

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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The New Perspective on Paul

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The Old Perspective on Paul

Let us first recall what we are being asked to discard, the "old perspective on Paul." The old perspective declared that Paul was concerned about God's law, sin, and individual salvation, and taught the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith alone. When we speak of "justification by faith alone" there are at least two terms that have to be defined, *justification* and *faith*. First, what is justification? "Justification is an act of God's free grace wherein he pardons all our sins and accepts us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us and received by faith alone" (*Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Question 33). A fuller explanation is given in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*:

Those whom God effectually calls he also freely justifies, not by infusing righteousness into them but by pardoning their sins and accounting and accepting their persons as righteous; not for anything wrought in them or done by them, but for Christ's sake alone; not by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience to them as their righteousness, but by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them, they receiving and resting on him and his righteousness by faith; which faith they have not of themselves: It is the gift of God [11.1].

Justification is God's declaring believing sinners not guilty on the basis of the imputation of Christ's righteousness to them, and faith is the simple "act of believing."

The Gospel, the good news, presupposes the bad news, the fall into sin and man's hopeless condition before a just and holy God, as recounted in *Genesis*. Man violated the covenant of works, which is the covenant God made with Adam in the Garden before the fall. As the *Westminster Confession* states it: "The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience" (7.2). This is the covenant that threatened death for disobedience. As

Scripture says: "And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the Garden you may freely eat, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat of it; for in the day that you eat thereof you shall surely die" (*Genesis* 2:16-17). "[T]he soul that sins, it shall die" (*Ezekiel* 18:4). "You shall therefore keep my statutes and my judgments, which, if a man do, he shall live in them; I am the LORD" (*Leviticus* 18:5). The bad news is that we have all broken this covenant; Adam's sin is imputed to all his posterity by ordinary generation; we are all under its just curse; and as a consequence, having been born in sin and iniquity, in the image of our fallen parents, we have no ability to keep its terms.

The good news, the Gospel, is that Christ kept this covenant on behalf of his people, his elect. He hung on the cross in our place and suffered the death that we deserved. He paid the penalties that this covenant required of those who transgress it. And more than that, he kept its terms for us. He led the perfectly sinless life of faithful and personal obedience that God requires of us, thereby earning everlasting life for us. Christ's perfect obedience to the law of God, his sinless perfection, his spotless righteousness, is imputed to us at the moment we believe the Gospel. We are justified, declared not guilty, because of the imputation of our sins to Christ, and the imputation of his perfect righteousness to us. It is by this double imputation that we are redeemed. Both imputations are necessary. The imputation of our sins to Christ, his paying the penalty for them, and our subsequent pardon deliver us from the eternal wrath to come in the lake of fire. The imputation of Christ's righteousness to us when we believe the Gospel fits us for Heaven and fellowship with a holy God. Both the obedience to God's law and the satisfaction of God's justice are absolutely necessary, and both are provided by Jesus Christ. We are saved by his passive and active obedience, not our own.

This is the Gospel that has been preached and proclaimed, believed and trusted, for the past 2000 years, especially during the 490 years since the Reformation. This is the Gospel that millions have trusted for the salvation of their everlasting souls. This is the Gospel that

has been the hope of God's elect from the days of Adam and Eve, who were promised a redeemer to come. And this is the Gospel that we are now being told is all wrong because it is based on a misunderstanding of first-century Judaism and what Paul was actually trying to teach.

The New Perspective on Paul

The New Perspective on Paul (NPP) says that the Western churches for the past 2000 years, and especially Protestants for the past 500 years, have all misunderstood Paul. The proponents of this novel theory claim that Paul was not talking about how individual sinners are saved from sin, nor about how sinners can be justified in the sight of a holy and just God. They claim that justification has nothing to do with our legal standing before God. In fact, they claim it has nothing to do with how we are saved. They claim that Paul's teaching about justification is not related to soteriology, the doctrine of salvation, but to ecclesiology, the doctrine of the church. Justification is horizontal, not vertical; familial, not legal.

