

The Attractions of the New Perspective on Paul

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25 Page Transcript of a paper given in Jackson, Mississippi and Glasgow, Scotland

Began Reading: December 22, 2008 | Finished Reading: December, 2008

Introduction

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I. What Is The "New Perspective" On Paul? (3)

A. In reality there is no such thing as THE New Perspective on Paul in that there is not unified consensus of agreement on all the particulars

B. Historical background on the New Perspective (NP)

1. Three Key Figures:

a. E.P. Sanders (formerly Dean Ireland's Professor of Exegesis, Oxford; now Arts and Sciences Professor of Religion in the Dept. of Religion at Duke University)

(1) Sander's ground-breaking work in the area of Palestinian Judaism during the time of Jesus and Paul brought some debate on a new way to understand Paul's thought in light of new questions regarding first century Judaism

b. James D.G. Dunn (Durham University)

(1) He coined the term "the new perspective on Paul" in his Manson Memorial Lecture in 1982

c. N.T. Wright (formerly Dean of Lichfield Cathedral, England, lately Canon Theologian of Westminster Abbey in London, and now Bishop of Durham)

(1) Wright has been the most prolific propagator of the NP among Evangelicals through his extensive writing and speaking

C. The heart of the NP is an accusation that both Protestant and Roman Catholic (RC) interpretations of Paul were and are wrong

"Reformation-era theologians read Paul via a medieval framework that obscured the categories of first-century Judaism resulting in a complete misunderstanding of his teaching on justification." [3]

1. As a result the ideas of justification, imputation, and the righteousness of God have been invented or misunderstood by the Lutheran and Catholic traditions of interpretation

D. In a nutshell the NP suggests that:

1. The Judaism of Paul's day was not a religion of self-righteousness that taught salvation by merit

2. Paul's argument with the Judaizers was not about a "works-righteousness" view of salvation over against the Christian view of salvation by grace

3. Rather, Paul's concern was for the status of Gentiles in the church
4. Therefore justification is more about ecclesiology than soteriology, more about who is part of the covenant community and what are its boundary markers than about how a person stands before God

E. The NP purports to help us:

1. Better understand Paul and the early church in their original context
2. Vindicate Paul and early Christianity from the charge of anti-Semitism
3. Clip the Gordian knot of theological impasse between Catholic and Protestant interpreters of Paul
4. Articulate an understanding of justification that has inherent social dimensions and thus secure a better theological foundation for social justice and ecumenicism among evangelical interpreters of the Scriptures; among other things

TAB: Note the ecumenicism that this attempts to bring between Rome and Protestants.

F. When I (JLD) First Started Reading Wright

1. Here Duncan establishes his qualifications and background study of the NP
 - a. He started reading Sanders and then Wright in preparation for his doctoral dissertation
 - b. He has since read everything that he could that Wright has published

G. Back to the New Perspective

1. A hypothetical question to N.T. Wright:

"So, if you were to quote approvingly the answer to the *Westminster Shorter Catechism's* Question 33 as your view of Paul's teaching on justification, 'Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein he pardons all our sins and accepts us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone,' and then ask N.T. Wright to comment, he might say something like this: 'Well, there are at least three problems with that particular answer. First of all, it doesn't understand what justification is. Justification has a forensic aspect, true, but it primarily has to do with how you know you are a member of God's people. Second, this definition imports an idea alien into the biblical text, the idea of imputation. Imputation is nowhere to be found, in either the teaching of Paul, anywhere else in the New Testament, or indeed anywhere in the first century context of the New Testament. Third, it misplaces the subject of

justification by putting it in the category of soteriology, the doctrine of salvation, whereas justification really ought to be back in the ethical section of the Shorter Catechism under the rubric of ecclesiology." [5]

2. To sum up:

- a. The NP suggests that the Judaism of Paul's day was not a religion of self-righteousness that taught works salvation
- b. Paul's argument with the Judaizers was not about works-righteousness salvation over against salvation solely by grace, but his real concern was about the status of the Gentiles in the church
- c. So justification is not so much about our relationship with God as it is our relationship with each other in the church, particularly that of the Jews and Gentiles
- d. So justification is more about ecclesiology than soteriology, who is part of the covenant community of the church (the boundary markers of membership in the body) rather than soteriology, one's status before God

TAB: The NP, in my opinion, ends up denying the perspicuity of Scripture in favor of an "exegetical gnosticism."

3. Once again, the The NP purports to help us:

- a. Better understand Paul and the early church in their original context (appealing to young evangelicals who, however, have not studied the issue thoroughly from both sides) - Here JLD commends D.A. Carson's book, *Justification and Veriegated Nomism*
- b. Vindicate Paul and early Christianity from the charge of anti-Semitism - this has been one of James Dunn's interests in the NP
- c. Clip the Gordian knot of theological impasse between Catholic and Protestant interpreters of Paul

This is effectively to say that if we really understood the biblical teaching on justification there would no longer have to be a division between Protestant and Roman Catholic on the issue.

