

THE NEW PERSPECTIVE'S VIEW OF PAUL AND THE LAW

Jack Hughes*

Scholars have not reached a consensus concerning Paul's view of the law. Disagreement prevails even among those who believe in verbal plenary inspiration. Paul's frequent references to the law come in many different contexts. Interpreting each reference accurately within its own context and synthesizing the interpretations into a systematic whole are difficult challenges. The New Perspective [NP] on Paul has amplified the existing problem. Founders of the NP take a historical, higher-critical, covenantal approach to interpreting Paul. Their low view of Scripture and their high view of extra-biblical literature have produced an entirely new way of understanding Paul's view of the law and have led many to redefine key theological terms related to both law and gospel. The NP on Paul leads those who subscribe to it outside the limits of orthodox theology.

* * * * *

Introduction

Macedonian legend tells of a poor man named Midas who lived during a time of universal unrest. One day Midas entered town with his ox-cart, weary and despondent over the future that lay ahead of him. Little did he know but on that very day the Phrygian elders had called a council to discuss an ancient oracle that told of a man pulling an ox-cart who would bring peace and prosperity to their people. The council spotted Midas and appointed him king.

Thankful for his good fortune, Midas erected a shrine and dedicated it to Zeus. The shrine contained his wagon, hitched to a pole. On the pole hung a large knot with hundreds of tightly interwoven strands of rope made from bark. No ends

*Jack Hughes, an M.Div. alumnus of The Master's Seminary and a D.Min. alumnus of Westminster Theological Seminary, Escondido, California, is Pastor/Teacher of Calvary Bible Church, Burbank, California, and a Faculty Associate in Homiletics at The Master's Seminary.

were exposed. After many months the bark hardened and eventually the knot was moved to the nearby town of Gordium, which was ruled by Gordius, Midas' father. Eventually, an oracle prophesied that whoever loosed the Gordian knot would become lord and ruler of all Asia. Many attempted to unravel the knot, but failed. In fact, visiting Gordium without attempting to loosen the knot was considered bad luck.

Eventually the son of Philip II, King of Macedonia visited Gordium. He was a young military man facing the conquest of Persia. Not wanting to have bad luck, the young man went to the shrine of Zeus and for two hours tried to undo the Gordian knot while the people of the city watched. Finally, in a fit of frustration he pulled out his sword and slashed at the knot, exposing its hidden ends which allowed him to unravel it. The young man went forth to conquer the known world. His name was Alexander the Great.

This story illustrates the difficulty in understanding Paul and the law. The subject is a theological Gordian knot. Its complexities are great. Its scope broad. Its implications deep. Theological presuppositions and hermeneutical alliances radically affect how one understands Paul's views of the law. Walt Kaiser has said, "The way to test the greatness and incisiveness of any truly evangelical theology is to ask how it relates biblical law to God's gospel of grace. The history of the Church's achievement on this issue has not been remarkable or convincing."¹ This writer is not deluded into thinking that he can cover thoroughly the New Perspective's views on Paul and the law in a single journal article. Many voluminous tomes have discussed and are still discussing Paul and the law. The purpose of this article is first to state some of the problems encountered when studying the subject; second, to survey the founders of the New Perspective [hereafter, usually NP] and their views of Paul and the law; and finally, to offer some pastoral perspectives on theological issues like the NP.

PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED WHEN STUDYING PAUL AND THE LAW

Before the NP, scholars took one of three general approaches in an attempt to unravel the theological knot of Paul and the law. At one end of the spectrum was the *No-Law View*. The No-Law View sees little continuity between the Old and New Testaments when it comes to law and grace. This camp is typically dispensational and asserts that Christians are not under *any* law. It would champion texts like Rom 6:14, "[Y]ou are not under law, but grace."² The No-Law View believes Christians

¹Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "God's Promise, Plan, and His Gracious Law," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 33/3 (September 1990):290.

²Sumner Osborne, "The Christian and Law," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 109/435 (July 1952):241; John A. Witmer, "A Review of *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth*, Part 2," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149/595 (July 1992):268. Biblical quotations are taken from the New American Standard Bible, unless otherwise

have died to the law—all law. Various NT texts, without reference to their contexts, seem to state emphatically that the Christian is under no law at all.

The No-Law View has come under fire primarily from two directions. First, those who hold to the No-Law View are accused of being antinomians. If there is no law that a Christian must obey, it is argued, then Christians live in a state of lawlessness. Thus the Christian is free from any law to do anything he wishes without consequence. In order to sin, one must have law, for sin is a violation of law. Paul affirms this in Rom 4:15, “[F]or the law brings about wrath, but where there is no law, there also is no violation.” The No-Law View is difficult to reconcile with 1 John 3:4 which says, “Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness.”

