

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_churchman\\_os.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php)

# Justified Hesitation? J.D.G. Dunn & The Protestant Doctrine of Justification<sup>1</sup>

Lee Gatiss

For the last two decades, the so-called ‘New Perspective’ has revolutionized Pauline studies. The impact has been most noticeable in studies of ‘the Law’ and of ‘justification’. The first thing to note, however, about the ‘new perspective on Paul’ is that the name is a misnomer. There is no single ‘new perspective on Paul’ but many new perspectives all of which have a common starting point in the work of E.P. Sanders on Palestinian Judaism.<sup>2</sup> This itself is not ‘new’ as such, but a re-working of a hypothesis about the nature of Judaism by G.F. Moore.<sup>3</sup> It was J.D.G. Dunn who coined the term ‘The New Perspective on Paul’ in his Manson Memorial Lecture of 1982,<sup>4</sup> and it has since entered into popular use to refer to the work of scholars such as Sanders, Dunn, and N.T. Wright.

These scholars have levelled criticism, particularly against Martin Luther, on justification. As advocates of the ‘New Perspective’ they claim that Luther significantly misunderstood Paul’s teaching on this point.<sup>5</sup> All subsequent Protestant teaching on justification is assumed to be ‘guilty by association’ or ‘guilty by descent’ of this same fault: as Dunn says, ‘Luther’s line of thinking began to go astray – and so also the Protestant doctrine of justification which stemmed from Luther’.<sup>6</sup> Dunn goes on to claim that his new perspective undercuts ‘the traditional debates of post-Reformation theology...and leaves much of the dispute pointless’.<sup>7</sup>

- 
- 1 This article is a modified form of a short dissertation submitted at Oak Hill Theological College in January, 2000.
  - 2 See his *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (London: SCM, 1977).
  - 3 Especially his “Christian Writers on Judaism” *HTR* 14 (1921).
  - 4 Reprinted as ch. 7 of J.D.G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul, and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville: Westminster, 1990).
  - 5 See, e.g., E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, p. 492, n. 57; Dunn, *Jesus, Paul, and The Law*, pp. 185-7; N.T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), pp. 258-9.
  - 6 Dunn in J.D.G. Dunn and A.M. Suggate, *The Justice of God* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1993), p. 13 (emphasis added). Cf. the similar comment on p. 14.
  - 7 J.D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 344.

In the light of such sweeping statements Christian preachers and teachers may find themselves hesitating. ‘Can I still preach the old doctrine,’ they ask themselves, ‘when the weight of such scholarship seems to be against it?’ To accuse Luther and the other Reformers of misreading Paul on justification is a serious and weighty allegation. Have we been misled all these years? Have Luther and the Reformers led us into thinking that justification means something it never did to Paul? The problem is more acute when we realize just how important our Protestant forebears saw the old doctrine to be. A few citations will quickly show its perceived confessional importance.

Luther declared that if the article of justification stands, the church stands but that if it falls, the church falls.<sup>8</sup> Calvin called this doctrine ‘the main hinge on which religion turns’,<sup>9</sup> while one of his successors at Geneva, Francis Turretin, declared that it is ‘of the greatest importance...the principal rampart of the Christian religion....This being adulterated or subverted, it is impossible to retain purity of doctrine in other places’.<sup>10</sup> More recently, Reformed theologian Robert Reymond has written of justification that it is ‘the heart and core of the gospel’ and that consequently, ‘great care must be taken in teaching this doctrine lest one wind up declaring ‘another gospel’ which actually is not a gospel at all’.<sup>11</sup> Similar assertions are made by many other Protestant theologians including Thomas Cranmer, John Frith, John Foxe, John Owen, George Whitefield, John Wesley, and Jonathan Edwards.<sup>12</sup> What is more, ‘New Perspective’ scholars are also aware of how important justification is; Dunn himself speaks of ‘its central significance for formulating the gospel [and] testing theology’.<sup>13</sup>

If justification is really this important, then we need to be sure we have got it

---

8 WA 40 III. 352.3 ‘*quia isto articulo stante stat Ecclesia, ruente ruit Ecclesia.*

9 J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), III.xi.1, p. 726.

10 F. Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (3 vols.), (Phillipsburg NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1992), p. 633.

11 R.L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), p. 740.

12 For citations see P.H. Eveson, *The Great Exchange* (Bromley: Day One, 1996), pp. 174-7. Cf. also G.J. Spykman, *Reformational Theology: A New Paradigm for Doing Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), pp. 490-1.

13 *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, p. 340.

right. Yet with widespread doubts about the traditional formulations and debates circulating in commentaries, books, and articles it would not be surprising if we were to hesitate before preaching justification. The question is, are we justified in hesitating? Having become convinced of the traditional understanding of the doctrine of justification by grace alone, must we relinquish it under the barrage of attacks from the 'New Perspective'? It is not my aim to examine all the exegetical minutiae of the 'New Perspective' case, or to show that the traditional Protestant understanding of justification is correct. This article is not intended as an exercise in confrontational polemics. More modestly, it is a kind of methodological prolegomenon in which I aim to show that at least one 'new perspective' scholar, J.D.G. Dunn, has not proved his case against the traditional doctrine. If this can be done then we should have no mental reservations about preaching and teaching the traditional Protestant doctrine.

