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Review Article

PAUL AMONG THE POSTLIBERALS

Douglas Harink

Grand Rapids, MI., Brazos Press, 2003. 284pp pb £18.99

ISBN 158743041X

The field of Pauline studies has, at least since Albert Schweitzer, been the scene of long-running skirmishes and some open battles between liberals and conservatives. It has also been the scene of some real progress in understanding, from both sides, though perhaps at times in the form of reacting to the claims of one's opponents.

Postliberalism has presented a somewhat different challenge, because it appears to have moved on from the deconstruction/reconstruction of liberalism to a more conservative approach to the historicity of the texts, and to a more literal reading of Paul as Paul. Readers who wish to know more about postliberalism (or postBarthianism, as it could also be called) will find a summary in the Introduction. The use of traditional language by postliberal scholars has served to diminish the obvious differences between themselves and conservatives, and the fact that many conservatives have themselves absorbed, to a greater or lesser degree, the less objectionable assertions of the sceptical liberals, has resulted in a closing of the gap between the two. The works of men like N T Wright have gone even further towards establishing a common understanding on many formerly controverted areas.

There is one area, however, that is still a cause of major controversy, that of justification by faith. While this is the central pillar of the mechanism of salvation in Reformed theology, the assertion of the New Pauline Perspective men, and of the postliberals also, is that Luther in particular fundamentally misunderstood Paul's teaching, but taught it in such a way as to make it very difficult for those who follow him in this matter to permit any change. Harink acknowledges as much in the first chapter of this book, on justification (p. 29).

The chapter is entitled "Justification—Beyond Protestantism", a title likely to arouse the suspicion of some readers. Harink begins by examining the phrase *πίστεως Χριστου*, which, he asserts, Luther mistranslated as 'faith *in* or *towards* Christ', but which AV correctly translates as 'faith *of* Christ'. However the real argument is less about translation and more about

interpretation. For even the correct AV translation will be interpreted wrongly if approached anthropocentrically. The notion, says Harink, that human beings need faith in Christ in order to be saved from their sins, is not one that finds support in Paul. The problem faced by human beings is not that they have sinned and need to be forgiven, but that, by rejecting the only true God in favour of idols, their lives have become corrupted. It is a denial of knowledge leading to error, rather than an inability to please God because of the presence of indwelling sin.

Now, it is perfectly correct to assert that the Bible can be read in this way; the revelation of God to the world is also the revelation of wisdom. Conversely, the rejection of that revelation, and the adopting of a false revelation as typified by idolatry, is a refusal to receive knowledge, and so to live with the consequences of ignorance, consequences with far-reaching implications for the lives of the ignorant idolater. Thus God's controversy with Israel prior to the exile was that she had rejected the life-giving wisdom of YHWH in exchange for the deathly ignorance of idolatry. God allowed this to come to its natural conclusion, and Israel 'died' in exile. It is only a return to God (repentance) that causes God to revive them. Thus Harink's (and many other NPP) readings of Romans 1-3 state that this is a polemic, not against fallen human nature *per se*, but against idolatrous Gentiles as opposed to monotheistic and faithful Jews. Indeed, Harink goes on to argue that Paul paid little or no attention to faith, because he himself had not been called to *faith in* the risen Jesus of Nazareth so much as to *recognition of* the risen Jesus as Messiah. Paul's purpose in preaching was to set the facts before people in such a way that they too would recognise him. Furthermore, the Gospel call was not to reject empty works and instead rest in faith, but to work for God rather than idols. Harink is careful to deny that works in Paul were intended to prepare one for grace, or that salvation was earned by them. "Their salvation and sanctification is all through the gracious work of the triune God" (p. 34). He does say that Paul's call to the Thessalonians (his key passage here) was not to have faith in Jesus, and then to live out that faith in practical obedience. Rather, their turning from idols, their standing fast under persecution, and their patient waiting for the coming of the Lord is their participation in the work of grace.

