

## Session 5

### Chapter 4 Justification (Part B)

#### III. The New Perspective

For some time, the advocates of the so-called *The New Perspective* (here after NP) have claimed that “the church, both Catholic and Protestant, has misunderstood the biblical teaching of justification for most of its history.”<sup>1</sup>

According to them, “they failed to apprehend the underlying problem that Paul was addressing in his epistles to the Galatians and to the Romans.”<sup>2</sup>

##### A. What does Paul mean by “the works of the law” according to the NP?

1. In Galatians 2, we find Paul confronting Peter for his hypocrisy of withdrawing himself from fellowship with the Gentiles in Antioch.

Paul says, “When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, “You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?” (Gal. 2:14).

- a. What is the error that Peter committed in Antioch? Did he break moral laws? No.
- b. Consider what term Paul used to depict Peter’s error.

He says: “Nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law (*ergōn nomou*: works of law) but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified” (Gal. 2:16 NASB).



He called what Peter did (separating himself from the Gentiles, not eating with them) as “the works of the law.”

2. So, what, then, are the works of the law by which one cannot be justified?
  - a. The works of the law that Peter failed to carry out in Antioch were not moral “good works” or violating the Ten Commandments of the Lord.
  - b. Instead, the works of the laws are things that divide Jews from Gentiles.

<sup>1</sup> Robert Saucy and Alan Gomes, “Justification and the New Perspective,” *Sundoulos*, Spring 2011, p. 12).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

- (1) Specifically, in the context of this passage (and we have no right to read Galatians 2:16 other than in the context of verses 11-15), the “works of the law” refer to the fact that “Jews do not eat with Gentiles.”

Wright: “They are not, in other words, the moral ‘good works’ which the Reformation tradition loves to hate.”

- (2) “What one might gain by such ‘works of the law’ is not a treasury of moral merit, but the assured status of belonging to God’s people, separated from the rest of humankind.”<sup>3</sup>

3. How is the view of justification advanced by the NP different from the traditional view?
- “In the old perspective, works of the law are human acts of righteousness” (e.g., moral merits, good deeds, etc.) “performed in order to gain credit before God”<sup>4</sup>
  - “In the new perspective, works of the law are elements of Jewish law that accentuates Jewish privilege and mark out Israel from other nations.”<sup>5</sup>

## **B. Two vital ingredients in the New Perspective**

- First, seen from this perspective, the purpose of the works of the law was to maintain the identity of the Jewish nation as a covenanted people.
  - This view, therefore, reacts against the traditional position that the Jews in the first century believed they could amass merits before God by doing good deeds.

Perhaps, we should say, “Not so fast.”

Recall that Jesus told the expert in the law who asked, “What must I do to inherit eternal life,” “*Do this [Love your neighbor as yourself] and you will live.*”

“But he wanted to JUSTIFY himself, so he asked Jesus, ‘*And who is my neighbor*’” (Lk. 10:25-9).

Undoubtedly, here we are talking about doing good deeds to obtain eternal life, instead of accentuating the specialness of the Jewish nation.

- “In place of seeing Paul’s contemporaries as legalistic, the NP says that the concern in early Judaism was to maintain the identity of the Jewish nation, especially through observing the following three things”<sup>6</sup>:

<sup>3</sup> Tom Wright, *Justification: God’s Plan and Paul’s Vision* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2009), pp. 30-31.

<sup>4</sup> Simon Gathercole, “What Did Paul Really Mean?” *Christianity Today*, August 2007, p. 24.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

- Sabbath
  - Circumcising their newborns
  - Eating kosher (e.g., not eating pork)
- c. “These boundary markers or badges of identity for the Jewish nation distinguished them as belonging to God’s covenant people.”<sup>7</sup>

2. Second, this understanding of first-century Judaism is, then, applied to Paul.

- a. Thus, it can be concluded that “Paul was not countering legalistic Jewish individuals who were attempting to earn their salvation through works-righteousness.”<sup>8</sup>
- b. What was their sin then?  
Rather, their sin was one of ethnocentric pride, but in what sense?

