The New Perspective on Paul

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The New Perspective on Paul and the Recovery of Pauline Anthropology

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An assessment of the so-called “new perspective on Paul” can be approached from several different angles. I intend to respond specifically to the claim of the proponents of the new perspective that Paul's gospel of justification by grace through faith apart from works of the law did not arise as a solution to the human condition. The assessment will come by way of an analysis of the work of four scholars who have been influential in forming the new perspective: Krister Stendahl, E. P. Sanders, James D. G. Dunn, and N. T. Wright. 1

The purpose is not to offer a complete assessment of their work, but to assess those aspects of their work that are most directly challenging to Lutheran emphasis on the justification of the sinner in Pauline theology.

As a preface I wish to point out three things and to make one clarification about the purpose of this paper.

1. It is not possible to speak of a single “new perspective on Paul.” Although there are important agreements among the four scholars mentioned above, there are also important differences.

2. The “new perspective” is no longer new.

3. The new perspective has generated a considerable body of secondary literature in response to it, and one hesitates to add to that literature.

In spite of points two and three, it may be of some value, as a new generation of Lutheran biblical scholars and theologians arises, to stop and take a look at the work of the four scholars identified who have had (for good or ill) an enormous influence, to assess their work, and to ask where we might go in the future. It will become apparent to the reader that I am not sympathetic to the approaches of the new perspective. I wish to point out, however, that my intention is not so much to provide an apology for a “Lutheran” Paul as it is to point out the serious problems that attend the new perspective, as a way of admonishing Lutherans not to jump on board this particular bandwagon too hastily. The virtues of the new perspective, of which there are several, will be noted at the end.

Krister Stendahl

The first figure whom we shall consider is Krister Stendahl. Stendahl was a bishop of the (Lutheran) Church of Sweden, but that did not stop him from criticizing the Lutheran tradition of Pauline interpretation. Stendahl's contributions to the "new perspective" lie, first, in his frequently cited article, “The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West,” 2 and then in two small books. 3

Stendahl's thesis in “The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West” is that the interpretation of Paul in Western Christianity (and especially in Protestantism) has incorrectly read Paul's doctrine of justification and his statements about the human condition and the law through the lens of Augustine and Luther. The driving issue in Paul's discussion of the law was the relationship between Jews and Gentiles, not anthropology. He notes, Paul,

had not arrived at his view of the Law by testing and pondering its effect upon his conscience; it was his grappling with the question about the place of the Gentiles in the Church and in the plan of God, with the problem, Jew/Gentiles or Jewish Christians/Gentile Christians, which had driven him to that interpretation of the Law which was to become his in a unique way. 4

It was only after this question was no longer a live issue in the church that Paul's doctrine of justification came to be applied to general human problems. While the early church shows little interest in Paul's doctrine of justification, Augustine, whose Confessions Stendahl calls “the first great document in the history of the introspective conscience," starts a new line of interpretation that leads to the Middle Ages and to Luther's penitential struggle. 5 In the Middle Ages there
was an increasing focus on introspection and self-examination in connection with penance. It was Martin Luther who, in response to the anguished cry of the pious of the late Middle Ages, "How do I find a gracious God," found in "Paul's words about a justification in Christ by faith, and without the works of the Law," a "liberating and saving answer."

Paul's conscience, however, was not that of Luther. As a Jew, Paul had what Stendahl calls a "robust conscience," and he points to Philippians 3:6 where Paul, looking back at his life in Judaism, says that, "as to righteousness in the law, [he was] blameless." This verse, not Romans 7, shows us the real conscience of Paul the Pharisee (and as a Christian Paul was no less confident in his blamelessness). Paul's sweeping judgment over humanity in Romans and Galatians—that no one can fulfill the law (which is what Stendahl takes to be Paul's argument in Romans 2:17—3:20 and Galatians 3:10-12)—does not tell us what Paul actually thought about the human condition. Rather, this assertion serves a different point. It is "part of a theological and theoretical scriptural argument about the relation between Jews and Gentiles," whereby Paul shows that the Jews "stand before God as guilty as the Gentiles" and that a "new avenue of salvation" has been opened up in Christ that is not based on the law. Thus Paul's assertions about the transgressions of Israel in Romans 2 through 3 are not about the transgressions of individuals, but of the nation. As for Romans 7, this is part of a defense of the law, not an analysis of the human condition. In fact, Stendahl argues, the "I" is acquitted in Romans 7. It is sin that is at fault, not the "I." It is only Western interpretation, occupied with introspection, which has made Romans 7 into a profound anthropological analysis.

In his later books Stendahl repeats many of the themes of this article and develops them further. Our interest falls mainly on Stendahl's early article, however, for it is this article that has proved to be most influential on later scholars. In this article we already find ideas that will feature prominently in the work of Sanders, Dunn, and Wright: In Paul's opinion solution (universal salvation in Christ) precedes plight (universal sinfulness); Paul's claim of universal sinfulness is rhetorical; Paul's teaching on justification by faith apart from works of the law is not central to Paul's theology but was worked out in connection with the Gentile mission; the heart of Paul's theology lies in the question of the relationship between Jews and Gentiles within the people of God; Paul did not experience a conversion to faith in Christ but a call to apostleship; Romans 7 is not anthropological analysis but a defense of the law, and as such incidental to Paul's theology, the human situation presented there being "trivial"; in Romans 7 the "I" is acquitted.

In evaluation of Stendahl's article the following points must be made: While Stendahl is correct to point out that Luther's question, "How do I find a gracious God," the question of an anguished penitent, was not Paul's question, his repudiation of Lutheran readings of Paul that emphasize the problem of sin has a fatal flaw. Stendahl's critique implies that, because Paul was not troubled (either as a Jew or as a Christian) by an anxious conscience, Paul was not troubled by the problem of sin. Here one must say: non sequitur. Stendahl sets up a false alternative: Either Paul's statements about sin and the law and the human condition in Romans 7 must be read as an expression of Paul's subjective consciousness, or they must be incidental to Paul's main purpose, which is a defense of the law. Since they are not the former, they must be the latter. But there is a third possibility, which is actually the correct one, but one which Stendahl does not consider. It is this: Paul intends Romans 7 to be read as an objective statement about humanity under sin and under God's law. It should be noted that Stendahl's paper was delivered as an address to the 1961 Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association, which perhaps explains in part its orientation to subjective consciousness.

That Romans 7 is an objective description of the human condition is, of course, one of the main points in dispute in the new perspective. The rejection of this view will be a major piece of Sanders's thesis about Paul, but the point is important enough that we must address it now. Stendahl holds that, since Paul had a "robust conscience" both as a Jew and as a Christian, his statements about sin, both its depth and its universality, cannot represent his real view. Paul's statements about the impossibility of fulfilling the law do not agree with his own testimony about himself, namely, that he was blameless in the law (Philippians 3:6); therefore they must be rhetorical. Nor do such statements agree with Paul's confidence, as a Christian, that he was without blame.

Stendahl confuses two different matters, and the confusion has been repeated often by scholars of the new perspective. The confusion is this: Paul's statements as a Christian about the depth and universality
of sin and the inability of the person under the law to overcome sin are a different matter from his claim of blamelessness in the law as a Pharisee; for there is strong evidence that Paul, after he came to faith in Christ, came to see sin as a much deeper problem than he had held it to be as a Pharisee.

This point, it seems to me, is proven quite easily. One must only consider the kinds of things that Paul, as a Christian, considers to be sin, and why, and what the consequences are. Romans 7 is, of course, Paul’s classic statement on the topic. For Paul sin is epitomized by epithymia, which is normally translated by “desire.” Desire is not an inadequate translation; only it must be recognized that Paul understands desire not in the narrow sense of appetitive desire, but in the full sense of the human’s “seeking one’s own” (1 Corinthians 10:24: εὑρίσκων τοῦ ἑαυτοῦ; cf. 10:33; see also Philippians 2:4: skopein to heautou), that is, the person’s radical turn towards the self and away from God and others, which leads to behaviors destructive of self and others (Galatians 5:15). This “seeking one’s own” is the opposite of love (1 Corinthians 13:5),¹⁶ that love most radically demonstrated in the kenôsis of Christ, who sought not his own good but the good of others (Philippians 2:1-11; cf. Romans 15:1-3; 1 Corinthians 10:33—11:1). It should be noted that when Paul condemns desire, it is not primarily the psychological aspect of desire that he condemns, but its manifestation in actions or ways of being.¹⁷

It is now widely recognized that in Romans 7:7-12 Paul offers an interpretation of the story of the fall of Adam and Eve, in which he seeks to explain how sin (understood as a power) defeats the law's purpose of producing righteousness and life.¹⁸ In 7:7 Paul quotes the commandment(s) against coveting (Exodus 20:17; Deuteronomy 5:21) in an abbreviated form (ouk epithymiasēs) (cf. Romans 13:9) to epitomize God's law, already given to Adam and Eve, Paul has at least two warrants for epitomizing God's law in this way. First, the (Hebrew) verbs for “coveting” and “desiring” in Deuteronomy 5:21 share exactly the same roots as the words used for describing the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:17) as being a “delight” to the eyes and as “to be desired” to make one wise in Genesis 3:6. There is thus an inner connection between the commandment given to Adam and Eve and the content of the law of Moses. Adam and Eve were already confronted with God's law against coveting (desiring).¹⁹ The story of Adam and Eve shows that the fundamental sin of humanity is to “desire” for oneself against God's will and commandment. Moreover, by the first century A.D., some Jewish interpreters of Scripture had come to interpret desire or covetousness as the root of sin,²⁰ and elsewhere we find Adam and Eve's sin identified as desire or lust.²¹ Therefore Paul, considered in his Jewish context, does nothing strange when he analyzes the problem of sin, from Adam onward, radically as the problem of human desire (in the broad sense of the term). Paul's point is that when God's law commands those who are under the law not to covet (or desire), they immediately, and paradoxically, find themselves in a situation of enslavement to sin (manifest as desire), even against their will. That is what first happened to Adam and Eve, who, precisely in the presence of God's law, were led by sin (symbolized by the serpent) to covet (desire) against God's law. Thus they fell under sin and suffered its consequence, set down by God's law, which is death (Genesis 2:17). By gaining a foothold in the world through Adam, sin now rules over all of humanity (Romans 5:12).

Being under sin is now humanity's inescapable condition outside of Christ. It is a situation of not doing what one wants to do and of doing what one does not want to do (Romans 7:15, 19). This situation is the manifestation of the ungodly desire (epithymia) that first afflicted Adam (Romans 7:7-12), against which the Christian still struggles (Galatians 5:17). Paul makes clear in all of this that the problem is not God's law. The law is holy, just, and good (Romans 7:12), but sin uses the law as an opportunity to work its deceptive and death-dealing power (Romans 7:11). That is why, for Paul, to be under the law (and not in Christ or in the Spirit) is inevitably to be under the power of sin (Romans 6:14; 7:4-6). Romans 7 is, indeed, a defense of the law. But that Paul's analysis of the human predicament in Romans 7 is intended seriously and objectively, and is not simply a by-product of his defense of the law, is proved by the fact that he presupposes this predicament even in contexts where the role of the law is not the primary topic of discussion, and even before he writes Romans (e.g., 1 Corinthians 15:56; Galatians 5:16-26).

From this discussion it now should be clear that for Paul as a Christian sin is much more than transgression of the commandments of the law of Moses, and (true) righteousness is much more than "blamelessness in the law" (Philippians 3:6). It is true that in Romans 7 Paul uses a commandment of the law of Moses to illustrate the
problem of sin. But Paul’s point is that what the law does is reveal sin to be more than transgression of this or that commandment. Presumably, as a Pharisee, Paul would have considered it possible to obey the commandment(s) of the Decalogue against coveting or, in the case of transgression, to repent of it. But the point is that once the law is given, the law uncovers the fact that our lives are full of sin, manifest in all manner of ungodly desires and in consequent actions and ways of being, which the law does not and cannot control. It is an epistemic matter. The function of the law, as Paul says in 3:20, is to bring knowledge of sin (cf. Romans 7:7). The law reveals not just that we sin, but it reveals what sin in fact is: Sin is more than transgression of the commandments; it is deep-seated hostility to God (8:7). Sin uses the law to show exactly how sinful sin is (Romans 7:13), and the law, having revealed humans to be radically sinful and hostile to God, condemns them, justly, to death.

To make the preceding points concrete, it is useful to consider the kinds of things that Paul considers to be sin. A good place to start is his list of “works of the flesh” in Galatians 5:19-21, which he can also call “desires” (Galatians 5:24; cf. 5:17): “fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these.” Such works of the flesh (or manifestations of “desire”) go well beyond what the law of Moses either commands or prohibits. Thus sin is more than transgression of commandments. Sin is redefined. Sin for Paul certainly includes crass sins of the flesh such as fornication or drunkenness, but it also includes all the works of the self that “seeks its own.” If, as an example, we consider why Paul considers fornication to be sinful, it will help us to understand his view of sin in general. Fornication is sinful because it violates the integrity of one’s body (1 Corinthians 6:18-19) as well as one’s relationship to God (6:15, 19). It separates one from God’s kingdom (1 Corinthians 6:9-10), and that means death. But as is clear from Galatians 5:21, Paul considers all works of the flesh, not just the crass ones, to exclude one from God’s kingdom. Even works of the flesh such as jealousy, anger, enmity, and strife lead people to the destruction of themselves and of one another (Galatians 5:15), and such works separate one from God (Galatians 5:21). Ultimately, they kill (eternally) (Romans 1:29-32; 6:21, 23; 8:13). Such is the depth of sin in human life, and such are its consequences, that even the law of God cannot overcome it. There are sins from which even the law cannot free a person, for no commandment in the law of Moses can free one from the deep-seated rebellion of the flesh. It is from this deepened understanding of sin that Paul can say that “the mindset of the flesh cannot submit to God’s Law” (Romans 8:7). One could say, then, from a Christian perspective, that the commandment, “You shall not desire,” is the one commandment that cannot be fulfilled by those who live in the flesh, but this is an insight that was available to Paul only after he, as a Christian, came to understand that sin is something that goes beyond the limits of the law. Only the Holy Spirit, which is the Spirit of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ, can free the self from so deep an entanglement in sin (Romans 8:2). That is because God has condemned sin in the flesh of Christ (8:3), and those who are in Christ through his Spirit (Romans 8:9) are able to share in his victory over sin and thus over death (1 Corinthians 15:56-57). Christ becomes their righteousness unto life (Romans 8:10). Christ ends the curse (the condemnation to death) pronounced by the law in alliance with sin (Galatians 3:13; Romans 8:1). That is why justification can come only through Christ and not through the law.

