

A new perspective on St. Paul

A new approach to Paul within the context of first century Judaism

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Within the Catholic world it may not seem like an important phenomenon, but the *New Perspective on Paul* does constitute a major shift in the way our protestant brothers and sisters see the Apostle in their theology and soteriology (theology of salvation). This 'new perspective', in short, means that Luther's doctrine of justification in which the individual stands before God, was erroneously based on the writings of St. Paul, without taking into account the social structures of first century Judaism.

If this would indeed be the case, we would be right to rejoice, because understanding Paul's own view on justification does not only give us a better understanding of the young Church, but could constitute a reconciliation in contemporary exegesis and theology and the ecumenical dialogue between Christians (and even between Christians and Jews) altogether.

In this article, we will examine the background of Luther's doctrine of justification, the social structures within Judaism in the first century, the origins of the *new perspective* at the beginning of the 70s, what this *new perspective* means and the contemporary criticism it faces.

Luther and the 16th century Church

In the Letter to the Romans, which Luther read as penance, he discovered that God had forgiven his sins, not because of "Luther's work's in Germany, but because of Christ's work on Calvary." (Kreeft, 1988, p.277), or in Romans 1:17, 'Anyone who is upright through faith will live.' Or Galatians 2:16, '[We know that] no human being can be found upright by keeping the Law.'

In his book *Freiheit eines Christenmenschen*, Luther explains that we are justified by faith in the work of Jesus Christ, not by our own works. We should not work like slaves to earn our way into heaven. Luther has a rather individual outlook on the salvation mystery where the individual and his conscience stand before the Almighty God.

According to Joseph Yoder this individual aspect is central to Protestantism, especially after "the merging of Protestant extentionalism with modern secular personalism – and even more especially since Freud and Jung imposed upon everyone in our culture the vision of a self-centered reacting organism." (Yoder, 1972, p. 135)

Central to the *new perspective* on Paul is how the Apostle views these 'works of the law'. A correct view on first century Judaism and the way the Jews saw the Law is crucial. Mattison (2008) concludes that for centuries we looked at Judaism as everything Christianity was not. Where we as Christians were focused on heaven, spirituality and humility, Judaism was focused on the world, the flesh and pride.

Luther, then, saw Judaism as the compilation of everything that was wrong with the 16th century institutional Church and her indulgences. In light of this Medieval Church, Mattison continues, "traditional Protestant theology is reinforced in all its particulars, along with its limitations". (Mattison, 2008, p. 2)

The *new perspective* takes a different view than Luther did. Bieringer (1990) notes that the *new perspective* looks at Paul's letters as documents of real human interaction, ordinary means of communication. He distinguishes four dimensions: self revelation, information, appeal and relation. In the past, the last two aspects never really played a role, the letters were more often interpreted as information given by one specific person,

Paul... not as Paul the minister (not just the theologian) who wrote his letters to people entrusted to his pastoral care.

In order to understand Paul, then, it is important to see who he wrote his letters to and why. In short: we cannot just ignore the historical context of these letters, as well as Judaism as it was practised in the first century A.D. This brings us to the hermeneutical question: what is the historical context of Paul's words.

First century Judaism

Luther and the reformers of his time read in Paul's texts – especially the quoted passages from Romans and Galatians – the burning issues they were facing in their battle against the legalistic aspects of the Church in their days. They departed from an unfounded view of first century Judaism.

And they were not alone. Mattison (2008) mentions that many theologians, including Bultmann and Schürer, departed from similar views on Judaism, based on an erroneous interpretation of rabbinic literature. This is the reason why Judaism was often looked upon as a very legalistic religion, bound by the Torah, the Law.

Since the 1900s we have seen more critics raise their voice against this view. Within the *new perspective* this resulted in E.P. Sander's book *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* in 1977. Opposite the caricature that Judaism had become, he proposes the so-called *covenantal nomism*. What he means by that, is that God in his mercy has chosen Israel and has given them the Torah. This means two things:

1. God will honor the decision He made when He chose Israel to be his people, and
2. He demands that the Israelites remain faithful to the covenant. God rewards the faithful and punishes those that stray.

