

ARE THE NEW PERSPECTIVE ON PAUL AND REFORMED THEOLOGY COMPATIBLE? AN INITIAL ASSESSMENT

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1 INTRODUCTION

When you immerse a Christian from one theological stream into another, and they encounter for the first time significantly different interpretive frameworks of key passages and associated doctrines, what happens? Naturally, some retreat to the safety of their current convictions, some give a cursory evaluation of the new theology, then return to their current convictions, and others give the new perspective a full hearing, and make as fair a decision as they can - to reject, merge, or adopt the new theology into their milieu. For many Reformed Christians, including myself, this is exactly the experience we have when we first encounter the New Perspective on Paul (hereafter NP). On its surface, the NP seems to conflict with or even repudiate traditional Reformed understandings of the books of Galatians and Romans, and challenges the view of justification by faith alone. Are such contradictions more than superficial, and does the NP deserve a hearing among the Reformed, as well as Evangelicals and other Christians interested in 'rightly dividing the word of truth?'

The answer to the latter question is unquestionably 'yes,' though arriving at this conclusion is not as simple as it might seem. While many doctrines, including heretical ones, arise throughout history, not all are worth spending time on unless they are (1) a possibly better exegesis of Scripture, and/or (2) have considerable influence and must be understood and addressed.

Regarding a possibly better exegesis of Scripture, the Reformed come from a position of 'high bibliology.' (Wallace, 1) Most Reformed Christians will first ask "is this doctrine biblical, or does it find root in the 'low bibliology' of theological liberalism?" The good news (pun intended) is that the NP seems to have been birthed out of a serious inquiry into the history behind the Pauline epistles, not a liberal deconstruction of them. Secondly, its arguments appear to be grounded in a reasonably conservative, grammatico-historic hermeneutic, not dissimilar to that

of the Reformed (by *my* initial evaluation of the primary authors, though some conservatives vociferously disagree) (Farnell, 197). However, N.T. Wright, one of the most notable NP scholars of today, is noted for being 'soft' on one of high-bibliology's main tenets, the ideas of inerrancy and infallibility:

Though I am not unhappy with that people are trying to affirm when they use words like "infallible" (the idea that the Bible won't deceive us) and "inerrant" (the stronger idea, that the Bible can't get things wrong), I normally resist using those words myself. Ironically, in my experience, debates about words like these have often led people away from the Bible itself into all kinds of theories which do no justice to scripture as a whole...Instead, the insistence on an "infallible" or "inerrant" Bible has been seen as the bastion of orthodoxy against Roman Catholicism on the one hand and liberal modernism on the other. Unfortunately, the assumptions of both those worlds have conditioned the debate. It is no accident that this Protestant insistence on biblical infallibility arose at the same time that Rome was insisting on papal infallibility, or that the rationalism of the Enlightenment infected even those who were battling against it. (Wright, N.T., 183 #1)

Secondly, when we examine the pedigrees and perspectives of the principal proponents of the NP, chiefly E.P. Sanders, James D.G. Dunn, and N.T. Wright, we find that these men have considerable intellectual heft, being educated at the likes of Cambridge and Oxford colleges. This however, does not really add to their status in the eyes of the Reformed, since while respecting and appreciating the value of reason, they perceive that these great institutions have broadened their theological foundations and are no longer strictly for the preparation of biblically-minded ministers, but are more oriented to pure intellectual research, or worse, have drifted from Calvinist roots (Wright, Conrad, 1). So graduation from these colleges gives no assurance of high bibliology, and in fact, if these schools have been affected by the higher criticism movement, in the eyes of the Reformed, it may be likely that such graduates end up with a *low* bibliology.

Finally, regarding the exegetical quality of the NP, the Reformed will also note with some concern the strong Anglican and Methodist/Arminian background of these writers, which as we will see, may play into the NP's theological assertions or conclusions. However, since the proponents of the NP are not *clearly* liberal or beginning with a low bibliology, we must evaluate

their assumptions and arguments, not their pedigree (we would hate to make the mistakes of *ad hominem* or genetic fallacies), and since this perspective has considerable sway among many influential Christian seminaries in the West, the Reformed must evaluate and come to an understanding, if not a conclusion, as to the verity of and stance towards the NP.

Regarding the influence of the NP, many conservatives note with alarm that the NP has strong influence in modern seminaries, which means that many future ministers of the gospel may be filling our pulpits with this viewpoint.

