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The New Perspective on Paul: A Brief Essay

Toward the end of the twentieth century, a revolution in Pauline studies brought to the fore an understanding of Paul's theology called the "new perspective."¹ This terminology assumes that there was an "old perspective" on Paul (though, of course, no one ever called it that at the time).

The discussion concerns an assessment of Paul's belief in "justification by grace" and of the importance that this had for his understanding of his own life and theology. The theme of justification by grace is prominent in two of Paul's letters (Romans, Galatians): Paul insists that people are put in a right relationship with God at God's initiative, as a result of God's mercy and love rather than because of anything that they have done to earn God's favor. The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century produced an understanding of Paul that focused on this motif in two ways.

First, the Reformers saw justification by grace as the center of Paul's thought; all the other things that he said could be regarded as implications of this one fundamental concept. Second, the Reformers understood justification by grace to be the doctrine that separated Paul from the Judaism of his day, which taught some form of "works righteousness" (i.e., the notion that people gain a right standing with God by doing good works and being obedient to God's

commandments). Thus the “old perspective” on Paul was that he was converted from a legalistic Pharisaism that told him that he had to earn favor with God to a grace-oriented Christianity that told him that God accepted him just as he was. He was converted from a religion of guilt to a religion of love.

This understanding of Paul went virtually unchallenged for four hundred years, and then scholars began to question some of its key presuppositions. First, scholars asked whether it is proper to make justification by grace so central to Pauline thought. He does not mention it at all in several of his letters, and in the critical sections where it is discussed, his primary purpose seems to be defending the rights of gentiles as full heirs of God’s promises to Israel.² The specific question for Paul was whether gentile converts must accept the Jewish law in order to become part of God’s chosen people, and what he says about justification by grace must be understood in that context.³

Second, a number of scholars have insisted that the Pharisaism of Paul’s day was not in fact a legalistic religion of works righteousness. The Pharisees believed that they stood in a right relationship with God through grace, on account of God’s covenant with Israel. They did not believe that they had to keep the law in order to earn God’s favor; rather, they delighted in keeping the law as a way to observe the covenant that God had made with them. Furthermore, Paul never indicates that he found his pre-Christian life burdensome, nor does

he refer to his life prior to his encounter with Christ as a time when he felt the need to attain salvation through his own efforts or merit (cf. Phil. 3:6).⁴

Separate and Exclusive

The new perspective suggests that Paul's ongoing conflict with his Jewish contemporaries concerned tendencies not toward legalism but rather toward separatism and exclusivism. God had revealed to Paul that, through Christ, salvation was available to all humanity. Thus Paul objected to "works of the law" not because they were construed as good works that could earn God's favor but, rather, because they were regarded as marks of ethnic privilege. Circumcision, dietary regulations, Sabbath laws, and the like were intended to set Israel apart from other nations so that Israel might remain God's elite chosen people.

According to the new perspective on Paul, justification by grace in itself was not a new concept; the Jews had always believed that they were justified by grace through God's covenant with Israel. What was new in Paul's gospel was that justification by grace now came through faith in Jesus Christ, and this claim had radical implications for all humanity: it was no longer exclusive to Israel. The controversial point in Paul's teaching was not the basic idea of people being put right with God through grace rather than through works; the controversial point was that gentiles could now become equal partners with Jews as part of the people of God.

New Perspective on Paul: An Example

What does this verse mean?

For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law. (Rom. 3:28)

Traditional Interpretation

People are put right with God by trusting in what God has graciously done through Jesus Christ rather than by doing things that would earn God's favor. In this view, "works of the law" = meritorious acts of human achievement (keeping commandments, performing good works, etc.).

New Perspective

People are put right with God by trusting in what God has graciously done through Jesus Christ rather than by being faithful to the covenant that God made with Israel. In this view, "works of the law" = covenant markers that identify Jews as belonging to God's chosen nation (circumcision, Sabbath observance, dietary restrictions, etc.).

This new perspective on Paul has met with widespread acceptance and has altered the way many scholars understand various matters that come up in Paul's letters.⁵ Many interpreters think the new perspective offers a more authentic way of understanding Paul's writings, reading them in light of first-century conflicts between Jews and gentiles rather than in light of sixteenth-century conflicts between Protestants and Roman Catholics.

Some critics, however, caution that the “new perspective” has gone too far.⁶ They maintain that some Jews in the first century did indeed view obedience to the law as a means to earn God’s favor (just as some Christians in every age have thought this) and that part of Paul’s emphasis on grace is directed against such notions (Rom. 4:4–5; 10:3).⁷ More to the point, some scholars claim that the new perspective on Paul shifts the primary focus of Paul’s concern from a vertical emphasis on how people relate to God to a horizontal emphasis on how God’s people relate to one another. Critics of the new perspective grant that Paul addresses manifold questions of how Jews and gentiles should relate to one another, but they claim that these are only the implications of a fundamental concern for how all human beings (Jew or gentile) are brought into a right relationship with God. Thus justification by grace is not important to Paul just as a means to an end, the end being reconciliation of humanity; it is, in itself, of primary importance, and the reconciliation of humanity follows as an inevitable consequence.

Discussion of these matters will continue. The debates (What is primary? What is secondary?) may seem somewhat pedantic to beginning students, but decisions on such matters do end up affecting interpretation of individual Bible passages, which in turn affect the preaching and teaching of Scripture in various Christian communities.

1. James D. G. Dunn is credited with coining the phrase “new perspective on Paul” during a 1982 lecture now published as “The New Perspective on Paul,” in *Jesus*,

Paul, and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990), 123–33. See also James D. G. Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007).

2. See Krister Stendahl, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976).

3. E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (London: SCM, 1983), 20.

4. See E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977).

5. Well-known advocates include James D. G. Dunn, E. P. Sanders, and N. T. Wright. See also Terence L. Donaldson, *Paul and the Gentiles: Remapping the Apostle's Convictional World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997); Francis Watson, *Paul, Judaism, and the Gentiles: Beyond the New Perspective*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007).

6. For a good summary of the criticisms, see D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 375–85. See also Seyoon Kim, *Paul and the New Perspective: Second Thoughts on the Origin of Paul's Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); Timo Laato, *Paul and Judaism: An Anthropological Approach*, trans. T. McElwain, SFSHJ 115 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995); Thomas R. Schreiner, *The Law and Its Fulfillment: A Pauline Theology of Law* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1993); Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The "Lutheran" Paul and His Critics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); and the essays collected in D. A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien, and Mark O. Seifrid, eds., *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001–4).

7. See Mark Seifrid, *Christ, Our Righteousness: Paul's Theology of Justification*, NSBT (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000); Mark Seifrid, *Justification by Faith: The Origin and Development of a Central Pauline Theme*, NovTSup 68 (Leiden: Brill, 1992); Peter Stuhlmacher, *Revisiting Paul's Doctrine of Justification: A Challenge to the New Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001).