The NPP teaches that justification has to do with covenant membership, not forgiveness of sins. Paul was not concerned about how we are delivered from our sins as much as he was concerned about church membership. The reason Paul did not need to be concerned about how we are saved from our sins is that first-century, "Second-Temple" Judaism already understood the way of salvation. (Had Jesus and John the Baptist realized this, they could have saved a lot of time and effort. As it was, they constantly corrected the soteriological errors of all the Jews they met, from Nicodemus on down. Apparently Jesus and John were not as bright as N. T. Wright.) According to the NPP, Second-Temple Judaism was really a religion that believed in "salvation by grace," and it has been improperly condemned as being a religion of salvation by works, human merit, and one's own righteousness. (I must put salvation by grace inside quotation marks, for the NPP gives them a new meaning not found in the Bible or in the writings of the Reformers.) According to the NPP the problem was not that the Judaizers in the early church were corrupting the Gospel and teaching a false way of salvation so much as they were confusing badges of church membership. They refused to admit Gentiles into the church unless they wore the Jewish badges of covenant membership: circumcision, adherence to the ceremonial law, etc. To the NPP, the entire question is, What is the badge of covenant membership in the New Testament – circumcision or faith?

According to the NPP, "justification" has to do with how we recognize who is in the covenant family. "Justification by faith" simply means that faith, as opposed to circumcision, observing the dietary laws of Moses, etc., is the badge that enables us to recognize who is a Christian, that is, who is in the covenant community. They are careful to point out that they mean faith in Christ as Lord, not faith in a substitutionary atonement. They believe that the whole plan of salvation that the Reformers taught as the Gospel is a fabrication based on a misunderstanding of Paul and

Judaism. The following quotations from NPP theologians give a sense of how they express these views:

James D. G. Dunn

The doctrine of justification by faith came to expression in these key letters of Paul (*Galatians* and *Romans*) as his attempt to prove that God's covenant blessings were for Gentiles as well as Jews, that God was ready to accept Gentiles as Gentiles, without requiring them first to become Jews. The Christian doctrine of justification by faith begins as Paul's protest not as an individual sinner against a Jewish legalism, but as Paul's protest on behalf of Gentiles against Jewish exclusivism.... Justification by faith is Paul's fundamental objection to the idea that God has limited his saving goodness to a particular people.¹

N. T. Wright

"Justification" in the first century was not about how someone might establish a relationship with God. It was about God's eschatological definition, both future and present, of who was, in fact, a member of his people. In [E. P.] Sanders' terms, it was not so much about "getting in," or indeed about "staying in," as about "how you could tell who was in." In standard Christian theological language, it wasn't so much about soteriology as about ecclesiology; not so much about salvation as about the church....

Despite a long tradition to the contrary, the problem Paul addresses in *Galatians* is not the question of how precisely someone becomes a Christian or attains to a relationship with God. (I'm not even sure how Paul would express, in Greek, the notion of "relationship with God," but we'll leave that aside.) The problem he addresses is: Should ex-pagan converts be circumcised or not? Now this question is by no means obviously to do with the questions faced by Augustine and Pelagius, or by Luther and Erasmus. On anyone's reading, but especially within its first-century context, it has to do, quite obviously, with the question of how you define the people of God. Are they to be defined by the badges of the Jewish race, or in some other way?²

By "the gospel" Paul does not mean "justification by faith." He means the announcement that the crucified and risen Jesus is Lord. To believe this message – to give believing allegiance to Jesus as Messiah and Lord – is to be justified in the present by faith (whether or not one has ever heard of justification by faith). Justification by faith is a second-order doctrine. To believe it is both to have assurance (believing that one will be vindicated on the last day [*Romans* 5:1-5]) and to know that one belongs in the single family of God, called to share

¹ James D. G. Dunn and Alan M. Suggate, *The Justice of God: A Fresh Look at the Old Doctrine of Justification by Faith*, 25, 28.

² Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 119-120.

table fellowship with all other believers without distinction (*Galatians* 2:11-21).³

What Paul means by justification in this context should therefore be clear. It is not how you become a Christian, so much as how you can tell who is a member of the covenant family. Justification, in *Galatians*, is the doctrine which insists that all who share faith in Christ belong at the same table, no matter what their racial differences, as they together wait for the final new creation.⁴

Such quotations could be multiplied, but these should be sufficient to demonstrate the central tenet of the NPP. Justification is not about salvation from sin, but about "who belongs at the same dinner table." It is about social fellowship and food, not sin and righteousness.

