

# A Guide to the "New Perspective on Paul"

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## Introduction

*I include this piece because the influence of this movement is increasing within Evangelicalism, and I believe many people are in the dark about it. The subject is important also because we tend to view Scripture through the lens of the Reformation instead of the other way round. Although the Reformers got the Gospel right, their successors have sometimes appealed to them and not the Bible. At least the New Perspective on Paul (NPP), whatever its merits or demerits, has directed us back to the Bible again.*

The so-called "New Perspective on Paul" would be better called 'New Perspectives on Paul.' But in whatever variation, and whatever its problems, the New Perspective offers an important and robust challenge to traditional Reformation views of justification and Pauline theology. I should say that I do not dismiss everything the New Perspective has to say. While I am completely in agreement with the Reformers on justification by grace through faith, I am not ready to "throw the baby out with the bath water."

The main protagonists of the so-called New Perspective on Paul begin with E.P. Sanders and his book *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* in 1977. This was the one that really drove the wedge between the modern understanding of Second Temple Judaism and the Judaism exemplified by Luther and the Reformation. According to the New Perspective scholars, Luther and Calvin and others got Second Temple Judaism wrong. They thought the Jews of Jesus' and Paul's era believed in a 'works' righteousness and therefore in justification *by* works. Whereas, going back to the sources, Sanders brought forward evidence to show that such was not in fact the belief held by scribes and Pharisees of the first part of the First Century A.D.

It is important that we understand that over the last 40-50 years, in fact the last 10-20 years, there has been a tremendous increase in our knowledge of the Judaism of Jesus' and Paul's day, and so there is a great deal more information to sift through arising a great deal earlier than the information people like Edersheim and Rosenmuller used when they were teaching about Judaism. (Of course, this has implications also for Messianic Judaism, which very often does not take this new information into account when it seeks an inside track into understanding Jesus and the apostles).

As far as this issue of justification is at stake, what E.P. Sanders taught was that Second Temple Jews believed, not in a 'works-based' salvation but in a 'grace-based' salvation. Now certainly this 'grace-based' salvation was not the same as the 'salvation by grace through faith' which the Reformation teachers spoke of. It was "grace-based" in that they understood that collective Israel was chosen, or elected, purely on the basis of God's grace and not on the basis of the people *within* Israel being special. Being part of the community of Israel; having the Scriptures and having the covenants (particularly the Mosaic Law), and having the "badges" of that covenant (like circumcision), led to the idea of identifying Jewish righteousness with these outward things. The Jews were seeing themselves as people of the covenant just because they had these tokens from God. We can see some of this indeed in Romans 2:17-3:8.

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1 <http://drreluctant.wordpress.com/2013/03/09/what-is-the-new-perspective-on-paul-a-basic-explanation-pt-1/>,  
<http://drreluctant.wordpress.com/2013/03/14/what-is-the-new-perspective-on-paul-a-basic-explanation-pt-2/>,  
<http://drreluctant.wordpress.com/2013/03/24/what-is-the-new-perspective-on-paul-a-basic-explanation-pt-3/>,  
<http://drreluctant.wordpress.com/2013/05/03/what-is-the-new-perspective-on-paul-a-basic-explanation-pt-4/>

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What was happening here is that the Jews were looking at their Jewishness and saying, "Well, because I'm a Jew, because I'm in the covenant, and because I have circumcision, and because I have these things by grace from God... that justifies me!" That is certainly part of what Paul is addressing in the passage.

### **The Problem Defined**

The problem comes into focus when people like Sanders, and those who, to differing degrees follow him – James DG Dunn, NT Wright, and Scott McKnight – allege that these 'badges', the exclusive claims which they say are the root of the problem Paul is dealing with in Romans and Galatians, are equated with the phrase "the works of the law." For example, in the following verses:

Yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law [e.g. circumcision, dietary laws, Sabbath observance, etc.] but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified. – Galatians 2:16

For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them." – Galatians 3:10

So then, these badges: circumcision, having the law of the covenant, and so on, become 'ethnic' or 'nationalistic' barriers which symbolize "inclusion in a grace covenant" and keep out the Gentiles.