Wright argues that it is literally a sin that a doctrine that was meant to unite the church (justification, in connection with Jews and Gentiles) has been allowed to divide the church (justification, in connection with Protestant and Catholic).

- d. Articulate an understanding of justification that has inherent social dimensions and thus secure a better theological foundation for social justice and ecumenicism

For Wright, justification is horizontal, not vertical. It's about the collective, the community, not about the individual. Therefore, it is about unity and should draw us together rather than divide us.

H. The NPP in Their Own Words

1. N.T. Wright's response to Australian Bishop Paul Barnett who wrote an article "Why Wright is Wrong" -

"By 'the gospel' Paul does not mean 'justification by faith.' He means the announcement that the crucified and risen Jesus is Lord. To believe this message-to give believing allegiance to Jesus as Messiah and Lord--is to be justified in the present by faith (whether or not one has ever heard of justification by faith). Justification by faith is a second-order doctrine. To believe it is both to have assurance (believing that one will be vindicated on the last day [Romans 5:1-5]) and to know that one belongs in the single family of God, called to share table fellowship with all other believers without distinction (Galatians 2:11-21). But one is not justified by faith by believing in justification by faith, but by believing in Jesus."

TAB: This is ludicrous. No one believes that the gospel = justification by faith. And NTW's reference that the gospel = an announcement is in error also. I don't see the direct connection to assurance, either. Assurance is found in a correct understanding of all that is our salvation.

"Justification is thus the declaration of God, the just Judge, that someone has had their sins forgiven and that they are a members of the covenant family, the family of Abraham. That is what the word means in Paul's writings. It doesn't describe how people get into God's forgiven family; it declares that they are in. That may seem a small distinction, but it is vital."

TAB: Yes, it is the declaration of God, but it is more than that. How does it declare that they are in? It must be grounded in the imputation of Christ's righteousness. Wright's definition here causes no rift with RC soteriology. God can declare our sins forgiven by our own merit, for example. But this is a perversion of the gospel.

"The three tenses of justification have often been confused, causing some of the great problems of understanding Paul. If we keep them both plainly distinguished and appropriately interrelated, clarity, and perhaps even agreement might follow. If justification is about belonging to a single family, it would be good if that family--and its friends--could try to agree about what it means." [JLD gives as the reference for this quote, N.T. Wright "The Shape of Justification" in the April 2001 Bible Review of the Biblical Archeological Review website. See also chapter 7 of *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997)]

2. N.T. Wright in his book, "What Saint Paul Really Said"

"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 Sander's 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 soteriology as about ecclesiology; not so much about salvation as about the church." [*What Saint Paul Really Said*, 119]

TAB: Is not Wright guilty of neglecting the semantic range for the word δικαιωσις, taking James' use of justification as vindication and imported that idea into Pauline soteriology?

"Despite a long tradition to the contrary, the problem Paul addresses in Galatians is not the question of how precisely someone becomes a Christian or attains to a relationship with God. (I'm not even sure how Paul would express, in Greek, the notion of 'relationship with God,' but we'll leave that aside.) The problem he addresses is: should ex-pagan converts be circumcised or not? Now this question is by no means obviously to do with the questions faced by Augustine and Pelagius, or by Luther and Erasmus. On anyone's reading, but especially within its first century context, it has to do, quite obviously, with the question of how you define the people of God. Are they to be defined by the badges of the Jewish race, or in some other way?" [*What Saint Paul Really Said*, 120]

"What Paul means by justification in this context should therefore be clear. It is not how you become a Christian, so much as how you can tell who is a member of the covenant family." [*What Saint Paul Really Said*, 122]

"Justification, in Galatians, is the doctrine which insists that all who share faith in Christ belong at the same table, no matter what their racial differences, as they together wait for the final new creation." [*What Saint Paul Really Said*, 122]

TAB: I am dumbfounded that anyone could come up with this exegesis through a plain reading of the text, much less through a thorough exegesis, apart from some novel pre-conceived notions (which Wright obviously has). And to say that he is not sure how Paul could express the notion of 'relationship with God' in Greek is quite an admission.

I. Two Funny Reactions

1. N.T. Wright's fickle attitude

On the one hand he acts like, "What's the fuss all about? I'm not saying anything that novel and you can still keep your traditional understanding of justification and have more understanding in the process." On the other hand, he speaks of justification as a "second order doctrine" and calls imputation pious fiction.

"Indeed, he comes close to claiming to be the only person who has ever understood Paul." [7]

In either case, he gets defensive and oblivious to the fact that orthodox believers see his view as an attack on the gospel.