Furthermore, there is no mention of 'the law', 'works' or 'justification by faith' in the epistles that are addressed to Gentile congregations, such as those at

Corinth, Ephesus and Thessalonica. These matters only become relevant when Jews and Gentiles are in mixed company. This is reflected in Wright's statement that Paul only uses 'works of the law' as a polemical tool in his arguments over 'table fellowship' between groups who have sought to distinguish themselves by certain signs, such as circumcision and the food laws. Harink asserts that Paul is only ever negative about 'works' and 'works of the law' when membership of the Abrahamic (covenant) family is thought of as being through *both* Christ *and* Torah-observance. Elsewhere, where this tension does not exist, Paul is entirely positive about 'good works'. The law (Torah) serves to distinguish rather than to divide Jewish Christian from Gentile Christian. The Gentile does not have to become a Jew to be in the covenant family; the Jew does not have to observe Torah in order to stay in. Both are in by grace. Indeed, the attitude of the Jerusalem apostles in Gal. 2 is not one of discouragement in Torah-observance. But the 'Edict' handed down by the apostles, recorded in Acts 15, does suggest something a little different, and the statement by Peter in v 10 shows very clearly that 'works of the law' were recognised as being a burden none could bear. This verse is overlooked by Harink.

Harink does not follow Sanders and Wright in their understanding of 'works of the law' as mere 'covenant badges'. His attitude is much closer to that of Reformed theology than that of the NPP men. He maintains, quoting Rom. 7:12, that Torah is by itself a good thing. However, because it has no power of itself to grant life, it is much more easily "captured and used by powers inimical to it...the power of sin and death..." (p. 40). What is required is something (or, properly, someone) that has actual power to deliver from these things, namely the crucified and risen Messiah. Law-observance or nonobservance are not the issue; reconciliation to God and being made 'one people' in the risen Christ is. The power of the resurrection, as revealed in Jesus and promised to all who are 'in' him, is the power we need, and to which we are called.

What, then, *can* we say about πίστewς Χριστου? It must be read, not as anthropocentric (as though faith from the individual towards Christ is the necessity) but as Christocentric. For Harink this means adopting the translation 'the faithfulness of Christ' (a legitimate translation) and applying it to "God's faithfulness in relation to Jesus' faithfulness" (p. 41). The result is that justification (or rectification, as Harink prefers, borrowing from Richard Hays) is

the definitive, cosmic, apocalyptic act of the one God of Israel in Jesus Christ, whereby this God, through the death and resurrection of the Faithful One, conquers the powers which hold the nations in bondage and reconciles the world to himself, in order that he might create in Christ a new people, indeed, finally a whole new world, in which loyalty, obedience and faithfulness to the one God of Israel is made possible among the nations in the power of the Holy Spirit (p. 44).

Or, the death of Jesus Christ, in perfect obedience to the will of his heavenly Father, is the means whereby, without reference to human beings (though with the salvation of human beings as its object) God actually reconciles all things to himself and creates a new people who will be obedient (faithful) to him.

For Harink this has an important exegetical value. While the language of justification may only be present in those passages that (apparently) deal with table-fellowship between believing Jews and believing Gentiles, this definition of justification (hence of the faithfulness of God) is present in the descriptions of Paul's missionary activity, in letters such as 1 Thessalonians. Justification by (the) faith(fulness of Jesus Christ) becomes once more the central doctrine in Paul's theology, for it is this that makes sense of the *δικαιοσύνην θεου*, about which Wright is so concerned. Or, God's covenant faithfulness in delivering Israel, and so the cosmos, cannot be separated from justification by faith; without the latter there is no former. That said, those texts which have been considered traditionally to represent the heart of Paul's gospel (Rom 1:17, etc.) must not be allowed to over-dominate. The theology of justification by (the) faith(fulness of Jesus Christ) is present throughout Paul's writings, and should be seen more widely than the 'key texts'.

Harink concludes this chapter with a fairly lengthy section, dealing with the contributions from Karl Barth, John Yoder, and Stanley Hauerwas. Since his own position, as outlined above, owes more to them than to the New Pauline Perspective—indeed, it often stands against the NPP—we can see why this volume is entitled 'Paul Among the Postliberals'. This brings us to the nub of the matter; why was a challenge ever raised to the Reformed position, and why has it been so apparently successful?

To answer the first part we must go back to the work of Albert Schweitzer.

Those who wish to know more could begin with NT Wright's *What Saint Paul Really Said*, pp. 12ff. In essence, Schweitzer raised a challenge to the prevalent view that Paul was more influenced by Hellenism than Judaism. To him, justification by faith was an anti-Jewish doctrine, and was never the centre of Paul's theology. Rather, the centre is found in 'being in Christ'. This illuminated Schweitzer's next question, What does Paul mean for us today? Living 'in Christ' worked out practically in Schweitzer by his spending many years as a medical missionary.

