scholars rescue Muslims from anti-Islamic caricatures?

¹⁹ *Approaches to Paul*, 60-62.

not think that the believer could obey the Law perfectly. He believed (as per his understanding of Roman 8:3-4) that the perfect obedience of Christ and his righteousness is imputed to the believer for salvation.

Like Luther, but to a lesser degree, Calvin compared the meritorious works of the Roman papists of his day to the Jewish Pharisees of Paul's day.²⁰ NPP scholars today would describe what Luther and Calvin did with their analogies as a "hermeneutical shift" (or "hermeneutical error") that is unwarranted because no attempt was made by Luther or Calvin to carefully examine who or what exactly Paul was opposing. NPP scholars would argue that no argument was advanced by Luther or Calvin in support of the analogy between the Catholic Church and Judaism.²¹

In the three centuries that followed Luther and Calvin, it was common for Protestant biblical scholars to equate the enemies of Protestantism with Judaism, and thus, a particular Pauline paradigm emerged. Scholars at this time (especially those in Germany) attempted to show the absolute superiority of Christianity in relation to Judaism by highlighting Paul's negative statements against the Jews.²²

The Formation of a Paradigm

Ferdinand Christian (F.C.) Baur came to the Tübingen School in 1809 to study philosophy and theology. He graduated in 1814, left and then came back to teach in 1826. In 1831, Baur published his seminal essay on Paul while teaching at Tübingen.²³ Using 1 Corinthians 1:11-12 as a basic framework, Baur argued that Paul's law-free Gentile Christianity was fundamentally opposed to Peter's law-oriented Jewish Christianity. Baur argued from this premise there was a basic conflict between Judaism and Christianity. He believed that Judaism was essentially inferior to Christianity and that Christianity's evolution would eventually cause it to win out and become the "absolute religion" by the end of the second century.

While many 19th century scholars rejected Baur's framework due to its weak historical and theological assumptions, Baur's treatment of Paul raised three interrelated questions that all students of Paul since have wrestled with as they attempt to work out a comprehensive picture of Paul's life and theology: 1) the identity and argument of Paul's opponents; 2) Paul's view of the Law and its relationship to the gospel; and 3) the center or main thrust of Paul's theology.²⁴ These three questions, above all, have been the focus

²⁰ See Calvin's *Commentary* on Philippians 3:5-8.

²¹ *Paul & the Law*, 24.

²² While no one should desire to promote anti-Semitism or Christian triumphalism (Stendahl's terminology), it must be remembered that Christianity has some advantage over Judaism. If this is not the case, then the "better" argument of Hebrews makes no sense (see Heb. 7:19, 22; 8:6; 9:23; etc.).

²³ "The Christ-party in the Corinthian Church, the Conflict Between Petrine and Pauline Christianity in the Early Church, the Apostle in Rome." *TZT* 4 (1831) 61-206. See also Baur's 1845 work titled, "Paul, the Apostle of Jesus Christ".

²⁴ In his article on "Hermeneutics/Interpreting Paul," G.R. Osborne cautions against looking for one "center" of Pauline thought, be it "justification by faith," being "in Christ," or something else. See also R.P. Martin's on "Center of Paul's Theology".

of Pauline interpretation for the last 150 years²⁵ and interpreters of Paul usually enter the debate by one of these three questions.²⁶

Men like Ferdinand Weber²⁷, Emil Schürer²⁸, and Wilhelm Bousset²⁹ continued Baur's portrayal of Judaism as an inferior religion that kept law-keeping (legalism) as its primary goal. William Sanday, Arthur C. Headlam, and Martin Noth all cast Judaism in a similar light.

Rudolf Bultmann. A student of Bousset, Rudolf Bultmann (1884 – 1976), was one of the most influential biblical scholars of the twentieth century. In his 1949 book, *Primitive Christianity in Its Historical Setting*, Bultmann set forth a picture of Judaism that was legalistic and of Jews who sought to earn justification by their own efforts. In Bultmann's 1948 *Theology of the New Testament*, Paul is set forth as one who teaches that the Law led humanity into death and sin to make God manifest as God.³⁰ Judaism, according to Bultmann, was doomed to end in death, whereas Christianity (faith without works of the Law) is a better and higher form of religion and leads to life.

Ernst Käsemann and Günther Bornkamm. Two students of Bultmann were Ernst Käsemann (1906-1998) and Günther Bornkamm (1905 – 1990). Both of these men worked on their doctoral thesis under the supervision of Bultmann and both of these men set forth a similar picture of Judaism as found in Bultmann. Käsemann claimed that the Jews in Paul's day trusted in their pious works (self-justification) and they would be saved from their deeds only through justification by faith.³¹ In similar fashion, Bornkamm claimed that Judaism represented a complete misunderstanding of God's plan

²⁵ Other contemporary questions in the Pauline debate include: 1) Was Paul converted? Or did he remain Jewish?; 2) Who was Paul addressing in his letters? And why does it matter?; 3) What was Paul's attitude toward the Law?; 4) Was Paul consistent in his views about the Law?; and 5) What is Israel's future according to Paul? Each of these questions will be answered below. For more on these questions see Daniel J. Harrington's article on "Paul and Judaism: 5 Puzzles".

²⁶ The discussion of these three questions is long and the answers multicolored, so I will limit my comments here to the NPP's take on each one. During the 19th and 20th Centuries, scholars set forth many theories as to the identity of Paul's opponents, from Judaizers (Jewish or Christian) promoting OT legalism, to Gnostics promoting philosophical heresy, a mixture of both, or someone completely different. Following the conclusions of E.P. Sanders, NPP advocates would say that Paul's opponents certainly were not Judaizing legalists. What about the second question concerning Paul's view of (or problem with) the Law? NPP advocates would say that Paul was not opposing a legalistic view of the Law when he opposed the "works of the law". What about Baur's last and most important question concerning the center of Paul's theology? Was the center of Paul's theology "justification by faith" or something else like being "in Christ" and his kingdom? Following the lead of Krister Stendahl, NPP advocates today would say that the center of Paul's theology is the full justified status of both Jews and Gentiles in the church. For more details see, "Paul and His Interpreters" by S.J. Hafemann; and, "Judaizers" by W.S. Campbell.

²⁷ Weber documented what he thought to be Jewish legalism in his 1880 work, *System of Theology of the Ancient Palestinian Synagogue, or the Teaching of the Talmud*; later titled *Jewish Theology on the Basis of the Talmud and Related Writings* (1897).

²⁸ Schürer documented what he thought to be Jewish legalism in his 1885-1891 two volume work, *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ*.

²⁹ Bousset documented what he thought to be Jewish legalism in his 1903 work, *The Judaic Religion of the New Testament Era*.

³⁰ This was Bultmann's understanding of Romans 3:20.

³¹ See Käsemann's 1969 *Commentary on Romans*.

for humanity and of their own religion and they needed saving through justification by faith alone.³²

Before proceeding it would be good to ask this question: Were these 19th century and 20th century scholars correct in their assessment of Judaism? Frank Thielman offers some good insight to this question:

The pervasiveness and persistence of this understanding of Judaism cannot, however, be attributed to a misreading of Weber or even to the influence of Luther alone. Part of the reason it was so successful was that the theological insight on which it was based was valid, not as an insight into the “grievous error” of Judaism (as Schürer put it) but as an insight into the implications of Paul’s comments about boasting in the law. This insight, moreover, met the theological needs of the times in which it was perceived. In the context of the problems faced by the 16th century Roman Catholic Church, it was important to emphasize Paul’s convictions about the danger of placing confidence in human ability, as it has been in nearly every epoch since. The problem lay not in the validity of the theological insight, nor in drawing that insight from Paul, but, as a few scholars have pointed out, in regarding Judaism as the great symbol of the problem before attempting to understand it on its own terms.³³

The Dismantling the Paradigm

Claude J.G. Montefiore. As scholars began to seriously address the questions raised earlier by Baur, a dismantling of the established Pauline paradigm began to be seen. Some scholars began to protest the established paradigm of Judaism and Paul. For example, Claude J. G. Montefiore (1858 – 1938), a British scholar and distinguished Jewish reformer, took Weber’s work to task.³⁴ He believed Weber was wrong in placing a systematic grid of legalism on rabbinic literature. Montefiore did not believe that Judaism and its view of the Law should be characterized as a religion of hypocrisy, externalism, or legalism. He believed that Judaism should be portrayed as a loving, merciful, and joyful relationship between a parent and a child. He believed that Paul was not against rabbinic Judaism but “some other form of Judaism” and “other non-Jewish intellectual systems”.³⁵

In 1909, the Jewish theologian Salomon Schechter gave a similar assessment of rabbinic Judaism as Montefiore.³⁶ George Foot Moore (1851 – 1931), the American rabbinics scholar and professor at Harvard, also took sharp issue with Weber’s caricature of Judaism. Moore completely rejected the scholarship of Weber, as well as the works of

³² See Bornkamm’s 1969 book titled *Paul*.

³³ *Paul & and the Law*, 26-27. For Paul’s references to “boasting” and “confidence” see Romans 3:27 and Philippians 3:3-4 respectively.

³⁴ Montefiore’s critique of Weber can be found in his article, “Rabbinic Judaism and the Epistles of St. Paul,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 13 (1900-1901): 161-217; and in his book, *Judaism and St Paul* (1914).

³⁵ *Approaches to Paul*, 91.

³⁶ Schechter’s work was titled *Aspects of Rabbinic Theology*.

Schürer and Bousset. Moore accused Weber of imposing the grid of Lutheran dogmatics on rabbinic literature.³⁷

Searching for a New Paradigm

The works of Montefiore, Schechter and Moore had no real impact during their day, but they provided the impetus for scholars in the late 20th century to search for a new Pauline paradigm. In the late 20th century, a quiet revolution in New Testament scholarship occurred which was largely unobserved by people in the pew, but well-known among the academics of the apostle Paul. A search for a new paradigm (perspective) on Paul was in the making. Today, this revolutionary thought is not confined to academia, but has made its way into some Protestant churches as well.

It is important to note at this point the timeframe which brought about this search for a new paradigm. The post-World War II era was a time in which many Protestant Christian scholars attempted to reach out to Jews with conciliatory dialogue in the wake of the holocaust. Magnus Zetterholm documents this practice thus:

World War II fundamentally changed the conditions for research on Judaism and early Christianity. When the atrocities of the death camps became widely known, time was ripe for a serious reassessment of the synthesis between theology and biblical scholarship. It came increasingly evident that there was a direct relationship between the anti-Jewish Christian theology and the industrialized mass murder of six million Jews. The Christian church that almost twenty centuries had defined itself in contrast to a distorted picture of Judaism no doubt shared the responsibility for the worst crime against humanity in history.

A tangible step on the way toward increased understanding between Christians and Jews was the establishment of various organizations like The Council of Christians and Jews in the United Kingdom, founded in 1942 ... Even though this incipient change, both in the Protestant churches and the Roman Catholic Church, meant a certain improvement of the official relations between Christianity and Judaism and led to some practical alterations, one must also point out that among the absolute majority of scholars and theologians, the attitude was “business as usual” ... But even though most scholars and theologians continued to repeat the traditional stereotypes about Paul and his relationship to Judaism, others seriously started to ponder other alternatives, often inspired by the evolving Jewish-Christian dialogue. An excellent example of this is Krister Stendahl...³⁸

³⁷ Moore's critique of Weber can be found in his article, "Christian Writers on Judaism," *Harvard Theological Review* 14 (1921): 197-254; and in his work *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era: The Age of the Tannaim* (Cambridge, Mass: 1927-1930).

³⁸ *Approaches to Paul*, 95-97. Krister Stendahl made it clear in the "Sources and Critiques" portion of his book that he was fighting anti-Semitism at the time. He wrote: "When the first two essays in this book assert that Paul's argument about justification by faith neither grows out of his 'dissatisfaction' with Judaism, nor is intended as a frontal attack on 'legalism,' I believe that I am striking at the most vicious root of theological anti-Judaism" (*Paul Among the Gentiles*, 127).

The point to note here is that there was a climate of peace-making between Protestant Christians and Jews that ran from the 1940's to the 1960's. Some Protestant Christian scholars during this time were trying to make amends with their Jewish "brethren" and they began to formulate a paradigm of Judaism and Paul that was less antagonistic than what had been previously portrayed. These scholars believed that it was simply time for a new paradigm which would place Judaism and Paul in a better light.³⁹ Donald A. Hagner observes:

To my mind what explains the impact of Sanders' book is that it was the first lengthy and strongly articulated statement of the case in the post-holocaust era. Thanks to the work of many Jewish writers – and non-Jewish too – people have become sensitized concerning the role of anti-Judaism in nourishing the evil of anti-Semitism. It was a point whose time had come.⁴⁰

Krister Stendahl: Paul Called to the Gentiles. Krister Stendahl, professor of New Testament studies at Harvard University between 1958 and 1984, was a prominent figure in the Jewish-Christian dialogue mentioned above.⁴¹ In 1961, Stendahl delivered an essay titled "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West", in which he set forth the idea that Paul was not addressing Jewish legalism or a guilt-ridden conscience of sin⁴² when he preached about "justification by faith".⁴³

According to Stendahl, Paul did not preach about the individual needing "forgiveness." Paul was simply fulfilling his mission to the Gentiles in preaching to them about how they could be included in God's plan to save mankind. Stendahl believed that Romans 9-11 was the real center and climax of Paul's thought: God, in salvation-history, has given a place to Gentiles to be saved in the church through justification by faith in Christ. Stendahl writes:

For Paul had not arrived at his view of the Law by testing and pondering its effects upon his conscience; it was his grappling with the question about the place of the Gentiles in the Church and in the plan of God, with the problem Jew/Gentiles or Jewish Christians/Gentile Christians, which had driven him to that interpretation of the Law which was to become his in a unique way ... The problem we are trying to isolate could be expressed in hermeneutical terms somewhat like this: The

³⁹ NPP advocates are quick to point out how they believe Luther was affected by his Catholic climate, but they are not willing to admit that Stendahl, for example, was affected by his post-holocaust climate of reconciliation. Glenn David Earley traces the process of Stendahl's hermeneutic shift as Stendahl first deconstructed certain Pauline texts and then rebuilt them using his own "perspectival relativism". When Stendahl was finished, these Pauline texts were changed to fit the post-Holocaust perspective and they were ready for the non-anti-Jewish theology so common in the post-Holocaust period of his day.

⁴⁰ "Paul and Judaism – The Jewish Matrix of Early Christianity: Issues in the Current Debate." *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 3 (1993) 112.

⁴¹ Stendahl gives credit to the previous work of W.G. Kümmel and his view of Paul's inner struggle with sin discussed in Romans 7. For a rare, but good response to Stendahl see John M. Espy's article on "Paul's 'Robust Conscience' Re-examined."

⁴² Stendahl did not believe that Paul had a guilt-ridden conscience based upon passages like Philippians 3:6.

⁴³ This essay was later published along with some other essays in *Paul Among the Jews and Gentiles* (Fortress Press, 1976).

Reformers' interpretation of Paul rests on an analogism when Pauline statements about Faith and Works, Law and Gospel, Jews and Gentiles are read in the framework of late medieval piety. The Law, the Torah, with its specific requirements of circumcision and food restriction becomes the general principle of "legalism" in religious matters. Where Paul was concerned about the possibility for Gentiles to be included in the messianic community, his statements are now read as answers to the quest for assurance about man's salvation out of a common human predicament.⁴⁴

In 1963, Stendahl delivered another essay titled "Paul Among the Jews and Gentiles", in which he set out to establish a proper view of Judaism and Paul. He argued once again that Paul's main interest was not how a sinner could find a merciful God, but how Jews and non-Jews could get along in their relationship with each other.

Stendahl made five basic points in his essay to this end: 1) Paul was not "converted" from Judaism, but simply "called" to preach to the Gentiles; 2) Paul did not preach "forgiveness" to all, only "justification" by faith; 3) Paul did not feel the personal guilt of "sin", only "weakness"; 4) Paul did not stress divisive "integrity" of Jews and Gentiles, but the need for a unifying "love" between them; and 5) Paul focused on his "unique" mission to the Gentiles, not on trying to establish a "universal" theology for all the church. Stendahl concluded this way:

The first two essays in this book are partly an attempt to get at some of the roots of Christian anti-Semitism ... When the first two essays in this book assert that Paul's argument about justification by faith neither grows out of his 'dissatisfaction' with Judaism, nor is intended as a frontal attack on 'legalism,' I believe that I am striking at the most vicious root of theological anti-Judaism ... Paul's arguments concerning justification by faith have *not* grown out of his 'struggle with the Judaistic interpretation of the law,' and are *not* 'a fighting doctrine, directed against Judaism.' Its place and function, especially in Romans, are not primarily polemic, but apologetic as he defends the right of Gentile converts to be full members of the people of God. When he uses the argument 'justification by faith' in Galatians, he defends the rights of his Gentile converts against the practice of 'Judaizing,' i.e., of *Gentiles* submitting to circumcision and food laws. Furthermore, there is no basis for believing that Paul had any *personal* difficulties with obeying the law ... I would now add that one of the most striking elements of Pauline anti-triumphalism lies exactly in the fact that in Romans Paul does not fight Judaism, but reaches a point where he warns the Gentile Christians against feelings of superiority toward Judaism and the Jews (Rom. 9-11, esp. 11:11-35 which climaxes in a non-christological doxology). When it dawns on Paul that the Jesus movement is to be a Gentile movement – God being allowed to establish Israel in his own time and way – then we have no triumphalist doctrine, but a line of thought which Paul uses in order to break the religious imperialism of Christianity. I also read this as a profound warning against that kind of theological imperialism which triumphs in its doctrine of the justification of the ungodly by making Judaism a code word for all wrong

⁴⁴ Paul Among the Jews and Gentiles, 84-86.

attitudes toward God ... I would again stress that Paul is not carrying out such a polemic against Jews, but is rather giving an apology for his mission in which he reflects on the mystery of God's dealings with Israel.⁴⁵

The 1961 and 1963 essays by Stendahl mentioned above contained many of the basic perspectives that would later be found in more contemporary research on Paul making him a ground-breaking figure in the NPP movement.⁴⁶ It was Stendahl who provided scholars with a "fresh look" at Paul.⁴⁷ However, a radical new calling-in-question of the predominant paradigm of Judaism was still needed in the mind of some NT scholars. E.P. Sanders would be the one to question the long-standing paradigm of Judaism.

E.P. Sanders: Jewish Covenantal Nomism. If Stendahl cracked the mold of contemporary Pauline studies, it was Ed Parish (E.P.) Sanders who broke it all together.⁴⁸ Sanders would be the one who would lay a foundation on the ground broken by Stendahl in the 1960's.⁴⁹ A turning point in modern Pauline studies came in 1977 with the views of E.P. Sanders and his book *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion*.⁵⁰ Sanders (1937 –), a former Oxford professor, is Arts and Sciences Professor of Religion at Duke University, Durham, North Carolina.

