



## CHAPTER 1:

# FOUNDATION OF THE NEW PERSPECTIVE ON PAUL

**A**listair Begg, a famous evangelical pastor-scholar, lamented to me:

Many evangelical pastors do not know how to respond when someone who is pro-New Perspective on Paul makes an argument from Second Temple Judaism. The pastors hardly know Second Temple Judaism documents and the tenuousness of arguments from them. Once someone makes a claim about Second Temple Judaism, the evangelical pastor feels inadequate to respond and the conversation simply stops.

Begg was aware that I was writing a book critical of the New Perspective on Paul (hereafter, NPP), but he was not aware of the particular focus of my book—engaging with the Jewish-background portion of NPP arguments. Needless to say, I was encouraged by his comments and sheepishly told him I was trying to remedy that situation. We then had a great discussion on aspects of Second Temple Judaism as he was very well informed.

## INTRODUCTION

The *foundation* of the NPP is a new perspective on the soteriology of Second Temple Judaism. Once given this new perspective on Second Temple Judaism, the house of a new perspective concerning Paul is built. That is, the NPP involves two new perspectives. The first relates to Second Temple Judaism, and the second, based off the first, relates to Paul.

The debate about Second Temple Judaism and its resulting effect on Paul is important. Why? The main conclusion, as espoused by NPP authors, is that the traditional Protestant view of justification as understood by Calvin, Luther, most modern evangelicals, and even many critical scholars is simply wrong or at least needs serious modification. In fact, so argues the NPP, the Reformers read their battles over merit with Roman Catholicism into Paul's battles.<sup>1</sup>

Who are the leading lights associated with the NPP? For Second Temple Judaism, it is E. P. Sanders. For views of Paul based off the foundation of Sanders, there are a variety of perspectives and authors; however, James D. G. Dunn and N. T. Wright are the most well known and prolific.

## BRIEF SUMMARY OF NPP AND JUSTIFICATION

Before discussing the focus of this book, a brief summary of the NPP's core commitments is presented below.

The NPP argues as follows: Second Temple Judaism 'was centered upon the gracious aspect of God's covenant with Israel' and was

1. So James D. G. Dunn in his famous article 'The New Perspective on Paul,' *BJRL* 65 (1983): 95-122. 'Since Paul's teaching on justification by faith seems to speak so directly to Luther's subjective wrestlings, it was a natural corollary to see Paul's opponents in terms of unreformed Catholicism which opposed Luther, with first century Judaism read through the "grid" of the early 16th century Catholic system of merit' (p. 98). While discussing exegetical options for justification by faith, Dunn opines 'far worse, to start our exegesis here from the Reformation presupposition that Paul was attacking the idea of *earning* God's acquittal, the idea of meritorious works, is to set the whole exegetical endeavour off on the wrong track' (p. 106, italics his).

not legalistic works righteous oriented as the traditional-Protestant view held.<sup>2</sup> This new conclusion about Judaism is then related to Paul's view of justification. Since the subject of justification in Paul comes up several times in contexts that include either first-century non-Christian Jews or Christian Jews (e.g., Rom. 2, Rom. 9-11, Gal. 3-5, Phil. 3), knowing what first-century A.D. Jews believed aids in understanding Paul's view of justification. This new view of Judaism helps to significantly better explain Paul's opponents and Paul himself.<sup>3</sup> Or so the NPP argument goes.

The NPP agreed that traditional Protestantism sees justification by faith as the opposite of legalistic works righteousness as a means for being declared righteous. Justification by faith is the legal declaration that Christ's work, and not the Christian's works, is the merit by which one is declared righteous. That is, if works righteousness is a human's work, then the opposite of that, grace, must not have any aspect of a human's work as the basis or ground of justification. Or to say it another way, the traditional Protestant view opposes two soteriological systems: justification by works of the law (works righteousness soteriology) versus justification by grace/Christ's work/faith (grace soteriology).