In 1963 Krister Stendhal published his seminal essay, 'The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West', in which he, apparently, argued that Paul's conversion experience should be normative for us, rather than Luther's. Paul was not troubled by a guilt-ridden conscience like Luther, and Paul's response to being confronted by the risen Messiah 'merely' caused him to re-align his chronology for God's dealings with the cosmos (to borrow from Wright). Luther, on the other hand, was freed from a deeply troubled conscience caused by his sense of alienation from God, when he saw that God had come near to him in Christ, and would continue to come to the penitent heart. This is the introspectiveness against which Stendhal contended. The normal understanding of the human condition has, in Western Reformed theology, been moulded by Luther's experience, as any reader of *Pilgrim's Progress* will testify.

There is a second problem, according to the NPP. Paul has been wrongly read as confronting Jewish Pelagianism—that the 'works of the law' have been seen as Jewish equivalents of medieval Catholicism. Not so, say Sanders and Wright, the Jewish works of the law are merely their racial badges, their covenantal boundary markers. It has been demonstrated (by J V Fesko, to name but one) that this is a misreading of Calvin, who thought nothing of the sort. However, it was certainly the view of at least some of his successors. Bishop J.C. Ryle, for instance, used the analogy of Pharisees and Sadducees to confront the twin cancers of ritualism and liberalism. Thus the assertion by Wright that this *is* the view of the Reformers may not be fair; and the assertion by Fesko that this view has no place in Reformed theology is equally unfair. Harink's reading of 'works of the law' is certainly closer to the Reformed position, though it appears to owe more to Yoder's *Politics of Jesus* than any recognisably Reformed theology.

But one would wish to challenge the assertion that Reformed theology has read the Augustine-Pelagius debate back into Paul. The trouble with the ‘Judaizers’ has always been represented as one of semi-Pelagianism, the attempt to add works to grace. Harink asserts that Paul’s concern was with Gentile believers who wished to add ‘works of the law’ to complete their justification (p. 39), which justification is in fact complete (begun and ended) in Jesus Christ. It was by his obedience that they were (and we are) justified, not by their own obedience. This does beg a question; Why does Paul not tell the Jews to give up law obedience if their justification is complete in Jesus Christ? The answer appears to be that, because they are Jews, Torah-observance is still part of their national identity (back to Sanders and Wright), though not the means or ground of justification. Where Harink differs from the NPP men is in his definition of ‘Torah’; for him it is anything to do with Torah, for them it is the boundary-markers of circumcision, kosher, and sabbath.

There is a third problem. The notion of imputation has disappeared. Harink mentions it in his definition of the Reformed doctrine of justification by faith, but it is elusive from then on. The book lacks an index (though can boast a Detailed Table of Contents) which is a drawback. In his 2003 Rutherford House Lecture, N T Wright asks,

Is there then no ‘reckoning of righteousness’ in, for instance, Romans 5.14–21? Yes, there is; but my case is that this is not God’s own righteousness, or Christ’s own righteousness, that is reckoned to God’s redeemed people, but rather the fresh status of ‘covenant member’, and/or ‘justified sinner’, which is accredited to those who are in Christ, who have heard the gospel and responded with ‘the obedience of faith’.

This is after he has dismissed 2 Cor 5.21 as having any bearing on the matter. His exegesis of this verse will be found in *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, p. 305. His argument is not unreasonable, and what follows is my own interpretation of what Wright has written.

This verse, taken as following on from v 20, and in accordance with the major theme of the epistle, is to do with Paul’s vindication of his own apostleship, against the claims of the super-apostles. In short, Paul’s whole argument in the verses immediately preceding v 21 is that by the resurrection of Jesus Christ all

who are in him are new creatures, v 17, and all things are reconciled to God through Jesus Christ, and the ministry of reconciliation has been given to ‘us’, the apostles. This is explained in v 19f, where Paul shows that this ministry of reconciliation was first working in and through Christ, God not imputing sin to those who were being reconciled, and that since Christ is ascended on high this ministry is now continued by those who are his ambassadors, whereby God beseeches by them, saying ‘be reconciled to God’. AV shows the translation error very clearly, where the word ‘you’ is added in italics. This goes back to Tyndale. Wright asserts that it ought not to be there; Paul is not beseeching the Corinthian church, who are already the church of God with the saints in all Achaia, 1.1, (*contra* Calvin, who speaks of the need for believers to be continually reconciled) but wherever he goes his method is to beseech all men in this manner. The ministry Paul and his co-workers have is, by appointment, the ministry which Christ had; which ministry is the outworking of the δικαιοσύνην θεου, the righteousness of God, v 21. Thus Paul and his co-workers have become what Christ was—the righteousness of God at work in the ministry of reconciliation. Unfortunately, Wright says nothing about the first part of that verse, ‘he has made him to be sin for us who knew no sin’. This can only be understood as referring to the imputation of sin; albeit of sin to Christ. Coupled with v 19, it is clear that Paul had a doctrine of imputation, at least regarding the imputation of sin to man to condemnation or to Christ to reconciliation.