Related to the first objection is the difficulty in trying to explain how all the commands in the NT directed toward believers are not law. Jesus in the Great Commission of Matt 28:20 calls the church to “make disciples of all nations, teaching them to observe all that *He commanded*” (emphasis added). Paul writes in 1 Cor 7:19, “What matters is *keeping the commandments of God*” (emphasis added). In 1 Cor 9:21 Paul describes himself as being “*under the law of Christ*” (emphasis added). In Gal 6:2 Paul calls on readers to “*fulfill the law of Christ*” (emphasis added). Clearly, certain texts teach that the Christian is under obligation to obey the commands or laws of Christ. How, one wonders, can those who hold to the No-Law View continue to do so in light of this?

One writer, representative of the No-Law View, explains what governs the NT believer with these words: “According to dispensationalists, the rule of life for the Christian is living in submission to the indwelling Holy Spirit (Eph 5:18) and in His power (Gal 5:16, 18, 25), manifesting His fruit (vv. 22–23), a higher rule of life than the Law.”³ This is an unsatisfactory explanation for many who are quick to point out that Christians would not know how to walk in “submission to the Spirit” or live according to the “rule of life for Christians” if it were not for the commandments or laws found in the Bible and particularly the NT.

At the other end of the spectrum is the view that may be called the *Old-Law-Edited View*. Calvin, though having slightly a different perspective on the law, might be in this camp.⁴ This view sees more continuity between Old and New

noted, except for the capitalization of “law,” which throughout this article is lower case for consistency’s sake.

³ John A. Witmer, “A Review of *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth*, Part 2,” 267.

⁴ Ralph Allen Smith, *Calvin’s Covenantal Pronomianism*, in multi-part online essay series: “Calvin on Natural Law,” <http://www.berith.org/essays/cal/cal03.html>; “Calvin on the Judicial Law of Moses (Part 1),” <http://www.berith.org/essays/cal/cal05.html>; “Calvin on the Judicial Law of Moses (Part 2),” <http://www.berith.org/essays/cal/cal06.html>; all accessed 8/28/05. See also John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 2.7.1, as cited in Jean Calvin and Henry Beveridge, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845-1846; reprint, Oak Harbor, Wash.: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997) 2.7.1.

Testaments when it comes to law and grace. Those in this camp believe Christians are to some extent bound by law. For example, C. E. B. Cranfield in a classic *Scottish Journal of Theology* article argued for the enduring nature of the law of Moses.⁵ He systematically attempted to show that neither Jesus nor Paul argued that the law of Moses has been abolished. His conclusion is that believers are still under the law of Moses, but in an edited way.

First, the law has been edited in that Christ has taken away the curse of the law. Second, it is edited in that the sacrificial portions of the law have been fulfilled in Christ. The moral aspects of the law, it is argued, are still binding on the Christian, not as a means of salvation but as God's holy rule of life. Some in the Old-Law-Edited camp have divided the law into three distinct categories, moral, civil, and ceremonial.⁶ They argue that the moral aspects of the law of Moses are still binding, but not the civil and ceremonial. The Ten Commandments, the heart of the moral law, still governs the Christian as a rule of life.

This view overcomes some of the weaknesses of the No-Law View by avoiding the impression that Christians are antinomians directed subjectively by some mystical inner moving of the Holy Spirit. It places the Christian under the moral law of God found in the objective text of Scripture, but not under the sacrificial or civil regulations which governed Israel as a theocracy or theocratic monarchy.

The weaknesses of this view are that texts in the NT seem to state directly that Christians are not under the law of Moses: "For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17). "For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law, but under grace" (Rom 6:14). "But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law" (Gal 5:18). "For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one, and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the law of commandments contained in ordinances, that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity" (Eph 2:14-16).

Obviously, a tension exists when trying to synthesize texts which seem to say Christians are not under the law of Moses and the texts which teach that they must obey commands found in the law of Moses. This tension has given rise to a mediating view of the law which might be called the *New-Law View*. This view agrees with the No-Law View, saying Christians are not under the law of Moses at all. It also agrees with the Old-Law-Edited View saying that Christians are still under law—the teachings of Christ which make up "the law of Christ," "the royal law,"

⁵C. E. B. Cranfield, "St. Paul and the Law," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 17/1 (March 1964).

⁶E.g., J. Daniel Hays, "Applying the Old Testament Law Today," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158/629 (January-March 2001):22.

“the perfect law,” “the law of liberty.”⁷

The New-Law View solves one of the primary difficulties that people have with the law of Moses. Most would argue that at least nine of the ten commandments are still binding on believers (Sabbath observance excepted).⁸ Most agree that the Ten Commandments are the heart of the Mosaic law. In fact, that all 600-plus laws in the OT are expressions of the Ten Commandments can be easily argued.