Paul and Palestinian Judaism is now considered by many scholars to be the accurate view of Judaism that is basic to the NPP understanding. Sanders' purpose in this book was to compare the "pattern of religion" (how "getting in" and "staying in" a religion is understood)⁵¹ in Paul's letters with the "pattern of religion" in Judaism. What was the basic relationship between Paul's religion and Palestinian Judaism? Was Paul's theology

⁴⁵ Paul Among the Jews and Gentiles, 126-132.

⁴⁶ Stendahl's point about Paul, not attacking Judaism, but simply working out the relationship between Jews and Gentiles is one main argument that would find its way into later NPP writings, especially those of James D.G. Dunn and N.T. Wright. For Stendahl's point here see Paul Among the Jews and Gentiles, 9, 16-17, 85, 87.

⁴⁷ "A fresh look at the Pauline writings themselves shows that Paul was equipped with what in our eyes must be called a rather 'robust conscience' (Paul Among the Jews and Gentiles, 80). In 1969, Ernst Käsemann published his Perspectives on Paul and devoted a chapter to answering Stendahl.

⁴⁸ It was noted above that Montefiore, Moore, and Schechter offered new appraisals of the classic view of Judaism, but their voices had little impact on Pauline studies. Sanders' 1977 work popularized and articulated with impact the new view of Judaism for the first time. Sanders succeeded in influencing Pauline scholarship where previous scholars had failed. Some have described this as "the Sanders revolution".

⁴⁹ Sanders is called the "godfather of the NPP" by some scholars.

⁵⁰ My review of Sanders will be taken primarily from this book. This is considered his seminal work on the subject. Paul and Palestinian Judaism is the much larger amplification of Sanders' argument that he presented four years earlier in an article titled "Patterns of Religion in Paul and Rabbinic Judaism: A Holistic Method of Comparison" (Harvard Theological Review 66 [1973]: 455-478). Sanders of course incorporated his views with expansion and modification in subsequent works; see Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People (London: SCM Press, 1985); Jewish Law from Jesus to the Mishna: Five Studies (London: SCM Press, 1990); and Judaism: Practice and Belief 63 BCE – 66 CE (London: SCM Press, 1992). The more recent defense of Sanders' view can be found in "Covenantal Nomism Revisited" (Jewish Studies Quarterly. Vol. 16 (2009), 23-55).

⁵¹ *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 17

antithetical to Judaism with some of his thoughts rooted in Judaism? Or, was Paul's theology basically the same as Judaism?

To answer these questions, Sanders surveyed the Jewish literature between 200 B.C. and A.D. 200⁵² and argued that the Judaism of Paul's day emphasized their place in God's covenant by God's free election and grace alone. He stated the six aims of his book this way:

- to consider methodologically how to compare two (or more) related but different religions;
- to destroy the view of Rabbinic Judaism which is still prevalent in much, perhaps most, of New Testament scholarship;
- to establish a different view of Rabbinic Judaism;
- to argue a case concerning Palestinian Judaism (that is, Judaism as reflected in material of Palestinian provenance) as a whole;
- to argue for a certain understanding of Paul;
- to carry out a comparison of Paul and Palestinian Judaism⁵³

According to Sanders, Jews as a whole believed salvation from God was a gift, not something earned by meritorious, legalistic law-keeping. Jews certainly kept the Law, but they did not keep it in order to "get in" God's covenant, neither did they keep it to *earn* or *merit* their salvation. They believed that they were already "in" God's covenant by grace. They simply kept the Law in order to "remain in" or *maintain* their status in the covenant.

Sanders portrayal of Judaism was designed to refute the notion that Judaism was a religion of legalistic works-righteousness.⁵⁴ Sanders coined the now-famous term "covenantal nomism" (covenant - law) to describe the Jewish "pattern of religion" that combined covenant and law.⁵⁵ He defined "covenantal nomism" this way in the conclusion of his section on Judaism:

The 'pattern' or 'structure of covenantal nomism is this: (1) God has chosen Israel and (2) given the law. The law implies both (3) God's promise to maintain the election and (4) the requirement to obey. (5) God rewards obedience and punishes transgression. (6) The law provides for means of atonement, and atonement results in (7) maintenance or re-establishment of the covenantal relationship. (8) All those who are maintained in the covenant by obedience, atonement and God's mercy belong to the group which will be saved. An important interpretation of the first and

⁵² See the article by D.A. deSilva on "Writing and Literature: Jewish".

⁵³ *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, xii.

⁵⁴ Sanders wrote that the legalistic concept of Judaism was not found in the Jewish literature itself, but in the writings of scholars who sought to put legalism back into Judaism: "We have here the retrojection of the Protestant-Catholic debate into ancient history, with Judaism taking the role of Catholicism and Christianity the role of Lutheranism" (*Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 57). Sanders would write later: "I was not interested merely in publishing a critique of legalism, but rather in replacing it with a superior view" (*Covenantal Nomism Revisited*, 25).

⁵⁵ "Covenantal nomism" has become the NPP shibboleth for understanding Second Temple Judaism.

last points is that election and ultimately salvation are considered to be by God's mercy rather than human achievement.⁵⁶

Sanders argued eight main points throughout his book: 1) Israel believed that their position in the covenant required them to obey the Law fully and completely which led to the formation of the "halakic" rabbinic literature (documents which spelled out in detail the precise applications of many of the laws); 2) God's commitment to the covenant with Israel was unconditional and he would remain faithful to Israel even if they disobeyed; 3) Israel believed different things about *why* they were chosen by God over other nations, but they never believed that they must *earn* their place in the covenant; 4) Israel believed that man has a free will and he can choose to obey God and be rewarded or disobey God and be punished; 5) Israel believed that membership in the covenant, not perfect obedience, is the basis of one's standing before God, 6) God made provision for Israel's sin through repentance and atoning sacrifice, so God does not determine human destiny by weighing merits against transgressions; 7) a righteous Jew does not earn divine approval, he simply accepts the covenant and remains in it; and 8) Pauline theology is not distinct from rabbinic thinking; rather, it is in basic *agreement* with Judaism that God's grace and human works go together and the fundamental point of disagreement between Paul and Judaism is that salvation is to be found only in Christ.⁵⁷

Two crucial conclusions emerged from Sanders' work concerning Judaism. First, Sanders agreed with Montefiore and Moore that many scholars had previously offered incorrect evaluations of Judaism.⁵⁸ Second, in surveying the "Tannaitic Literature" (pages 33-238), the "Dead Sea Scrolls" (pages 239-328), and the "Apocryphal and Pseudepigrapha" (pages 329-418), Sanders concluded that a single, unified "pattern of religion" known as "covenantal nomism" was the norm in Judaism as evidenced from each body of literature surveyed (pages 233-238, 316-321, 419-428).

Sanders found that although Judaism is worked out in many ways, it still rested upon a common "pattern of religion"; namely, "covenantal nomism".⁵⁹ This "pattern of religion" focused on the primacy of God's gracious election for Israel "getting in" the covenant and their obedience to the Law for "staying in" the covenant. Obedience allowed a Jew to *maintain* his position in the covenant, but it did not *earn* or *merit* God's grace. Judaism, according to Sanders, was a religion of grace that kept works on the "staying in" side of the religious pattern.

⁵⁶ Paul and Palestinian Judaism, 75, 180, 420, 544.

⁵⁷ Paul and Palestinian Judaism, 81, 95, 89-99, 100, 114-119, 135, 147, 149, 157, 176, 178, 180, 204, 297, 543, 551-552, 543-544.

⁵⁸ Paul and Palestinian Judaism, 33-59

⁵⁹ Sanders was looking for a "common Judaism". He looked for the following in Judaism: a "general understanding" (page 69); a "common pattern" (page 70); "basic religious principles" (page 71); "what principles lie behind" (page 71); "underlying agreement" (page 85); "the same underlying pattern" (page 424); and "basic common ground" (page 424).

As for Paul and Judaism, Sanders believed that Paul taught a different *type* of religion,⁶⁰ but it was still in basic agreement with covenantal nomism. Sanders writes:

Paul's 'pattern of religion' cannot be described as 'covenantal nomism', and therefore Paul presents an *essentially different type of religiousness from any found in Palestinian Jewish literature*. This is true despite the fact that on the point at which many have found the decisive contrast between Paul and Judaism – grace and works – Paul is in agreement with Palestinian Judaism ... There are two aspects of the relationship between grace and works: *salvation is by grace but judgment is according to works; works are the condition of remaining 'in', but they do not earn salvation*. ... The point is that God *saves* by grace, but that *within* the framework established by grace he rewards good deeds and punishes transgression.”⁶¹

While the tide of biblical scholarship was now moving away from the established view of Paul in search of a new paradigm, scholars still had to deal with Paul's apparent negative statements about Jews and the Law (particularly, his statements about the “works of the law”). These newer scholars had dealt accurately (they believed) with Judaism, now they had to deal with Paul. For example, what did Paul mean by “as it were by works” (Romans 9:32) and “seeking to establish their own” (Romans 10:3)?

If, according to NPP advocates, the picture of Judaism we find in Luther and much of the former scholarship is inaccurate, what was Paul saying when he spoke so negatively about the Jews, their works, and the Law? To what error was Paul responding to when he wrote, “not by works” (Titus 3:5)? Was Paul fighting a straw man who did not exist? Who or what was he opposing?

Montefiore, for example, tried to deal with Paul's negative statements about the Law by saying that Paul directed these statements to the “poorer” Diaspora Judaism, not Palestinian Judaism. Hans Joachim Schoeps dealt with Paul's negative statements in a similar way. Moore, on the other hand, dealt with Paul's negative statements by saying that Paul missed entirely the significance of the Law in Judaism and that Paul's critique of Judaism and the Law was based upon his presuppositions that no Jew would have accepted.⁶²

Sanders, similar to Montefiore, argued that Paul directed his statements away from Judaism. Sanders argued that because Paul spoke so loudly about salvation in Jesus Christ, Paul had no dissatisfaction with the Law before his conversion, nor did Paul

⁶⁰ Paul's type of religion according to Sanders was “participationist eschatology” (becoming one person with Christ); see *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 549.

⁶¹ *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 543. Peter T. O'Brien answers this point in his article titled “Was Paul a Covenantal Nomist?” (*Justification and Variegated Nomism*, 249-296).

⁶² Moore believed that the false caricature of Judaism not only went back to Luther, but even back farther to Paul himself. He wrote: “The prejudice of many writers on Judaism against the very idea of good works and their reward, and of merit acquired with God through them, is a Protestant inheritance from Luther's controversy with Catholic doctrine, and further back from Paul's contention that there is no salvation in Judaism” (“Christian Writers on Judaism.” *Harvard Theological Review*. 14 (July 1921): 197-254.

accuse Judaism of being legalistic after his conversion.⁶³ According to Sanders, Paul's negative statements about the Jews and the Law (for example, Romans 2:17, 23; 3:27-4:25; 9:32; 10:2; Philippians 3:9) are not condemnations of self-righteousness. These statements are simply Paul's way of saying that salvation comes only through faith in Christ. For Sanders, the problem with the Jews was that they rejected God's saving work through Jesus.⁶⁴ Sanders concluded with his now-famous statement: "In short, *this is what Paul finds wrong in Judaism: it is not Christianity.*"⁶⁵

Thus, the grace-covenant (non-legalistic) view of 1st century Judaism found in the NPP today was brought to the forefront of academic studies by E. P. Sanders. S.J. Hafemann comments:

Sanders changed the course of scholarship on Paul because he succeeded in forcing scholars to rethink *fundamentally* the nature of the opposition Paul faced in his churches, and consequently the character and content of the criticism he raised against it. He accomplished the feat by presenting his own portrayal of Paul against the backdrop of a comprehensive and polemically forceful understanding of Palestinian Judaism as a religion of non-legalistic "covenantal nomism" ... Once accepted, the effects of the paradigm shift regarding Judaism precipitated by Sanders are thus both far-reaching and decisive for the way in which Paul will be read in the decades ahead.⁶⁶

Various Bible scholars and students reading Sanders in the late 1970's and early 1980's soon became dissatisfied with the once established portrayal of Judaism (the legalism of the "self-righteous" Pharisees). They began to favor a portrayal of Judaism that focused on a covenant of grace. They opted for Sanders' kinder, gentler caricature of Judaism. NPP advocates have been and are still often at odds with each other on various points of scripture exegesis, but they are unified by their common conviction that 1) 1st century Judaism was not the legalism of past caricatures, and that 2) "covenantal nomism" is a fair and accurate picture of the Judaism of Paul's day.

While NPP advocates at this time were satisfied with Sanders' basic depiction of Judaism, they were not, however, satisfied with Sanders' portrait of Paul and they sought to better understand Paul's opposition to Judaism. They would soon argue that Paul was more opposed to Jewish exclusivism, not the Jewish legalism proposed by Luther or the Jewish rejectionism proposed by Sanders. It was time for Sanders' "covenantal nomism" to be developed further and popularized. James D.G. Dunn and N.T. Wright would be the men to do it.⁶⁷

⁶³ NPP advocates debate among themselves whether or not Paul was really "converted". For a helpful discussion of this, see the article by J.M. Everts on "Conversion and Call of Paul".

⁶⁴ *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 474-511.

⁶⁵ *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 552.

⁶⁶ "Paul and His Interpreters" in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 673.

⁶⁷ There were other scholars at this time like Heikki Räisänen, who agreed with Sanders' basic assessment of Judaism, but who went in an entirely different direction with reference to Paul. Räisänen set forth his understanding of Paul and Judaism in *Paul and Law* (1983). He believes that Paul is inconsistent and

James D.G. Dunn: Social Function of the Law. While the foundational work of E.P. Sanders opened the way for scholars to think afresh about Judaism, it was a lecture given by James D.G. Dunn in 1982 and published the following year which marked the launching point of the NPP.⁶⁸ Dunn (1939 –), Professor of Divinity at the University of Durham, England, would become a leading voice in the radical reorientation (paradigm shift) offered first by Stendahl and Sanders. Dunn coined the term “new perspective on Paul” in this lecture and he acknowledged the impact that Sanders’ work had on his own thinking.⁶⁹

Dunn accepted Sanders’ understanding of 1st century Judaism and stated his agreement with Sanders that Paul was not fighting Jewish legalism. Dunn wrote:

The problem focuses on the character of Judaism as a religion of salvation. For rabbinic specialists the emphasis in rabbinic Judaism on God’s goodness and generosity, his encouragement of repentance and offer of forgiveness is plain. Whereas Paul seems to depict Judaism as coldly and calculatingly legalistic, a system of ‘works’ righteousness, where salvation is *earned* by the *merit* of good *works*. Looked at from another angle, the problem is the way in which Paul has been understood as the great exponent of the central Reformation doctrine of *justification by faith*. As Krister Stendahl warned twenty years ago, it is deceptively easy to read Paul in the light of Luther’s agonized search for relief from a troubled conscience. Since Paul’s teaching on justification by faith seems to speak so directly to Luther’s subjective wrestlings, it was a natural corollary to see Paul’s opponents in terms of the unreformed Catholicism which opposed Luther, with 1st century Judaism read through the ‘grid’ of the early 16th century Catholic system of merit. To a remarkable and indeed alarming degree, throughout this century the standard depiction of the Judaism which Paul rejected has been the reflex of Lutheran hermeneutic ... But now Sanders has given us an unrivalled opportunity to look at Paul afresh, to shift our perspective back from the sixteenth century to the first century, to do what all true exegetes want to do – that is, to see Paul properly within his own context, to hear Paul in terms of his own time, to let Paul be himself.⁷⁰

So, a new perspective on Paul was born out of a new perspective on Judaism. But, while agreement existed between Dunn and Sanders on the basic characterization of Judaism,

incoherent in his presentation of the Law. Because Räisänen’s bizarre views of Paul are not popular with the general NPP crowd, they will not be discussed in detail here.

⁶⁸ Dunn’s T.W. Manson Memorial Lecture was delivered at the University of Manchester on November, 4 1982. It was later published as “The New Perspective on Paul” in the *Bulletin of the John Ryland’s Library* 65 (1983): 95-122. This lecture is considered his seminal work on the subject. Dunn of course incorporated his NPP views with expansion and modification in subsequent works; see *Jesus, Paul and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster - John Knox Press, 1990). Dunn’s lecture and a collection of his other writings on this subject from 1988 to 2004 can be found in *The New Perspective on Paul: Revised Edition* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2008). The page numbers cited for Dunn’s lecture will be taken from this revised edition.

⁶⁹ Dunn acknowledges that Krister Stendahl had written about a “new perspective” earlier in his *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1976).

⁷⁰ *The New Perspective on Paul*, 101-102.

Dunn, like other scholars of his day, disagreed with Sanders over the relationship that Paul maintained with Judaism. Dunn believed Sanders' position on Paul to be "only a little better than the one rejected". While Sanders believed that Paul broke with Judaism, Dunn, on the other hand, believed that Paul maintained his connection with Judaism. Dunn voiced his disappointment with Sanders this way:

I must confess that I find Sanders' Paul little more convincing (and much less attractive) than the Lutheran Paul. I am not convinced that we have yet been given the proper reading of Paul from the new perspective of 1st century Palestinian Judaism opened up so helpfully by Sanders himself. On the contrary, I believe that the new perspective on Paul does make better sense of Paul than either Sanders or his critics have so far realized. And, if I may, I would like in what follows to make a beginning to an exegesis and description of Paul's theology from this perspective.⁷¹

Dunn's statement here demonstrates clearly that the NPP is based upon a new perspective of Palestinian Judaism. Dunn agreed with Sanders that the picture of Judaism up to that point has been "historically false" and "fundamentally mistaken". Dunn believed that scholars to a greater or lesser degree have been guilty of modernizing Paul. The question and puzzle that remained for Dunn concerned Paul's objection to "works of the law". If Judaism, according to Sanders, was a system of "covenantal nomism" and Judaism was not legalistic, to what exactly was Paul objecting?

Dunn's wrestling over this question would lead him to formulate his view of the NPP. Dunn believed he had found the answer to this question within the context of Galatians 2:1-16. Dunn believed Paul's objection to "works of the law" here to be an objection to Jewish works like circumcision and food laws.

One major point argued by Dunn in his lecture concerned Jewish heritage or culture. The problem of Judaism, according to Dunn, was not their legalism or work-righteousness; it was their covenantal exclusivity. They believed that by their "works of the law" they maintained their status in God's covenant and that Gentiles had to comply with their "works of the law". Dunn used Galatians 2:16 in his lecture as a focus to make this point.

Dunn argued four points from this passage: 1) Paul used the term "justified" in the standard way that Jews' of his day used it: being already in God's covenant, not getting into the covenant; 2) Paul spoke against the "works of the law" which were, in this context, things like Jewish circumcision, dietary food laws, and feast days like the Sabbath; 3) Paul spoke of being "justified by faith in Christ" and meant that a person is justified *through* faith in Christ and *from* faith in Christ and that this faith is the only necessary and sufficient response that God looks for in justifying anyone;⁷² and 4) Paul clarifies what he meant by "works of the law" when he added "no flesh"; i.e., not by fleshly circumcision.

⁷¹ The New Perspective on Paul, 105.

