

New Approaches of Biblical Theology to Justification

By Douglas Kelly

The new perspective on Paul offers us less than the gospel of justification by grace through faith.

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Several influential works in the 20th century Biblical Theology movement have called into question the accuracy of the traditional Reformational understanding of Paul's teaching on Justification as objective acquittal from guilt and entrance into a righteous status with God by grace through faith, as opposed to Jewish trust in works' righteousness. To quote Tom Holland (Ch. 9, p. 1): "It has been claimed that the Reformers read their own debate with Rome into Paul's debate with Judaism. Biblical theologians are now claiming that Paul's understanding of justification was not about being acquitted from sin, as understood by the Reformers. Rather, the term is claimed to be about being part of the covenant community."

I. RE-INTERPRETATIONS OF PAUL ON JUSTIFICATION

This reappraisal (and to some degree, rejection – varying with particular scholars) of the Reformed/Lutheran exposition of justification came in different stages. I can only mention a few of the seminal works in this process. W. D. Davies after the Second WW properly reacted against Bultmann's attributing to Paul a heavily Hellenistic background of thought. His most influential work was *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*.

N. T. Wright (*What St. Paul Really Said*) states:

Davies' work signals a new attitude to Judaism on the part of post-war scholarship. Until then, Judaism had been regarded by most Pauline expositors as the great exemplar of the wrong side of religion. It represented human self-effort, legalism, prejudice and pride... But with Davies the whole scene changed, in line with the work of Karl Barth, with the so-called 'biblical theology' movement, and of course with the post-war reaction against the vile anti-Semitism which caused the holocaust. Judaism was suddenly in vogue; Jewish ideas were regarded as good... [Davies] at least demonstrated that one could not dislocate Paul from his Jewish setting without doing him great violence (p. 16, 17).

Davies' ideas on Paul and Judaism were taken much further by his student, E. Sanders, in his famous work, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. As N. T. Wright put it:

His major point ... can be quite simply stated. Judaism in Paul's day was not, as has regularly been supposed, a religion of legalistic works-righteousness... Most Protestant exegetes had read Paul and Judaism as if Judaism was a form of the old heresy Pelagianism, according to which humans must pull themselves up by their bootstraps and thereby earn justification... No, said Sanders. Keeping the law within Judaism always functioned within a covenantal scheme. God took the initiative, when he made a covenant with Judaism; God's grace thus precedes everything that people (specifically, Jews) do in response. The Jew keeps the law out of gratitude...not, in other words, in

order to *get* into the covenant people, but to *stay* in. Being ‘in’ in the first place was God’s gift. This scheme Sanders famously labeled as ‘covenantal nomism’ (from the Greek, *nomos*, law). Keeping the Jewish law was the human response to God’s covenantal initiative.

Sanders thus, at a stroke, cut the ground from under the majority reading of Paul, especially in mainline Protestantism. (*What St. Paul Really Said*, 18, 19).

Wright goes on to reveal the cultural, political atmosphere to which Sanders’ re-interpretation of Paul so strongly appealed in the late 20th c., with its concern for a positive attitude towards Jews and other minorities: “But his practical agenda is very clear: Christians should regard Jews with a good deal more respect than in the past, and in particular should not saddle them with a form of religion of which they are innocent. Pauline Christians and the successors of first-century Judaism should not anathematize each other as they have often been wont to do.” (*Ibid.*)

The distinguished British NT scholar, James Dunn, followed Sanders, as did N. T. Wright. Dunn also illustrates the cultural, political concerns that seem to be served by changing the traditional understanding of Paul’s controversy with the 1st c. Jews. Dunn and Alan Suggate (in *The Justice of God: A Fresh Look at the Old Doctrine of Justification by Faith*, 1993) sought to develop the doctrine of justification as a basis for opposing racism.

Tom Holland responded as follows: “Without in any way discounting his concern over this terrible belief, he did not focus on what justification is about. Rather, his emphasis was to apply the doctrine to contemporary social issues. I [adds Holland] will shortly argue that for Paul justification is about entry into the covenant, not the equality of all men before God. For that, he ought to have argued from the doctrine of man being created in the image of God” (Holland, chapter 9, p. 5).

All of this will indicate that exegesis is never ‘culture-free’ (no more in the 21st than in the 16th c.!) This may have something to do with the rapidity with which so many have jumped on the bandwagon of the new Paul since Davies and Sanders. (This observation does not in itself mean that their concerns are wrong nor that their exegetical work is not to be taken seriously in its own right. But it should at very least raise a caution that they are no less shaped by the problems of their culture than was Martin Luther, or than is the person who is writing this critique).