Seminaries are places where would be ministers of the gospel are being trained to preach the gospel. And it so happens that the so-called New Perspective on Paul has crept up on us. So much so that in the mainstream of seminaries in the English speaking world today, it dominates, it is the prevailing view of most students of the Biblical, and in particular, the New Testament departments....and when students in seminary are being taught the new perspective on Paul, you shouldn't be surprised when it finds its way into the pulpits. (Venema)

I myself have become sensitized to the atmosphere of wholesale acceptance of the NP at my own Fuller Theological Seminary, among both professor and long time students. The associated veneration of N.T. Wright, on first experience, reminds me of the esteem given to the theological stars of my own conservative background, including the likes of Wayne Grudem and John Piper. I am sure that many are properly critical of Wright, but such critical distancing is not always obvious.

This paper reflects, not a final evaluation, however, but rather, a reflection of a significant first stage in evaluating the NP from my own Reformed perspective. It may, in fact, be modified or replaced by modified convictions on the subject. At the very least, however, it may be used to understand the steps that a Reformed person might pass through in assimilating the NP, as well as possible misunderstandings of it! Therefore, commencing, the question now becomes, "what are the salient assertions of the NP?"

2 A SUMMARY OF THE NP

Many have undertaken the task of preparing a concise summary of the NP, but in truth, brevity leaves out too many important clarifications, implications, and distinctions necessary to avoid confusion. However, the summary below will serve as an example of both the difficulty and incomplete nature of one's initial understanding of the NP, even at the level of a graduate student, to say nothing of the ordinary Reformed church attendee.

2.1 First Century Judaism as Non-legalistic

The primary contribution to the early stages of the NP come from E.P. Sanders' book *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, which asserted that the Judaism of the first century was not, as the Reformed followers of Martin Luther claim, primarily legalistic in its view of justification, but a covenantal, relational one, that is, one based on grace.

Our analysis of Rabbinic and other Palestinian Jewish literature did not reveal the kind of religion best characterized as legalistic works-righteousness. (Sanders, 65).

If this is the case, then whence our understanding of Pharisaical legalism? The NP argues that the Reformed perspective was informed by Luther's mis-reading of the relevant passages, in which he transferred his experience with the works-righteousness of the Catholic Church onto Paul's writings, and in doing so, forged a legalistic understanding of both the Pharisees and Paul's arguments against them. Or in the words of N.T. Wright:

The tradition of Pauline interpretation has manufactured a false Paul because they have manufactured a false Judaism for him to oppose. (Wright, N.T., 78 #2)

So essentially, having misunderstood first century Judaism, Reformed theology may have misunderstood Paul's audience and his arguments, and in so doing, may have made subsequent theological errors which need correction.

2.2 Paul's understanding and use of "Works of the law"

If Paul was not addressing legalism, especially in the relevant passages in Galatians and

Romans, what was he addressing? The NP argues that Paul's primary use of the phrase "works of the law" was addressing the Jewish use of the law under covenantal nomism, a phrase coined by Sanders to describe the actual theology of the first century Jew:

Briefly put, covenantal 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 transgression. (Sanders, 75)

There are three important ideas here. First, first century Jews believed that *initial* justification was by grace (entering into the covenant by birth as a Jew), not by some ritualistic legalism. Second, obedience was not primarily for the sake of justification, but for the sake of exhibiting 'boundary markers' of faith, or as a sign to others that they were God's elect, or as Gorman puts it "Jews expressed their gracious election by obeying the Law" (Gorman, 20). And third, obedience to the law is what *kept* one in the covenant. The third point will be addressed later, but the first two points amount to a gracious Judaism, and a largely symbolic, rather than legalistic understanding of the use of the law.

In this view, the main error of the Judaizers (Galatians 2) was *a Jewish nationalism, and exclusion of the Gentiles*, or a requirement that God's covenant people should still essentially have the traditional Jewish cultural distinctives. So when Paul argues against keeping the law, he is not primarily arguing against a legalistic works-righteousness, but rather, a narrow Jewish interpretation of what being in the covenant looks like:

What [Paul] is concerned to exclude is the racial, not the ritual expression of faith; it is nationalism which he denies, not activism. (Dunn, 115).

The NP argues that the Jewish emphasis on obedience to the Jewish law was nationalistic and exclusionary to the Gentiles – it was not concerned with obeying the moral law for righteousness sake, but obeying the outward 'signature' practices of dietary, Sabbath, and circumcision rules.

2.3 Justification and Works

This is perhaps where the conflict between the NP and Reformed theology really begins to emerge, and where the theology gets more esoteric and harder to grasp. The NP, in my current estimation, emphasizes that Paul is primarily concerned, not with eliminating works as part of the salvific equation, but addressing their role and efficacy in the New Covenant perspective, vs. the Jewish covenantal nomist one. This view, mentioned as point three in the section above, has two main features.