Against Stendahl, Paul’s analysis of the human condition in Romans 7 is anything but “trivial.” Moreover, we see that the frequently alleged contradiction between Paul’s assertion of blamelessness in the law (as a Jew) and his assertion about the universality and inescapability of sin is baseless. The possibility of blamelessness in the law, from Saul’s Pharisaic perspective, and the inescapability of sin, from Paul’s Christian perspective, are two very different things. Finally, Stendahl’s claim that in Romans 7 the “I” is acquitted is simply indefensible. Although it is sin that works in me (Romans 7:17, 20), “I” still commit the sin (Romans 7:15, 16, 19, 20). “I” am guilty.

If we ask how Paul came to such a view of sin, it is quite probable that after he came to faith in Christ he saw that the problem of sin in his own life was much deeper than he had ever imagined it to be as a Pharisee. That is not to say that Romans 7 is primarily autobiographical; it is not. But there is evidence that Paul interpreted his conversion to faith in Christ and his call to be an apostle as an event of the justification of the godless by God’s grace through faith. When Paul speaks of his conversion and his call to apostleship, he looks upon them as a result of God’s grace: “God called me through his grace (charis)” (Galatians 1:15). And:
I am the least of the apostles, unfit (ouk hikanos) to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. By the grace (charis) of God I am what I am, and his grace (charis) toward me has not been in vain (kenç). On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I (ouk ego), but the grace (charis) of God that is with me (syn emoi)” (1 Corinthians 15:9-10).

These references to Paul’s conversion and call must be compared with what Paul has to say about justification by faith in Galatians 2:19-21:

For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ. I live, though it is no longer I (ouketi ego), but Christ lives in me (en emoi). The life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself up for me. I do not nullify the grace (charis) of God; for if righteousness is through the law, then Christ has died in vain (dorean).

God’s grace in Paul’s conversion and call is the totally unmerited favor that God showed to Paul in overlooking his past. This, however, is precisely how Paul speaks about the grace of justification; it is God’s overlooking of past sins (Romans 3:24-25; 4:4-8). It is God’s grace in Christ that makes Paul who he is, both as an apostle (1 Corinthians 15:10) and as a person (Galatians 2:20). It is this grace that puts Paul in a right standing with God (dikaiosynç) (Galatians 2:21).31

In Philippians 3:6 Paul connects very closely his blamelessness (as a Jew) with respect to righteousness in the law with his zealous persecution of the church (zçlos). Also in Galatians 1:13-14, Paul mentions in the same sentence his persecution of the church and his zeal (literally, Paul was a “zealot,” zçlôtçs) for the “traditions of the fathers,” which is probably a reference to the legal traditions of the Pharisees (cf. Acts 22:3). It is probable that Paul’s persecution of the church, a manifestation of his zeal for the law, was rooted in his desire to protect the law from threats to it presented by the burgeoning Christian movement. In other words, it was precisely his loyalty to the law that led him to persecute the church. This activity, Paul came to see later, had set him against God.32 Precisely through his devotion to the law he was misled into sin (cf. Romans 7:11)33 Paul came to see that not only did his righteousness in the law and his zeal for the law

not produce the righteousness that God seeks; it made him an enemy of God. Only God’s unmerited grace in Christ could set things right.

In summary we may say that Stendahl’s essay has the virtue of reminding us that Augustine and Luther were not Paul, and that these three figures developed their theologies in different situations. We must try to understand Paul on his own terms and not read into his words the concerns of very different times and places. But Stendahl’s essay is ultimately misleading, because he confuses subjective consciousness of sin with Paul’s objective description of sin, and because he fails to see the difference between Paul’s assertions about the possibility of blamelessness in the law and his assertions about the depth and universality of human sinfulness. These errors have contributed to an unwarranted dismissal of Romans 7 and of its anthropology, and thus to a misconstrual of Paul’s doctrine of justification by later scholars. That is certainly the case with E. P. Sanders, to whom we now turn.

E. P. Sanders

Although Stendahl already sounded notes that would become important for much of the “new perspective” discussions, it is the work of E. P. Sanders that is usually regarded as marking the real watershed in Pauline scholarship. Sanders’ most important contributions are contained in two books: Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion, 1977; and Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People, 1983.34 We shall consider each of these books in turn.

As Sanders states in the preface to Paul and Palestinian Judaism, his construal of Paul’s thought took form in a project in comparative religion.35 He defines this project as the task of comparing two “patterns of religion”:

A pattern of religion, defined positively, is the description of how a religion is perceived by its adherents to function. “Perceived to function” has the sense not of what an adherent does on a day-to-day basis, but of how getting in and staying in are understood: the way in which a religion is understood to admit and retain members is considered to be the way it “functions.”36

The intellectual-historical background of Sanders’ work is important, because one must bear in mind that in Sanders’ first book on Paul, Paul’s writings do not serve as the primary focus of study.
but as one body of literature that is to be compared to another body of literature. Nor was Sanders primarily interested in the sources of Paul's thought. Furthermore, the questions that are brought to Pauline theology are questions that serve the purpose of comparison. Sanders studies the major bodies of Palestinian Jewish literature with a view to understanding how they answer the questions of how one becomes a member of a religion ("gets in") and how one remains a member ("stays in"). With Paul, Sanders treats his teaching on justification by faith as functioning within Pauline theology primarily as the way that the believer "gets in" to the body of Christ (and not how one "stays in" it); entrance into the body of Christ is by faith, not works of the law. Sanders concludes his book by setting Palestinian Judaism and Pauline thought over against each other as two different patterns of religion, that is to say, as (respectively) a religion of "covenantal nomism" (what this is will be explained immediately below) over against "participationist eschatology" (this will be explained further on). Paul's religion of "participationist eschatology," Sanders argues, is basically not derivable from Palestinian Judaism as we know it from the primary sources, which indicates the gulf that Sanders finds between Paul's thought and the thought forms available to the apostle in his day. Righteousness by faith is part of Paul's participationist eschatology, but the theme of righteousness by faith is basically subordinate to participationist language. Perhaps it is needless to say that approaching the matter in this way has important consequences for how Sanders ultimately understands the significance of justification by faith apart from works of the law in Paul's thought.

The most important arguments and conclusions from Paul and Palestinian Judaism for the purposes of this article can be summarized easily. We may discuss those arguments and conclusions in two steps, first with regard to Palestinian Judaism, and second with regard to Paul. With the exception of the apocalyptic work 4 Ezra (written ca. A.D. 100), Sanders finds behind the main bodies of Palestinian Jewish literature (tannaitic rabbinic literature; the Dead Sea Scrolls; and the apocrypha and pseudepigrapha [in which he includes discussion of Sirach, 1 Enoch, Jubilees, Psalms of Solomon, and 4 Ezra]) a common pattern of religion, which he calls "covenantal nomism." This pattern of religion is the following:

(1) God has chosen Israel and (2) given the law. The law implies both (3) God's promise to maintain the election and (4) the requirement to obey. (5) God rewards obedience and punishes transgression. (6) The law provides for means of atonement, and atonement results in (7) maintenance or re-establishment of the covenantal relationship. (8) All those who are maintained in the covenant by obedience, atonement and God's mercy belong to the group which will be saved. An important interpretation of the first and last points is that election and ultimately salvation are considered to be by God's mercy rather than human achievement.

Sanders believes that his finding this pattern of religion refutes those scholars who have found in ancient Judaism, and especially in rabbinic Judaism, a kind of legalistic works-righteousness as the foil against which to understand Paul's teaching on justification by faith apart from works of the law. Paul's teaching on justification by faith apart from works of the law cannot have been directed against Jews or Jewish-Christians who were teaching that individuals should merit salvation by achieving enough good deeds in the law, because there was no such Jewish teaching in his time.

When Sanders turns to Paul, he seeks to present the apostle's thought as a pattern of religion that can be profitably compared to the pattern of religion of Palestinian Judaism as discussed above. This leads Sanders to search for "the basic coherent structure of Paul's thought (assuming for the moment that there is one)" and to the question of the center of Paul's thought. Sanders quickly denies that righteousness by faith can be considered the center of Paul's thought. He follows Albert Schweitzer in arguing that one can understand Paul only if one respects the eschatological and participationist elements in his thought. Moreover, Sanders agrees with Schweitzer that "righteousness by faith" is inadequate for representing the center of Paul's thought because it is unable to explain major aspects of Paul's theology, whereas "righteousness by faith can be derived from and understood on the basis of other aspects of Paul's thought such as possession of the Spirit and living in the Spirit."

Sanders's starting point for understanding Paul's thought lies in two primary convictions that he finds to have "governed Paul's Christian life: (1) that Jesus Christ is Lord, that in him God has provided for the salvation of all who believe . . . and that he will soon return to bring all things to an end; (2) that he, Paul, was called to be the apostle to the Gentiles. From here Sanders moves quickly
to his main hypothesis about Paul’s thought: the solution (salvation for all people in Christ) preceded Paul’s awareness of the problem (the universal sinfulness of humanity). He supports this hypothesis by an examination of Paul’s missionary preaching, as this can be derived from his letters, from which he concludes that the heart of Paul’s gospel was the death and resurrection of Christ, his lordship, his imminent return, salvation for believers, and destruction for unbelievers. Paul sought to elicit faith in this gospel, by which people could participate in God’s saving action in Christ. Thus, argues Sanders, Paul’s preaching did not begin “from man’s need, but from God’s deed.” The conclusion that all the world—both Jew and Greek—equally stands in need of a savior springs from the prior conviction that God had provided such a savior. If he did so, it follows that such a savior must have been needed, and then only consequently that all other possible ways of salvation are wrong. This point is made explicitly in Galatians 2:21: If righteousness could come through the law, Christ died in vain.

For Sanders, then, the heart of Pauline soteriology lies in the hope of future salvation, which takes the form of the future resurrection of believers. Believers have been given the guarantee of this salvation through the gift of the Spirit. In the present, believers are united to Christ through the same Spirit, and it is the Spirit that also guides their life. Through the Spirit believers are to maintain lives of purity in anticipation of the day of judgment. Thus the Spirit, through the possession of which believers have both a present union with Christ and the guarantee of future resurrection, is what gives coherence to Pauline soteriology and ethics. From this brief overview one understands how Sanders came to denominate Paul’s pattern of religion as “participationist eschatology.”

From this perspective there are two implications that Sanders draws that are particularly important for our purposes. The first is that anthropology is a secondary element in Pauline theology. The second is that the juristic conceptuality of justification and righteousness is taken to be subordinate to (although intertwined with) participatory conceptuality. Sanders claims that “Paul’s ‘juristic’ language is sometimes pressed into the service of ‘participationist’ categories, but never vice versa.” Justification is primarily a term to designate transfer, that is, the transfer from participation in the realm of sin to participation in Christ.

Sanders believes that the “strongest confirmation” of his hypothesis that Paul’s thought moved from solution to plight comes from an analysis of Paul’s statements about the law, because such an analysis will reveal how Paul conceived of humanity’s plight and how the solutions to it are to be understood. He suggests that Paul’s attitude towards the law can be discovered by asking the question: “Why did Paul think that those who accepted the law were excluded from being saved by Christ?” Sanders finds the primary reason Paul held that righteousness does not come from the law in Galatians 2:21: “If righteousness were through the law, then Christ died to no purpose.” Sanders consistently emphasizes the point that Paul’s argument in Galatians is dogmatic: righteousness is by faith, not by works of the law. Paul gives no analysis of the human condition in Galatians so as to exclude righteousness by works of the law. That must mean that the real reason for Paul’s exclusion of righteousness by works of the law is found in Galatians 2:21 and 3:21: Christ died for a reason, and the law was never intended to give life.

When Sanders turns to Romans, he finds Paul’s reasons for excluding righteousness by works of the law to be very much like those in Galatians:

There are actually two reasons given by Paul why salvation (“the promise,” “righteousness”) comes by faith and not by law. (1) The promise cannot be inherited on the basis of keeping the law, because that would exclude Gentiles. But Gentiles cannot be excluded, for God has appointed Christ as Lord of the whole world and as savior of all who believe, and has especially called and appointed Paul as apostle to the Gentiles. (2) If it is necessary and sufficient to keep the law in order to inherit the promises of God, Christ died in vain and faith is in vain. The two arguments—the inclusion of Gentiles and the death of Christ—stand together, as we see in Romans 3.21-26. But it is clearly for these reasons, rather than for any others, that Paul rejects the requirement to keep the law.

