

# NEW PERSPECTIVE ON PAUL (NPP) THEOLOGICAL THEORY

## AN ADVISORY PAPER

(ADOPTED BY THE GENERAL PRESBYTERY IN SESSION AUGUST 4-5, 2014)

In recent years, a number of New Testament scholars have advanced several fresh proposals relating to the nature of Second Temple Judaism and its relationship to Paul's view of the Jewish Law, or Torah. These views have come to be known as "The New Perspective on Paul," and by the popular acronym NPP. While certain proposals of the NPP seem apt and are certainly worthy of note, others seem to place core New Testament teachings such as the atonement of Christ and justification by faith at risk.

As the NPP has become increasingly influential in contemporary scholarship and among many emerging church leaders, it is important that certain cautions be noted among our Fellowship, hence this intentionally concise advisory paper.

### What is it?

The New Perspective on Paul (NPP) is primarily a shift in the way that scholars interpret Paul. It is most influential as a force among Protestant scholars, with less debate and resistance within Catholic and Orthodox circles.

Early forerunners of the NPP include Krister Stendahl (1963) and E. P. Sanders (1977), who argued that Lutheran and Reformed views on Paul were faulty by attributing to first-century Judaism what were actually characteristics of sixteenth-century Catholicism. J. D. G. Dunn and N. T. Wright have since become the most prominent scholars associated with the NPP. But it should be noted that there is in fact no unified NPP voice. Wright, for instance, wants "to make it clear that there are probably almost as many 'New Perspective' positions as there are writers espousing it—and that I disagree with most of them."<sup>1</sup>

The common thread in the NPP is that the "old perspective" on Paul and Judaism of Luther, Calvin, and their followers is in some way incorrect. But in many ways the NPP is more a New Perspective on Judaism (NPJ) than a new perspective on Paul. Let it be noted that the precise error of the "old perspective" is disputed. The crucial question becomes, "What did Paul really mean in his statements on the Law?"

For Sanders and Dunn, Judaism's general possession and performance of Torah seems to confer a moral status of rightness with God (Sanders's *covenantal nomism*). Wright sees the Jews' possession and use of Torah as a contrast with paganism, not as the means for gaining merit, as traditionally understood in Protestantism. By contrast, the NPP understands Paul and first-century Judaism as believing that the Law distinguishes Jews from Gentiles, a sort of ethnic identifier. Keeping Torah was not at all considered a way of gaining God's saving favor through one's merit. On the whole, the main battlefield of the NPP proper is this issue: what role does the Law play in the salvation of humanity

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<sup>1</sup> N. T. Wright, "New Perspectives on Paul" (10th Edinburgh Dogmatics Conference, Rutherford House, Edinburgh, August 25–28, 2003). [http://ntwrightpage.com/Wright\\_New\\_Perspectives.htm](http://ntwrightpage.com/Wright_New_Perspectives.htm).

and in particular of Israel? Can a person be saved by obeying the Law as given by God to Israel?

### **What benefit does it bring to the body of Christ?**

The most significant insight brought by the NPP is that Judaism was not entirely and exclusively focused on works of righteousness through Law keeping. This is correct, as witnessed by those who chose to follow Christ from among the ranks of the Pharisees and other observant Jews. Not all Jews were rigid legalists.

The NPP also encourages the reader to examine Scripture for himself or herself, rather than relying on perspectives of others that might be biased. For instance, Luther's struggle with the Papacy of his day may have caused him to read a similar struggle into Paul's criticisms of the Law in Galatians. Paul would never agree with the anti-Semitism or anti-Judaism which some justify on the basis of Luther's approach.

The NPP offers a beneficial reminder: God has always sought worshippers who worship him "in the Spirit and in truth" (John 4:24).<sup>2</sup> A genuine relationship with God will produce correct behavior. In every generation, God has had people who have sought Him and loved Him and who in faith observed His ordained sacrifices and laws. At the same time, others tried merely to control or cajole Him by means of sacrifice and law keeping. God has always wanted the hearts of His people rather than rote obedience (Isaiah 1; Hosea 6:6).