Two things stand out as we reflect on these statements. First of all, they emphasize that "justification by faith" has nothing to do with salvation (soteriology), but everything to do with church membership (ecclesiology), or, as they like to put it, our standing in the family of God. The Gospel of justification by faith alone, as involving salvation from sin and death and Hell through the atoning work of Jesus Christ, is totally eliminated. Secondly, they state that the gospel is about believing in Jesus as Lord. They state that all who profess Jesus as Lord are Christians and part of the family of God.

The Biblical doctrine is that one must believe in Jesus Christ as both Savior and Lord. In *Matthew* 7:21-23, those who believe in Jesus as Lord but not as Savior are sent to Hell, much to their surprise.⁵ The NPP teaches that one can, indeed must, accept Jesus as Lord, but one need not accept him as Savior. Indeed, he is no Savior; he is the Messiah, a political figure. NPP calls us to trust a person, the Lord Jesus Christ, but not to believe what he said about his great work of salvation for his people. The doctrine of trusting Jesus as Lord, without a Gospel that deals with our sins, lays the perfect foundation for the various forms of Neolegalism these views have spawned. Our faithful obedience to Jesus as Lord becomes the basis for our hope of salvation. This is no gospel, no good news at all. That such doctrines can get a hearing in churches that profess to be Reformed shows how theologically rotten they are.

The Origins of the New Perspective

While some of these ideas have been around for some time, the present movement dates itself from 1977, when E. P. Sanders' book *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* was published. This is the most scholarly and comprehensive presentation of what came to be known as the New Perspective on Paul. However, Sanders is a theological Liberal who finds Paul incoherent and ignorant of the true

³ N.T. Wright, "The Shape of Justification." See also chapter 7 of *What Saint Paul Really Said*.

⁴ *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 122.

⁵ See John W. Robbins, "Justification and Judgment," *The Trinity Review*, www.trinityfoundation.org

nature of Judaism, so he would never have made much of an impact in conservative or Reformed circles. James D. G. Dunn is also a Modernist, and he, like Sanders, was unlikely to meet with significant success in Evangelical circles. It took a Trojan horse, a pseudo-Evangelical, to introduce this heresy into conservative churches. That function was performed by N. T. Wright, Bishop of Durham in the Church of England. Wright is considered a member of that church's "Evangelical" wing,⁶ and he has been a popular speaker at "Evangelical" conferences promoting the NPP. PCA leader D. James Kennedy has featured N. T. Wright on his television show. As Brian Schwertley stated it,

E. P. Sanders and James D. G. Dunn are both Modernists who accept critical, skeptical (*i.e.*, unbelieving) views of New Testament authorship. They both engage in creative, sloppy exegesis of important passages, impose their paradigm on clear passages that explicitly contradict their viewpoint, and ignore historical and Biblical evidence that refutes their presuppositions. N. T. Wright seems much more evangelical in his approach to Scripture. However, his central presupposition or point of departure in theology and exegesis involves the heretical "covenantal nomism" of E. P. Sanders. Norman Shepherd and the Auburn Avenue theologians have abandoned historic Protestantism and Reformed orthodoxy for heretical concepts developed by Liberals.⁷

The Agenda of the New Perspective

Things do not happen in a vacuum. People do not invent new doctrines mindlessly. They have an agenda; they have theological axes to grind; they have a purpose. What motivated the originators of the NPP to craft this revisionist view of Paul's theology? Since they have been rather explicit in promoting the alleged benefits of their "perspective," we can gain a direct insight into their agenda. I will cover it under the following heads:

1. Anti-Semitism. Proponents of the NPP say they want to vindicate Paul from the charge of anti-Semitism. They think Paul's harsh words against the Judaizers and his low estimation of first-century Judaism lays him open to a charge of anti-Semitism. (This simply shows they do not know what anti-Semitism is. It is a form of racism, not opposition to false religion.) They feel that this is solved by the NPP's re-evaluation of first-century Judaism and re-

⁶ How anyone in such a corrupt communion, who is in ecclesiastical fellowship with Christ-deniers, heretics, Druids, and apostates, can be considered Evangelical is beyond me. However, it is not beyond the Banner of Truth Trust, who first published Wright's writings. This enabled him to exploit his standing as an "Evangelical" and promote this heresy among conservative churches.

