

**“To be Right with God”:
An Exploration of the New Perspective View on Paul**
by Rich Hagopian*

Introduction

In 1977, with E. P. Sanders' publication of *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, a major upheaval took place in Pauline studies.¹ Sanders' main thesis was that the long-held view of looking at Paul through “Lutheran-colored spectacles” was incorrect.² Luther believed that much of Paul's theology was grounded in an attack against Jews trying to be justified through works, thereby earning their “right-standing with God”—a conclusion that has been influential in nearly all post-Reformation New Testament scholarship.³ Sanders radically proposed that this was not a concern of Paul's at all; that in fact this scenario was not a reality at the time of Paul.⁴ Instead, Sanders saw Judaism in Paul's time as a “covenantal nomism,” in which Israel was graciously given membership in God's covenant, which required obedient action while providing atonement for sin.⁵ These conclusions have been a substantial challenge to traditional understandings of Pauline thought, which have been based on Luther's understanding of first-century Judaism. As McGrath has written, “If Sanders is right, the basic features of Luther's interpretation of Paul are incorrect, and require radical revision.”⁶ That revision, both positively and negatively, has been the main emphasis of a spectrum of scholarship that Dunn has labeled “the New Perspective on Paul.”⁷

This paper will attempt to trace the argument set in motion by Sanders' work. The intention of such a survey is to bring together various components and viewpoints within the New Perspective in order to answer the question, “What does it mean to be ‘right with God?’”

The Religio-Historical Context

There does not seem to be a “New Perspective School” in New Testament studies.⁸ There is, however, what might be called a “spectrum of appropriation,” in which theologians accept Sanders' basic conclusions concerning covenantal nomism with varying degrees of enthusiasm over their usefulness or implications.⁹ Seyoon Kim has noted that those who accept Sanders' conclusions about the nature of the Intertestamental period “elevate [it] to the status of dogma,” while insisting on interpreting Paul only in that context.¹⁰ Kim serves as a starting point in the discussion of this paper, insofar as he calls for an examination of the broad religio-historical context that serves as “the plank upon which all varieties of the [New Perspective] rest.”¹¹

* Rich Hagopian (B.A, Ohio State University) is an M. Div. student at ATS.

Covenantal Nomism as Primary Religio-Historical Context

Sanders argued that Judaism at the time of Paul was “a religion of grace, with human obedience understood as a response to that grace.”¹² Accordingly, he felt that “*obedience maintains one’s position in the covenant, but does not earn God’s grace as such.* It simply keeps an individual in the group which is the recipient of God’s grace.”¹³ God’s covenant to Israel was given in grace, and “doing the law” earmarked the way of life within the covenant, as well as maintained one’s membership therein.¹⁴ Thus, these “works of the law” were not done to earn covenant membership, its promises, and its salvation, but rather to maintain one’s availability to them.¹⁵ This, as noted in the introduction, stands against the ideas about this period under which most Protestant theology has been formed. N. T. Wright sums up Sanders’ main thesis as stating that “Judaism in Paul’s day was not...a religion of legalistic works-righteousness.”¹⁶ This idea, which has been termed covenantal nomism, is an aspect of the New Perspective about which Kim might be said to be correct; it is accepted as “dogma.” Yet, this is not an acceptance *a priori*, but rather a conclusion arrived at after being explored in depth by many who engage with the New Perspective.¹⁷

The responses to this thesis are varied. Stuhlmacher—though a strong opponent of the New Perspective—seems to accept Sanders’ view, noting that theologians long before him argued the same.¹⁸ Yet D. A. Carson finds the idea of covenantal nomism misleading and reductionistic.¹⁹ This conclusion is in tension with that drawn by Räisänen, who nine years prior to Carson noted that it has “ceased to be a minority position.”²⁰

Despite Carson’s strong language, there does seem to be what Dunn calls a “growing consensus” on two aspects of covenantal nomism.²¹ The first is that a “right-standing with God” began with God’s gracious giving to Israel a covenant in which to stand. The second is that participation within this covenant community necessarily called for the keeping of its covenantal obligations.