NPP rejects the traditional-Protestant view that Paul is opposing two soteriological systems. Why? Because a works righteousness soteriology did not exist during the first-century A.D.! In that light, here is the first main point we must consider: *NPP authors*

2. Frank J. Matera, *Galatians* (SP 9; Liturgical: Collegeville, MN, 1992), 30. Matera is pro-NPP and has an excellent, brief presentation of the standard NPP view on pp. 26-32.
3. On the other hand, I rebut that Paul also argues that some in OT Israel misunderstood justification (Rom. 9-11) and some understood it (Rom. 4); hence, Paul is not limited to first-century A.D. Jewish views. Anti-NPP authors with a high view of Scripture complain that many NPP authors tend to allow their Second Temple Judaism views to *control* the exegesis of Scripture. E.g., Guy Prentiss Waters, *Justification and the New Perspective on Paul: A Review and Response* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2004), 154-55; and S. M. Baugh, 'The New Perspective, Mediation, Justification,' in *Covenant, Justification, and Pastoral Ministry: Essays by the Faculty of Westminster Seminary California* (ed. R. Scott Clark; Phillipsburg: P&R, 2007), 137-63, esp. 145-47.

agree that Paul was not arguing against a legalistic works righteousness view because it did not exist—that is, they accept Sanders’ covenantal nomism.<sup>4</sup> Given this foundational starting point, the NPP further concludes that the expression ‘works of the law’ (e.g., Rom. 3:20, Gal. 2:16) in Paul cannot refer to legalistic works righteousness.<sup>5</sup> If ‘works of the law’ does not refer to legalistic works righteousness, then justification by faith which is contrasted with ‘works of the law’ cannot be the opposite of legalistic works righteousness. Consequently, justification by faith cannot be the traditional-Protestant view, which brings us to the second main point: *NPP authors agree on what justification is not—it is not the traditional-Protestant view.*<sup>6</sup>

How do NPP authors define ‘works of the law’ if not as works righteousness? The vast majority of NPP authors define ‘works of the law’ as technically the whole Torah, but primarily ‘works of the law’ in context as emphasizing the three Jewish boundary markers or badges, *Sabbath, circumcision, and food laws.*<sup>7</sup> It is these boundary markers that separate Jews from Gentiles. Therefore, Paul is contrasting grace, not against works righteousness, but against those who trust in their Jewish identity, or as Wright initially coined it,

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4. Sanders’ covenantal nomism is described below in the next section of this chapter.
  5. So N. T. Wright, ‘[Paul’s] polemic against “works of the law” is not directed against those who attempted to *earn* covenant membership through keeping the Jewish law (*such people do not seem to have existed in the 1st century*)’ (‘Justification,’ in *New Dictionary of Theology* [ed Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1988], 359-61, first italic his, second mine).
  6. Some NPP authors, in their later works, have said that there is some level of compatibility between the traditional and NPP views of justification. See my discussion of this claim in the Dunn and Wright sections in Chapter 4, respectively.
  7. So James D. G. Dunn, ‘New Perspective View’ in *Justification: Five Views* (ed. James K. Beilby and Paul Rhodes Eddy; Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011), 176-201, esp. 193-95. N. T. Wright agrees with Dunn (*The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991], 139 n. 10); also he still agrees in his latest work (*Paul and His Recent Interpreters: Some Contemporary Debates* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 92.

a trust in a ‘national righteousness.’<sup>8</sup> Paul is proclaiming that one is justified by faith and not by Jewish boundary markers. Note, the NPP does not see these boundary markers as part of a larger category of works righteousness. Note also that ‘works of the law’ and ‘works’ never refers to general human deeds as many Reformers taught. Thus we come to the third main point: *NPP authors agree that ‘works of the law’ primarily refer to Jewish boundary markers, Sabbath, circumcision, and food laws.*

According to NPP authors, why would Paul be bringing up ‘works of the law’ (boundary markers) in Romans, Galatians, and Philippians 3? Why is this so important to him? Yinger, a pro-NPP author, summarizes well:

At issue was a question of social identity: ‘Who belongs to the people of God and how is this known?’ i.e., does one have to be Jewish—be circumcised, keep food laws, celebrate Sabbath, etc.—in order to inherit the promises of Abraham?<sup>9</sup>

Paul was an Apostle to the Gentiles. The issue of Gentile acceptance among Jewish Christians was very important to him. This leads us to the fourth main point: *NPP authors agree that Paul’s mission to the Gentiles is the context for his teaching on justification.*<sup>10</sup> The context is *not* that some wanted to be justified by their works righteousness.