The first is that there is no longer a place for Jewish boundary markers, but there is a *Christian analog* to said markers. They have been replaced by *an obedience to the moral law, motivated by love and enabled by the indwelling Spirit*. That obedience is still part of Paul's calculus of salvation can be seen in many of his remarks (Romans 1:5, 6:16, 16:26), not to mention other NT references, such as the epistle of James. Regarding another Pauline verse, Dunn notes:

No passage may signal this more clearly than 1 Cor. 7:19, where Paul both regards circumcision with indifference and, in the same breath, insists on the importance of keeping God's commandments. (Dunn, 55)

According to the NP, these works are part of the "fulfillment of the law" of the NT covenant to which we become participants (Romans 13:10, cf. Galatians 5:14). While the Old Covenant was weak in that we could not fulfill the covenant, under the new covenant, we *are* enabled to obey the law of love by the spirit:

For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. (Romans 8:3-4)

This brings us to the second NP claim regarding justification and works, an extension of the first, and the principle that is really the crux of the potential disagreement with Reformed theology – that, like covenantal nomism, the New Testament view provides grace for *initial* justification, but requires works for *final* justification. On first glance, this statement seems to

indicate that the NP is merely synergism, or semi-Pelagianism in new clothes, and critics have said so (Dunn, 75). Or, to characterize this view with less heretical nomenclature, this seems like not much more than Arminianism. Dunn, who seems to be the most accommodating to Reformed theology among NP scholars, denies these allegations, and attempts to define and defend the NP position on justification in many detailed essays, but this quote seems representative:

Critics, please note: my concern is not to argue that Paul's understanding of salvation was synergistic: I have no doubt that I and all other believers in Christ will be saying 'the payer of humble access' throughout our lives to the end. My concern is rather twofold: (a) to question whether the charge of synergism should laid so confidently at the door of Judaism when some of Paul's language seems vulnerable to the same charge; and (b) to ask proponents of Pauline 'monergism' to take more seriously and with due seriousness the other Pauline teaching and exhortations....I have to insist that it is Paul's own teachings and urgings which force the issue upon us....I do not for a minute suppose that Paul was not aware of the danger that too much emphasis on 'the obedience of faith', on 'putting to death the deeds of the body', and such like, could lead to reliance upon and pride in achievement. But that clearly did not prevent him from urging such responsibility on believers. The integration here is one which both sides of the debate occasioned by the new perspective need to work hard to retain (Dunn, 88-89).

Certainly, Dunn is correct that we must now work hard to determine how the NP impacts our current doctrines. My overview of the NP above merely introduces the most critical of the many important doctrinal issues touched by the NP, and space does not permit me to address all of them. However, in the remainder of this paper, I would like to address the following dilemma – based on the above definition of the NP, and the traditional Reformed ideas of justification by faith, are we at an impasse? Or can a meaningful adjustment to Reformed theology be crafted to incorporate the insights of the NP?

3 EVALUATING THE NP WITH REFORMED CONCERNS

3.1 Is the NP a Monolith?

Before comparing, contrasting, and criticizing the NP, it must be stated that the NP can not be so easily nailed down to one hard set of ideas. In fact, even Dunn himself admits that the NP ought to perhaps be called the New Perspectives (plural) on Paul (Dunn, 1-2). So rather than address a singular, perhaps even majority NP position, it seems better to include the alternatives in order to include the widest birth of agreement possible between our two positions.

3.2 Are 'works of the law' always or only boundary markers?

While the phrase 'works of the law' appears primarily in the sections of Galatians and Romans that are contextually surrounded by the concerns of the Judaizers (circumcision, dietary, and Sabbath observance), certainly not all Pauline references to the law can be characterized as merely referring to boundary markers. If an NP adherent wants to make this claim, not only would this challenge the idea of the NT refuting works-righteousness, it would seem to smack of over-application. Dunn agrees, stating

Even if it could be accepted that the works of the law in Gal. 2.16 seem to refer in particular to the boundary issues of circumcision and food laws, few are persuaded that the equivalent initial reference to works of the law in Rom. 3.20 and its subsequent reference in 9.11-12 in particular can be so restricted in scope. And for most, the obvious reference of 4.4-5 is to a works-righteousness. (Dunn, 44)

I would add that Ephesians 2:8-9 seems to be more global in scope, and referring to works-righteousness. Dunn adroitly addresses this point, concluding

Ephesians shows that the challenge of the new perspective on Paul's soteriology is not best posed as "Lutheran or New Perspective" but better as "Lutheran and New Perspective". (Dunn 57).