### **What cautions should be noted?**

The redefining of "works of the Law" to mean "covenantal markers" (and not meritorious achievement) raises significant concerns. NPP proponents believe that what Paul "really said" is that first-century Judaism was not fundamentally lacking in its relationship with God, but needed to be more inclusive. In their thinking, Paul did not experience conversion on the Damascus Road, but rather a calling to the mission of including the Gentiles in this covenant.

While Luther may have read too much into Paul's highlighting of the shortcomings of the Law, it should not be assumed that Paul actually considered the Law adequate in and of itself, as if Christ's sacrifice were not needed. Any perspective on Paul, Judaism, or Christ that renders Christ's work on the cross as an optional or unnecessary event contradicts Scripture and Paul (1 Corinthians 1:18; 2:2; etc.).<sup>3</sup> Other New Testament writings, ignored by some NPP proponents, also make it clear that the Law has been superseded by the sacrifice of Christ (John 3:14–31; Acts 15:7–11; Hebrews 7:12, 18–19; 8:7–13; chapters 9 and 10; 1 Peter 1:18–21; 1 John 2:1–2; 3:4–5; 4:9–10). To some extent, the NPP inverts Paul's question in Romans 3:29, in effect asking, "Is Jesus the Savior of the Gentiles only, or also of the Jews?" Some in the NPP would argue that the Cross won salvation only for Gentiles, while Jews are saved through the Law as a "covenant marker." This is in conflict with Romans 9–11, which completely rejects the idea that Christ's work is not of vital importance for Jews.

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<sup>2</sup> All Bible citations are from the New International Version (2011) unless otherwise noted.

<sup>3</sup> One must keep in mind the opening disclaimer offered by N. T. Wright. He is not one of those proposing that the sacrifice of Christ is superfluous for Israel.

We affirm Statement 5 of our Statement of Fundamental Truths, one of our cardinal doctrines: “Man’s only hope of redemption is through the shed blood of Jesus Christ the Son of God.” As to the conditions of salvation, “Salvation is received through repentance toward God and faith toward the Lord Jesus Christ. By the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, being justified by grace through faith, man becomes an heir of God, according to the hope of eternal life.” Since Israel’s (and humanity’s) Messiah has now been made known, salvation is found in Him alone, for Jews and Gentiles alike.

Doctrines such as understandings of sin and the end times are also affected by one’s stance on the Law, its meaning, and its effectiveness. However, these are not at the core of NPP discussion. They are therefore not addressed in this paper. Moreover, on these doctrines, there is even greater disagreement within NPP ranks than there is on the Law and the justification of mankind. So certain participants in the NPP may well raise further concerns as to theological compatibility with the historic Assemblies of God position.

God’s plan of salvation has stayed the same. Do some individuals in the Christian church today wrongly trust in works for their salvation? Yes, just as there were Jews in the time of Christ and Paul who did the same. That there also were Jews in the time of Christ and of Paul who had a genuine covenantal relationship of faith to God is not the question. Rather, was this truth adequately understood among all Jews? If so, why was Christ’s death necessary? If an adequate solution existed for the salvation of even a portion of humanity, surely the Cross is a grotesque and horrid event. Authentically biblical corrections offered within the NPP should be accepted. The incorrect conclusions many derive from it must be rejected.

## **Bibliography and Reading List**

The major proponents of the NPP, in their own words:

Dunn, James D. G. *A New Perspective on Jesus: What the Quest for the Historical Jesus Missed*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005.

Dunn, James D. G. *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*. Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1998.

Sanders, E. P. *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977.

Stendahl, Krister. “The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West.” *Harvard Theological Review* 56 (3): 199–215.

Wright, N. T. *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005.

Writings explaining and responding to the NPP:

Carson, D. A., Peter Thomas O’Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid. *Justification and Variegated Nomism*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001. (2 volumes: vol. 1 responds to Sanders, vol. 2 responds to Dunn)

Perrin, Nicholas, Richard B. Hays, and N. T. Wright. *Jesus, Paul, and the People of God: A Theological Dialogue with N. T. Wright*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2011. (Challenges to and responses by N. T. Wright)

Stuhlmacher, Peter. *Revisiting Paul’s Doctrine of Justification: A Challenge to the New Perspective*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001. (A fairly easy read, challenging the NPP.)

Westerholm, Stephen. *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The "Lutheran" Paul and His Critics*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004. (A weightier overview on the NPP.)