Finally then, what does justification by faith actually mean? NPP is clear and unified on what justification does not mean. However, NPP is unclear and not unified on what justification actually means. Is justification forensic? Is it transformative? Is it relational? Is it related to covenant? When does it happen? How does it relate to the ‘righteousness of God’? Does it relate to getting

8. N. T. Wright, ‘The Paul of History and the Apostle of Faith,’ *TynBul* 29 (1978): 61-88, esp. 65, 71, 83. ‘[Israel] is guilty not of “legalism” or “works righteousness” but of what I call “national righteousness,” the belief that fleshly Jewish descent guarantees membership of God’s true covenant people’ (65).

9. Kent L. Yinger, *The New Perspective on Paul: An Introduction* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), 30-31.

10. One of Dunn’s four points of NPP is, ‘The significance of Paul’s mission is the context for his teaching on justification’ (‘New Perspective View,’ 177).

into the covenant community (soteriology) or is it a confirmation that one is already in the community (ecclesiology)? Is it important? There are many differing NPP answers. However, it is useful to summarize briefly at least one standard NPP view.

Justification has two components, initial and final. Initial justification primarily concerns ecclesiology, that is, who is in the covenant community, not soteriology, how does one get in. Initial justification is related to grace, Christ's work, and faith. It is the status that one is in the covenant.<sup>11</sup> Final justification is at least partially based on one's works done in the Spirit.<sup>12</sup> Also, justification does not include the imputed righteousness of Christ—NPP is united and clear on this point!<sup>13</sup> More specific details as to James D. G. Dunn and N. T. Wright's views of justification will be presented in the respective sections in Chapter 4. Finally, the fifth main point: *NPP authors are not united on justification. One standard view: Initial justification is by faith and recognizes covenant*

11. N. T. Wright, 'Justification in this setting [Paul's Jewish context], is not a matter of *how someone enters the community of the true people of God*, but of *how you tell who belongs to that community*.... In standard Christian theological language, it wasn't so much about soteriology as about ecclesiology; not so much about salvation as about the church' (*What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997], 119, italics his).
12. N. T. Wright comments, 'Justification, at the last, will be on the basis of performance, not possession,' 'The Letter to the Romans: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,' in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (vol. 10; Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 393-770, esp. 440. Similarly, 'Future justification, acquittal at the last great Assize, always take place on the basis of the totality of the life lived' ('The Law in Romans 2,' in *Paul and the Mosaic Law* [ed. James D. G. Dunn; WUNT 89; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck: 1996], 131-50, esp. 144). Also see Wright's *Justification: God's Plan & Paul's Vision* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009), 186, 260 n. 11. To be clear, Wright sees these works done in the power of the Spirit. Similarly, James D. G. Dunn, 'Paul's theology of justification by faith alone has to be qualified as final justification by faith *and* works accomplished by the believer in the power of the Spirit' ('The New Perspective: whence, what and whither?,' in *The New Perspective on Paul* [rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008], 1-97, esp. 88, italics his).
13. Reformed theology affirms the imputation of Christ's righteousness, although not all modern evangelical affirm this. More on this in Chapter 4.

*status (ecclesiology), while final justification is partially by works, albeit works produced by the Spirit.*

I have summarized NPP, especially as it relates to the key doctrine of justification, with five main points.<sup>14</sup> The ‘five points of NPP’<sup>15</sup> are repeated here:

1. NPP authors agree that Paul was not arguing against a legalistic works righteousness view because it did not exist—that is, they accept Sanders’ covenantal nomism.
2. NPP authors agree on what justification is *not*—it is *not* the traditional-Protestant view.
3. NPP authors agree that ‘works of the law’ primarily refer to Jewish boundary markers, Sabbath, circumcision, and food laws.
4. NPP authors agree that Paul’s mission to the Gentiles *is* the context for his teaching on justification.
5. NPP authors are not united on justification. One standard view: Initial justification is by faith and recognizes covenant status (ecclesiology), while final justification is partially by works, albeit works produced by the Spirit.