There are two other aspects of Intertestamental Judaism that are critical to a New Perspective understanding of one’s “right standing with God.” These are the dimensions of exile and ethnicity, both articulated by two of the more visible supporters of the New Perspective.²²

Persistence of Exile in the Religio-Historical Context

N.T. Wright has proposed that Intertestamental Judaism’s self-perspective was one of continuing exile.²³ Noting that often in both the biblical prophets and Intertestamental literature the idea of a forgiveness of sins is combined with a return from exile— itself combined in Jeremiah with the idea of “covenant renewal”—he draws the conclusion that “Since covenant renewal means the reversal of exile, and since exile was the punishment for sin, covenant renewal/return from exile means that Israel’s sins have been forgiven—and vice versa.”²⁴

Two implications follow from this statement. The first is that this sense of continuing exile contributes to an inherently *eschatological* expectation: it puts Judaism at the time of Paul anticipating that God will do something (namely, renew his covenant/end exile/forgive sins).²⁵ The second is that this expectation is *communal* rather than *individual*. Davies affirms this, noting that many narratives written within the intertestamental period all “link the justification of the individual with the justification of the Jewish people.”²⁶ These two implications will prove fruitful when examining the New Perspective interpretation of Paul.

Marks of Membership in the Religio-Historical Context

Jews were those who kept the covenant. New Perspective thought emphasizes that if what mattered to the Judaism of the day was staying in the grace of the covenant given to Israel by God, the corollary of which meant the following of certain obedient actions (such as circumcision, the observance of Sabbath, and dietary laws), those actions thus served as markers of belonging within the boundaries of the covenant.²⁷ Thus, Dunn can state, “A member of the covenant people was, by definition, one who observed these practices in particular.”²⁸ Dunn also notes that in Intertestamental literature Jewish heroes are those who don’t break these covenant obligations and points out that Greco-Roman literature of the time explicitly identified those who observed the law as being Jewish.²⁹ This idea becomes increasingly important when examining Pauline thought, insofar as a basic contention of the New Perspective is that Paul’s condemnation of “works of the law” (particularly as seen in Galatians and Romans) is not a statement against trying to earn righteousness by works, but rather a condemnation of misusing the markers of covenant obedience to protect their sense of “identity and privilege” as covenant members.³⁰

Conclusion

Within New Perspective thought these three interwoven ideas—covenantal nomism, persistence of exile, and marks of membership—are seen as the religio-historical context of Paul. The result is that Pauline interpretation is done in light of this background, as opposed to the traditional Protestant perspective noted in our introduction.

The Language of Righteousness

If the re-examination of the above themes within Judaism could be thought of as one pillar upon which the New Perspective rests, the other would surely be Paul’s language of righteousness and justification. Understanding Paul’s use of such language is foundational for any Christian understanding of what it means to be ‘right with God.’³¹ It is not, however, as easy a task as might seem. Dunn has remarked on the difficulty of discussing such language, insofar as Greek uses the same root word and its cognates to describe what in English are two separate words: the noun “righteousness” (*dikaïosunē*) and the verb ‘to

justify’ (dikaioō).³² This is important, for it reveals that one cannot speak of righteousness apart from justification. The importance of this when interpreting Paul’s thought will be apparent.

However, before examining Paul it is first necessary to look at the use of righteousness language within the religio-historical context surveyed above. This survey of language use within Paul’s context is highly relevant insofar as understanding Paul’s use of such language derives primarily from an understanding of the language of the time. N.T. Wright notes that this language has three dimensions—covenantal, judicial, and eschatological—making simple classification difficult.³³ The eschatological dimension can also be fairly aligned with a creational dimension, further embellishing the New Perspective argument.

Covenantal Righteousness Language

J. A. Ziesler, in an exhaustive study on the language of righteousness, notes that within the Old Testament “most scholars regard righteousness as fundamentally concerned with relationships.”³⁴ However, important for the understanding of New Perspective interpretations on Paul, Ziesler notes that in the Old Testament, the “relationship above all others within which behavior occurs which may be called ‘righteous’ is the covenant.”³⁵ He goes on to say that,

When Israel thought of relationship (our term) she thought of covenant (her term). It is true that the covenant was primarily what Yahweh had done and was doing, that is, it was a matter of grace, but it was also a reciprocal thing. The act of grace required a continuing response, and that response was to a large extent righteousness, the behavior proper to the covenant.³⁶

This statement unpacks into profound areas of meaning, especially as it relates to covenantal nomism. By affirming an inherently relational nature of righteousness language—yet qualifying that relationship with covenantal boundaries—it affirms the gracious nature of Sanders’ covenantal nomism. Though righteousness is a relational term, its boundaries of usage lie within God’s covenant with his people. All actions within this covenant thus presuppose a gracious relationship with God. Ziesler will go on to note that this covenantal term—righteousness—has implications within the realm of inward and outward disposition, corporate and individual persons, and that “everything...which befits the requirements of the covenant in a given situation is then ‘normal’ or righteous.”³⁷ Thus, living righteously is living correctly within the covenant. This proves foundational to the understanding of the New Perspective, especially concerning its inherent affirmation of Sanders’

covenantal nomism. The main point to note, however, is that righteousness *only* makes sense as a covenantal term.