To push back further even on our Galatian and early Romans passages, it could be argued that, while Paul certainly is referring to their use as nationalistic Jewish boundary

markers, he is also using them as *halakhoth* – representative of the whole law (Dunn, 15). In that case, even if the NP is correct in its assertion of Paul's primary anti-nationalist and nomist thrust, it is quite conceivable that Paul is also purposefully using these to refer to all of the law, and in so doing, rejecting Jewish synergism.

3.3 How does the NP address synergism?

The accusation of synergism for both covenantal nomism and the NP is hard to avoid, but NP proponents like Dunn do provide a defense. Their first defense, and really a good one, is an offense – the claim that Reformed theology, from the monergistic side, does not do an adequate job in addressing the role of works in our salvation. Reformed theology must defend itself against simplistic answers to passages like the justification of Abraham by works in James (the works were evidence of his faith, not credited to him as righteousness), or the judgment of all by their deeds (there are two judgments, the second being the *bema* judgment, not for salvation, but for rewards) do not entirely explain the consistent linkage between works and final justification in the New Testament. The NP claims that its clear separation of initial and final justification, connected by works of obedience, clarifies these passages better.

The second defense against synergism comes in the answer that the main difference between the Jewish and NP views of the obedience required to assure final justification is that the New Testament obedience is Spirit enabled – thus providing a type of monergistic solution.

Dunn writes:

In the current debate the principal answer the conundrum is found in the Spirit. In contrast to the failure of the old covenant to meet the demands of the law, members of the new covenant are enabled or empowered to 'fulfill the requirements of the law' by the Spirit (Rom. 8.4); 'those who have the Spirit actually keep the law.' (Dunn, 82)

Regarding the further accusation that even under Spirit-led conditions, no believer will obey the law completely and therefore by justified by their works, Dunn admits that the 'alien righteousness' of the Reformed doctrine of imputation must stand, even though NP adherents

shy away from the term because it implies a significant diminishment of the role of works and personal transformation (sanctification) in our final justification.

So in Paul's soteriology, faith and the Spirit do not reduce or remove the human responsibility of obedience...and the expected outcome is not simply imputed righteousness, but transformed persons. This need not count as a denial that for Paul the righteousness found finally acceptable in the believer at the final judgment is and always will be an 'alien righteousness,' but equally, such an affirmation should not be seen as a denial that the believer the one who 'walks by the Spirit' is expected to fulfill the requirements of the law. It is not helpful to insist that justification is entirely extrinsic and forensic, if it narrows down the process of salvation to the single metaphor of justification and does not give sufficient attention to the transformation which is equally part of that process. (Dunn, 85).

4 CONCLUSION - INCORPORATING INSIGHTS FROM THE NP

It seems probable that the first two pillars of the NP outlined above, that of a more gracious first century Judaism, and the cultural and synergistic use of the law as boundary markers, are an important contribution to the understanding of Paul, and this view has some superior explanatory power for a wide range of Pauline passages that, under Reformed theology, remained obscure or existed with strained interpretations. Further, the criticism that Reformed theology de-emphasizes the role of works in justification, is a good one, even if it can be rebuffed with theological proofs – the Reformed, at least in their praxis, ought to evaluate the type of Christians it is producing when they heavily emphasize a monergistic view of salvation. In conclusion, what final observations and warnings can be provided to each side in this debate?

4.1 Re-evaluating Luther AND Catholicism

Is it certain that Luther projected his own experience onto Paul, and so misinterpreted first century Judaism as a works-righteousness system? I think that point is highly debatable. What is certain is that the views unearthed by Sanders have been historically overlooked, and they broaden our understanding of Paul's milieu significantly. However, this does not mean that Judaism had not degenerated to a highly synergistic system, or to at least a 'legalistic nomism.' (Dunn, 78) It is quite possible that Luther, to some extent, rightly understood Pharisaical Judaism to be legalistic. Additionally, we should not assume that the Catholicism of Luther's day was not equally nomistic, rather than legalistic – certainly the official teachings of the Church emphasized initial justification by grace, and even Augustine's 'infused righteousness.' It is reasonable to conclude that it is not necessary to accuse Luther of projection or misapprehension of first century Judaism, but rather, an overly narrow understanding that omitted the key features of covenantal nomism and boundary markers.