The solution provided by the New-Law View is to understand an overlap between the law of Christ and the law of Moses, nine out of the Ten Commandments, for instance.⁹ The reason for this overlap is that both the law system of Moses and the law system of Christ are built on the same all-encompassing commands, love God and love your neighbor as yourself: “On these two commandments depend the whole law and the prophets” (Matt 22:40). Though the law of Moses and the law of Christ are two completely different law systems, they are both founded upon the same great commandments. Hence the two have similarities.

As an example, suppose an electrician recently moved from Idaho to California to practice his trade. Much of the electrical code of Idaho would be identical to that of California. Yet though many identical regulations between the Idaho and California electrical codes exist, he would not be under the Idaho code at all. He would be under a completely new code, the California code. The reason for the similarities between the Idaho and California codes is that both are derived from the national electrical code. All states must submit electrical codes which comply to the all-encompassing national code.

Similarly, Christians are no longer under the law code of Moses at all; they are under a completely new law system, the law of Christ. Significant overlap between the two law systems is because both are derived from the universal law code, love God and love your neighbor. The New-Law View removes Christians from the law of Moses, the strength of the No-Law View, but leaves them under the

⁷Jesus, after training the twelve, sent them out to make disciples of all nations, teaching them to observe all He commanded (Matt 28:19-20). The apostles and their disciples communicated the law of Christ in the text of the NT. It is Christ's law that the NT believer is to obey (see 1 Cor 9:21; Gal 6:2; Jas 1:25; 2:8, 12).

⁸Some, like Seventh Day Adventists or Seventh Day Baptists, argue that the Fourth Commandment is still binding (Walter Martin, *Kingdom of the Cults*, rev. ed. [Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1985] 485-89; F. R. Harm, “Sabbatarianism,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984] 963-64; G. H. Waterman, “Sabbath,” in *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. Merrill C. Tenney [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975] 5:188). Others, following in the footsteps of the Reformers, teach that the Sabbath has been transformed or transferred to Sunday, the Lord's day, and that Christians need to observe the Sabbath on Sunday (J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness* [Wheaton: Crossway, 1990] 236-43; Tom Schwanda, “Growing in Christ: Glorifying and Enjoying God through Reformed Spiritual Disciplines,” *Reformation and Revival Journal* 10/1 [Winter 2001]:25-28).

⁹The Author was first introduced to the New-Law View by John S. Feinberg in 1999 when he lectured at The Master's Seminary in The Distinguished Scholars Series on “Continuity and Discontinuity.”

law of Christ as a moral rule of life, the strength of the Old-Law-Edited View.

The three views above are all non-NP views, held by Protestants who believe in verbal plenary inspiration, the inerrancy, authority, and infallibility of the Word of God and who subscribe to historical-grammatical exegesis. Regardless of which of the three camps one finds himself in, most non-NP Protestants agree on seven crucial points of doctrine which relate to Paul's view of the law.

- (1) Most believe the ceremonial aspects of the law foreshadow Christ and were fulfilled by Christ.
- (2) Most believe that the moral aspects of the law, which express and are derived from God's nature, are for God's people of any age and are profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness.
- (3) Most believe that the demands of God's moral law are beyond the ability of fallen man to fulfill.
- (4) Most believe that a primary purpose of the law is to reveal sin and a need for a Savior, and hence to serve as a tutor to lead one to Christ.
- (5) Most believe that justification is by faith alone and that those who are justified escape the wrath of God and the curse of the law.
- (6) Most believe that the justified are enabled by the Holy Spirit to obey God's commandments.
- (7) Most believe that justification is a one-time act whereby a believer is declared righteous before God based on the imputed righteousness of Christ.

Almost universal agreement among all branches of conservative Protestantism prevails in these areas, but the tangles in the theological Gordian knot of Paul and the law are often worse than the beginning student of the law realizes. Some critical questions will facilitate a closer look at the knot.

1. When Paul uses the word "law," what specifically was he referring to? Some have argued that Paul had a single definition in mind when he used the word "law." Cranfield, on the other hand, sees five different uses.¹⁰ John Walvoord sees

¹⁰Cranfield, "St. Paul and the Law" 44.

six different uses in the book of Romans alone.¹¹ What Paul means by the word "law" in each context is a fundamental question to be answered.

2. What did Paul mean by the phrase "under law?" Did he mean under any law system or a specific law system such as the law of Moses? Did he mean that those "under law" have to obey the law and/or are under the curse or condemnation of the law, or something else? In each context where the phrase appears, one must reach a conclusion about what Paul meant by the phrase "under law." Interpretations abound.