J. Another Taste of the NPP On Justification

1. Philippians 3:8-9

8 More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ, 9 and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, (NASB)

a. Here is Wright's paraphrase of this text:

"Paul is saying, in effect, 'I, though possessing covenant membership according to the flesh, did not regard that covenant membership as something to exploit. I emptied myself, sharing the death of the Messiah, wherefore God has given me the membership that really counts in which I too will share the glory of Christ.'" [*What Saint Paul Really Said*, 124]

(1) "Righteousness" is translated as "covenant membership" - "righteousness," according to Wright, is being declared part of God's covenant community

(a) Wright argues that Christ's righteousness is non-transferrable - the righteousness of God is His alone and cannot be transferred to another

Wright says that it would be ridiculous to talk about a judge transferring his righteousness to the defendant in a courtroom. He says that never happens in a courtroom, and that's not what the N.T. means, either. No one can receive Christ's righteousness, it is His own and cannot be shared.

TAB: Poor analogy. I suppose that begs the question as to how Christ could bear our sin? Is not our sin our own, not to be shared with Holy God? How does Wright exegete texts like 2 Cor. 5:21? How then is one holy or righteous before God? Good deeds plus belief? That is insufficient and perhaps Wright will one day adopt Purgatory as a way to finalize the deal.

II. What is the Historical Background of the New Perspective? (9)

A. A simplification would be to say that Rabbinic Judaism has traditionally been viewed as a religion of merit

1. N.T. and Intertestament scholar Weber wrote works in this vein in the 1880s

a. His works influenced others such as Sanday and Headlam in the ICC Series (and similar assessments were made by Emil Schürer in his work on Judaism)

(1) This in turn influenced Bultmann and other early 20th c. scholars

2. A challenge came to this sort of interpretation in the 1920s by Jewish scholar Claude Montefiore and George Foote Moore

B. The Sanders Revolution

1. E.P. Sanders in 1977 in his work, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, went several steps further claiming that it was wrong to view Rabbinic Judaism as a religion of merit or as an early example of Pelagianism

a. Sanders was also critical of Paul finding him "incoherent" and at some points not well informed as to Palestinian Judaism

TAB: This is a tremendous accusation and seems quite foolish unless one totally discounts the Paul of history.

b. Sanders went on to influence and change the basic assumptions of N.T. scholars about the theological context of early Christianity

(1) N.T. scholars after Sanders tended to argue for a greater continuity between early Christianity and contemporary Judaism

(a) In Sander's own terms: the old school of thought considered the relationship between the two as "*peripheral agreement and basic disagreement*" and the new school of thought changed that to "*substantial agreements and a basic difference*"

C. Krister Stendahl - the NPP Before it was Called the NPP

1. Stendahl taught at Harvard and argued for a similar new approach to Paul

a. He gave three defining lectures (1961, 1963, 1964) - including one at Rochester's Colgate Divinity School

- b. Stendahl was thus articulating Sanders Dunn and Wright before they did and his lectures were collected into one work entitled *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* in 1976 - one year before Sanders book was published

2. Some of what Stendahl argued for:

- a. We have misunderstood Paul by reading him through an Augustinian and Lutheran lens

- (1) In his famous lecture *The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West* he attempted to prove that Paul was not someone who viewed himself as alienated from God by sin and thus in need of an alien righteousness in Christ in order to be reconciled to God

- (a) He argues by way of a series of texts (from Acts, 1 and 2 Cor., Phil., and elsewhere) and argues that Paul really sees himself as a person who was in good standing with God (before his "conversion" in Acts 9)

- i. Stendahl asks:

"Does [Paul] ever intimate that he is aware of any sins of his own which would trouble his conscience? It is actually easier to find statements to the contrary. The tone in Acts 23:1, 'Brethren, I have lived before God in all good conscience up to this day' (cf. 24:16), prevails also throughout his letters. Far from being 'simultaneously a sinner and a saint' (*simul iustus et peccator*), Paul testifies of his clear conscience: 'Indeed, this is our boast, the testimony of our conscience: we have behaved in the world with frankness and godly sincerity' (2 Cor 1:12a). He was aware that he had not yet 'arrived' (Phil. 3:12-14), that he still struggled with the flesh, yet he was confident of the value of his performance (1 Cor. 9:27). He looked forward to a day when 'all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil' (2 Cor. 5:10), and he anticipated a favorable verdict (v. 11). He acknowledged that his clear conscience did not necessarily ensure this verdict (1 Cor. 4:4), but he was confident nevertheless. These are hardly the convictions of a man who intends to rest entirely on the merits of an alien righteousness imputed to his account." [JLD cites Mark Mattison's "A Summary of the New Perspective on Paul" available at <http://www.angelifire.com/mi2/paulpage/summary.html> as his source. Mattison is apparently pro-NPP]

D. The Dunn and Wright Modifications

1. Dunn extrapolated the findings of Stendahl and addressed them with more of an exegetical approach (cf. his commentary on Romans)
2. N.T. Wright then takes the work of Sanders in a new direction by jettisoning the more objectionable aspects (objectionable to evangelicals) - Wright is less objectionable than