### Has Dunn read Luther (Properly)?

Dunn's major statements on justification are found primarily in his magnum opus, *The Theology of Paul The Apostle*, and also in an important article and book.<sup>14</sup> In his mind there is a clear link between Luther and 'all subsequent Protestants'.<sup>15</sup> He declares, 'However we understand Paul's conversion...it was not a conversion like Luther's. Consequently, it follows that an interpretation of Paul's teaching on justification by faith should not be predicated on the assumption that it was'.<sup>16</sup> The implication is that 'all subsequent Protestants' have made just this mistake, and based their teaching on the faulty assumptions of Luther and the other magisterial Reformers. The negative side of their emphasis on justification, Dunn claims, is:

an unfortunate strain of anti-Judaism....As Luther had rejected a medieval church which offered salvation by merit and good works, the same, it was assumed, was true of Paul in relation to

---

14 J.D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* "The Justice of God: A Renewed Perspective on Justification by Faith" in *JTS* 43.1 (1992); *The Justice of God* (with A.M. Suggate).

15 *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, p. 335; cf. "The Justice of God," pp. 13-14.

16 "The Justice of God," *JTS* 43.1 (1992), p. 4.

the Judaism of his day. Judaism was taken to have been the antithesis of emerging Christianity: for Paul to react as he did, it must have been a degenerate religion, legalistic, making salvation dependent on human effort, and self-satisfied with the results.<sup>17</sup>

There are several problems with this statement, the biggest of which is that it is not backed up with any evidence from the primary sources on Luther. In the footnote for the paragraph above, there is no reference to any of Luther's writings, only to citations found in the work of M. Saperstein. This might be forgivable if it could be demonstrated from elsewhere that Dunn was familiar with Luther at first-hand. All of Dunn's information about the Reformer appears, however, to be from second-hand sources. A search of his other writings reveals that every time Dunn quotes Luther he has gleaned the quotation (or opinion) indirectly from another writer, rather than from Luther's works themselves.<sup>18</sup>

There are only two possible exceptions to this. The first two famous lines of Luther's *The Freedom of a Christian* are quoted directly in Dunn's book *Christian Liberty*: 'A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all'.<sup>19</sup> Another is an

---

17Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, pp. 336-7.

18 See for example:

- (i) The citation of *On the Jews and Their Lies* in "The Justice of God," *JTS* 43.1 (1992), p. 5 (attributed to M. Saperstein);
- (ii) The quotation from *The Preface to James in Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, p. 425 n. 7 (attributed to Kümmel).
- (iii) The comments from *The Preface to the Revelation of St. John* in "The Authority of Scripture According to Scripture Part II" p. 222f n. 70 (attributed to Kümmel).

Apart from the books and articles mentioned already, I searched for references to/by/about Luther in the following works by Dunn: *Jesus, Paul, And The Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville: Westminster, 1990); *Christology in the Making 2* (London: SCM, 1989); *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1977, 1990); "The Authority of Scripture According to Scripture" Parts 1 & 2 *Churchman* 96.2 & 96.3 (1982); *Romans 1-8* (Dallas: Word, 1988); *Romans 9-16* (Dallas: Word, 1988); *The Epistle to the Galatians* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993); *1 Corinthians* (Sheffield: SAP, 1995); *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Paternoster: Carlisle, 1996).

19 *Christian Liberty: A New Testament Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), pages 3-4. The quotation is, he tells us, 'Accessible e.g., in J. Dillenberger, *Martin Luther: Selections from his Writings*' (n. 3) although this is not one of the standard scholarly sources.

allusion (not a quotation) in Dunn's commentary on Romans,<sup>20</sup> but this is also indirectly attributed to Harrisville. Since there are 25 references to Harrisville and only one to Luther in the whole two-volume commentary, it is at least possible that the Luther quotation was gleaned from Harrisville. Even so, it is safe to say that Dunn does not demonstrate a great familiarity with Luther's own works. His knowledge of other Reformers also appears to be meagre and second-hand.<sup>21</sup>

This lack of footnotes referring to primary sources on the people and positions he attacks is all the more surprising since Dunn is normally an assiduous writer of footnotes: in 35 pages of his articles for *Churchman* in 1982 there are 118 footnotes referring to 160 other sources.<sup>22</sup> The fact that he does not interact sufficiently with Luther and his other Reformation opponents leaves him open to the charge of building 'straw men' – something which he has been accused of before when addressing doctrinal issues.<sup>23</sup> This lacuna in his workings makes it very difficult indeed to check his reading of Luther, Calvin and what he calls 'all subsequent Protestants'. In other words, it is impossible to verify, from his published work at least, whether Dunn has actually grappled with the traditional Protestant teaching on justification. This is disappointing given the two pages of bibliography and 224 footnotes in his chapter on justification in *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*. He has certainly not indulged in a careful reading or point-by-point refutation of Luther, or indeed of any classic Protestant writer on justification.