3. What does it mean to be "under grace?" At first, this may seem to be a simple question, but it is not. Does it imply that OT saints were not under grace? Does it mean that OT saints were saved by works? Does it mean OT saints were saved and sanctified by works? Does it mean that OT saints were saved by grace and then abandoned by God to live the rest of their lives trying to please God in the flesh? Does "under grace" mean not under any law, even the law of Christ?

Or maybe Paul is speaking to people who have adopted false views of the law, and when he says, "We are no longer under law, but grace," he is not saying, "God previously placed people under law but now He has placed them under grace." Rather he is saying, "God never placed us under law, but we (Jews) placed ourselves under law, but now that we know the truth, we are where we should have been all along, under grace." One must ascertain the meaning and implications of the phrase, "under grace." Interpretations and their explanations are like the sand on the seashore.

4. What is meant by the phrase "works of the law"? Does it mean, obeying the law for the glory of God? Does it mean obeying the law for sinful reasons, e.g., legalism? Does it mean obeying the law while the curses of the law remain? Does it mean obeying the law as a means of salvation or sanctification, or both? Does it describe what the law does to a person or what a person does in compliance to the law? One must answer these questions. What does Paul mean by the phrase "works of the law?" Interpretations are almost as numerous as the stars of heaven.

5. In Jeremiah's description of the new covenant (Jer 31:33), God says, "I will put My law within them" and "on their heart I will write it." In Ezek 36:27 He adds, "I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances." If Christ inaugurated the new covenant with His death,¹² what law, statutes, and ordinances are referred to? What would the original audience have understood Jeremiah to mean? Was Jeremiah referring to the law of Moses, the law of Christ, the two great commandments, the Ten Commandments, or some other law or law system that would be given in the future? If one can answer this question with certainty, it will provide immense help in unraveling the

¹¹John F. Walvoord, "Law in the Epistle to the Romans, Part 1," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 94/373 (January 1937):21.

¹²See Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25; 2 Cor 3:6; Heb 8:6-13; 9:15; 10:16-17; 12:24; 13:20.

Gordian knot of Paul and the law.

Questions, like the sampling above, reveal the complexities related to Paul and the law. Every one of the questions must be answered with careful exegesis, and then all texts must be synthesized into a system as they are properly interpreted within their given contexts. All that has been said is to demonstrate that even before the NP came along, the theological complexities of Paul and the law were overwhelming. The introduction of NP views has increased the size of the knot. *The Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, commenting on the state of Pauline studies since the NP, says, “[T]he plethora of new proposals spawned by this paradigm shift suffers as much from internal dissent as from external critique, since no consensus has yet emerged concerning the reason(s) why Paul actually rejected Judaism and the ‘works of the Law,’ nor concerning the actual meaning of ‘works of the Law’ in Paul’s writings.”¹³

After a survey of some of the complexities concerning Paul and the law, one realizes that the subject presents an interpretive challenge of great proportions. With this background, a look at NP views of Paul and the law is in order.

NEW PERSPECTIVE VIEWS OF PAUL AND THE LAW

Before a general survey of NP views of Paul and the law, several factors must be understood. First, the NP is not a monolithic theological system. There is no *one* “NP Theology” or “NP view of Paul and the law.” The NP is really composed of two primary historical perspectives that have significant theological implications: Sanders’ view of Second-Temple Judaism and Dunn’s view of “the works of the law.”¹⁴ NP views vary greatly depending on: (1) a person’s assessment of the two NP historical views; (2) which aspects of the NP are accepted or rejected; (3) to which texts to apply the NP views; and (4) hermeneutical and theological biases which one brings to bear on the issue. These variables spawn a plethora of NP theologies. This makes the NP a moving and ever changing target for those attempting to critique it. When one aims at and blows one view out of the water, other views emerge to which the critique does not apply.

Books are being written on the topic of Paul and the law faster than anyone can read them. The books are often very detailed, with redefined words, new jargon, and totally foreign approaches to Pauline theology which leave even seasoned theologians baffled. So what or whose NP view/views of Paul and the law should be singled out? It is best to lay the ax to the root of the tree. Though many branches grow on the NP tree, they all rely upon the historical assumptions of the root.

¹³S. J. Hafemann, “Paul and His Interpreters,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, eds. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993) 673.

¹⁴For a helpful summary of the foundational issues of the NP, see Douglas Moo, “Review of Heikki Räisänen, *Paul and the Law*, and E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law and the Jewish People*,” *Trinity Journal* 5/1 (Spring 1984):92-99.

Though others may have written more persuasively, E. P. Sanders and James Dunn compose the root of the NP tree.¹⁵ Though a couple of scholars before E. P. Sanders had NP ideas, Sanders' writings on second-temple Judaism have popularized the NP. James Dunn has latched on to Sanders' research, and though they disagree at points, both subscribe to Sanders' basic conclusions about second-temple Judaism.