Judicial Righteousness Language³⁸

The judicial dimension of righteousness that Wright claims (above) follows from this covenantal understanding. Ziesler goes on to note that the way God is seen in context determines the word's usage with reference to God.³⁹ Thus, "God's righteousness means mercy in one situation, triumph in another, judgment in another, the establishment of good government and good justice in another."⁴⁰ N. T. Wright is quick to note that God's righteousness, however, is never the same as an individual's righteousness.⁴¹ As noted above, being within the covenant is the only context for righteousness; thus those "outside the covenant, and therefore not in relation to Yahweh, cannot be righteous."⁴² In this situation, those that are judicially declared righteous are the "keepers of the covenant."⁴³ They are in this sense declared to have the status of righteousness. Righteousness, then, is status judicially given to someone who has fulfilled covenant obligations, whatever those might contextually be.⁴⁴

Eschatological/Creational Righteousness Language

Reviewing the language of righteousness within the Old Testament, Mark Seifrid concludes that it has to do primarily with "creational thought."⁴⁵ He ties this explicitly to the "biblical concept of kingship" which has much to do an "all-embracing justice by means of God's rule."⁴⁶ For Seifrid this is something that necessarily calls for a clear separation of the language from a covenantal context. From the New Perspective this separation is unnecessary—creation and covenant can be seen to complement each other quite well. Ziesler also sees the existence of this creational component having an eschatological emphasis over and above a judicial sense.⁴⁷ Drawing upon several verses in Isaiah, he notes that the "existence of righteousness and justice among men" is directly related to God's outpouring of his Spirit "in the last days."⁴⁸ This is to be seen as a "new creation" in humanity that will correspond to a "new creation" in nature.⁴⁹ Insofar as Ziesler notes that this idea of created righteousness is explicitly a gracious covenantal *promise*, righteousness then becomes an attribute that is both creational and *eschatological*.⁵⁰

Conclusion

Thus, a review of the language of righteousness implies that righteousness is an explicitly *covenantal* term, the covenant being the only realm within which such language makes sense. It is also *eschatological*—yet in a *creational* way: in the last days, God will create his righteousness among his chosen people through his Spirit. Finally, it is *judicial*: one is declared righteous when one fulfills covenantal obligations in whatever way is appropriate.

Righteousness Language Qualifier: On Pauline Usage

Having reviewed the broad context for and usage of righteousness language at Paul’s time, it is necessary to briefly examine traditional interpretations of Paul’s actual use of that language. This is particularly true of the phrase the “righteousness of God” (*dikaio sunē theou*).

Wright has succinctly reviewed four possible interpretations of this phrase.⁵¹ It can have either the meaning of a moral quality (a possessive genitive), a “salvation-creating power” (subjective genitive), a “righteous standing” from God (genitive of origin), or a righteousness that “counts before God” (objective genitive).⁵² Nearly all modern Protestant and Catholic views of the righteousness of God are now associated with the genitive of origin, in which God’s righteousness is judicially declared concerning a person (imputed/Protestant) or given to a person to “grow into” (imparted/Catholic) because of one’s faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior.⁵³

Concerning the genitive of origin, Wright declares it is “simply” a categorical mistake, in that righteousness is not “a substance or a gas” that can be transferred from one person to another.⁵⁴ As Ziesler noted—and as Wright agrees – it is rather a judicial metaphor, denoting the covenant faithfulness of the one to which it is applied.⁵⁵ In contrast, Wright emphasizes a combination of aspects of the subjective and possessive genitive.⁵⁶ Thus he ends up defining righteousness in a way that is highly similar to that seen in the survey of Ziesler, finding it both “a quality in God and...an active power which goes out, in expression of that [covenant] faithfulness, to do what the covenant always promised.”⁵⁷

Synthesis of Religio-Historical Situation and Righteousness Language

Bringing together the three dimensions of righteousness language as informed by Wright’s conclusions with the three dimensions of the religio-historical context of Paul, we can draw a New Perspective backdrop for Paul. Paul is writing from a context of covenantal nomism, in which Jews are acting out “works of the law” as both obligations required by, and badges of, their covenant membership. They do these works aware of unfulfilled promises—namely that they are not yet experiencing forgiveness of sins/covenant renewal/end of exile—yet they look forward to the pouring out of God’s Spirit so that this multi-dimensional expectation can be lived out. The language of righteousness in this context refers to covenant faithfulness.