Basically what was happening, according to writers of the New Perspective, is that the Jews were saying, "We have these covenant tokens; they are given to us by grace. We haven't done anything to deserve them, but we have them and they are ours! They are not the property of the Gentiles! So you have to be in this covenant community in Israel in order to be saved; you have to have these badges."

In the words of one critic of the New Perspective:

In addition to his agreement with Sanders general description of Judaism as a non-legalistic religion, Wright also makes sympathetic use of Dunn's interpretation of Paul's dispute with the Judaizers and their understanding of the works of the law. The problem with the Judaizers appeal to the works of the law was not its legalism, Wright insists, but it's perverted nationalism; the Pauline expression 'the works of the law' does not refer to a legalistic claim regarding how sinners can find favor with God by obeying the law but to the

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nationalistic Jewish claim that God's covenant promise extends only to the Jews. The 'works of the law' are what Dunn calls 'boundary markers'; those acts of conformity to the law that serve to distinguish the Jewish community from the Gentiles.<sup>2</sup>

Dunn, Wright, and others believe that the "Lutheran perspective on Paul" and what Paul was dealing with when he was dealing with Jews, is all wrong because it interpreted Paul's Jewish opponents as believing in 'works righteousness' when in fact, according to Wright, Dunn, and Sanders, they didn't believe that at all; they believed in national 'grace righteousness.' The Jews saw themselves as being 'by grace' under the covenant as a people; this is what E.P. Sanders dubbed 'covenant nomism.'

In probably the best work on the subject, Westerholm writes,

<sup>3</sup>Israel sinned as all people sinned. But the 'Adam' in Israel made Israel's singular vocation the basis for Israel's characteristic sin, the 'meta sin,' [as Wright calls it in his book, *The Climax of the Covenant*] of boasting of the nation's special place in God's plan and treating the symbols of its distinctiveness [Sabbath, circumcision, the dietary laws] as 'badges of superiority'. Paul did not charge Jews with supposing that they could merit God's favor by keeping Torah's demands. Rather, he criticized Israel's 'relentless pursuit of national, ethnic, and territorial identity'. By emphasizing its distinctiveness along national lines, Israel was, paradoxically, becoming *like* the other nations rather than serving as their light. Possessing God's law, ethnic Israel believed itself inalienably God's people and confined the bounds of God's covenant to those who displayed the external 'badges' of Jewishness.

Now in interpreting the phrase 'works of the law' as being these external 'badges / emblems' of Jewishness this means that when you come to passages like **Galatians 3:10** the phrase no longer means what the Reformers took it to mean: that you cannot earn your salvation by 'works' or 'good deeds'; it just means the Apostle is saying 'these outward emblems don't mean anything.' In other words, **Galatians 3:10** becomes quite like **Romans 2:17ff.**, which declares any reliance on the Law a forlorn hope, whether it be "covenant nomism", or works righteousness.

### **The Affect on Exegesis**

For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is

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2 Cornelis Venema, *By Faith Alone*: edited by Gary LW Johnson and Guy P Waters, 41.

3 Stephen Westerholm. *Perspectives Old and New on Paul*, 180.

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written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them." – Galatians 3:10

From what has been said already we may view the NPP as an attempt to adjust Christian understanding of the way First Century Jews saw themselves in relation, first to God and second to the Gentiles. To God they apparently did not think, like the Reformers believed they did, that they could earn merit with God. Instead it is claimed, they held that by grace they were in the grace covenant which assured national blessing to Israel. Hence, by observing the rites and solemnities of circumcision, Sabbath observance, kosher practices, etc., they were showing fidelity to the covenant. Hence, when they read "works of the law" as in Gal. 3:10 above, the Jews understood it to mean these exclusivistic observances.