As mentioned in this issue's article by David Farnell, the NP has as one of its worst and culminating effects the overthrow of Reformation soteriology. The adoption of NP views has led some to accept a gospel different from the gospel preached by the Reformers. Some have tried to argue that if one redefines justification, rejects imputation, rejects perseverance, redefines righteousness, and redefines the church, he hasn't changed the gospel. Critical theological terms such as justification and righteousness are being redefined. Other theological concepts like imputation and perseverance are being rejected.¹⁶ Could it be that these terms have nothing to do with redefining the gospel? This writer strongly asserts that they do. By redefining and rejecting critical doctrines, a scholar strikes at the very heart of the gospel and how one is made right before a holy God.

The NP seems rather harmless at first because it concerns itself with historical studies. All faithful students of the Bible are concerned with historical studies. Every hermeneutics book worth its salt teaches the importance of historical background. But historical background has ramifications for NT words. In this case, in defining words like justification, righteousness, law, and works of the law, Sanders and Dunn, like most who reject verbal plenary inspiration, tend to put equal and sometimes more weight on select, uninspired historical texts than on the inspired text of God's Word.¹⁷ That is because they have a low view of the Bible, leading them to judge the Bible by history rather than vice versa. Remembering that the NP is not a unified theological system but a historical, higher-critical approach to interpreting the Bible, one realizes that it leads to a wide variety of unorthodox positions. Some of the more common branches in the NP tree are:

¹⁵N. T. Wright, for example, is one of the more winsome, articulate, and voluminous NP writers. Though he does not agree with Sanders and Dunn in every area, he relies upon their initial research. If Sanders and Dunn can be compared to the root of the NP, Wright is the trunk of the tree.

¹⁶N. T. Wright (*What Saint Paul Really Said* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997]) argues for a new definition of righteousness (95-111) and a new definition of justification which does not include imputation (113-33). He then summarizes these views (151-65). See also N. T. Wright's entries on "Justification" and "Righteousness" in *New Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1988) 359-61, 590-92. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., discusses Wright's and Dunn's rejection of imputation in "Review Essay of James D. G. Dunn's *Paul the Theologian*," *Westminster Theological Journal* 61/1 (Spring 2000):140. Sanders denies the doctrine of perseverance in *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1983) 7.

¹⁷For examples of Sanders' reliance upon extra-biblical literature, see *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1983) 3, 41, 44-45; cf. also Mike Stallard, "Review of James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of the Apostle Paul*," *Journal of Ministry and Theology* 2/2 (Fall 1998):233.

1. *Legalism was not a problem in first-century Judaism and Paul did not address it.* Sanders argues that Paul did not believe the law was impossible to obey.¹⁸ Both Sanders and Dunn argue that first-century Judaism was not legalistic and Paul did not argue against legalism.¹⁹ Ironically, Moisés Silva observes that Sanders does not seem to understand what legalism is. He argues,

Otherwise, how does one explain the fact that Sanders actually quotes passages from Early Jewish literature that are clear evidence of “legalism” (in the sense that matters the most) yet he shows no awareness of the problem at all? The clearest example comes from the Wisdom of Joshua ben Sirach, which Sanders discusses in the third chapter of his work. Under the heading of atonement, Sanders tells us that “Ben Sirach shared the general belief that atonement is possible. Among good deeds, two are singled out which atone for transgression. They are honouring one’s father and giving alms.” Sanders then proceeds to quote the relevant texts: “Whoever honours his father atones for sins. . . . Water extinguishes a blazing fire: so almsgiving atones for sin” (Ecclus 3:3, 30). Astonishingly, Sanders overlooks altogether the theological implications of those statements and moves on to discuss the “precise significance attached by the author to the sacrificial system.” Sanders offers no explanation for—indeed, shows no awareness of—what looks like a fairly blatant view of self-salvation.²⁰

Dunn understands “works of the law” to refer to circumcision, Sabbath observances, and food laws. According to Dunn, Paul is not refuting “works which earn God’s favor, as merit-amassing observances. They are rather seen as badges . . . [that] serve to demonstrate covenant status.”²¹ Dunn believes that what Paul attacks in Galatians is an attitude toward the law that distinguishes Jew from Gentile.²² N. T. Wright, following Dunn and Sanders, says:

Paul’s argument, “has nothing to do with a specious attitude towards good behavior. On the contrary: Paul expects his converts to live in a manner appropriate for members of the covenant (Rom. 6 etc.), and this is in fact necessary if faith is not to appear a sham (2 Cor. 13:5). His 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) but against those who sought to

¹⁸Daniel B. Wallace, “Galatians 3:19-20: A Crux Interpretum For Paul’s View of the Law,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 52/2 (Fall 1990):240; Sanders, *Paul, and Law, and the Jewish People* 23, 28, 43-44, 78.