Concerning God and the phrase “the righteousness of God” (*dikaio sunē theou*), the reference is to God’s personal commitment to fulfill what has been promised to those who are faithful to the covenant. For humans, it is the judicial acknowledgement by God of one’s proper covenantal behavior. It does not mean receiving God’s own personal righteousness.

These conclusions intermingle and inform one another; they also provide the New Perspective backdrop against which Pauline theology is done.

In addition, they focus the question with which this paper began: In light of these intermingling realities, what does it mean to be “right with God?” This answer lies in Paul, and thus to him we must now turn.

Paul and the New Perspective

Having prepared the New Perspective backdrop against which Paul is interpreted, it is necessary to survey a selection of themes from Paul’s thought. These include Jesus, the Law, the Spirit, Resurrection, and others. By doing this, one will be able to answer the question that served as the impetus of this paper: What does it mean to be “right with God” according to the New Perspective?⁵⁸

On Jesus: Preliminaries

L.W. Hurtado feels that Paul’s statement in Rom 8:29 (“For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family”) is a sign of what he calls the “primacy of divine sonship.”⁵⁹ He notes how the role of “firstborn” holds a special rank in ancient Judaism.⁶⁰ Further, the phrase itself is often shorthand for either the nation of Israel (specifically as it relates to its divine covenant status) or the Davidic king.⁶¹ Wright affirms this, noting, “in ancient Israel...the king and the people are bound together in such a way that what is true of the one is true in principle of the other.”⁶² Thus, the covenant people (Israel) have been redrawn around the divine “firstborn” (Jesus). This foundational Pauline understanding is even more explicit in Rom 1:3-4, where Paul states his gospel as concerning Jesus the “Son of God...who was descended from David.”⁶³ This very brief sketch of Jesus as the one around whom the covenant was redrawn will prove fruitful for the following discussion.⁶⁴

Life of the Spirit as fulfillment of the Law

In Rom 7:6 Paul states, “But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we are slaves not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit.” Thielman has argued that this “life of the Spirit” can be seen as a new “law” (or covenant) that those who believe in Christ are to follow.⁶⁵ This idea is strengthened by Wright, who examines Paul’s statement in Rom 8:2, “For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.” He believes that in both cases the “law” referred to is the Mosaic Law.⁶⁶ In the latter case (“the law of sin and death”), sin prohibits the law from delivering the life it was supposed to offer, whereas in the former case (“the law of the Spirit of life”) this same law is reinterpreted in light of Christ and shown as the “final intention” and fulfillment of the Mosaic Law.⁶⁷ This insight dovetails into a proposal made by Longenecker, in which he notes that “works of the law” might be thought of as “the means whereby behavior is governed and managed” (not only marks of covenantal membership).⁶⁸ Both the management of this behavior and the

fulfillment of the Mosaic Law meet in one place, love. Paul thus writes in Rom 13:8-10,

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; you shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love you neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Together these statements inform Pauline phrases such as Gal 5:25, “If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.” The conclusion to be drawn is that those who “live by the Spirit” live by the law that is Christ’s law, characterized above as love in action—the fulfillment of the Law of Moses.⁶⁹

This Spirit is also mentioned in Rom 8:10-11, where Paul writes, “If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.”⁷⁰ What is important to note here is that Paul explicitly links the indwelling of the Spirit to being “in Christ” and notes the expectation of resurrection that those who are “in Christ” should have.

Why can it be said of Jesus that by being “in him” one receives the Spirit? In addition, what is the significance of his resurrection? To answer these questions a closer examination of Jesus’ resurrection becomes necessary.

Resurrection and Being in Christ.

Wright goes to great lengths to show that the idea of resurrection at the time of Paul was a sign of eschatological vindication.⁷¹ This vindication would take the form of justification, as those who were resurrected from the dead would be declared to have been righteous in life—or, marked out judicially as faithful to the covenant.⁷² In this sense resurrection functioned as a denotation of those who were considered righteous. God thus confirmed through Jesus’ resurrection his identity as the righteous one, the Messiah.⁷³ Yet, this eschatological expectation has not occurred at the end of time as expected, but rather in the middle of history.⁷⁴ Jesus has been “justified” in this judicial sense. In Rom 8:10-11, above, this judicial justification is appropriated by those who are “in Christ” in such a way that they can look forward with certainty to their own resurrection and future justification.⁷⁵ Thus Paul in Gal 5:5 can encourage these believers to “await the hope of righteousness” that is theirs because of the Spirit they have. This hope is something inherently gracious (Gal 4:4), as all things belonging to the covenant have always been.⁷⁶ It is also precisely the

hope for a positive future judgment of covenant faithfulness in their favor because of their being in Christ.