After this explanation of why Paul excluded righteousness by works of the law, Sanders raises and treats extremely briefly the problem of why God ever gave the law. The answer is that God gave the law in order to condemn. “Since all the world can be saved only
through Christ, all the world must have stood condemned, and it was the law’s role to condemn.” That is why Paul comes to link the law with sin, the flesh, and death.63

It is at this point that Sanders turns to consider the problem of the plight of humanity. Having argued that Paul’s rejection of righteousness by works of the law is dogmatic and not based on an analysis of the human condition, Sanders combines this argument with his previous claim that, for Paul, justification is primarily a transfer term. The dominant conception of being in Christ is “the transfer from one lordship to another.” One belongs either to sin or to Christ.64 The conviction that Christ came to save all people comes to be linked with an analysis of the human condition by way of the concept of mutually exclusive lordships:

Paul actually came to the view that all men are under the lordship of sin as a reflex of his soteriology: Christ came to provide a new lordship for those who participate in his death and resurrection. Having come to this conclusion about the power of sin, Paul could then argue from the common observation that everybody transgresses—an observation which would not be in dispute—to prove that everyone is under the lordship of sin. But this is only an argument to prove a point, not the way he actually reached his assessment of the plight of man.65

Thus an analysis of the human condition was not the starting point of Paul’s theology. It was secondary and a reflex of his soteriology.66

We conclude here our summary of Sanders’s argument in his first book on Paul. We see that the following points are crucial to his case: Justification—Paul’s religious concept for “getting in” to the group of those who will be saved—is primarily a transfer term; the heart of Paul’s missionary preaching was the universality of salvation in Christ; it is from this universal message of salvation that Paul derived the notion of universality sinfulness; Galatians 2:21 and 3:21 and Romans 4 give us the real reasons why Paul believed that the law does not justify: if it did, Christ’s death would have been in vain; the law was never intended to be the way to life; and God has appointed Christ to be the savior for all people, but since the law excludes Gentiles, justification cannot be through the law; Paul’s anthropology is secondary and a reflex of his soteriology.

Sanders presents much of his argument in Paul and Palestinian Judaism without detailed exegesis of major Pauline texts such as Galatians 3 and Romans 7, upon which, however, much of his argument depends. Such detailed exegesis had to await his second book, Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People, and to that we now turn. If we ask whether Sanders’ treatment of these texts supports his major theses about Pauline theology presented in his earlier book, the answer must be that they do not. We cannot provide a complete assessment of Sanders’ exegesis here. What we can do, however, is, moving forward from our discussion of Pauline theology that we initiated in the section on Stendahl, assess Sanders’ treatment of Galatians 3 and Romans 7 to the extent that they are relevant to the argument of this paper and, specifically, to the extent that they call into question Sanders’ theses about Pauline theology that are summarized in the previous paragraph.

For the purposes of this paper there are two arguments of Sanders in particular to which we must object. The first is the argument that Paul’s views on God’s purpose in giving the law were inconsistent and that there is a major development in this topic from Galatians to Romans. The second is the argument that Paul’s anthropology was only a reflex of his soteriology. We can deal with both of these arguments if we examine Sanders’ treatment of Galatians 3 and Romans 7 in Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People.

Sanders’ main thesis about “Paul and the law” in this book is that Paul’s many statements about the law are not totally consistent with each other, and that the reason for this is that what Paul has to say about the law depends on the question that he is trying to answer in any given situation.67 In the first chapter Sanders deals, among other things, with the question of why Paul holds that righteousness does not come through the law. Here he repeats his argument from Paul and Palestinian Judaism that Paul’s rejection of righteousness by the law was “dogmatic”: “[T]he problem with the law is not that it cannot be fulfilled. Paul has a view of God’s intention which excludes righteousness by the law.”68 Sanders backs up this statement by briefly discussing Galatians 3:15-26, where Paul assigns the law and faith their places in salvation history. God never intended to save through the law. “[I]n giving the law God intended to lead up to salvation through Christ. . . . With regard to righteousness by the law the ‘punch line’ seems to be 3:21: righteousness cannot be by the law; no law has been given which can make alive.”69 Thus “it lies ready at hand to
conclude that his [Paul's] revised view of the law in God's plan springs from his conviction that salvation is through the death of Christ (Galatians 2:21)." There are two statements above all that tell us what Paul's position is and why he holds it, and these are in Galatians 2:21 and 3:21. "Put in propositional terms, they say this: God sent Christ; he did so in order to offer righteousness; this would have been pointless if righteousness were already available by the law (2:21); the law was not given to bring righteousness (3:21). That the positive statement about righteousness through Christ grounds the negative one about the law seems to me self-evident."

In Chapter 2, Sanders moves to the question of the purpose of the law. In this chapter Sanders proposes to discuss two problems related to the role of the law in Paul's understanding of God's plan of salvation "whether or not he [Paul] always gives it [the law] the same role and how he relates being under the law to other human conditions prior to Christ." Sanders states that "[d]ifficulty, even tortuousness, marks the principal passages in which Paul replies to the implied question of why God gave the law." The tortuousness, Sanders claims, is due to the dilemma that Paul faced as a Jew: "[Paul] thought that whatever happened was in accord with divine providence; the law, then, could not be opposed to God's will; yet the law does not provide for salvation." Sanders notes that "[i]n general terms, Paul's way out of this dilemma was to connect the law with sin and to assign it a negative place in God's plan of salvation." Thus, according to Galatians 5:22, the law was intended only to "lock up" all things under sin until righteousness by faith arrived.

When Sanders turns to Romans 7, he finds that Paul's understanding of the relationship between the law and sin has changed significantly, not only vis-à-vis Galatians, but even vis-à-vis Paul's earlier statement in Romans 5:20-21. In Galatians 3 Paul says that God used the law to prepare for salvation. So also in Romans 5:20-21 it is clear that God gave the law in order to increase the trespass, so that grace would ultimately reign. But

[the purpose clauses of [Romans] 7:13, unlike those of Galatians 3:22, 24; Romans 5:20ff., do not indicate that God has turned the knowledge of sin, or its increase, to good account. In fact, the active agent that produces sin is not God, nor even the law, but sin itself. Romans 7:7–8 exhibits such a marked difference from the other passages in which Paul attempts to formulate the relationship between the law and God's plan of salvation that it requires us to rethink what we have thus far posited as being Paul's view."

After a discussion of Romans 6, in which Sanders shows that Paul portrays the human situation as one of bondage to the power of sin and allies sin with the law, Sanders identifies what he considers to be the major difference between Galatians 3–4 and Romans 7:

Sin is not, in Romans 6, the instrument of God, used in order to hold all captive so that he could save all on the basis of faith. It has independent status and is not subject to God's control. In Romans 6 and the first part of Romans 7 Paul retains his earlier connection of sin and the law. He comes close to equating the law with sin; but, since sin is now an alien power outside God's will, he must explicitly deny the implied equation. I think that it is the virtual dualism of Romans 6 and 7:1-6 which leads to the discussion of the law and sin in 7:7-25. We turn now directly to that discussion."

It is this difference that leads Paul now to say different things about the law. In Galatians, Paul could solve his dilemma, namely, that God had given the law (it had a purpose) but that it could not produce righteousness, by arguing that the law nonetheless had a role in God's overall plan: "It produces sin." But in Romans 6, where sin is depicted as having an independent power and therefore is not subordinate to God's purpose, "the dilemma requires a different solution." Now, in Romans 7:7-13, Paul regards the law as having been used by sin to produce "a situation contrary to the will of God. Thus there is an alteration in Paul's view of the relationship between sin and God's intention (God does not, as in Galatians 3:22, 24, intend bondage to sin), and between God's will and the law (he gave the law to save, an intention which was frustrated, rather than with the intent to condemn)." The law does not remain an instrument of God but "rather, is the agent of sin because it condemns and thus provokes transgression. Sin, through the commandment, teaches what it is to covet; the law condemns covetousness, and consequently the one who covets (7:7-11); and the law is thus the agent of sin."
Sanders sees a different line of reasoning at work in Romans 7:14-23. Here the problem is not that sin grasps the law away from God and uses it to provoke transgression. Rather, sin acts as another "law," which prevents humans from fulfilling God's law. Sanders regards the solution of Romans 8:1-8 to answer primarily the dilemma of Romans 7:14-23, not that of 7:7-13. Now the law does not provoke sin. "Its 'fault,' rather, is that it does not bear within itself the power to enable people to observe it. Only those who are in Christ, who have the Spirit, can do that." Sanders finds this section of Romans astonishing:

The human plight, without Christ, is so hopeless in this section that one wonders what happened to the doctrine that the creation was good. Those who see here a profound analysis of why the law is not an answer to the plight of humanity may miss the criticism of God the creator and giver of the law which can easily be derived from Romans 7:10 and 7:14-25. Paul, to be sure, does not derive such a criticism.  

Thus Sanders proposes that Paul has three different ways of understanding the relationship between God's will, the law, and sin. The majority view is that of Galatians 3:22-24 and Romans 5:20-21, in which sin and the law are subordinated to God's will. The view of Romans 7:7-13 is that sin uses the law to produce transgression against God's will. The view of Romans 7:14-25 breaks the connection between law and transgression and has "another law" (sin) producing transgression without reference to God's law. Sanders proposes that these shifts in Paul's view "can be understood if we think of them as arising from an organic development with a momentum towards more and more negative statements until there is a recoil in Romans 7, a recoil which produces other problems."  

After briefly dismissing the view that Romans 7 really tells us what Paul thought about the human situation—the main reasons for such dismissal being (1) that the precise subject of the chapter is not the human condition, but the relationship between the law and sin; and (2) that what Paul says about the human condition in Romans 7 is unique in the Pauline corpus and inconsistent with what Paul says about humans elsewhere. Sanders returns to his main point about the chapter: "[W]hen he reaches Romans 7 Paul has just put the law on the side of death, sin, and the flesh. He then recoils from the potential denial that God acted for the good: it is not God's fault, nor the law's, but sin's." The result of this recoil, however, creates new problems for Paul:

[In recoiling from attributing transgression and thus condemnation to the law (the question posed in 7:13), he [Paul] goes to another extreme. He retracts the positive connection between sin, God's will, and the law, a connection which is otherwise made whenever he asks about the function of the law. This finally puts the law on the side of good (where it naturally belongs, since God gave it) and exonerates God. Yet Paul now runs into other difficulties. He thinks in black and white terms, as we have already said, and now he overstates human inability to fulfill the law as well as Christian success in doing what it requires.]

This leads Paul into another difficulty: He places God and the law in contrast. Although God gave the law, and although he gave it for life, God "must launch a rescue operation apart from the law. God's first effort, it would appear, was a failure, and he had to redeem his own failure by sending his son. Paul, to be sure, does not say that it was God's failure: 'The law' could not do what was necessary. But God gave the law."  

Sanders concludes his discussion of Romans 7 with these words: "We must back away from strict exegesis of Romans 7 to understand Paul's thought." The reason for this, to repeat, is that Paul made many attempts to explain why righteousness does not come by keeping the law, but these attempts (including the ones in Romans 7) are not harmonious. Paul did not begin with an analysis of the human condition. Consistent in Paul are the description of the universality of humanity's plight and his assertion that the law does not justify, but that God saves another way.  

We shall now assess Sanders' treatment of Galatians 3 and Romans 7. Unfortunately, after careful study of these texts one must conclude that Sanders' presentation of them is so inaccurate that there is virtually nothing left of his exegesis that can be retained as valid. Sanders describes neither Paul's views in Galatians 3 and Romans 7 nor the relationship between the two chapters accurately. Sanders claims that in Galatians 3 God uses sin as an instrument to
Thus sin, or transgression, is part of God’s will. In Romans 6 and the first part of Romans 7, however, sin becomes an independent, alien power, no longer under God’s control. Thus whereas in Galatians 3 sin and the law are still subject to God’s purpose, in Romans sin and the law threaten to come into opposition to God’s will. Therefore Paul must offer a different view of the relationship between the law and sin. Now Paul says that God gave the law with an intention so save, but this intention was frustrated by the alien power of sin. The law provokes sin. God’s intention was good. Transgression is not God’s fault, nor the law’s, but sin’s (Romans 7:7-13). Then Paul goes on to break the connection between the law and sin in Romans 7:14-25. It is not sin’s use of the law that produces transgression, but sin’s dwelling in the flesh. This leads to the exaggerated claim that no one can obey the law, and the equally exaggerated claim in Romans 8, which is an answer to Romans 7:14-25, that those who walk by the Spirit can do what the law requires.

Against Sanders the following points must be made:

(1) Nowhere, not even in Galatians, does Paul say that “sin” is God’s instrument. It is correct that Paul understands the law to be God’s instrument of trapping people under sin. That is his consistent view in Galatians 3:22 and Romans 3:9-20. Furthermore, nowhere does Paul say that it is God’s will that humans should sin. When Paul says that the law came “for the sake of transgressions” (Gal 3:19) or in order to increase transgression (Romans 5:20), the idea is not that God willed sin, but that through the law sin reveals itself and its death-dealing power (cf. 7:13)—for there is no transgression without law (Romans 4:15; 5:13)—so that sinners stand condemned and must die.

(2) Sanders makes a false distinction between Galatians 3—where, on his reading, sin and the Law are part of God’s will—and Romans 7, where sin is no longer under God’s control and sin and the Law no longer serve God’s purpose. Against Sanders, already in Galatians 3, sin is to be understood as an independent power. Sin is active in the world apart from God, but God uses the law (not sin) to trap people under sin, because the law condemns them as sinners. Furthermore, Romans 7:7-13 is not incompatible with the argument of Galatians 3. When Paul says that God gave a commandment that was “for life” (Romans 7:10), that does not contradict Galatians 3:21-22. As we gave a commandment to Adam and Eve which, if followed, would preserve life. But sin (in the form of the serpent) deceived Adam and Eve into transgressing that very commandment. The problem is not the law, but weak, fleshly humanity (Romans 7:5). Once humans sin in the presence of the law, they stand condemned, trapped by the law. That is also the point of Galatians 5:22. But that explains why the law cannot give life (Galatians 3:21). The law cannot (dynamenoς) make alive, because it traps everyone under sin.