Contrary to Dunn's assertion, neither Luther nor the theologians of the Reformed consensus assert that Judaism was a 'degenerate religion'. Nor do

---

20 Dunn, *Romans 1-8* (Dallas: Word, 1988), p. 247.

21 Knowledge of Luther's contemporary Melanchthon for example. Cf. the five words quoted from *Apology of the Augsburg Confession in Theology of the Apostle Paul*, p. 336 (attributed to Reumann). Five words from Calvin's *Institutes* 1.7.4 are quoted (out of context) in n. 99, p. 431 of *Theology of Paul the Apostle* while the same words are alluded to (and the citation given as *Institutes* 1.7.4-5) in Dunn's *Romans 1-8* p. 454.

22 "The Authority of Scripture According to Scripture" Parts 1 & 2, *Churchman* 96.2 & 96.3 (1982).

23 The *Churchman* articles (above) seek to refute Warfield, yet Dunn only cites his (minor) work seven times! Cf. R. Nicole, "The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture," *Churchman* 97.3 (1983), p. 199.

they think that Luther's experience was parallel to Paul's in the way that Dunn assumes they assume.<sup>24</sup> If Dunn can prove the veracity of these assertions then he has failed to do so by providing references to the relevant works. 'Luther and those who joined him' (Dunn's phrase)<sup>25</sup> remain innocent until proven guilty, and there is no case against them.

### **Romans 7 and the 'Introspective Conscience'**

Some of the references Dunn makes are either incorrect or misleading. In a discussion of Romans 7, for example, he writes:

Paul's conversion was understood as the climax to a long, inward, spiritual struggle, during which Paul had wrestled with the pangs of a troubled conscience – just like Luther....The cries of self-perplexed anguish in Rom. 7:14-25, 'I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate' (7:15), 'Who will deliver me from this body of death?' (7:24), could be drawn in as the self-confession of the pre-Christian Paul. Like Luther and Augustine before him, it could be assumed that Paul had found justification by faith to be the answer to his own spiritual torment, the peace with God which flows from the recognition that God's acceptance is not dependent on human effort.<sup>26</sup>

Here Dunn builds on the work of K. Stendahl<sup>27</sup> to undermine the presentation of justification as the answer to a plagued conscience. Paul, he says, never had this crisis of conscience before he was a Christian, and so it would be wrong to read Paul as if Romans 7 were about pre-Christian angst to which justification was the answer. The problem is, although Luther compares his former zeal as a monk with Paul's zeal as a Pharisee,<sup>28</sup> not once

<sup>24</sup>He states this most forcefully in "The Justice of God," in *JTS* 43.1 (1992), pp. 3-4.

<sup>25</sup>"The Justice of God," p. 3.

<sup>26</sup>"The Justice of God," p. 3.

<sup>27</sup>K. Stendahl, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West" *HTR* 56 (1963).

<sup>28</sup>*Cf.* Luther, "Lectures on Galatians 1-4" (1535) *Luther's Works* American Edition, Volume 26 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1963), p. 68.

in his own account of his 'tower experience' does he compare Paul's conversion to his own.<sup>29</sup> His understanding of justification by faith has nothing whatsoever to do with reading his own experience into Paul. Dunn may think that it is 'no wonder that Luther and those who joined him should assume that Luther's discovery had first been Paul's'<sup>30</sup> but Luther made no such assumption.

Luther and Augustine (as cited by Dunn) do not, in fact, agree on the interpretation of Romans 7. Augustine does apply Romans 7 to himself immediately before what he saw as his conversion in Confessions 8:5. As he narrates his own conversion he seems to suggest that before he was a Christian he was troubled like the 'wretched man' of Romans 7:

I had now no longer my accustomed excuse that, as yet, I hesitated to forsake the world and serve thee because my perception of the truth was uncertain. For now it was certain. But, still bound to the earth, I refused to be thy soldier; and was as much afraid of being freed from all entanglements as we ought to fear to be entangled. Thus with the baggage of the world I was sweetly burdened, as one in slumber, and my musings on thee were like the efforts of those who desire to awake, but who are still overpowered with drowsiness and fall back into deep slumber....On all sides, thou didst show me that thy words are true, and I, convicted by the truth, had nothing at all to reply but the drawling and drowsy words: "Presently; see, presently. Leave me alone a little while". But "presently, presently," had no present; and my "leave me alone a little while" went on for a long while. In vain did I "delight in thy law in the inner man" while 'another law in my members warred against the law of my mind and brought me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members' For the law

---

29 Cf. Luther, "Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings" (1545) in *Luther's Works* American Edition, Volume 34 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1963), pages 336-8. Whether his famous 'reformatory discovery' can really be called his 'conversion' is a moot point, but it is to this experience that Dunn refers in "The Justice of God".