Sanders or Dunn and JLD sees this as a reason why N.T. Wright is more dangerous as he is more greatly accepted into the evangelical community

F. Five general areas of agreement among the NP crowd (quoted from a former advocate of the NPP, Francis Watson):

(1) The dominant, post-Reformation tradition of Pauline interpretation is seriously at fault. Taking his starting-point in the Pauline antitheses of faith and works, grace and law, this view claims that Paul's intention is to contrast the Christian understanding of salvation with the Jewish one. On the Christian view, salvation or justification is by grace alone, wholly an act of God, to be acknowledged as such in faith. In contrast to this, the Jewish view holds that it is human obedience to the law that can secure salvation. This opposition between salvation by God's action or by human action is, however, not at all what Paul intended.

(2) So far as they are known to us, the diverse forms of Judaism practiced in the period before 70 CE do not teach that obedience to the law is the way to salvation. Foundational to what they teach is God's gracious election of Israel. The Jew who observes the law is already within the covenant, the sphere of God's mercy and grace. Law-observance is therefore a means not of getting in but of staying in, in the sense that God's electing action always precedes and grounds the human response required by the law. In addition, it is only very serious breaches of the law that could lead to exclusion from the covenant. Otherwise, it is assumed that God is merciful and forgiving, that repentance is always a possibility, and indeed that provision is made for this in the law itself, in the form of sacrifices for sin. For Judaism, then, salvation is by God's grace alone, although a degree of law-observance is also required. The divine election is absolute and unconditional.

TAB: This sounds much like the error going through Presbyterianism (is it Auburn Ave. Theology?) that claims children of the covenant are regenerate unless they should give some clear evidence otherwise. It also sounds Romish in that regard (not a matter of a moment of regeneration/repentance that leads to life, but a matter of "staying in"). One also wonders how this can be based on unconditional election and grace when someone can get out and when a degree of law-keeping is necessary? How much sin gets one out? How much law-keeping keeps one in?

(3) As a minority group within the dominant Hellenistic culture, the Jewish community was concerned above all to preserve its distinctive cultural identity as the elect people of God. Certain characteristic Jewish practices were identified as such by hostile Gentile critics, and came to symbolize and to embody the community's self-differentiation from the wider Gentile world. Among these practices were male circumcision on the eighth day after birth, abstention from pork, observance of the Sabbath, and rejection of the gods and images of all other peoples. The symbolic significance of these distinctive practices was confirmed and heightened by Gentile hostility of them, expressed for example in the actions of King Antiochus Epiphanes and the Emperor Caligula. To be a Jew was above all to remain loyal to the distinctive identity signified by such practices. Once again, it is a matter of preserving the identity conferred by the divine election of Israel, and not of observing the law in order to earn salvation by one's own efforts.

(4) It was just such a Judaism of divine election and mercy that Paul both affirmed and opposed. He affirmed it in the sense that he leaves God's covenant with Israel intact, denounces incipient Gentile Christian anti-Semitism, and even believes that there will come a day when 'all Israel will be saved'. If, in the heat of controversy, he occasionally said things that imply a negative view of Israel or the law, these do not represent the main trend of his thought. Yet he did oppose his fellow Jews on one crucial point: the fact that their understanding of the covenant confined the possibility of salvation to the Jewish people. When Paul criticizes the view that righteousness comes 'by works of the law,' he is criticizing the claim that only members of the Jewish community are truly righteous. When he asserts that righteousness is by faith in Christ, he is asserting that in Christ salvation is open to all people alike, irrespective of their Jewish or Gentile origins. Over against a narrow and exclusive understanding of salvation, Paul asserts a broad and inclusive one. There is perhaps an question about whether he is justified to claim this. Be that as it may, for Paul the antithesis of faith and works has to do with the scope of God's saving action. It has little or nothing to do with the old Protestant contrast of divine grace and human effort; it asserts that God's saving action must be understood inclusively.

(5) This recent rethinking of Paul's relationship with Judaism is a classic example of an interpretive problem that constantly recurs in ever-new forms. Despite two centuries and more of historical-critical scholarship, biblical interpreters continue to misread the biblical texts by anachronistically imposing on them their own theological presuppositions. It is of course pleasant to imagine that one's own beliefs are mirrored by the biblical texts. Yet, through rigorous application of the historical-critical method, it becomes clear again and again that theologically-oriented biblical interpretation results in serious misreadings of the text. The clash between the 'Lutheran' and the 'new' perspectives on Paul is a case in point. It demonstrates the need for a presuppositionless exegesis--the 'presuppositions' in question being, of course, theological ones."

