

The Elders' Perspective On The New Perspective

Recently there has been increasing concern about something called, "the New Perspective on Paul." Followers of "the new perspective" attempt to understand Paul's letters in light of the fact that he was a Jew writing to refute Jewish teaching. Unfortunately this has led some to redefine key terms related to the doctrine of salvation, specifically the doctrines of justification, imputation of Christ's righteousness and the Gospel. Many trusted evangelical leaders like John MacArthur and Phil Johnson have responded by denouncing "the new perspective." They have rightly voiced concern over influences that may threaten such doctrines. The elders of Nampa Bible Church are equally concerned to guard the truth and protect the Gospel. As the controversy continues in churches dealing with these influences, the elders want to reaffirm our unyielding commitment to the doctrine of salvation as we've always known it. We have not moved from our position outlined in article II-D of our church constitution: "God provided a way for each individual to escape the judgment of God caused by sin. Salvation is a free gift from God, offered to all. Through God's grace, salvation is given to all who put their trust and faith in Jesus and receive His gift of forgiveness. It is only through Jesus' sacrifice that this gift can be offered to anyone, and only through faith and trust in Him can it be received. Good works are an evidence of faith and salvation, but are not a means to salvation." Nevertheless, as the critical doctrines of justification, the imputation of Christ's righteousness and the Gospel have become the center of concern regarding the influence of "the new perspective" (and since our current constitution is fairly general in regards to these terms), the elders of Nampa Bible Church would like to clarify them in greater detail:

- 1) **JUSTIFICATION:** Justification is a critical component of the Gospel. It explains that only those who have placed their faith in Christ will be acquitted of God's coming wrath (Ro. 5:9). God's declaration that a sinner is righteous is based on Christ's work of propitiation on the cross (Ro. 5:18-19) and the sinner's appropriation of such atonement by faith alone (Ro. 5:1). Justification isn't a process in a person's life or an uncertainty that is hidden until some time in the future. After a person exercises faith in Christ, at that moment he is declared righteous by God and can confidently look forward to the day when Christ returns. At that time the believer will be publicly acquitted and delivered from God's wrath (Mt. 25:31-46; Ro. 8:19, Phil. 1:27-30). Justification before God, then, is an act of God (Romans 8:33) by which He declares righteous those who, through faith in Christ, repent of their sins (Luke 13:3; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 11:18; Romans 2:4; 2 Corinthians 7:10; Isaiah 55:6-7) and confess Him as sovereign Lord (Romans 10:9-10; 1 Corinthians 12:3; 2 Corinthians 4:5; Philippians 2:11). This righteousness is apart from any virtue or work of man (Romans 3:20; 4:6) and involves the imputation of our sins to Christ (Colossians 2:14; 1 Peter 2:24) and the imputation of Christ's righteousness to us (1 Corinthians 1:30; 2 Corinthians 5:21). By this means God is enabled to "be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Romans 3:26).
- 2) **THE IMPUTATION OF CHRIST'S RIGHTEOUSNESS:** Upon conversion God

unites us with Jesus Christ and thereby reckons to our account His righteous status to us (Ro. 3:22, 5:17; 1 Co. 1:30). This eternal, perfect righteousness of our great Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is not our own; it is imputed to us and made ours by faith alone. Being the “lamb of God” and ultimate sacrifice to which animal sacrifices pictured (Heb. 9:13, 10:4), Jesus is the only basis for our righteous standing before God. A person’s work or “merit” can never secure God’s saving activity because salvation is by grace, not human merit (Ro. 3:21-26; Eph. 2:8-9). From our secure status as “righteous” before God flows a continuing commitment to being conformed to His image (1 Co. 1:30; Ro. 6:20-23, 8:29; 1 Pet. 1:14-16).

- 3) **THE GOSPEL:** The original purpose of mankind in God’s world was to represent His image in order to reflect His glory (Gen. 1:26). In the fall man rebelled against God and sin entered the world (Gen. 3). Since this time Mankind has been dead in his trespasses and sins, walking according to this world and the prince of the power of the air, and by nature we have become “children of wrath” (Eph. 2: 1-3). From this point on God has been working to reconcile man to Himself in order to fulfill the purpose of His creation. Jesus Christ in His death on the cross provided the basis for our forgiveness and reconciliation with God. In order to be saved from God’s coming wrath an individual must repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ (Mk. 1:15; Acts 3:19, 5:31, 8:12, 10:43, 11:18, 13:39, 15:11, 17:30; Ro. 10:9-11). In God’s rich mercy, He saved us while we were still dead and made us alive together with Christ, raising us up and seating us with Christ in the heavenly places in order that His rich grace may be shown in us for ages to come for the praise of His glorious grace. “For by grace you have been saved through faith, it not of yourselves nor the results of works, no one can boast” (Eph. 2:4-8). Upon conversion the believer is immediately justified and considered righteous before God (see above). As regenerate individuals, “created in Jesus Christ for good works ... we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:8-10).

WHAT IS THE NEW PERSPECTIVE?