⁷² It should be noted that while some advocates like N.T. Wright are opposed to specific elements of Calvinism, they still advocate the general Calvinistic position of salvation by "grace alone through faith alone" in Jesus Christ. They maintain their Calvinism, but argue it from a different angle.

Dunn focused primarily on Galatians 2:16 in his lecture, but he did make the following observation about a couple of passages in Romans which helps us to understand his position:

Likewise, Paul's later letter to the Roman Christians gains considerably in coherence when viewed from the same perspective. For example, when in Romans 3.27 Paul affirms that boasting is excluded, he is not thinking of boasting in self-achievement or boasting at one's good deeds. It is the boasting of the Jew which he has in mind – the boasting in Israel's special relationship with God through election, the boasting in the law as the mark of God's favour, in circumcision as the badge of belonging to God (Rom. 2.17-29). Among other things, this means that there is no significant development in Paul's thought on this particular point, at least, between Galatians and Romans.⁷³

The strength of Dunn's lecture was found in his attempt to do careful exegesis of Paul's statements about the law in Galatians 2:16 and his desire to relate what Paul said to the broader context of Jewish "covenantal nomism". Because of this, Dunn's work would become the foundation of much of the NPP material published from the early 1980's to the present.

N.T. Wright: One Group Justified by Faith. While Dunn is credited for launching the NPP,⁷⁴ Nicholas Thomas (N.T.) Wright (1948 –), former Cambridge professor and Canon Theologian of Westminster Abby, has been a major force in popularizing the NPP view since its inception. Wright, now Bishop of Durham in the Church of England, writes in such a way that a general audience can understand and thus he has been able to spread the NPP through his prolific writings.

N.T. Wright actually spoke about "a new way of looking at Paul", "a new perspective", and "a new picture of Paul's theology" in his 1978 Tyndale House lecture titled, "The Paul of History and the Apostle of Faith". This lecture was delivered just one year after the publication of Sanders' *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. Wright said:

I want in this lecture to contribute to the debate in question ... and discuss the distinction which needs to be made today between the real Paul and the Apostle of the church's imagination ... between the Apostle who preached the Lutheran gospel of justification by faith and the Paul who was called ... to be the Apostle to the Gentiles ... I want to try nevertheless to present what I take to be a new view of Paul, in the hope of at least stimulating fresh thought, and also to prepare the way for further and fuller, exegetical studies.⁷⁵

⁷³ The New Perspective on Paul, 117.

⁷⁴ Dunn is often given this credit even though N.T. Wright had addressed the same subject five years prior to Dunn's lecture. Wright was among the first to espouse the NPP.

⁷⁵ "The Paul of History and the Apostle of Faith", 61. This lecture was originally delivered by Wright at Tyndale House, Cambridge, on July 4, 1978. It was then published in *Tyndale Bulletin* 29 (1978): 61–88. This lecture is considered his seminal work on the subject. He of course incorporated his NPP views with

Wright, in his lecture, referenced Stendhal, Sanders and others whom he believed had the proper perspective on Judaism and Paul. Some of the key ideas set forth by Wright in this lecture are as follows: 1) Israel was not guilty of “legalism” or “work-righteousness”, but of “national righteousness” or national pride – the belief that fleshly Jewish descent guarantees salvation – and circumcision was a badge of that national pride;⁷⁶ 2) Jesus as the Messiah was the climax of God’s covenantal dealings with Israel and the representative embodiment of all Israel;⁷⁷ 3) justification is set in the context of salvation history demonstrating that both Jew and Gentile can be saved through faith in Jesus Christ;⁷⁸ 4) faith is not a work because it is based upon the historical facts of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection;⁷⁹ 5) interpreters of Paul in the past have manufactured a false Paul by manufacturing a false Judaism for him to oppose – Judaism was a religion of grace and good works, not a religion of legalistic works-righteousness;⁸⁰ 6) advocates of the new view of Judaism (like Sanders) got it right about Judaism, but got it wrong about Paul;⁸¹ and, 7) a new view of Paul is needed; namely, that Paul’s fault with the Jew (Rom. 2:17-29; 3:27-31; 9:30-10:13; Gal. 2-4) is not legalism but using the Law as a “national righteousness” to reject the Gentiles; he offered a sensitive critique of Judaism *as its advocates present it*.⁸²

Wright worked from the basic premise of Sanders to produce his own nuanced version of the NPP. At this point, it would be good to observe that the NPP is not one, unified perspective on Paul. NPP adherents do not agree among themselves on some of the specifics of their view. The NPP is actually made up of different perspectives (plural), thus, the New Perspectives on Paul would be more accurate.⁸³ Others, influenced by the works of Sanders, Dunn, and Wright⁸⁴ have produced their own versions of the NPP, so that today, NT scholars have proposed several perspectives on Paul⁸⁵.

Hafemann wrote the following in 1993 about 10 years after the emergence of the NPP:

expansion and modification in numerous subsequent works that can be viewed in the bibliography at the end of this manuscript.

⁷⁶ “The Paul of History and the Apostle of Faith”, 65-66.

⁷⁷ “The Paul of History and the Apostle of Faith”, 66-69.

⁷⁸ “The Paul of History and the Apostle of Faith”, 69-72.

⁷⁹ “The Paul of History and the Apostle of Faith”, 72-77.

⁸⁰ “The Paul of History and the Apostle of Faith”, 78-81.

⁸¹ “The Paul of History and the Apostle of Faith”, 81.

⁸² “The Paul of History and the Apostle of Faith”, 82-88.

⁸³ N.T. Wright noted in 2003, “there are probably almost as many ‘New Perspective’ positions as there are writers espousing it – and ... I disagree with most of them”; see “New Perspectives on Paul”

http://ntwrightpage.com/Wright_New_Perspectives.htm.

⁸⁴ The NPP has been labeled the “Sanders – Dunn – Wright trajectory” by some of its advocates (Yinger, 30).

⁸⁵ Yinger documents several perspectives on Paul (including his own) that have been advocated since Sanders, Dunn, and Wright (31-36). In a similar way, I documented in my work on the New Hermeneutic how that some in Churches of Christ (in the 1980’s and 1990’s) were not advocating just one New Hermeneutic, but in fact, several New Hermeneutics. They were not in agreement what the New Hermeneutic should be, so they proposed different new hermeneutics. The only agreement they possessed among themselves was that the old hermeneutic of commands, examples, and necessary inference had to go. See *Out With the Old and In With the New*, 19.

But the plethora of new proposals spawned by this paradigm shift suffers as much from internal dissent as from external critique, since no consensus has yet emerged concerning the reason(s) why Paul actually rejected Judaism and the “works of the Law,” nor concerning the actual meaning of “works of the Law” in Paul’s writings.⁸⁶

Twenty-five years after the advent of the NPP, Stephen Westerholm documented the names and works of no less than 33 scholars who have advanced different perspectives on Judaism and Paul.⁸⁷ Some of these scholars have even now moved beyond the NPP. For them, the NPP is passé or even incorrect. Today, several scholars are looking elsewhere for the correct interpretive key to Paul’s writings.⁸⁸

Thielman suggests two lessons that can be learned from surveying the broad landscape and long history of Paul’s interpreters. He writes:

The clearest lesson the journey teaches is that an awareness of our own theological context will help to rescue us from the assumption that Paul, who wrote within a different context, must mean whatever our own traditions teach that he means.

No one, however, should be able to get away with the claim that after the destruction of the old Lutheran-Weberian consensus on Judaism, scholarship on Paul’s view of the law has reached some enlightened, bias-free plane ... The books of Sanders and Räisänen, similarly, have been produced within a context in which theological truth

⁸⁶ “Paul and His Interpreters” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 673. This admission by Hafemann goes a long way in showing that NPP advocates have yet to ground their teaching on plain statements of scripture. If Sanders’ “covenantal nomism” is so clear and obvious from Judaist literature and if a new reading of Paul is so clear and obvious from Romans and Galatians, then why so many “new perspectives” (plural)?

⁸⁷ “The ‘New Perspective’ at Twenty-Five” in *Justification and Variegated Nomism. Volume II. The Paradoxes of Paul*, 1-38. Westerholm limits his survey primarily to English-speaking scholars who show significant dependence upon, or who interact with, Sanders’ *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. He divides his survey into five categories followed by the names of the scholars: 1) Paul as Sanders Sees Him (Sanders); 2) Paul Finds No Flaw in Judaism (Neil Elliott, Lloyd Gaston, Stanley K. Stowers); 3) A Paul Who Critique Is Not of Substance (Francis Watson, Reinhold Liebers, Mikael Winnige, Kari Kuula, Terence L. Donaldson); 4) Paul Finds Judaism Ethnocentric (N.T. Wright, James D.G. Dunn, Don Garlington, Bruce Longenecker, John M.G. Barclay, William S. Campbell, Daniel Boyarin, Kent L. Yinger); and 5) Paul Finds Judaism Reliant on Human Works (Heikki Raisanen, Frank Thielman, Timo Eskola, Thomas R. Schreiner, A. Andrew Das, Peter Stuhlmacher, Timo Laato, Jean-Noel Aletti, Mark Seifrid, Glenn N. Davies, Lauri Thuren, Colin G. Kruse, Richard H. Bell, Vincent M. Smiles, Brad Eastman, Seyoon Kim). In *Perspectives Old and New on Paul* (Eerdmans, 2004), Westerholm surveys the following men who have contributed extensive discussion about Paul: Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley, William Wrede, Albert Schweitzer, Claude G. Montefiore, Hans Joachin Schoeps, E.P. Sanders, W.G. Kummel, Krister Stendahl, Rudolf Bultmann, Ulrich Wilckens, John W. Drane, Hans Hubner, Heikki Raisanen, N.T. Wright, James D.G. Dunn, Terence Donaldson, C.E.B. Cranfield, Thomas Schreiner, A. Andrew Das, Frank Thielman, Mark Seifrid, Timo Laato, Lauri Thuren, Jean-Noel Aletti, J. Louis Martyn, and Jurgen Becker.

⁸⁸ Zetterholm lists Lloyd Gaston, Peter J. Tomson, Mark D. Nanos, and Caroline Johnson Hodge as examples of contemporary scholars who have moved beyond the NPP (*Approaches to Paul*, 123-167). Zetterholm lists Neil Elliott, Kathy Ehrensperger, and Davina C. Lopez as representing a radical new perspective on Paul (*Approaches to Paul*, 195-224).

is increasingly viewed as elusive and many from Christian traditions are trying to come to terms with the shameful treatment of Jews by “Christians” throughout the history of the church . . . Dunn’s reading of Paul’s statements about the law were produced, similarly, in a climate in which the intellectual world has become increasingly concerned with the problems of racism, nationalism, and the plight of the oppressed, and Dunn is quick to demonstrate how his understanding of Paul helps address these issues.

A second lesson that Paul’s past interpreters teach is the importance of treating the traditions of others honestly. The story of the misinterpretation of Judaism by New Testament scholars should cause every Christian interpreter of Paul to wince and should stand as a warning of the immense harm that comes when we wrench the traditions of others out of shape in order to pillory them . . . On the other hand, as Westerholm reminds us, the pendulum has now swung so far the other way that scholars stand in danger of pillorying Luther and the Protestant tradition in retaliation for what they did to Judaism. Luther’s bad handling of Paul’s relationship to Judaism does not necessarily mean that the great Reformer misinterpreted Paul.⁸⁹

New Perspective: Critical Analysis

Having examined the basic historical development of the NPP and its three prominent proponents (Sanders, Dunn, and Wright), we now turn our attention to the major concerns that have been raised within the NPP debate. There are three: historical concerns, exegetical concerns, and theological concerns.

Historical Concerns over NPP Judaism

Was Sanders right about 1st century Judaism being non-legalistic? Advocates of the NPP argue that Sanders was right and that the Judaism of Paul’s day was *primarily* a religion of grace-covenant and not a religion of legalism. They argue that the Jews of Paul’s day were not interested in maintaining righteousness based upon keeping the works of the law. So, a critique and question is in order here: Does the grace-covenant view of Judaism (a non-legalistic view of Judaism) fit with the facts found in and out of the Bible? N.T. Wright believes that it does and goes so far as to say this about Sanders:

He nevertheless dominates the landscape, and, until a major refutation of his central thesis is produced, honesty compels one to do business with him. I do not myself believe such a refutation can or will be offered; serious modifications are required, but I regard his basic point as established.⁹⁰

Advocates of the NPP will often acknowledge that *both* grace *and* legalism are present in 1st century Judaism, but when they argue their case they focus *primarily* on grace. NPP

⁸⁹ Paul & the Law, 45-46.

⁹⁰ What Saint Paul Really Said, 20.

advocates frequently use the word “primarily” in their discussions. To focus as the NPP does *primarily* on the grace-covenant religion of Judaism and refuse to admit any legalism does not fit the facts historically or biblically. When we are fair and balanced with all the material, both non-biblical and biblical, we must conclude that the caricature of Judaism is quite diverse (or complex), and both Jesus and Paul would have said what was necessary to address whatever Jew was present on any given occasion.⁹¹

Historical Concerns: The Historical Picture of Diversity

The Judaism of Jesus’ day and Paul’s day was diverse (or complex) and this can be established by the historical documents outside of scripture. The grace-covenant view of 1st century Judaism found in the NPP does not represent all the facts found outside the Bible. In 2001, D.A. Carson and other scholars published a work titled *Justification and Variegated Nomism*⁹² in which they documented how 1st century Judaism was in fact complex⁹³ and variegated, made up of a variety of beliefs including both “covenantal nomism” and legalism. How widespread legalism was in Judaism we may never know, but still, legalism was in fact present among the Jews. Carson concludes this way: “One conclusion to be drawn, then, is not that Sanders is wrong everywhere, but he is wrong when he tries to establish that his category is right everywhere”.⁹⁴

The contemporary Jewish scholar, Shaye J.D. Cohen offers the following caricature of 1st century Judaism that includes both the legalistic Jew and the faithful covenant Jew:

And then there were Jews who integrated the new piety into their lives through the observance of the rituals and observances, but did not seek to sanctify their lives thereby. They ignored the meaning and purpose of the entire regimen, the sanctification of life and the direction of one’s thoughts to God and to God’s revealed truth. These are the Jews whose ‘legalism,’ that is, reliance on the mere external observance of the rituals to ensure them favor in God’s eyes, has loomed so large in Christian polemics against Judaism. Such people are to be found in all religious communities ... in all ages, and we may assume that such Jews existed in ancient times, even if we disbelieve the jaundiced portrayal of the Pharisees in the Gospels. Jesus was not the only preacher to attack the hypocrisy and the ostentatiousness of the self-righteous. Whether Jewish piety lends itself more readily than the Christian to a focus on external observances rather than inner spirituality is a question that a historian cannot answer. Most Jews observed the commandments of the Torah; some did not. Of these, some became apostates and left the Jewish community. Others simply ignored some or all of the commandments, while others protested that the Torah did not really demand literal observance of the ritual laws

⁹¹ A fair and balanced caricature of Judaism (OT, Inter-testamental, and NT) can be found in Frank Thielman’s *Paul & the Law*, 48-68, 238-245.

⁹² D.A. Carson, Peter T. O’Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid, editors. *Justification and Variegated Nomism. Volume 1: The Complexities of Second-Temple Judaism*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001.

⁹³ See Roland Deines and Martin Hengel’s review of Sanders in “E.P. Sanders’ ‘Common Judaism’, Jesus, and the Pharisees” (*Journal of Theological Studies* 46, 1995, 1-70). See the article on “Judaism” by B.D. Chilton where he describes 1st century Judaism as “a radically pluralized Judaism”.

⁹⁴ *Justification and Variegated Nomism: Volume 1*, 543.

... Other Jews rejected both the rhetoric and the conclusion; for them the yoke of the Torah, the yoke of the commandments, and the yoke of the kingdom of heaven were not burdens but opportunities for the service of God.⁹⁵

Scholars like Sanders are willing to admit the Jewish diversity just described (more on this below). However, the NPP paradigm shift to “covenantal nomism” comes into play when these scholars focus *primarily* on the covenant aspect of Judaism. In other words, Judaist diversity is admitted (given lip service?), but “covenantal nomism” is selected as the *primary, prevalent, pattern* of religion. Thus, any element of Judaist legalism that is present is downplayed when looking at 1st century Judaism. NPP advocates are not willing to accept the simple truth that Judaism’s diversity can and did include the legalistic, self-righteous Jew.⁹⁶

Here is an example of this line of thinking from N.T. Wright in his 1978 lecture:

... we have in the Rabbinic literature, the Targums, the Scrolls and the Apocalyptic literature a broad and varied picture of the many-sided Judaism which, in the widest sense, formed Paul’s milieu. Those who are experts in these fields ... have recently been saying increasingly clearly that the real Judaism was not a religion of legalistic works-righteousness.⁹⁷

The practice of admitting a Jewish *diversity* but then selecting a Jewish *primary* pattern can also be seen in the comments of Michael B. Thompson. Thompson is sympathetic toward the NPP position and he makes a candid admission about Jewish *diversity*, but then sides with Sanders’ *primary* view of Judaism:

Recently a number of scholars have challenged Sanders’ basic thesis about Judaism. There does appear to be evidence that some Jews held to notions that people could attain merit before God, storing up a ‘treasury of works’ (4 Ezra 6.5; 7:77; 8:33,36; 2 Baruch 14.12; see also Tobit 4.9-10 and Psalms of Solomon 9:3-5). 2 Baruch 51.7 refers to those who have been ‘saved because of their works,’ although both it and 4 Ezra were written at least a generation after Paul. And no doubt some Jews in Paul’s day misunderstood the teaching of the OT and thought in terms of personal merit, just as many Christian have misunderstood grace in the NT. Nevertheless, most scholars accept that Sanders has successfully debunked a caricature that had previously led some German scholars in the early 20th century to seek and to show the inferiority of Judaism as ‘legalism’ rather than grace...⁹⁸

⁹⁵ From the Maccabees to the Mishnah, 69-70.

⁹⁶ See the article by S. Mason on “Jewish Theologies and Sects”, the article by P.R. Trebilco and C.A. Evans on “Diaspora Judaism”, and the article by C.A. Evans on “Post-A.D. 70 Judaism” for a good picture of this diversity.

⁹⁷ “The Paul of History and the Apostle of Faith,” 79.