Concerning righteousness language, we recall that the partner of eschatology is creation. We have already seen the way in which the outpouring of God's Spirit at the end of time will result in a "new creation." Thielman links this period particularly with Paul's statement in Rom 5:5b: "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."⁷⁷ Elsewhere, Paul can write that this "new creation is everything" (Gal 6:15). Further, Wright notes the way in which Paul uses this term "new creation" as a demarcation of those who are followers of Jesus.⁷⁸ If we recall that the essential nature of Jesus as Messiah is Israel's representative individual, and that "what is true of him is true of them,"⁷⁹ then those who are "in Christ"—thereby having his Spirit—are seen to be members of the true covenant people (Israel) in whom new hearts have been created, from which they can be obedient to the demands of the covenant. That is, they can live obediently in the life of the Spirit and fulfill the demands of the covenant through love (above).

Though the survey of Pauline themes is very nearly complete enough to answer the question with which this paper began, it is not quite complete. This paper assumes the presence of sin as a Pauline reality. Thus, any New Perspective conclusion that is to be drawn concerning what it means to be "right with God" must necessarily engage this reality. What follows is the review of that engagement. This review will allow us to bring together the full breadth of themes presented, thus answering the question of what it means to be "right with God."

From Sin to the Summing Up of All Things

As our discussion of the New Perspective started with Seyoon Kim's criticism, the beginning of the end will start with another's. Stuhlmacher has states that a major shortfall of the New Perspective is its lack of any real atonement, by which he means dealing with sin.⁸⁰ From what we have seen, Israel expected an end to exile. This would be marked by a covenant renewal that would graciously remake hearts and forgive sins. In Jesus, God effected this covenant renewal, breaking the eschatological hope into the middle of history. Some implications of that have been seen above; however, to address Stuhlmacher's concerns, a more complete understanding of "forgiveness of sins" is necessary. To review this, one must turn to a particularly important Pauline passage, Rom 3:21-26. Here Paul writes,

But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,

whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.

What might a New Perspective interpretation of this verse be? Before this can be answered we must briefly review the nature of “faith.” Longenecker notes that there are often good linguistic reasons for reading the phrase “faith in Christ” in Paul’s epistles as “the faith/faithfulness of Christ.”⁸¹ DeSilva, in examining patron-client relationships at the time of Paul, notes that faith in this context “denotes the patron’s reliability, the client’s acknowledgement of that reliability and the client’s loyalty or fidelity toward the patron as part of the client’s response of gratitude.”⁸² The patron (Jesus) thus secures “benefits” for his client (the one who believes).⁸³ Together these insights call for a dynamic reading of the idea of faith as being something a believer has (i.e., “faith in”) concerning what Jesus has already done (or, “the faithfulness of Christ”).⁸⁴ Recalling the nature of righteousness language, this Pauline selection might then be understood as saying,

But now, apart from law, God’s covenant faithfulness has been disclosed, and is attested to by the law and the prophets, God’s covenant faithfulness through the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah for all who believe. For there is no distinction since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are declared covenantally faithful by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his faithfulness to his covenant, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is covenantally faithful and that he declares covenantally faithful the one who has the faithfulness of Jesus.

To engage appropriately with this newly-minted translation, we must draw together the themes of Paul that have already been explored; in so doing, we will implicitly answer the question posed at the beginning of this review, “What does it mean to be ‘right with God’ from the New Perspective?” This in mind, we turn back to Rom 3:21-26.

What It Means To Be Right With God: A Synthesis of Rom 3:21-26

We have seen above that sin subverted the law, keeping it from giving the life it was meant to give. Believing in Jesus in this verse means believing that Jesus' faithfulness to the covenant secured justification—a judicial declaration of covenant faithfulness—for those who are “in him.” This believing also allows one to claim “redemption” from the sins that are inherent in everyone. This redemption is accessible to “all,” thereby fulfilling God's intentions to bless “all nations” as seen in Gal 3:6-9.⁸⁵ Atonement—redemption from sins—is thus gained by faith in Jesus' faithfulness. This faith in Jesus functions as a marker of covenant membership, against which all other markers (such as works of the law) are found unreasonable and ineffectual.⁸⁶ Prior to examining Paul, we saw that the main markers of covenant membership were the obedient actions done in obligation to the covenant. Now, however, the main marker of covenant membership has become faith—a faith in Christ's opening up of the covenant to all those who are “in him.”⁸⁷ Paul can thus remind his readers that “The one who is righteous will live by faith.”⁸⁸ This is true “justification by faith”—covenant membership through faith in Christ's faithfulness, something Wright can term “justification by belief.”⁸⁹

This, then, is what it means to be “right with God.” It is to live within this graciously given covenant, offered un-earned to any who would accept it.⁹⁰ It is to believe in Jesus, and be found in him. Those who would do this live as new creations, with their sins taken away and themselves emboldened by the Spirit to obediently fulfill the call for love that lies at the heart of the Law of Moses. In the meantime, they look toward their future resurrection as the final declaration of their status as covenant members. They stand justified before God.