30 Dunn, *ibid.*, p. 3.



of sin is the tyranny of habit, by which the mind is drawn and held, even against its will. Yet it deserves to be so held because it so willingly falls into the habit. “O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death” but thy grace alone, through Jesus Christ our Lord?”<sup>31</sup>

This is the text that Dunn footnotes as a classic example of the kind of retrospective reading he is against.<sup>32</sup> Augustine states quite clearly elsewhere, ‘The man described here is under the Law, prior to grace; sin overcomes him when by his own strength he attempts to live righteously without the aid of God’s liberating grace’.<sup>33</sup> Paul could not, therefore, be speaking of himself as an Apostle and a Christian. Romans 7 seems here in Augustine to be understood as pre-Christian experience. Far from agreeing with this position, however, Luther takes issue with Augustine on precisely this point:

There are some, and among them St. Augustine, who denied that the Apostle here [in Romans 7] speaks of his own person... But the whole passage shows very clearly a strong hatred against the flesh and a sincere love for the Law and all that is good. No carnal man ever does this.<sup>34</sup>

So, according to Luther, Romans 7 is not about the carnal man, the preconversion existence of a Christian. Indeed, Augustine himself changed his mind, and in his major work against the Pelagians he says:

And it once appeared to me also that the apostle was in this argument of his describing a man under the law. But afterwards I was constrained to give up the idea by those words where he

---

31 Confessions 8:5.

32 Dunn, *ibid.*, p. 3, n. 4.

33 Following a quotation of Romans 7:15-16 in Propositions from the Epistle to the Romans 44.2; *Augustine on Romans*, translated by P.F. Landes (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982) p. 17.

34 Luther, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1960) p. 96 (on Romans 7:9ff).

says, “Now, then, it is no more I that do it”....And because I do not see how a man under the law should say, ‘I delight in the law of God after the inward man’; since this very delight in good, by which, moreover, he does not consent to evil, not from fear of penalty, but from love of righteousness (for this is meant by “delighting”), can only be attributed to grace....The apostle is rightly understood to have signified not, indeed, himself alone in his own person, but others also established under grace.<sup>35</sup>

Luther is aware that Augustine changed his mind, and quotes him extensively on the subject. On Romans 7:7f in his lectures on Romans, he writes:

From this passage on to the end of the chapter the apostle is speaking in his own person and as a spiritual man and by no means merely in the person of a carnal man. St. Augustine first asserted this extensively and repeatedly in his book against the Pelagians. Hence in his *Retractations*, I, 23, taking back a former explanation of this passage he says, “...I was absolutely unwilling to understand this passage as referring to the person of the apostle who was already spiritual, but I wanted to refer it to him as a man placed under the Law and not yet under grace. This is the way I first understood these words, but later, after I had read certain interpretations of the divine words by men whose authority impressed me, I considered the matter more carefully and saw that the passage could also be understood of the apostle himself”.<sup>36</sup>

So Luther followed the later Augustine, and did not read his own conversion experience into Romans 7. A footnote in one of Dunn’s books from 1975 might indicate that he is aware of Luther’s interpretation of Romans 7,<sup>37</sup> yet

---

35 Augustine, *Against Two Letters of the Pelagians* I.x.22 and 24; *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), Volume 5, p. 384. See the whole discussion of Romans 7 from I.viii.13ff as well as his statements in *Retractations* I.xxiii.1 and II.i.1 and *Contra Julianum* Book II (3.7 and 4.8).

36 *Luther’s Works*, Volume 25 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1972), p. 327. Cf. also p. 335.

37 See *Jesus and the Spirit* (London: SCM, 1975), p. 444, n. 57.

he does not make this clear in his later work on the new perspective, which appears to indict Luther alongside ‘those who joined him’ for reading Paul retrospectively.<sup>38</sup>

Did those who joined Luther make this mistake? As Packer rightly states, ‘In the sixteenth century, confronted by theologies that referred this whole passage to preconversion experience....Luther, Calvin, and all the magisterial Reformers except Bucer and Musculus invoked the passage as exegeted by [the later] Augustine to show that there is sin in the best Christians’ best works’.<sup>39</sup> The traditional Reformed position reads Romans 7 in the same way as Luther and Calvin. For instance, Melancthon, Beza, B.B. Warfield, Charles Hodge, Louis Berkof and John Murray, as well as puritans such as Owen, Charnock, and Goodwin all read it this way as, it seems, do the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Westminster Confession of Faith.<sup>40</sup>

There may be some in this tradition who read it differently and fall into the trap which Dunn warns us against. Theirs, however, is a self-confessed minority view, and Dunn does not name a single proponent of it in support of his contention. He claims that ‘it was not until the end of the third decade of this century [the twentieth century] that Werner Kümmel effectively undermined the more traditional interpretation of Rom. 7 and prevented it from being used as a piece of pre-Christian autobiography’.<sup>41</sup> Yet the idea that Romans 7 is ‘a piece of pre-Christian autobiography’ was actually undermined so effectively by Luther, Calvin, and others that it cannot be called the ‘traditional interpretation’ at all. Dunn’s allegation that Luther’s preconversion experience has been habitually read back into Paul is thus seen

---

38 See again that statement in ‘The Justice of God’ p. 3: ‘no wonder that Luther and those who joined him should assume that Luther’s discovery had first been Paul’s’.

39 “The Wretched Man Revisited: Another Look at Romans 7:14-25” in S.K. Soderlund & N.T. Wright, *Romans and the People of God* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 71.

