

## Personal Reflections on the New Perspective

By Paul E. Miller

The New Perspective on Paul (NPP) is an influential scholarly movement of largely American and English scholars that has developed “a new perspective” on Paul’s theology. Among other things, it critiques the traditional Protestant view of justification by faith that we’ve inherited from Luther. E.P. Sanders’ influential book, “Paul and Palestinian Judaism” (1977) launched the movement with a fresh reading of Jewish literature written between 200 BC and 200 AD.<sup>1</sup> Sanders argues that no first century (AD) Jew thought he was earning his salvation since they already believed they were elect by virtue of their being in the covenant—born as a Jew, circumcised, etc.<sup>2</sup> They kept the law to be faithful to the covenant. Thus, our stereotype of the Pharisees as legalists isn’t correct because they weren’t trying to work their way into heaven.<sup>3</sup>

Keep in mind that I am not a Pauline scholar nor am I an expert on the NPP, so my responses below are not comprehensive and are somewhat fragmentary. Among NPP scholars, I’ve mainly read N. T. Wright, so most of my comments refer to his writings.

### Some of my positive reactions to NPP.

- NPP scholars pay attention to texts and their cultural context(s). Thus, they often have thought-provoking readings. I am often challenged when reading them.

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<sup>1</sup> Although, as many scholars have noted, Krister Stendahl’s “The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience in the West” (HTR 56 (1963): 199-215) also did much to launch the movement by raising questions about the framework in which the Reformers read Paul’s comments on law, legalism, and the relationships between Jews and Gentiles.

<sup>2</sup> Early in his *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, Sanders nuances his use of the term ‘soteriology’ and defends his preference for the term ‘pattern of religion.’ Understanding this preference helps us to see the kind of study Sanders is conducting in his work. This term ‘pattern of religion’, he says, “is the description of how a religion is perceived by its adherents to *function*.” (Sanders, 17; emphasis original) In other words, it is the “way in which a religion is understood to admit and retain members.” (Sanders, 17) In contrast to this, the term ‘soteriology’ “may connote a preoccupation with other-worldliness, or it may imply all are in need of a salvation which they do not possess, thus further implying a concept of original sin. Since much of [Second Temple] Judaism is not other-worldly, and since a concept of original or even universal sin is missing in most forms of Judaism, such connotations would be unfortunate.” (Sanders, 17-18.) So, Sanders uses non-Christian terminology in an attempt to avoid anachronistic pitfalls. In doing this, he also crafts descriptions of Second Temple Jewish sources that - from his perspective - accord with the beliefs expressed in those writings. Of course, those interpretations are, and continue to be, the subject of scholarly debate.

<sup>3</sup> Sanders noted that it is entirely possible that there were Jewish legalists, albeit hidden from view in the surviving literature of the day. “The possibility cannot be completely excluded that there were Jews accurately hit by the polemic of Matt. 23, who attended only to trivia and neglected the weightier matters. Human nature being what it is, one supposes that there were some such. One must say, however, that the surviving Jewish literature does not reveal them.” Sanders, 426. Sanders goes on: “The frequent Christian charge against Judaism, it must be recalled, is not that some individual Jews misunderstood, misapplied and abused their religion, but that Judaism necessarily tends towards petty legalism, self-serving and self-defeating casuistry, and a mixture of arrogance and lack of confidence in God.” Sanders, 427.

- They've forced conservative evangelical scholars to dig deep into Paul and not just retreat into systematic theology (as valuable as systematic theology is).
- NPP scholars (the big three are E.P. Sanders, James Dunn, and N.T. Wright) emphasize Paul's Jewish lens. This has helped scholars break free from the "Greek lens" of 19th century liberal German scholars and re-discover Paul's Jewishness. One of the primary drivers of this shift was the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The rediscovery of Jesus and Paul's Jewishness in the last 30 years is a significant break from 200 years of liberal scholarship that made Jesus almost incoherent.
- Many critiques of NPP are not aware that N.T. Wright has brilliantly critiqued Jesus Seminar scholar Marcus Borg. The NPP, following Albert Schweitzer, represents a real break with a more radical liberalism. This has been an enormous help to the church.
- With the traditional evangelical focus on individual salvation (psychology of the gospel), the NPP has made us aware of corporate elements of salvation (sociology of the gospel) and the "mind" of late Second Temple Judaism. They are concerned to help us rediscover Paul's vision of community.
- I share the NPP's concern that we've not grounded our ethic in the gospel. So, Paul's idea of a "fellowship of his suffering" permeates their thinking. For example, see Michael Gorman's *Cruciformity* and N. T. Wright's opening discussing of Philemon in *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*.
- The NPP handles Biblical texts with much more respect than classical liberalism. Some evangelical scholars consider themselves to be adherents of the NPP. As I mention below, N.T. Wright is a devout believer whose writings have often enlightened and moved me.
- N.T. Wright has focused on how a sociological and anthropological context informs our understanding of Jesus and Paul. His work has turned the tide against the previously popular influence of John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg.

