

The New Perspective on Paul—Part 2

Presuppositions and Preunderstanding:

It is always dangerous to interpret God’s Word based upon one’s own presuppositions. This is known as eisegesis—reading into scripture what the interpreter thinks it ought to say. NPP teachers are guilty of that very error.

Ironically, NPP teachers accuse Luther and the Reformers of misinterpreting Paul. They say that the Reformers imposed their own presuppositions on the text. However, a basic rule of interpretation that the Reformers had was to discount their own biases and follow the principle of *tabula rasa* (“clean slate”). This meant to study the text with an open mind. It meant applying literal, historical-grammatical principles of interpretation to arrive at the intended meaning of the original author. In following this principle of interpretation, they would also arrive at the meaning which would be understood by the original readers.

In reality it is Sanders’ own preunderstanding that led him into his erroneous NPP teachings. Sanders, as well as other NPP followers, followed the path of historical criticism. As a result, they have rejected the orthodox view of biblical inspiration in favor of a subjective view of biblical interpretation. Sanders states that “very little or virtually nothing” in the Gospels is factual.¹ N.T. Wright says that the Gospels are at best only on the “edge” of truth. NPP teachers claim that the Gospels are *less* reliable than rabbinic writings in their portrayal of first century Judaism.²

The View of Jesus and John the Baptist.

Recall that N.T. Wright claims, “we have misjudged early Judaism, especially Pharisaism.” According to the NPP view, the Pharisees were not legalists. Judaism is portrayed in a positive light by the NPP.

But when we examine the view of Jesus and John the Baptist about second-temple Judaism, we get a different picture.

¹ Robert Thomas, “HERMENEUTICS OF THE NEW PERSPECTIVE ON PAUL,” TMSJ 16/2 (Fall 2005) 299.

² Ibid.

- When the Pharisees and Sadducees came to John the Baptist to be baptized by him, he called them a “brood of vipers” (Mt. 3:7). That hardly fits the description given to us by NPP teachers regarding second-temple Judaism.
- Jesus said, “For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 5:20). The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were the rabbis of second-temple Judaism. As we read the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus paints a picture of the apostasy of Judaism’s rabbinical leaders.
- Mark 2:1–3:6 records a series of conflicts in which the opponents of Jesus were the scribes, Pharisees, and Herodians. Sanders dismisses these events saying that the conflicts recorded by Mark never happened. He claims that these disagreements between Jesus and the Jews were nothing more than embellished stories either by Mark, another author or the early church. In other words, these events most likely never took place and Jesus never made such criticisms of Judaism’s use of the law. This is a perfect example of how Sanders’ preunderstanding based upon higher criticism allows him to read into the text whatever he wants.
- In both Mark 7 and Matthew 15 we have accounts of Jesus’ disagreements with first-century Judaism regarding the washing of hands. However, Sanders states, “Deadly enmity over handwashing is, I think, historically impossible.”³ Sanders also has a problem with Jesus’ attack on the Pharisaic view of *korban*. He claims, “No Pharisee would justify using a semi-legal device to deprive his parents.”⁴ Again, he rejects the historical accuracy of the Gospels. His higher critical approach to scripture colors his preunderstanding thus allowing him to read into the text his own ideas.

Disregard for Biblical Context

It’s important to study passages of Scripture within its context. Taking verses out of context leads to all kinds of error. Context is crucial to accurate interpretation of God’s Word. It is one of the most fundamental truths for understanding the Bible and yet this

³ Ibid. 300.

⁴ Ibid.

truth is sadly neglected by many as they seek “proof texts” out of context to prove their points.

Unfortunately, NPP teachers repeatedly violate this basic principle of interpretation. They jump from passage to passage without thoroughly considering the immediate context of their “proof texts”. As a result, they read into passages of scripture things that are not in the immediate context. In doing so, they distort the original author’s intention and the original reader’s understanding of what was written.

In Romans 1:1 we read, “Paul, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated to the gospel (εὐαγγέλιον) of God.” In commenting on the word gospel in Romans N.T. Wright states, “In Paul’s Jewish world, the word looked back to Isa 40:9 and 52:7, where a messenger was to bring to Jerusalem the good news of Babylon’s defeat, the end of Israel’s exile, and the personal return of YHWH to Zion.”⁵ In order to import his preunderstanding into the text, Wright draws his meaning for the word gospel from an Old Testament context. He defines the word gospel from a prophecy of Isaiah regarding national Israel. It makes no difference to Wright that Romans is a letter addressed to a church composed mainly of Gentiles. He does this in order to support his theory of covenantal nomism.

While it is true that scripture does interpret scripture, you always begin with near context in order to understand what is written in any given passage of the Bible. The proper approach to sound interpretation would be to draw the meaning of the word gospel from verses in the same chapter—Romans 1:9, 15, and 16. In Romans 1:15 Paul states his desire to preach the gospel to the Gentile church in Rome. In Romans 1:16 he says that “the gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” Would Gentiles in Rome understand Israel’s exile and YHWH’s return to Jerusalem? Probably not! But according to Wright, the Gentiles in faraway Rome were already familiar with the idea of covenantal nomism in A.D. 55. Wright’s theory is highly improbable.

Romans 1:16 clearly speaks of the saving power of the gospel. To read into that verse covenantal nomism requires the interpreter to not only redefine the word “gospel” but also to redefine the word “salvation.” Yet Wright believes that justification is not “so

⁵ Wright, “Romans” 415; cf. idem, *What Saint Paul Really Said* 40-44.

much about soteriology as about ecclesiology; not so much about salvation as about the church.”⁶ According to Wright, justification is not how to become a part of the people of God as it is about how to tell who is a part of that community. It is hard to understand how he can claim that justification does not refer to an individual’s salvation when the context of Romans 1:16 is dealing with the salvation of individuals. But that is exactly what he wants his readers to believe. The only way that he can make this claim is by totally ignoring the immediate context. Instead of using the book of Romans to define the words gospel and salvation, he uses an obscure passage in Isaiah which tells of the rescue of Israel from pagan oppression. Based on this passage in Isaiah, he wants us to believe that salvation is not for individuals, but rather for a corporate group of people. This concept is totally foreign to the context of the book of Romans. National salvation is hardly in view when Paul uses the words “to everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16). Redefining the terms gospel and salvation in Romans violate a fundamental principle of keeping immediate context preeminent when interpreting God’s Word. Such a violation is a result of allowing preunderstanding and bias to impose itself upon the text of Romans. Such a twisted interpretation does not come from the context of Romans itself.

Conclusion

The NPP system is in error because it is based on a preunderstanding which questions the inerrancy of God’s Word. The preunderstanding of NPP does not allow the biblical text to speak for itself. The NPP is not based on the testimony of Scripture. It is contrary to it, making it an unbiblical teaching with serious consequences for those who follow it and are led astray by it.

[Sanford Bible Church](#)

⁶ Ibid. 119.