¹⁹Sanders, *Paul and Law, and the Jewish People* 78; Moisés Silva, “Law and Christianity” *Westminster Theological Journal* 53/2 (Fall 1991) 341.

²⁰Silva, “The Law and Christianity” 348.

²¹*Ibid.*, 346.

²²*Ibid.*, 347.

demonstrate their membership in the covenant through obeying the Jewish Law.²³

A strange legalistic irony is evident here. Both scholars deny legalism and at the same time affirm it! Where does this come from? It comes from a covenantal view of the church. Those who subscribe to dispensational theology often have more difficulty trying to understand the NP. The reason for this is that they are often unfamiliar with covenant theology which sees more continuity between Israel and the church. The church is seen as the "Israel of God." Hence the church in the NT is viewed in a very similar way as Israel under the Mosaic law.

The people of Israel were God's covenant people. But merely being in the covenant community of Israel did not guarantee an individual's salvation, but it did put them in the right circumstances to be saved as God's Word came to those within the covenant community. The church, in like manner, is seen as the "covenant community" of God, in Christ. One should think "church" when reading NP advocates who speak of "the covenant community," and things will become clearer.

Being part of the covenant community (the church) does not guarantee the salvation of individuals, but it puts them into the right circumstances to be saved. Believers have the hope of future salvation as long as they continue to obey. In other words, one enters the covenant community by faith and stays in the covenant community by works. Sanders' has coined the phrase "covenantal nomism" to describe this view. Sanders, like Dunn, argues that second-temple Judaism taught a form of justification by faith and that righteousness by works was not a problem addressed by Paul.²⁴ Scott Hafemann, commenting on Sander's work, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, remarks, "Thus, for Palestinian Judaism at the time of Paul, 'the intention and effort to be obedient constitute *the condition for remaining in the covenant*, but they do not earn it' (Sanders, 180, emphasis his)."²⁵ This means that Christians in the covenant community are under a bilateral covenant, entered by faith, but maintained by works.

David Watson describes Dunn's view of "covenantal nomism" as follows:

[C]ovenantal nomism is a term used to describe a kind of Jewish self-identity in which the covenant relationship between God and God's people begins with God's gracious election and is maintained by adherence to the Law. In this view, the Law isn't viewed as a burden or a way to earn righteousness. Rather, it's how one exemplifies and preserves one's place within the covenant community.²⁶

²³N. T. Wright, "Justification," in *New Dictionary of Theology*, eds. Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1988) 360.

²⁴Mike Stallard, "Justification By Faith Or Justification By Faith Alone?," *Conservative Theological Journal* 3/8 (April 1990):68.

²⁵S. J. Hafemann, "Paul and His Interpreters," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* 673.

²⁶David Watson, "Paul's Letter to the Galatians," <http://people.smu.edu/dwatson/galatians.htm>, (accessed Aug 9, 2005).

Dunn clearly rejects the doctrine of perseverance.²⁷ Through faith in Christ a person is placed into the covenant community (the church), but if he fails to obey, he perishes in hell.²⁸

The similarities to Roman Catholic theology are very striking. Roman Catholic theology teaches that infant baptism places one into the “covenant community” and as long as that person continues to observe the sacraments, he will preserve himself and be saved. That is legalism, salvation by works.²⁹

In short, the proponents of the NP deny legalism was a problem with Paul, and then teach that the assurance of salvation depends on obedience. This seems to explain, in part, their blindness. The question which needs to be asked and answered is this, “Does the Bible teach legalism was a problem among the Jews in the first century?”³⁰ The answer is clearly, “Yes.”

In the parable of “The Pharisee and the Publican,” Jesus taught that the Pharisees “trusted in themselves that they were righteous” (Luke 18:9). Jesus’ indictment of the scribes and Pharisees in Mark 7:8-9 is clear, “Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men.” This is a form of legalism.

To say every Jew, Jewish leader, or Pharisee was a legalist may be wrong, but it is clear that according to the Bible, many who opposed Jesus were. Those who had true faith in God accepted Jesus as the Messiah. The ones who did not were legalists and were the target of Jesus’ censure and rebuke.