4.2 Limiting the boundary markers interpretation

One of the key decisions that affects our assessment of the compatibility of the NP and Reformed theology is the extent to which we apply the 'boundary marker' understanding of the phrase 'works of the law.' If, as Dunn seems to do, we limit its use as the primary understanding of certain passages (specifically Gal. 2.6 and Romans 1), and allow that Paul is secondarily addressing Jewish synergism, I think we can use the NP to expand our theology rather than limit or replace it. If, however, we are more aggressive in applying this rubric to the Pauline use of the law, we may have more difficulty. In this case, it might be possible to say that *sola fide* is a proper application of the scriptures, but not the primary teaching, we could still have somewhat of an agreement, though much more tenuous. Perhaps this is the position that a more Arminian-leaning NP adherent might take, but this would not, I assume, satisfy a Reformed Christian.

4.3 Limiting the role of works in final justification

Certainly, the NP can easily be interpreted or even adhered to in a manner that is Arminian and even synergistic. Naturally, these two positions are not truly harmonizable with Reformed doctrine. Even the concept of 'final justification' is a bit anathema to the Reformed, since they see justification as a one-time imputation near the commencement of Salvation (cf. the *Ordo Salutis*), and to not see sanctification or works as playing any role in justification, but merely as indicators and effects of regeneration and initial/final justification. However, if, like Dunn, we are merely redefining our use of the words for clarification, I think we can certainly agree that, in some sense, the works of the believer complete their salvation, even in a Reformed view.

4.4 Admitting the mystery of faith and works

What is welcome about the NP is its contribution to understanding first century Judaism, and the subsequent expanded understanding of Paul and his emphasis on the Jewish/Gentile

divide, and of his insistence on some sort of new covenant obedience in the Christian life, which certainly can be downplayed, if not dismissed, in Reformed theology and praxis. Additionally, we must all admit that we are approaching the mystery of faith and works, perhaps from opposite sides of the divide, and this discussion in the end may really be about emphases and balance, not exclusion of one or the other perspective. The tension across such paradoxes must be explored and maintained if we are to avoid the heresies associated with taking only one side. It appears that the NP's doctrinal impact, in the end, merely addresses justification and works, and is a re-exploration of what the Reformed sometimes 'shoehorn' into the doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints – such an approach is nothing if not tidy. But the mysteries of faith are not all easily bounded, and the NP reminds us of that. In the end, it seems that a moderated NP most certainly contributes to a Reformed understanding of Paul, and does not controvert it.

5 AFTERWORD

Coming from a post-Arminian Reformed history, I found the NP a significant challenge, both because of its criticisms of Luther and Reformed doctrine, as well as the esoteric and refined nature of its claims. In point of fact, my powerful experience of being rescued by Reformed doctrine from the torment of Arminian holiness, a type of covenantal nomism, certainly predisposed me to rejecting the NP on its face. The power of the Reformed message to deliver one from a life of works cannot be overvalued. Additionally, to think that Paul was not addressing the ubiquitous human tendency towards legalistic righteousness, but was instead merely addressing a parochial issue, seemed to diminish the breadth and applicability of scripture to the human condition. I have enjoyed, however, the challenge of understanding and incorporating the NP into my own perspective, and the privilege and treat of reading James Dunn's conciliatory, thorough, and erudite prose on the matter.

I regret that I did not have the space to address such interesting topics as 'the righteousness of God' or the understanding of 'from faith to faith' and the Habakkuk reference of Romans 1:17, all of which open up many interesting possibilities. On this, however, I think I side with the approach of one of my favorite theologians, John Stott, where he remarks

Thus, 'the righteousness of God' can be thought of as a divine attribute (our God is a righteous God), or as activity (He comes to our rescue), or achievement (He bestows on us a righteous status). All three are true and have been held by different scholars, sometimes in relation to each other. For myself, I have never been able to see why we have to choose, and why all three should not be combined....In other words, it is at one and the same time a quality, an activity, and a gift. (Stott, 63).

It may be right to assume that the intelligence of Paul and of the Divine author were sometimes intending to address more than one point at a time with a single passage, such as both boundary markers and Jewish synergism. Of course, it is still our intellectual duty to determine that, and whether or not there was a primary v. secondary import. I think, however, that this multi-purpose hermeneutic is beneficial to the understanding and integration of the NP into our

existing, hard wrought historic theologies – it may be counterproductive to couch such initiatives as an attempt to overthrow tradition or attack our spiritual forefathers like Luther (or Augustine, Arminius, etc). To this end, I found Dunn's explicitly conciliatory approach accessible, friendly, and convincing. Thank you for recommending that book in the syllabus!

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the Ivy League Schools, and discontented Calvinists actually spawned new schools in response, who in turn became theologically liberal as time passed. This trend is not forgotten by the Reformed, and with the other historic liberal intellectual movements like that of Higher Criticism, Calvinists enforce their wariness of Ivy League credentials.

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