⁹⁸ *The New Perspective on Paul*, 9

False dilemmas need to be avoided in our discussions about Paul and the Jews.⁹⁹ It is not the case of “either-or,” but the case of “both-and”. The choice is not: either *all* of Judaism was legalistic¹⁰⁰ or *none* of it was. That fact is that some individuals, groups, or areas of Judaism were more legalistic than others.¹⁰¹ Likewise, there is not a single Judaism behind all the documents (biblical or extra-biblical), nor should we presume that the opponents of Jesus were necessarily the same as the opponents of Paul on this point or that Paul’s opponents were always of the same mindset. Each case and context where John the Baptist (Lk. 3), Jesus (Mt. 12, 15, 23; John 8), Peter (Acts 3-5), Stephen (Acts 7), or Paul (Rom. 2, 9-11; Gal. 1-6) addressed erring Jews must be studied by itself and a priority must be given to the biblical accounts over the *non-inspired, extra-biblical* information.¹⁰²

Historical Concerns: The Biblical Picture of Diversity

Yes, there were Jews in Paul’s day who believed that they were in God’s covenant and they were there by God’s grace. We must certainly be careful not to reduce Judaism down to a religion of legalism alone. Many faithful Jews in the 1st century would remember (and so must we) that God expressed his “gracious” favor (Exodus 33:19; 34:6) and “love” (Deut. 7:6-8; 8:14-18; 9:4-5) toward Israel in choosing them. They believed that their obedience was a response to God’s grace.¹⁰³

Jews like Zacharias¹⁰⁴ and Elizabeth, Joseph and Mary (Luke 1), Simeon, Anna (Luke 2), and all who came with humble repentance to John’s baptism (Luke 3), were clearly a part of the remnant who appreciated God’s gracious covenant with them. They desired to obey his will in all things and they recognized their need for forgiveness (compare Luke 1:77 with Jeremiah 31:34). Like the assembly of 120, there were Jews who desired to worship God in Jerusalem with a faithful attitude toward God’s grace (Luke 24:52-53; Acts 1:12-15).

No doubt, there were also humble and contrite Jews at this time who, like Ezra (9:6-15), Nehemiah (9:5-37), Daniel (9:4-19) were very conscious of God’s grace and faithfulness as well as their own disobedience and need for forgiveness. They understood that they had broken God’s covenant.¹⁰⁵ There would have been Jews who were also looking for the fulfillment of a new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34) and a new spirit (Ezekiel 36:22 –

⁹⁹ For a good review of this false dilemma often found in the NPP debate, see Moises Silvas’ article “The Law and Christianity: Dunn’s New Synthesis.”

¹⁰⁰ Sanders writes “that ancient Judaism was not ... a miscellaneous bunch of people, isolated from one another and from their own history, all of whom tried to save themselves by their own efforts ... The view that Judaism was ‘legalistic’ meant that all individual Jews thought they had to save themselves by their own merits” (*Covenantal Nomism*, 26).

¹⁰¹ Charles H. Talbert describes Judaism as “one genus ... and within that genus a number of species were in tension with one another over who represented the true tradition with reference to the scriptures of Israel” (“Paul, Judaism, and the Revisionists,” 2).

¹⁰² See the article by P.W. Barnett on “Opponents of Paul.”

¹⁰³ See also Baruch 1:15 – 3:8 and Prayer of Manasseh 1-15.

¹⁰⁴ See “Zechariah’s Song” by S.C. Farris.

¹⁰⁵ See also Baruch 1:15-3:8; Judith 5:17-21; 8:18-19; 2 Macc. 4:16-17; 8:36; and similar references in Josephus’ *Jewish War* (2.391-93) and *Antiquities of the Jews* (1.14).

37:14). There were Jews who were humble and repentant (Lk. 18:13). There were Jewish rulers like Nicodemus (Jn. 3) and Joseph of Arimathaea (Mk. 15:43) who were willing to come to Jesus because they were “looking for the kingdom of God”.

However, while there were Jews in the 1st century that no doubt approached God’s covenant in the right way as the faithful remnant (Rom. 9-11), there are Bible passages that tell us there are other Jews at this time who were very much interested in “doing” or “keeping” the law and boasting in their observance of the law.¹⁰⁶ Keep in mind that a “remnant” (Rom. 9-11) is just that, a “remnant” and not a majority.

There were Jews who believed they could maintain their covenant status by keeping the law and merit their salvation by law-keeping. Jesus faced this kind of Jew who had set his hope on Moses (Jn. 5:45) and who was a disciple of Moses (Jn. 9:28). He had placed his hope on strictly following the Law of Moses (see also Mt. 23:2). The Pharisee of Luke 18:9-12 was this kind of Jew. He did not believe he was a sinner in need of repentance. He believed he was righteous because of his fasting and tithing.¹⁰⁷

Jesus pronounced woe upon the Pharisees¹⁰⁸ who shut others out of the kingdom of heaven and *they themselves would not even enter in* (Mt. 23:13; Lk. 11:52). How could these Pharisees possibly be in “covenantal nomism” when they would not even enter God’s kingdom themselves? The “not-all-that-bad” picture of the Pharisees portrayed by some NPP advocates just does not match up with the truth of the gospel record.

Some of the Jews in Paul’s day rested upon the Law (Rom. 2:17) and gloried in the Law (Rom. 2:23), thinking that they could be justified by their circumcision *and* their keeping of the letter of the Law (Rom. 2:25-27). Paul told these Jews that their law-keeping apart from doing all the Law and apart from faith in Christ does not justify (Rom. 2:13, 25; 3:19-28). There was enough of this kind of Jewish thinking for Paul to address them this way: “What shall we say then? That the Gentiles, who followed not after righteousness, attained to righteousness, even the righteousness which is of faith: but Israel, following after a law of righteousness, did not arrive at that law. Wherefore? Because they sought it not by faith, but as it were by works” (9:30-32).¹⁰⁹ Israel, on the whole, refused a “righteousness which is of faith”. They followed a “law of righteousness” which was a way of life that sought to be justified by law-keeping (see 10:3-5).¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ See Romans 2:25; 10:5; Galatians 3:10,12; 5:3; 6:13; etc. For the Old Testament backdrop to “doing” the law, see Leviticus 18:5; Deuteronomy 4:1; 5:33; 30:11-20; etc. Compare also Sirach 15:15-17 and Psalm of Solomon 9:4-5. The Law, of course, did not encourage legalism. But, the *interpretation* and *application* of these verses by some Jews did encourage legalism. This was not the position of *all* Jews, however. How widespread this legalism was among the total population of Jews we do not know from scripture or from reliable historical sources.

¹⁰⁷ See also Mt. 9:10-13; Mk. 2:15-17; Lk. 5:27-32; 7:36-47.

¹⁰⁸ See the article on “Pharisees” by S. Westerholm. The article on “Pharisees” by S. Mason concludes with these words: “Rabbinic literature should no longer be used, therefore, as transparent evidence for the Pharisees.”

¹⁰⁹ Unless otherwise indicated, all scripture quotations are taken from *American Standard Version* (1901).

¹¹⁰ See the article by W.S. Campbell on “Israel” and “Church as Israel, People of God.”

Consider also the mixed picture of Judaism given by Daniel and Malachi. Daniel 11:32-35 and 12:10 speak of Jews around 150 B.C. who are “wicked” and other Jews who are “wise” and “pure”. Malachi 3:1-6 and 4:1-6 deal with John the Baptist (Mt. 11:10, 14) and the Jews of his day. We are told that some Jews in his day will be “wicked” and some Jews will “fear my name”. There is a difference in the attitude and religious practice among Jews. Apparently, some scholars today do not want to “discern between the righteous and the wicked” (Mal 3:18) among the Jews. Inspired literature like Daniel and Malachi is what we need to be reading to get an accurate picture of 1st century Judaism.

It must be remembered that the Judaism of the 1st century was not the unified Judaism of OT Israel, but the diverse Judaism of the post-exile. After the Babylonian Captivity, there was the dispersion of the Jews into Greek-speaking areas,¹¹¹ the rise of the Jewish sects (Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Zealots, etc.),¹¹² the formation of the synagogue worship service,¹¹³ the addition of two new feast days (Lights and Purim), the imposition of human traditions, etc. All of these factors and more contributed to the formation of diverse Judaism that simply did not exist before 587 B.C.

Paul, as a Jew and a Pharisee, can also give us insight into 1st century Judaism. He said to the “brethren and fathers” in Jerusalem: “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city, at the feet of Gamaliel, instructed according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God, even as ye all are this day” (Acts 22:3). He told Agrippa: “My manner of life then from my youth up, which was from the beginning among mine own nation and at Jerusalem, know all the Jews; having knowledge of me from the first, if they be willing to testify, that after the strictest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee” (Acts 26:4-5).

Again, Paul said that he: “advanced in the Jews’ religion beyond many of mine own age among my own countrymen, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers” (Galatians 1:14). Would Paul’s instruction in the Jews’ religion lead him to naturally have an attitude of legalism? Yes, but let Paul answer for himself in Philippians 3:5: “as touching the law, a Pharisee”, in 3:6: “as touching the righteousness which is in the law, found blameless”, and in 3:9: “not having a righteousness of my own, even that which is of the law”.¹¹⁴

Advocates of the NPP argue that Paul addressed problems between Jews and Gentiles from the standpoint of his own Jewishness. Some NPP scholars focus on Paul the Palestinian Jew and others focus on Paul the Hellenistic Jew. However, these scholars often ignore the simple fact that Paul was writing ultimately as an inspired apostle who

¹¹¹ See the article by P.R. Trebilco on “Jewish Communities in Asia Minor”, the article by W.T. Wilson on “Hellenistic Judaism”, and the article by C.C. Hill on “Hellenists, Hellenistic and Hellenistic-Jewish Christianity.”

¹¹² See the article by G.G. Porton on “Sadducees”, the article by W.J. Heard and C.A. Evans on “Jewish Revolutionary Movements” and the article by T. Beale on “Essenes”.

¹¹³ See the article by B. Chilton and E. Yamauchi on “Synagogues”.

¹¹⁴ N.T. Wright sidesteps the force of this passage by redefining “righteousness” (*dikaioisune*) to mean a “covenant status” or covenant membership”, even though no Greek lexicon has “covenant membership” as a possible meaning of “righteousness”; see *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 124.

received his gospel from Jesus Christ. He wrote: “For I make known to you, brethren, as touching the gospel which was preached by me, that it is not after man. For neither did I receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came to me through revelation of Jesus Christ” (Galatians 1:11-12).

Paul did not preach a gospel that originated from his Jewish background, nor was Paul taught his gospel by some man. Paul’s gospel came by “revelation of Jesus Christ”. Paul’s gospel was the gospel of Jesus Christ, not the gospel of a Palestinian Jew or Hellenistic Jew.¹¹⁵ This simple, yet important truth is often left out of the NPP debate. Paul’s Christ-given gospel to the entire world must also be considered. Paul’s gospel addressed the needs and attitudes of different kinds of Jews and different kinds of Gentiles in the 1st century. All mankind, Jew or Gentile, had three things in common: they all had sinned, they all could not save themselves; and, they all needed to obey the same gospel plan of salvation (Rom. 1-3). However, Paul’s gospel – the one gospel for all – made different arguments depending upon the various audience members being addressed. Some of Paul’s audience included the hardened, legalistic Jew (Rom. 2:5).

Paul’s use of the OT and his understanding of the whole redemptive history must also be taken into account when we look at Paul’s negative statements to the Jews of his day. The large amount of extra-biblical material surveyed by Sanders can certainly give us some insight into what Jews believed, but Paul appealed to the OT for his arguments, not a body of uninspired rabbinic literature. He quoted the OT against the Jews’ “works of the law” and for his defense of “justification by faith”.¹¹⁶ Paul’s inspired use of the OT must be given priority over Sanders’ uninspired interpretation of rabbinic Judaism. Hafemann offers this perceptive analysis:

But even adherents to the “New Perspective” on Paul, who have worked hard to renew our understanding of Paul within the Judaism of his day, have often not taken the Jewish matrix of Paul’s own thinking seriously enough as the decisive conceptual source for Paul’s thinking. Moreover, at the heart of the debate concerning the Law and the role of justification in Paul’s thought is the question of Paul’s understanding of redemptive history (cf. Gal 3-4; 2 Cor. 3:7-18; Rom 3:21-26; 9-11), which itself can only be solved by a renewed study of Paul’s use and understanding of the OT within the larger question of the relationship of Paul and his gospel to Israel as the old covenant people of God...¹¹⁷

Historical Concerns: The Biblical Picture of God’s Wrath

¹¹⁵ Many NT scholars in and out of the NPP movement prefer to assess Paul from a sociological standpoint instead of addressing his divine inspiration. These scholars are liberal in their view of revelation and many of them do not believe in the full, plenary inspiration of the scriptures. They will talk about the social influences that went into Paul’s writings, but not his divine inspiration. They do this on purpose so as not to be cast into that unthinkable category of “fundamentalist”. Any perspective on Paul that does not maintain a high view Paul’s divine inspiration is a perspective that must be rejected.

¹¹⁶ See the article by M. Silva on the “Old Testament in Paul.”

¹¹⁷ “Paul and His Interpreters” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 678.

In addition to the biblical picture of Jewish diversity, we also have the biblical picture of God's wrath upon disobedient Jews. We must remember that the New Testament tells us that God was displaying his wrath upon the disobedient Jews of Paul's day. This would have been a continuation of God's promise found back in Deuteronomy 27-32 to punish Israel for their disobedience. One clear example of God's wrath upon the Jews is found in 1 Thessalonians 2:16: "to fill up their sins always: but the wrath is come upon them to the uttermost". The point here is that God is punishing hardened Israel for their rejection of the Christ.

The general pattern of Sanders' "covenantal nomism" is actually not found in the New Testament. What is found is a remnant of faithful Jews and another group of hardened and disobedient Jews who are receiving God's wrath. These hardened Jews will receive God's wrath in the present (Romans 1:18; 3:5; 9:22) and they will receive it again in the future if they do not repent (Romans 2:5, 8). The faithful remnant will be saved because they are "an election of grace" (Romans 11:5-7). The hardened Jews will be lost because of their reliance upon "a law of righteousness" (Romans 9:31-32; 10:3-5) and "works" (Romans 11:5-7).

In Paul's day, the ultimate display of God's wrath upon the hardened Jews came with the divine destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. The Jews' house would be left desolate because of their rejection of God's prophets (Matt. 23:37 – 24:34) and of Jesus himself (Jn. 1:11-12). There were Jews within God's covenant who were in sin (Acts 3:25-26) and needed redemption from bondage (Gal. 4:4-5, 24).

God's wrath upon the disobedient Jews of Paul's day is an aspect of Judaism that is sometimes left out in the NPP debate. J.M Scott observes:

Unfortunately, however, Sanders has so stressed continuity in the covenantal relationship between God and his people, and readily available atonement for sin by means of repentance, that another major stream of tradition in Palestinian Judaism, which emphasizes prolonged *discontinuity* in the relationship as punishment for sin, has gone practically unnoticed. In no way can it be said that the 'business-as-usual' approach of the theocratic stream prevailed in every quarter ... Sanders fails to see that, according to the Deuteronomic view of Israel's history which Paul appropriates in Romans 9-11, there was a plight: Israel had apostatized from the covenant and this led to their judgment in exile; covenantal nomism had ceased to be a viable option after 587 B.C.¹¹⁸

Exegetical Concerns over NPP Interpretation

Is the hermeneutical method of Bible interpretation found among NPP proponents (Dunn and Wright in particular) accurate as they go through and exegete Paul's passages on justification, works, law, righteousness, and gospel? Opponents of the NPP have raised several exegetical concerns,¹¹⁹ but I will limit mine to four biblical phrases that are used

¹¹⁸ "Restoration of Israel", 797, 805.

¹¹⁹ See Yinger, *The New Perspective*, 47-70.

often by NPP advocates. What we will find in this survey is that NPP advocates often take a reductionist approach to these biblical phrases unnecessarily limiting them to fit their NPP theology. The hermeneutic of the NPP is both revisionist and reductionist.

My exegetical (hermeneutical) critique of the NPP is that it is unnecessarily reductionist in its approach to scripture. The understanding of Paul by many NPP advocates is far too narrow and simple to capture all that Paul is saying in his writings. The basic, often one-dimensional definitions offered by many NPP advocates simply do not do justice to all that Paul has to say about a particular matter, be it justification, works of the law, or something else. Using Sanders' "covenantal nomism" as a starting point, we find that eisegesis, not exegesis dominates NPP hermeneutics.

NPP advocates approach Pauline texts with a hermeneutic maneuver that involves three steps: 1) read any passage where Paul demonstrates an antithesis between grace and law, or faith and works, with Sanders' "covenantal nomism" as a background; 2) read the antithesis as an ecclesiological (church) statement about the inclusive nature of God's people (faith = God's inclusion of both Jews and Gentiles; works = the Jews' exclusion of the Gentiles); and 3) reduce the meanings of biblical words and phrases to fit the alleged "covenantal nomism" and ecclesiological statement of the first two steps. Let us now consider some examples of this NPP maneuvering.¹²⁰

"Works of the Law." What does Paul mean by the phrase "*works of the law*" (ἔργων νόμου)?¹²¹ Those who advocate the NPP suggest that the *primary* meaning of the biblical phrase "works of the law" in Galatians 2:16¹²² and elsewhere refers to a limited number of works.¹²³ In all fairness, it should be noted that early on (1983) Dunn limited the "works of the law" to things like circumcision, the Sabbath, and dietary restrictions.¹²⁴ But, in his later writings (1988 to the present), he expanded his definition to include whatever the law requires to be done. However, what Dunn wrote in 1983 about Paul's "works of the law" is what has stuck in contemporary NPP theology. Here, Dunn believes that phrase *primarily* means the particular observances of the Law like circumcision, Sabbath-keeping, and dietary restrictions.

Dunn says that these "works of the law" function as "badges" of Jewish identity. "Works of the law" is not a reference to works-righteousness or legalism, but simply another way

¹²⁰ For more on the NPP's hermeneutical maneuvering, see "Not the New Perspective" by Francis Watson, an unpublished paper delivered at the British New Testament Conference, Manchester, September 2001.

¹²¹ The phrase "*works of the law*" (ἔργων νόμου) is found eight times in Paul's letters (Romans 3:20,28; and Galatians 2:16 [3 times]; 3:2,5,10). The same idea is found in Romans 3:27 even though the wording is different.

¹²² Some Bible translations of Galatians 2:16 emphasize the human doing in the phrase "works of the law". See for example, "*justified by doing the works of the law*" (NRSV), "*justified by observing the law*" (NIV), or "*justified by obeying the law*" (NLT).

¹²³ Moises Silva answers this argument in his article titled "Faith Versus Works of the Law in Galatians" (*Justification and Variegated Nomism*, 217-248).

¹²⁴ Dunn was not the first to do this. John Calvin comments on scholars in his day and before who limited "works of the law" to "ceremonies" and would not apply this phrase to the whole law. See Calvin's comments on Romans 3:20.

of describing the Jewish people. According to NPP advocates, Paul is not fighting meritorious works; he is fighting racial (Jewish) exclusivity. So, when Paul writes “not by works of the law” (Galatians 2:16) he is simply saying “not by being Jewish”. Dunn writes:

‘Works of law’, ‘works of the law’ are nowhere understood here, either by his Jewish interlocutors or by Paul himself, as works which *earn* God’s favour, as merit-amassing observances. They are rather seen as *badges*: they are simply what membership of the covenant people involves, what mark out the Jews as God’s people; given by God for precisely that reason, they serve to demonstrate covenant status ... The phrase ‘works of the law’ in Galatians 2.16 is, in fact, a fairly restricted one: it refers precisely to these same identity markers described above, *covenant* works – those regulations prescribed by the law which any good Jew would simply take for granted to describe what a good Jew did. To be a Jew was to be a member of the covenant, was to observe circumcision, food laws and sabbath. In short, once again Paul seems much less a man of 16th century Europe and much more firmly in touch with the reality of 1st century Judaism than many have thought.¹²⁵

There are several problems with Dunn’s limited view of works. First, some Jews in Paul’s day prided themselves in counting and keeping over 600 commands and prohibitions found in the OT. These laws of Moses, *in addition* to the traditions, were spelled out in detail. There would be no reason for Jews to do this if they were focusing *primarily* on circumcision, Sabbath-keeping, and dietary restrictions. Passages such as Matthew 19:3,7 (dealing with divorce) and 23:2-3,23 (dealing with tithing) bear this out.