#### **A summary of my negative reactions.**

- I'm usually stimulated by N.T. Wright's work. He often approaches Biblical texts in fresh ways, but, at times, he over-reads, using his particular sociological, political and anthropological lenses. I suspect that over-reading is his reaction to the narrow, individualistic lens of Pietism. For example, in *Luke for Everyone*, (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 213-214, Wright discusses the parables of the Unjust Judge and the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. He ignores Jesus' specific, personal application of the Unjust Judge and applies it to all Israel. Possibly that is in the background, but Wright makes it the foreground. So, some of the parables end up with a more political application, rather than one directly applicable to believers in the faith today.
- The NPP defines three key words or phrases differently: *justification*, *faith*, and *works of the law*. *Faith* becomes *faithfulness*; *works of the law* becomes something merely Jewish, and *justification* becomes something I do. All of these move us in a crypto-Catholic direction and away from free justification.
- The NPP has overreacted to the Reformation bias towards the individual (psychology) and over-emphasized "the group" (sociology). The NPP dislikes the simplicity of the gospel that even my daughter Kim, with all her disabilities, can understand.
- Because the NPP comes out of the world of mainstream scholarship, it has some of classical liberalism's biases: it tends to under-emphasize judgment, the wrath of God, propitiation, and the atonement. Wright formally defends those key concepts (see

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/dont-tell-me-nt-wright-denies-penal-substitution/>), but he repeatedly underweights them in his writings. For example, in *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (547-550) when discussing Paul's view of sin, Wright never mentions God's anger at sin. Or, in his discussion of Jesus's garden agony, there is no mention of propitiation or the wrath of God (*Luke for Everyone*, 270).

### Additional Reflections on NPP

1. **Life-Legalism.** The NPP misses how life-legalism dominated first century (AD) Judaism and for that matter, the human heart. They presume that because most devout Jews had a form of grace and thus seemed assured of their election they weren't legalists. Qumran documents (4QMMT) or any of the gospels confront the reader with both a virulent legalism and tribalism identical to what we see in the Gospels.
2. **The Pharisees.** The NPP tends to make the Pharisees "the good guys" (partly out of reaction to the German liberal scholarship's anti-Semitism). For example, when Wright discusses the worldview of the Pharisees (*Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 184-185), he surveys multiple late Second Temple Jewish texts but makes no reference to the clear psychological picture of the Pharisees in the Gospels. The NPP minimizes how life dominating the "Jewish boast" (to use Gathercole's phrase) was. Paul's list of seven boasts is psychological *and* sociological. Paul places himself high in his tribe, which itself is a boast against other tribes. See Simon Gathercole, *Where is Boasting?*
3. **Justification by Faith.** I believe that the NPP's readings of Paul on justification by faith miss the mark. Luther is at times poorly nuanced, but I believe Luther understands Paul on justification. I don't know how Paul could have said more clearly that we are justified by faith. This is a complex subject so I'll just refer you to the books I find to be most helpful:

Stephen Westerholm, *Justification Reconsidered: Rethinking a Pauline Theme* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013).

Dane C. Ortlund, *Zeal Without Knowledge* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012).

John Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015).

Simon Gathercole, *Defending Substitution: An Essay on Atonement in Paul* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2015).

Tom Schreiner's review of N. T. Wright's, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, in *Credo Magazine* (January 2014), "*N.T. Wright Under Review: Revisiting the Apostle Paul and His Doctrine of Justification.*"

Charles Lee Irons, *The Righteousness of God: A Lexical Examination of the Covenant-Faithfulness Interpretation*. WUNT II/386. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015).

4. **The Flesh.** Paul's language ("the flesh") suggests he is not merely speaking about a narrow Jewish problem (as the NPP would have us believe), but a problem for all mankind. The NPP over-reads their Jewish lens and misses how Paul repeatedly goes universal (Rom. 1-5) when talking about the human condition.

5. **Works of the Law.** The phrase “works of the law” only appears in Romans, Galatians and the Dead Sea Scrolls’ “Sectarian Manifesto” 4QMMT: 4Q393-399. The Manifesto is an example of legalism’s emphasis on outward purity as opposed to Paul’s emphasis on the heart and the inability to be pure before God. Thomas Schreiner’s article, “*Works of Law*” in *Novum Testamentum XXXIII*, 3 (1991) 217-244 is a good summary. See Michael O. Wise, Martin G. Abegg Jr., and Edward M. Cook, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 454-462. See also Schreiner’s review of N. T. Wright’s two volume work on Paul. <https://credomag.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/FINAL-Credo-January-2014-Final-1-25-14.pdf>
  
6. **Luther.** NPP scholars thought Luther misread Paul and misapplied justification by faith simply because most first century Jews seemed assured about their salvation. While there is truth to this (Paul is clearly confident in himself and his goodness in Phil 3:4-6), the NPP has partially misread both the 1st century and Paul (see *Where is Boasting: Early Jewish Soteriology and Paul’s Response in Romans 1-5* by Simon Gathercole). Paul’s boasting and Luther’s failure have the same root problem-- a heart curved in on itself. Both are on the Failure-Boasting Chart. Both need justification. See also John Barclay’s *Paul and the Gift*. Barclay analyzes different 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish approaches to grace showing how, yes, 1<sup>st</sup> century Judaism did have a theology of grace, but, no, it was different from Paul’s. What makes Paul’s grace so radical is that it is grace for the ungodly, those not worthy or deserving of grace (“incongruent grace”). See also *Paul and the Law* by Frank Thielman.
  
7. **Faith or Faithfulness.** Richard Hays and N. T. Wright redefine *faith* as *faithfulness*. This view, though not technically part of the NPP discussion (Dunn disagrees with Hays and Wright), dominates among mainstream scholars, and has the effect of reinforcing the NPP focus on obedience at the expense of faith. See Moises Silva’s article “Faith Versus Works of Law in Galatians,” in *Justification and Variegated Nomism, Volume 2: The Paradoxes of Paul*. Eds. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O’Brien, Mark A Seifried. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004). Finally, see Kevin McFadden’s article, *Does Pistis Mean ‘Faith(fullness)’ in Paul?* Tyndale Bulletin 66.2 (2015): 251-70.