40 See Packer, *ibid.*, plus his earlier “The ‘Wretched Man’ in Romans 7” in *Keep in Step with the Spirit* (Leicester: IVP, 1984), pp. 263-70 and A.B.R. Clark, *Delight for a Wretched Man: Romans 7 and the Doctrine of Sanctification* (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 1993), pp. 16-18. Hodge’s position is clear from his commentary, *Romans* (Crossway Books: Wheaton, 1993), pp. 218-25 where he describes it as the ‘ordinary interpretation’.

41 Dunn, “The Justice of God” pp. 3-4.

to be without support.

This is important because Dunn is claiming that Luther and other Protestants have incorrectly stated the doctrine of justification precisely because of this misunderstanding of Paul. Yet the Reformed tradition does not, as Dunn claims, read Luther and Augustine's experience of justification back into the New Testament. Assumptions about Luther's 'introspective conscience' affecting his reading of Paul are without foundation, because Luther does not make all the links Dunn claims he does.<sup>42</sup> He does not 'assume that [his] discovery [of justification] had first been Paul's'.<sup>43</sup> If the traditional doctrine of justification is to be indicted alongside Luther's, as Dunn suggests it can be, then at least the case against Luther has to prove solid. It does not, however, stand up to close scrutiny. Dunn not only misrepresents the traditional Reformation position, but he fails to demonstrate an acquaintance with the primary sources. Dunn's case for abandoning the traditional doctrine of justification rests heavily upon this point, but it is evident that from the start that his attack has not been made with sufficient strength or integrity to cause us to hesitate in preaching it.

### **The Background to Paul's Doctrine**

A further aspect of Dunn's case against the traditional doctrine of justification revolves around his understanding of the relationship between covenantal nomism and medieval soteriology.

[m]ost insidious of all, was the way this reading of Paul's teaching on justification by faith in the light of Luther's experience reinforced the impression that Judaism, and not least the Judaism of Paul's time, was a degenerate religion. Luther had striven to please God by his acts of penitence and good works. The Church of his day taught that salvation could

---

42 See G. Bray, "Justification: The Reformers and Recent New Testament Scholarship" *Churchman* 99 (1995), pp. 103-106 for a more detailed point by point rebuttal of the points against Luther.

43 Dunn, "The Justice of God," p. 3.

be gained by merit, the merit of the saints, that the time spent in purgatory could be diminished by the purchase of indulgences. That was what the discovery of justification by faith had freed him from. It was all too easy to read Paul's experience through the same grid. What Luther had been delivered from was also what Paul had been delivered from. As the medieval church taught salvation by merit and good works, so must the Judaism of Paul's day.<sup>44</sup>

Following Sanders, Dunn is convinced that first century Judaism was not a religion of works, but one of grace. Sanders came up with the label 'covenantal nomism' to describe first century Jewish religion: that is, one got into the covenant by grace, not by works, and that works only played a role after this initial salvation by grace. Dunn argues that Luther and others misunderstood what Paul was trying to say about justification because they thought that Paul was arguing against a legalistic system like medieval Catholicism.

At this point, Dunn distorts medieval soteriology. Although merit and good works were thought by medieval theologians to play a part in salvation, and even of justification, their soteriology was far more nuanced than 'salvation by works' or 'salvation by merit'. In theory at least, all the medieval schools of thought on justification would have defended the concept of grace,<sup>45</sup> in much the same way as Dunn (following Sanders) defends the concept of grace in Judaism.<sup>46</sup> The diluted value of the words 'mercy' or 'grace' (so often not defined as unconditional) in both Medieval Catholicism and Judaism must be recognized.<sup>47</sup> As Seifrid avers, 'In contradiction to Sanders' assumptions [which Dunn follows]...an emphasis on 'mercy' did not necessarily exclude the idea that obedience was a prerequisite to salvation in early Judaism'.<sup>48</sup>

---

44 "The Justice of God," pp. 6-7.

45 See A.E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification* 2 (Cambridge: CUP, 1998), p. 190 on the anti-Pelagian structure of the doctrine throughout its history, especially the medieval period.

46 Dunn, *Theology of the Apostle Paul*, p. 338.

47 See the critique of Sanders in R. Smith, "A Critique of the New Perspective on Paul" *RTR* 58.2 (1999), p. 101.

48 M.A. Seifrid, *Justification By Faith: The Origin and Development of a Central Pauline Theme* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992), p. 133.

A very real synergism was present in both systems, according to works an indispensable role in salvation, even if technically speaking it was still said to be by 'grace'. Judaism may not have been legalistic, but neither did the Reformers assume that the religion of their day was legalistic. Calvin was conscious that in the Catholicism of his day, 'a great part of mankind imagines that righteousness is composed of faith and works'.<sup>49</sup> Opponents of the traditional Protestant doctrine did not dispute the fact that salvation began with grace. It was the place given to works alongside grace that was in contention: 'This is the pivotal point of our disputation,' says Calvin, 'For on the beginning of justification there is no quarrel between us and the sounder Schoolmen'.<sup>50</sup> The doctrine of Luther and others was polemically directed not against legalism per se, as Dunn suggests, but against theologies which, while they spoke of grace in theory, were in practice as 'covenantally nomistic' (semi-Pelagian?) as 'new perspective Judaism'. P.T. O'Brien's conclusion that, 'many advocates of the newer reading of Paul have failed to wrestle with the character of the Reformation debate'<sup>51</sup> is spot on.