Second, the biblical information we have about what Jews were binding on themselves and Gentiles does not fit Dunn’s limited (reductionist) view of “works of the law”. For example, Luke records the following: “But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees who believed, saying, ‘It is needful to circumcise them, and to charge them to keep the law of Moses’” (Acts 15:5). The charge to keep the Law of Moses was *in addition* to being circumcised.¹²⁶

¹²⁵ *The New Perspective on Paul*, 111

¹²⁶ There is no question that Paul has much to say about circumcision. He mentions circumcision approximately 30 times in his letters. And there is no question that Jews placed the demand of circumcision on Gentile believers (“*they compel you to be circumcised*,” Galatians 6:12). But, the large amount of material from Paul discussing circumcision and the high demand of the Jews upon Gentiles for circumcision does not warrant the conclusion that Jews of Paul’s day were focused only or primarily on circumcision and not doing the rest of the law. Note, for example, that Paul opens and closes his thought in Galatians 5:2-12 with circumcision. But, right in the middle, he writes: “Ye are severed from Christ, ye who would be justified by the law...” (verse 4). He does not write, “ye who would be justified by circumcision”. The particular observance of circumcision for some Jews was a demand of the greater observance of all the law. Unlike NPP advocates, Paul is careful here not to reduce the Jew- Gentile debate to circumcision alone. Circumcision was not the only concern even among Jewish believers (Acts 21:20-21). For other examples of Paul’s mention of the particular act of circumcision within the larger context of keeping the law see Romans 2:25-27 and Galatians 6:13. For a helpful discussion of circumcision see T.R. Schreiner’s article on “Circumcision” and D.R. de Lacey’s article on “Circumcision.”

This emphasis on circumcision *and* other obligations in the Law is consistent with what Paul wrote concerning those Jews “who with the letter and circumcision art a transgressor of the law” (Rom. 2:27). When you back up to Romans 2:15 and read “works of the law” there, you find that the meaning of it in context includes more than just circumcision (read from verse 12 down to verse 29). Therefore, when Paul writes in Romans 3:28 about a man that is justified by faith “apart from the works of the law”, he is talking about a Jewish caricature that began back in 2:12; that is, a Jew that demanded circumcision *and* law-keeping as a system of justification.¹²⁷

Third, the biblical phrase “works of the law” is clarified in such passages as Galatians 3:10: “For as many as are of the works of the law are under a curse: for it is written, Cursed is everyone who continues not in all things that are written in the book of the law, to do them.” Paul quotes from Deuteronomy 27:26 and speaks of “all things that are written in the book of the law”. Paul’s quotation here would be unnecessary and off point if Jews were merely binding the limited work of circumcision. Additionally, Paul quotes from Leviticus 18:5 in verse 12 and writes: “He that doeth them shall live in them.” Doing the Law in general, and not just circumcision, is clearly the context of Leviticus 18:4-5.¹²⁸ Remember, Paul writes elsewhere: “the doers of the law shall be justified” (Romans 2:13).

Michael B. Thompson, a sympathetic proponent of the NPP, makes another candid admission on this point:

Dunn’s approach has the strength of drawing our attention to the social and historical context when Paul wrote, and his suggestion about ‘works of the law’ has led many to think again. Nevertheless, not all texts referring to ‘works’ can be neatly identified and limited to specific ‘badges of Judaism.’ Rom 2.17ff, 3.9-20, 11.6 and Titus 3.5 seem to have something broader in mind, and Dunn himself has now clarified his earlier claim, acknowledging that the word can have a wider meaning in Paul. What is more, in some passages Paul clearly speaks of ‘boasting’ of self-accomplishment (Rom 4.2; 1 Cor 1.29; 4.7; Eph 2.9; compare Gal 6.4) rather than

¹²⁷ Note that the faith-works argument used by Paul in Romans 3:27-28 was not used by Peter in answering the Jews in Acts 11:1-18. Neither was this argument used by Peter, Paul, or James in answering the Jews in Acts 15. NPP advocates leave the impression that the faith-works argument used by Paul was how the Jew-Gentile argument was settled. Paul used this argument to address a particular audience in Rome and in the Galatian churches, but it was not meant to be a standard argument used in all cases of the like.

Additionally, the faith-works argument is nowhere found in the Gospels, and yet we find Jesus and the apostles dealing with Jews and Gentiles and their place in the kingdom (see “Gentiles” by S. McKnight).

¹²⁸ Stephen Westerholm is one scholar who has attempted to answer Dunn’s view of “works of the law”. Westerholm believes that “works of the law” most naturally means “the doing of the law”; see *Israel’s Law and Church’s Faith: Paul and His Recent Interpreters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988) and *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The “Lutheran” Paul and His Critics* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004. See also Douglas J. Moo’s article on “Law, ‘Works of the Law,’ and Legalism in Paul;” Frank Thielman’s article on “Law;” and, Thomas R. Schreiner’s article on “Works of the Law.”

boasting in the gift of the law or election. Many still see Rom 4.4-5, Eph 2.8-10 and Phil 3.9 as texts that fit the ‘Old Perspective’ much better than the ‘New.’¹²⁹

Fourth, Paul applies the phrase “works of the law” to all people, Jew and Gentile (“all the world” and “no flesh”) in Romans 3:19-20. The principle of not being justified by the works of the law is true for the Jew (legalist, exclusivist or both) *and* the Gentile. No one, Jew or Gentile will be justified by a system of law keeping apart from faith in Jesus Christ. Since that is true, then Dunn’s emphasis on *Jewish* “boundary markers” is misdirected. What “boundary markers” was the average Gentile (not just the Gentile proselyte living by the Law)¹³⁰ trying to live by and force on others?

Fifth, Paul speaks about God’s plan to save all mankind by his grace and mercy and “not of works” (Eph. 2:9), “not according to our works” (2 Tim. 1:9), and “not by works” (Tit. 3:5). These passages speak of the plan of salvation for *all mankind*. All mankind, both Jew and Gentile, will be saved by God’s grace and not “by works”.¹³¹ These passages cannot be used to speak of Jewish exclusivism as Dunn would have us believe, because these passages are not talking *primarily* about Jewish attitudes toward Gentiles. “Not of works” applies to *all* mankind that “no man should glory” (Eph. 2:9).

Sixth, Paul speaks of works in relationship to Abraham in Romans 4:1-5 and it has nothing to do with the works of the Law of Moses (circumcision or any other law) because that law had not been given to Abraham.¹³² Still, Paul argues that Abraham was not justified by works (by human activity or by doing alone). In other words, Dunn’s argument does not hold up when talking about Abraham, yet Paul makes the same argument for the Jew and Gentile in Romans 3 (“apart from the works of the law”) as he does for Abraham in Romans 4 (“him that worketh not”).

Seventh, when Paul writes that one cannot be justified by the “works of the law” (Romans 3:20,28; Galatians 2:16; etc.), this is the same as what he preached in Antioch. In Acts 13:15, there was “the reading of the law and the prophets” in the synagogue and then Paul began his lesson. Paul closed his lesson this way: “and by him every one that believeth is justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses” (Acts 13:39). The law and the prophets that these Jews read from that day (not just circumcision) could not justify, but their faith in Jesus Christ could.

Eighth, the issue of Dunn’s view of the “works of the law” raises an important question: What exactly was Paul’s directive concerning “works of the law”? Was he asking Jews to stop these “badges of identity” all together, or just in some cases where it was not helpful

¹²⁹ *The New Perspective*, 11.

¹³⁰ See the article on “Proselytism and Godfearers” by S. McKnight.

¹³¹ Paul is not excluding God’s works of righteousness that a person must perform as a part of demonstrating an obedient faith (Acts 10:35). Paul is talking about human works of merit that do not save. For Paul’s use of Abraham in Romans and Galatians see the article by N.L. Calvert on “Abraham”.

¹³² The same point could be made concerning Jacob and Esau in Romans 9:11: “that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calleth”. The same point could be made of David even though he was under the Law (Rom. 4:6): “apart from works”. Jews in David’s day were not binding circumcision, the Sabbath, and dietary restriction on Gentiles around him.

to Gentiles? W.R. Stegner, in an article sympathetic toward the NPP, candidly admits the following:

Was Paul asking Jewish Christians to abandon the boundary markers of the Law in their own practice? Did he teach that they should cease circumcising their sons and observing the dietary law in their homes? Or was he speaking about fellowship between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians in such places as Antioch and other mixed congregations? The question can be asked more pointedly: Did Paul entirely abandon the boundary markers (“works of the law”) for himself? Or did he continue to observe them in so far as they did not interfere with his Gentile apostolate? At this point, there does not seem to be a clear answer [among NPP advocates – chr] to this question.¹³³

Ninth, when Dunn replaces Jewish legalism with Jewish exclusivism as the meaning of “works of the law”, what has been gained in the discussion? Paul is now opposed to exclusivism instead of legalism, so what? A Jew seeking to be justified by a limited number of works (exclusivism) is not substantially different than a Jew seeking to be justified by all the works of the Law (legalism). Indeed, exclusivism can become a type of legalism itself.

Finally, when Dunn focuses on Jewish exclusivism as he does, he shifts the argument away from Paul’s central point about grace and works and removes the basic polemic that Paul is trying to establish between grace and works.¹³⁴ Paul is trying to say that salvation is by God’s (unmerited) grace; it is not by man’s (merited) works. If it were by man’s (merited) works, then it could no longer be by God’s (unmerited) grace. Why? It would be a “debt” that God owes the worker, not grace (Rom. 4:4). This whole point and polemic (for grace to be grace, it cannot be of works) is lost with Dunn’s limited view of works and emphasis on Jewish exclusivism.

Read Paul again: “But if it is by grace, it is no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace” (Rom. 11:6). This particular dichotomy between grace and works presented by Paul is real; it is not a false dichotomy.¹³⁵ This point must be maintained throughout Paul but it is lost in the NPP debate (see also Eph. 2:8-9 and 2 Tim. 1:9).

¹³³ “Paul the Jew.” Dictionary of Paul and His Letters, 510-511.

¹³⁴ Dunn’s emphasis on Jewish nationalism or exclusivism also shifts the argument away from what the author of Hebrews was trying to say. The author of Hebrews points out that Jewish Christians erred, not by holding to their national identity, but by holding to a now defunct priesthood and Law system (Hebrews 5-10). For a discussion of what some Jewish Christians (Judaizers) bound on Gentile Christians, see the article by D.A. Hagner on “Jewish Christianity”.

¹³⁵ No doubt, Calvinists present a false dichotomy between grace and works when they try to eliminate all works from their “grace only” theology, but the grace-works dichotomy of Paul in Romans 11:6 and other passages is real. It belongs to Paul, not the Calvinist. We do not need to remove the real dichotomy between grace and works found in Romans 11:6 in order to answer the Calvinist. Yes, Calvinists misread the New Testament scriptures concerning grace and works in order to eliminate all works. However, we do not misread the same passages when we uphold the proper dichotomy that Paul was presenting and when we uphold the proper use of certain works in God’s plan of salvation. The Calvinists misuse of scripture will not dictate my proper exegesis of scripture.

“Justification by faith.” What does Paul mean by the phrase “justified by faith” (δικαιωθῶμεν ἐκ πίστεως)?¹³⁶ The advocates of the NPP like Dunn and Wright would have us believe that the *primary* meaning of “justification by faith” deals with God’s acknowledgement that both Jews and Gentiles are in the covenant. According to them, justification does not refer to how guilty sinners can find favor with God, but about who belongs in God’s covenant. Thus, justification is not about soteriology (forgiveness of sins and how one is saved), but about ecclesiology (who belongs in the covenant).¹³⁷ Dunn writes:

This understanding of ‘being justified’ is thus, evidently, something Jewish, something which belongs to Jews ‘by nature’, something which distinguishes them from ‘Gentile sinners’. But this is covenant language, the language of those conscious that they have been chosen as a people by God, and separated from the surrounding nations ... Paul therefore prefaces his first mention of ‘being justified’ with a deliberate appeal to the standard Jewish belief, shared also by his fellow Jewish Christians, that the Jews as a race are God’s covenant people ... God’s justification is God’s recognition of Israel as his people, his verdict in favour of Israel on grounds of his covenant with Israel ... In talking of ‘being justified’ here Paul is not thinking of a distinctively *initiatory* act of God. God’s justification is not his act in first *making* his covenant with Israel, or in initially accepting someone into the covenant people. God’s justification is rather God’s acknowledgement that someone is in the covenant...¹³⁸

N.T. Wright puts it this way:

There, ‘justification by works’ has nothing to do with individual Jews attempting a kind of proto-Pelegian pulling themselves up by their moral bootstraps, and everything to do with definition of the true Israel ... Justification in this setting, then, is not a matter of *how someone enters the community of the true people of God*, but of *how you tell who belongs to that community*...

“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’ terms, it was not so much about “getting in,” or indeed about “staying in,” as about “how you could tell who was in.” In standard Christian theological language, it wasn’t so much about

¹³⁶ The phrase “justified by faith” (δικαιωθῶμεν ἐκ πίστεως) is found five times in Paul’s letters (Romans 3:28; 5:1; Galatians 2:16; 3:11,24).

¹³⁷ Men like Dunn and Wright take their cue on this point from Krister Stendahl who wrote about the place of the Gentiles in the church and plan of God and its affect on Paul’s interpretation of the Law (see Stendahl’s *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*, 84).

¹³⁸ *The New Perspective on Paul*, 107; see also James D. G. Dunn and Alan M. Suggate, *The Justice of God: A Fresh Look at the Old Doctrine of Justification by Faith*, 25, 28; and James D.G. Dunn, “The New Perspective View” in *Justification: Five Views* edited by James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (InterVarsity Press, 2011).

soteriology as about ecclesiology; not so much about salvation as about the church.¹³⁹

Mark M. Mattison, following Dunn and Wright, removes justification from the realm of salvation and places it into the realm of the church:

The unity of the church at that time was threatened by ethnic and social conflict. The issues then at hand — circumcision, holy days, meat sacrificed to pagan idols — are no longer issues in the church. It must be asked, then, whether comparable issues currently exist. Our answer must be in the affirmative. We no longer fight over circumcision but we do fight over worship styles and a host of other issues. Even today Christianity is confused with culture and many are unable to distinguish between the substantial and the supplemental. Paul speaks to all of this by affirming that all cultural and ethnic groups stand before God on an equal footing and that we are not justified on the basis of peripheral issues. In this light, the Pauline doctrine of justification has less to do with the individual quest for righteousness and more to do with the sociological makeup of the community of faith.¹⁴⁰

Here, as with other biblical phrases, NPP advocates reduce a biblical word or phrase unnecessarily. They err in two ways: their basic *definition* of the word “justification” does not include the idea of an individual being right with God,¹⁴¹ only corporate identity; and, 2) their *application* of the word “justification” does not include past or present right-standing, only the possibility of a future right-standing in the judgment day. N.T. Wright overstates the case when he writes: “every time Paul discusses justification he seems simultaneously to be talking about Gentile inclusion” (*Paul: Fresh Perspective*, London: SPCK, 2005). Really?

The biblical words justify, justified, and justification (from Gr. verb *dikaioo*), are all used of man’s salvation (being right), and they have reference to one’s initial “getting in” to God’s covenant (Acts 13:38-39; Romans 4:5; 5:1,9,16; 6:7; 8:30; 1 Corinthians 6:11; Titus 3:7)¹⁴² as well as one’s “staying in” in that covenant (Luke 18:14; James 2:21,24-25; Revelation 22:11).¹⁴³

To reduce “justification” down to simply who belongs in the covenant misses Paul’s deeper point in Romans 1-6. Paul’s point here is not simply that God wants both Jews and Gentiles saved, but how a guilty and condemned sinner (either Jew or Gentile, 3:23) can escape the wrath of God (Rom. 1:18; 2:5) and be forgiven and saved (justified) through faith in Jesus Christ and not by works (3:26-27). The lost sinner is “justified by faith” (5:1) because he has been “justified by his blood” (5:9). But, when does this

¹³⁹ *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 119. A more recent and thorough treatment of N.T. Wright’s views on justification can be found in his book *Justification: God’s Plan & Paul’s Vision* (2009).

¹⁴⁰ A Summary of the New Perspective, October 16, 2009.

¹⁴¹ The family of Greek words in the NT with the dik prefix carry with them a meaning of “being right” (in a forensic or judicial sense) that NPP advocates like N.T. Wright are not willing to consider seriously.

¹⁴² Read Acts 13:38-39 and note that justification in Christ is tied in directly with remission (forgiveness) of sins in Christ.

¹⁴³ See the article on “Justification” by A.E. McGrath.

justification “by faith” and “by his blood” take place? It takes place *initially* when the lost sinner dies to sin and is baptized into Christ’s death (6:3-6). Paul writes: “for he that hath died is justified from sin” (6:7). The starting point of this entire discussion by Paul begins with the righteousness of God “revealed” (1:17) and the wrath of God “revealed” (1:18) toward sinful mankind.¹⁴⁴

“Righteousness of God.” What does Paul mean by the phrase “righteousness of God” (θεοῦ δικαιοσύνην or δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ)?¹⁴⁵ N.T. Wright, for example, would have us believe that the *primary* meaning of this phrase refers to the character of God that is his trustworthiness and faithfulness. It refers to his covenantal faithfulness in action toward Israel in saving them, but it does not refer to his righteous justice given to anyone.¹⁴⁶ Clearly, God is righteous himself and he demonstrates his righteousness in his own faithfulness (Romans 3:25). But, the “righteousness of God” is also a reference to God’s righteous plan in the gospel to make mankind righteous through faith in Jesus Christ (Romans 1:17; 10:3; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Ephesians 4:24; Philippians 3:9; 2 Peter 1:1).¹⁴⁷

As for the righteousness of an individual, N.T. Wright re-defines that as well to fit it within his NPP paradigm. For example, according to Wright, Paul is not giving up self-righteousness (“a righteousness of my own”) in Philippians 3:9; he is giving up “the status of orthodox Jewish covenant membership.”¹⁴⁸ Like other biblical phrases, this phrase is reduced unnecessarily to fit the narrow meaning and paradigm of NPP advocates.

“Gospel of God”. What does Paul mean by the “gospel of God” (εὐαγγέλιον θεοῦ)?¹⁴⁹ N.T. Wright has much to say about the “gospel of God” from a NPP approach. Wright believes that the *primary* meaning of “gospel” is more about the lordship of Jesus Christ, and not so much a message about how a person can be saved or an order of salvation

¹⁴⁴ For a different interpretation of Romans viewed through the lens of a post-holocaust, new perspective, see Calvin L. Porter’s article titled “A Paradigm for Reading Romans: Dialogue Between Christians and Jews.” For a new perspective approach to Romans, see James D. G. Dunn’s commentary on Romans in the *Word Biblical Commentary* series.