⁷ Brian Schwertley, *Auburn Avenue Theology* (American Presbyterian Press, 2005), 2.

definition of Paul's true concerns in his controversy with it. Now, Paul was himself a Jew, with a passion for the salvation of his fellow Israelites. His practice in every place where he went was to preach the Gospel first in the local synagogue, if permitted. Paul even said,

For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites, to whom pertain the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises; whose are the fathers, and of whom as concerning the flesh Christ came, who is over all, God blessed for ever. Amen (*Romans 9:3-5*).

These are not the words of an anti-Semite, but of a man desperately laboring to bring salvation to his fellow Jews who are trapped in the coils of a false religion, Judaism, ignorant of their Messiah, and blinded to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. His harsh words concerning the Jewish religious leaders are acts of love for those whom they are deceiving. But the NPP does not and cannot distinguish between racism and opposition to false religion. The result is that they whitewash the false religion and false teachers that Christ and Paul condemned.

2. Ecumenism. The proponents of the NPP decry the results of the Christian Reformation. They regret that the "church of Jesus Christ" was split and fractured over theological issues. They feel it is particularly tragic that the separation between Catholics and Protestants was over the doctrine of justification by faith, the ecumenical doctrine. They believe that both sides in the Reformation misunderstood Paul, and that the entire Reformation was a gigantic mistake. The NPP, they think, sets forth what Paul was really teaching in the doctrine of justification, and they hope that their teachings will reunite Catholics and Protestants. Thus they have a twofold plan to repeal the Reformation: First, theologically, by subverting its key doctrine, justification by faith alone; and second, institutionally, by reuniting the Catholic and Protestant branches of the professing Christian church. They see their novel doctrine as particularly useful in reuniting all branches of the "Christian" church and accomplishing the goal of one church in one world.

3. Socialism. Third, they see their doctrine as of great use in advancing the church in its primary goal of promoting "social justice." They believe that there is an "inherent social dimension" to the doctrine of "justification." Their view of Paul is that he was battling for the acceptance of Gentile converts into the church while the Judaizers were resisting, insisting that the Gentiles become Jews first by submitting to circumcision, the dietary laws of Moses, etc. To the NPP the doctrine of "justification" is about accepting diversity, about inclusiveness, and about social justice for all men. As one critic of the New Perspective stated it,

[T]he NPP purports to help us articulate an understanding of justification that has an inherent social dimension and thus secures a better theological

foundation for social justice and ecumenism amongst evangelical interpreters of Holy Scripture. For Wright, justification is about our "horizontal" relationships with one another and our inclusion in the covenant community more than it is about an individual's "vertical" relationship with God. Hence, justification, is inherently, for the NPP, about the collective. It's not about individuals, it's about the community. Consequently, they argue that this understanding of justification better helps us to work for unity in the body of Christ, and to show how justification is a doctrine that ought to be drawing us together instead of dividing us and separating us.⁸

4. The Gospel. Finally, we have to deal with the unstated premise in all this. It is this: The Gospel of the Christian church, which was restored in the Christian Reformation, must be eliminated and replaced with something else, something more relevant, more mundane, more tangible. The NPP is radically opposed to the Biblical doctrines of sin and salvation. It has no interest in any Gospel that deals with the salvation of men's eternal souls; it denies that Paul had any such interest either; and it asserts that Christians have misunderstood the Bible on this very basic point for the past 2,000 years..

Now there is a common thread to all these concerns. There is a uniformity to this agenda. These are all Liberal concerns. Christians are concerned about truth. Christians are concerned about sin and the salvation of their fellow men, about their eternal standing before a just and a holy God. Liberals have other concerns. They do not believe in the Gospel. They see no need for it because they do not believe in man's desperate condition before God. Their concerns, like the Sadducees of old, are all related to this present world. The New Perspective is the latest form of theological Liberalism.

