

The New Perspective On Paul In Galatians

by Allen Dvorak

Introduction:

- I. Martin Luther (1483-1546) is generally credited with setting the Protestant Reformation into motion. It is certainly true that Luther's actions changed the face of church history.
 - A. The substance of Luther's 95 theses had to do with his disagreement with the practice of indulgences, but he also opposed the "works theology" of the Roman Catholic Church.
 - B. Proponents of the New Perspective on Paul (hereafter NPP) affirm that the influence of Martin Luther upon subsequent Bible students has been much more extensive than many have recognized and not beneficial in every way.
 1. Luther argued that no amount of "works" could save a person; men are saved by faith alone. He understood Paul to be confronting the idea of salvation by meritorious works, a concept that he believed characterized first century Judaism. Luther saw the same problem with the Roman Catholic Church.
 2. It is the contention of NPP advocates that Protestant scholars since Luther have followed his lead and, in so doing, incorrectly characterized Judaism as a religion of legalism. As a result, they have misunderstood the writing of Paul.
 3. In summary, they argue that modern commentators have interpreted Paul's writings through "reformation lenses."
- II. The NPP is essentially a "reformation of the Reformation." It's time for a change of glasses!
 - A. The NPP is a new paradigm for understanding Second Temple Judaism (as manifested by Paul's opponents), Paul's view of the Law and the main thrust of Paul's theology.
 - B. "The New Perspective on Paul is an intricate, confusing amalgamation of positions tied together by a revised view of Second Temple Judaism leading to a reinterpretation of Paul and his teachings." (Gibson, "Hermeneutics [Part II]," 157)
- III. Although this lecture will attempt to describe identifying characteristics of the NPP, it should be understood that the NPP finds its source and support in no single theological persuasion and there is much disagreement among its proponents.
- IV. Course of study:
 - A. Briefly trace the development of the NPP.
 - B. Evaluate the NPP as an acceptable way to interpret Galatians.
 - C. Offer a limited general response to the NPP.

Body:

- I. **Development of the NPP¹**
 - A. Although Kent Yinger in his excellent short introduction to the NPP begins with E. P. Sanders, the individual who first broke significant ground for the NPP was Krister Stendahl.

¹ I have relied heavily on material written by Chris Reeves on this subject (see the bibliography). His material is more detailed, well written and painstakingly researched.

1. Some Protestant scholars have suggested that the atrocities committed against the Jews during the Holocaust were partly due to the negative presentation of Judaism in the traditional Pauline paradigm.
 - a. The characterization of Judaism as a legalistic religion that was quite inferior to faith-based Christianity was continued by the Tübingen school of German rationalists such as Rudolph Bultmann (1884-1976) and those of his students (e.g., Ernst Käsemann [1906-1998] and Günther Bornkamm [1905-1990]).
 - b. Both Käsemann and Bornkamm followed Bultmann's view of Judaism as a legalistic religion and the Jews as trusting in their own works for justification.
 - c. Speaking of the post-WWII period, Magnus Zetterholm wrote, "It came [sic] 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." (Zetterholm, *Approaches to Paul*, 95-97; cited by Reeves, *The New Perspective On Paul [Part I and II]*, 31)
2. In the period of the 1940's to the 1960's, there were efforts on the part of a few to improve the relationship between Protestants and Jews in Europe. These efforts inspired the re-evaluation of the traditional negative characterization of Judaism as a religion of legalism.
3. Although not the first to question the long-standing portrayal of Judaism, Stendahl was dissatisfied with the Lutheran paradigm of Paul and challenged its fundamental assertions.
 - a. "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." (Stendahl, *Paul Among the Gentiles*, 127)
 - b. "Stendahl stated that Paul did not have an 'introspective conscience' (a guilt-ridden conscience) and he did not preach about the *individual* needing 'forgiveness.' Paul's concern was more practical for the *group*: the relationship between Jews and Gentiles." (Reeves, 32)
4. In two essays delivered in 1961 and 1963, Stendahl laid out a new paradigm for understanding Paul:
 - a. Paul was not "converted" from one religion (Judaism) to another (Christianity), but simply "called" to a specific mission of preaching to the Gentiles – the "apostle to the Gentiles."
 - b. Paul did not preach "forgiveness" to all, only "justification" (God's acceptance of both Jews and Gentiles) by faith.
 - c. Paul did not feel the personal guilt of "sin," only "weakness."
 - d. Paul did not stress divisive "integrity" (rights) of Jews and Gentiles, but the need for a unifying "love" between them.
 - e. Paul focused on his "unique" mission to the Gentiles, not on trying to establish a "universal" theology for all the church. (Reeves, 33)