Dunn's argument against the traditional doctrine of justification is specifically based on what he sees as Luther's illegitimate equation of Jewish and Roman Catholic soteriology. Having apparently proved that Judaism was not offering salvation by merit, Dunn concludes that Luther was faulty in his understanding and application of Paul's theology of justification. He does not substantiate the existence of such a direct link in Luther's thought; the evidence he provides in the footnote, while containing some quotations from Luther, does not make the point unless his own interpretive comments in the note are read in quotation marks and attributed directly to Luther.<sup>52</sup> If it were possible to provide such evidence he could conceivably argue that subsequent formulations of the doctrine of justification have suffered because of this weak link. Yet once it is seen that covenantal nomism and Medieval semi-Pelagianism have much in common, including a common denial of 'salvation by good works', and that the Reformation doctrine was not aimed at

---

<sup>49</sup> *Institutes*, p. 743 (emphasis added).

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 778.

<sup>51</sup> P.T. O'Brien, "Contemporary Challenges to the Doctrine of Justification By Faith" in R.J. Gibson (ed.), *op.cit.*, p. 19.

<sup>52</sup> See *Theology of the Apostle Paul*, p. 337, n. 7. It is not just a printing error since the same interpretive comments appear with no quotation marks in "The Justice of God," (p. 7, n. 19).

straightforward ‘salvation by works’ anyway, the basis of Dunn’s criticism disappears. There is, therefore, no cause for hesitation here when it comes to preaching the traditional doctrine.

Dunn’s ‘new perspective’ begins by attacking Luther and the other Reformers. We have seen, first, that his attack is not backed up with citations from the primary sources, and that he misunderstands Luther and others on the points in question; and second, that he misunderstands and misrepresents the Reformation debate. That debate wasn’t against a simple ‘justification by works’ theology as he claims, and the New Testament wasn’t interpreted as if it addressed mere legalism either.

These things alone should cause us to doubt whether Dunn has a good case against the traditional Protestant understanding of justification. On the basis of the evidence so far, we would be justified in hesitating to go further with Dunn’s re-reading. But there are some other causes for doubt about the veracity of his arguments too.

### **The Terminology of Justification**

It is surprising that Dunn relies on a dubious linguistic argument to make his terminological assertions. He claims that, “‘righteousness’ is a good example of a term whose meaning is determined more by its Hebrew background than by its Greek form. The point is that the underlying Hebrew thought in both cases (with “righteousness” and “to justify”) is different from the Greek’.<sup>53</sup> To back up his conclusions on the alleged ‘Hebraic’ character and relational meaning of *dikaiosune* he cites 1 Samuel 24:17 as his sole biblical example: ‘Saul said to David, “You are more righteous than I; for you have repaid me good, whereas I have repaid you evil.”’<sup>54</sup> This, however, is clearly one of the uses of *dikaios/tsadiq* which has by no means been ignored by Protestant theologians but which is normally classified as

---

<sup>53</sup> *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, p. 341.

<sup>54</sup> *Theology of Paul the Apostle*, p. 341. The reference is 1 Samuel 24:18 in the LXX and Hebrew.

comparative, a very rare use of a term<sup>55</sup> which is usually forensic/legal in its meaning.

Here Dunn follows the work of a scholar from the nineteenth and early twentieth century, Hermann Cremer, in ‘realigning the debate on “righteousness” to its Hebrew background with the resulting emphasis on relationship’.<sup>56</sup> What Dunn doesn’t say is that Cremer’s approach came under severe attack at the turn of the century, but most decisively in 1961 from James Barr. Barr’s seminal work, *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, severely undermined any attempt to appeal to an absolute dichotomy between ‘Hebrew thought’ and ‘Greek thought’, a dichotomy that Cremer (and Dunn) posits.<sup>57</sup> That this distinction cannot be easily and simply made is a recognized axiom of lexical semantics,<sup>58</sup> and is discouraged in basic exegetical handbooks. As Carson says, ‘If one mentions titles like Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek in a room full of linguistically competent people, there will instantly be many pained expressions and groans...one should be suspicious of all statements about the nature of the ‘Hebrew mind’ or ‘the Greek mind’ if those statements are based on observations about the semantic limitations of words of a language in question’.<sup>59</sup> Yet Dunn freely, and without qualms or reservations, contrasts the ‘Greek worldview’ with ‘Hebrew thought’<sup>60</sup> – ‘Hebrew thought’ and ‘the Graeco-Roman concept’.<sup>61</sup> Although this may not be the precise fallacy so comprehensively attacked by Barr, it is certainly too simplistic a presentation of the linguistic arguments. It also compares very unfavourably with the detailed work on the meaning of justification which can be found in the work of Calvin and Turretin, or in the

55 See Turretin for example, *op.cit.*, p. 643 who lists Ezekiel 16:51-52 and Jeremiah 3:11 as other examples of the comparative use.