[Duncan cites Francis Watson, who wrote a pro-NPP book in 1986 entitled *Paul, Judaism and the Gentiles* (Cambridge University Press). Watson delivered a paper called "Not the New Perspective" at the British New Testament Conference, Manchester, in September 2001 (from which these five points are excerpted). The paper can be read at the following URL: <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/divinity/articles/watsonart.htm>]

III. What are the Concerns and Agendas of the New Perspective? (12)

A. Duncan outlines four basic concerns and agendas

1. A Contextual Concern

NP advocates claim that we have been reading Paul in light of a misunderstanding of what he was responding to, thinking all along that Rabbinic Judaism was legalistic when it was not. So we have misunderstood Paul's concern and his solution and have therefore misunderstood what justification is really all about.

2. An Exegetical Concern

NP advocates want to see a better, more accurate exegesis of Paul (*TAB: of course they do!*). Paul's teaching on justification is not about right standing with God but about how we are included in the community. The church has misunderstood Paul's use of the words "righteous" and "justified."

- a. Duncan adds that young evangelicals are impressed with the sheer volume of pro-NPP literature that's available in contrast to that which refutes it

3. An Historical-Theological Revision and Reassessment Concern

NP advocates want to see a revision and/or reassessment of the Protestant Reformers' understanding of Paul. They argue that the reformers read Augustine and Luther's conversion experience back into Paul. The reformers, they argue, wrongly viewed Judaism as legalistic and as a prototype of their own dilemma with legalistic Rome and so have misinterpreted Paul and justification.

4. A Practical Horizontal or Social Concern

NP advocates think that there is an imbalanced emphasis on individual piety and an overemphasis on sin and forgiveness. They argue that because evangelicals view Judaism as legalistic, they have fallen prey to anti-Semitism! And because they have failed to grasp that Paul deployed justification to promote church unity, they have failed to be adequately ecumenical. And because evangelicals have failed to see the horizontal-social dimension of justification, they have failed to promote the social gospel in the way that Paul would have.

TAB: The NP has little or no room for a doctrine of regeneration. Apart from an orthodox understanding of regeneration there is no Gospel

Some of their arguments are ludicrous, such as connecting a legalistic view of ancient Judaism to anti-Semitism. These arguments are of the "you've got to be kidding" variety.

IV. Why is the New Perspective so Attractive to Young Evangelicals? (13)

A. J. Ligon Duncan lists 11

1. N.T. Wright's role in responding to the "Jesus Seminar" has given him standing in the evangelical community as a defender of Jesus and Scripture and opened the door for his theological influence elsewhere (thus he is seen by some as a defender of traditional Christianity)

a. However, John Stott has raised some serious questions about Wright's methodology and conclusions in regard to the historical Jesus

(1) Example: Wright is uncertain about Jesus' Messianic self-consciousness

2. N.T. Wright has considerable wit, popularizing ability and writing skills

a. He has a charismatic and likeable personality and he is a superb communicator of his ideas

3. The New Perspective's emphasis on the social dimension of New Testament Christianity is very attractive to young evangelicals

a. Especially American evangelicals who have tended to be more individualistic - they appreciate the social emphasis and the no-guilt approach to being evangelical and socially active

(1) The solution of the NPP is not healthy or biblical, however

b. Two camps within evangelicalism tend to fall prey to this aspect:

(1) Those whose consciences have fallen prey to social concerns like racism, poverty, universal health care, etc.

(2) Those who are social conservatives and intent on Christianity expressing itself socially

(a) These include theonomists, reconstructionists, "ex-theonomists and reconstructionists" and "other miscreants"

"It is amazing how quick they are to discard reformational soteriological teaching in order to advance their neo-sacerdotalism, kingdom ecclesiology/eschatology, and dreams of Christendom. . . . (basically they have a 'flat view' of Old Covenant and New in the progress of redemption) . . ." [14]

4. The New Perspective has a seeming exegetical superiority and historical-contextual superiority to traditional exegesis

- a. Compare some of our best commentaries on Romans, for example, to those of Wright and Dunn and you will find the latter are asking more detailed questions and engaging in historical-contextual issues at a level that 'our' commentaries are not
 - (1) One example given by Derek Thomas of Reformed Seminary is the appeal of a realized eschatological approach to Romans 9-11 (in contrast to our traditional parenthetical approach relating to justification): The NP gives a hermeneutic to this text that naturally explains these chapters as the capstone of Paul's fundamental concern, Jewish-Gentile relations in the community
 - (a) JLD argues, however, that traditional reformed theology and exegesis are able to give a solid argument and men like Moo and Schreiner are equipped to rejoin the NPP at the highest level
 - i. He also cites the work by Carson, O'Brien, and Seifrid: *Justification and Variegated Nomism* as being an essential read and if one cannot read the entire 2 book series to at least read Carson's summary article at the end
 - (i) This series doesn't address Dunn and Wright directly but rather to engage the front-line scholars who are doing the groundbreaking work in Rabbinic Judaism

None of Wright's ideas about Rabbinic Judaism are unique to him. They have been gleaned from other sources and are no means the accepted consensus in Rabbinic studies today. In Duncan's opinion, the traditional view is better argued by examining the primary source material of 2nd Temple Judaism and the major academic assessments of it today.

