

I Get Mail or Justification and the New Perspective on Paul

This is the second part of a response to a reader who left some comments on an essay I'd written a few years ago entitled [Anglican Reflections on Justification by Faith](#). Unfortunately, an adequate response required more space than would fit in a comment box. Here's my response to the second comment:

And one other issue: IMHO one of the most powerful claims made by the "New Perspective" is that we cannot find a single instance of an author in the New Testament period who was defending "works righteousness"; hence, Paul could not have been arguing against a non-existent opponent. I have not seen a single response to this claim.

Unfortunately, (as Krister Stendahl asserted in an important essay), we read Paul through Luther, who indeed was battling those who were advocating salvation by works. A better resolution may be found in pursuing more carefully how the church has understood the role of merit in justification/sanctification. I'm reminded that Augustine said that when God rewards our merits, He crowns his own gifts.

Thanks. Steve



Steve,

You raise two different issues in this comment, but both are variations on a common theme – that in some way the “New Perspective on Paul” invalidates the Reformation understanding of justification. In the realm of “popular” theology, I see this claim raised both by traditional Protestants (who then reject the New Perspective) and by Roman Catholics (or others of “catholic” leanings, e.g., Eastern Orthodox, Anglo-Catholics) who presume that the “New Perspective” in some way validates the “Catholic” position on justification. I mentioned this in my essay: “Occasionally, one comes across Roman Catholic apologists who suggest that the New Perspective proves that the Council of Trent was right, after all. More frequently, traditional Protestants (such as John Piper) vigorously attack the ‘New Perspective’ (notably N. T. Wright) as not only a betrayal of the Reformation, but a distortion of Paul’s theology.” Your reference to “merit” as God “crowning his gifts” sounds like a variation on the “Catholic” apologetic.

Some of this I already addressed in my essay: (1) “[T]he New Perspective does not amount to a simple rejection of the Reformation understanding of justification.” (2) “For example, broadly speaking, New Perspective scholars are clear that justification language in Paul is the language of the courtroom, and is thus forensic,” and (3) “New Perspective scholars continue to affirm that justification in Paul is ‘by faith alone.’ ”

New Perspective advocate N. T. Wright illustrates the above three points: (1) The New Perspective is not simply rejecting the Reformation understanding: "Do we then overthrow the Reformation tradition by this theology? On the contrary, we establish it. Everything Luther and Calvin wanted to achieve is within this glorious Pauline framework of thought."¹ (2) Justification is forensic: ". . . it is *law-court language* . . ."² "The verdict of the last day stands in the background of Romans 3 . . . But . . . Paul envisages this verdict being heard here and now, because it has been brought forward into the present."³ (3a) Justification takes place through union with or incorporation into Christ: "The people declared to be 'in the right' are the people who are *incorporated into the Messiah* . . . the Messiah's death constitutes the past event which enables justification to take place, and the Messiah's present incorporative life is the context within which it makes sense for the one God to make the same declaration over people *now* that he made over the Messiah himself in the resurrection."⁴ (3b) Justification is by faith alone: "Justification by faith means that God now declares circumcised and uncircumcised alike 'in the right,' 'members of the covenant family,' the former 'on the basis of faith' and the latter 'through faith'" "[T]his lawcourt verdict, implementing God's covenant plan, and all based on Jesus Christ himself, is announced both in the *present*, with the verdict issued on the basis of faith and *faith alone*, [my emphasis] and also in the *future*, on the day when God raises from the dead all those who are already indwelt by the Spirit."⁵

The Reformation understanding of justification does not stand or fall with the claim that first-century Jews were defending "works righteousness." At the same time, the "New Perspective" claims about first-century Judaism are not unproblematic. The two basic claims are (1) for Paul, "works of the law" (Rom.

3:28) means “boundary markers” that distinguish Jews from Gentiles, specifically, circumcision, sabbath keeping, and kosher diet. Paul’s criticism of the law in Galatians and Romans is not a protest against the law itself but against ethnic divisiveness. (2) The claim by E.P. Sanders that first-century Judaism could be described as “covenantal nomism”: keeping the law is not a matter of “works righteousness,” but rather a grateful response to God’s gracious covenant.

The first claim (endorsed by both Sanders and James Dunn, but also somewhat by N.T. Wright) is based on the Qumran document 4QMMT. The problem with the appeal to Qumran is that this was a sectarian community that had rejected current Jewish leadership and had set itself apart in the desert. As Ben Witherington points out, this was the opposite of the agenda of the Galatian Judaizers who were trying to get the Galatian church more closely connected with the Judaism centered in Jerusalem. Moreover, while Paul recognized the boundary marker issues of circumcision, sabbath keeping, and kosher diet, he makes no distinctions within the law itself between boundary markers and others aspects of the law. Rather, to keep any part of the law demands keeping the entire law! (Gal. 5:3-4)⁶

Concerning Sanders’ “covenantal nomism,” contemporary scholars recognize that traditional scholarship (especially Protestant) characterized first-century Judaism as legalistic. At the same time, recent scholars point to first-century Jewish writings that could be described as a “works righteousness approach to the issue of salvation”: 4 Ezra, Jubilees 15:3-4; Sirach 44:19-21; (Qumran) CD 3.2. “Their authors believed that final or eschatological salvation for anyone is a reward for strenuous obedience to the law.”⁷

More important is that Paul’s concern with the law in Galatians and Romans does not concern either boundary issues or “covenantal nomism.” Paul is rather concerned with two other issues: Christology and sin.