56 *Theology of the Apostle Paul*, page 341-2, n. 27. See the even more direct reliance on Cremer in “The Justice of God” in *JTS* 43.1 (1992), p. 16. Cremer’s work is *Die paulinische Rechtfertigungslehre im Zusammenhange ihrer geschichtlichen Voraussetzungen* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1900).

57 J. Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: OUP, 1961). See especially chapters two, three and eight, where the concept itself and Cremer specifically, are refuted.

58 See M. Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994). Cremer is especially criticised in the section running from pp. 18-28.

59 D.A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), p. 44.

60 *Theology of the Apostle Paul*, p. 341.

61 “The Justice of God,” p. 16.



more recent work of John Murray<sup>62</sup> or Mark Seifrid.<sup>63</sup> At the very least, Dunn's linguistic understanding of the key terms in the debate on justification must be questioned because it is not very thorough.

On the basis of this linguistic argument, Dunn quickly dismisses Protestant–Roman Catholic disputes over the meaning of *dikaioo* as 'either/or exegesis'. He claims that:

The recognition of the essentially relational character of Paul's understanding of justification also speaks with some immediacy to the traditional debates of post-Reformation theology. In fact, it largely undercuts them and leaves much of the dispute pointless. The debate on whether 'the righteousness of God' was subjective or objective genitive, 'an activity of God' or 'a gift bestowed by God,' can too easily become another piece of either-or exegesis. For the dynamic of relationship simply refuses to conform to such analysis....The other dispute, as already noted, was whether the verb *dikaioo* means 'make righteous' or 'reckon as righteous'. [o]nce again the answer is not one or the other but both.<sup>64</sup>

Protestant theologians generally conclude that the verb 'to justify' means 'to reckon as righteous' whereas the Catholic position is that it means 'to make righteous'. According to Dunn, it means both, and the debate itself is pointless. Space forbids an examination of exactly why this distinction has been made historically. It is certainly illegitimate, however, to write off centuries of 'either-or exegesis' with the simple answer that both sides were

---

62The Appendix on the meaning of the terms in Murray's recently reprinted commentary on Romans is called 'the finest available in English' by Robert Reymond (Reymond, *New Systematic Theology*, p. 743, n. 49).

63See his excellent *Christ, Our Righteousness* (Leicester: Apollos, 2000) and "Righteousness language in the Hebrew Scriptures and early Judaism: Linguistic considerations critical to the interpretation of Paul" in D.A. Carson (ed.), *Justification and Variegated Nomism 1: The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism* (Tübingen & Grand Rapids: Mohr [Siebeck], forthcoming).

64*Theology of Paul the Apostle*, p. 344.

right. It is not as if no-one has ever tried to find a mediating position between Protestant and Catholic doctrine until now! Dunn claims that he does not want to set aside the Reformation doctrine, that 'there is no call to set aside the often penetrating insights of Reformation and Protestant restatements of the doctrine' and that he only wishes to 'restate a more rounded and richer and more biblical doctrine of justification'.<sup>65</sup> What his redefinitions mean though is that the Reformers actually got it wrong, for their positive assertions always go hand in hand with negative denials. They do not say that *dikaioo* means 'reckon as righteous'. What they say is that it means 'reckon as righteous' and definitely not 'make righteous' – the negative always accompanying the positive.

### Works of the Law

There is also cause for doubt over Dunn's understanding of the phrase 'works of the law'. Paul's insistence that 'works of the law' cannot justify (Rom. 3:20) sounds strange in the light of Sanders' reconstruction of Judaism. If the law was not, and never had been, a way of 'getting in' as far as Judaism was concerned, what was Paul opposing? Dunn suggests that 'works of the law' ought to be understood as the Law of Moses as it operated socially. In other words, they are those works which particularly separate Jews from Gentiles in society: circumcision, the food laws, and the Sabbath.<sup>66</sup> 'Works of the Law' were not works done to earn God's favour, but distinctive works done by those already inside the covenant community: they were not for 'getting in' but 'staying in' – or as Dunn puts it, "'Works of the Law" is the Pauline term for "covenantal nomism"'.<sup>67</sup>

This is a reasonable and thoroughgoing attempt to reconcile Sanders' new perspective with what Paul actually says. Dunn denies that the phrase refers only to circumcision, the food laws and the Sabbath. What he says is that 'in a context where the relationship of Israel with other nations is at issue, certain laws would naturally come more into focus than others'.<sup>68</sup> Yet, if

---

65 "The Justice of God" p. 21; cf. *Theology of Paul*, p. 367.

66 *Theology of Paul*, pp. 354-9 especially p. 356.

67 *Ibid.*, p. 355.

68 *Theology of Paul*, p. 358.

‘works of the law’ really does refer to works which separate Jew from Gentile then why does he only highlight ceremonial aspects of the Law? Why not the moral and ethical precepts of the Law, such as those which forbade homosexuality for example? Jews and Gentiles were certainly distinct as regards their accepted sexual ethics.