B. E. P. Sanders (1937-)

1. Sanders' book, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, published in 1977, laid the foundation for the NPP and constitutes a clear turning point in Pauline studies.
 - a. Sanders examined Jewish extra-biblical writings dating between 200 B.C. and A.D. 200.
 - b. The beliefs and practices of Jews from the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple by the returned exiles to the destruction of Herod's temple in A.D. 70 are referred to as Second Temple Judaism.
2. Sanders sought to discover a "pattern of religion" in the Jewish writings of the Second Temple period. He described the "pattern" that he observed in those extra-biblical writings as "covenant nomism."
 - a. "Rigorous obedience to the commandments was the expected response to God's prior act of saving grace, not an attempt to earn it. Both the nation and the individuals within the nation kept the commands *not in order to be redeemed* but *because they had been redeemed or saved* (think exodus from Egypt)." (Yinger, *The New Perspective on Paul: An Introduction*, 8)
 - b. "Covenant nomism is the view that one's place in God's plan is established on the basis of the covenant and that the covenant requires as the proper response of man his obedience to its commandments, while providing means of atonement for transgressions." (Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 75)
 - c. "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 last points is that election and ultimately salvation are considered to be by God's mercy rather than human achievement." (Sanders, 422)
 - d. "Many modern scholars today (e.g., E. P. Sanders, J. D. G. Dunn) disagree that Paul tried to teach a *justification by faith alone* rather than by works. Instead, this new perspective on Paul believes Jews were already justified by God's electing grace as long as they remain in the Covenant by obeying God's commandments. This is called *covenantal nomism*. This view, however, subverts and contradicts everything Paul says in Romans 3-5 and 9:30-33 since God's righteousness is a once-and-for-all event that comes by faith alone in Christ alone." (López, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, 638)
3. How did Sanders deal with Paul's "negative" comments about "works" (of the law)? Reeves summarized, "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. Paul was opposed to 'works of the law,' not because they were inherently flawed, but simply because they were not faith in Christ. For Sanders, the problem with the Jews was that they rejected God's plan to save the Gentiles through faith in Jesus. Sanders concluded with his now-famous statement: 'In short, *this is what Paul finds wrong in Judaism: it is not Christianity.*'" (Reeves, 38; citing Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 474-511, 552)

4. Yinger suggests that there is general agreement among scholars (NPP) on two points:
 - a. “First-century Judaism was not the legalistic religion of past caricatures.”
 - b. “Covenantal nomism is a fair description of Jewish soteriology of the period.” (Yinger, 11)

C. James Dunn (1939-)

1. Although Dunn acknowledged the value/influence of Sanders’ work, he asserted that Sanders had “failed to see the continuity between Paul and Judaism.” (Yinger, 17)
 - a. “While Sanders believed that Paul broke with Judaism, Dunn, on the other hand, believed that Paul maintained his connection with Judaism.” (Reeves, 40)
 - b. “Where Paul differed fundamentally from his Jewish tradition was not over the role of grace, faith, and obedience in salvation, but whether salvation was tied to being Jewish or not.” (Yinger, 22)
 - c. “Unlike Sanders and traditional Pauline interpretation, which see justification by faith as a distinctly Pauline and un-Jewish conviction, Dunn thinks Paul and his Christian Jewish opponents would have agreed on this issue.” (Yinger, 20)
2. Dunn attached a different meaning to the phrase “works of law.”
 - a. “Prior to Sanders, this referred to Jewish legalism, doing works in order to be saved. Dunn argues that this phrase refers not to works-righteousness but to particular observances of the Law that functioned as badges of Jewish identity in the ancient world. In the Antioch incident, where Paul had to confront Peter (Gal. 2:11-15), food laws were at issue (see esp. v. 12, ‘He used to eat with the Gentiles’). Elsewhere in Galatians circumcision plays a central role. Along with Sabbath keeping, these were the practices, the ‘works of law’ that most characteristically identified one as being a member of the covenant people of Israel. Rather than being a code-phrase for legalism, ‘works of law’ could be more accurately understood as a sociological category. It refers to a group of people, the Jewish people, who can be identified by their practice of these ‘works of law.’” (Yinger, 20)
 - b. “Dunn believed that Paul was objecting to the Jews’ *misunderstanding* or *misuse* of the Law. According to Dunn, Paul’s objection to ‘works of the law’ was an objection to Jewish works like circumcision, the Sabbath, and dietary food laws. Thus, Paul was opposed to *specific* works of the Law and not to the Law per se, or ‘good works’ in general. These *specific* works, Dunn said, acted as national markers or badges of identity for the Jews. Thus, the Jews’ pride was a nationalistic or racial pride, not a pride in meritorious law-keeping.” (Reeves, 41)
3. Dunn asserted that “justification” referred to “God’s recognition of Israel as his people, his verdict in favour of Israel on grounds of his covenant with Israel.” (Dunn, *Jesus, Paul, and the Law*, 190).
 - a. “So, for instance, when Paul speaks of ‘justification through the law’ (Gal. 2:21) or ‘by the law’ (3:11), he envisions not the individual’s effort to merit salvation by keeping the Law, but the Jewish conviction that membership in God’s people belongs only to those identified with Torah; this salvation or justification is only ‘through the (works of) law.’” (Yinger, 23)

D. N.T. Wright (1948-)

1. Through his prolific writing Wright has brought the NPP to a broader audience and has become a major “voice” for this new interpretive template.
2. “One of the characteristics of his position is how he sets Paul’s theology within the larger biblical story (narrative) of God’s work with Israel. God’s intention for humanity and creation was temporarily derailed through Adam’s sin (Gen 1-11). The resolution of this dilemma was the family of Abraham, Israel, through whom the divine blessing was to extend to all humanity (Gen 12). However, the Jewish people failed as well to fulfill their role as the instrument of God’s blessing to the world. Instead of being the light for the nations, they wandered from their covenant obligations, ultimately into exile. It would, thus, be left up to Israel’s representative to fulfill Adam’s originally intended role under God. Messiah Jesus is Israel, the seed of Abraham, the son of God, and his obedience, death, and resurrection are Israel’s obedience, death, and resurrection. He is the climax of God’s covenantal dealings with Israel and humanity (Adam). Notice, for Wright the story is less about sinful individuals being rescued from judgment for guilt (although it is, for him, also about that), and more about God’s fulfillment of his purposes for all creation through Israel.” (Yinger, 27-28)
3. “The Roman occupation was a daily reminder that Israel had broken the covenant and still awaited the fulfillment of the promises. But in what way had the nation broken God’s covenant? Israel’s failure was not ‘legalism’ or ‘works-righteousness,’ but ‘national righteousness, . . . the belief that fleshly Jewish descent guarantees membership of God’s true covenant people.’ Elsewhere Wright terms this a ‘charter of national privilege.’ Rather than fulfilling her vocation as a light to the nations, Israel viewed herself in exclusive possession of God’s blessings; and only those who became a member of Israel (signified for males by circumcision) could have access to these same blessings. (This corresponds to Dunn’s take on ‘works of law.’)” (Yinger, 29)