But that is not all. The New Perspective also urges us to reinterpret the Apostle Paul's mindset in these same terms. Once we do that, we are told, we will see that Paul was not speaking about works of merit at all in Romans and Galatians. Rather, he was speaking about these badges of exclusivity.

You see, the real problem Paul was writing about was that the Jews would not allow that through Christ's work on the Cross the Gentiles too were invited to become covenant people along with Israel. Just as the Jews believed they were partakers of God's covenant grace, so also they must accept that Gentiles likewise would be included with them if they believed the good news that God had opened the covenant up to them as equal sharers of covenant grace with Israel, but without the need for Israel's badges – which, remember, as markers of exclusivity, would be rendered unnecessary and redundant.

Let us take another look at Galatians 3:10a with these things in mind:

For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.

Reformation interpreters and their followers would read the verse like this: – **For as many as are of the works of the law** [that is Jews and those who follow their lead, who are seeking their justification in works of merit, trying to establish their righteousness by obeying the law] **are under the curse.** [The curse that comes because the law can do nothing but condemn us, and therefore put us under a curse.]

The standard NPP interpretation would be: – **For as many as are of the works of the law** [now seen as those Israelites who are looking to their external 'badges' or emblems, trying to find their justification in them] **they are under the curse.** [Because of failure to see that justification through covenant membership

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is extended to non-Jews]. "They" here is Israel generally. This is a national curse which has come upon them. (This also explains why NPP advocates tend to use strong replacement language).

### **The Nationalistic Problem**

So NPP advocates believe the problem is not with individuals, but with the nation of Israel, which believes itself to be safe in the covenant because of these grace emblems that they've been given by God and which set them off from the Gentiles. In actual fact, we're told, those very things, Paul would say to the Jews, "do not justify you if you exclude Israel."!

Conversely this means that justification would not be interpreted as individual justification because that's not what is needed. Rather, "justification" is that Israel embraces Messiah, understands that Messiah has come, and that the true 'badge' of the covenant is faith and not these external markers. As Westerholm represents the NPP writers as teaching:

Justification meant for Paul what it meant for other Jews; the decisive vindication of God's people when God as a court of law pronounced in their favor. Righteous or justified here designates those in whose favor the Divine Judge has pronounced. But for Paul, the people of God destined for justification were not those demarcated by the works of Torah. Justification, a divine verdict at the end of history, known in anticipation by God's people in the present, is for those who have faith in the gospel. What Paul was at pains to demolish was the national righteousness pursued by those who imagined that their place in the covenant people of God was secured by their loyalty to the signs of Jewish ethnic identity.<sup>4</sup>

### **What of Faith?**

Does this focus on the corporate nature of salvation alter the doctrine of justification by grace through faith? We must answer this question with a resounding "Yes", although it is important not to overstate the case. Someone such as N. T. Wright will not discount individual salvation, but he would still say that the main issue in Paul's Gospel is the inclusion of the Gentiles into the covenant community. For example, he says,

Paul's new vocation involved him not so much in the enjoyment and propagation of a new religious experience, as in the announcement of what he saw as a public fact, that the crucified Jesus of Nazareth had been raised from the dead by Israel's God, that he had thereby been

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<sup>4</sup> Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul*, 182-183.

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vindicated as Israel's Messiah, that surprising though it might seem he was therefore the Lord all the whole world.<sup>5</sup>

In his response to John Piper, simply entitled *Justification*, Wright seems dismayed that his critics can't fathom that he has not kicked the individual into touch in his view of justification. From his more recent statements it appears that he does have a place for the "Lutheran view" (i.e. the justification of those individuals who place their trust in the Cross). However, he says, that's not the whole story. Still to many onlookers he seems to treat the received view of individual justification by grace through faith in the substitutionary atonement of Christ as fairly subordinate in the gospel.