In the sense that “these Jews had erected barriers between themselves and their Gentile brother and sisters by insisting that, along with faith in Jesus, the Gentiles must also follow such specifically Jewish ceremonial practices as circumcision, the kosher dietary laws, and Sabbath observance.”<sup>9</sup>

- c. Thus, it is argued that “Paul extend[ed] these insights to church relations.

Just as Jews wrongly restricted God’s covenant, so also Jewish Christians wrongly insisted that Gentile Christians needed to observe the law to be full-fledged disciples”<sup>10</sup> or to be considered as believers, period.

- d. Subsequently, “the sin of these ‘Judaizers’ was that they were alienating themselves from their fellow believers in a spirit of ethnic exclusivism and pride, not that they were attempting to earn salvation in relation to God through moral effort.”<sup>11</sup>

3. In light of that, what was Paul’s main concern?

- a. That Gentiles understand that God would welcome them without having to observe Jewish practices (kosher food and circumcision).
- b. Romans 3:28-30 is believed to be making this point:

“For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law (*ergōn nomou*: works of law).<sup>29</sup> Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too,<sup>30</sup> since there is only one God, who

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Saucy and Gomez, p. 14.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Gathercole p. 24

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith.”

**Discussion<sup>1</sup>:** In what sense is today’s church doing the same as what the 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish Christians did to make some people feel very uncomfortable about coming to our church?

### C. How does this NP then affect the understanding of the justification by faith?

1. First, let’s examine the complain the NP has regarding the traditional view on the justification (from the Greek root *dikaioō*) by faith.

Wright says:

- a. “[Justification] does not denote an action which transforms someone so much as a declaration which grants them a status. It is the status of the person which is transformed by the action of ‘justification’, not the character.”<sup>12</sup>

- b. “It is in this sense that ‘justification’ ‘makes’ someone ‘righteous,’ just as the officiant at a wedding service might be said to ‘make’ the couple husband and wife—a change of status, accompanied by a steady transformation of the heart (it is hoped), but a real change of status even if both parties are entering the union out of pure convenience.”<sup>13</sup>



- c. He believes that our “present justification, which is on the basis of faith, anticipates our future justification that will take place on the day of judgment, which is ‘on the basis of the entire life.’”<sup>14</sup>

2. What his critics have said.

- a. Some have interpreted this statement to mean, while our present justification is by faith, our future justification is, in some sense, by works, a view that Wright himself eschews since the works are produced in the power of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>15</sup>

- b. In response to the statement, “Present justification, which is on the basis of faith, anticipates our future justification that will take place on the Day of Judgment,” Wright’s critics have said:

“According to the NP, justification is the declaration that a person is in the covenant family. Accordingly, ‘righteousness’ is simply a statement of that person’s status. He or she is not regarded as morally virtuous (whether through an inherent or an

<sup>12</sup> Wright, p. 70

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Saucy and Gomez, p. 14

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

imputed righteousness), but is simply declared to be in the covenant.”<sup>16</sup>

Wright’s critics are upset because his view on justification:

- Seems to be only concerned with its legal sense.
  - Undermines the power of justification to transform lives.
  - (Future justification) is work-based (entire life which implies work).
- c. It is ironic that Wright is accused of presenting his version of forensic or legal condition of justification, instead of transformation of vital reality or character, since that was his complaint against the traditional view on justification.
- d. Disliking the traditional view on justification, Dallas Willard said (sarcastically):

“No one is in this ‘saved’ condition until declared to be so by God. We do not enter it by something that happens to us, or in virtue of a reality that moves into place in our life, even if that reality is God himself.”<sup>17</sup>

### 3. The irony.

Wright is also concerned about this issue, but he thinks that such work is done more by the Holy Spirit than the belief in the imputed righteousness of Christ.