- 5. The New Perspective on Paul is attractive to young evangelicals because of their general historical-theological ignorance, as well as that of so many pro-NPP New Testament specialists
 - a. NPP students are going by what they read from NPP writers who are often ignorant in their assessment of the reformers
 - (1) Example, Dunn critiques Luther but shows no first-hand knowledge of Luther's writings or having engaged in Luther's exegesis

"Carl Trueman, who used to be at Aberdeen and who is now at Westminster Seminary, has done a good job of demonstrating the want and inaccuracy of pro-NPP historical assessments of Luther and the Reformers. In an essay originally delivered in 2000 to the Tyndale Fellowship at Cambridge, called "A Man More Sinned Against than Sinning? The portrait of Martin Luther in Contemporary New Testament Scholarship: Some Casual Observations of a Mere Historian," Trueman shows the deficiency of the NPPs account of the Reformer's teaching on Paul, the law, and justification. Yet many students take Dunn's assessment of the Reformers as dogma." [15]

Trueman also states that the scholarship of Wright and Dunn in treating Luther and Calvin is so weak that he can't help but wonder if their reading of Paul isn't any better.

6. The New Perspective Offers a diminished view of sin and the issue of sin the New Testament
 - a. It exchanges justification as needed for the guilty sinner to be reconciled to God to the restoration of relationships in the covenant community

"I think that is one thing that makes the NPP attractive. It provides instant relief from introspection in an entirely intellectual manner. Call it a rationalists's once-for-all-time auricular confession, with accompanying perpetual plenary indulgence!" [15]

7. The New Perspective seems to offer a solution to the Protestant-Catholic conflict
 - a. There would have been members of the Council of Trent who would have been delighted to accept the NPP definition of justification
 - (1) The NP definition of the Gospel makes it about the person of Christ rather than about the work of Christ (it's about "Jesus is Lord and Messiah")
 - (a) As such the NP cannot do justice to passages such as 1 Cor. 15:1-4 or Rom. 1:16-18 (or the whole context of Romans 1-3)
8. The New Perspective is attractive to some young evangelicals because it saves Paul (and them) from E.P. Sanders

It is easy to read Sanders and be dismayed and intimidated by the implications of his N.T. theology. So anyone who appears to take on Sanders' thesis (such as Wright) is readily embraced. This is true even though Wright accepts much of Sanders' conclusions, but he appears to do so within an evangelical framework.

9. Wright's overly realized eschatology is attractive to students today

"Preterism is all the rage in some conservative Reformed circles these days. The 'already and not yet' is out, and the 'been there, done that' is in. N.T. eschatology, for the preterist, is retrospective and realized. Well, along comes Wright, with his very this worldly eschatology, and provides a high-powered academic justification for the low-rent forms of preterism circulating in some places today." [16]

10. The New Perspective is attractive because all many students know about Second Temple Judaism is what they have learned from E.P. Sanders or N.T. Wright

- a. Few students have read the primary source material in order to compare it with the assertions of Sanders and Wright
11. Wright has provided a coherent (if reductionistic) New Testament theology for evangelicals trying to work in a mainstream academic setting
- a. Many mainstream N.T. scholars reject the idea of a coherent or traditional N.T. theology and now Wright has articulated one that resonates at points with evangelical tradition yet leaves one unstained by the charge of being "a fundamentalist"

TAB: In other words, it's a matter of being accepted in liberal religious environments as a "real scholar" and not some fundamentalist Christian in a scholar's disguise. This "need to be in with the world" mentality is deadly.

V. What are the Problems with the New Perspective? (17)

A. The Problems with the New Perspective are in the same four areas of concerns and agendas of the New Perspective

1. The Historical-Contextual Errors of the NPP

a. They are in error when it comes to their assessment of Second Temple Judaism

Paul Zahl (Dean of the Cathedral of the Advent in Birmingham, Alabama), who studied under Peter Stuhlmacher on the continent . . . has written, in a fairly recent *Themelios*, an article on "The Mistakes of the New Perspective on Paul." He writes:

"E.P. Sanders mistakes the 'semi-Pelagianism' of Second Temple Judaism for 'Pelagianism' and thus misunderstands Luther's critique of the Roman Catholic Church as well as Luther's grasp of Paul. Sanders is in reaction to something that doesn't exist. He has therefore founded a movement with an illusory *raison d'etre!*

In other words: Sanders thinks that Luther's struggle with Roman Catholicism was a struggle against Pelagianism, therefore Luther projected the 'straw man' of Pelagianism onto Judaism. This is untrue. Luther's objection to the scholastic theology of the Roman Catholic Church was never to its Pelagianism. The Church was never Pelagian. It neither believed that salvation was according to works of the Law nor that the human being had to 'work' in order to gain the gracious favor of God. Medieval Catholicism was *semi-Pelagian*. . . . the Church taught that man and God were co-operators in salvation . . . Luther and the Church of Rome agreed that salvation was by faith. The difference was that Luther said it was by faith alone. We are not participants with God, we are not co-creators with him, we are not in any kind of relationship that involves mutuality or co-dependence. Salvation is a one-way street! The *sola in sola fide* is the thing.