To say the same thing in different words, the NPP basically teaches concerning justifying faith that it ought to be directed at the inclusive and integrative message that both believing Jews and believing Gentiles make up "the people of God." By contrast, the New Testament points its finger at each one of us and demands our individual repentance and embrace of Christ's blood covering for our sins.

This brings up another problem, which is the way in which the attention is shifted from off of sin and on to the message of inclusion.

### **Is Lack of Righteousness the Problem?**

In the various presentations of the New Perspective on Paul or NPP, the centrality of the call upon sinners to repent and believe in the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ, and the promise of forgiveness and eternal life with God when they do is seriously compromised. Think about these words from the end of John 3:

"He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him."  
– Jn. 3:36.

The solemnity of these words strikes everyone who reads them. The difference between everlasting life and abiding wrath is belief in the Son. What is it that must be believed? The answer to that question is the reason why John wrote his Gospel. After recounting the crucifixion and resurrection John focuses upon Thomas's doubt and the Lord's answer to that doubt. Jesus stresses belief in Him in that context. Then John adds his summary:

And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; 31 but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that

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<sup>5</sup> N.T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 43.

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believing you may have life in His name. – Jn. 20:30

So what is the Gospel? Venema quotes N.T. Wright as saying,

Let us be quite clear – the gospel is the announcement of Jesus' Lordship which works with power to bring people into the family of Abraham; now redefined around Jesus Christ and characterized solely by faith in him. Justification is the doctrine which insists that all those who have this faith belong as full members of this family on this basis and no other.<sup>6</sup>

What Wright appears to be saying is that the Gospel which we must believe is that Jesus is Lord. There is no mention here of the cross and Christ becoming sin *for us*. There is nothing said about His death and resurrection *for us*. All that needs to be done, so it seems, is that people believe that Jesus is Lord and that includes them in the covenant family in Him. No word about our sin and God's judgment! Venema introduces this quotation with the following words:

If the gospel is not about how people get saved but the proclamation that Jesus is Lord, this is implications for our understanding of what Paul means by justification. This doctrine, though an essential, albeit subordinate theme in Paul's preaching, does not address the issue of how guilty sinners can find favor with God. This would be to assume that Paul's gospel focuses upon the salvation of the individual rather than [as the NPP would have it] upon the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the consequences of that Lordship for the realization of God's covenant promises to Israel.

### **The Gospel according to the NPP in Sum**

This is the Gospel of the New Perspective:

As it was proclaimed to Israel by Jesus and by Paul and others, the Gospel was that Israel's exile was over. Important to Wright is this view that ever since the Babylonian captivity Israel had been in exile. Even though they were in their own land, they were still in exile because they were under Roman rule, and so did not have self-sovereignty. The proclamation of the death and resurrection of Messiah, is for Wright the solution to Israel's exile. They are to believe that Jesus is the Messiah; that Jesus is Lord. Having that badge of faith acts as the new and only badge of entrance into the covenant and is what justifies them.

Clearly there has been a radical shift of emphasis!

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<sup>6</sup> Cornelis Venema, *By Faith Alone*, edited by Gary LW Johnson & Guy P Waters, 43.

## **Clarity on Justification**

Wright likes to say this idea of justification as a kind of 'gas' or a substance that can pass from one person [Jesus] onto another person [the sinner] is nonsense, unbiblical, and is, in fact, mythological. Before dismissing everything in that statement it should perhaps be admitted that this is the way certain schools of thought (and some in the Reformed churches come to mind), have sometimes construed justification. It is not uncommon in certain types of Reformed theology to be taught a view of justification as 'transformative' of the person who believes in Christ. In this teaching justification and sanctification merge or overlap. The classical view of the Reformers was that justification was just 'forensic' – a one-time legal decision made by God on behalf of the believing sinner. This approach does indeed view justification as an ongoing power: as a continual justifying faith to final perseverance.