¹⁴⁵ The phrase “righteousness of God” (θεοῦ δικαιοσύνην or δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ) is found six times in Paul’s letters (Romans 1:17; 3:5,21,22; 10:3; 2 Corinthians 5:21).

¹⁴⁶ *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 96, 103. Wright discusses on pages 98-103 how that God’s righteousness is not imputed to anyone. We would agree at this point with N.T. Wright that God’s righteousness is not imputed to anyone via the perfect life of Christ (the Calvinist’s “imputed righteousness of Christ”). However, this does not change the point mentioned above that the “righteousness of God” can refer to God’s righteous plan in the gospel to make mankind righteous through faith in Jesus Christ (Romans 1:17; 10:3; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Ephesians 4:24; Philippians 3:9; 2 Peter 1:1).

¹⁴⁷ See the article by K.L. Onesti and M.T. Brauch on the “Righteousness of God” and the article by C.C. Newman on “Righteousness.” Newman understands Paul to be in direct contrast to Sanders’ righteousness found in “covenantal nomism” (“Righteousness,” 1055-1056).

¹⁴⁸ *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 124.

¹⁴⁹ The phrase “gospel of God” (εὐαγγέλιον θεοῦ) is found eight times in the New Testament; once in Mark (1:14), once in 1 Peter (4:17), and the rest in Paul’s letters (Romans 1:1; 15:16; 2 Corinthians 11:7; 1 Thessalonians 2:2,8,9).

(*ordo salutis*).¹⁵⁰ As with the other biblical phrases above, Wright's "gospel of God" has been reduced to a *primary* point.

However, the good news of Paul's "gospel" is not limited *primarily* to a message about the lordship of Jesus Christ. It includes a message about remission of sins through baptism (Mk. 16:15-16). For example, Philip preached the "gospel" to the Samaritans and to the Eunuch (Acts 8:4-13, 26-40), Peter preached the "gospel" to Cornelius and his household (Acts 10:34-48; 15:7), and Paul preached the "gospel" in Macedonia (Acts 16:9-34). In all three cases, the "gospel" was a message about Jesus' lordship *and* the need for baptism.

Theological Concerns over NPP Agendas

Is the outcome or overall theological agenda of the NPP scriptural? A number of theological concerns are made by opponents of the NPP. Many of these concerns have to do with the NPP's apparent rejection of "justification by grace alone through faith alone" – a major tenet of the Protestant Reformation shaped by John Calvin.¹⁵¹ Thus, many Reformed Calvinists are opposed to the NPP because it undermines their Calvinism. However, not being a Calvinist myself, my concerns over the NPP lie elsewhere.

First, there is the concern over the NPP charge of anti-Semitism. Some NPP advocates hope to even vindicate Paul from the charge of anti-Semitism.¹⁵² However, when Paul prayed for his fellow-Israelites (Rom. 9:1-3; 10:1-2), and when he used harsh words (Rom. 2:4-10; 2:17ff; Phil. 3:1-3; Gal. 5:12) and harsh actions (Gal. 2:5) against them, he was not engaged in anti-Semitism (racism). He was opposing false religion. Some NPP advocates apparently do not know the difference between racism and opposing false religion.

As a result, NPP advocates weaken and water down the actions and words of the Jewish false teachers and the Jewish false religion that John the Baptist, Jesus and Paul so strongly confronted and condemned. J.A. Weatherly reminds us of the following

¹⁵⁰ *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 40, 61, 133. N.T. Wright sets forth his idea about the gospel this way: "It is not, then, a system of how people get saved. The announcement of the gospel *results* in people being saved..." (page 45). However, Paul writes that the gospel is to be "obeyed" (Rom. 10:16; 2 Thess. 1:8) and Peter does the same (1 Pet. 4:17).

¹⁵¹ Men like Dunn and Wright maintain their belief in Reformed doctrines. However, many Reformed theologians today, like John Piper and Cornelis P. Venema, are militant and adamant in their attack of the NPP because they see it as undermining Reformed theology. They view the NPP as a form of proto-Pelagianism because of its emphasis on obedience in staying in God's covenant. They are doing all they can to defend their Calvinist position of "justification by grace alone through faith alone" as well as defend their belief in the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer. See Piper's *The Future of Justification* and *By Faith Alone* edited by Gary L. W. Johnson and Guy P. Waters. See also R.H. Gundry's article "Grace, Works, and Staying Saved in Paul" (*Biblica* 66, 1985, pp. 1-38).

¹⁵² The charge by some scholars of anti-Semitism does not simply go back to Luther. Paul and other New Testament Christians are also charged with anti-Semitism. See the section on "Christian Anti-Semitism" in Zetterholm's work (pages 47-58).

important point: “Condemnation of some Jews on religious grounds is fundamentally different from prejudice against all Jews on racial grounds.”¹⁵³

Douglas Moo offers this important observation as well:

...the laudable efforts of Jewish and Christian scholars to come to a better understanding of each other should not be made at the sacrifice of exegetical integrity on either side ... While I am convinced that no reasonable definition of ‘anti-Semitic’ can be appropriately applied to Paul, efforts to rescue him from such a charge by removing from his writings sentiments that appear to be there are misguided and ultimately self-destructive.¹⁵⁴

Second, there is the concern of evangelical ecumenism (inclusivism) promoted by the NPP.¹⁵⁵ The NPP is clearly an ecumenical movement. Greater ecumenism between Protestants and Catholics and greater ecumenism within Protestant Churches is one agenda of the NPP. It is thought by NPP advocates that believers today can set aside their denominational “badges” that separate themselves (modern-day “works of the law”) and be one “Christian” Church based upon the NPP proper understanding of justification by faith in Christ. Dunn, for example, used the following illustration when he was discussing his view of the “works of the law”:

If it helps, some may like to compare the role of the sacraments (baptism and the Lord’s Supper) in Christianity today. These have very much the same fundamental role in Christian self-understanding as circumcision, table regulation and sabbath had in the Jewish self-understanding of Paul’s day. Even though we acknowledge the Quakers and the Salvation Army as Christian bodies, even so any attempt to define the boundary markers which identify and distinguish Christians as Christians will almost certainly give a primary place to baptism and the Lord’s Supper. If an unbaptized Christian is for most of us a contradiction in terms, even more so was a Jew who did not practice the works of the law, circumcision, table regulations and sabbath.¹⁵⁶

N.T. Wright put it this way:

Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith impels the churches, in their current fragmented state, into the ecumenical task. It cannot be right that the very doctrine

¹⁵³ “Anti-Semitism”, 13-14.

¹⁵⁴ “Paul and the Law in the Last Ten Years,” 306.

¹⁵⁵ The NT scholars of a more liberal persuasion (non-evangelical) are using the NPP to reach out to modern-day Jews in hopes of reconciling their long-standing differences between Christians and Jews. Some of these scholars are saying that the modern-day Jew is saved without faith in Jesus Christ.

¹⁵⁶ *The New Perspective on Paul*, 110-111. The following items that Dunn includes as “boundary markers” to be set aside have been gathered from his writings and documented by Gerhard H. Visscher: baptism, the Lord’s supper, abortion, women priests, speaking in tongues, scriptural inerrancy, and papal infallibility. See “New Views Regarding Legalism and Exclusivism in Judaism: Is There a Need to Reinterpret Paul?” *Koinonia: A Periodical of the Ministers of the Canadian and American Reformed Churches*. Volume 18.2 Fall 1999: 15-42.

which declares that all who believe in Jesus belong at the same table (Galatians 2) should be used as a way of saying that some, who define the doctrine of justification differently, belong at a different table. The doctrine of justification, in other words, is not merely a doctrine in which Catholic and Protestant might just be able to agree on, as a result of hard ecumenical endeavor. It is itself the ecumenical doctrine, the doctrine that rebukes all our petty and often culture-bound church groupings, and which declares that all who believe in Jesus belong together in the one family. . . . The doctrine of justification is in fact the great *ecumenical* doctrine.¹⁵⁷

Yinger also lists ecumenism as a positive effect of the NPP:

As a last benefit of the NPP to be mentioned, reconciliation between Catholics and Protestants over justification might just be possible. Since the Lutheran Reformation's understanding of Paul and justification was one of the major elements leading to the split with Rome, the NPP's re-evaluation of Paul and justification might show the two sides not quite so far apart on this matter as Luther thought.¹⁵⁸

Brenda B. Colijn makes use of the main ideas of the NPP in her chapter on "Justification by Faith (fullness)". As she closes her chapter, you can see in her remarks how she believes the NPP to be an advantage in facilitating ecumenism:

As Western society becomes more postmodern and pluralistic, Christians will need to consider carefully how they can work together for the sake of the kingdom. The covenantal context of the New Perspective may provide a framework for greater understanding between Catholics and Protestants. It holds together the Protestant emphasis on grace and the Catholic concern for the moral life. Because the New Perspective does not divorce justification from sanctification, the New Perspective may help the church maintain its commitments to both evangelism and social concern.

Paul's vision is also essential for a modern church that is becoming increasingly multicultural. Like the 1st century Jewish believers, European and American Christians may need to be challenged by Paul's description of an ever-faithful God who keeps his promises in creative and surprising ways. What badges of covenant membership might God want us to give up so that he can welcome new people into his family? As the center of gravity for the church moves from Europe and America to the Two-Thirds World, can we welcome the moving of God's Spirit and willingly yield our privileged position? It will require humility for those who have been teachers to become learners again. But if we truly understand God's grace toward us, we can do no less.¹⁵⁹

Third, there is the concern of the NPP social agenda which is similar to the point just mentioned. NPP advocates believe that there is an "inherent social dimension" to the

¹⁵⁷ What Saint Paul Really Said, 158.

¹⁵⁸ The New Perspective on Paul, 92-93.

¹⁵⁹ Images of Salvation in the New Testament, 216-217.

doctrine of justification.¹⁶⁰ The NPP doctrine of justification then is about promoting diversity, inclusiveness, and social justice for all who are in the group of believers.¹⁶¹ While true unity-in-diversity has its place in the Lord's church (Eph. 2:11-21), the social agenda (or social gospel) of the NPP promotes a religious "unity" within a group that is in fact diverse in doctrine and practice. The NPP is simply a new argument in a long history of evangelical attempts at unity-in-diversity.

Fourth, there is the concern of removing the importance of the individual in the NPP scheme of things. The NPP is about focusing on the *group* (Jews and Gentiles), not on *individuals*. The NPP gospel (following the approach of Stendahl) is not so much about the individual's salvation from sin (guilt, forgiveness, etc.), as it is about something more relevant and more tangible to the group as a whole. Many NPP advocates focus so much on the sociological group aspects of Judaism that the place of an individual coming to Christ is de-emphasized.

The problem with this approach is once again, reductionism; namely, reducing or limiting Paul's writings to sociological matters between the *group* of Jews and Gentiles. We must remember that the very first question asked by the audience on the day of Pentecost was: "Brethren, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:47). This question was followed later with: "Sirs, what must I do to be saved" (Acts 16:30)? Yes, the Lord's church is the corporate body of all the saved, but the *individual* must first decide if he wants to deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Jesus (Mt. 16:24-26) before he can enter into this body.

Louis DeBoer, who correctly describes the NPP controversy as an "intramural dispute between Evangelical Christians," offers a fitting conclusion to these four concerns:

Now there is a common thread to all these concerns. There is uniformity to this agenda. These are all liberal concerns. Christians are concerned about truth. Christians are concerned about sin and the salvation of their fellow men, about their eternal standing before a just and a holy God. Liberals have other concerns. They do not believe in the gospel. They see no need for it because they do not believe in man's desperate condition before God. Their concerns, like the Sadducees of old, are all related to this present world. The New Perspective is the latest form of theological liberalism.¹⁶²

New Perspective: An Appraisal

What can be said for and against the NPP? What, if anything, may Bible students take away from this new understanding of Paul that will help them to properly exegete the epistles of Paul?

¹⁶⁰ Dunn writes often of the "social function of the law". See *The New Perspective on Paul*, 16.

¹⁶¹ Dunn believes that his NPP will help to combat "the nationalism and racialism which has do distorted and diminished Christianity past and present" (*The New Perspective on Paul*, 17).

¹⁶² "The New Perspective on Paul" in *The Trinity Review*. Number 263. January, 2007, 3-4.

First, the NPP calls the Bible student back to reading Paul through 1st century lenses and not through the lens of the Protestant reformers.¹⁶³ We must always come to the Bible text with eyes wide open to its historical background and its original context. We must always let Paul speak to us as a 1st century, inspired apostle who is addressing the 1st century issue of salvation for Jews and Gentiles. It is agreed that Paul was not talking about Calvinism in his letters. Paul's own words, not Luther, Calvin, or a NPP view of Paul, is what we want to come to know and understand. Of course, we have always tried to read Paul through 1st century lenses, but if the NPP can remind us once again to do this, that is fine.

In a similar fashion, Sanders has rightly sounded a warning concerning the practice of some in the past to read the rabbinical writings and other writings of that time in such a way that the issues involved in the debates of the Reformation about justification by grace/works are imposed upon the Jews. To read them today with the presupposition that they were *all* legalists is inappropriate. Rabbinical writings, like Scripture, need to be allowed to speak for themselves.¹⁶⁴

Second, the NPP reminds us that the covenant between God and man is an important relationship and both divine and human agency are necessary in maintaining that covenant. Clearly, grace and works go together hand-in-hand in God's plan to save mankind.¹⁶⁵ Sanders has shown us that the principals of God's grace were indeed alive and well in Judaism. No doubt, it was a joy and delight for many Jews in the 1st century to worship God and obey his law. Much of what Sanders writes about God's grace and Israel's faithful works of obedience is scriptural and right on point.

There is a clear continuity of grace and works (obedient faith) in God's plan of salvation between the OT and the NT. God saves mankind by his own grace through an obedient faith *all throughout the Bible*, from the time of Noah (Genesis 6:8, 22), to the time of Israel (Exodus 19:4-6; 20:2-27; Deut. 7:6-11), and down to the NT church (Ephesians 2:8-9). This we have always taught. NPP advocates also rightly point out the importance of being judged in the last day according to our works.¹⁶⁶ Of course, we have always said this as well in reference to such passages as 2 Corinthians 5:10 and Philippians 2:12, but if the NPP can reaffirm this Bible truth, that is fine.

¹⁶³ It would be good to ask at this point: Is the NPP calling us back to look at the New Testament through 1st century lenses or through the lens of Sanders' Judaism? If we are truly looking at the New Testament as one living in the New Testament period, then fine. But, if we are looking at things through the eyes of Sanders then we have simply exchanged one man-made lens (Luther) for another (Sanders).

¹⁶⁴ Sanders attempts to let the Rabbinical writings speak for themselves, but, as pointed out below, he often removes a Rabbinical statement from its broader context in order to achieve his purpose.

¹⁶⁵ The owners of the website monogism.com have posted many articles against the NPP because they do not like the idea of both God and man working together (synergism) to maintain a covenant relationship. Even Sanders has been charged with promoting synergism (*Covenantal Nomism Revisited*, 48-52).

¹⁶⁶ Even Sanders recognizes this point; see *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 515-518.

Third, the NPP reminds us that the New Testament church is for both Jews and Gentiles¹⁶⁷ and Paul had a special mission to the Gentiles.¹⁶⁸ Of course, we have always taught this in reference to such passages as Ephesians 2:11-22, but if the NPP can reaffirm this Bible truth also, that is fine. The NPP also reminds us of the important social and ethnic issues (challenges) that existed between Jews and Gentiles in the 1st century church. Of course, we have always been aware of this because of such passages as Romans 14:1 – 15:13; 1 Corinthians 8:1 – 10:33; Ephesians 2:11-22; and Colossians 2:18-23.¹⁶⁹

Fourth, the NPP reminds us that Christianity has a close connection with Judaism in that the first Christians were Jews. There is a Jewish context that is the antecedent to Christianity that must first be understood. Of course we have always taught this in reference to such passages as Acts 3:26; 13:46; and Romans 1:16. And, the NPP reminds us that there is some continuity between Christianity and Judaism as well as some discontinuity between the two.¹⁷⁰ This continuity-discontinuity is found in Paul himself (compare Romans 7:6 with 13:8). If the NPP can remind us of this Bible truth, that is fine.

Finally, some advocates of the NPP, like N.T. Wright, are opposed to certain aspects of Calvinism. For example, Wright does not accept the Calvinist doctrine of the imputation of Christ's righteousness. This is good, but have not Bible students capably and decisively answered Calvinism over the past 150 years without hearing of the NPP, let alone using it? And what of all those people who were converted out of Calvinism by sound biblical arguments before the NPP came along?¹⁷¹ The fact is, Calvinism has been answered over and over again and no NPP was ever used to do it. We have thoroughly answered Calvinism by pointing out the proper definition of biblical words like grace, faith, law, and works, and by pointing out the proper relationship between them all.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁷ This appears to be the positive value of the NPP found by Steve Wolfgang in his lecture. He writes: "The 'NPP' does, however, have the advantage of focusing on issues which sound very much like what is actually reported and discussed in texts such as Matthew 8:5-13; Mark 7:24-30; Luke 3:7-8; John 8:31-58; Acts 9:15; 10:15,35; 11:3,15; 22:21-22; Romans 2:17-25; 3:29-31; Galatians 3:13,15-29; 4:21-31; Romans 9:30ff; and 'much more'" (*Saved by His Life*, 213).

¹⁶⁸ See the article by W.P. Bowers on "Mission", the article by D.R. de Lacey on "Gentiles", and the article by S. McKnight on "Gentiles, Gentile Mission."

¹⁶⁹ I have personally been aware of these types of social/ethnic issues all my life. My upbringing in local churches with Hispanic members living in a predominately white culture reminds me daily of the importance of what Paul wrote in these passages. There is a constant need for patience, sacrifice, and a "give-and-take" attitude between brethren of mixed race and culture involving matters of personal scruple.

¹⁷⁰ See the article by B. Crossfeld on "Torah" and the article by C.A. Evans on "Christianity and Judaism: Partings of the Ways".

¹⁷¹ See my lecture given last year at the Alpharetta Bible Study titled, "*The Impact of Calvinism on Churches of Christ*".

¹⁷² The answer to Calvinism is not found "covenantal nomism" (keeping grace and works together). Proof of this is found in Dunn who believes in "covenant nomism" and still espouses the Calvinist doctrine of salvation by grace alone though faith alone without works. The answer to Calvinism is found in the fact that there are different kinds of "works"; some which save (John 6:29; Acts 10:35; etc.) and others which do not.