Let us look now more closely at precisely how such influential scholars as Sanders, Dunn and Wright have re-interpreted the teaching of St. Paul on Justification. Sanders writes that

“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 ... Obedience maintains one’s position in the covenant, but it does not earn God’s grace as such ... Righteousness in Judaism is a term which implies the maintenance of status among the group of the elect” (Sanders, *Paul*, 75, 420, 544, quoted in J. Dunn, ‘The New Perspective on Paul’ in *Jesus, Paul and the Law*, 186).

Dunn comments:

In talking of 'being justified' here [i.e., Gal. 2:15,16] Paul is not thinking of a distinctively *initiatory* act of God. God's justification is not his act in first *making* his covenant with Israel, or in initially accepting someone into the covenant people. God's justification is rather God's acknowledgement that someone is in the covenant – whether that is an *initial* acknowledgement, or a *repeated* action of God (God's saving acts), or his *final* vindication of his people... 'To be justified' in Paul cannot, therefore, be treated simply as an entry or initiation formula; nor is it possible to draw a clear line of distinction between Paul's usage and the typically Jewish covenant usage. (J. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul and the Law*, 190).

Dunn goes on to narrow down what Paul is said to have meant by 'works of the law', as follows:

His denial that justification is from works of law is, more precisely, a denial that justification depends on circumcision or on observation of the Jewish purity and food taboos. We may justifiably deduce, therefore, that by 'works of the law' Paul intended his readers to think of *particular observances of the law like circumcision and food laws...* But why these particular 'works of the law'? The broader context suggests a reason.

From the broader context, provided for us by Greco-Roman literature of the period, we know that just these observances were widely regarded as characteristically and distinctively Jewish. (Dunn, *op. cit.*, 191).

Dunn then goes so far as to make the amazing claim that

'Works of law', 'works of the law' are nowhere understood here, either by his Jewish interlocutors or by Paul himself, as works which earn God's favour, as merit-amassing observances. They are rather seen as badges: they are simply what membership of the covenant people involves, what mark out the Jews as God's people; given by God for precisely that reason, they serve to demonstrate covenant status... In other words, Paul has in view precisely what Sanders calls 'covenantal nomism'...

More important for Reformation exegesis is the corollary that 'works of the law' do not mean 'good works' in general, 'good works' in the sense disparaged by the heirs of Luther, works in the sense of self-achievement... The phrase 'works of the law' in Galatians 2:16 is, in fact, a fairly restricted one: it refers precisely to these same identity markers described above, covenant works – those regulations prescribed by law which any good Jew would simply take for granted to describe what a good Jew did. To be a Jew was to be a member of the covenant, was to observe circumcision, food laws and Sabbath. In short, once again Paul seems much less a man of sixteenth-century Europe and much more firmly in touch with the reality of first-century Judaism than many have thought. (Dunn, *op.cit.*, 194, 195).

N. T. Wright agrees that justification is not about getting saved but about signs that one is already in the covenant community. He states:

Justification...is not a matter of how someone enters the community of the true people of God, but of how you tell who belongs to that community...In standard Christian theological language, it wasn't so much about soteriology as about ecclesiology; not so much about salvation as about the church. (Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 119).

He later adds: "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'" (*Ibid.*, 122).

II. RESPONSE TO RE-INTERPRETATIONS OF PAUL ON JUSTIFICATION

For the sake of brevity and clarity, I shall respond to their entire re-interpretation of this 'article of a standing or falling church' by examining two of their crucial claims. These two claims will take us to the heart of their thesis. (A) Are these scholars right about 'works of the law'? and (B) Are they right about justification not being an entry to covenant salvation, but a sign that one is in the community? Nearly everything they have to offer in their new interpretation follows from these two claims. Does the Bible itself support them?

(A) 'The Works of the Law'

A plain reading of both Old and New Testaments makes it necessary flatly to deny their watering down 'works of the law' to mere 'badges of covenant membership' such as circumcision, Sabbath observance and food laws. Professor Moo in his Commentary on Romans gives the proper clue here: "Dunn consistently down plays the role that transgression of the law not just adherence to certain ethnic identity-markers plays in Paul's argument. Again and again, Paul insists in Rom. 2:1-19 that it is not dependence on the law or circumcision as such that renders the Jews liable to judgment, but their disobedience of the law" (214).