(3) That leads to a third point. Sanders consistently argues with respect to Galatians 3:21 that Paul’s idea is that the law was not intended (by God) to give life, or that it is “impossible” for the law to give life because justification is based on faith (3:11), whereas the law is based not on faith but on works (3:12). In other words, for Sanders, Paul’s argument that the law is unable to give life is a merely formal one. Thus Sanders cites Galatians 3:21 in connection with his “dogmatic” explanation of Paul’s understanding of justification by faith apart from works of the law: Paul did not come to his view that the Christians should not seek justification in the law because of the human plight, but only because God had given a different way that excluded the law. What Sanders fails to note, however, is that Galatians 3:21 does not say that the law was not “intended” to give life (a statement that would, in any case, contradict Romans 7:10 and 10:4-5), or that justification by the law is impossible because justification is based on faith (Galatians 3:11), while the law is based on works (Galatians 3:12). What Paul denies is that a law has been given that is able (dynamenon) to give life (in the form of a contrary-to-fact conditional sentence). What does Paul mean by this statement? The most obvious clue is not Galatians 3:11-12 but Romans 8:3, where Paul says that God did through Jesus what the law was not able to do (to adynaton tou nomou) because of the weakness of the flesh. What the law was not able to do because of the flesh (7:14-25) was to give life (7:10). Instead the law brought death (7:10, 24). Is that not what Paul means in Galatians 3:21 also? This proposal is supported by Galatians 3:22, where Paul writes that Scripture has trapped everyone (indeed, everything!) under sin. How else are we to read this statement except as Paul’s belief that all of humanity is under the power of sin? In other words, against Sanders, the anthropology of Romans 7 and the nexus between sin, the law, and death that we find there are already

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presupposed in Galatians 3. Paul’s argument about the law is not divorced from his understanding of the human condition, not even in Galatians.

(4) That the anthroplogy of Romans 7 is already presupposed in Galatians is supported further by Galatians 5:17–18. There Paul writes: “For the flesh desires (epithymei) against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, so that you do not do what you want (hina mē hæ an thelēte tauta poiēte). But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law (hypo nomon).” Here Paul describes the ongoing struggle of the Christian life in terms very similar to his description of life “under the Law” (hypo nomon) (cf. Rom 6:14) and in the flesh (7:5) in Romans 7:15–16: The fleshly “I” under the Law does not do what it wants (ou ὅ θελω touto prassó), but does instead what it does not want to do (ho ou thelō; touto poïō). As 7:7–8 makes clear, this result of “sin working in me” is nothing other than fleshly desire (epithymia). Thus Sanders’s claim that the human plight of Romans 7 does not inform Paul’s argument in Galatians is untenable.

(5) The problem of weak, fleshly humanity that stands helplessly under the power of sin and condemned under the law is then also the point of Romans 7:14-25. Sanders fails to see that 7:14-25 is a continuation of the thought of 7:7-13 (or perhaps it is better to say, 7:13-25 is a continuation of 7:7-12).97 Once sin gained a foothold in humanity through Adam, it continued and continues to work over all of humanity (5:12). In Romans 7:13-25 Paul points out that the problem of sin and the law that already confronted Adam is the same problem that confronts all of humanity under the law. In the presence of God’s law, one can delight in God’s law, and yet still the result, paradoxically, is sin, and so death. As we saw above, for Paul sin is not just the transgression of this or that commandment; it is the deeply-seated ungodly “desire” that corrupts the human and continually places him or her in opposition to God. Sanders claims that, in recoiling from attributing the sin to law and in breaking the positive connection between sin and the law, Paul ends up exaggerating the human inability to do the law in this passage. Sanders fails to see, however, that what Paul is discussing in 7:13-25 is nothing other than the continuing problem of sin-effected “desire,” which sets one in opposition to God’s will.

(6) Thus Sanders is wrong when he writes that Romans 8:1-8 is an answer to the problem of 7:14-25 but not that of 7:7-13. The latter two passages discuss the same problem, but from different perspectives. The first discusses how sin first came into action, when the commandment was given to Adam; the second describes humanity’s plight since Adam, which is in effect, however, the same problem: It is, paradoxically, precisely in the presence of the law that sin is most effective, not because the law causes sin, but because it traps people in their sin and condemns them to death. Sanders is also wrong when he says that the doctrine of the good creation has been lost sight of in 7:14-25. Sanders fails to see that standing behind Paul’s discussion in Romans 7 is the story of the fall of Adam. The creation was (and, in some sense, remains) good, but it is fallen.

(7) Finally, Sanders’ claim that Paul exaggerates the human inability to do the law in Romans 7 and that this exaggeration contradicts his anthroplogy elsewhere is wrong. Sanders finds a contradiction between Paul’s assertion, on the one hand, that he was blameless in the law and, on the other hand, that only Christians are able to do what the law requires. We have already dealt with this (only apparent) contradiction above, where we pointed out that Saul the Pharisee’s belief in the possibility of blamelessness in the law is a different matter from Paul the Christian’s belief in the universality and inescapability of sin. As a Christian Paul came to see that the law reveals sin to be a much deeper problem than transgression of this or that commandment. It should only be added here that this point undermines Sanders’ central claim that in Paul’s thought solution preceded plights. Although there is an element of truth in Sanders’ formulation—Paul the Pharisee was not Luther in search of a gracious God—it might be more accurate that for Paul “solution preceded plights.” In other words, as we saw above, God’s gracious call of Paul (solution) out of a life of zealous devotion to the law and of persecution of the church led Paul to understand the problem of sin more deeply than he had understood it before (plight), and that in turn led to his understanding of justification as God’s gracious action to deliver sinners from imprisonment under sin, a freedom that not even the law was capable of effecting (solution).

Against Sanders, then, there is great consistency in Paul’s understanding of the relationship between sin and the law, in his understanding of the human plights, and in his understanding of
justification by faith as the answer to the human plight. On Sanders' reading, it is as though in Romans 7 Paul paints himself into a corner as he tries to explain, ever more incoherently and desperately, how the law could possibly fit into God's plan. But this makes nonsense of Paul's theology. On Sanders' reading Paul turns out to be deeply confused. 1 Corinthians 15:56, where sin, the law, and death are connected as they are in Romans 7, but where justification and the role of the law are not even at issue, shows that Paul did not write Romans 7 as an incoherent and ultimately unsuccessful attempt to understand the role of the law, nor does he paint himself into a corner. The nexus of sin, the law, and death had been worked out by Paul, however incipiently, well before the writing of Romans. Galatians 3:21-22 and 5:16-24 are further evidence of this. The reason for Sanders' failure to make sense of Romans 7 and 8 is clear. It is because he fails to link justification and anthropology in Paul in any meaningful and coherent way, and because he fails to see the coherence between Galatians 3 and Romans 7. One must conclude that the confusion is not Paul's. It is Sanders'.

But that means that several major elements of Sanders' view of Pauline theology, some of which appear in Paul and Palestinian Judaism, but are given their major exegetical support only in Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People, cannot stand. These include: that justification is primarily a transfer term (how one "gets in") in Pauline theology; that in Paul's thought only to Paul's exclusion of justification by works of the law is unrelated to his anthropology and that it is connected instead with the inclusion of the Gentiles. In other words, many of the major conclusions from Sanders' work that are thought to undermine Lutheran understandings of Paul are themselves untenable.

I do not want to be taken to suggest that Paul had worked out his detailed view of the relationship between sin, the law, and death that we find in Romans 7 from the very beginning of his career as an apostle. Rather I wish to emphasize that we have good reason to believe that two of the major building blocks of Paul's teaching on justification as an answer to the human condition were present in his theology quite early: (1) the concept of justification by faith, perhaps received from early Christian tradition, and understood, in the first instance, as forgiveness of sins, and (from there) more generally as

him (see n. 14); and (2) the insight, obtained already from his own conversion, that the law is inadequate as a way to righteousness before God. I do not doubt that it took considerable time and reflection for Paul to work out the detailed anthropology that we find present in Romans 7 and find implied in Galatians 3 and 5. But the main point is that Sanders' claim that Paul's anthropology is only a reflex of his soteriology, and that his view of the relationship between sin and the law was inconsistent and changing even to the time of the writing of Romans, is untenable. Already in (the early) 1 Thessalonians Paul speaks of the human plight as the need to be saved by Christ from the wrath of God (1:10), a statement that is best explained by 5:9-10, on the one hand, where Paul states that being saved from God's wrath follows from Christ's death "for us," and by Romans 1:16-3:26 and 5:6-11, and on the other hand, where Paul spells out more fully the relationship between the wrath of God, Christ's death "for us (the ungodly)," justification, and salvation from the wrath of God.

A final word on Sanders' method is perhaps appropriate. As we saw, Sanders approached the study of Paul as a project in comparative religion. While such study is useful, it cannot replace deep engagement with the Pauline texts on their own terms. Is it not possible, indeed is it not likely, that the major questions that animated Paul's life and thought were not how one "gets in" and "stays in" the group of the saved? Do not the cries—"The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law, but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!" (1 Corinthians 15:55-57); and, "Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Romans 7:24-25)—do not these cries point to the real heart of Paul's doctrine of justification: the deliverance of each and every sinner from sin, death, and the law through faith in Jesus Christ, who constitutes the sole hope of eternal life?

James D. G. Dunn

In his 1983 article, "The New Perspective on Paul," James D. G. Dunn takes as his starting point for a reevaluation of Paul's teaching on justification by faith apart from works of the law Sanders' "mouldbreaking" work on Paul and Palestinian Judaism. While praising Sanders and accepting his characterization of Palestinian Judaism as a religion of covenantal nomism, Dunn is also critical in
that he considers Sanders to have raised to make use of his own work “to explore how far Paul’s theology could be explicated in relation to Judaism’s ‘covenantal nomism.’ “Instead,” Sanders “remained more impressed by the difference between Paul’s pattern of religious thought and that of first-century Judaism.” Dunn finds Sanders’ Paul to be odd, because Paul comes across as one who “abandons Judaism simply because it is not Christianity.” In short, Dunn finds Sanders’ Paul to jump arbitrarily from Judaism to Christianity. Dunn does not find Sanders’ Paul to have improved in Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People. Paul’s jump from Judaism to Christianity still seems arbitrary, and Paul’s treatment of the Law becomes inconsistent and illogical. Dunn finds Sanders’ Paul to be “little more convincing (and much less attractive) than the Luther Paul.” But finally Dunn thinks that “we have not yet been given the proper reading of Paul from the new perspective of first-century Palestinian Judaism opened up so helpfully by Sanders himself.” Thus Dunn, starting from the new perspective on Palestinian Judaism given by Sanders, seeks to explain Paul’s theology not as an abandonment of Judaism but as growing out of Judaism understood, in Sanders’ terms, as covenantal nomism.

Central for Dunn’s reevaluation of Paul’s teaching on justification by faith apart from works of the law has been attention to the nature of “works of the law.” Within the framework of covenantal nomism, the Mosaic Law is not only a means by which the faithfhl Jew remains in the covenant and is guaranteed salvation; it is also the source of those “works” (practices) by which the Jew in ancient times (as still today) was distinguished from non-Jews. In short, works of the law are national boundary markers. Starting from Paul’s discussion of the Antioch controversy in Galatians 2, Dunn argues that Paul’s rejection of justification by works of the law was an attack on this Jewish self-understanding. Paul had no disagreement with his fellow Jews (and Jewish Christians) on the concept of justification by faith. “Justification by faith is not a distinctively Christian teaching.”

Justification, which Dunn understands within a Jewish context to mean “God’s acknowledgement that someone is in the covenant,” was in Judaism grounded in “the profound recognition of God’s initiative and grace in first establishing and then maintaining the covenant.” Nor was Paul combating the idea that one must earn God’s favor through works. Rather Paul’s problem with justification by “works of the law” is that it denies covenantal grace to those who are not

in the covenant. The “advent of Christ had introduced the time of fulfillment. . . . So, now that the time of fulfillment had come, the covenant should no longer be conceived in nationalistic or racial terms. . . . The covenant is not thereby abandoned. Rather it is broadened out as God had originally intended.” Dunn is careful to explain his view that Paul is not opposed to observance of the law as such, but “works of the law” specifically, understood as “Jewish prerogative and national monopoly.” Finally, Dunn affirms Stendahl’s view that “Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith should not be understood primarily as an exposition of the individual’s relation to God, but primarily in the context of Paul the Jew wresting with the question of how Jews and Gentiles stand in relation to each other within the covenant purpose of God now reached its climax in Jesus Christ.”

In order to assess Dunn’s understanding of Paul’s teaching on justification it is useful to take a test case to see how his hypothesis works and to determine whether it is viable. In an early article Dunn himself proposed Galatians 3:10-14 as the main test case for his hypothesis, and so we may use that passage as our test case.

Lutheran (and other Protestant) interpreters have often read into this passage a presumed minor premise. Paul states that all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse because Deuteronomy 27:26 pronounces cursed everyone who does not abide by all that is written in the book of the law. The assumed minor premise would be that no one can do all the works of the law, and therefore anyone who tries to do so automatically falls under the curse of Deuteronomy 27:26.

Dunn offers a different, innovative reading: Those who rely on works of the law are under a curse because (by the very fact that they are of works of the law) they do not abide by all the things that are written in the law. Why? Because those who insist on the works of the law understand “the scope of God’s covenant people as Israel per se, as that people who are defined by the law and marked out by its distinctive requirements.” This understanding of covenant and law leads to a wrong set of priorities.