E. Summary statements:

1. Dunn described the “old paradigm”: (Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*, 195-194)
 - a. “What this meant, first of all, was that Paul’s conversion was understood as *the climax to a long, inward, spiritual struggle*, during which Paul had wrestled with the pangs of a troubled conscience – just like Luther.”
 - b. “A second corollary to the juxtaposition of Paul’s conversion and Luther’s was the understanding of justification by faith in distinctively individualistic terms. Justification was all about the individual finding peace with God, just like Luther – and Paul.”
 - c. “Thirdly, bound up with Luther’s understanding of Paul’s conversion was the idea that it was a conversion *from Judaism* – as indeed a passage like Gal. 1:13-14 could imply (where Paul speaks of his previous way of life ‘within Judaism’). Unfortunately, however, the further corollary was drawn: that Judaism was the antithesis of Christianity, what Paul had been saved from. Such a view, of course, had been prominent in Christianity at least since the Epistle of Barnabas, and fitted well with the strong strand of anti-semitism which so disfigured Christianity’s attitude to Jews and Judaism in the Middle Ages, an attitude which Luther himself expressed in characteristic forthrightness in his infamous *On the Jews and Their Lies*. Tragically, however, it reinforced Christian suspicion, not to say hatred of Judaism, which was to reach its horrific outworking in the

Holocaust... And still today there are German scholars who speak of Judaism as something done away with by Jesus.”

- d. “Finally, and most insidious of all, was the way this reading of Paul’s teaching on justification by faith in the light of Luther’s experience reinforced the impression that Judaism, and not least the Judaism of Paul’s time, was a *degenerate religion*. Luther had striven to please God by his acts of penitence and good words. The Church of his day taught that salvation could be gained by merit, the merit of the saints, that the time spent in purgatory could be diminished by the purchase of indulgences. That was what the discovery of justification by faith had freed him from. It was all too easy to read Paul’s experience through the same grid. What Luther had been delivered from was also what Paul had been delivered from. As the medieval church taught salvation by merit and good works so must the Judaism of Paul’s day. It was a degenerate religion precisely because it was legalistic, dependent on human effort, and self-satisfied with the results. And the Pharisees were the worst of all – narrow-minded, legalistic bigots.”
2. “The New Perspective on Paul (NPP) stands against the attitude that views the Judaism of Paul’s day as legalistic and driven by ‘works-righteousness.’ This attitude asserts that Jewish hope of salvation rested on the attempt to earn God’s favor by meritorious works. This perspective may have been largely shaped by Martin Luther’s reading of the New Testament against the backdrop of his own struggles with the Catholic Church. Thus, modern interpreters import a legalistic framework of Judaism into the reading of Paul’s letters, where Paul’s grand vision becomes ‘justification by faith’—a movement away from the merit-based justification of Judaism. In contrast, the NPP posits that Second Temple Judaism is based on a covenant that also valued the grace of God and the faith of humans in His mercy.” (Gupta, *The Lexham Bible Dictionary: “Paul, New Perspective On”*)
 3. Dunn summarized the NPP as follows: (Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*, 16-17)
 - a. “It builds on Sanders’ new perspective on Second Temple Judaism and Sanders’ reassertion of the basic graciousness expressed in Judaism’s understanding and practice of covenantal nomism.”
 - b. “It observes that a social function of the law was an integral aspect of Israel’s covenantal nomism, where separateness *to* God (holiness) was understood to require separateness *from* the other nations as two sides of the one coin, and that the law was understood as the means to maintaining both.”
 - c. “It notes that Paul’s own teaching on justification focuses largely if not principally on the need to overcome the barrier which the law was seen to interpose between Jew and Gentile, so that the ‘all’ of ‘to all who believe’ (Romans 1:17) signifies, in the first place, Gentile as well as Jew.”
 - d. “It suggests that ‘works of law’ became a key slogan in Paul’s exposition of his justification gospel because so many of Paul’s fellow Jewish believers were insisting on certain works as indispensable to their own (and others?) standing within the covenant and therefore as indispensable to salvation.”
 - e. “It protests that failure to recognize this major dimension of Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith may have ignored or excluded a vital factor in combatting the nationalism and racialism which has so distorted and diminished Christianity past and present.”
 4. The “new” paradigm (as summarized by Yinger, 30-31)