The Attractions of the New Perspective

Since the NPP is not yet widely accepted among ordinary churchgoers, and only a small minority of ministers are openly advocating it, where is it finding acceptance and what are its attractions? According to J. Ligon Duncan, the NPP is popular among seminary professors and students.

One of the chief reasons offered to explain the popularity of the NPP is the popularity of N. T. Wright. He is considered a brilliant scholar without being boring and pedantic. He is witty and entertaining, and has the ability to popularize his ideas with messianic zeal. In short, he is a very effective propagandist for his views. Further, he has managed to acquire a reputation as an Evangelical, even as a defender of the faith. This is partly due to his work in opposing the "Jesus Seminar," a Liberal project to replace the Jesus of Scripture with a caricature drawn by the

⁸ J. Ligon Duncan, "The Attractions of the New Perspective(s) on Paul."

imaginings of Modernists. It is appalling that a man who is a Bishop in one of the most apostate and corrupt churches could gain such a standing among Evangelicals. (J. I. Packer paved the way.) Are Evangelicals so enthralled by Bishops and Brits that they are blind to the realities of the situation? When one adds to this the fact that in his opposition to the Jesus Seminar Wright waffled on Christ's Messianic self-consciousness, one has to marvel. If Christ did not know who he was, then he cannot have been the omniscient God-man revealed in Scripture. Evangelicalism is rotten to the core if a man with such views can lead it, as a piper, entirely away from the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Certain Evangelicals are attracted to the NPP because of its emphasis on "social justice." Billy Graham started all this nonsense by labeling himself an "Evangelical with a social conscience" so he could market his ministry to both professing Evangelicals and theological Liberals, just as he had earlier marketed it to Roman Catholics. Since then it has been fashionable to have one's feet in both camps. The NPP facilitates this. It professes to be Evangelical, while proclaiming a social gospel. Another group that is captivated by this aspect of the NPP is the Theonomists, or Christian Reconstructionists. Their emphasis on law-keeping and denial of justification by faith alone makes them particularly fond of the various forms of Neolegalism that are the logical fruit of the NPP.

Additionally, J. Ligon Duncan points out that the NPP is accepted by many Evangelicals because of their ignorance. They think that they are Evangelicals, but they do not understand the Evangel, the Gospel. They have never studied the doctrines of the Christian Reformation. They have never read Luther or Calvin. They do not understand the Gospel, the soteriology, of the Reformation. Once they get past platitudes about being "saved by grace," and being saved by "faith in Christ," they are lost. They cannot explain the details of God's way of salvation through Christ. They cannot explain terms like *justification*, *propitiation*, *imputation*, etc. They have, therefore, no means by which to test the statements of NPP theologians. They are defenseless when confronted with the NPP's critique of the Reformation.

Another reason for the attractiveness of the NPP is that it diminishes the problem of sin. One would think that this would be a fatal attribute of the NPP among Evangelicals, but according to Duncan, it is not. The strength of the Gospel is that it deals with the power and consequences of sin. It seems that many "Evangelicals" are relieved not to have to think about such troubling issues. After all, thinking and talking about sin can be very negative, a real downer. One can avoid dealing with depressing issues like that by thinking positively and getting on with the thrilling task of building a socialist society.

The heart of the matter is that the NPP is attractive to unbeliever. The NPP offers shelter to unbelievers in the

churches and seminaries who do not want to lose their Evangelical reputations. They want to be considered "Evangelicals," but they neither understand nor believe the Evangel. They reject Christianity, writing books with titles like *Against Christianity*, but they do not want to be rejected by the churches. So, like the Pharisees of old, and like unbelievers in every generation, they are happy to play the hypocrite, and prate on about the intellectual achievements of the NPP, while despising the Gospel of salvation through the finished work of Jesus Christ. The real attraction of the New Perspective is that it offers shelter for unbeliever in the churches, a way for unbelievers to masquerade as Christians.