It puts too much weight on physical and national factors, and it undermines the promise of the inclusion of Gentiles by faith. Christ removed the curse of the law (Galatians 3:13) in that, by being crucified, he himself fell under the curse of exclusion from the covenant. Dunn explains:
His [Jesus'] body hung on a tree is accursed by God and therefore constitutes a defilement of the land; so it must be removed without delay. This ties in with the understanding of curse as implying a rejection and expulsion; and in a Deuteronomistic setting particularly with the warning of the divine curses on covenant breakers, which entails their expulsion from the land of covenant inheritance (Deuteronomy 29:27-28; 30:1). The point is, however, that the covenant-breaking Israelite thus cursed and expelled from the covenant land has in effect been expelled from the covenant. That is to say, he is placed in the same position as the one already outside the covenant, the Gentile. The cursed Israelite is like the uncovenanted Gentile.  

Thus Jesus in his death identified with “sinning Jew and Gentile alike.” He ended the restriction of the covenant blessings to the Jewish people alone, and he demonstrated that God’s grace could come without the law. Thereby he brought the blessing of Abraham to the Gentiles. This is what justification (understood as being acknowledged as a member of the covenant) by faith without works of the law means.

There are a number of problems with Dunn’s reading. I shall discuss four of them.

1) Dunn provides no evidence either from Paul or from Second-Temple Jewish literature that the verb “to justify” ever meant “to acknowledge that someone is in the covenant,” nor am I aware of any such evidence. It is true that the adjective “righteous” and the noun “righteousness” can be used in the context of covenantal or other relationships to describe God or humans. But there is no evidence that the verb specifically was used to denote the process by which God acknowledges one to be a member of the covenant people, a meaning that Dunn’s interpretation requires. The primarily forensic meaning of the verb that lies behind Paul’s usage refers to God’s declaration that someone is innocent, righteous, or in a right relationship with God, but that is so quite apart from the question of covenant membership. Consequently there are also no grounds for Dunn’s claim that “justification by faith” is nothing new in Paul since it was already the presupposition of Judaism (understood as covenantal nomism).

2) Dunn’s claim that “works of the law” would have been understood by Paul and his Jewish contemporaries not as works by which one achieves righteousness but as practices by which faithful Jews restricted the covenant promises to themselves is put into serious doubt by the relatively recently published (1994) document from the Dead Sea Scrolls, 4QMMT. This fascinating document is important for our question, because it is the first known document of the Second-Temple period other than Paul’s letters to use certainly and explicitly the term, “the works of the law,” and to connect it with the topic of justification (righteousness). The document is thought to be a kind of letter, probably written about the middle of the second century B.C. by the leadership of the Qumran community (or a community that immediately preceded the formation of the Qumran community) and sent to a leader in Jerusalem. The authors spell out in detail their interpretation of the law (their “halakah”) and call upon the recipient to follow their interpretation of the law rather than a competing interpretation, which seems to be proto-Pharisaic and pre-rabbinic. At the conclusion of the letter the authors write:

And we are aware that part of the blessings and curses have occurred that are written in the book of Moses. And this is the end of days when they will return to the law and... and not turn back and the wicked will act wickedly and... remember the kings of Israel and reflect on their deeds, how whoever of them was respecting the... freed from afflictions; and those were the seekers of the Law. Remember David, who was a man of the pious ones, and he, too, was freed from many afflictions and was forgiven. And also we have written to you of the works of the Torah which we think are good for you and for your people, for we say that you have intellect and knowledge of the Law. Reflect on all these matters and seek from him that he may support your counsel and keep far from you the evil scheming[s] and the counsel of Belial, so that at the end of time, you may rejoice in finding that some of our words are true. And it shall be reckoned to you as justice when you do what is upright and good before him, for your good and that of Israel.

Although the text is partly fragmentary, it is coherent enough that we can make sense of it. The context is eschatological. The authors urge the recipient to follow their halakah, in the conviction that performing the works of the law in the way that they prescribe will lead to the
recipient's eschatological justification before God. This document seriously undermines Dunn's hypothesis about "works of the law" in Second-Temple Judaism.

Dunn, who developed his thesis about "works of the law" in the early 1980s, before 4QMMT was published, subsequently tried to claim the evidence of 4QMMT for his view. Dunn considers the "principle point of parallel" between 4QMMT and Galatians 2 to be that the "works of the law" are "understood as defining a boundary which marks out those of faith/faithfulness from others." In this case, the works of the law would separate the faithful of the Qumran community (or its predecessor) from the adherents of an alternative halakah. This, in Dunn's view, supports his hypothesis that the primary problem with "works of the law" for Paul was that they served as boundary markers.

But, against Dunn, surely just as important a parallel, if not more important, is that works of the law are understood to delimit those who will be the recipients of eschatological justification. While Dunn notes the striking parallel between the two documents in the reference to the "reckoning of righteousness," he does not acknowledge that this parallel undermines his main thesis. He argues that 4QMMT can be fit into a stream of Jewish tradition in which "Genesis 15:6 was understood . . . as indicating the faithful devotion to Israel's covenant distinctiveness which God counted as righteousness." Thus in 4QMMT the authors are saying that those who are faithful to the halakah that distinguished the Qumran covenant from the rest of Judaism are those who will be reckoned righteous. In other words, Dunn is trying to argue that 4QMMT shows that the primary valence of the term "works of the law" in pre-Pauline Palestinian Judaism was that it designated those who belonged to the covenant qua distinct from others. Against Dunn, however, the point of the authors of 4QMMT is not that those who follow its halakah will be regarded as righteous because they are distinct from the rest of Judaism, but because they do the works of the law correctly. The authors do not state that the recipient will receive eschatological justification if he becomes a member of the authors' covenant community, but rather if he does the works of the law correctly.

4QMMT's reinterpretation of Galatians 3:10-14 leads to confusion about the nature of the curse of the law, its effects, and to whom it applies. On the one hand Dunn argues that the curse of the law falls on Jews, specifically those Jews devoted to the works of the law as a way of maintaining national identity. On the other hand he can say that the Gentiles are also under the curse, because they, like the Jews who uphold the works of the law in an exclusive manner (and so are condemned and put outside the covenant), turn out to be outsiders.

Yet again, Dunn describes the Gentiles as suffering under the effects of the curse (on the Jews): the blessings of the covenant cannot flow to the Gentiles because the Jewish devotees of works of the law prevent that from happening. Christ's death removes the effects of the curse on the Gentiles, because now they can receive the covenant blessings. But all of this raises the question: What exactly is the "curse of the law"? If the curse is on Jewish doing of the works of the law, how can it also fall on Gentiles, who, by definition, do not do the works of the law? This confusion is the result of Dunn sometimes defining the curse as the curse that the law pronounces and sometimes defining it as the results of the curse.

(4) Dunn's interpretation of the redemptive (or atoning) significance of Christ's death as breaking down the barrier of the law between Jews and Gentiles, rather than as redeeming from the power of sin and the condemnation of transgressions, is not only narrow, as Dunn himself acknowledges; it neglects the close connection between Galatians 3:13 and Paul's atonement theology as found in such passages as 2 Corinthians 5:21; Romans 3:21-26; 8:1-4; Galatians 1:4. These passages show that for Paul the primary significance of Christ's representative death was to save sinners from personal sin, death, and the condemning power of the law. In conclusion, Dunn's shifting of the focus of justification in Paul from the salvation of the sinner to the question of covenant membership and its blessings fails to convince. The shortcomings of Dunn's work reveal how far-reaching the consequences are of basing one's understanding of Paul on the erroneous views presented by Stendahl and Sanders.

N. T. Wright

N. T. Wright describes his recent book as presenting a "fresh perspective" on Paul. He situates himself neither as a thoroughgoing supporter of the new perspective on Paul advanced by Sanders and Dunn nor as a thoroughgoing critic of it. We include Wright, however, because he does share certain important perspectives with Sanders and Dunn and because his work, which has received considerable attention, also presents challenges to Lutheran readings of Paul.
In order to understand Wright’s view of Paul, it is necessary to keep in mind some fundamental conceptual and exegetical decisions that he made early in his career that have shaped his interpretation of Pauline texts. Wright considers the following to be crucial for understanding Paul’s theology correctly: (1) The primary framework within which we are to interpret Paul’s theology is the framework of exile and restoration. In the time of Jesus and Paul, Palestinian Jews believed that they were still living in the exile since the glorious promises of post-exilic restoration about which Israel’s prophets had spoken had not yet been fulfilled. As long as Israel continued to live under the yoke of foreign rule (in Jesus and Paul’s time, under the Romans), the exile could not be considered to have ended. Paul sees Christ’s death and resurrection as God’s (surprising) answer to the problem of the exile. (2) God’s answer to the problem of exile in Christ is, for Wright, a matter of covenant theology. God’s covenant with Israel, through Abraham and his descendants, was the means by which God intended to undo the consequences of Adam’s fall. Through Israel God intended to restore all of humanity. Biblical Israel is the embodiment of true humanity (cf. Daniel 7). Thus creation and covenant are closely connected to each other. Israel’s continuing exile, however, meant that God’s covenantal purposes had not yet been accomplished. And, although Israel is intended to be a light to the nations, to undo the consequences of Adam’s sin, Israel also participates in the consequences of Adam’s (and all of humanity’s) fall. Therefore Israel itself needs redemption. (3) Jesus embodies Israel, and God did in Jesus what Jews had expected God to do in, with, through, and for Israel as a nation. In dying a crucifixion death, as rejected King of the Jews, the victim of Roman oppression, Jesus himself embodies the exile of Israel. In the resurrection of Jesus, God both overcomes sin and opens up Abraham’s family to include the Gentiles. Thus through Jesus God’s covenantal purposes for Israel come to fulfillment. Not only is Israel saved, but the Gentiles are also brought into the people of God. This is the beginning of a new creation.121

Since Wright understands Paul to be a covenant theologian, he understands Paul’s “justification” and “righteousness” language as referring primarily to covenant membership. To be justified, to be “right,” means to be a member of God’s covenant people.122 That does not mean that Wright excludes other senses to the words righteousness and justification, but it does mean that Wright does not see the primary emphasis of Paul’s teaching on justification as relating to the justification of the individual sinner through the atoning death of Christ. A convenient way to get at Wright’s understanding of justification in Paul and to assess it is, as in the case with Dunn, to test his hypothesis against Galatians 3:10-14.123 This test will then lead to a more direct discussion of Wright’s understanding of justification in Paul.

Observing that Deuteronomy 27:26 appears in a part of Deuteronomy that focuses on the blessings and curses promised to national Israel as a result of their obedience or disobedience, and in line with his hypothesis that the major conceptual framework for understanding Paul is exile and restoration, Wright considers the “curse of the Law” in Galatians 3:10 to be nothing other than Israel’s exile. It is this exile in which Israel (in Paul’s time) still found itself, and it is this exile that has prevented God’s covenantal purposes, namely, the blessing of the nations, to come to fulfillment.124 Thus, in order for God to fulfill his purposes, he must remove the curse of exile. God must first restore Israel, so that the blessing will then also go to the nations. The Torah cannot do this, because the Torah has not been a means to blessing but rather to curse. Furthermore, Habakkuk 2:4 shows that, when God restores Israel, covenant membership will be defined by faith, that is, by belief in Israel’s God (Galatians 3:11). Thus Habakkuk relativizes Leviticus 18:5 (Galatians 3:12); the latter offers life as the result of doing the Torah, but it has already been shown that the Torah is excluded. God’s solution to the curse is that he let the Messiah Jesus take upon himself the curse of exile. Jesus’ death on a Roman cross is the climactic form of the curse of exile. By removing the curse from Israel, Christ allows the covenantal blessings to flow. Those blessings are the new covenant for Israel and membership in the family of Abraham for Gentiles.

In this example we see how justification understood as covenant membership functions in Wright’s understanding of Paul. In assessment of Wright the following must be said:

(1) The criticism applied to Dunn, namely, that there is no evidence that justification means to be acknowledged as a member of the covenant in Second-Temple Judaism or in Paul, applies also to Wright. Wright himself acknowledges that his assumption that “dikaioloygos” is best rendered in terms of ‘membership within the covenant’ is controversial.125 It is not only controversial; it is untenable. But that means that a major pillar of Wright’s edifice is removed.
await the hope of righteousness (elpida dikaiosynēs).” Thus the function of the Spirit is not only to incorporate the believer into Christ, and so into the family of Abraham (3:14, 26-29); the Spirit (pneuma), which comes with faith (exo akōs pistēōs) (3:2-5) also establishes the basis for the hope of eschatological justification (5:5).