- a. “First-century Judaism was not legalistic, but was characterized by covenantal nomism—saved by God’s grace and obligated to follow his ways.”
 - b. “Since Jews were not espousing works-righteousness, Paul was not opposing legalism in his letters.”
 - c. “Instead, at issue was a question of social identity: ‘Who belongs to the people of God and how is this known?’ i.e., does one have to be Jewish—be circumcised, keep food laws, celebrate Sabbath, etc.—in order to inherit the promises to Abraham?”
 - d. “Paul does not differ from most other Jews as to the roles of grace, faith, and works in salvation; where he differs is the conviction that Jesus is Israel’s Messiah and the Lord of all creation. No longer is Torah the defining center of God’s dealings; what counts now is belonging to Christ.”
- F. Not all who are unhappy with the Lutheran paradigm for Paul are agreed on the features of its replacement. Yinger lists several variations of the NPP as typically described: (Yinger, 32-36)
1. Social Interpretation
 2. A Non-Systematic Paul
 3. An Anti-Imperial Paul
 4. Two-Covenant Soteriology
- G. *N. T. Wright*: “There are probably almost as many ‘New Perspective’ positions as there are writers espousing it – and...I disagree with most of them.” (Yinger, 32)

II. NPP: Acceptable Method of Interpretation for Galatians?

- A. How does the text of Galatians impact our view of the fundamental issues in understanding Paul?
1. What was the nature of Second Temple Judaism? Legalistic...or characterized by covenantal nomism?
 2. What was the primary concern of Paul’s theology?
 3. What was the apostle Paul’s relationship to the Law of Moses?
- B. Who was “troubling” the Galatians (Galatians 1:6)? Consider these descriptions in Galatians:
1. “The circumcision party” (2:11)
 2. “[Those] who rely on works of the law” (3:10)
 3. Those who preached circumcision (5:11; Paul used this phrase to deny that he was doing that very thing!)
 4. “Those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ” (6:12)
 5. “Even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law” (6:13)
 6. “They desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh” (6:13)
- C. According to the NPP, the main concern of Paul’s theology was not the justification of the individual (a forensic concern), but rather the acceptance of Gentiles as part of God’s spiritual people without becoming Jewish.

1. Krister Stendahl argued that the “doctrine of justification by faith was hammered out by Paul for the very specific and limited purpose of defending the rights of Gentile converts to be full and genuine heirs to the promises of the God of Israel.” (Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*, 2; cited by Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*, 8)
2. “Where Paul differed fundamentally from his Jewish tradition was not over the role of grace, faith, and obedience in salvation, but whether salvation was tied to being Jewish or not. In Jewish covenantal nomism, God’s election of Israel was fundamental; God’s saving work was directed only toward his covenant people. In order to take part in this salvation one needed to be a member of this people. This is what Paul’s opponents in Galatia were demanding, that uncircumcised Gentile converts join the covenant people by circumcision. They “try to compel you to be circumcised” (Gal 6:12)...But Paul remains adamant on this point. Being justified, being reckoned a member of God’s saved people, is no longer tied to being Jewish. (Yinger, 22-23)
3. As already noted, Paul’s opponents in the Galatian churches were demanding that Gentile converts be circumcised, in essence, ostensibly making them proselytes to Judaism. At first blush, it might appear that the NPP has correctly diagnosed Paul’s concern.
 - a. There seems to be no doubt that the question of whether the church would become just another Jewish sect was a pressing issue in the first century.
 - b. The discussion of the relationship of Gentiles to the Law of Moses in Acts 15 is evidence of the importance of this question.
 - c. The fact that Paul had Timothy circumcised (Acts 16:3), in light of the apostle’s comments in Galatians and Romans about circumcision, makes it clear that his concern in Galatians involves more than just the act of circumcision. Could one become a proselyte without cutting himself off from the grace available through Christ (cf. Galatians 5:2-4)?
 - d. In Acts 15, the obligation to be circumcised comprehended the greater obligation to keep the whole law. The letter that came from this meeting in Jerusalem, addressed to Gentile brethren, emphasized that only certain obligations fell upon them, and not the obligation to keep the Mosaic Law in its entirety.
 - 1) Acts 15:1 (ESV): ¹ But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”
 - 2) Acts 15:5 (ESV): ⁵ But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.”
 - 3) Acts 15:28-29 (ESV): ²⁸ For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: ²⁹ that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.”
 - e. Writing to those who desired to be “under the law” (Galatians 3:10; 4:21; 5:4), Paul made the same connection:

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- 1) Galatians 3:10 (ESV): ¹⁰ For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.”
 - 2) Galatians 4:21 (ESV): ²¹ Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law?
 - 3) Galatians 5:3 (ESV): ³ I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law.
4. Paul’s comments to the Galatians indicate that his concern was not just “social badges of identity” (*cf.* Dunn’s view of “works of the law”), but the fundamental nature of the Law.
- a. He described the Law as a “yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1) and those “under the law” as being in slavery (Galatians 4:21, 24-25, 31).
 - 1) Galatians 5:1 (ESV): ¹ For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.
 - 2) Galatians 4:21, 24-25, 31 (ESV): ²¹ Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law?... ²⁴ Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. ²⁵ Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children... ³¹ So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman.
 - 3) Note also Acts 15:10 (ESV): ¹⁰ Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?
 - b. Paul explained why the Law of Moses was a “yoke of slavery.”
 - 1) Galatians 3:10-12 (ESV): ¹⁰ For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.” ¹¹ Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for “The righteous shall live by faith.” ¹² But the law is not of faith, rather “The one who does them shall live by them.”
 - 2) Galatians 5:1-4 (ESV): ¹ For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. ² Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. ³ I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. ⁴ You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.
 - c. The first three chapters of Romans are devoted to demonstrating the failure of both Gentile and Jew to keep law perfectly.
 - d. Consider Dunn’s explanation of Galatians 3:10-12 (excerpts on this pericope in his commentary on Galatians) and notice the meaning he assigns to “works of the law.”
 - 1) “What would have been surprising and shocking for most of the addressees would have been the boldness of the opening words, and the brazenness of the attempt to link them to the Deuteronomy text. For in typical Jewish