First, Christology: The gospel concerns God's Son (Rom. 1:1-6), and is the "power of salvation," to all who have faith, both Jews and gentiles (Rom. 1: 16-17). Christ is the second Adam, through whom the "grace of God has abounded" (Rom. 5); Abraham is the forerunner of those whose faith was "accounted for righteousness," and "who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification (Rom. 5:24). Paul's discussion of justification by faith in Phil. 3:2-11 makes clear that Paul's concern in justification is not limited to issues concerning Gentile inclusion. Rather, the primary concern in justification language is participation in the death and resurrection of Christ."⁸

Second, Sin: Paul establishes in Romans 1 that Gentiles have sinned without the law, but in Romans 2, that Jews, although they have the law, are still guilty of sin. Paul's concern with the law is not with either "boundary markers" or "works righteousness." The first problem with the law is that it leads to consciousness of sin. In the words of N.T. Wright, "all who attempted to legitimate their covenant status by appealing to Torah would find that the Torah itself accused them of sin."⁹ Second, in light of Christ, the law is obsolete: "What bothers him most is that keeping the Law implies in Paul's mind that Christ's death did not accomplish what in fact he believes it did accomplish."¹⁰

So the Reformation understanding of justification does not depend on arguing against a "non-existent opponent." Nor does it depend on the claim that first-century Jews advocated "works righteousness." It depends first on the claim that salvation comes through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and, second, that, since all have sinned (both Jews and Gentiles), all need salvation.

On Krister Stendahl

I'm fairly certain that most of those who appeal to the Krister Stendahl essay have not actually read it. Stendahl does not argue that "we read Paul through Luther," but that we read Paul through Luther and *Augustine*! (It is at least incongruous then that you finish by appealing to Augustine). Stendahl's point anticipates Sanders and the New Perspective in pointing out that Paul was concerned with the ignored question of relations between Jews and Gentiles – which, I acknowledge as an important correction by the New Perspective in my earlier essay. More significantly, Stendahl focuses on the misinterpretation of Romans 7, the problem of the "Pauline I," which Augustine and Luther understood as a self-description of Paul after his conversion to Christianity. Stendahl points out correctly that the context concerns the holiness and goodness of the Jewish law, not a generic description of the predicament of the human being under sin. Contemporary biblical scholars suggest that the "Pauline I" is actually a description of Adam (Witherington) or of Israel, whose "Adamic condition" has been exacerbated by Torah (Wright).^{[11](#)}

At the same time, nothing in what Stendahl writes conflicts with Reformation understanding of justification as such. To the contrary, he agrees with the standard Reformation interpretation: (1) "The impossibility of keeping the whole Law is a decisive point in Paul's argumentation . . . this impossibility is the background for Paul's arguments in favor of a salvation which is open to both Jews and Gentiles in Christ." (2) "Jews are not better than the Gentiles, in spite of circumcision and the proud possession of the Law. . . They stand before God as guilty as the Gentiles, and even more so . . ." (3) "[T]he only grace which counts is the one now available in Messiah Jesus."^{[12](#)}

Augustine and Merit

Finally, your last two sentences are just a huge jump.

Logically, there is no direct path from “The New Perspective” and “Krister Stendahl” to the Western Catholic doctrine of “merit.” Certainly if sanctifying grace is a real thing, then “when God rewards our merits, He crowns his own gifts.” If there is a real distinction between justification as a forensic declaration of righteousness (alien righteousness) and sanctification as an inherent transformation (infusion), then the latter takes place through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit who unites Christians to the crucified and risen Christ, and any moral transformation that occurs in sanctification is God “crowning his own gifts.” However, the mere mention of merit does not address the crucial question: Is the formal cause of the Christian’s right standing before God the finished work of Jesus Christ outside of him or her (appropriated through the instrumental cause of faith), or, rather, is the formal cause infused righteousness, even if it results from the indwelling of the Holy Spirit? That is, is transformation by grace a consequence of having been freely forgiven by God? Or rather, is divine forgiveness conditioned by prior transformation? That is, does “merit” follow justification or does justification depend on merit?

[1](#) N.T. Wright, *Justification: God’s Plan and Paul’s Vision* (IVP Academic, 2009), 252.

[2](#) N.T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 117.

[3](#) N.T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God: Book 2* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 997.

[4](#) Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 951.

[5](#) Wright, *Justification*, 216, 251.

[6](#) “Works of the Law surely means all of the works of the law . . . For Paul, the Law is a package deal . . . All must be obeyed if one is under the Mosaic Law.” Ben Witherington, *The*

Problem With Evangelical Theology (Baylor University Press, 2005), 50-55; *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Social-Rhetorical Commentary* (Eerdmans, 2004), 102-107.

[7](#) Witherington, *Romans*, 103.

[8](#) Brevard S. Childs, *The Church's Guide for Reading Paul: The Canonical Shaping of the Pauline Corpus* (Eerdmans, 2008), 108-109.

[9](#) Wright, *The Letter to the Romans, The New Interpreter's Bible: Volume 10* (Abingdon, 2002), 461.

[10](#) Witherington, *Problem with Evangelical Theology*, 55. See also Childs, 97-112.

[11](#) Krister Stendahl, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," *Harvard Theological Review* (1963) 199-215; Witherington, *Problem With Evangelical Theology*, 21-37; Wright, *Romans*, 558-572.

[12](#) Stendahl, 201-202.