Theological History Fabricated by the NPP

According to the NPP, Paul developed the doctrine of justification by faith because of the Jews' reluctance to admit Gentile converts into the church without first being circumcised. One problem with that contention is that the doctrine of justification by faith alone is clearly taught in the Old Testament, thousands of years before Paul. An examination of a few key texts will establish this:

And when Abram was ninety years old and nine, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be perfect. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly [*Genesis 15:5-6*].

God required sinless perfection of Abraham, that is, his standard had not changed since the Garden of Eden. How did Abraham acquire the perfect righteousness required by God? Abraham was a sinner in violation of the covenant of works, so God clothed him with a righteousness not his own, a righteousness imputed by faith. As Moses records it: "And he brought him forth abroad, and said, Look now toward Heaven, and count the stars, if you are able to number them; and he said unto him, so shall your seed be. And he believed the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness" (*Genesis 17:1-2*). Abraham was justified by faith alone.

David also rejoiced that a man could be justified by God although he was a sinner. He wrote, "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man unto whom the LORD imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no guile" (*Psalms 32:1-2*).

This is the exact language of imputation that is found in the Reformation definition of justification. And that brings us back to Paul. Paul didn't develop the doctrine of justification to deal with a first-century problem in the church. He took his doctrine of justification by faith alone directly from the Old Testament, using exactly the texts we have just quoted. Paul says:

What shall we say, then, that Abraham, our father as pertaining to the flesh, has found? For if Abraham were justified by works, he has something in which to glory; but not before God. For what says the Scripture?

Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness. Now to him that works the reward is not reckoned of grace, but of debt. But to him that works not, but believes on him that justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness. Even as David also describes the blessedness of the man unto whom God imputes righteousness without works, saying, Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin [*Romans* 4:1-8].

And speaking of Abraham and his faith Paul continues:

Who against hope believed in hope, that he might become the father of many nations, according to that which was spoken, "So shall your seed be." And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about a hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sarah's womb: He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; and being fully persuaded that what he had promised he was able also to perform. And therefore it was imputed to him for righteousness [*Romans* 4:18-22].

Now this has to be terribly hard for proponents of the NPP. If Paul's doctrine of justification is not based on a first-century problem, but is derived from the Old Testament, their vaunted scholarship is not scholarship at all but imagination. Their doctrine has nothing of Christian theology or church history in it.

What was the nature of first-century Judaism? Was it really a religion of grace, not works, as the NPP asserts? To determine that, we have to consider the theology of the conservative Pharisees, because the Sadducees were theological Liberals who denied angels, miracles, and a future resurrection; and obviously they did not represent the faith of the Old Testament saints.

The Lord Jesus Christ frequently confronted the Pharisees. What was the nature of these confrontations? For starters, he frequently rebuked them for their hypocrisy. If that were the extent of his criticism, then the case might be made that they were doctrinally sound and taught the true faith, but simply did not live up to it. But Christ's criticism of them went far deeper. He also condemned them for their doctrine. Christ gave his disciples explicit warnings about the dangers of the doctrines taught by the Pharisees and Sadducees: "Then they understood how that he bade them not beware of the leaven of bread, but of the doctrine of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees" (*Matthew* 16:12). Of course proponents of the NPP might attempt to argue that while there were some doctrinal problems with first-century Judaism, the Pharisees were sound on the doctrine of salvation. Yet, that is specifically what the Lord Jesus Christ denied in his confrontations with them. He commanded them: "Search the Scriptures; for in them you think you have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me. And you will not come to me, that you might have life" (*John* 5:39-40). Christ warned them that they needed to study the Scriptures and learn the way

of salvation, of which they were ignorant. In the same chapter, Christ denied that they believe the Old Testament: "But you do not have his Word abiding in you, because him he sent, him you do not believe"; and "For if you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?"

Not only did the Pharisees not believe the Old Testament, but Christ specifically identified what they believed instead, what they trusted for salvation. In the parable of the Pharisee and the publican he identified the problem as their soteriology:

And he spoke this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank you, that I am not as other men – extortioners, unjust, adulterers – or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess. And the publican, standing afar off, would not so much as lift up his eyes unto Heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner. I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other, for every one that exalts himself shall be abased; and he that humbles himself shall be exalted [*Luke* 18:9-14].