I am amazed at how such fine exegetes as Dunn and Wright can treat in detail such passages as, let us say, Galatians 2 (as Dunn in his essay 'The New Perspective on Paul' – Ch. 7 of his *Jesus, Paul and the Law*) or Romans 3 (as Wright in *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 105-107), as though Paul did not write Romans 1, or Paul's divine Master did not preach the Sermon on the Mount. In other words, they have isolated 'works of the law' from their larger covenant context (to use a word dear to these scholars!).

Can it be possible that one could interpret what the Apostle Paul means by 'the works of the law' and justification from the law's condemnation in such total isolation from how he explicates the devastating judgment of God's law against both Jews and Gentiles in Romans chapters 1 and 2. And furthermore, could Paul have understood the condemnation of the law against sinners (both inside and outside Israel) in a way essentially different from the Christ he met on the Damascus Road; from the Christ who plainly showed the hopeless state of Pharisaic Judaism in light of what God's law really meant (in chapters 5 to 7 of Matthew – the Sermon on the Mount)?

Dunn and his colleagues have dealt far more gently with Pharisaic externalism and pretensions to righteousness thereby than did the Lord Jesus Christ and his Apostle to the Gentiles! One does not get the impression from reading the Sermon on the Mount that the Pharisees were more or less right in reducing the claims of God's holy law to works that they could supposedly accomplish in the flesh (including circumcision, Sabbath keeping and pork laws, among many other regulations). Maybe they considered such works to be badges of membership in Israel; external markers of the covenant people, and proofs that they already had the grace of God, but Jesus does not seem to think so!

On the contrary, the Lord Jesus showed 'how exceeding broad' is God's law, reaching the deepest places of heart and motive. Far from limiting the law's authority over soul and community to 'badges of membership', he affirms the depths and heights of its universal range:

Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5:19, 20).

Among other matters within the range of legal requirements flowing from the character of God, Jesus deals with such sinful responses as anger (Matt. 5:22); lustful thoughts (Matt. 5:28); divorce (Matt. 5:32); swearing (Matt. 5:34); revenge (Matt. 5:38-42); improper responses to enemies (Matt. 5:43-48); flaunting of piety (Matt. 6:1-23); worry (Matt. 6:24-34); harsh judgment of others (Matt. 7:1-5) and so on. A religiosity (found among Pharisaic leadership of Judaism at that time) that concentrates on keeping certain 'works of the law', while neglecting the heart and soul of the matter that flows from a right relationship to God ends in the disastrous fall of a house 'built upon the sand' (Matt. 7:24-29).

The seriousness with which Jesus opposed the Pharisaic confidence that they had fulfilled the requirements of God's law as Abraham's covenant sons is revealed not only in the Sermon on the Mount, but also in John chapter 8. There, the Pharisees deny their need of the freedom offered them by receiving the truth of Christ. They answer: 'We are Abraham's seed, and were never in bondage to any man...' (v. 33). Jesus replies: '... Whoever commits sin is the servant of sin. And the servant abides not in the house for ever: but the Son abides forever. If the Son therefore shall make you free, you shall be free indeed' (vs. 34, 35).

Jesus then goes on to make it plain that physical descent from Abraham does not guarantee that one is truly free (i.e., Justified; in the Covenant of God's grace). 'I know that you are Abraham's seed: but you seek to kill me, because my word has no place in you' (v. 37). Significantly, as far as a proper New Testament understanding of justification is concerned, Jesus firmly denies that the Pharisees have in fact done 'the works of Abraham' (v. 39). Clearly he did not accept that their keeping of such covenantal 'boundary markers' as circumcision, Sabbath and food laws kept them 'in the covenant' as the seed of Abraham. On the contrary, he said that 'they were of their father, the devil' (vs. 44), which meant that they needed to enter the covenant by a work of grace.

The teaching of the Apostle Paul in Romans 1 and 2 is no less clear and frightening than that of Paul's Lord concerning the righteous condemnation of God's far-reaching law upon all human efforts – whether Jew or Gentile – at self-justification. In these chapters, so basic to the reception of the Gospel of grace, Paul demonstrates God's proper wrath 'against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold [down] the truth in unrighteousness' (Rom. 1:18).

