



## The New Perspective

### *A recent development in evangelical theology?*

You may be wondering why I am writing on what has come to be known as the “new perspective” on the writings of Paul. There are a number of reasons. First, this is not so much a specific doctrine. It is more like a movement that has effected many churches around the world, including evangelical and conservative churches. If you have not encountered it yet, it is likely that you soon will and it would be helpful for you to know something of it. Second, what is at stake in this new teaching is nothing short of the gospel message itself. How a person is saved and on what basis he or she is saved is of crucial significance for all believers and for the world at large. As we shall see, if the “new perspective” is correct, as evangelicals we shall have to rethink the gospel message. In fact, the Church, especially since the Reformation, has been “getting it wrong” for hundreds of years. These are bold claims and before we embrace them, we need to put them to the test of Scripture. Third, and following on from this, if the “the new perspective” is fundamentally incorrect, it presents a serious threat to the gospel once for all delivered to the saints. Given Paul’s own very strong warnings against distortion of the gospel in Galatians 1:6-9, this is something that we have to take very seriously.

One other introductory point: In this article, I will be presenting the argument of the NP writers as faithfully as I can. Let me point out in advance that I do not necessarily agree with all that is said here.

### **Background: The view of the Reformers on “Justification”**

N.T. Wright, one of the writers of the New Perspective school, once said, I think somewhat tongue-in-cheek, that Luther was opposed to the law, Calvin was in favour of it and everyone else has been writing footnotes since.

As I say, I think that remark was somewhat tongue-in-cheek but certainly Martin Luther and John Calvin, as figures in the 16th century Reformation in Europe, have exercised giant influence right down to the present day, especially upon the Protestant world. Both of them held very strongly that the only way sinful people can obtain righteous standing before a holy God was through faith in Christ. And they contrasted faith in Christ with works of righteousness. In other words, when it came to the issue of salvation – the question of how we can be saved – both Luther and Calvin stressed very strongly that we are not saved by means of righteous deeds that we perform. In fact, it is impossible for us to earn salvation by our lives. They said that salvation was a gift of God and righteousness was also a gift of God received by means of faith.

The process that Martin Luther went through in coming to this position is well known. Luther entered a monastery of the Augustinian order in 1505. This was his first opportunity of possessing a Bible and he began to study it very diligently. He gave special attention to the books of Galatians and Romans and to the writings of Augustine, one of the early church fathers. During the period of his studies, he became more and more aware of his personal sinfulness and he tried to deal with this by going through the accepted procedures of confession and penance and prayer and self-denial. But the more he worked at this, the more effort he put in, the more troubled he became in his heart and he would not accept the assurances of his confessors that his deep-rooted sense of guilt was purely emotional or the product of a warped sensitivity.

To get an idea of why Luther was so troubled in his conscience, less than a century before, the Netherlands painter Roger Van Der Weyden had produced a great work called The Last Judgment. A detail of this shows Michael the Archangel weighing souls and it is a vivid illustration of the mediaeval view of justice under which Luther was labouring. Michael is remote from the scales that he holds. He is disinterested, like modern figures of a blindfolded "justice". In the pans of the scales, one soul is weighed down, his sins too heavy. Another is elevated, his credits sufficient. In this aspect of medieval theology, justice had become a question of the scale of merits outweighing the scale of demerits. And Luther was not prepared to accept that he had a pure heart or that the accepted theory of righteousness was correct.

Meanwhile, during the period from 1512-1517, Luther's fame grew as he lectured on the Psalms, Hebrews, Romans and Galatians as a professor of theology at the University of Wittenberg. It was during this period that his studies of these books, especially the latter two, led him to reject the idea of a person meriting salvation by means of his works. In fact, Luther understood that the Judaism of Paul's day was similar in many respects to the medieval theology of salvation just described. Luther saw parallels between them – especially the teaching of the Pharisees – and the prevailing view of the church of his day. He understood that he was following in the footsteps of the apostle Paul in rejecting the teaching of righteousness based on works. Luther was actually staggered that Paul should have spoken of God's righteousness as good news (read Romans 1:17). He had always understood that divine righteousness should be identified as a severe judge. And how could a standard of infinite perfection be anything other than a nightmare for guilty sinners? But as the book of Romans unfolds, Paul speaks of Abraham's faith being credited to him as righteousness so that as we believe in God and trust in the person and work of Jesus Christ, we are pronounced righteous by God. For Luther, this was a profound revelation. It was like the throwing off of a yoke of slavery and when he nailed his theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg in 1517, the bell reverberated right throughout Europe and it is still sounding in many churches around the world today.