A higher-critical approach to Scripture like that of Sanders and Dunn, who follow the pattern of the Jesus Seminar, makes it easy to deal with such death knells to NP by denying the authenticity of Jesus’ words. Jesus did not say these things; they were added later!³¹ Sanders writes, “Of the material which depicts legal conflict, what actually goes back to the historical Jesus? I continue to think that relatively little does.”³²

Anyone who endorses verbal plenary inspiration of the Bible should be alarmed at such a statement, a statement that reveals a fundamental flaw of the most serious nature, a blatant denial of biblical authority. Those who accept a high view of Scripture, who believe in the Bible’s authority, inerrancy, and sufficiency must

²⁷Mike Stallard, review of *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* by James D. G. Dunn, *Journal of Ministry and Theology* 2/2 (Fall 1998):232.

²⁸For a visual example of this view, one can examine a chart Sanders provides in *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, which shows that after someone by faith is “righteoused” (Sander’s word for justified), reconciled, washed, sanctified, cleansed through Christ’s death, he enters into the “covenant community,” but if he sins (there is transgression) and does not repent, he goes to hell (*Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* 7).

²⁹Ibid, 45-46.

³⁰See article by William D. Barrick in this issue.

³¹E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 175.

³²Ibid., 93.

consider the folly of such a statement. The founders of the NP have no regard for the that view of the Word of God.³³ When a Scripture takes their faulty preunderstanding out at the knees, they conveniently deny its authenticity, making them unassailable. Statements such as “Paul was wrong,” “Paul was confused,” “Paul conflicts with himself,” or “Paul did not even write it” are not acceptable to those who believe the Bible is the inspired Word of God. Denying the authenticity of texts which undermine a system may be an invincible response for some, but not for those who accept verbal plenary inspiration. The Bible’s pronouncement is clear concerning those who add or subtract from the Word of God.³⁴

Though historical research is important, the Bible must take priority over extra-biblical literature. The Bible is always right because it is the Word of God. To say Moses is wrong is to say God is wrong. To say Paul was confused is to say the Holy Spirit is confused. Sanders and Dunn reject what is fundamentally essential concerning the Word of God. One must not be lured into the NP by incidental details with which on the surface he might agree. The Lordship of Christ, the authority of the Bible, faith in Christ, and Jewish and Gentile distinctions are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom, but they are being used as theological bait to capture the unsuspecting.

What Sanders attempts to do is to make a person choose between a totally legalistic second-temple Judaism or a totally non-legalistic second-temple Judaism. After showing extra-biblical historical evidence that some Jews were not legalists, he tries to force the conclusion that no Jews were legalists. The weakness of his view is that the Bible says some Jews were legalists. May God be true, though every man a liar. Dunn tries the same tactic in relation to Paul. On one side he places “Jewish legalistic law-keeping,” and on the other side “Jewish law-keeping as a badge of identity” for those in the covenant community. Krister Stendahl uses the same all-or-nothing tactic. Paul’s “question was not ‘How can I be saved?,’ but, ‘How can Gentiles be included within the Messianic community of Israel?’”³⁵ In other words, pick one or the other. This kind of argumentation is often an attempt to force the reader to choose between the better of two wrong views. In the end, no matter what view he takes, it is still wrong because the right view has not been offered or defended.

The NP argues that badges which show status in the covenant community are what Paul is addressing, not legalism and works righteousness. But why would someone want to be included in the Messianic community of Israel? Obviously, in order to be saved! The concepts of being included in the covenant community (the church) and being saved are not mutually exclusive. The only way someone can be saved is by being in the church. No one outside the church is saved, and if one is

³³Stallard, review of *Theology of the Apostle Paul* 231-32.

³⁴Deut 4:2; 12:32; Prov 30:6; Rev 22:18-19.

³⁵Silva, “The Law and Christianity” 352.

kept in the covenant community by works, this means salvation is by works. The issue of being in the covenant community (the church) is an issue of salvation. Again, the primary authority on this issue is God's Word. If it can be shown that Paul discusses legalism, salvation, and national identity together in the same context, the NP illusion is exposed.

In Eph 2:8-9 Paul presents a strong denial of works righteousness: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast." Paul then continues talking about God bringing both Jews and Gentiles together in the church through faith in Christ. He denies legalism and affirms salvation by grace through faith, and then proceeds to discuss national identity.

Before Christ, Israel was to be a light to the nations. Paul says in Eph 2:12, that Gentiles who were not part of Israel, "were . . . separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world." No hope of what? Salvation! To be saved, one needs to have God's Word which was originally given to the covenant community of Israel. It is a nonsequitur to argue that national identity, salvation, and legalism are mutually exclusive.

In Rom 4:4-5 Paul argues, "Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness." Of course, the context argues against legalism. Keeping the law of Moses does not save anyone, as Abraham's life proves. All three concepts (national identity, salvation, and legalism) are taught together.

In Rom 11:6 Paul says, "But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace." The context is about God's sovereign choice of individuals within national Israel for salvation. Legalism, salvation, and national identity are again addressed together.