Paul shows that God's righteous judgment condemns all mankind: 'those who have sinned without law' and 'those who have sinned in the law' (Rom. 2:12). The very areas in which Paul shows God's condemnation of the Jewish opposers of Christ (thus, 'Second Temple Judaism'), such as committing adultery and idolatrous sacrilege (v. 22), are used to demonstrate that outward circumcision, far from justifying the Jews, would condemn them, apart from that 'circumcision of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter...' (v. 29). Nothing that 'the new perspective' on Paul and justification says about covenant 'boundary markers' can give any comfort to those whose adherence to circumcision and other covenant markers is divinely judged to be external rather than internal. This leads us directly to the second response to the re-interpretation of Paul:

(B) Justification as Entry to Covenant Salvation

Is it true, according to the teaching of Jesus and Paul, that keeping the boundary markers of traditional Judaism meant one was already 'in the covenant', not needing to be justified in order to enter it? Let us look at how Christ dealt with Nicodemus, a leader of the Pharisees, in John chapter 3. Who could doubt that Nicodemus was circumcised, kept Sabbath and honored the food laws? Yet the Lord told him that unless he was born again, he could neither see the kingdom of God (John 3:3) nor enter the kingdom of God (v. 5). The Lord told him that the life and activities of the flesh produced only more flesh; supernatural birth by the Spirit was necessary for salvation (vv. 5-8).

Jesus explained further that this birth by the Spirit involved looking up to the One, who like the brass serpent on the pole in the wilderness, provided healing in the look of faith from sin's deadly venom (John 3:13-16). This means specifically, believing in Christ, the only begotten Son of God (John 3:16). Trust in Him removes our condemnation, that is to say, trust is the instrument of our justification (v. 18). Only in union with him can the deeds (or works) of humans 'be wrought in God' (v. 21). To deny that light means that one's deeds will be reprov'd (condemned; not accepted) – (v. 20). This means that one enters eternity under the wrath of God, for the Final Judgment is in view when both Christ and Paul discuss divine assessment of human life and works.

Precisely this one way of escape from the righteous wrath of God against universal sin is a pressing issue with the Apostle to the Gentiles in Romans 3 and 4. In Rom. 1:18, Paul said: 'For the wrath of God is revealed ...against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men...' He goes on to demonstrate that both Gentile and Jew are ungodly and unrighteous. That is, their sin (whether 'within the law' or 'without the law' – Rom. 2:12) merits the judgment of God (Rom. 2:1-6). '...all the world is guilty before God' (Rom. 3:19). Jew and Gentile are guilty before the divine law which they have offended by their sin (Rom. 3:9).

In other words, 'all the world' (clearly including the Jewish portion of it) is sinful and under the righteous wrath of God. That is the greatest and final problem of every human, '...for those who commit such things are worthy of death...' (Rom. 1:32). Escaping the wrath of God against sin and the eternal death it entails is the great issue dealt with by Paul in chapters 3 and 4 of Romans. 'The new perspective on Paul' scholars deal with this major strand of Gospel hope (deliverance from divine wrath) all too superficially. As Stephen Westerholm has noted: "Though Sanders and Raisanen both concede that Paul argues for universal sinfulness in Romans 1-3, the tenet is dismissed to the periphery of Paul's thought" (*Israel's Law and the Church's Faith*, 160).

Surely the major question here is not 'boundary markers' of who is in the covenant, as though that would settle the final matter of the outpouring of God's indignation against sin! Paul goes to the heart of the matter in Rom. 3:26, 'To declare... at this time, his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.' Here is the question for all time and eternity: how can God Himself remain just and at the same time justify ungodly sinners (who believe in Jesus)? God cannot, will not violate His own character. His character is the stability of the universe. How could He properly pronounce righteous a sinner who believes in Jesus and not deny His integrity?

The only way for Him to retain His righteousness in accepting and acquitting sinners is propitiation through the blood of Christ (Rom. 3:25). Propitiation is a stronger term than expiation. Expiation deals with the covering of sin; propitiation deals with the objective turning away of God's wrath against that which violates His holy character (namely, sin). Jesus' infinite obedience in holy life and in atoning death has fully satisfied the just requirements of the character of God, which requires Him to deal justly with sin. Jesus' blood has turned away the wrath of God against all those who identify through faith with His atonement. This final reality is not seriously dealt with by Dunn and Wright (e.g., see Wright's insufficient explanation of 'justification' as found in Rom. 3:24-26 in *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 129).

But how does a condemned sinner identify with the propitiatory atonement? The question here is how does one *enter* this Covenant of Salvation; not who has the boundary markers of it. That is, how do we get our sins forgiven? Paul deals with this in Romans 4. There he demonstrates that Abraham was declared righteous even before he was circumcised as the initiatory mark of his entrance into the covenant (Rom. 4:3,10-11 and Genesis 15:6). Abraham was declared righteous through faith, for '...he believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness' (Rom. 4:3).