### **The "New Perspective" – early signals**

All this has been called into question in recent times by what has come to be known as the New Perspective. This movement was signaled by a Lutheran biblical scholar by the name of Krister Stendahl, who wrote a significant essay dealing with the subject of justification in 1961. According to Stendahl, it is extremely problematic to seek for a common universal human experience which can transcend the ages. We cannot take the "introspective conscience" of the modern Western world into a kind of interpretive common denominator between the modern west and the ancient east, and then read ancient texts, such as Paul's writings, in that light.

What is needed by way of corrective, according to Stendahl, is

*"a fresh look at the Pauline writings themselves. Paul "never urges Jews to find in Christ the answer to the anguish of a plagued conscience." In fact, when he speaks of the universal reality of sin, in passages like Romans 3, (read), he is not speaking in individual and psychological categories. He is speaking corporately. His concern is to show how it is that Jew and Gentile, as distinct ethnic groups, fit into salvation-history respectively. The actual transgressions in Israel – as a people, not in each and every individual – show that the Jews are not better than the Gentiles." Thus salvation is now found in Christ, not law, "an avenue which is equally open to Jews and Gentiles, since it is not based on the Law, in which the very distinction between the two rests."*

In Stendahl's opinion, for centuries the West has wrongly surmised that the biblical writers were grappling with problems which no doubt are ours, but which never entered their consciences. And it is high time that all those churches in the Reformation tradition that have understood Paul in this way should continue reforming and take a fresh look at the biblical writings, but not through the glasses of Luther's troubled conscience or our own, for that matter.

## **E. P. Sanders: “Paul & Palestinian Judaism” – 1977**

As one writer has put it, if Krister Stendahl's essay in 1961 was the small cloud on the horizon the size of a man's hand, the storm broke in 1977 with the publication of a book by E. P. Sanders called *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. Sanders was a colleague of N.T. Wright at Oxford University, but is now a professor at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. It was the work of Sanders in particular that led to the expression “the New Perspective” on Paul. Writers both inside and outside the New Perspective school openly speak of “the Sanders revolution,” so that should give you some insight into how significant his work has been.

What Sanders did was to go back and try to sketch a broad canvas of what Palestinian Judaism was like in the days of the New Testament writers. To do this he consulted the Dead Sea Scrolls, the apocrypha and pseudepigrapha, together with the writings of the rabbis. And his conclusion was that the Judaism of Paul's day was not, as had been regularly supposed, a religion of legalistic works-righteousness at all. And to view it as such, particularly since the Reformation through the eyes of Martin Luther, was to do great violence to Judaism and consequently to the New Testament writings themselves. Speaking of the significance of Sanders' work, James D. G. Dunn, another of the NP writers, says:

*“If Stendahl cracked the mold of twentieth-century reconstructions of Paul's theological context, by showing how much it had been determined by Luther's quest for a gracious God, Sanders had broken it altogether by showing how different these reconstructions are from what we know of first-century Judaism from other sources.”*

Sanders argued that keeping the law within Judaism always functioned within a covenantal scheme. In the covenant with Israel, God had taken the initiative and so always grace preceded the law. The covenant was God's gracious gift to his people. And the Jews kept the law out of gratitude rather than out of the intention or desire to earn salvation. Sanders coined the expression covenantal nomism – from the Greek *nomos*, meaning law – to express this. The Jews did not keep the law in order to get into the covenant people but to stay in. Being “in” the covenant was first and foremost God's gracious gift and law-keeping (righteousness) was simply the appropriate response to God's grace and the means by which God's people remained in covenant with him.

According to Sanders, Judaism was and is a valid form of religion. Paul's argument was not with Judaism as such. It was merely that Paul, having found salvation in Christianity, was forced to conclude that Judaism was not enough. In this respect, Sanders spoke of Paul's thought running not from plight to solution but from solution to plight. In other words, Paul did not have a major problem or crisis with Judaism and then find in Christianity the solution (as did Luther with the medieval theology of justification), but he found salvation (the solution) in Christianity, and therefore was forced to re-evaluate his commitment to Judaism.

The net effect of all this was that the Protestant view of justification, which had been expressed so powerfully during the Reformation by people like Luther and Calvin, was fundamentally flawed. It was, to put it bluntly, wrong-headed. Luther got it wrong. And all Protestant evangelicals who have been trying to convince people of the plight of their own personal sin and guilt before a holy God and of their need to express faith in Christ as the solution to their plight, have got it wrong as well. That is simply not what Paul was talking about when he said that we are not saved by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ.