Christ made it abundantly clear that what the Pharisees trusted in was their own covenant righteousness. They believed that their own good works, for which they thanked God, made them acceptable with God. They were indeed covenantal nomists, and covenantal nomism is indeed a works religion. Either we believe Christ's evaluation of first-century Judaism or that of the NPP. They cannot both be true.

We also have the infallible testimony of the Apostle Paul on the nature of first-century Judaism. Paul's situation was unique. While some of the other apostles had been fishermen, publicans, or zealots, Paul had been a Pharisee. He had lived at the very heart of Second-Temple Judaism. If any of the apostles, if any of the Jews, knew what Judaism really was, it was Paul. And what was Paul's evaluation? Did Paul consider Judaism a good foundation for his teaching ministry as an apostle? Did he simply take the soteriology of first-century Judaism and add to it the notion that Jesus is the Messiah? Was the difference between him and the Pharisees merely about who was Lord and not about how sinners are saved? Or did Paul reject the religion of the Pharisees as worthless and throw it out root and branch? Here are Paul's words:

Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the circumcision. For we are the circumcision, which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh – though I might also have confidence in the flesh. If any other man thinks that he has something he might trust in the flesh, I more: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of

Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ and be found in him, not having my own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith: That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death; if by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead [*Philippians* 3:2-11].

Paul makes it unmistakably clear that he has nothing in common with the false teachers of Judaism. It is only if he discards “all things” of Judaism that he can be saved. The Jewish theologians are not considered erring brothers to be corrected and led back into the fold. He calls them dogs and evil workers. The basis of this charge is that they trust in the flesh; they trust their heritage and their attainments; they trust their own righteousness. By contrast, believers rejoice in Jesus Christ, trusting in his finished work of salvation. Paul acknowledges that he has all the Jewish credentials for “trusting in the flesh,” for relying on what he was rather than on what Christ had done for him. Having recounted his position as a Jew and a Pharisee, listing the things that first-century Judaism trusted for salvation – circumcision, ancestry, zeal for the law, good works – Paul goes on to say that he was willing to lose them all in order to gain salvation. He states they were worthless, and he counted them as garbage, the Greek word for “garbage” being “skubalon,” referring to what is cast out to the dogs.⁹ Paul contrasts the two kinds of righteousness upon which these two different religions rely. When he was a Pharisee, Paul had his “own righteousness, which is of the law”; but when he became a Christian, he had a righteousness not his own, an imputed righteousness, “the righteousness which is of God by faith.” The result of this change from his own righteousness to the imputed righteousness of Christ received by faith is that he will attain unto the resurrection of the dead, the resurrection of the just unto eternal life. Those who trust in their own righteousness are lost, having failed to attain to the salvation that is in Christ alone. Once again we have to make a choice between the Holy Spirit’s own words and those of the NPP. Is the issue here one of life or death in the world to come, or is it merely a difference over the marks of who belongs to the church? It is impossible to reconcile the NPP with the teachings of Scripture. We will stick with Paul and reject these “evil workers” and their Judaizing doctrines, for we too desire to

⁹ Is Paul engaging in a little sarcasm here? After he has called these false teachers “dogs,” he states that their vaunted attainments, upon which they base their salvation, are fit to be cast to the dogs.

attain to the resurrection of the just.

How does the NPP deal with the Scriptures that so clearly contradict their lies? They don’t even blink an eye. N. T. Wright audaciously twists the *Philippians* passage:

Paul is saying, in effect, “I, though possessing covenant membership according to the flesh, did not regard that covenant membership as something to exploit. I emptied myself, sharing the death of the Messiah, wherefore God has given me the membership that really counts in which I too will share the glory of Christ.”¹⁰

Schwertley says of this perversion: “Wright translates the word righteousness (*dikaiosune*) as ‘covenant membership,’ even though no Greek lexicon in the world has ‘covenant membership’ as a possible meaning of *dikaiosune*.” Wright deliberately mistranslates Scripture.

The Authority of Scripture

The NPP attack on the Gospel is also an attack on authority of Scripture. This is abundantly clear in the writings of Sanders and Dunn. They are theological Liberals who openly state that Paul was in error and at best confused about the issues he was dealing with, such as justification. Wright is more subtle. He represents himself as an Evangelical with a high view of Scripture. But his “high view” does not include inerrancy. He denies it.