thinking, ‘all who rely on works of the law’ were one and the same as ‘everyone who remains within ... the law to do it’. *They* were precisely the ones who were *not* under the curse, but could expect God’s blessing. Paul’s opening claim was exactly the opposite from what it should have been; the text from Deuteronomy simply contradicted the claim it was supposed to support. What could Paul be thinking of? Clearly the logic of the train of thought in verse 10 is that ‘reliance on works of the law’ amounts to *failure* to do all that the law requires. But how could he hope to sustain such an idiosyncratic reading of Deut. 27:26 in face of the traditional reading of it?

“Most attempt to resolve the riddle by reading in a further assumption of Paul: that ‘those who rely on works of the law’ means those who seek to achieve their own righteousness before God; and that in quoting Deut. 27:26 Paul presupposed that it is impossible to fulfil *all* that the law requires (the ‘all’ is found only in LXX, not in the Hebrew). The hidden presumption is that complete or perfect obedience to the law is beyond human capacity: however zealous any might be, they fail to abide by everything written in the law, and so fall under its curse. The problem for this reading is twofold. (1) We have already seen that Paul’s talk of ‘works of the law’ should not be taken as an attack on self-achievement (see on 2:16). (2) There is no hint in Deut. 27:26 or in Paul’s use of it that the obedience called for is impossible. Deuteronomy certainly did not think so (Deut. 30:11-14); and neither did Paul (Rom. 8:4; see on 5:14). The mistake, once again, has been to read into the argument the idea that at this time the law would be satisfied with nothing less than sinlessness, unblemished obedience, that the law was understood as a means to achieving righteousness from scratch. But in Jewish thought to ‘abide within all that was written in the law and do it’ meant living within the provisions of the law, including all its provisions for sin, through repentance and atonement (see particularly Sanders, *Paul*). That was why Paul was able to describe himself as ‘blameless’ before his conversion (Phil. 3:6; see also on 1:14); *not* because he committed no sin, *not* because he fulfilled every law without exception, but because the righteousness of the law included use of the sacrificial cult and benefit of the Day of Atonement. That the Judaism, against which Paul here reacts, called for an impossible perfection is not part of the context of the argument at this point and should not be read into it (see also on 5:3 and 6:10).

“The answer is more likely to be found in a closer analysis of the main subject of the statement—‘all who rely on the works of the law’. Literally Paul says, ‘as many as are from works of the law’, admitting no exception. The phrase is clearly framed in contrast to the repeated phrase of the preceding paragraph—‘those who are from faith’ (3:7, 9). It thus denotes those whose identity was grounded on works of the law, whose relationship with God was characterized and determined by works of the law, in contrast to those characterized by faith. And ‘works of the law’, as we have seen, is Paul’s code for those requirements of the law in particular which brought to sharpest focus Israel’s claim to be distinctive from others as God’s covenant people, as also at Qumran (see on 2:16). By the phrase ‘those who rely on the works of the law’, therefore, Paul meant those who, in his judgement, were putting too much weight on the distinctiveness of Jews from Gentiles, and on the special laws which formed the boundary markers between them, those who rested their confidence in Israel’s ‘favoured nation’ status, those who invested their identity too far in the presumption that Israel was set

apart from ‘the nations’—including, of course, the Jewish Christians in view in 1:6-8 and 2:4, 12.” (Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 170-172)

5. Justification: what does it mean in Galatians?
 - a. The NPP view is that justification refers to the acceptance of the Gentiles without their becoming part of the Jewish nation.
 - b. Justify/justified – appears 8 times in the ESV & NKJV (2:16 – 3x; 2:17; 3:8, 11, 24; 5:4)
 - c. In every case, the Greek verb translated is δικαιόω (*dikaioo*), defined by Vine as meaning: (Vine, *Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, Vol. 2, 339)
 - 1) “to show to be right or righteous”
 - 2) “to declare to be righteous, to pronounce righteous”
 - 3) Vine comments: “... ‘justification’ being the legal and formal acquittal from guilt by God as Judge, the pronouncement of the sinner as righteous”
 - d. Words, of course, can have more than one possible meaning or even shades of meaning. The meaning of a word, as defined by lexicons, is affected by context. What evidence, in the text of Galatians, would demand that *justification* have a different meaning than that presented in the lexicons/dictionaries?
- D. Some (as in the two-covenant soteriology variation of the NPP) assert that the Jews could be saved while continuing under the Mosaic covenant; the new covenant was intended only for Gentiles.
 1. “Nevertheless, this ‘two-covenant theory’ can be a valid, perhaps even necessary, conclusion drawn from NPP arguments. Why bother converting Jews to Christianity if covenantal nomism is sufficient for the Jews as a covenant relationship with God and sin atonement? What does it lack that the gospel fills? Let Jews be saved as Jews.” (Gibson, *Hermeneutics [Part II]*, 147)
 2. Paul’s comments in Galatians concerning the law and the condition of those “under the law” should be compared to NPP advocates who argue that Paul “had no problem with the law”!
 - a. Galatians 2:15–16 (ESV): ¹⁵ We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; ¹⁶ yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.
 - b. Galatians 2:21 (ESV): ²¹ I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.
 - c. Galatians 3:11 (ESV): ¹¹ Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for “The righteous shall live by faith.”
 - d. Galatians 3:21–22 (ESV): ²¹ Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. ²² But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.
 3. Paul made similar affirmations in his letter to the Romans:

