

The New Perspective on Paul—Part 1

Introduction

When a “new perspective” that questions biblical doctrines is proposed, Christians need to be aware of possible dangers. Often “new” ideas, teachings, or perspectives are not actually new at all. Solomon rightly wrote, “there is nothing new under the sun” (Eccl. 1:9). Often “new” perspectives are simply old errors with new packaging. So also, the “New Perspective on Paul” (hereafter abbreviated NPP) is an ancient error that denies foundational doctrines clearly taught in the Word of God. The NPP rejects truths which have been accepted by orthodox Christians for centuries.

The NPP is a system of thought that attempts to reinterpret the Apostle Paul and what he wrote in his letters. As one reads the letters of Paul, it becomes quite clear that he is opposed to the legalistic Jewish system of his day which seeks to earn salvation through works. In contrast, teachers of the NPP claim that Paul has been misunderstood. They contend that he was actually opposing an attitude of Jewish arrogance. Supposedly, the Jews were simply boasting of being God’s chosen people, and not trying to gain acceptance from Jehovah through good works. NPP teachers claim that the “works” of the Jews in Paul’s day were only done to show that they were God’s covenant people and not to earn their salvation. Teachers of the NPP claim that the Jews who were being confronted by Paul actually supported the doctrine of sola gratia (grace alone).

Historical Background

Since the early 1900’s a few Bible teachers have claimed that Paul was being misinterpreted by men such as John Calvin and Martin Luther. But that “new perspective” did not have much of a following until recently. In 1977, E.P. Sanders wrote *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. Sanders claimed that the Judaism of Paul’s day has been wrongly criticized as a religion of “works-salvation.” As a result, a number of scholars embraced the NPP beliefs with regard to Paul and the Judaism of his day. Besides E.P. Sanders, James Dunn, and N.T. Wright are among the more well-known scholars who promote the NPP. James Dunn was the first to coin the term “The New Perspective” in his 1983 Manson Memorial Lecture, *The New Perspective on Paul and the Law*.

NPP Teachings

It can be difficult to list the major teachings of any particular group of Christians. For instance, there are many types of Calvinists. Trying to create a list of what they all believe is nearly impossible. The same could be said for those who teach the NPP. The following is a list of some of the main ideas of the NPP position. However, not every NPP teacher would necessarily embrace every topic in this list.

Judaism Taught Grace

A fundamental premise held by most NPP teachers is that Judaism was actually a religion of grace. Sanders claims that the Apostle Paul was actually in agreement with Palestinian Judaism. He claims that not only did Paul teach salvation by grace, but the Jews of Paul's day also taught salvation by grace. According to Sanders, Judaism taught "election and ultimately salvation ... to be by God's mercy rather than human achievement."¹ The traditional orthodox position is that Paul opposed the Judaism of his day because they taught a works-based salvation rather than salvation by grace. According to the NPP position, orthodox Christianity has been mistaken for nearly 2000 years.

NPP teachers conclude that first-century Judaism agreed with the same understanding of grace found within the New Testament and the letters of Paul. This is the premise upon which the NPP is built.

N.T. Wright says, "we have misjudged early Judaism, especially Pharisaism."² The contention of NPP teachers is that the Pharisees were not legalists. But how does that statement line up with scripture?

Jesus described the Pharisees as those who "neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness," "straining at a gnat while swallowing a camel," and ones who "cleaned up the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence" (Matthew 23:23–25).

The view that first-century Pharisees were not legalists and their religion was not one of self-righteousness and works-based salvation directly contradicts Jesus' own words.

¹ E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 422.

² N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 32.

Covenantal Nomism

The word “nomism” means ethical or religious conduct based upon moral law. It comes from the Greek word νόμος which means law. Thayer’s Greek lexicon defines νόμος as “a law or rule producing a state approved of God.”

E.P. Sanders coined the term “covenantal nomism.” The underlying idea of “covenantal nomism” is that 1st century Jews in the land of Israel did not believe in works righteousness. For that hypothesis to be true, the NPP must explain Judaism’s strict obedience to the law as a system of works. NPP teachers say that a person is brought into the Abrahamic covenant through birth and stays in the covenant through works. God will be faithful to his promise to Israel, but the nation is required to obey Him. The Law provides the means for atonement which maintains the covenant relationship to Him. NPP teachers claim that the reason Israel required strict obedience to the law was because they were “keeping the covenant,” rather than attempting to merit salvation through their own works. They say that when the Jews spoke of “obedience” it was in the context of “covenantal nomism” and not legalism. As a result, Judaism is then not concerned with “how to have a right relationship with God” but with “how to remain his covenant people.”