Paul believes himself to be in line with the way both Abraham and David *entered* a righteous status with God, when he shows that both of them were put in the right with God through faith, not works:

Now to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justified the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness. Even as David also describeth the blessedness of the man, unto whom God imputeth 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 (Rom. 4:5-8).

Yet, central as this is to Paul's argument of imputation of Christ's righteousness to sinners as the essence of the Gospel, Wright criticizes the notion of imputation (*op. cit.* 125). Similarly, (though with more regard to retaining some notion of the possibility of imputation, along with subjective righteousness in the person of the sinner), Dunn writes: "The debate on whether 'the righteousness of God' was subjective or objective genitive, 'an activity of God' or 'a gift bestowed by God', can too easily become another piece of either – or exegesis. For the dynamic of relationship simply refuses to conform to such analysis..." (Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 344).

If Dunn is correct here, then not only the Protestant Reformers, but the Apostle Paul himself got it wrong with his 'either – or' statement of being declared righteous, not by works, but by the imputed righteousness of Christ! Paul unmistakably teaches that those who believe in Christ enter the experience of salvation; they are eternally and totally forgiven, not by their works, but – like Abraham and David – through faith. Whether circumcised (as in 'Second Temple Judaism', so emphasized in the new Pauline perspective) or uncircumcised, one becomes justified 'through faith' (Rom. 3:20), 'without the deeds of the law' (Rom. 3:28). In the context of Abraham's justification, Paul specifically opposes justification by faith to justification by works (Rom. 4:2, 4). Having 'his faith counted for righteousness' (Rom. 4:5) is a reckoning of grace, not due (or 'debt') – vs. 4. It is 'by faith of Jesus Christ, unto all and upon all them that believe... Being justified freely by his grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus...' (Rom. 3:22, 24).

Wright seems to hold that faith, and the justification of which it is the instrument, is a sort of covenant boundary marker, whereas the Apostle sees it as something far greater: the only way to be 'reckoned as righteous.' The Apostle shows how eschatologically major an issue this imputation of righteousness is for the believer in Rom. 5:9, in that it constitutes the only escape from the final wrath of God: 'Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him.'

It seems to me, that for all their insights, neither Sanders, Dunn, nor Wright gives anything approaching due weight to this eternally massive issue of how sinners escape the wrath of God through imputation of the righteousness of Christ, received through faith, as *entry* into God's gracious covenant mercies. Wright speaks of imputation as 'a cold piece of business' (*op.cit.*, 110), and Dunn essentially denies the imputation of Adam's sin to the human race, and therefore makes nothing significant of the imputation of the righteousness of the Last Adam to all who will be 'in Him' through faith, in the power of the Spirit. (*Theology of Paul*, 94-97).

Instead of clear-cut, forensic imputation of the righteousness of Christ to believers (cf. Rom. 4:3,5) and forensic non-imputation of their sins to the infinite, holy substitute (cf. Rom. 3:8 and II Cor. 5:19), the new perspective on Paul appears to offer us a rather confusing mixture of faith as covenant badge and justification as something like the infused grace of a regenerate life. With all due respect to these scholars, they are offering us something far less than the apostolic gospel of justification by grace through faith.

Bishop Robert Forsyth, a personal friend of N. T. Wright, has explained in brief the pastoral difference between the new perspective on justification (especially with Wright) and the traditional Protestant understanding of justification by grace through faith:

The problem with Tom's understanding is that it looks like he is implying that God justifies us because we have been regenerated by the Holy Spirit and come to faith and belong to God's people. That is, it sounds like the discredited Roman Catholic doctrine of the 16th century that we are justified because of God's work in us, rather than because of God's work for us in Christ, or that we are right with God because we belong to the church not the other way around. This implication has caused considerable alarm among reformed evangelicals.

I believe that a plain and straightforward reading of the sacred texts we have examined in Matthew, John, Romans and elsewhere will show the lack of tenability of the re-interpretation of Paul on justification. What advantages it may have to offer (such as, perhaps, easier dialogue with Jewish and Roman Catholic friends), appears to me more than lost by its watering down and muddying of the great Good News, which we should be most eager to share with them – whole and entire – as we seek ‘to speak the truth in love’.

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[TE Douglas F. Kelly](#) is professor of Systematic Theology at Reformed Theological Seminary in Charlotte, N.C.

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