- a. Romans 3:20–23 (ESV): ²⁰ For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. ²¹ But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— ²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

E. What was Paul’s relationship to the Law of Moses?

1. Paul described himself as having “died to the law that [he] might live to God” (Galatians 2:19).
2. If Paul was not “converted” to another faith, but simply “called” to preach justification by faith to the Gentiles, then he could have continued to be justified by covenantal nomism. Note, however, these comments:
 - a. Galatians 2:16 (ESV): ¹⁶ yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.
 - b. Galatians 2:20–21 (ESV): ²⁰ I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. ²¹ I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.

III. A Limited General Response to the NPP²

A. The NPP is flawed at the “foundation” level.

1. As already noted, Sanders’ book, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, is considered to be the foundation for the paradigm shift in understanding the writings of Paul.
2. Probably all are agreed that a study of the historical background of the biblical documents will aid in understanding the meaning of the text.
3. Sanders’ work on the literature of Second Temple Judaism is considered, by NPP advocates, to be a definitive study and the foundation of the NPP and yet Sanders completely ignored the inspired New Testament books in his analysis of Judaism.
 - a. “In formulating his opinion about second-temple Judaism, however, Sanders in his 1977 work conspicuously fails to use the historical books of the NT, the four Gospels and Acts... Scholars who follow in his NP train entertain similar views regarding NT historical books... [N. T. Wright] pictures the following as the current stage in the Third Quest for the historical Jesus: ‘First-century Judaism and the Gospels are opposite edges, and all discourse about Jesus must take place between them.’ Wright and other ‘questers’ along with NP advocates exemplify an extremely low view of biblical inspiration of the Gospels. The Gospels are at best only on the ‘edge’ of truth, they say, and are less reliable than rabbinic writings in their portrayal of first-century Judaism.” (Thomas, “*Hermeneutics of the New Perspective on Paul*,” 298-299; cited by Gibson, “*Hermeneutics [Part II]*,” 149)

² For excellent and more detailed discussions of the weaknesses of the NPP, see the articles by Reeves and Gibson cited in the bibliography.

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4. In the NPP, the literary context of Paul's writings (specifically the Jewish writings of the Second Temple period) becomes the "67th book," *i.e.*, assumes authoritative status.³
 - a. In truth, the *inspired* literature of the New Testament is interpreted in light of fallible human conclusions drawn from the Jewish extra-biblical literature of the Second Temple period!
 - b. The infallible is made subservient to the fallible. Human opinions and conclusions can, and often do, change with time and additional information.
 5. Note these comments on hermeneutical methods:
 - a. "The danger that Historical-Critical Methodology (which is embraced by Sanders and others) will have on one's view of the inspiration of Scripture and its interpretation cannot be overstated. It is destructive to belief in the divine inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible by presupposing that all reality is accessible to human reason and investigation, thereby dismissing the biblical claims of supernatural activity and inspiration. Various biblical characters, events, prophecies, and authorships are denied as authentic and/or historically accurate. It is clear that such a methodology would consistently subject the interpretation of the biblical testimony to the ever-changing theories and philosophies of men. Any contrary scriptural testimony is reinterpreted to fit the scholarly dogmas of Historical-Critical methodology." (Gibson, "Hermeneutics [Part II]," 150)
 - b. "Sanders' hermeneutic is the very antithesis of the Grammatical-Historical hermeneutic, a methodology that has been used by serious students of the Bible down through the centuries. Those who employ it believe the Bible is the special, divinely revealed word of God. It is possible, they believe, to discover the true meaning of a given text of Scripture by following the rules of grammar and syntax combined with the literary context and style of the passage and the historical, cultural context of the author. These believe there can be only one correct interpretation of a text which faithfully expounds what the author intended, and this means that all other interpretations are wrong." (Turner, *The Sixty-Seventh-Book of the Bible Syndrome*, 20)
 6. Sanders' work is so critical to the NPP that it is sometimes stated by advocates that the Bible student cannot understand Paul's writings without first recognizing the character of Second Temple Judaism.
 - a. How many average people have access to or the ability to assess the historical documents of Second Temple Judaism? Yet their ability to understand the New Testament teaching about justification depends on these extra-biblical writings?
 - b. Were these documents preserved with accuracy?
 - c. The authors of these documents were not inspired. How accurate is the information contained in the original documents?
 - d. Do these authors represent "main-stream" thinking among the Jews of the period?

³ Allan Turner describes some examples of what he calls the "67th Book Syndrome" (*The Sixty-Seventh-Book Of The Bible Syndrome*, 5-20).