While the NPP does in fact remind us of some important truths, there are several errors associated with it that we must consider. Because of these errors, the NPP, therefore, is not the way to approach New Testament studies. Here are my reasons for this conclusion:

First, consider the liberal theological grounding upon which the NPP was first built.¹⁷³ This is well-documented. Krister Stendahl and E.P. Sanders were theological liberals arguing their cause during a post-holocaust time of reparation between Jews and Protestant Christians.¹⁷⁴ Sanders describes himself thus:

I am liberal, modern, secularized Protestant, brought up in a church dominated by low christology and the social gospel. I am proud of the things that that religious tradition stands for. I am not bold enough, however, to suppose that Jesus came to establish it, or that he died for sake of its principles.¹⁷⁵

Additionally, in the case of Sanders, he does not believe that Acts and all of the thirteen epistles assigned to Paul can be used to ascertain a “pattern of religion” for either Judaism or Paul himself.¹⁷⁶ But what bearing does this theological liberalism have on the NPP? The theological liberal is often interested in placing modern Judaism in a better light and suggesting that Christianity is no better than Judaism. The NPP gives them the framework from which to launch this agenda.¹⁷⁷ On this point, Donald Macleod offers the following observation:

Yet contrition for the Holocaust cannot by itself offer a total explanation for either the emergence of the New Perspective or the welcome accorded to it. As P.S. Alexander points out, ‘It is surely significant that most of these scholars have either been Christians of liberal Protestant background or Jews arguably influenced by liberal Protestant ideas.’ Such a background would provide little sympathy with classical Lutheranism. Instead, it would predispose them to see their own Liberalism

¹⁷³ F. David Farnell documents several examples of theological liberalism and historical-critical ideology in Sanders, Dunn, and Wright. These men are not conservative when it comes to such matters at NT book authorship, inspiration, the deity of Jesus, the historical record of Jesus, etc. See “The New Perspective on Paul: Its Basic Tenets, History, and Presuppositions.” *The Master’s Seminary Journal*. 16.2 (Fall 2005): 189-243.

¹⁷⁴ Sanders referenced three blank pages in the index of *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* as examples of “truth, ultimate” (page 627). Sanders also wrote this: “Thus in all the literature considered together one has Judaism as it spoke for itself during the period, not just Judaism as subsequent generations wanted it remembered (which is the case with Christianity).” *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 426.

¹⁷⁵ *Jesus and Judaism*, 334.

¹⁷⁶ For several examples of Sanders’ liberalism see the article by F. David Farnell.

¹⁷⁷ This was the very point made to me after a two-hour interview with Daniel Patte, Professor of New Testament Studies at Vanderbilt Divinity School. Patte told me that the NPP is an accurate assessment of Judaism and that he holds to a version of it himself. But, according to Patte, many in the NPP movement have not gone far enough. He believes that men like Dunn and Wright have not understood the full ramification of the NPP because they continue to affirm that Jews have to be saved through Jesus Christ. Patte believes that because Jews are in a right covenant relationship with God already (“covenantal nomism”), that they are saved without Jesus Christ. Patte believes that scholars like Robert Jewett set forth the correct understanding of Romans. Jewett believes that Paul’s point in Romans is that “all Israel is saved” without Jesus Christ. See Jewett’s article titled “The Law and the Coexistence of Jews and Gentiles in Romans.”

reflected from the bottom of the rabbinic well. It would then be tempting to minimize the differences between Judaism and Christianity and in particular to play down any suggestion that the one faith is superior to the other.¹⁷⁸

There are two main liberal theological presuppositions which lie behind the practice of NPP: 1) following men like F.C. Baur, Rudolf Bultmann, Wilhelm Wrede, and Albert Schweitzer, the historical-critical method is used to ascertain the meaning behind the NT text (form, redaction, and tradition criticism); 2) following modern Jewish scholars like Montefiore, Schechter, and Scheeps (men who were opposed to Jesus' presentation of the gospel and Paul's description of Judaism), the picture of Judaism that is painted today is one of a gracious God-loving Jew with little or no element of legalism.¹⁷⁹ The observation offered by F. David Farnell is important to consider:

Though many historical critics were nominally Lutheran or Reformed in their views of Paul, their philosophically motivated proposals facilitated the rise of not only a "search for the historical Jesus" but also a "search for the historical Paul." A fortuitous, well-timed convergence in the 20th and early 21st centuries of historical-critical ideologies, political correctness, and eisegesis of Pauline texts by such men as Sanders, Dunn, and Wright have led to the emergence and prominence of the NPP.¹⁸⁰

Second, consider that there are problems with Sanders' methodology in arriving at his overall picture of Jewish "covenantal nomism". Sanders' methodology in *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* is flawed.¹⁸¹ Consider the following flaws:

(1) Sanders is so interested in looking at a religion like Judaism *as a whole* (the holistic comparison) that he does not want to consider individual peculiarities within that religion. After discussing how previous scholars have offered inadequate views of Judaism, of Paul, or both,¹⁸² Sanders concludes that what is needed today is a comparison of "a whole religion with a whole religion."¹⁸³ While this approach by Sanders appears to be improved, it must be observed that his approach allows him to dismiss at any time any particular irregularity that he finds that does not fit the "whole" of the religion. If he finds some legalism in Judaism, for example, then he rejects it as an anomaly that simply doesn't fit the "whole."

¹⁷⁸ "The New Perspective: Paul, Luther and Judaism", 6-7.

¹⁷⁹ F. David Farnell gives several details of these two liberal presuppositions in his article titled "The New Perspective on Paul: Its Basic Tenets, History, and Presuppositions."

¹⁸⁰ "The New Perspective on Paul: Its Basic Tenets, History, and Presuppositions," 243.

¹⁸¹ Sanders' work in *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* is large and detailed. The reader may find himself so lost in all the detailed information that he does not take notice of the flaw in Sanders' methodology.

¹⁸² *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 1-12.

¹⁸³ *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 12. Sanders would write later: "One of the difficulties of the discussion has been that Christianity, and thus the critiques of Judaism offered by Christian scholars, focuses on individual salvation, whereas Judaism has been more concerned with the protection and preservation of the group" (*Covenantal Nomism Revisited*, 26).

Sanders wants to examine only what he believes to be homogeneous in a religion, not every theological proposition or concept within a religion. Sanders' flaw is found in his refusal to look at certain particulars that he does not want to see. Additionally, it must be noted here that Sanders treated his "holistic" approach to Palestinian Judaism differently from his "holistic" approach to Paul. He believed he could find a "whole" in Judaism" but not so with Paul. Thus, Sanders' flaw is found in his unfair and unbalanced approach to Jewish writings and New Testament books. Sanders writes:

...the nature of Palestinian Jewish literature lead to considering large blocks of it together, while rendering it almost impossible to isolate the thought of individuals comparable to Paul. On the other hand, Christianity was developing so rapidly that we could not reasonably take up 'the New Testament pattern of religion' as a topic. One would become so occupied in distinguishing the different types and patterns of religion in the New Testament that the hope of meaningful conclusions would be lost. We have from Paul's hand (or mouth, if he dictated) a distinctive body of letters, and we had better not confuse the matter by attempting to consider James, Hebrews and the Gospel of John at the same time.¹⁸⁴

(2) Sanders refuses to examine the gospels, the book of Acts, and some of Paul's epistles.¹⁸⁵ Sanders has his list of permitted documents that he is going to examine and Bible books do not make the list. He does not take into account the inspired picture of Judaism presented in these inspired biblical documents. Surprisingly, Sanders does not even use the Old Testament to gain an accurate picture of Judaism. The Old Testament would certainly be the place to begin looking at a "pattern of religion" for the Jews because that body of literature is the very body of literature that shaped the legacy of later Judaism. Sanders, for example, rejected the Aramaic Targums in his survey because he believed them to be "early traditions" that are not reliable (page 25-26).

But why reject the entire Old Testament as well which would have provided an accurate and necessary antecedent to Second Temple Judaism? Why also reject the New Testament as Sanders does? Sanders does not believe that the New Testament is helpful for his study of Judaism. According to him, when one is looking at understanding New Testament passages he is "hardly in a position to learn much about Judaism for its own sake" (page 28). The methodology of any Bible scholar like Sanders who refuses to include Old Testament books or New Testament books in a survey of Jewish religion is seriously flawed.

(3) Sanders is critical of many scholars before him who viewed Judaism as legalistic and he does not accept their methodology as valid. Yet, Sanders uses the same type of methodology of which he is critical. For example, he charges Paul Billerbeck with using numerous quotations from rabbinic literature which may or may not accurately reflect the consensus of rabbinic thought (page 42). But,

¹⁸⁴ Paul and Palestinian Judaism, 19-20.

¹⁸⁵ An examination of Sanders' "Index of Passages" will bear this out.

Sanders does the same type of voluminous quoting later in his own work. Another example is Sanders' criticism of Matthew Black for mixing the beliefs of the (early / late) Pharisees with the (early / late) Rabbis (page 51).¹⁸⁶ But, again, Sanders does this type of mixing later in his own work. Sanders' flaw is noticeable in being guilty of the very thing he criticizes in others.

(4) Sanders admits to the assumptions necessary in using rabbinic (Tannaitic) material to assess 1st century Judaism. He assumes certain things about the dating, authorship, variety of meaning, and nature of the Tannaitic literature (pages 59-84). However, he proceeds without seriously considering the dangers of using this post-apostolic material for New Testament studies; namely, the late date of this material and the social and religious transformations found in this material that differ from 1st century Judaism. Rabbinic literature simply is not directly comparable to the material found in the gospel writers or in Paul's epistles.¹⁸⁷ Sanders' flaw is in using late rabbinic material to assess 1st century Judaism and Paul's teaching.¹⁸⁸

(5) Sanders knows that the Rabbis differ with one another over the same topic being discussed. However, even though Sanders admits this, he moves forward and focuses on the "underlying agreement" he is looking for. The flaw here is not taking seriously these differences of opinion and not allowing these differences of opinion to affect the total outcome of the "pattern of religion". Which Rabbi are we to accept as true? Which rabbinic opinion is accurate? Sanders writes:

Our procedure in this, as in subsequent sections, is to examine the different types of statement and to determine whether they reveal an underlying agreement. If they do not, we shall have to be content simply to let the divergent statements stand as real differences of opinion.¹⁸⁹

(6) Sanders does not come to rabbinic Judaism to uncover the issues *within* rabbinic Judaism. He seeks to impose from *without* certain issues of Pauline scholarship and Paul (namely, the grace-works dichotomy) upon rabbinic Judaism to see if these issues are present in there. When Sanders does this, a true holistic comparison is not made, but rather a limited theological comparison is made.

¹⁸⁶ See the article by B.D. Chilton on "Rabbis" for the transition from the Pharisees to the Rabbinic Judaism.

¹⁸⁷ For caution in using rabbinic literature to understand Jesus, see the article by B.D. Chilton on "Rabbinic Traditions and Writings", the article on "Rabbinic Literature: Talmud" by H. Maccoby, the article on "Rabbinic Literature: Mishnah and Tosefta" by J. Nuesner, the article on "Rabbinic Literature: Midrashim" by G.G. Porton, and the article on "Jewish Biblical Interpretation" by P. Enns. See also Chilton's article on "Rabbinic Literature: Targumim and the article on "Midrash" by C.A. Evans.

¹⁸⁸ S. Mason writes: "Perhaps the most important observation to be made about ancient Jewish groups is that our knowledge is defective. We can summarize what we find in the texts and hypothesize about interrelationships, but the quality and quantity of the evidence do not normally permit overwhelmingly probable conclusions ... Nor can we be sure that an individual Pharisee or Essene behaved in a manner somehow typical of the group or as an individual. Much remains beyond our grasp" ("Theologies and Sects, Jewish", 1229).

¹⁸⁹ *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 85.

Additionally, Sanders ignores the greater context in which a particular rabbinic statement is made because he is focused on finding his “covenantal nomism” first. He does not ask what is important and central within a piece of rabbinic literature. All he wants to know is what, in those writings, addresses his thesis of “covenantal nomism”. Sanders gathers sayings from diverse sources in Jewish literature, writes them down, organizes them, categorizes them, and then draws his conclusion about what “the Rabbis” teach.¹⁹⁰ The flaw here is that Sanders gives no context for a given statement in its own setting in its own document. We are forced to look at a rabbinic statement and Sanders conclusion about that statement without the original intention, focus, issue, or concern of the rabbinic document as a whole.¹⁹¹

(7) Sanders downplays the role of perfect obedience found in some Jewish literature. This perfect obedience, would of course, lead some Jews to have a legalistic attitude toward serving God. Thus, Sanders emphasizes God’s grace and mercy and downplays the statements requiring obedience as he surveys the literature. His methodology is deliberately skewed to emphasize grace over obedience.¹⁹² However, in some of the Jewish literature examined by Sanders, there can be found plain statements of the importance of perfect obedience to the Law’s commands.

Consider two examples surveyed by Sanders: the literature of Qumran and *Jubilees*. In the Qumran literature there are examples of the requirement of perfect obedience (1QS 3:9-11), yet Sanders downplays this perfect obedience and emphasizes God’s grace (page 293-294). In *Jubilees*, the author points out the importance of perfect obedience (1:22-24; 5:12; 50:5), but Sanders once again downplays it and says that it is not a legalism of work-righteousness (page 382-383).

(8) Sanders understands the Pseudepigrapha IV Ezra to contain elements of legalistic works-righteousness. The flaw here is Sanders’ unwillingness to let IV Ezra be a part of Judaism’s total “pattern of religion”. He simply states that IV Ezra is an exception to his “covenantal nomism” and moves on. Sanders writes:

...for there is only one question to be determined: whether or not the covenant maintains its traditional efficacy in the view of the author of IV Ezra. To anticipate the conclusion: the view argued for here is that it does not, that in IV Ezra one see how Judaism works when it actually does become a religion of individual self-righteousness. In IV Ezra, in short, we see an instance in which

¹⁹⁰ “We saw that the Rabbis were of the opinion...” (page 109) is one of many examples throughout Sanders’ book.

¹⁹¹ The large number of quotations from rabbinic literature throughout Sanders’ book are too numerous to list here. Sanders uses the following method on just about every page in the main portion of his book: “(name of Rabbi) said:”

¹⁹² See the article by A. Andrew Das titled “Beyond Covenantal Nomism: Paul, Judaism and Perfect Obedience.”

covenantal nomism has collapsed. All that is left is legalistic perfectionism ... One has here the closest approach to legalistic work-righteousness which can be found in the Jewish literature of the period...¹⁹³

(9) Sanders admits different places in his book that *some* Jewish diversity (including legalism) existed in the time of Jesus and Paul. He admits that there is evidence of Jewish legalism. The flaw is in Sanders' admission of Jewish legalism, but his refusal to accept it as a part of his "pattern of religion". Sanders writes:

The great usefulness of Weber's legalistic Judaism and the temptation to retroject more recent arguments into the New Testament period do not, however, completely account for the persistence of Weber's view. *It persists because it appears to rest on solid evidence.* The view that weighing fulfillment and transgression constitutes Rabbinic (or Pharisaic or Jewish) soteriology can apparently be supported by actual texts concerning weighing ... The view is there in Billerbeck (= Rabbinic literature); it was held by the Rabbis of some period or another; they did not make it up *de novo*; therefore it may be safely applied to some group or another of Jews around the time of Jesus, give or take a few decades.¹⁹⁴

But, Sanders is quick to move throughout his book from Jewish *diversity* to a *primary* focus in order to establish his thesis. The flaw here is one of emphasis. His methodology is skewed to fit what he wants to *primarily* see in the rabbinic literature. He does not believe the minority view (his opinion) of Judaism being legalism is of any account in producing a "pattern of religion". He concludes his discussion of "Judaism in the time of Jesus and Paul" this way:

Because of the consistency with which covenantal nomism is maintained from early in the second century b.c.e. to late in the second century c.e., it must be hypothesized that covenantal nomism was *pervasive* in Palestine before 70. It was thus the basic *type* of religion known by Jesus and presumably by Paul. (One knows very little about the distinctive characteristics of Judaism in Asia Minor.) The possibility cannot be completely excluded that there were Jews accurately hit by the polemic of Matt. 23, who attended only to trivia and neglected the weightier matters. Human nature being what it is, one supposes that there were some such. One must say, however, that the surviving Jewish literature does not reveal them ... On the assumption that a religion should be understood on the basis of its own self-preservation ... we must say that the Judaism of before 70 kept grace and works in the right perspective, did not trivialize the commandments of God and was not especially marked by hypocrisy. The frequent Christian charge against Judaism, it must be recalled, is not that some individual Jews misunderstood, misapplied and abused their religion, but that *Judaism*

¹⁹³ *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 409, 418. On page 427-428, Sanders gives his opinion as to why IV Ezra is not representative of Judaism or Pharisaism, but it is nothing more than an opinion.

¹⁹⁴ *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 58.

necessarily tends toward petty legalism, self-serving and self-deceiving casuistry, and a mixture of arrogance and lack of confidence in God. But the surviving literature is as free of these characteristics as any I have ever read.¹⁹⁵

(10) Sanders' overall flaw in examining ancient Judaism is his belief that Jews were loyal to God and because of this loyalty God would save them. Sanders believes that Jews were loyal to God, thus, his picture of "common Judaism" is always cast in a positive light. In his article that revisited the topic of "covenantal nomism", he presented three arguments in favor of "covenantal nomism."

Concerning his third argument, Sanders writes: "(3) The third argument is an appeal to history: Jews remained loyal to the God of Israel and loyal to one another."¹⁹⁶ However, when you examine the NT picture of Judaism as a whole, can you honestly say that "Jews remained loyal to God"? The NT picture of Jews as a whole does not portray a Judaism loyal to God.

The following quote from Sanders again shows his belief in the Jews loyalty to God:

One final word on legalism: there has never been a historical *community* of people who believed that they could save themselves entirely by their own efforts. That requires a conception of isolated individuals: not a national group, but individuals with no collective benefits, no solidarity with any form of saving history, standing entirely on their own face-to-face with a judgmental and unforgiving God. Such communities are a fiction created by polemic. If there ever were such a community, it would not have included first-century Jews. One of the main things that we know about them is that they were steadfastly loyal to their God and to their people. They identified themselves with one another and with the God who gave them distinctive laws and customs. They all knew that the people to whom they were loyal were members of a group chosen by God. They did not see themselves as isolated individuals.¹⁹⁷

Third, consider the reductionist approach to New Testament exegesis used by NPP advocates. For example, the relationship of God and the Jews is reduced to a covenant of grace. The law-keeping works of Jews is not admitted or taken seriously. NPP advocates also use a reductionist approach to biblical hermeneutics. "Works of the law" is reduced to things like Jewish circumcision, Sabbath-keeping, and dietary restrictions. According to them, no law-keeping at all is in Paul's picture, only the "social function" of the law. Clearly, ethnic and social issues between Jews and Gentiles abound in Paul's writings.¹⁹⁸ But, ethnic issues about Gentiles are not the only concerns Paul has toward his Jewish brethren.

¹⁹⁵ Paul and Palestinian Judaism, 426-427.

¹⁹⁶ Covenantal Nomism Revisited, 36.

¹⁹⁷ Covenantal Nomism Revisited, 55.

¹⁹⁸ See Romans 14:1 – 15:13; 1 Corinthians 8:1 – 10:33; Ephesians 2:11-22; and Colossians 2:8-23.