Proponents of the NPP have a higher authority than Scripture. They think they are better prophets than Christ and Paul. They have their religious sensibilities. N. T. Wright’s reprehensible twisting of *Philippians* proves what is driving his agenda. His is not an honest – intellectually or otherwise – attempt to exegete, expound, and apply Scripture. Wright fabricates his theology.

Conclusions

Is the NPP controversy an intramural dispute between Evangelical Christians? Is this a debate between brethren? Unfortunately this is generally the way the issue is framed whenever it is debated. Very few are willing to draw the conclusion that this is anything else. It isn’t politically correct. It isn’t nice. And if there is anything that is unforgivable in contemporary “Christianity,” it is failing to be nice when dealing with heretics. Neither the Old Testament prophets, nor the New Testament apostles, nor Christ himself was “nice.” Rather, their ministries were characterized by confrontation. Elijah confronted Ahab and mocked the priests of Baal. Jehu rebuked the godly king Jehoshaphat for his compromising with Ahab and declared, “Should you help the ungodly, and love them that hate the LORD? Therefore is wrath upon you from before the LORD” (*2 Chronicles* 19:2). David declared of the enemies of the Lord, “Do not I hate them, O LORD,

¹⁰ *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 124.

that hate you? And am not I grieved with those that rise up against you? I hate them with perfect hatred: I count them my enemies" (*Psalms* 139:21-22). Christ himself repeatedly confronted the religious leaders of his day, the official spokesmen for Second-Temple Judaism, and his rebukes were sharp in the extreme. Today's "Evangelicals" extend the right hand of fellowship to wolves in sheep's clothing and count heretics as "esteemed brethren."¹¹

The great question before us is this: Is the Gospel of Jesus Christ a negotiable doctrine? Can the church even exist without the Gospel? We are not dealing with minor differences, but with errors that are totally destructive of the Christian faith.

A maxim in the political world says, "Treason never prospers; what's the reason? If it prosper, none dare call it treason." The parallel maxim in ecclesiology would be, "Heresy never prospers, for if it prosper, none dare call it heresy." Is this the reason that we never hear of any minister or seminary professor being charged with heresy, despite the apostasy all around us, even in Reformed churches? Is this why we never hear of any church court accusing a false teacher of being a false teacher? The Old Testament is replete with warnings about false prophets. The New Testament is replete with warnings about false teachers. Twenty-two of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament contain such warnings. The churches are filled with theological confusion, error, and unbelief, yet we never hear these warnings from the lips of church leaders. Instead, we see false teachers honored as "esteemed brethren." We see them accepted and even honored by the churches. And we see those who would confront them in the spirit of Elijah, those who would strip away the sheep's clothing and expose the wolves, sanctimoniously condemned as troublemakers, unloving, and schismatics. Heresy must be prospering in the churches, for none dare call it heresy.

Let us heed Paul's words: "For I know this, that after my departing grievous wolves shall enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. Therefore watch, and remember that for the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears" (*Acts* 20:29-31). "For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ. And no marvel; for Satan himself is

transformed into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as ministers of righteousness, whose end shall be according to their works" (*2 Corinthians* 11:13-15).

This essay has been condensed and revised by Dr. John Robbins. The original is available at the American Presbyterian Church's website.

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¹¹ I recently watched a debate between Dr. James White and Douglas Wilson on the topic of whether Romans Catholics are our brothers in Christ, with Wilson defending the affirmative. The debate was characterized by collegiality and punctuated with humor. While Wilson was subverting the Gospel, fun and friendliness was the order of the day. Dr. John Robbins reported in *The Trinity Review* that a symposium hosted by Knox Seminary on these issues was more of the same. A number of speakers who were on the side allegedly maintaining the faith went out of their way to express their love and esteem for the "brethren" who were subverting it. Thankfully, the Reformers held the Biblical position of the primacy of truth, or Luther's protestations of his esteem for Dr. Eck and his love for Pope Leo X would still be ringing in our ears.