In any case, Dunn’s suggestion about the meaning of ‘works of the law’ is by no means a new suggestion, as he appears to think. The traditional doctrine of justification often interacts with a view that sees ‘works of the law’ as referring only to works of the ceremonial law, or to distinctly ‘Jewish’ works.<sup>69</sup> This view can be traced back to Pelagius, who argued that ceremonial works are excluded by Paul, but not moral works, thus relying on that old distinction between civil, ceremonial and moral law.<sup>70</sup> The purpose of this in Pelagius is to reintroduce some element of works into justification: to allow moral works to count before God while explaining Paul’s allergy to ‘works of the law’. Calvin calls this view ‘an ingenious subterfuge’ which, regardless of its long pedigree is ‘utterly silly’. He spends some time discussing it but concludes: ‘Even schoolboys would hoot at such impudence. Therefore, let us hold as certain that when the ability to justify is denied to the law, these words refer to the whole law’. Calvin tries to explain why Paul speaks occasionally of ‘works of the law’ instead of ‘works’ generally: even legalists, he says, would only give such weight to works which had the ‘testimony and vouchsafing of God’ behind them (i.e. those written in God’s own Law).<sup>71</sup> Calvin is also not unaware of the fact that these ritual-ceremonial laws functioned as ‘badges’ to exclude the Gentiles.<sup>72</sup>

Turretin also interacts with this view of ‘works of the law’ which Dunn suggests. He points out that if the socially-excluding ceremonial law alone was to be excluded, then justification would have been ascribed to the moral law, which it never is. Using the New Testament he shows that ceremonial

---

69 See the discussion in Calvin, *op.cit.*, pp. 749-50; Turretin, *op.cit.*, p. 641; C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology* Vol. 3 (London: Thomas Nelson: 1873), pp. 134-5.

70 A distinction traceable through Aquinas, *cf.* D.A. Carson, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), p. 35 at least to Pelagius (see n. 36, p. 749 of the Westminster Press edition of Calvin’s *Institutes*).

71 Quotations from Calvin, *op.cit.*, pp. 749-50.

72 See *Institutes* II.vii.17 for example.

works brought with them the obligation to fulfil the whole Law of Moses, and so Paul had opposed them because of this larger implication. Other people interact with this sort of view as well, including James Buchanan<sup>73</sup> and John Owen, who claims to show ‘the vanity of that pretence’.<sup>74</sup> The Reformed consensus on the subject is that ‘works of the law’ includes all works generally.<sup>75</sup> This is not a mere assumption but a well thought-through conclusion reached in dialogue with an opposing opinion which saw ‘works of the law’ as specifically ceremonial or distinctively ‘Jewish’. Dunn appears to be unaware of just how much thinking has been done on this precise issue over the past few centuries.

As G.K. Chesterton says somewhere, ‘You can find all the new ideas in the old books; only there you will find them balanced, kept in their place, and sometimes contradicted and overcome by other and better ideas. The great writers did not neglect a fad because they had not thought of it, but because they had thought of it and all of the answers to it as well’. Dunn may be right to draw our attention to the historical background of Paul’s writings on justification, but his new perspective on ‘works of the law’ is not actually very new at all, and the issues he raises have not been ignored over the centuries. The reasons for considering them may have changed, but many of the answers were thought of long ago. Dunn cannot therefore use what he sees as a new insight to undermine the old doctrine.

## Conclusion

To conclude then, are we justified in hesitating to preach the traditional Protestant doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone because of the work of Christ alone? Is this doctrine, as is traditionally held, the answer to the question, ‘How can a sinner be saved?’ or must we redefine the question and the answer as Dunn suggests? I think that on the evidence provided here, we have no need to hesitate. We must still be convinced that

---

73 J. Buchanan, *The Doctrine of Justification* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1997), pp. 66ff and 349ff.

74 Cf. John Owen, *The Doctrine of Justification By Faith*, pp. 278-82 in *The Works of John Owen* W. H. Goold (ed.), (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1998) Vol. 5., p. 282.

75 Cf. Hodge, *op.cit.*, p. 137; Reymond, *op.cit.*, p. 749

the traditional doctrine is biblically faithful and theologically consistent. If that is so, however, there is no need to pause too long on account of Dunn's new perspective.

Professor Dunn's contributions to New Testament scholarship have been weighty, learned, and highly stimulating. His great skill as a communicator comes across in everything he writes. Yet, as I have tried to show, while his knowledge is deep it may not always be broad enough to be reliable in areas outside of modern (twentieth-century) Pauline scholarship. His contributions to the complex and fast-moving debates on the 'new perspective' are essential reading, particularly for those with an interest in the doctrine of justification (such as all Christian ministers). The historical and doctrinal conclusions which he comes to, however, should be handled with great care. His indictment of Luther and 'all subsequent Protestants' for misunderstanding Paul's theology of justification has been demonstrated to rely on second-hand evidence and (in places) fallacious logic and exegetical technique. Some of his ideas are not as new as the name 'new perspective' would suggest. So therefore there is no need to hesitate on Dunn's account in preaching the gospel of justification as we have received it.

LEE GATISS is currently engaged in research at Oak Hill Theological College in London.