Reductionism is not a sound approach to biblical studies of any kind. We must always use a holistic approach in our biblical studies which seeks to take *all* that the Bible says on a particular subject. We must take *all* of what the Bible says about a matter before drawing a conclusion and let the Bible define itself and its own terms. The best commentary on the Bible is the Bible itself. We must never reduce biblical doctrine down to a narrow interpretation to fit a particular theological agenda. What if Bible students begin using the same NPP lingo? Will these people begin to describe “works of the law” (like Dunn) and “justification by faith” (like N.T. Wright) as merely ecclesiological (church) statements of who belongs to God’s people?

Fourth, consider what is being made of ecumenism by NPP advocates. The NPP allows for evangelicals today to broaden their base of fellowship to include all who exercise their faith (alone) in Jesus Christ. What if Bible students using similar NPP arguments begin to do the same? Will they begin to call for us to lay aside our peculiar “badges of identity” like a cappella singing, the necessity of baptism for the remission of sins, or the Lord’s Supper each first day of the week?

Fifth, consider that some of the scholarly evangelicals who espouse the NPP are still Calvinists. Dunn and Wright claim to be Evangelicals. N.T. Wright is a Bishop in the Anglican Church. Dunn is a Presbyterian, trained for ministry in the Church of Scotland. Dunn defends the writings of John Calvin, the Reformed tradition, and the classic Westminster Confession of Faith. He writes:

I affirm as a central point of Christian faith that God’s acceptance of any and every person is by his grace alone and through faith alone ... I am astonished by and repudiate entirely the charge that ‘the new perspective on Paul’ constitutes an attack on and denial of that Lutheran fundamental. Anyone who reads that from my writings is reading in what he wants to see, not reading out what is there. The point I am trying to make is simply that there is another dimension (or dimensions) of that biblical doctrine of God’s justice and of Paul’s teaching on justification which have been overlooked and neglected, and that it is important to recover these aspects and to think them through afresh in the changing circumstances of today’s world. In a word, I seek *not* to diminish let alone repudiate the doctrine of justification (*me genoito*), but to bring more fully to light its still greater riches ... Putting the point from Paul’s perspective, Paul was clear that justification is by faith alone: to regard any ‘works of the law’ as essential (in addition to faith) undermines ‘faith alone’. The gospel principle is clear: ‘no one is justified by works of the law, but only (*ean me*) through faith in Jesus Christ’ (Gal. 2.16).¹⁹⁹

Some among us are beginning to introduce the NPP to members of the church and I ask, “Why?” Is it because you have found a few modern evangelicals like N.T. Wright who are opposed to certain elements of Calvinism? Is it because you believe that the NPP is somehow the death knell to Calvinism because it keeps grace and works together and shifts the argument away from Calvinism in Paul’s letters? If that is the case, do you

¹⁹⁹ The New Perspective on Paul, 22-23, 25.

actually think that if we introduce a church member to N.T. Wright, that he will take only the anti-Calvinism part of Wright's theology and not the rest of it.

And, how can the NPP be the death knell to Calvinism when one of the original framers, James D.G. Dunn, is a thorough-going Presbyterian Calvinist? According to Dunn, when you shift the issue away from Jewish legalism (Luther's reading of Paul), to Jewish exclusivism (the NPP's reading of Paul) you still can maintain the Reformed doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone. So, I ask, what have you gained in your arsenal against Calvinism by adopting the NPP?

Sixth, consider the big picture of how the NPP was born. We cannot simply look myopically at some historical information about how Jews thought they were "in by grace and stayed in by obedience". We cannot take up with the NPP simply because we find that some Jews were not legalistic. What is the big picture? The big picture is that the NPP is based upon one man's (Sanders) historical-critical understanding of a large body of *extra-biblical, non-inspired* literature! And the use of this *extra-biblical, non-inspired* material is then imposed upon the NT text. This *non-inspired* material being interpreted by a *non-inspired* scholar (Sanders) is being used to (re)interpret Paul! This should shout a word of warning to us. Is it the case that we cannot see Sanders' "forest" for the NPP "trees"?

It must be remembered that Sanders did not appeal to the gospels, the book of Acts, or to Paul's epistles when trying to assess a "pattern of religion" for the Jews. He wrote 426 pages and examined the *extra-biblical* literature, but he did not examine the *biblical* literature! Douglas Moo reminds us of a simple, yet important point: "...the evidence of the gospels and Paul's epistles should also 'count' in any assessment of first century Judaism."²⁰⁰

I agree that the Bible text should be studied in light of its historical context as much as one can do that. But, when we are told by some that it is impossible to understand Romans, for example, without understanding the NPP, I ask: What historical documents will we appeal to (past, present, future) and which particular scholars will we appeal to (past, present, future) to find the correct historical context of a Bible text? Which NPP advocate will go with to properly interpret Paul? Will it be Sanders, Dunn, Wright, or someone else? Will we one day have to have a New Perspective on Jesus,²⁰¹ Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, James, Peter, or Jude, because scholars studying extra-biblical documents related to these men say that we need a new perspective.

Will our interpretation of the Bible text be constantly revised as non-inspired scholars have new interpretations of non-inspired historical documents? If interpretations of Paul are constantly changing, would it even be possible to know the absolute truth about what

²⁰⁰ "Paul and the Law in the Last Ten Years", 292

²⁰¹ Liberal scholars have already told us we need a New Perspective on Jesus because of what they have found in the Gnostic Gospels.

Paul taught?²⁰² Ultimately, God gives us his word that can be fully understood on its own without dependence upon outside historical documents or scholars.²⁰³

We are told by some that we cannot truly understand Paul unless we get the other side of the conversation about 1st century Judaism from the NPP. There are three problems with this approach to Paul:

(1) How many other matters about Paul can we not truly understand until we get the “other side of the conversation”? For example, using this reasoning, there would be matters in First Corinthians that we would never be able to understand because we do not have the Corinthian correspondence to give us the “other side of the conversation” (see 1 Cor. 5:1; 7:1; 8:1; etc.).

(2) The “other side of the conversation” given to us by NPP scholars brings us no closer to a better understanding Paul because these scholars simply do not agree among themselves as to how Paul is to be interpreted.²⁰⁴

(3) This approach undermines a basic premise that runs throughout scripture: scripture can be understood. Paul and other Bible writers spoke and wrote in such a way that we can get all the parts of the “conversation” necessary to understand God’s teaching for us today (Eph. 3:4; 5:17). God did not reveal his word in such a way that demands that one *also* read extra-biblical sources to get the “other side of the conversation”.

Finally, consider that we already have a New Perspective on Judaism and Paul – the *New Testament* – and this perspective does not match up with the modern NPP on many points. The *New Testament* gives us the following perspective on Judaism and Paul:

1) The picture of Judaism was not uniform but diverse (or complex) with some remnant Jews faithfully serving God within their covenant,²⁰⁵ willing to obey the

²⁰² Zetterholm answers this question in the negative. He concludes his work on the various approaches to Paul this way: “Once we have dismissed the quest for the absolute, historical truth in the biblical texts as a methodological impossibility, what remains are the numerous interpretations more or less plausible ... But who presents the real Paul? The question is probably wrongly posed: perhaps it is precisely in the multitude of these various interpretations that we may glimpse a blurry and elusive portrait of Paul. The general hermeneutical limitations when it comes to knowledge about the past make it crucial that we appreciate the multitude of interpretations ... Thus different interpretations deal with different aspects of Paul, which together make up a more complete image of the apostle ... This, I assume, is ultimately the way Pauline scholarship will develop. Through the interaction of various parallel and even contradictory interpretations, a new dominant paradigm will perhaps eventually emerge, built on other aspects than the dichotomy between Paul and the Judaism he was born into.” (*Approaches to Paul*, 238-240).

²⁰³ Who among us will argue that a particular secular document (or set of documents) *must be properly understood first* before we can properly understand the Bible, thus, making the document(s) like the 67th book of the Bible.

²⁰⁴ If Sanders’ “covenantal nomism” is so clear and obvious from Judaist literature and if a new reading of Paul is so clear and obvious from Romans and Galatians, then why so many “new perspectives” (plural)? Please tell me which one I am to pick.

²⁰⁵ Luke 1-3 (see especially Luke 1:17,67-79); Romans 9:27; 11:5

gospel when it came along²⁰⁶, and other Jews self-righteously trusting in themselves,²⁰⁷ being hardened²⁰⁸, refusing to enter the kingdom,²⁰⁹ and disobedient to the gospel;²¹⁰

2) Some Gentiles (including proselytes who had converted to Judaism²¹¹) were obedient to the gospel²¹² while others were disobedient;²¹³

3) Both Jews with the Law and Gentiles without the Law were sinners in need of saving through faith in Jesus Christ and obedience to the gospel;²¹⁴

4) Paul, before his conversion, was a devout Jew and Pharisee²¹⁵ who had confidence that he was righteous because of his own Jewish works,²¹⁶ but he gave that up to obey Jesus Christ;²¹⁷

5) Paul was a sinner²¹⁸ who was converted²¹⁹ and he became a member of “the Way which they call a sect”;²²⁰

6) Paul preached to Jews²²¹ even though he was given a special commission and call to preach to the Gentiles;²²²

7) The problem for the unconverted Jew at this time was that he was a sinner who could no longer be justified by the Law of Moses;²²³

8) Some Jews were attempting to live by a “law” system based upon self-righteous works²²⁴ or the works of the Law of Moses that do not justify²²⁵ and

²⁰⁶ Acts 13:43; 14:1; 17:1-4,10-12; 18:7-11,18-21,24-28; 19:1-7,8-20; 28:17-24

²⁰⁷ Luke 16:14-15; 18:9-12; Romans 2:17-29; 9:31-32; 10:3

²⁰⁸ John 12:40; Acts 19:9; Romans 2:5-8; 11:7; 2 Corinthians 3:14

²⁰⁹ Matthew 23: 13; Luke 11:52

²¹⁰ Acts 13:40-41,45-46,50-51; 14:2-7,19; 17:5-9,13; 18:4-6,12-17; 19:9; 20:1-3; 26:28-29; 28:17-28; Romans 10:21; 11:31; 15:31; Titus 3:3

²¹¹ Matthew 23:15; Acts 2:10; 6:5; 13:43

²¹² Acts 13:12,43,46-49; 14:1,20-27; 16:10-40; 17:12,34; 28:28-31

²¹³ Acts 14:5; 17:32-33; 19:23-41; 24:24-25; Romans 11:30; 1 Peter 2:7-8

²¹⁴ Acts 20:21; 24:24; Romans 1:16 - 3:23 (see especially Romans 2:12-16)

²¹⁵ Acts 8:1-3; 9:1-2; 22:3-5; 23:1-6; 26:2-5; Galatians 1:13-14

²¹⁶ Philippians 3:1-6,9

²¹⁷ Philippians 3:7-11

²¹⁸ Acts 22:16; 1 Timothy 1:13-16; 2 Timothy 1:9; Titus 3:3-7

²¹⁹ Acts 9:1-19; 22:6-16; 26:6-15

²²⁰ Acts 9:2; 24:14

²²¹ Acts 9:15,20-22,29; 13:5,14-52

²²² Acts 9:15; 20:24; 22:17-21; 26:16-23; Galatians 1:15 – 2:10

²²³ Acts 2:38-41; 3:19-26; 5:31; 13:38-39

²²⁴ Ephesians 2:9; Romans 4:5; 9:11; 11:6; 2 Timothy 1:9; Titus 3:5

²²⁵ Romans 3:19-21,27-28; 9:31-32 (see especially 9:31); Galatians 2:16,21; 3:2,5,10,11,21; 5:4; Philippians 3:6,9

others were willing to humbly submit to a “law” system based upon an obedient (works of) faith in Jesus Christ that does justify;²²⁶

9) Paul rebuked some Jews / Jewish Christians who were attempting to bind circumcision and other matters of the Law of Moses on Gentiles;²²⁷

10) Paul presented a positive picture of the Law that had passed away²²⁸ but could also be fulfilled in some respects both personally²²⁹ and in general;²³⁰

11) Paul pled with his unsaved Jewish brethren²³¹ and with Gentiles to put their faith in Jesus Christ and obey the “righteousness of God”²³² found in the gospel revealed to him by Jesus Christ;²³³

12) Paul preached that Jesus provides individuals with forgiveness of sins;²³⁴

13) Paul preached salvation by grace conditioned upon an obedient (working) faith in Jesus Christ;²³⁵

14) Paul preached that both Jews and Gentiles would be God’s people in the new “Israel of God” – the church;²³⁶ and

15) Paul preached the necessity of obedient works for Christians that God will take into account in the judgment day.²³⁷

In closing, let me offer some reminders and cautions. I remind us that what often is read and discussed in the seminaries and among the evangelicals is not what we should be reading and discussing; and for good reason. The “new” things that are read and discussed in these places do not accord with Bible truth. The NPP is popular with scholars and seminary students but not with the average churchgoer or minister. One of the chief reasons for this is the popularity of N.T. Wright. He is considered a brilliant scholar without being boring or pedantic. He is witty, entertaining, and he has the ability to popularize his views.

²²⁶ Acts 10:34-35; Romans 1:17; 3:21-28 (see especially 3:27); 4:5,9,11,13; 9:30; 10:4-6; Galatians 2:16; 3:24; 5:5; Philippians 3:9; Hebrews 11:7

²²⁷ Acts 15:1-5; 18:13; 21:28; Galatians 1:6-9; 2:3-5,11-21; 3:1-29; 4:1-31; 5:1-12; 6:12-16; Philippians 3:1-3; 1 Timothy 1:7

²²⁸ Romans 7:1-6; 2 Corinthians 3:4-18; Galatians 3:15-25; Ephesians 2:14-15; Colossians 2:14

²²⁹ Acts 16:3; 21:17-26; 24:14; 25:8; 1 Corinthians 9:20

²³⁰ Romans 13:8-10; 1 Corinthians 9:8-9; Galatians 5:14

²³¹ Romans 9:1-5; 10:1-4

²³² Romans 1:17; 3:21-22; 10:3 Philippians 3:9

²³³ Galatians 1:11-12

²³⁴ Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:14

²³⁵ Romans 1:5; 2:10; 4:16; 5:2; 16:25-26; Galatians 5:6; 6:10; Ephesians 2:4-9; 1 Thessalonians 1:3; 2 Thessalonians 1:11; Titus 3:3-7

²³⁶ Galatians 3:7; 5:16; Philippians 3:3

²³⁷ Romans 2:6; 1 Corinthians 3:8; 2 Corinthians 5:10; 11:15; 2 Timothy 4:14

I caution Bible students about taking only part of the NPP. Some may want to focus on Sanders' caricature of Judaism, but not on his perspective of Paul. Some may want to take the NPP on Judaism, but not the NPP on Paul. How can you disagree with Dunn or N.T. Wright on Paul but agree with Sanders on Judaism? Dunn's agreement with Sanders on Judaism *is what led him* to have his understanding of Paul. The NPP understanding of Paul is *directly related* to Sanders' particular understanding of Judaism and vice-versa. You cannot have one (the NPP Judaism) without the other (the NPP Paul).

Others want to take the parts of the NPP that they already agree with and leave the rest. Through the years errors have been propagated because of imbalance like this. A Bible student wants to focus primarily on a particular aspect of Paul's teaching (e.g. faith, not works; the group, not the individual) and ignore or downplay some other aspect of his teaching. Like the Pharisees of old, we need to be careful not to focus on what we want to emphasize and leave other matters undone (Mt. 23:23). I fear that some today, in an attempt to strain out the Protestant gnat, have swallowed the NPP camel (Mt. 23:24).

I caution Bible students about looking at Calvinist evangelical attacks against the NPP as evidence that the NPP is true. How can the Calvinists' opposition to the NPP show us that we need the NPP? Yes, Calvinists (like our Baptist friends) have rightly recognized that the NPP, if correct, means that Paul *was not* teaching what they have always taught. Paul was not teaching Calvinism. However, that does not mean that the NPP, if correct, means that Paul *was* teaching what we have always taught. We have *not* always taught some of the basic tenants of the NPP. So, we are going to have to change our teaching to match what the Calvinists have not taught. What kind of convoluted approach to Bible study is that?

Collin Hansen offers the following insight that is helpful to us all:

Seminary is not reality. That much became obvious to me the moment I met my classmates and began looking over syllabi for classes on Greek, Hebrew, missions, and biblical theology. No congregational ministry can replicate the time seminary affords for intense focus on technical but important matters of theology. Professors toss around fascinating innovations and insights. Students, though often downtrodden by the gravity and complexity of their tasks, suddenly shine as they behold great truths about God.

The average churchgoer will never have the time or inclination to focus on theology. Even in our most rigorous churches, the cares of this world interfere. Perhaps an encounter with a seminary graduate has convinced them that theology belongs to arrogant eggheads. As a result, what seems so important in seminary produces blank stares in the pews.

For evangelicals—Christians committed to a high view of Scripture—this is a discouraging scenario. More than that, it's dangerous. Christian colleges and seminaries can grow detached from the churches they serve. Hazardous ideas can percolate for decades without so much as a nod from most churchgoers. And parents

wonder why their undergraduate daughter or seminary son graduates with odd ideas about everything. So they blame the theologians and the cycle continues.²³⁸

While some Bible students might find the NPP new and exciting (the final blow to Calvinism?), it is important to remember that the NPP for evangelicals has been around since the late 1970's. The NPP is no longer new to some scholars. The NPP has grown old for some of them and is on its way out. They are already looking for something "newer" than the new perspective.²³⁹

Like Israel's call for "a king like the nations" (1 Samuel 8), we all need to be careful not to pick up worldly ideas that have already been around for years. I would caution anyone who desires to board this passing NPP bandwagon to keep in mind that as you hop on in the front, many evangelicals are hopping off in the back, and we would do well to ask why.

Bible students today will most likely not know much about the NPP until someone among us believes it necessary to introduce it to them.²⁴⁰ Our aim should be to go to the scriptures first and then understand all of the NPP (not just Sanders' Judaism) as best we can in light of what the scriptures teach. The NPP based upon a new understanding of Judaism does not accurately represent the inspired picture of Judaism found in the New Testament nor does it accurately represent Paul's inspired message to the Jews found in his epistles. So, I leave you with this closing admonition: *ad fontes*.

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²³⁸ "From the Seminaries to the Pews." Christianity Today. 8/31/2007

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/augustweb-only/135-52.0.html>

²³⁹ Current Pauline studies are now focusing on understanding the Roman Empire as the interpretive backdrop to Paul's epistles. It is no longer about Paul and Judaism. It is about Paul and the Empire, or, Caesar verses Christ; see *Jesus Is Lord, Caesar is Not: Evaluating Empire in New Testament Studies* edited by Scot McKnight and Joseph B. Modika (IVP Academic, 2013).

²⁴⁰ I polled several gospel preachers in preparation for this lecture. Some of these men have post-graduate degrees in religion and are well-read outside the Bible and they had not heard about the NPP. The NPP has been around some 30 years and these men had not heard of it! Could that say something about worth of the NPP for us, or lack thereof?

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