Thus, he writes:

- a. “The question is about the means of salvation, how it is accomplished. [The Reformed theology] has said that salvation is accomplished by the sovereign grace of God, operating through the death of Jesus Christ in our place and on our behalf, and appropriated through faith alone.”



“Absolutely. I agree a hundred per cent. . . . But there is something missing—or rather, someone missing. Where is the Holy Spirit?”<sup>18</sup>

- b. “In some of the great Reformed theologians, not least John Calvin himself, the work of the spirit is every bit as important as the work of the son.

But you can’t simply add the spirit on at the end of the equation and hope it will still have the same shape. Part of my plea in this book is for the spirit’s work to be taken seriously.”<sup>19</sup>

## D. Evaluation of “The New Perspective”

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1997), p. 47.

<sup>18</sup> Wright, viii

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

1. First, the belief that the Jews were not preoccupied with righteousness obtained from works of the law is not necessarily true.

- a. “Documents from around the time of Paul state that some Jews believed obedience to the law was rewarded on the final day with salvation:

“The one who does righteousness stores up life for himself with the Lord” (*Psalms of Solomon*, c. 50 B.C.). “Miracles, however, will appear at their own time to those who are saved by their works” (2 *Baruch*, c. A.D. 100)<sup>20</sup>.

- b. What does this mean?

(1)“Paul’s understanding of justification makes sense, then, as a criticism of the observance of the law as a whole (not just circumcision, Sabbath observance, and food laws) as the means to eternal life.”<sup>21</sup>

(2)In this sense, the New Perspective is incorrect.

2. However, it is quite true that Jewish Christians were very reluctant to eliminate all aspects of Judaism from the new faith.

This is quite obvious from what happened in the Galatian Church and what the men from James had proclaimed in Antioch:

“Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: ‘Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved’” (Acts 15:1).

- a. There is little doubt about what the Jewish Christians were thinking:

Demanding that the Gentiles acquiesce to the requirement of Jewish laws (e.g., circumcision) in order to keep as many of them from joining the new faith.

- b. Perhaps the best example of this occurred in Acts 22 where the Jews were quite willing to let Paul speak to them about his mission until he said, “Then the Lord said to me, ‘Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles’” (22:21).

(1)How was this statement received by the Jewish crowd? Not well.

“The crowd listened to Paul until he said this. Then they raised their voices and shouted, ‘Rid the earth of him! He’s not fit to live!’” (Acts 22:22).

(2)Why were they upset? They could not tolerate the idea that

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<sup>20</sup> Gathercole, p. 26

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

their God wanted to share His blessing with the Gentiles.

c. And this is the struggle many Jewish Christians carried into their new faith, not always successful in handling it. The result of this type of theology in the Church would have kept the Gentiles out of the NT covenant! Paul would have none of it!

d. Thus, Paul had to address both issues at the same time:

(1)Ethnocentrism of the Jews that kept the Gentiles from the church

(2)Theology of salvation by works that kept the sinners—both Jews and Gentiles—from being made righteous by God through Christ (Rom. 5:1).

**Discussion<sup>2</sup>:** In what sense is today's church doing the same as what the 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish Christians that kept the nations from receiving God's blessing in Christ?

3. Then, what should we believe about the justification by faith?

a. "At its core, the doctrine of justification says that sinners can be miraculously reckoned righteous before God. This happens for all who believe and has nothing to do with observance of the law, which for sinners is impossible"<sup>22</sup>

b. "The New Perspective rightly observes that Paul uses justification to argue that Gentile Christians need not take on the yoke of the law and that Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians should live together in harmony."<sup>23</sup>

## Homework 5

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 28

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

Read over the material covered in the last class and the additional Bible reading (if any).  
If you have any questions, please note them here and ask me later.

1. How does the New Perspective interpret Paul's term "the works of the law" (Gal. 2:16)?  
What were the 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish Christians mostly concerned about?
2. How does this New Perspective differ from the traditional understanding of the works of the law?
3. Evaluate the New Perspective in terms of its validity and error.