Paul, speaking of his hope in Phil 3:9, says, "and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith." In the preceding context Paul speaks of his privileged Jewish heritage, circumcision, tribe, association with the Jewish sect of the Pharisees, and his blameless obedience to the law of Moses. He thought those things earned him a righteousness of his own. Legalism, salvation, and national identity come together.

Here is another example of the confusion that surrounds the NP. One finds himself agreeing with many things they say, but then he is enticed to make an either/or, all-or-nothing choice which leads to false theological conclusions, basing his theology on the views of those who reject the veracity of the Word of God. Adapting the words of Yoda to Luke Skywalker, "The rejection of verbal plenary inspiration leads to the theological dark side." In the case of the NP, its supporters advocate the heresy and dark doctrine of salvation by works. Silva correctly states,

Legalism is but the human cry for personal autonomy. Doing things our way as distinct from trusting God's power is illustrated just as clearly in modern evangelicalism as it is in the narrative of the wilderness wanderings. The inclination toward self-righteousness is thus not a unique Jewish problem: it is endemic to the human condition, and even the most deeply sanctified believer is vulnerable to its power.³⁶

The dark side of the NP is that it teaches that legalism was not a problem with NT Judaism and that Jesus in his Gospel teachings and Paul in his epistles, were not arguing against legalism. Supposedly they were arguing against those who were trying to make distinctions between Jew and Gentile by observing things like the Sabbath, dietary laws, and circumcision. The two dark paths then lead to other hellish doctrines. The church is redefined as "the covenant community," which one enters by faith and yet is kept in by works. As long as someone continues to do good works, he preserves his status within the covenant community, but if he fails, he perishes in hell. Certainty of salvation is impossible, hence perseverance of the saints is rejected. Justification is merely the hope of future vindication for those who continue in good works. The NP denies that justification is a forensic declaration of righteousness based on the merits of Christ. That leads to the rejection of imputation which is described as a pious fiction invented by Reformers who were reacting against Roman Catholic theology. Righteousness is a synonym for covenant community, which is a synonym for the church. In the end, the Reformers had it all wrong. They preached a false gospel and the true gospel has finally been rediscovered after two thousand years. The NP historical views create an avalanche of theological consequences which are pronounced *anathema* (Gal 1:6-9).

PASTORAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE NEW PERSPECTIVE

My heart has always been for normal pew-sitters in the local church and for pastors who will shepherd them. Because of this, I would like to close with some parting exhortations which I hope will serve as warnings for those who are dabbling in the NP or for those who are tempted to do so.

- (1) Don't be distracted from your ministry to submerge yourself in bad doctrine and theology. Remember that bad theological company corrupts good theology.
- (2) Don't forget that those who do not know Christ are sons of the devil. They do the work of their father the devil (John 8:44). They are held captive by Satan to do his will (2 Tim 2:26). Satan works in the sons of disobedience (Eph 2:1-2). They are devoid of the Spirit, spiritually dead, unable to appraise the things of the Spirit of God, and they cannot please God (Rom

³⁶Ibid., 349.

8:5-8; 1 Cor 2:14; Col 2:13; Jude 19). Unbelievers do not make acceptable theological mentors. Sitting at the feet of the children of Satan to learn doctrine is both foolish and dangerous.

Though all have to read a certain amount of false doctrine so we can warn, guard, and obey the Lord's command to protect the flock and refute those who contradict, if we major in false doctrine, we are playing with anthrax. To think someone can go to school with the spiritually dead and not end up smelling like a corpse is a serious mistake. Puritan Thomas Watson put it this way: "Suppose that you had a friend in the hospital with a deadly and contagious disease. If you spent many hours next to your friend, what do you suppose is more likely to occur, that you would infect him with your health, or that he would infect you with his disease?"

- (3) Any pastor quickly discovers that many people in the local church need salvation. If they are saved, they need help with the basic Christian disciplines like Bible reading, prayer, giving, and serving. They want to know how to honor Christ in their marriage, in their parenting, in their jobs. It is the shepherd's primary responsibility to tend to his flock. Be warned. A never-ending stream of theological distractions waits to derail the pastor from his primary responsibilities. When the next "new doctrine" comes along, everyone starts talking about it. Emails start flying, and journal articles get written, then lots of books are published. Don't be distracted from your calling by those who reject what you hold to be fundamentally essential. Paul in warning Timothy of false teachers said, "For some men, straying from these things, have turned aside to fruitless discussion, wanting to be teachers of the law, even though they do not understand either what they are saying or the matters about which they make confident assertions" (1 Tim. 1:6-7).
- (4) Remember that we are called to "earnestly contend for the faith once for all handed down to the saints" (Jude 3). This means we are proclaimers of old doctrines, not new ones.