## **N.T. Wright – “What St. Paul Really Said” – 1997**

At this point I want to introduce you to the view of N.T. Wright, one of the most prolific modern authors within the NP school. It won't be possible to interact here with all that he says, and I couldn't do that even if I wanted to because there are just too many books and articles in print. But we'll confine ourselves to the basic argument expressed in a book entitled *“What St. Paul Really Said”*, published in 1997. Wright himself disagrees with Sanders on some points, and, by his own admission, wants to go much further than him on others, but on the whole, Wright is appreciative of

Sanders' work. In his own words, *"there is no doubt that (Sanders) has towered over the last quarter of the century, much as Schweitzer and Bultmann did over the first half."* So as far as he is concerned, Sanders has had a powerful and lasting effect upon the scholarly world.

Wright begins by sketching a picture of what Saul of Tarsus was like before he was converted and came to be known to the world as Paul the apostle of Jesus Christ. In Philippians 3:6, Paul describes himself as *"in terms of zeal, a persecutor of the church"* and in Galatians 1:13, 14 he says that he *"ravaged the church of God and tried to destroy it; and I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my kinsmen, being exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers."*

This is the autobiographical material that we have from Paul himself and Wright correctly says that we must give Paul's own words due weight. He then goes on to describe the two major schools of Pharisaic thought in the first century. It is well known that there was a more moderate school, known as the school of Hillel and a more extreme school, known as the school of Shammai. In terms of political aspirations, the more moderate school had a live-and-let-live policy with regard to Herod the Great, his successors and also to the Romans. They did not like foreign interference, they would much rather that it was not there, but they were prepared to put their heads down and get on with life, so to speak. The more extreme school, the school of Shammai, had a very different perspective. They were revolutionary in their thinking and were quite prepared to take up arms for Israel's cause. Now Wright deduces from Paul's own statements that he was a member of the second, much more radical school. Here is what he says:

*"A word of contemporary relevance at this point, with due caution about the danger of anachronism. If you want to see roughly what Shammaite Pharisaism was all about, look at the philosophy which inspired Yigal Amir to shoot Yitzhak Rabin in Tel Aviv on 4 November 1995. Amir was described as a 'law student'. This didn't mean he was training to be a solicitor or barrister in the Western sense, but that he was a student of Torah. And, as came through very clearly in all the news reports, he believed, with the backing of some senior rabbis in Israel and in America, that Rabin was a traitor, that he had sold out to the pagans, because he was prepared for the sake of peace to trade one of the greatest ancestral symbols, namely land.*

*When I saw Amir's face on the front page of the London Times, and read the report, I realized with a shock that I was looking at a twentieth-century version of Saul of Tarsus..."*

Wright goes on to explain, drawing on information in the Dead Sea Scrolls, that Saul of Tarsus believed passionately the promises of Daniel 2, 7, 9, involving the establishment of the messianic kingdom, had not yet been fulfilled but soon would be. Isaiah's vision of comfort, peace, and prosperity in Isaiah 40-55 had not yet been realised. Israel was still in exile and the real return for God's people was about to happen.

Saul, like a great many Jews of his day, read the Jewish Bible not least as a story in search of an ending; and he conceived of his own task as being to bring that ending about. The story ran like this. Israel had been called to be the covenant people of the creator God, to be the light that would lighten the dark world, the people through whom God would undo the sin of Adam and its effects. But Israel had become sinful, and as a result had gone into exile, away from her own land. Although she had returned geographically from her exile, the real exilic condition was not yet finished. The promises had not been fulfilled. The Temple had not been rebuilt. The Messiah had not yet come. The pagans had not yet been reduced to submission, nor had they begun to make pilgrimages to Zion to learn Torah.

Saul, as a Shammaite, and the revolutionaries in general, were eager to bring these prophecies to fulfilment by their zeal for Torah. They would not sit around and take matters into their own hands. They were looking forward to the time when God would judge the nations and vindicate his people. This was what "justification" meant in this context. It would be a great international law court scene with Israel winning.

## A comment

I cannot resist making some comment at this point. Paul himself speaks of having studied under Gamaliel in Acts 22:3 and that it is known that Gamaliel was a member of the school of Hillel, the more moderate school. But according to Wright, it simply cannot be the case that Saul was a Hillelite before his conversion – unless all the evidence of his persecuting activity was later fabrication. I should also point out that this view of Paul before his conversion that is presented by N.T. Wright is highly speculative. Given that first century Judaism was NOT a seamless garment, that there were differences of opinion even among the Pharisees as a body, not to mention the extreme political aspirations of the Qumran sect, one should be wary of asserting with such boldness what Saul of Tarsus thought about the nature of the Messiah's work and the future of his own people. Especially when this picture is not drawn from, or even substantiated by, the apostle's own writings. Surely the question whether Saul was more mainstream in his thinking (whatever that might mean) or more closely aligned with the apocalyptic expectations of those who gathered and stored the Dead Sea Scrolls can only be established conclusively from his own writings, and not from secondary sources.