Implications

The implications of the New Perspective way of thinking are broad; I have not been able to explore every nuance of the argument nor fully elucidate even those that have been reviewed.⁹¹ Yet one simple—and quite personal—realm of implication can be briefly examined: the ethical. Evangelical faith, which centers so solely on the work of Jesus, often requires little ethical behavior from those who claim it as their own.⁹² The New Perspective view that we have seen emphasizes not only one's entrance into the community of the faithful, but the implication that membership in this community must naturally affect and inform one's whole life. This life, characterized as it is by the law of the Spirit—the law of love—clarifies how to read Paul's statements on the body of Christ and its corollary, love (the “more excellent way” in I Cor 13:1-13). It is the sublime character of the covenant community. To be a Christian (and thus a member of the covenant in Christ) is to be one who lives and loves by the Spirit. Insofar as the goal of this covenant is to welcome ever more people into it, love also denotes all outward facing behavior with humanity and the world. Of course faith is needed, of course grace is a reality, of course Christ is the

center of all of this—but the implication of a community of ethical love is highly attractive, an idea which if understood as foundational would necessarily renovate the mission and substance of evangelical faith.

Notes

- ¹ N.T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 18-19.
- ² Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 379.
- ³ See Wright, 11-14 for a brief review of this trend.
- ⁴ James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 338. Here Dunn succinctly summarizes Sanders’ view. We will briefly re-visit Sanders’ work *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* below.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 338-339.
- ⁶ McGrath, 379.
- ⁷ James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul, and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990), 3, 183.
- ⁸ But see Seyoon Kim, *Paul and the New Perspective: Second Thoughts on the Origin of Paul’s Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 295, where Kim argues against mainly Dunn, but also the New Perspective School.
- ⁹ See Wright, 114, “Most of us in the guild of New Testament studies have, I think, taken the path...of searching the texts carefully to see if, and if so to what extent, these things may be so.” A helpful overview of many of these theologians is in Colin G. Kruse, *Paul, the Law, and Justification* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996), 24-53.
- ¹⁰ Kim, 294. Kim attempts to interpret Paul without relying on dogma at all, either that of “the New Perspective or of the Old Perspective,” so that Paul can be taken as a reliable witness to Judaism of the period. In so doing, he concludes that the New Perspective is incorrect in their findings. I somewhat doubt the feasibility of this method.
- ¹¹ Brendyn Byrne, “Interpreting Romans: The New Perspective and Beyond,” *Interpretation* 58 no. 3 (July 2004): 241-252. Available [Online]: HW Wilson. <http://vnweb.hwwilsonweb.com/>. [March 4, 2005].
- ¹² Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 338. See E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 543, for a slightly more nuanced conclusion.
- ¹³ Sanders, 420.
- ¹⁴ Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 338-339.
- ¹⁵ Dunn, *Jesus, Paul, and the Law*, 187. Sanders has often been critiqued on how he has used this idea of “covenantal nomism” in relation to Paul.
- ¹⁶ Wright, 18-19.
- ¹⁷ See above n.9.
- ¹⁸ Peter Stuhlmacher, *Revisiting Paul’s Doctrine of Justification: A Challenge to the New Perspective* (Downer’s Grove: Intervarsity, 2001), 76-77. See here for a short list of such theologians.
- ¹⁹ D. A. Carson, “Summaries and Conclusions,” in *Justification and Variegated Nomism: The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism*, eds. D. A. Carson, et. al. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 1:554. This is the first in a projected two-volume work attempting to provide further examination of “covenantal nomism” (from preface). Obviously, the title of the volume is not accidental. He argues that the time period is

much more complex than covenantal nomism allows for. This might be the case; however, this does not negate conclusions made by the New Perspective, so much as call for further exploration—a thing that most New Perspective scholars are doing.

²⁰ Heikki Räisänen, *Jesus, Paul and Torah: Collected Essays*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series no. 43 trans. David E. Orton (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), 266. Winsomely, he follows this with “except perhaps in Germany.”