But when you read most accounts of Judaism, both 'then' (i.e. in Jesus' and Paul's time) and now, you see very quickly that Judaism operates in what Christian theologians recognize as semi-Pelagian categories. Judaism, then and now, understands the will human beings to be free, more or less. With support of the community, considerable leeway from the standpoint of the gracious God, and the extensive possibilities for repentance, forgiveness, and restoration, the human being can *fly right*. . . . Judaism shares with Christianity the hope of God's grace to sinners, as Sanders rightly pointed out. However, the New Testament understands the human condition as less tractable, less subject to effort and amelioration than Judaism generally does. Luther understood from Paul that Judaism did not go far enough in its analysis of the human problem. Luther's inherited religion had been semi-Pelagian, as Judaism was and still is.

Sanders and his partners in the New Perspective have missed completely the distinction between Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism. Therefore they understand neither Luther nor Paul, nor are

they aware of the vital difference in anthropology that distinguishes rabbinic Judaism from Pauline Christianity." [JLD cites the source as "Mistakes of the New Perspective on Paul" *Themelios* 27:1 (Autumn 2001), 5-11.]

J. Ligon Duncan adds that,

"Human-merit theology is just as much a problem in the theology of semi-Pelagianism as it is in Pelagianism, but it is far more subtle. . . . The person who is trying to combine grace and works in salvation is the hardest to get to and the one most easily self-deceived." [18]

2. The Exegetical Errors of the NPP

- a. They constantly invoke the discredited "eastern thought" vs. "western thought" - "forensic" vs. "rational" and "Greek" vs. "Hebrew" dichotomies

*TAB: Duncan adds that they need to "go back and read James Barr's **Semantics of Biblical Language** one more time." This might be a good book to obtain.*

- b. They are myopic in their focus on Pauline soteriology and ecclesiology and thus skew the results of their exegesis by failing to coordinate Pauline anthropology and hamartiology with it
- c. They've erred in the key area of justification by faith

(1) Chuck Hill (N.T. instructor at Reformed Theological Seminary) writes:

"Wright is right about justification being an eschatological definition, but wrong about the content of that definition.

How does one go about determining the meaning of a word when it is called into question? This happens with other controversies as well. When faced with definitional problems, how should we attempt to resolve them?

One sort of mechanical but still indispensable way is to look at lexicons. Lexicons are compiled by people who have tried to encompass all the uses, or categories of uses, of words from the sources. Lexicographers are human and fallible; they sometimes have biases and blind spots. And lexicons don't give you the particular contexts. But they are invaluable nonetheless as integrated attempts at exhaustive evaluations of the meanings of words. Challenge: find a lexicon which defines the Greek word *dikaiosune* ('righteousness') as 'membership within a group' or *dikaioo* ('justify') as 'to make or declare the member of a group.'

Another way is to look at previous and contemporary works, etc., to try to establish current usage. The claim to have discovered and restored this broad Jewish context is central to Wright's attempt

to redefine justification. He essentially argues that in the Judaism which nurtured Paul and which Paul addressed throughout his ministry, justification is all about covenant membership in God's Israel. Here I think he is radically wrong. He has certainly not established this in his book. The covenant relationship may be the context in which Jews discussed justification, but it was the context for their discussion of everything!

When first-century Jews talked about justification by God, as far as I can see (so far!), it had to do with the last judgement, or with something in the present which would anticipate or approximate the last judgment, and it was about one's standing before God in terms of sin. Judgment, even by Jews, was viewed as a universal thing and thus as a universal human concern. Jews would have all sorts of advantages on that day because they were Jews and members of the covenant. But the real issue was: How are you doing to escape the wrath of God?