7. A common criticism of Sanders' work is that his conclusion about the character of Second Temple Judaism is an over-generalization.
- a. "Even if covenantal nomism is a correct description of most Jewish thought of the period, does it accurately depict all of the many variegated forms? Since not all first-century Jews thought exactly alike, perhaps some were more legalistic than others. A concerted probe in this direction was published in 2001. More than a dozen scholars examined a wide variety of Second Temple Jewish literature and found that some texts seem supportive of covenantal nomism, others are silent or unclear on the subject, and a few may evidence some type of legalism." (Yinger, 42-43)
 - b. "In *Paul and Variegated Nomism*, a book edited by Carson, O'Brien, and Seifrid, a group of biblical scholars test Sanders' theory of 'covenantal nomism' to see if this pattern of grace and obligation holds up under close scrutiny of the evidence from Second Temple Jewish texts. The editors conclude that these Jewish texts were diverse enough with respect to Torah obedience, salvation, and judgment that it is difficult to cast them all together under one rubric, as Sanders does. (Gupta, *The Lexham Bible Dictionary: "Paul, New Perspective On"*)
 - c. "The problem emerges when you attempt to rigorously apply the category of 'covenantal nomism' to the vast range of Jewish literature where it soon becomes clear that it doesn't always fit. In some literature the idea of 'getting in' and 'staying in' is not even raised... Sanders is somewhat guilty of imposing questions onto texts which the texts do not set out to answer. What is more, the variety of literary genres and social contexts encountered in various Jewish writings such as Antiquities, Joseph and Aseneth, 2 Enoch, 4QMMT, 1 Maccabees, or the Mishnah may imply that these documents are not agreeable to such broad blanket analysis. One could easily anticipate a diverse range of soteriologies emerging from such literary platforms." (Bird, *The Saving Righteousness of God: Studies on Paul, Justification and the New Perspective*, 92)

B. What is "legalism"?

1. In our modern religious environment, virtually any attention to obedience to law is considered to be legalism.
2. Note the differences between these definitions:
 - a. "Strict, literal, or excessive conformity to the law or to a religious or moral code" (*Merriam-Webster*)
 - b. "Strict adherence to law, especially to the letter rather than the spirit" (*The Random House College Dictionary*)
 - c. "Legalism could be defined as any attempt to rely on self-effort to either attain or maintain our justification before God. (www.reformationtheology.com)
 - d. "Legalism, in Christian theology, is a pejorative term referring to an over-emphasis on law or codes of conduct, or legal ideas, usually implying an allegation of misguided rigor, pride, superficiality, the neglect of mercy, and ignorance of the grace of God or emphasizing the letter of law over the spirit. Legalism is alleged against any view that obedience to law, not faith in God's grace, is the pre-eminent principle of redemption. (*Wikipedia*)
 - e. "Generally, legalism is viewed as the attempt to gain righteousness wholly by human effort, resulting in a salvation merited (earned) by human works. Jewish 'legalism' has usually been understood as the attempt by the Jewish people (in

particular the Pharisees) to be justified by meritorious, perfect law-keeping of the Mosaic Law (Torah) which led to attitudes promoting self and prideful boasting.” (Gibson, “Jewish ‘Legalism’: ‘Proto-Pelagian,’ Or Just An-All Too Often Human Response To God’s Marvelous Grace?” 307)

- C. Is there any evidence in the New Testament that Jews were relying on their own efforts for justification?
1. Luke 18:9-14 (parable of the Pharisee and the tax-collector)
 - a. In his prayer, the Pharisee began by thanking God that he was not like other men, mentioning extortioners, the unjust and adulterers, and even the tax collector who had also come to the temple to pray (v. 11). He continued by mentioning his perseverance in fasting and tithing (v. 12). The words of the Pharisee, as he prayed, emphasized his own efforts to achieve righteousness.
 - b. By contrast, the tax collector humbly petitioned God for mercy, identifying himself as a sinner (v. 13).
 - c. Kent Yinger recognized the difficulties for the NPP presented by this parable. He commented: “Could it be that our view of this Pharisee needs adjustment? He does not boast in self-achieved goodness, but thanks God that he does not walk in sin (v. 11). If so inclined, one could interpret the references to his fasting and tithing as self-righteousness (v. 12). But if Jews kept the Law as a grateful response to God’s saving mercy, maybe the Pharisee only refers to his obedience as confirmation of his gratefulness...Also, the opening line of the narrative (‘He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt’) may actually reflect Jewish covenantal nomism rather than legalistic self-righteousness.” (Yinger, 13)
 - d. Yinger’s comments suggest at least three observations:
 - 1) First, Luke introduced the parable by noting that Jesus told it to “some who trusted *in themselves* that they were righteous” (Luke 18:9; ESV; emphasis mine – asd).
 - a) Trusting in oneself is obviously not the same as trusting in God’s grace. Legalists trust in themselves. Observe that Luke did *not* say that these people “trusted in the covenant,” as though they believed themselves to be saved by covenantal privilege.
 - b) Note also that the Pharisee did not thank God for forgiveness of the sins of extortion, injustice and adultery, but rather that he was not “like other men.” Of course, he was not an extortioner, unjust or an adulterer because he had obeyed God’s law. Despite Yinger’s assertion to the contrary, it is quite clear that he was “boasting in his self-achieved goodness.”
 - 2) Second, Jesus commented on the condition of the two men. He said that the tax collector “went down to his house justified, rather than the other” (v. 14).
 - a) Yinger argued that the Pharisee was perhaps merely expressing his gratitude for the divine grace received rather than reflecting legalistic self-righteousness. According to *covenantal nomism*, that is exactly what the Jew under the Law was supposed to do – express his gratitude

for salvation by keeping the Law. If both men recognized their need for divine grace, why did Jesus not indicate that both men were justified?