(3) The last point leads to what is another major problem with Wright’s understanding of justification in Paul, and that is his downplaying of the eschatological dimension of the justification of the individual. To be sure, Wright acknowledges that for Paul justification includes an eschatological component, but even then he associates the eschatological component primarily with cosmic renewal and with membership in the people of God.128 In Paul: In Fresh Perspective Wright summarizes his understanding of justification. In one place he writes:

Paul has already spoken in Romans 2 about the final justification of God’s people, on the basis of their whole life. This will take place at the end, when God judges the secrets of all hearts through the Messiah. The point of justification by faith is that, as he insists in [Romans] 3.26, it takes place in the present time as opposed to on the last day. It has to do with the question, “Who now belongs to God’s people?” and “How can you tell?” The answer is: all who believe in the gospel belong, and that is the only way you can tell. . . . Justification, for Paul, is a subset of election, that is, it belongs as part of his doctrine of the people of God.129

Later, taking up the same ideas, Wright states:

[The Spirit is the path by which Paul traces the route from justification by faith in the present to justification, by the complete life lived, in the future. You cannot understand justification by faith in Romans 3 and 4 unless you see it flanked by the long statement of judgment according to works in Romans 2.1-16 and the spectacular scene in Romans 8 which explains why there is indeed “no condemnation for those who are in the Messiah, Jesus.” The point then, laid out in Romans 8.1-11, is this: The verdict already issued over Christian faith in Romans 3 does indeed genuinely anticipate the verdict to be issued

Wright makes the point that Paul’s purpose in Galatians 3:10-14 is to discuss how the promise made to Abraham, that the Gentiles will become part of one world-wide family along with Israel, is to be fulfilled. That is not incorrect. On this basis, however, Wright draws a further conclusion, which is incorrect, namely, that in Galatians 3:10-14 Paul does not present an “atonement-theology, a statement of the general problem of sin and the general divine solution, namely, redemption through the death of Christ.”126 Wright abolishes any meaningful atonement theology from Paul. As we saw in our discussion of Dunn, Galatians 3:13 is conceptually related to several other major Pauline texts that speak of Christ’s representative death in order to deliver from sin, death, and the condemning power of the law. In order to reach his conclusion Wright must put asunder what are in Paul’s theology closely united, namely, (1) becoming a child of Abraham and (2) justification understood as forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God. Wright reads Galatians 3:14 as though the promise given to Abraham is limited to the Gentiles becoming members of the covenant people and the promise of the Spirit consists in covenant renewal for Israel.127 As Galatians 3:22-23 makes clear, however, the promise lies not only in becoming children of Abraham, but also in being freed from the power of sin and in being redeemed from under the law. Precisely this is to be “justified by faith” (Galatians 3:24), and that is also what was promised to Gentiles (Galatians 3:8). Paul’s argument in Romans 4:1—5:11, which bears important similarities to his argument in Galatians 3:6-29, makes clear that justification by faith goes hand-in-hand with being a child of Abraham, but it is not simply synonymous with being counted among his descendants. Justification includes the forgiveness of (the individual’s) sins (Romans 4:4-8, 25) and reconciliation with God (Romans 5:1-11). The forgiveness of sins that is given to those who, like Abraham, are justified by faith (Romans 4) establishes a new relationship with God (Romans 5:1), and that brings with it a promise of eschatological salvation (for those who remain in Christ to the end) (Romans 5:9-11). Wright ignores all this in his exegesis of Galatians 3:10-14.

Furthermore, it is clear that even in Galatians Paul has in view justification as leading to the eschatological salvation, for in Galatians 5:5 he writes: “For we, by the Spirit (pneumatō), by faith (ek pisteōs),
Over the entirety of the life led, because the Spirit now at work in you, the Spirit because of whose presence you are beginning to walk according to the Spirit and not according to the flesh, is the Spirit of the God who raised Jesus from the dead, and hence the Spirit through whom God will raise all those who belong to the Messiah. This is why, when Paul looks ahead to the future and asks, as well one might, what God will say on the last day, he holds up as his joy and crown, not the merits and death of Jesus, but the churches he has planted who remain faithful to the gospel. The path from initial faith to final resurrection (and resurrection, we must remind ourselves, constitutes rescue, that is salvation, from death itself) lies through holy and faithful Spirit-led service, including suffering.\(^{130}\)

Nearly all of this is wrong. The topic is important enough that Wright’s errors must be spelled out individually and in detail:

(1) Wright would have it that for Paul, initial justification (by which one enters the people of God) is based on faith, whereas final justification (deliverance from death) is based on “the whole life lived.” That leads Wright to make the astounding claim that when Paul looks to the last day, not just final judgment but salvation (resurrection) as such, he will rely, not on the merits of Christ, but on his work in the gospel. That is completely wrong, as already Philippians 3:9-11 can show. For Paul, justification, both present and future, is based on faith in Jesus Christ (present: Romans 3:21-26; 5:1; future: Romans 4:24; Galatians 5:5). Justification in the present is not in itself a guarantee of future salvation (on the last day). One can lose future salvation if one falls away from the gospel or if one lives willfully according to the flesh (1 Corinthians 15:2; Galatians 5:4; 6:7-9). As long as one remains in Christ, however, present justification will give way to final justification and salvation on the last day (Romans 5:9-10). The basis for such final justification and salvation will not be one’s works, but only faith in Christ.

Final judgment, on the other hand (to be distinguished from final justification), is based on the “whole life lived,” including one’s works. All Christians will face a final judgment of the lives that they have lived (see especially 2 Corinthians 5:10; also Romans 2:16; 14:10). But this final judgment is not the same as final justification. As 1 Corinthians 3:10-15 shows, Paul could very easily imagine that an apostle can be saved even while he is judged for his bad works. If the apostle’s work has been bad, his work will be destroyed and he will lose his reward (he will be penalized), but he will not lose salvation, because Christ has remained his foundation (5:11). Christ remains the basis for final justification and salvation. Christians who remain in Christ until the end can trust that they will be saved (they will receive eternal life), even while the eternal rewards for the quality of their lives may vary.

(2) Romans 2 must be understood within the context of Paul’s broader argument in 1:18–3:20. In this section Paul is making the case that all people, Jews and Gentiles alike, are under sin (5:9; 19-20), in order to set up his next point, which is to declare that all people, Jews and Gentiles alike, are justified equally, on the same basis, namely, by faith in Jesus Christ, just as they have all equally fallen short of God’s glory (5:21-26). In 2:1–16 Paul makes a transition from his denunciation of Gentile wickedness in 1:18–32 to a condemnation of Jewish unrighteousness in 2:17-24. As 2:9-11 shows, Paul bases his argument on God’s impartiality. One who would judge the wicked Gentile must take care that he not commit the same errors, for God will judge all and render to each according to his due, and that includes the Jew. Thus in 2:12-16 Paul argues rhetorically, on Jewish presuppositions, from a Jewish perspective against an alternative Jewish perspective. Against the Jew who follows approvingly Paul’s condemnation of Gentile sinfulness in 1:18-32, who believes that he, by virtue of his Jewishness and his possession of the law, is in the clear, and who therefore thinks that he does not have to fear God’s judgment, Paul says, also from a Jewish perspective (although an opposing one): No! You (the Jew) are also subject to God’s judgment. God, who is impartial, will judge you for the quality of your life as much as he will judge the Gentile. The only difference is that whereas God will judge the Jew according to the law, he will judge the Gentile according to his conscience (2:12-15). In other words, Paul is arguing, from within a Jewish framework, that God’s impartiality (2:11) must lead the thoughtful Jew to realize that simply having the law is not enough to guarantee justification according to the law. He must actually do the law in order to be justified on the basis of the law (2:13).

For anyone familiar with the preaching of John the Baptist (Matthew 3:7-10; Luke 3:7-9), it cannot be considered surprising to read a Jew arguing, from within a Jewish framework, that his fellow

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Jews must not rely on their status as Jews to be saved in the final judgment but must do the works that the law requires. But that is not Paul’s argument from a Christian perspective! In 2:16 Paul does not say that his description of justification by doing the law in 2:13 is how final judgment (and justification) will work for Christians. He only says that, according to his gospel, there will be a judgment day, and on that day God will judge the secrets of people through Jesus Christ (evidently reformulating a phrase that he used in 1 Corinthians 4:5). In Romans 2:17-29 Paul goes on to condemn the Jew who prides himself on his Jewishness but who fails to keep the law. That shows that Romans 2 is an argument made about Jews within the framework of Jewish presuppositions. Thus it is false that “Paul has already spoken in Romans 2 about the final justification of God’s people, on the basis of their whole life” (see Wright).

(3) The verdict of Romans 8:1, that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, does not depend, as Wright implies, on the further statement that “the Spirit now at work in you, the Spirit because of whose presence you are beginning to walk according to the Spirit and not according to the flesh, is the Spirit of the God who raised Jesus from the dead, and hence the Spirit through whom God will raise all those who belong to the Messiah” (Romans 8:4, 11). The reason that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ is not that the Spirit leads to the mortification of the flesh and the producing of righteousness in those who belong to Christ (although the Spirit does do that), so that one may then be justified in the final judgment on the basis of the quality of one’s life; no, the reason that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ is, first, that Christ, having died for our sins and having risen from the dead, lives at God’s right hand to intercede for us with God (Romans 8:31-39; see also 5:6-11; 1 Thessalonians 1:10; 5:9-10); and, second, that in Christ’s death God condemned the power of sin in the flesh (Romans 8:3) and removed the curse of the law, that is, its power to condemn (Galatians 3:13). For those who are in Christ, sin and the law no longer have power to condemn. The Spirit of that very person, Christ, in whose flesh the power of sin was condemned comes to dwell in our bodies and becomes righteousness, and thus life, for us (8:10). It is true that the Spirit also leads us to fulfill the just requirement of the law (Romans 8:4), but that is not the basis for righteousness.

Wright’s erroneous presentation of Paul’s doctrines of justification by faith and of final judgment explains why his presentation of Paul’s eschatology and soteriology also comes up short. On Wright’s reading, initial justification is largely (not completely) equated with covenant membership, while final justification is effectively collapsed into final judgment by works. The time between initial justification and final justification is the time of life in the Spirit, which becomes the basis for final judgment/justification. But this (mis)reading, besides introducing the errors discussed above, also fails to explain how Paul can describe the life of the Christian as a continuing struggle, in the Spirit, against the flesh (Galatians 5:17-24). It is as though, once justified (once possessed of the Spirit and become a member of the covenant), the personal struggle against personal sin is over. Sin and the law no longer threaten to kill the individual, because one is in the Spirit. All that is left, in respect to the final justification of the individual, is to serve in the Spirit, in the work “of making God’s saving, restorative justice as much of a reality as possible in the present age, in advance of the final putting-to-rights of the whole creation,”131 in short, to await the salvation of the whole world as one also works towards it. But what then of the continuing power of sin in the individual, precisely in the individual Christian, sin which causes the flesh still to fight against the Spirit (Galatians 5:17)?132

In conclusion, we see that Wright’s starting point, namely, that Paul’s theology is to be understood primarily within the framework of exile/restoration and of covenantal theology, and that justification is primarily about becoming a member of the covenant people, leads to massive confusion about the structure of Paul’s thought. It does not do justice to Paul’s actual statements about the saving significance of Christ’s representative death for sinners. Finally, it fails to make sense of Paul’s anthropology.

Positive Contributions of the New Perspective

The discussion of the new perspective on Paul has been thoroughly negative to this point, and the question arises whether there is anything positive to say about it. There certainly is. In particular I would suggest that the following three insights of the new perspective are of lasting value:
The new perspective has reminded us of the importance of careful study and fair treatment of the Jewish sources relevant to the study of Paul. To the extent that it has encouraged New Testament scholars to independent study of the Jewish sources, the new perspective has been salutary. No one can reasonably come away from a reading of Sanders' devastating critique of older Christian scholarship on Judaism, particularly on rabbinic Judaism, in *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (pp. 33-59), without acknowledging that there has been a massive misrepresentation of ancient Judaism in wide sectors of New Testament scholarship. We may hope that those days are gone for good and that we do not repeat the errors of the past. It is incumbent upon all New Testament scholars who undertake to write about ancient Judaism to gain an independent working knowledge of it.

The new perspective has helped to free us from subtle, or not so subtle, anti-Jewish tendencies in New Testament scholarship. One thinks, for example, of Käsemann's infamous statement that Paul's doctrine of the righteousness of God "strikes at the hidden Jew in all of us," where the hidden Jew is the devout person who sins precisely because he or she misunderstands the "annunciation of God's will in the law" as a "summons to human achievement." Francis Watson writes that "[s]uch language is obviously disturbing for more than merely exegetical reasons," noting that Käsemann takes the idea of the "hidden Jew," or more exactly, the one who is an "inward Jew," which in Romans 2:29 serves a positive function, and turns it into something negative. Although I disagree with the proponents of the new perspective on the reasons for Paul's rejection of justification by works of the law, they are certainly correct to point out that Paul's problem with the law is not that it leads to the desire to establish one's own righteousness or identity through "achievement." And that leads to a third point:

Although, as this paper indicates, I do not believe that the new perspective provides us with a better understanding of Paul's doctrine of justification than does the traditional Lutheran reading, the new perspective has rightfully called attention to certain distortions of Lutheran readings that must be rejected. An example of this is Bultmann's claim that for Paul sin, epitomized as desire, lies precisely in the desire of the zeal to fulfill the law. The effort itself is sinful, because it is "man's self-powered striving to upend his own existence in forgetfulness of his creaturely existence, to procure his salvation by his own strength." Critics such as Sanders have correctly pointed out that this is not Paul's critique of the law. This must be seen as a reading into Paul of Lutheran ideas. One can find such ideas already in Luther's own writings (e.g., the 1535 Lectures on Galatians; see LW 26:253-54: the "very keeping of the law" is sinful).

Where Do We Go From Here?

Our analysis of the work of the four major scholars associated with the new perspective on Paul has shown that their major claims cannot be sustained. The question, then, is, "Where do we go from here?"

Very briefly I would suggest that future work on Pauline theology and his teaching on justification in particular will require at least the following three things:

1. Scholars who write on Paul must above all seek for the coherence of his theology. It has become fashionable in some circles to argue that Paul's theology is incoherent and to regard Paul as fundamentally confused, especially on the matter of the role of the law. As we saw in discussing Sanders, however, Paul does have a coherent understanding of the role of the law in the history of salvation. Although the possibility that Paul was confused, inconsistent, or incoherent cannot be ruled out a priori, it is incumbent upon scholars to explore every avenue possible to make sense of Paul before passing the verdict that he is confused. Scholars who do not find a way of understanding Paul's theology in a coherent way should consider the possibility that they are the ones who are confused before they judge Paul to be so. We have seen that confusion has attended much of the writing of the new perspective: the failure to distinguish between Saul the Pharisee's blamelessness in the law and Paul the Christian's claim of the universality of sin (Stendahl and Sanders); the failure to attend to Paul's coherent view of the law in Galatians and Romans and the intimate connection between his anthropology and his teaching on justification (Sanders); the disintegration of Paul's coherent atonement theology (Dunn and Wright); and the confusion between justification and final judgment and the failure to see the inherent connection between initial justification and final justification based on faith (Wright).