Saul: Legalist or Zealot?

In order to prove their claims, NPP teachers need to explain the life of the Apostle Paul prior to his salvation. Before Paul was converted, was he attempting to gain merit in the sight of God through his zeal for the law? Or was he simply being a zealous nationalist who had a passion for his nation Israel and for their special place in God’s plan? NPP teachers claim that the pre-Christian Saul was not trying to earn his salvation through meritorious works. This is an important point. If the NPP argument is true, then this means that the converted Apostle Paul was not fighting the legalistic system of Judaism. In other words, the vast majority of Protestant scholars have been wrong about who Paul was and why he had written his letters in which he confronted the Jews of his day.

Paul’s Criticism of Judaism

NPP teachers have differing views regarding what Paul found wrong with Judaism. Briefly stated, we could say that NPP teachers believe that Paul did not have a problem

with the Jewish system of law-keeping in and of itself. Keeping the law was not opposed to living under grace. They say that the only problem Paul had with the law was when it seemed to threaten the doctrine of salvation by faith in Christ.

Is it true that Paul really did not have a problem with the doctrine of salvation taught by the Jewish leaders of his day? In his letters to the Galatians and the Romans, Paul clearly condemned the works-based system of righteousness promoted by the Judaizers. These false teachers were trying to persuade the Galatians to turn away from the message of the gospel. In response, Paul said that anyone who preached a gospel other than the one he preached should be “eternally condemned” (Galatians 1:8–9).

Boundary Markers

Teachers of the NPP say that the Jews of Paul’s day were not trying to attain salvation by their own good works. And so, Paul was not confronting them about a works-based salvation. They say that the Jews were only trying to keep their “nationalistic boundary markers” such as circumcision, dietary laws, the Sabbath, etc. As a nation, these boundary markers were what kept them as the chosen people of God. Works, as well as these boundary markers, were used to keep themselves within the boundary of God’s people.

NPP teachers say that these “boundary markers” were observances that separated the Jews from the Gentiles. Paul came to do away with these “boundary markers” so that Jew and Gentile would be unified. They claim that when Paul criticized the Jews for adhering to “works of the law,” he was referring to these “boundary markers.” In other words, Paul was not fighting legalism, but was instead fighting the works and national pride that separated the Jews from the Gentiles. He was not opposing a system of works-righteousness, as has been traditionally taught by orthodox Bible scholars throughout church history.

Denial of Imputed Righteousness

Teachers of the NPP argue that Paul’s use of the term “the righteousness of God” in the book of Romans has also been misunderstood by orthodox Bible scholars. They say that this term actually refers to God’s faithfulness rather than the imputation of Christ’s righteousness.

N.T. Wright reinterprets portions of scripture which clearly teach imputed righteousness. For example, 2 Corinthians 5:21 says “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” According to Wright, this is speaking about God’s covenant faithfulness and not imputed righteousness. Wright does not believe God’s righteousness is anything that He can give or that can be transferred to a believer. He says that the believer is simply declared righteous because he has become a covenant member.

Faith vs. Works

As we read the letters of Paul, it becomes evident that there is a clear contrast between faith and works.

- Rom. 3:27 Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith.
- Rom. 4:5-6 But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness, just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works.
- Rom. 11:6 And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work.
- Eph. 2:8-9 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.

Yet according to NPP teachers, Paul never presented faith and works as being incompatible.

Justification

According to NPP teachers, justification is not about how a person comes into a right standing before God. For example, N.T. Wright says that justification isn’t merely an *initial means* by which someone is right with God, but rather a mark of who already is. He states,

“In theology, therefore, justification is not the means whereby it becomes possible to declare someone in the right. It is simply that declaration itself. It is not how someone becomes a Christian, but simply the declaration that someone is a

Christian. It is not the exercise of mercy, but the just declaration concerning one who has already received mercy.”³

Summary

Although the NPP is of recent origin, the errors it teaches are not new. The NPP claims to have discovered new truth about 1st century Judaism which orthodox Bible teachers have missed for the last 2,000 years. Teachers of the NPP reject Biblical doctrines which have been accepted by orthodox Christians for centuries. When someone questions fundamental truths such as justification by faith or the imputed righteousness of Christ, we need to question their belief system.

[Sanford Bible Church](#)

³ N. T. Wright, *Pauline Perspectives: Essays on Paul* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013) 22.