However, justification should not be seen as 'transformative.' Sanctification *is* 'transformative', but not justification. Justification has to do with God being just and justifying the sinner who believes on Christ. As I have said, it is a legal decision not based on our righteousness but rather on the righteousness of Christ and our faith in Him.

So Wright is correct here, at least in part. Still, that doesn't mean that the whole idea of justification as the forgiveness of sin through the imputation of the righteousness of Christ *to the individual* is done away with! God *must* deal with sin.

Furthermore, this idea that Jews saw themselves as still in Exile is not persuasive. As Douglas Moo points out,

It is very unlikely that Jews like Paul, however self-satisfied, thought that they were living in the age of eschatological restoration [i.e. the Messianic Kingdom]. The Jews' failure to recognize that Jesus Christ initiated the eschatological righteousness of God was itself due to a continuing and persistent preoccupation with the law. Here again we see the problem in using exile as an overall explanatory concept. The satisfaction that Paul and many Jews expressed with respect to their personal religious condition [e.g. Phil. 3:4-6] suggests that they were certainly not thinking of themselves as personally still in exile; even as they, undoubtedly to varying degrees, would have recognized that their mere residence in the land of Israel did not bring an end to exile in the way that the prophets had foretold.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *Justification and Variegated Nomism: The Paradoxes of Paul*, edited by D. A. Carson, P. T. O'Brien, & Mark Seifrid, 205.



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What Moo is saying is Paul, before he was converted, seems to have been self-satisfied and did not see himself as being in exile! He was perfectly happy with his religious condition while being unhappy with Roman occupation of his land. Therefore, Wright's interpretation of the way Jews viewed themselves in Paul's day seems to be skewed. As Moo also points out, the coming of Christ would have only exacerbated the sense of exile (if there was one), not relieved it.

Now, everybody is waiting for Wright's fourth volume in his massive Christian Origins and the Question of God because in that book we will have a full explication of his mature position. I predict that we will see a much more nuanced position where he will give more of a place to individual justification and substitutionary atonement for sin than he appears to have done in books like The Climax of the Covenant. But we are still going to see this added emphasis of corporate identification in the covenant on the basis of faith; we'll wait and see what happens there.

### **NPP Righteousness versus Pauline Righteousness: The "Works of the Law"**

In an excellent piece for Christianity Today entitled, "[What Did Paul Really Mean?](#)", (w/thx to Filops!) Simon Gathercole called attention to the way New Perspective scholars interpret the phrase "the works of the law." He writes:

According to the new perspective, Paul is only focusing on these aspects of Jewish life (Sabbath, circumcision, food laws) when he mentions "works of the law." His problem isn't legalistic self-righteousness in general. Rather, for Jews these works of the law highlighted God's election of the Jewish nation, excluding Gentiles. Called by God to reach the Gentiles, Paul recognizes that Jews wrongly restricted God's covenant to themselves.

Gathercole's comment matches Dunn a little more than Wright, but neither scholar thinks "works of the law" means the achieving of merit through religious deeds. Certainly we can say it is doubtful if many Jews in the Second Temple period were 'legalistic' in the sense that they truly believed their works were good enough. But they were still going about to establish themselves by the law:

For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes. – Romans 10:3-4

The plain fact is, the righteousness the Jews were striving for was not what God would call righteousness because it wasn't the righteousness *of* God in Christ.

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“Grace” was not viewed within Second Temple Judaism in the Pauline sense:

To say that salvation in Judaism was by grace and imply that ‘works’ in the Lutheran sense were excluded is simply not true to Judaism. Nor should one expect that a Judaism that did not see humanity as fundamentally lost, nor requiring the death of God’s Son for its redemption, would construe the relation between divine grace and human works in the same way Paul did.<sup>8</sup>

Because of this misunderstanding of grace, the Judaism’s interpretation of “the works of the law” was indeed that religious works were required for salvation. Hence, the offense of the Cross.

Furthermore, there is a big difference between the idea of imputed righteousness (Reformers) and inclusive communal righteousness which is *not* imputed (New Perspective).