## SANDERS’ COVENANTAL NOMISM IS THE FOUNDATION OF NPP

The foundational new perspective on Second Temple Judaism is directly related to E. P. Sanders. In brief, E. P. Sanders’ thesis is

14. Charles Lee Irons, an anti-NPP author, summarizes NPP with the metaphor of three pillars. His first pillar is Sanders and covenantal nomism (which matches my first two points). The second pillar is the ‘social function of the law,’ which is the Jewish boundary markers (which matches my third and fourth points). The third pillar is to interpret ‘righteousness of God’ as God’s covenant faithfulness, which then relates to justification (part of my fifth point about the standard view). See his *The Righteousness of God: A Lexical Examination of the Covenant-Faithfulness Interpretation* (WUNT II/386; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 2-8, esp. 3.
15. If I could just figure out an acrostic similar to ‘Tulip!’

that Second Temple Judaism is not works righteousness oriented at all. It is a religion of grace and has a soteriological structure that he has termed ‘covenantal nomism.’<sup>16</sup> Also, Sanders argues that this same soteriological structure existed across all varieties of Jewish groups in Second Temple Judaism. Details of Sanders’ view are presented and critiqued in Chapter 2; part of the critique continues into Chapter 3.

The NPP authors themselves readily admit that Sanders’ gracious covenantal-nomism is their foundation.

For example, N. T. Wright summarizes the core tenet of the Judaistic-background aspect of the NPP (specifically, E. P. Sanders’ view<sup>17</sup>), ‘Judaism in Paul’s day was not, as has regularly been supposed, a religion of legalistic works righteousness. If we imagine that it was, and that Paul was attacking it as if it was, we will do great violence to it and him.’ Wright continues and gives his view about this (Sanders’) basic thesis: ‘I do not myself believe such a refutation [of Sanders’ basic thesis] can or will be offered, ... I regard his basic point as established.’<sup>18</sup>

Or consider Dunn, who lists ‘four aspects’ of NPP. The first is, ‘The new perspective on Paul arises from a new perspective [Sanders] on Judaism.’<sup>19</sup> Yinger gives three ‘main lines’ of NPP. The first is, ‘First-century Judaisms were not legalistic, but were

16. E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1977), 422-23.

17. Wright is referring specifically to E. P. Sanders’ book, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*.

18. N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 18, 20. Wright has been consistent on this theme; in one of Wright’s early works he states, “‘Works of the Law’ were not, as is usually thought, the attempt to earn salvation *de novo*.” He cites Sanders in this connection (‘Justification: The Biblical Basis and its Relevance for Contemporary Evangelicalism,’ in *The Great Acquittal: Justification by Faith and Current Christian Thought* [ed. Gavin Reid; Glasgow: Collins, 1980], 13-37, 109-19, esp. 18, 111 n. 18). While agreeing with Sanders’ basic thesis, Wright does state that ‘serious modifications are required’ (*What Saint Paul Really Said*, 20). Wright’s minor complaints about Sanders are found in *Paul and His Recent Interpreters*, 74-75.

19. Dunn, ‘New Perspective View,’ 177.

characterized by covenantal nomism—saved by God’s grace and obligated to follow his ways.<sup>20</sup>

McGrath in his well-known volume on justification discusses Sanders’ covenantal nomism. If true, this has reoriented everything because the entire history of the church, although not agreeing on justification, did agree that Judaism had a works righteousness soteriology.<sup>21</sup> McGrath concludes his book by summarizing Sanders’ potential impact and the possibilities that the NPP offers.

The situation envisaged by Paul in formulating his doctrine of justification by faith is not universal human self-righteousness which makes Pelagian claims on God’s favour, but a specifically Jewish concern about the covenantal limits of the people of God. If this is so, the traditional interpretation of the Pauline doctrine of justification, from Augustine through Luther and beyond, requires revision.<sup>22</sup>

## FOCUS AND THESIS

I hold to a traditional Reformed view of justification and believe that the new perspective on Second Temple Judaism is substantially wrong. Similarly, I believe that the resulting NPP, at least as it concerns justification, is also substantially wrong.

There have been a reasonable number of good books by anti-NPP authors directly focused on Paul and defending the traditional-Protestant view of justification against the NPP.<sup>23</sup> There have been

20. Yinger, *The New Perspective on Paul*, 30.

21. Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification* (3rd ed.; Cambridge: CUP, 2005), 30.

22. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 420.