Moreover, the Law presents us with ways of reconciliation, of returning to the covenant. Being faithful to the covenant is not something legalistic as if it were the road to salvation, but is first and foremost an expression of the covenant itself. In addition, we see that mercy and reconciliation play a key role in the Law.

With this view of Judaism in mind, we can look at the meaning this has for the interpretation of St. Paul in the *new perspective*.

Origins and development of the *new perspective*

At the origin of the *new perspective* on St. Paul, we should mention the Lutheran theologians Krister Stendahl and Ed Sanders. Stendahl (1963) wrote an article in which he explains why Luther's image of Paul's theology is off. This image corresponds more with incorrect assumptions about Paul than with what Paul actually wrote. Sander's book (1977), which is an in-depth analysis of Jewish literature, has already been mentioned. He puts forward that Luther's theology was based on an off beam image of Judaism in Paul's days.

In 1982 James Dunn uses the term *new perspective* for the first time, after which many other writers, such as the Anglican Bishop Nicolas Wright, have devoted numerous books and articles to the matter. Today a considerable collection of articles about the *new perspective* can be found at thePaulPage.com.

It is important to mention that not all authors think alike on the matter. While this article proposes mainly an image as it is given to us by Stendahl, Sanders and Dunn, there are many other views. It is best summarized by what Bishop Wright said at the 10th dogmatic conference in Edinburgh: "there are probably almost as many 'new perspectives' positions as there are writers espousing it – and I disagree with most of them." (Wright, 2003, p. 2)

The new perspective – Stendahl and Sanders

Stendahl (1963) wonders whether Paul was just like Luther: an individual who was struggling with his conscience before God. He concludes that this is not the case and that Paul was not plagued by the relentless introspection that Luther subjected himself to, and which has become so typical to our Western mindset. In 2 Corinthians 1:12 we read: "There is one thing that we are proud of, namely our conscientious conviction that we have always behaved towards everyone, and especially towards you, with that unalloyed holiness that comes from God."

Stendahl calls our attention to the passage in Romans 7 regarding the Law. It does not condemn the person, but sin and flesh. The Law in itself is good and holy. There is a law in the nature of sin, and this is what Paul wants to highlight; not some extreme form of Western legalistic thinking. Because Luther has an introspective conscience and looks at Paul from this legalistic point of view, he reads that the human will is the center of moral corruption, while Romans 7:18 reads: "for though the will to do what is good is in me, the power to do it is not."

Based on Stendahl's findings, we can conclude that St. Paul did not protest against any sort of legalism or self-justification before God, when he was speaking about the works of the Law. But against what did he protest, then? Sanders (1983) indicates that we should look at this discussion within the framework of first century Judaism. In this setting the discussion is concerned about the Law and whether the gentiles should continue practising the works of the Jewish Law. Sanders write:

The dispute in Galatians is not about "doing" as such. Neither of the opposing factions [Paulus en de Joden] saw the requirement of "doing" to be a denial of faith. [...] The conflict between "doing" as such and "faith" [die centraal stond bij Luther] is simply not present in Galatians. What was at stake was not a way of life summarized by the word "trust" versus a mode of life summarized by "requirements", but whether or not the requirement for membership in the Israel of God would result in there being "neither Jew nor Greek." (Sanders, 1983, p. 159)

As we already saw when we talked about the covenantal nomism, there is a difference between *entering into* the covenant and *remaining in* the covenant. What St. Paul means when he talks about being justified is the entering into the covenant. This entering into the covenant is based on someone's faith. It is the person's faith that makes him justified. The Law, the Torah, demands more, i.e. circumcision.

When Paul was talking about justification, he was did not mean the works someone has to do to remain within the covenant. God asks us, just like the people of Israel, to maintain his law and continue to do good. So St. Paul, in fact, presents us with anthropology of his own: he wants to do away with the distinction between faith and acts, something Jesus noticed in the Pharisees.

To sum it up: when it concerns the demands to enter into the covenant, the works of the law do not matter. When it concerns our behavior, we must fulfill the law.