If we take a passage like Romans 9:30-32 perhaps we can see this illustrated better:

What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith; but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone. – Romans 9:30-32

Again, Dunn and Wright would say, “Yes, but the ‘works of the law’ are these external badges of status within the covenant, not religious works or works of merit.” If true, this would entail the verses underlined above would mean that because Israel’s faith was directed toward the emblems of the covenant and not the Lord [Christ] of the covenant, Israel had stumbled over the issue of Jesus and the salvation of the world. They did not realize that faith in the covenant and Messiah was not restricted to Israel. All nations now had access to the covenant people of God in Christ through the exercise of an ongoing faith in Him.

Faith, though, is not accounted as righteousness in a one-time legal sense because imputation is deemed absurd. Even N. T. Wright, for all his language about the propitiatory nature of Christ’s death, cannot accept the doctrine of imputation. As Waters writes,

Wright frequently avers that God at the cross ‘dealt once and for all with the sin of the world.’ A study of his comments on Christ’s death...

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<sup>8</sup> Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The “Lutheran” Paul and His Critics*, 443-444.

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in his recent commentary on Romans shows Wright's consistent refusal to articulate Christ's death in terms of an imputed righteousness...While Christ's death may be said to be atoning, punitive, even propitiatory, Wright consistently refuses to detail the mechanism by which Christ's death comes to be applied to the individual believer in time and history.<sup>9</sup>

However, in Romans 4:4-5 grace is equated with faith in Jesus Christ and is opposed to works. This then means that the supposed 'grace' that, according to the New Perspective, the Jews were thinking of when they were speaking of their privileged position within the covenant (i.e. their boundary markers of Sabbath and circumcision and so on), is not the same grace that Paul is speaking about. The grace that he is referring to is something given to a person when they accept Jesus Christ as Savior! Because of this grace, the sinner passes from death to life. Something happens to them; they are taken out of Adam and they are put into Christ! Grace does this, not works.

On another passage in Romans, Seifrid comments:

This Christological understanding of justification is especially apparent in Romans 5:12-21, where Paul summarizes his initial exposition of justification and hope, and restates his preceding argument in a new form. Up to this point in the letter he has presented justification as a matter of the standing of the individual before God; in this passage he sets it in the context of human history, which he defined in terms of divine judgment in Adam and grace in Christ.<sup>10</sup>

When this idea of "grace in Christ" is coupled with Paul's words in Ephesians 2:8-9, one gains a true understanding of what "grace" is, and also what Paul means by "works." Although Paul is dealing with Gentiles in Ephesians, (though there was a Jewish community there), he is working within the same frame of reference as in Romans 4 and 5:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. – Ephesians 2:8-10

So "works" in Paul are either things we do because we are saved and have

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9 Guy Prentiss Waters, *Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul: A Review and Response*, 141-142.

10 Mark A. Seifrid, *Christ, Our Righteousness: Paul's Theology of Justification*, 70.

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trusted in Christ, or they are deeds that we do because we're trying to gain favor with God by them (i.e. "the works of the law" cf. Eph. 2:15). The former are only acceptable to God after we have been "created (*ktizo*) in Christ Jesus". Indeed, they cannot be performed until after we are saved. The latter do not justify because they are performed outside of Christ. But in neither case does the term "works" mean emblems of status.

### **Conclusion**

Though limited and simplified, I hope this has been something of a useful orientation to the New Perspective on Paul. The main issue as I see it is, as always, hermeneutical. In short, proponents of this position allow their relative comprehension of facets of Second Temple Judaism (roughly 500 B.C. to 70 A.D.) to cloud their reading of the New Testament, and especially of the Apostle Paul. Read as sufficient in itself, the New Testament sets out a clear picture of Jewish antagonism to the Gospel; not because of narrow covenantal boundary-markers, but because "seeking to establish their own righteousness, [they] have not submitted to the righteousness of God" – Romans 10:3.



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