23. E.g., Thomas R. Schreiner, *The Law and Its Fulfillment: A Pauline Theology of Law* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993); Frank Thielman, *Paul & the Law: A Contextual Approach* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994); Mark A. Seifrid, *Christ, our Righteousness: Paul’s Theology of Justification* (NSBT 9; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000); Seyoon Kim, *Paul and the New Perspective: Second Thoughts on the Origin of Paul’s Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); D. A. Carson, Peter T. O’Brien, Mark A. Seifrid, eds., *The Paradoxes of Paul*, vol. 2 of *Justification and Variegated Nomism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004); Guy P. Waters, *Justification and the New Perspective on Paul*; Stephen Westerholm,

fewer books delving into the details of the Jewish-background arguments and making anti-Sanders arguments.<sup>24</sup> To supplement the imbalance, this book will focus on presenting and critiquing the foundational arguments related to Second Temple Judaism and Sanders' covenantal nomism. That is, the focus of this book will be the first of the 'five points of NPP.' That first point is 'NPP authors agree that Paul was not arguing against a legalistic works righteousness view because it did not exist—that is, they accept Sanders' covenantal nomism.' To say it another way, the central burden of this book is to show that works righteousness views did exist in the first-century A.D. To be clear: My view is *not* that every document or Jewish group was works righteousness oriented. I am simply trying to prove that some were. Once given this, then there is no need to deny that Paul's opponents had these views since this seems to be the straightforward way to take Paul's statements. In sum, if works righteousness views did exist in the first century A.D., then the core belief of NPP crumbles and the logic for a re-interpretation of Paul disappears.

However, there is a difficulty. I have been teaching NT at the same seminary for twenty-three years and know that the entering and graduating seminary students have not read much of the non-canonical ancient Jewish literature. On the other hand, they are well acquainted with the Bible. To aid those not as familiar with

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*Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The 'Lutheran' Paul and His Critics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004); Cornelis P. Venema, *The Gospel of Free Acceptance in Christ: An Assessment of the Reformation and 'New Perspectives' on Paul* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 2006); John Piper, *The Future of Justification: A Response to N. T. Wright* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007); R. Scott Clark, ed., *Covenant, Justification, and Pastoral Ministry: Essays by the Faculty of Westminster Seminary California* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2007); and William B. Barclay with Ligon Duncan, *Gospel Clarity: Challenging the New Perspective on Paul* (Carlisle: EP, 2010).

24. Three excellent books are D. A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien, Mark A. Seifrid, eds., *The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism*, vol. 1 of *Justification and Variegated Nomism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001); Simon J. Gathercole, *Where is Boasting? Early Jewish Soteriology and Paul's Response in Romans 1-5* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); and Irons, *The Righteousness of God*.

non-canonical ancient Jewish literature and current scholarship's general views about it, I have included a lengthy appendix entitled 'Overview of Judaism's Literary Sources.' The question of works righteousness is *not* addressed in this appendix. This general background, including many primary-source quotes, should aid the reader in better evaluating the relative strengths of Sanders' arguments and my counter-arguments. Some readers should probably read the Appendix before reading Chapters 2 and 3.

To reiterate, the primary focus of this book will not be on Paul *per se*, but the focus will be the arguments related to the question of works righteousness in Second Temple Judaism. In addition, the meaning of 'works' in Eph. 2:8-10, Titus 3:4-7, and 2 Tim. 1:8-10 will be a secondary focus. Why include these Pauline texts? Although I affirm that these texts are genuine Pauline letters, many scholars do not and designate these as Deutero-Pauline. Hence, these three texts have received minimal attention in pro-and-con NPP debates. I want to fill in this gap.

Intriguingly, many scholars conclude that these three 'Deutero-Pauline' texts *do* contrast grace against works righteousness, and at the same time conclude that Galatians, Romans, and Philippians 3 do *not* contrast grace and works righteousness. I want to explore the implications of this on (1) the supposed uniformity of Sanders' covenantal nomism and (2) the NPP's interpretation of Galatians, Romans, and Philippians 3, especially as it concerns 'works of the law' and 'works.' Therefore, in terms of the 'five points of NPP,' this secondary focus will be on the third point ('works') and its implications for the fifth point (justification).

The primary thesis of this book, then, is that *there are many examples of works righteousness (Pelagian and semi-Pelagian versions) in Second Temple Judaism literature and, therefore, Sanders' uniform covenantal nomism is mistaken.* Hence, the new-perspective-on-Judaism foundation crumbles and the NPP house comes crashing down. *The secondary thesis is that the NPP is especially vulnerable in its explanations and/or avoidance of Eph. 2:8-10, Titus 3:4-7, and 2 Tim. 1:8-10.*

Finally, I want to make clear that, the ultimate argument that vindicates the Reformed view of justification is made from the