The second item that Stendahl brings up is the soteriological status of the heathens. Stendahl sees this as the central motive in the letters of Paul. De Vries describes thus: "Das Thema der Rechtfertigung dagegen ist diesem Oberthema [de soteriologische status van de heidenen] untergeordnet und dient nur dem Ziel auch die Rechte der heidnischen Konvertiten zu sichern." (De Vries, 2007, p. 1)¹

¹ On the other hand, the theme of justification is second to the main theme [the soteriological status of the heathens] and is only there to ascertain the rights of the heathen converts.

In other words, Paul uses his 'justification theory' to preach salvation to the heathens. Luther only applied it to the individual plagued by his conscience. He took the journey of Paul to Damascus as a true conversion (change of religion), instead of a vocation to convert the heathens.

Sanders (1983) assumes more or less the same, when he says that the salvation Christ brought is for everyone, both heathen and Jew. And if so, salvation cannot come from the law alone. In maintaining the law and doing good works, we do not deny our faith in God.

The new perspective – Dunn

James Dunn (1983) was the one who coined the term *new perspective* for the first time. He adds a new dimension to Sanders' view as he delves deeper into the meaning of the term 'works of the law'.

In the old, Lutheran, perspective on Paul, works are the things we do to live up to God's standards. In this perspective, Paul would be against the idea that we as humans could justify ourselves before God through our good works.

In the *new perspective*, according to Dunn, works are a sign of the covenant. He outlines the situation in Paul's days in which many gentile Christians started to put their faith in the Torah to be a part of the (saved) people of Israel. In Paul's time, Christians were confronted with a choice: continue with the ancient customs of the Torah, or accept the new Hellenistic customs.

In the *new perspective* Paul is then interpreted as critical towards the gentile Christians, who were of the opinion that they somehow better if they followed the traditional Jewish customs, such as circumcision, food laws and the observance of certain days.

Dunn, like the others, assumes a Paulinian anthropology, where 'acting' is a result of 'being':

"We should not let our grasp of Paul's reasoning slip back into the old distinction between faith and works in general. [...] Paul is not arguing here for a faith which is totally passive because it fears to become a 'work'. It is the demand for a particular work as the necessary expression of faith which he denies." (Dunn, 1990, p. 198)

Criticism on the new perspective

Because the *new perspective* really touches the heart of the protestant faith, it is not surprising that it is a very controversial subject, although it is a very contemporary one about which consensus is growing (Mattison, 2008).

The supporters of the *new perspective* feel that the supporters of the old perspective disregard the Bible and historical evidence, in order to remain faithful to their traditions and confessions of faith. The supporters of the old perspective (Piper, 2007) feel the new perspective undermines the fundamental values of Christianity. It goes against the confessions of faith within the Lutheran and reformed traditions. They are of the opinion that the *new perspective* portrays Paul and Christianity in an erroneous way and Augustine and his destination theory are often quoted to support this.

Conclusion

The conflict surrounding St. Paul's justification has remained a relevant subject since the 16th century. The *new perspective* holds that the rejection of 'all good works' is in no way a correct interpretation of the letters of Paul. As true as it may be that someone cannot earn his salvation before God, this was not what Paul was trying to say.

By studying the text in its historical context and the social structures of the time (the appeal and relation dimensions taken into account, to speak with Bieringer), we can appreciate that the letter to the Romans was meant for the first century Christians in Rome: a church that found itself in the midst of an ethnical and social conflict, in which issues such as circumcision, Jewish holidays, meat that was sacrificed to heathen gods, etc. all played a very real role.

This means that when Paul speaks about the 'works of the law', he does not mean you should not perform them because of your faith and out of fear you would take pride of them and not Gods grace. He was in fact speaking about the heathen Christians who had begun to observe the Torah so they could become part of the chosen people of God. According to Paul, one was already part of this covenant if one had accepted the redemption through Christ, the Messiah, and not because of the works of the law, such as circumcision.

Once one was part of the covenant, however, one was still obliged to remain in it by performing good works. Not in the way the Pharisees did, but from Paul's anthropology, that the things you do come from the person you are.

In this light, the *new perspective* on Paul is an encouraging phenomenon within protestant theology, which provides the ecumenical dialogue with new hand holds to bring Protestants and Catholics closer together.

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