- b) According to the view that rejects Pharisaical legalism, the Pharisee said nothing that could be criticized! Supposedly he merely expressed gratitude for the grace he had received and noted his obedience in response to that grace. Yet Jesus clearly implied that the Pharisee had “exalted himself” (v. 14b).
- 3) Finally, we need to remember that Jesus was telling a parable, not relating an actual event. He could choose whomever he wanted to include in His illustration. Why choose to use a Pharisee and present him as “trusting in himself,” if the Pharisees in general were not pursuing a righteousness of their own? Even Yinger sees the difficulty here:
 - a) “However, if first-century Judaism was not characterized by this self-righteous boasting in merits, what becomes of our interpretation of this parable? Maybe Jesus picked an atypical Pharisee for this story...But that’s not how parables usually operate. The main elements and characters are drawn from common experience. Otherwise, the surprise in the parable doesn’t quite work. It arrests the hearers’ attention precisely because they assume that Pharisees were among the righteous ones (‘justified’) and not the despised tax collectors. No, this Pharisee must be typical of most.” (Yinger, 13)
2. Romans 9:30-33; 10:1-4 (comparison of Jews and Gentiles in their pursuit of righteousness)
 - a. Gentiles attained righteousness by faith, but Israel failed (vv. 30-31). They “pursued a law that would lead to righteousness,” but did not succeed in reaching that law.
 - b. Paul explained the reason for Israel’s failure – “because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works” (v. 32).
 - c. Paul described Israel as:
 - 1) “being ignorant of the righteousness of God” (10:3)
 - 2) “seeking to establish their own [righteousness]” (10:3)
 - 3) not submitting to God’s righteousness (10:3)
 - d. It does not appear from Paul’s description of Israel that they were characterized by covenantal nomism. Instead they were pursuing “a righteousness based on works”!
3. Matthew 23:23 (ESV): ²³ “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.
 - a. It is granted that Jesus was specifically addressing the Pharisees and scribes in the “woes” of this chapter, but He also instructed the crowds and His disciples to “do and observe whatever they tell you” (23:2-3).

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- b. The behavior of the Pharisees and scribes in their tithing of garden herbs seems to fit well one of the definitions of legalism (“Strict adherence to law, especially to the letter rather than the spirit”).
 - c. Jesus did not indicate that such tithing was wrong or inappropriate, but they obviously had missed the spirit (“weightier matters”) of the law: justice, mercy and faithfulness (23:23).
4. Romans 7:13-25
- a. The fact that the apostle wrote in the first person and in the present tense is cited as evidence that he is speaking of himself as a Christian.
 - b. It is certainly true that there is a struggle between the flesh and the Spirit in the Christian (cf. Galatians 5:16-24).
 - c. It seems to me, however, that some of the descriptions Paul used in verses 14-24 do not fit the Christian. For instance:
 - 1) “Sold under sin” - verse 14
 - 2) “Sin that dwells within me” - verses 17 and 20
 - 3) “Wretched man that I am!” - verse 24. This exclamation hardly describes the attitude of a triumphant Christian.
 - a) Contrast this with Romans 5:2, 11.
 - b) Philippians 4:4 (ESV): ⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.
 - 4) Paul’s discussion of the Christian’s relationship to sin in chapter 6 would suggest that these descriptions should not describe a Christian.
 - a) Romans 6:14 (ESV): ¹⁴ For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.
 - b) Romans 6:16 (ESV): ¹⁶ Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?
 - d. I favor the view that Paul is assuming the identity of the unregenerate man and particularly the man who lives under a system of law trying to justify himself through his own merit, i.e., by perfect obedience to law.
 - 1) He was, in fact, that man, earlier in his life!
 - 2) Before he was responsible to law, he was alive spiritually (Romans 7:9). When he became accountable before God (“when the commandment came”), he violated the law and died spiritually.
 - 3) I believe that he continued to use himself to represent the man under law.
 - e. The man living under a system of law can want to do right (v. 18), but he does not keep law perfectly.
 - 1) Even if he could live today without sin, what about all of his sins in the past?
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- 2) He finds himself in bondage to sin. This is why Paul described the law as a “yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1).
- f. This view also seems to be in harmony with the greater context of the passage. Paul has just discussed the purpose of the law and now he points to the helplessness of the law to deliver from the bondage of sin.
- g. Note the change in emotional tone from 7:24 to 7:25-8:1-2.
- h. It does not seem that in verse 25 Paul was saying that he could serve the law of God with his mind all the while serving the law of sin with his flesh.
 - 1) Paul affirmed the unacceptability of this dual service in Romans 6:15-23.
 - 2) I believe rather that he is laying out two choices of servitude; depending on whether one wishes to live according to the flesh or according to the spirit (v. 25; see 8:1).

Conclusion:

- I. The New Perspective on Paul brings deserved attention to the first century issue of the relationship of Gentile Christians to the Law of Moses. It begins, however, with a bad foundation (the view of Judaism) that was laid with a faulty hermeneutic. In order to support the new paradigm for understanding Paul, it becomes necessary to twist words and passages and virtually ignore others.
- II. It might seem to some that we don’t “have a dog in this fight.” While I don’t agree with the NPP’s view of Paul, I also don’t subscribe to the “old” or Lutheran paradigm either (saved by faith alone; saved by grace alone). Nevertheless, although I don’t believe Luther got it entirely right, I don’t think that the NPP “fixed” it!
- III. The idea that the average Bible student cannot understand even the general thrust of the writings of Paul without the benefit of extensive study of Jewish extra-biblical literature is disturbing. One might even conclude that God failed to preserve with obvious integrity all that we need to know for life and godliness (2 Pet. 1:3). The background assumption that the majority of Bible students since the Reformation period have misunderstood Paul’s arguments is difficult to swallow, to say the least.

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