2. The discovery of QMNT means that we can no longer exclude the likelihood that there were Jews in the Second-Temple period who
the proclamation that Christ is our righteousness (1 Corinthians 1:30) remains the foundation of personal hope for salvation.

There are two reasons, however, why, at least at the current time, I do not think that this is the major thing at stake for Lutherans. First, in the light of recent ecumenical convergences it is becoming increasingly implausible to maintain that the churches of the Reformation are the sole custodians of the pure doctrine of justification. Second, as the mainstream Lutheran churches of Europe and North America continue their drift into liberal Protestantism, it is becoming increasingly doubtful that the doctrine of justification, unless it is integrated into the whole of Christian doctrine and the whole of the biblical witness, is really the doctrine by which the churches will "stand." In fact, the Protestant churches are being torn apart by disagreements that are due in no small part to disagreements precisely over justification, with some circles highlighting the transformative aspects of Paul's righteousness conceptuality and the organic connection between justification and sanctification, and others highlighting the forensic aspects of justification with a reluctance to bring transformative dimensions to bear on ethical issues. While the Reformers' insistence on imputed righteousness made good sense within the context of the debates with late medieval Catholicism, it is doubtful that this doctrine alone, cut off from the rest of Christian teaching, can sustain churches in fidelity to the gospel and to the fullness of Christian orthodoxy in the long run. In this crisis of Protestantism the doctrine of justification may well end up being the cause of the churches' falling, rather than of their standing.

What is at stake in the dispute over the new perspective is not only getting Paul's teaching on justification right (both in its forensic aspect and in its organic connection to transformative categories). It is also—and this has been a major point of this paper—respecting his anthropology; for, despite Sanders, Paul's anthropology is in fact intimately linked with his teaching on justification. Moreover, it is Paul's anthropology that underlies the Augustinian foundation of Western Christianity, and this is a foundation that is shared by Lutheranism, Roman Catholicism, and the major branches of Western Protestantism alike. The new perspective is often viewed as undermining Lutheranism. In fact, it undermines the Augustinian foundations of Western Christianity.

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A question that urges itself upon the churches of the West in this day is the future of the individual and of human community; and the crisis in which Western Protestantism finds itself is not separable from that question. The churches of the West must be concerned about the future of Western civilization and, indeed, of human civilization. To the extent that the churches still have influence over imaginations, they can go a long way towards shaping how people imagine personhood and human community. Although a full exploration of this topic is not possible here, I shall outline an outline of an approach to this question.

John Milbank has argued that modern Western liberal society is built on an ontology of violence that has its ultimate roots in classical antiquity but its more proximate roots in a fundamental shift that took place in the early modern period away from an Augustinian anthropology. According to Thomas Hobbes, original justice is of human making and arises out of a situation of original injustice. Every human possesses by nature unlimited freedom. The original condition of man is a state of “war . . . of every man against every man,” as every person seeks his own and seeks to defend his own. For the sake of self-preservation humans agree to forfeit part of their freedom and to recognize a “common power set over them.” This is a humanly constructed power, not a divine one. That is the basis of the social contract. John Locke developed his political philosophy on the basis of Hobbes’s concepts. Although Locke modified Hobbes’s concept of the state of nature in important ways, his political philosophy is, like Hobbes’s, built on the principle of the transfer of originally individual, self-possessed rights to the sovereign and the idea that the state arises out of the self-interested protection of life, liberty, and property. These ideas, of course, stand at the foundation of Western, and especially American, democracy. Milbank argues, however, that these developments also represent a new anthropology, according to which the human is defined essentially as the individual will to self-preservation.

This way of constructing human personhood and society has important implications and consequences. The first is that it presupposes and enshrines as a first principle lust, the human desire for the continual expansion of one’s own dominion and right. As Robert Jenson puts it: “In our original condition, ‘the augmentation of dominion over men’ is according to Hobbes the primal right of each individual, since it is necessary to the individual’s self-preservation against all others, each of whom is in turn identically situated and compelled.” Locke’s philosophy does not fundamentally change this anthropology. Second, public interest is subordinated to the securing of private rights. But that leads to the possibility of a “collective tyranny.” For, in the absence of the guidance of transcendent truth or a transcendent good, individuals must submit themselves to a power of human construction, whose rule is arbitrary, as is the basis for deciding what is good and just. There is, therefore, at least in American democracy, a tension between the drive towards the expansion of individual rights on the one hand and the drive towards a limited but relatively absolute government on the other hand.

The consequences of this “symbiosis of tyranny and lust” are all too apparent in America today, where, on the one hand, there is the promotion of lust, whether it be in the form of expansive sexual expression or of capitalist greed, while, on the other hand, we are subject to a national government whose main purpose for existence seems to be, at least to judge from recent history, its own self-preservation and the protection of the interests of the powerful. In the absence of the guidance of a transcendent reality, there is no truth; only arbitrary power is left. These developments do not bode well for the future of the West.

This account of human society is, of course, almost completely counter to the account of the Augustinian City of God—almost, though not completely; for, as Milbank shows, modern liberalism and socialism are to some extent merely a modern residue and parody of Christian culture, insofar as Christianity prepared the way for liberalism and socialism through the values of liberty and equality. But, once freed from the moorings of a Christian view of reality, and specifically from the foundation of caritas, modern liberalism became something very different from historic Christianity. Unlike modern liberalism, whose account of political origins grounds in an ontology of violence, the City of God grounds in an ontology of peace. Original justice is not constructed by humans out of an original injustice; original justice is rather given by God in Adam’s Paradise, before the Fall, in which human desires are properly subordinated to the soul, and the soul to God. Only this City allows for true and lasting peace, for individual difference does not become the occasion for the pursuit of individual dominium but for a true community in which love directs all human
desires to God and to his will, both individually and socially.\textsuperscript{157} And as Augustine argued, it is only this peace that can free the City of Man from its lust for dominion and the way of destruction.\textsuperscript{158}

From a different perspective, but with much the same results, Reinhard Hütter describes the perversion of the Christian account of genuine human freedom in the modern and post-modern world.\textsuperscript{159} This perversion begins with the Enlightenment postulate that moral responsibility requires freedom understood as autonomy and self-sufficient moral sovereignty. The result is an exchange of attributes in which humans take on the attribute that previously had been God’s: the “ungrounded freedom of sovereignty.” On the other hand, God becomes contingent. This modern “daydream,” however, becomes the post-modern “nightmare,” because, once the ungrounded freedom of sovereignty has been denied to God and transferred to humanity, the “salvation” of humanity now depends on humanity itself. Only we can save ourselves, but we also must save ourselves. “If we don’t decide and thus choose who we are or what we want to be or do, some other human will.”\textsuperscript{160} The result of the modern daydream and the postmodern nightmare is, on the one hand, the celebration of petty license, indulgence in the limitless expansion of individual autonomy and freedom, and, on the other hand, the social recriminations of a “victimized” humanity, in which everyone suffers at the hands of the will-to-power of everyone else.

As Hütter notes, all of this is a result of the abandonment of the Christian, and particularly Augustinian, account of human freedom, and he suggests that it is only a return to Augustine’s account of human freedom that will wake us from the “modern daydream of sovereignty and the postmodern nightmare of bondage to destruction camouflaged by license”.\textsuperscript{161}

St. Augustine remains the unsurpassed ecumenical teacher of the West, ceaselessly instructing us about the intrinsic relationship between true freedom (\textit{vera libertas}) and love (\textit{caritas}). Charity restores our will’s undivided desire toward God. Now our will delights and trusts in God’s goodness and is set free from our bondage to fear and lust. Propelled by the heartbeat of \textit{caritas} true freedom unfolds.\textsuperscript{162}

Lutherans sometimes like to think of themselves as occupying a position that does require them to engage in the formation of culture. The Christian and the church can live with a more or less privatized faith. But the history of Lutheranism, at least in the modern, secularized West, shows that when the Lutheran church does not seek to shape culture, culture will shape it. It may be that the survival of an authentic Lutheran witness in the West will only be possible if the Lutheran churches turn away from their enchantment with liberalism (and with liberal Protestantism) and return to the Augustinian foundations that they share with the rest of historic western Christianity;\textsuperscript{163} for Augustine’s \textit{City of God} offers a vision of an alternative polity to that generated by the “modern daydream” and the “postmodern nightmare”—grounded in an ontology of original justice, established by God, and therefore open to the possibility that we can indeed be freed from fallen humanity’s path towards self-destruction.\textsuperscript{164} But only God can do this, by turning our desires to him through love. But to return to Augustine is ultimately to return to Paul; for Paul teaches us that we \textit{can} be freed (however imperfectly in this life), individually and socially, from our bondage to sin and turn our love from ourselves to God. But only God in Christ is able to affect such freedom.
Endnotes

The New Perspective on Paul and the Recovery of Pauline Anthropology

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1 N. T. Wright does not identify himself directly with the new perspective, preferring to speak of his own work as a “Fresh Perspective” on Paul (see n. 120 below). Yet he shares some basic presuppositions with Sanders and Dunn, and his work is equally challenging to Lutheran readings of Paul, so that it is appropriate to treat him here. We shall not address the current debate over the meaning of *pistis Christou* in Paul. Although that debate also presents certain challenges to Lutheran (and not only Lutheran) readings of Paul, the topic requires separate treatment.


4 Stendahl, “Apostle Paul,” 204.

5 Ibid., 205.

6 Ibid., 203.

7 Ibid., 200, 210.

8 Ibid., 209–10.

9 Ibid., 201–02.

10 Ibid., 211–14.

11 See Stendahl, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles*, 12–13; idem, *Final Account*, ix, 1–7, 14, 28–29, 40, 43: Paul did not have a troubled conscience. He was troubled neither about sin nor about the Law. To read Paul as though he did is to read him through the lens of Augustine and Luther. Paul was concerned about Israel and its salvation, about the mission to the Gentiles, and about the relationship between Jews and Gentiles. Stendahl presents his view — though he is not the first to present the idea — that Paul develops his doctrine of justification by faith apart from works of the Law only in dealing with the question of Gentile converts, that is, how they are to become part of the people of God (*Paul among Jews and Gentiles*, 27; *Final Account*, 4, 14). It is also in these books that Stendahl develops the idea that Paul’s understanding of salvation history entails an “affirmation of a God-willed coexistence between Judaism and Christianity in which the missionary urge to convert Israel is held in check” (*Paul among Jews and Gentiles*, 4) and that “it is the plan of God for the Jesus movement to become a Gentile movement” (*Final Account*, 41), an idea that has led to the charge that Stendahl promotes a two-covenant model of salvation. Stendahl claims that this charge does not quite meet his view (*Final Account*, x–xi). We do not need to discuss that question here.


14 As stated in the introduction, our focus is on Stendahl’s views about the relationship between Paul’s teaching on justification and the human condition. But Stendahl’s thesis can be criticized from another perspective. It is inaccurate to say, as he does, that “Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith has its theological context in his reflection on the relation between Jews and Gentiles” (*Paul among Jews and Gentiles*, 26). It is generally acknowledged that Paul draws on older traditions when he speaks of justification in such passages as Romans 3:24 or 1 Corinthians 6:11. Although there can be no doubt that Paul has sharpened the language by insisting on justification by faith apart from works of the law, the pre-Pauline usage makes it clear that Paul’s doctrine of justification does not have its origin in the question of the relationship between Jews and Gentiles. For a critique of Stendahl from this perspective, see Friedrich Wilhelm Horn, “Juden und Heiden: Aspekte der Verhältnisbestimmung in den paulinischen Briefen. Ein Gespräch mit Kristeindahl,” Lutherische und Neue Paulusperspektive: Beiträge zu einem Schlüsselproblem der gegenwärtigen exegetischen Diskussion (ed. M. Bachmann; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005) 24–29. Horn speaks correctly of Stendahl’s unwarranted reduction of Paul’s teaching on justification to a merely missionary concern (page 38).


16 1 Corinthians 13:4–7 and Galatians 5:16–24 reveal the structure of Paul’s thought. Love, which is the chief gift of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:31;
13:13; Galatians 5:22) and which "does not seek its own" (1 Corinthians 13:5), embodies those gifts of the Spirit (e.g., patience and kindness [cf. 1 Corinthians 13:4 with Galatians 5:22]), the possession of which means precisely freedom from the passions and desires (epithymiai) of the flesh (Galatians 5:22-24).

17 This is seen clearly, for example, in Romans 6:12: "Do not let sin rule in your mortal body so as to obey its desires." Cf. also Romans 7:14-25: It is what sin (understood as a power) causes me to do, or what sin does in me (for which I am, however, still responsible) that is sin.

18 For a generally coherent and convincing reading of Romans 7:7-13 based on this presupposition, see Otfried Hofius, "Der Mensch im Schatten Adams," Paulusstudien II (WUNT 143; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002) 104-154, esp. 114-135. However, Hofius (pp. 117-118, 135) denies (incorrectly) that the statement that the commandment was given for life (Romans 7:10) also applies to the law of Sinai. The denial is disproved by Romans 10:4-5.

19 According to some rabbinic and other ancient Jewish traditions, God already gave the Torah to Adam in Paradise to observe, or at least some of its commandments (see esp. Tg. Neof. on Genesis 2:15; 3:22; Tg. Ps.-J. on Genesis 2:15; 3:22; Abot R. Nat. (B) 21; cf. also 4 Ezra 7:11; Gen. Rab. 16:5 on Genesis 2:15). If Paul worked from such a tradition, one can understand the ease with which he equates the commandment given to Adam with the Mosaic Law. The references to Gen. Rab. 24:5 and b. Sanh. 56b in James D. G. Dunn, Romans 1-8 [WBC 38A; Dallas: Word, 1988], 379, are not directly relevant since the commandments mentioned there are the Noahian commandments, binding on all of human life even apart from the Torah.