However, moving on, Wright observes that this picture of Saul was very different from the one he was taught when he grew up. He had assumed that for Saul, the point of life was to go to heaven when you die, and that the way to go to heaven was by strictly adhering to the moral code of God's law – that Paul was interested in pulling himself up by his own moral boot-straps, so to speak. He says:

*"I now believe that this is both radically anachronistic (this view was not invented in Saul's day) and culturally out of line (it is not the Jewish way of thinking). To this extent, I am convinced, Ed Sanders is right: we have misjudged early Judaism, especially Pharisaism, if we have thought of it as an early version of Pelagianism."*

But for Saul, all this changed when he was confronted by the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. Saul was forced to see that God had done for Jesus of Nazareth, in the middle of time, what he said he would do for Israel at the end of time. The death and resurrection of Jesus meant that the time of fulfilment had come, and if this was so, then the time for the incorporation of the Gentiles in the covenant had also come. And this is what Paul means by the term "gospel". He does NOT mean by this how individuals get saved from their sin. He means the fulfilment of the promises in the Old Testament and the incorporation of the Gentile nations into the church. The gospel message becomes the authoritative proclamation that Jesus has come and it is through this message that the Holy Spirit changes people's hearts and the church grows.

Likewise the concept of the "righteousness of God" must also be reconsidered. Ever since Luther, people have thought of the "righteousness" of God in ethical terms. It was the status people had upon expressing faith in Christ after hearing the gospel. But for Wright, God's righteousness is His covenant faithfulness which involves the vindication of his people and his plan of salvation for the world. The Lord's righteousness always remains His own, and is never conferred upon the believer.

Still further, the idea of "justification" must also be rethought. According to Wright, discussions of what justification meant got off the wrong foot at the time of Augustine and stayed there ever since. The Church has seen this term as relating to the question of how sinful men and women can be reconciled to a holy God. Throughout, constant appeals are made to the writings and statements of the apostle Paul. But, says Wright:

*"If it is true that Paul meant by 'justification' something which is significantly different from what subsequent debate has meant, then this appeal to him is consistently flawed, maybe even invalidated altogether. If we are to understand Paul himself, and perhaps to provide a Pauline critique of current would-be biblical theology and agendas, it is therefore vital and, I believe, urgent, that we ask whether such texts have in fact been misused. The answer to that question, I suggest, is an emphatic Yes."*

## **The 'new' definition of justification**

So what then should we understand by the term "justification"? It is:

*"The covenant declaration, which will be issued on the last day, in which the true people of God will be vindicated and those who insist on worshipping false gods will be shown to be in the wrong..."*

This declaration, this verdict, is ultimately to be made at the end of history. Through Jesus, however, God has done in the middle of history what he had been expected to do – and, indeed, will still do – at the end; so that the declaration, the verdict, can be issued already in the present, in anticipation.

Therefore ... all who believe the gospel of Jesus Christ are already demarcated as members of the true family of Abraham, with their sins being forgiven. They are demarcated by their faith – specifically, by their believing of the 'gospel' message of the sovereignty of Jesus Christ.

Wright explains that this is the meaning of the crucial term 'justification apart from works of the law'. The badges of membership by which some Jews had sought to demarcate themselves in the present time, ahead of the eschatological verdict, were focused upon the works of the law – Sabbath, food laws, circumcision, etc. Paul rejects this and substitutes a new badge of membership in the covenant – faith in Jesus. Wright stresses that the doctrine of justification by faith is not what Paul means by "the gospel". Again, the gospel is not an account of how people get saved. It is the proclamation of the lordship of Christ and it is as this message is proclaimed that people come to faith and so are regarded as members of God's covenant people. The conclusion:

Let us be quite clear. "The gospel" is the announcement of Jesus' lordship, which works with power to bring people into the family of Abraham, now redefined around Jesus Christ and characterised solely by faith in him. "Justification" is the doctrine which insists that all those who have this faith belong as full members of his family on this basis and no other.

## **Conclusion**

Their conclusion is that we have come a long way since Martin Luther sat wrestling in his study with the problem of his sin and guilt and how he could be free from the burden of it. Martin Luther and the other 16th century Reformers, quite simply, got it entirely wrong. They did not understand the apostle Paul and it is very much a case of out with the old and in with the new. If the New Perspective is correct, we are faced with nothing short of a revolution in our thinking about the way of salvation. We must rethink biblical terms like righteousness and justification. We must rethink the nature of the gospel message and we must rethink the mission of the church. So what is at stake here is nothing short of a completely new approach to the nature of salvation, one that wipes out with a wave of the hand a good deal of church history and certainly much of the older perspective that we always believed to be the biblical truth.

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