It’s NOT:

- 1 It's **NOT** a coherent doctrinal system – there's technically no “NPP” view of anything beyond historical issues. Scholars from the New Perspective embrace differing positions on just about everything.
- 2 It's **NOT** anti-Reformed – Some people within the NPP are Reformed.
- 3 It's **NOT** best represented by NT Wright – J.D.G. Dunn coined the phrase “New Perspective” in relationship to scholarship on 1st C. Judaism, and Wright's view has often been called “the fresh perspective” because it differs from Dunn and Sanders.
- 4 It's **NOT** new in the sense that it's trying to redefine biblical terms, rewrite biblical history and or rework biblical doctrines – it's an attempt to understand the biblical writers, their terms and doctrines in their own historical setting.
- 5 It's **NOT** a post-holocaust attempt of Christians to reconcile with Jews – Wright's more liberal critics have labeled him as being anti-Semitic. The resurgence of trying to understand Judaism comes from longstanding theological debates within Pauline studies.
- 6 It's **NOT** an attempt to make extra-biblical texts equal to the Bible – Every brand of Christian scholarship, no matter how conservative, use extra-biblical scholarship to try and understand the historical background of the NT. New Perspective authors use these texts to try and set the background as well as non-New Perspective scholars. The debate is over how to evaluate and appropriate these texts, not whether to consult them or not.

It IS:

- 7 It **IS** a renewed attempt to understand the Bible in its own setting – there is a self-conscious attempt to not read later controversies, backgrounds and church settings into the New Testament.
- 8 It **IS** a renewed attempt to understand Paul's letters within his Jewish setting – this is the point at which all New Perspective scholars generally agree – namely that the Judaism Paul refutes can be better understood by studying texts from that day.
- 9 It **IS** extremely diverse and difficult to summarize – Some of its harshest scholarly critics have trouble nailing down exactly what holds the New Perspective together, and can't fairly label the whole thing as heresy. D.A. Carson said: “To be frank, the movement called ‘the new perspective on Paul’ is now so diverse that many who defend ‘the new perspective’ cannot agree with each other. The movement is now a complex nexus of a lot of different positions held together by some common denominators. This means that some in the movement certainly have an orthodox stance, but take some steps which in my judgment are ill-advised and not exegetically well-established. Others are clearly outside the camp.”

WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE NEW PERSPECTIVE?

General problems about the movement of scholarship:

- 1 Hasty generalizations about the Reformation and Martin Luther (pot-shots taken at his exegesis and scholarship, caricatures painted of his conversion and development of his theology)
- 2 Overstatement in contrasting with traditional views (differences are typically finely

- nuanced, not epoch making changes)
- 3 Nebulous theological categories (lots of imprecision and miscommunication related to loosely used theological vocabulary)
- 4 Homogenizing tendency in reconstructing Judaism from variegated texts (unconvincing glossing over merit categories)
- 5 So loosely held together and broadly defined it can barely be treated as a particular “camp” within NT studies (difficult to nail down a "NP" stance, given the widely divergent contributions of its proponents)
- 6 Many deny inerrancy, inspiration and some even authority of Scripture

Specific problems with particular scholars:

- 1 N.T. Wright:
 - Weak on Deity and self-identity of Christ (Jesus knew He was God like a person knows he is loved . . .)
 - Weak on inspiration and inerrancy (though he claims to believe in absolute authority of Scripture, i.e. he gives Scriptures absolute authority for faith and practice, but doesn't necessarily endorse verbal plenary inspiration)
 - Denies imputation in his rigid view of the Hebrew law-court metaphor (the idea that we actually have the Judge's own righteousness is ruled out of hand because of an over-analysis of the law-court metaphor)
 - Preterist, supersessionist and post-millennialist eschatology (no future for Israel, complete replacement with church)
 - View of justification as “ecclesiological” more than “soteriological”
 - Naïve ecumenism with Catholics
- 2 J.D.G. Dunn:
 - Sociological (and theologically weak) view of law and justification (Jew/Gentile social distinction played up, standing before God played down)
 - Denies inspiration of Scripture
 - Denies deity of Christ
- 3 E.P. Sanders:
 - Denial of inspiration, inerrancy and authority of Scripture
 - Views Paul's thoughts on the Law as contradictory and inconsistent

ARE THERE ANY HELPFUL CONTRIBUTIONS FROM THE NEW PERSPECTIVE?

- 1 **Text-oriented** – Unlike classical liberals, scholars from the New Perspective put a higher premium on historicity in the Bible engage in more rigorous exegesis. N.T. Wright is the most devastating critic of the liberal Jesus Seminar which denies the historical nature of the Gospels. This text-oriented approach is why many reference works related to historical backgrounds and technical exegetical commentaries in conservative commentary reference tools are written by New Perspective authors (i.e. the IVP NT Commentary set, the New International Greek Testament Commentary set, The New Dictionary of Theology, The New Dictionary of Biblical Theology, The

New Bible Dictionary etc. all have contributors from within the New Perspective). Even if one disagrees with their interpretations, they force you to have a textual reason for doing so, since that's how they argue.

- 2 **Strong emphasis on the Old Testament Setting** – Many authors within the New Perspective view the Old Testament as setting the theological backdrop for the New, which makes their theological contribution very stimulating to read. Much of Wright's view of Israel supports dispensational interpretations of the Old Testament (though he is a postmillennialist). Even if one disagrees with an author's conclusions, the prodding to see the Old Testament setting the backdrop for New Testament Theology is helpful.
- 3 **Sensitivity to Eisegesis** – Because the New Perspective authors typically try to justify everything they say about the historical background from either the Bible or material written during the same time (which is helpful as long as it doesn't contradict the Bible), they are very sensitive to reading their theology into the passages they study. Even if one disagrees with an author at various points, it forces the reader to have exegetical reasons for doing so.