²¹ James D. G. Dunn, “In Search of Common Ground,” in *Paul and the Mosaic Law: The Third Durham-Tübingen Research Symposium on Earliest Christianity and Judaism (Durham, September, 1994)*, ed. James D. G. Dunn (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 327-328. The two points that follow are from these pages.

²² Mark A. Seifrid, *Christ, Our Righteousness: Paul's Theology of Justification*, New Studies in Biblical Theology no. 9, ed. D. A. Carson (Downers Grove: Apollos, 2003), 17-25. In this section Seifrid explicitly finds both these self-understandings of second temple Judaism incorrect.

²³ See Frank Thielman, “The Story of Israel and the Theology of Romans 5-8,” in *Pauline Theology: Romans*, eds. David M. Hay and E. Elizabeth Johnson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 3:172-176 for a similar stance on this issue.

²⁴ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 269. See 268-275 for the survey of verses and arguments that bring Wright to this conclusion.

²⁵ See also Thielman, 174.

²⁶ Philip R. Davies, “Didactic Stories,” in *Justification and Variegated Nomism: The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism*, eds. D. A. Carson, et. al. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 1:131.

²⁷ Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 356.

²⁸ Dunn, *Jesus, Paul, and the Law*, 192, within context of 191-194.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, For the former, see 191; the latter, 193. For a (relatively) more complete treatment, see also Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 354-359.

³⁰ Byrne, 2004.

³¹ See Mark A. Seifrid, “Righteousness Language in the Hebrew Scriptures and Early Judaism,” in *Justification and Variegated Nomism: The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism*, eds. D. A. Carson, et. al. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 1:415, where he makes this point before proceeding to conclusions that for him show general shortcomings of a New Perspective view of righteousness. The New Perspective scholarship reviewed here does claim to be Christian scholarship.

³² Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 341. Though purposefully written to argue against the new perspective, volumes such as *Justification and Variegated Nomism* reveal the difficulties in mapping out the Intertestamental period, including its language use. These difficulties, however, have never limited theologians from drawing myriad (and often distinctly incongruent) conclusions directly based upon linguistics. Dunn, of course, is not the only one who has examined the ambiguities of the language of righteousness (e.g., both Ziesler and Wright, who follow).

³³ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 99, 117-118. As with any compartmentalization, what follows is artificial, and thus overlap of ‘dimensions’ is inevitable. This is not, however, explicitly negative; in fact, one aspect of the whole study is to show that righteousness/justification language is multi-dimensional.

³⁴ J. A. Ziesler, *The Meaning of Righteousness in Paul: A Linguistic and Theological Inquiry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 38. This is a fascinating and apt-titled treatment of the topic.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 38-39.

³⁷ Ibid., 39-40.

³⁸ Ibid. Ziesler gives an incredibly thorough treatment of this topic. See especially 70-104. Much more could be said here; suffice it to say the book is fascinating, and language use within the time period complex.

³⁹ Ibid., 41.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 99.

⁴² Ziesler, 42.

⁴³ Ibid., 43.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Seifrid, *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, 440. I feel as though the quite interesting arguments presented here could be as easily put to service for a covenantal understanding as they have been for the creational conclusions Seifrid has drawn. This is, of course, purely opinion.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 425.

⁴⁷ Ziesler, 44.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 44,45.

⁵¹ Others have done this as well, e.g. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 340-346.

⁵² Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 100-101.

⁵³ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 457-460. These lines do blur. Attempting to follow the nuances of traditional doctrinal interpretations of righteousness/justification is not easy!

⁵⁴ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 98. He does not seem to argue against the genitive of origin *per se*, but rather sees the options he favors as more complete and more fully in line with the context of righteousness language at the time of Paul. For a more comprehensive review of the possible understandings of this phrase see N.T. Wright, “On Becoming the Righteousness of God: 2 Corinthians 5:21,” in *Pauline Theology: 1 & 2 Corinthians*, ed. David M. Hay (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 2:200-208.

⁵⁵ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 99.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 103.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 103. These promises include “saving his people, dealing with evil, and doing so impartially.”

⁵⁸ It is worth noting that the limited scope of this review allows for only the briefest delve into what is a very large cavern of Pauline thought and New Perspective interpretation. Regardless of this caveat, enough can be learned from the dive to find a relatively well-rounded answer as to what it means to be “right with God.”

⁵⁹ L. W. Hurtado, “Jesus’ Divine Sonship in Paul’s Epistle to the Romans,” in *Romans and the People of God: Essays in Honor of Gordon D. Fee on the Occasion of*

His 65th Birthday, eds. Sven K. Soderlund and N. T. Wright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 230. The work from which this is taken is very interesting, incorporating theologians from a wide spectrum of methodologies and theological emphases.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 231.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 46.