20 Philo: Decal. 173 (cf. also 153; Opif. 152); Spec. 4:84; James 1:15; Apoc. Mos. 19:3; Apoc. Ab. 24:10. Much like Paul, Philo cites the commandment against coveting in abbreviated form (ouk epithymizeis) and treats the commandment as prohibiting all manner of "desires" (Spec. 4:78-131).

21 See Apoc. Mos. 19:3.

22 The meaning of the prohibition of coveting is discussed in the Mechila of Rabbi Simoa ben Yohai on Exodus 20:17 (edition Hoffmann, p. 112). There a distinction is made between desire (ita/taSw) and coveting (hendad) on the basis of Deuteronomy 5:21. To "desire" is a matter of the heart and involves the simple desire to have something. To "covet" involves one in seeking actually to acquire something for oneself. See further Henry A. Wolfson, Philo: Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1947), 2:226-27.

23 Thus the law does more than "to indicate the lines and limits of conduct appropriate for an Israelite, as laid down by God, and therefore to make the Israelite aware of what conduct is unacceptable to God and inappropriate within that realm." See James D. G. Dunn, "Was Paul against the Law? The Law in Galatians and Romans: A Test-Case of Text in Context," Texts and Contexts: Biblical Texts in Their Textual and Situational Contexts, ed. T. Fornberg and D. Hellholm (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1995); reprinted in idem, The New Perspective on Paul, 276.

24 When in Galatians 5:23, after giving the list of fruits of the Spirit, Paul says that "against such [fruits of the Spirit] there is no law," he implies that there is a law (or commandment) against the works of the flesh in Galatians 5:19-21. The only commandment that can possibly encompass all of them is, "you shall not desire" (cf. Galatians 5:16-18, 24).

25 Cf. Paul's statement in Acts 13:38: "...through him [Jesus] forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, by him everyone who believes is set free from all those sins from which you could not be freed in the law of Moses." Thus even according to the Acts of Paul there are sins from which the law of Moses cannot free a person. In 1 Corinthians 4:4 Paul states that he is not aware of anything unworthy in himself, but that does not constitute grounds for considering himself acquitted (or justified: ouk en toutou dedicatíaomai), for God will decide at the final judgment. This passage shows that, although Paul considered himself to be blameless, he could not be absolutely sure that he was. Whereas Paul can say that as a Pharisee he was blameless, he does not dare to say the same about himself as a Christian. Blamelessness remains a goal, not a given, for the Christian (1 Corinthians 1:18; Philippians 1:10; 1 Thessalonians 3:13; 5:23).

26 As Romans 7:22-23 shows, for the person in the flesh the inner person (ho eso anthrópos) or the mind (nous) agrees with the law of God (ho nomos tou theou), but sin still takes the person captive. It is in this sense that those who are in the flesh are bound in slavery to the flesh. The promise of Leviticus 18:5.

27 That is why the law cannot give life (Galatians 3:21-22), despite the promise of Leviticus 18:5.

28 Thus Paul could maintain at one and the same time and without contradiction that within the framework of righteousness in the Law (i.e., from a Jewish point of view) he was blameless (Philippians 3:6) and that (from a Christian point of view) all people (presumably including himself) without Christ and under the law are under sin.

29 One might object: Did Paul really think sin was so problematic as all this? After all, the law allows for repentance. And does not Paul himself foresee repentance as an answer to sin, even as a Christian? In 2 Corinthians 12:20-21 he requires repentance for the very sins of the flesh that he condemns in Galatians 5:19-21. This question leads to three points. 1) First, yes, Paul foresaw the possibility of repentance for such sins. 2) This shows that one should not play off against each other absolutely and as mutually exclusive the (Jewish) idea of repentance, which I assume for Paul was a given and which he clearly continued to believe in as a Christian, and the idea of dying to sin through Christ (Romans 6:7-11). Paul was able to think of both of these as two sides of the same coin, just as rabbinic Judaism considered both repentance and death (among other things) to be means of atonement. It has long been a critique of Paul on the part of Jewish scholars (as well as some Christian scholars) that, since Judaism has a strong doctrine of repentance and atonement, and since these provisions are part of the law itself, Paul, as a Jew, must have either been ignorant of this aspect of Judaism or deliberately misrepresented it when he claimed...
that no one can be justified by works of the law (e.g., Claude G. Montefiore, Judaism and St. Paul: Two Essays [London: M. Goschen, 1914], 76; George Foot Moore, Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era: The Age of Tannaim, 5 vols. [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927-1930], 3:151). But Paul clearly did know the possibility of repentance. Presumably when he calls himself blameless in the law (Philippians 3:6) he does not mean that he never transgressed, only that by the standards of the law, including its provisions for repentance and atonement, he was, at least in his own judgment, above reproach. If he transgressed a commandment, he undertook the necessary means of repentance and atonement. 3) But we should not conclude from this that Paul does not mean what he says when he asserts that all of humanity is inescapably imprisoned under sin, even when living according to the Law; for, on the one hand, even living by the law does not result in the righteousness that God seeks (Romans 8:4); and, on the other hand, life in the flesh, without the renewing power of the Spirit, inevitably results in sin, understood as the deep-seated rebellion of the human against God (Romans 7:7-8; 8:7-8). There is sin from which even the law cannot free one. (See the previous note.)


31 Cf. Kim, Origin, 293-95. Oddly, Stendahl, "Apostle Paul," 208-211, remarks on the importance of the word "sin" (hamartia) in Paul and even notes that for Paul his greatest sin must have been the persecution of the church. Stendahl even reads Paul's language of justification and reconciliation in Romans 5:6-11 in this connection: "[T]he words about the sinful, weak and rebellious ... refer to the past, which is gloriously and gratefully blotted out, as was Paul's enmity to Jesus Christ and his Church." But in this connection he writes: "It is much harder to gauge how Paul subjectively experienced the power of sin in his life and, more specifically, how and in what sense he was conscious of actual sins." Stendahl then goes on to discuss texts which are taken to indicate that as a Christian Paul's conscience was not troubled by sin. But is not Paul's point precisely that when he persecuted the church he was objectively an enemy of God? Stendahl seems to realize this when he writes in Paul among Jews and Gentiles, 14: "To recognize that kind of sin [the persecution of the church] does not require an introspective conscience." But Stendahl does not allow this realization to inform the rest of his treatment of sin in Paul's letters.


33 According to Acts 22:16, Paul, after his conversion, is to be baptized, to call on the name of Jesus, and to be washed of his sins.


Parish Sanders, ed. F. Udoh et al. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 14-25.

36 Sanders, Paul and Palestinian Judaism, 17; see also p. 548.

37 One notes that in Paul and Palestinian Judaism, out of a text of 556 pages, only 113 pages are devoted to Paul.

38 Ibid., 2. See also Sanders, "Comparing," 24.

39 See especially the summaries on rabbinic literature (Paul and Palestinian Judaism, 233-338), the Dead Sea Scrolls (pp. 316-321), I Enoch (pp. 361-362), and the general summary on Palestinian Judaism on pp. 422-423.

40 Ibid., 544-45. See also Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People, 6-10. See also the statement in the latter book (p. ix): "Despite the length of that book [Paul and Palestinian Judaism], the subject was limited to how 'getting in and staying in' were understood by Paul and his near contemporaries in Judaism."

41 Sanders, Paul and Palestinian Judaism, 549, 552-53.

42 Ibid., 552.

43 See further below.

44 Sanders, Paul and Palestinian Judaism, 422.


46 Cf. Sanders, Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People, 19-20.

47 Sanders, Paul and Palestinian Judaism, 433-442. The quotation is from p. 435.

48 Ibid., 434.

49 Ibid., 438-441. The quotation is from p. 441.

50 Ibid., 441-42.

51 Ibid., 444.

52 Ibid., 443.


54 Ibid., 446: Paul's anthropology is "only the implication of his theology, Christology and soteriology. It is not worked out for its own sake, for man's plight does not seem to be primarily what Paul preached about."

55 Ibid., 502-508.

56 Ibid., 503.

57 Ibid., 544; see also pp. 472, 497, 501.

58 Ibid., 475-476.

59 Ibid., 476.

60 Ibid., 483 n. 37, 484, 492.

61 Ibid., 483-484.

62 Ibid., 489-490.

63 Ibid., 497.

64 Ibid., 497.

65 Ibid., 499.
confirmation of this is that in 7:17, 19 Paul speaks of sin (hamartia) dwelling in the "I" and working (katergazesthai) there. That is precisely how Paul describes "desire" (epithymia) in 7:8.


Ibid., 101 (reprint p. 103).

Ibid., 102 (reprint pp. 104-105).

Ibid., 102 (reprint p. 105).

Ibid., 106 (reprint p. 108).

Ibid., 106 (reprint p. 107).

Ibid., 106 (reprint p. 108).

Ibid., 110 (reprint p. 111).

Ibid., 114 (reprint p. 114).

Ibid., 118 (reprint p. 117). See also p. 129 (reprint pp. 118-119).

Ibid., 121 (reprint p. 120).


For references to those who hold this view, see Sanders, Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People, 52-53, nn. 21 and 22; and Dunn, "Works," 540 n. 38 (reprint p. 133 n. 38).


Ibid., 534 (reprint p. 135).


Ibid., 227; Dunn, "Works," 537 (reprint p. 139).

Dunn, "Works," 539 (reprint p. 140).

Nor does Richard B. Hays, Justification, ABD 3.1131-1132.

1QS III, 5 states of one who refuses to enter the covenant (II, 25-26) that he will not "be justified." As the context indicates, the verb refers to the status of one who has already not entered the covenant community and not to the fact itself of not entering the covenant community. See further the entries on the verbal forms of sldq in BDB 842-843; TDOT 12.250 (B. Johnson); Martin G. Abegg, The Dead Sea Scrolls Concordance, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 2.632; on dikatao in TDNT 2.212-219 (G. Schrenk); Albert-Marie Denis, Concordance grecque des pseudopigraphes d'ancien testament (Louvain: Université catholique de Louvain, 1987), 272; and on justifico in Albert-Marie Denis, Concordance latine des pseudopigraphes d'ancien testament (Turnhout: Brepols, 1993), 280.

Dunn, "Works," 534 (reprint pp. 133-134) criticizes traditional readings of Galatians 3:10-14 on the grounds that they must read into the passage the presumed minor premise of the impossibility of fulfilling the whole law. Dunn's interpretation also requires reading into it an assumption. Dunn ("Works," 534-35; reprint p. 135) writes: "Paul could assume that his

See, e.g., Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 121-122; idem, *Climax of the Covenant*, 214.

See Wright, *Climax of the Covenant*, 137-156.

Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 140.


Ibid., 138.

Ibid., 154.


Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 121.

Ibid., 148. See also pp. 57, 149.

Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 147.

This problem is demonstrated in Wright's inadequate treatment of Galatians 5:18 (ibid., 146-147): Paul's "main point" is that "if you are walking by the Spirit you are clearly already part of God's new age and his renewed people, part of that inaugurated-eschatological family who have been delivered from the present evil age—and, as such, you are 'not under the Torah.'" Wright fails to see that Galatians 5:16-21 is a description of the Christian still struggling with the condition described in Romans 7:13-25. The result is an overly realized eschatology.


Ibid., 184.


Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 481-482. One does not need to be a proponent of the new perspective, however, to realize this error. See, for example, Hofius, "Der Mensch im Schatten Adams," 128.

Besides Sanders (see above), see especially Heidi Rätäinen, *Paul and the Law* (WUNT 29; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck]), 1983.

See n. 29.

Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*, 6: "I took Sanders to have made his case..." (see also p. 69). The way in which Dunn cites "covenental nominalism" in this book as though it were a concrete reality rather than a scholarly abstraction is remarkable (see, e.g., pp. 43, 50, 111, 136, 176, 177, 180, 182, 185, 214, 304, 310, 393).
Milbank, Theology and Social Theory, 30.

Jenson, Systematic Theology, 2.144.


See Devine, "Absolute Democracy," who traces this tension back to Hobbes and Locke. As he notes, however (pp. 767-768) the limitation of rights becomes more unpopular the more that appeal to natural law is viewed as implausible.

As Jenson, ibid., 2.144, puts it.

Milbank, Theology and Social Theory, 391, 405, 422.

Ibid., 5, 392-395, 405, 414-417, 422.

Ibid., 394.


Ibid., 453.

Ibid., 459.

Ibid., 458.

A signal example of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's enchantment with liberal Protestantism and the liberal project is the social statement "Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust" and the accompanying "Recommendation on Ministry Policies," all adopted at the 2009 biennial churchwide assembly in Minneapolis. The church, no longer confident that Scripture conveys the Word of God on the matter of marriage and human sexuality, and divided over the question whether the church can bless homosexual relationships or ordain persons in such relationships, must settle for the management of difference in a way that will please both (or all) sides in the debate. Since there is no transcendental truth on the matter, all that is left is the power of an apparently arbitrary majority (or minority), from which everyone else must be protected. Held up are, on the one hand, the expansion of the right of the individual to self-expression of sexuality, and, on the other hand, church governance that is no longer interested in truth but only in the peaceful management of difference.

Cf. Milbank, Theology and Social Theory, 416.

Engaging Luther from a New Perspective

John Meech


All of these studies presuppose E. P. Sanders' Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1977). The quote above is from page 422. Dunn coins the phrase "new perspective" in "The New Perspective on Paul," Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester 65 no 2 (Spring 1983): 95-122. The three main figures I engage in the new perspective are James D. G. Dunn,