But the clearest road to the meaning of a word in a given author is the context which that author gives you, assuming that he gives you a context. In determining how the context points to a word's meaning, we need to ask some important questions: What is the author's train of thought and how does this concept fit within it? What words, phrases, or concepts does he equate with the word? With what does he contrast it? What kinds of other words does he use when he uses this word? This kind of information gives us the necessary boundaries for defining the word. When we do this for Paul's uses of justification, I do not see how we can follow Wright." [JLD cites as his source, Charles E. Hill, *IIM Magazine Online* 3:22 (May 28 to June 2, 2001), page 2-3 in print-out form. Available at <http://www.thirdmill.org/files/english/html/nt/nt.h.hill.wright.html>]

- d. The NPP allows a provisional theory regarding the interpretation of the Judaism prior to and contemporary with early Christianity to utterly dominate its exegesis

- (1) The text takes a backseat to historical context

Historical context is certainly helpful and often needful, but,

". . . new resources for the study of and formulations of the theology of the Judaism that was contemporary to New Testament Christianity will never produce 'corrective material' that completely reverse the Church's apprehension of a clear teaching of the New Testament pertaining to salvation - at least not if one has a Protestant view of special revelation." [19]

- (a) This pertains to the perspicuity of Scripture

3. The Historical-Theological Deficiencies of the NPP

- a. The NP advocates have done a disservice to Luther and Calvin's exegesis

The NPP in general has a condescending attitude toward reformational exegesis. That's not to say that the reformers were perfect in their exegesis. Calvin was more careful and nuanced than Luther. But they were faithful to the Scripture and faithful to the doctrine of justification.

(1) Quote from Stephen Westerholm (whom JLD describes as "no flaming evangelical"):

"Students who want to know how a Rabbinic Jew perceived humanity's place in God's world will read Paul with caution and Luther not at all. On the other hand, students who want to understand Paul, but feel that they have nothing to learn from Martin Luther, should consider a career in metallurgy. Exegesis is learned from the masters." [20]

4. The Practical Pastoral and Theological Errors of the NPP

- a. The NP tends to be reductionistic / minimalist in nature and undercuts the certainty of believers regarding the substance of the Gospel

(1) Duncan gives two examples:

(a) The content and nature of the Gospel

The NPP reduces the Gospel to the person of Christ while neglecting His work. This is an incarnational approach to redemption that has been seen recently in figures such as Barth, and Duncan suggests that Wright has been influenced by these quarters.

"Though Wright doesn't deny the importance of the work of Christ, he rarely, if ever, attempts to articulate clearly just what that work is how it functions. . . . the doctrine of the atonement is underdeveloped and under-emphasized in Wright's version of Pauline and New Testament theology." [20]

(b) The NPP diminishes the New Testament emphasis on the importance of the problem of sin and its forgiveness in relation to the Gospel

In the NPP 'righteousness' is primarily about God's faithfulness (on the divine side) and our membership status in the covenant community (on the human side). NOT - God dealing with us in strict justice through the atoning work of Christ (on the divine side, as in Romans 1-3) and our being acquitted of our sin by God and justified by God through the alien righteousness of Christ (on the human side).

(2) Three ramifications of accepting that the Gospel is not about justification and is about 'covenant membership' that leave a void in the historic Protestant consensus regarding justification:

(a) The nature of the human predicament

(b) The nature of Paul's pastoral context and counsel

(c) The nature of the Christian message of salvation

Therefore, those like N.T. Wright have a huge "rebuilding program" in their need to deal with these issues adequately.

VI. What Good Has or Can Come Out of the Debate on the New Perspective? (20)

- A. The NP has put the issue of the context of Second Temple Judaism to the fore - A need has arisen that has impelled scholars to study the issue afresh
- B. Negatively, the NP has demonstrated how little evangelicals know about the historic-theological doctrine of justification *sola fide*
 - 1. Duncan suggests that, pastorally, we need to do three things to address this:
 - a. We need to be precise when we address soteriological legalism especially as it relates to the distinction between Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism
 - b. We need to be aware of the overly psychologized /subjectivized view of justification that has influenced evangelical circles (views of justification that focus too much on the subjective to the neglect of the objective)
 - c. We need to think rigorously about the meaning of the Gospel - too many are ignorant as to the essential nature of it (especially true regarding proponents of the NP)

VII. What Are Some Good Resources for Studying the New Perspective? (21)

TAB: I'm only going to list some of the books Duncan suggests, not the articles and websites which are plentiful in his list.

A. Pro-NPP books:

1. *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (N.T. Wright)
2. *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (N.T. Wright)

B. Con-NPP books:

1. *Revisiting Paul's Doctrine of Justification: A Challenge to the New Perspective* Peter (Stuhlmacher and Donald Hagner)
2. *The Law and its Fulfillment: A Pauline Theology of Law* (Tom Schreiner)

C. Mixed Reviews (critical yet sympathetic to the NPP):

1. *Paul and the Law: A Contextual Approach* (Frank Thielman). This was an initial assessment of Sanders' position, Thielman both critiques and appreciates Sanders' insights into Paul and the Law.
2. *Israel's Law and the Church's Faith: Paul and His Recent Interpreters* (Stephen Westerholm)

D. Foundational books to the growth of the New Perspective / Reassessment of Second Temple Judaism

1. *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays* (Krister Stendahl)
2. *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (E.P. Sanders)
3. *Jesus, Paul, and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (James Dunn)
4. *The Justice of God: A Fresh Look at the Old Doctrine of Justification by Faith* (James Dunn and Alan Suggate)