⁶³ These phrases are actually inverted in the Bible. All verse quotations unless otherwise noted are taken from *The Harper Collins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version*, ed. Wayne A. Meeks, et. al. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993).

⁶⁴ The limitations of this survey don't allow a full Trinitarian/Christological treatment. The basic Christian Trinitarian doctrine is thus assumed for the sake of this argument. A brief note may, however, be helpful: In I Cor 8:6 Paul writes, "Yet for us there is one God, the Father from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist." N.T. Wright, noting the similarity of this section to the Jewish "basic confession of faith" (the *Shema*) in Deuteronomy 6:4, which states "The Lord our God, the Lord is one" (alternate reading in NRSV), has argued that by placing Jesus in the middle of this Jewish confession of Monotheism, he reinterprets the one true God as being both Father and Lord—Jesus and Yahweh (*What Saint Paul Really Said*, 65-67; see chapter 4 for larger treatment).

⁶⁵ Thielman, 190-191.

⁶⁶ Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology*, 209. This is a conclusion drawn from within a narrative analysis of Romans 8:1-11.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 209-210.

⁶⁸ Bruce W. Longenecker, "Defining the Faithful Character of the Covenant Community: Galatians 2.15-21 and Beyond: A Response to Jan Lambrecht," in *Paul and the Mosaic Law: The Third Durham-Tübingen Research Symposium on Earliest Christianity and Judaism (Durham, September, 1994)*, ed. James D. G. Dunn (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2001), 88. He here does not seem to be excluding the more popular New Perspective view (that is, works as covenantal badges), but rather slightly emphasizing this aspect.

⁶⁹ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 160.

⁷⁰ The "if" would seem to read rhetorically in this case, i.e., as "because."

⁷¹ Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology*, 203, as well as N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 153-175. This book is an astonishingly readable treatment of nearly every facet of resurrection imaginable.

⁷² Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 155-157.

⁷³ See above, n.64, for a slightly larger picture of Jesus than has been seen in the main text.

⁷⁴ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 140-142.

⁷⁵ I Cor 15:24

⁷⁶ Recall Ziesler and Sanders statements on this above.

⁷⁷ Thielman, 178. He also notes various Old Testament passages (Ezek 11:19, 18:31, 36:26) that show God promising Israel a new spirit that will “re-create” its heart to make it “new” at the nation’s restoration from exile.

⁷⁸ Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology*, 48. See also 2 Cor 5:17.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Stuhlmacher, 44.

⁸¹ Longenecker, 84,85.

⁸² David A. DeSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods, and Ministry Formation* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 2004), 612-613, 506-507.

⁸³ Ibid, 507.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Robin Scroggs, “Salvation History: The theological Structure of Paul’s Thought (1 Thessalonians, Philippians, and Galatians),” in *Pauline Theology: Thessalonians, Philippians, Galatians, Philemon*, ed. Jouette M. Bassler (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 1:232. Here Scroggs maps out a very interesting salvation history from a narrative framework.

⁸⁶ This would seem to be the main thrust of much of Galatians.

⁸⁷ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 132.

⁸⁸ Rom 1:17.

⁸⁹ N. T. Wright, “Putting Paul Together Again: Toward a Synthesis of Pauline Theology (1 and 2 Thessalonians, Philippians, and Philemon),” in *Pauline Theology: Thessalonians, Philippians, Galatians, Philemon*, ed. Jouette M. Bassler (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 1:185. It is not a declaration that one “earns their righteousness by works” any more than is the traditional idea of “justification by faith.” It is, however, a clarification of terms. See Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 132-133.

⁹⁰ The notion of this covenant membership availing all who believe in Christ is implicit in the notion of the gospel, something that we have unfortunately been unable to really explore. However, see Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 151-165. The question of how this sense of universal availability relates to Paul’s conversion experience is undeniably important, yet it would stray too far from the topic at hand. It is, however, a major focus of Kim’s work—it having been written to counter much of Dunn’s theologizing on the topic. (For example, see Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 181, “It was the encounter with Christ on the Damascus road which revolutionized Paul’s whole faith and life. Christ became the key to understanding God’s purpose for humankind, and indeed God himself...Encountering this Christ turned his whole system of values upside down.”)

⁹¹ Of course, many things could not be covered in this survey, such as a review of Paul’s Adam-Christology, or his self-perception as a missionary to the gentiles. It would also be interesting to examine the New Perspective implication concerning the role of baptism.

⁹² This may be due to the individualistic slant “right standing with God” takes in most evangelical circles, as well as the inherited theological caution concerning any attitude that might dangerously lend itself to heavily-feared practical legalism.

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