Wright does not finally and completely exclude imputation, and we shall have to wait for Volume 4 for his definitive statement on justification by faith. However, both the NPP and the postliberals have managed to remove from their understanding the key to the mechanism of justification and reconciliation as held in Reformed theology. Wright argues that the forensic declaration that an individual is righteous does not depend on the righteousness of the judge (except in so far as the judge judges justly); rather, the declaration is based on the fact that the law has nothing to say against the accused, who must then be acquitted. There is some truth in this, especially (as Wright has also pointed out) righteousness is not a substance or a gas that can be passed across the court room. (This has been unfairly parodied by one critic of Wright, who claims he believes the declaration of righteousness is like ‘passing gas’.)

This does appear to be a weakness in both the NPP and the postliberal readings

of Paul; on what basis does God consider a person righteous? Against Wright, Reformed theology has always maintained that the law has a very great deal to say against individuals. The NPP downplaying of imputation leaves the matter with our 'being in Christ', whereby we are partakers of his righteousness, though this is seen as the direct consequence of election, at least in Wright's thinking. The postliberal view that this righteousness is in fact the faithfulness of God to the Abrahamic covenant (a view shared by the NPP), coupled with the startling assertion that Paul never paid much attention, if any, to faith on the part of individuals, and without the notion of election, leaves the matter with an assent to the gospel claim that Jesus is Messiah. At least Wright believes that faith is necessary, and that it is not a work that must be rewarded with the declaration of righteousness but is the first work of the Holy Spirit in the individual who is being saved. Furthermore, he is clear that none can say 'Jesus is Lord' without the Holy Spirit. In his recent commentary on Romans (NIB series) he says, 'There is no such thing in New Testament theology as a Christian who does not have the spirit of God dwelling in him or her'. However, the mechanism of salvation (a concept probably alien to both postliberalism and NPP) needs addressing; to use the words of Job, 'How can a man be righteous before God?'

In his Rutherford House lecture Wright does include a section on the *Ordo Salutis*. He sums up his view in this way,

God takes the initiative, based on his foreknowledge; the preached word, through which the Spirit is at work, is the effective agent; belief in the gospel, that is, believing submission to Jesus as the risen Lord, is the direct result.

It is unlikely that any Reformed Christian could object to this, as far as it goes, but there is nothing here about *how* God forgives sin.

There is a fourth problem. If the assertion of Stendhal regarding the introspective conscience of the West is correct, then much of what passes for worship today is entirely misplaced. A good number of the classic hymns still sung in many churches would have to be abandoned. Whether modern compositions would fare any better I cannot say, as I have almost no experience of them.

Further, the Anglican liturgy would require extensive revision. The Book of Common Prayer, with its emphases on the confession of individual sin and the forgiveness of God for all that ‘truly repent and unfeignedly believe his holy Gospel’, the whole doctrine of the Lord’s Supper, and much else beside, would become irrelevant. Indeed, worship of any kind in the Reformed tradition, whether liturgical or not, would require major rethinking in line with the new understandings outlined above.

This leaves us with our second question; why has the challenge to the Reformed position been so apparently successful? My answer to this is likely to ruffle a few feathers.

Firstly, because the advances of liberalism have gone on quietly eating away at the heartwood of Reformed theology. Confidence in the text of Scripture, certainty over authorship of various books and epistles, and the lure of academic respectability have all played their part in breaking up the foundations on which Reformed theology has stood — the Bible. What we are left with is a veneer of orthodoxy, hiding a rotten mess beneath. Until the Bible is once more regarded as *the* authoritative self-revelation of God to mankind, until confidence is restored in the authorship and accuracy of each part, there will be no certainty about the very means we have of determining these questions.

Secondly, because Reformed theology has tied itself too closely with an Aristotelian systematising of dogma. The Bible has come to be treated, in effect, as a great mine from which treasures must be wrested, rather than as a coherent and straightforward revelation of the saving acts of God in history. The voices of the individual biblical authors have become muted, even distorted, by the adopting of a reading of the Bible that is alien to it. The Epistle to the Romans is NOT Paul’s systematic theology; it is a coherent statement of theology in its own right, the definitive statement by Paul of what God has done and is doing in the cosmos according to his sovereign promises to Abraham.

Thirdly, and as a consequence of the second point, Reformed theology has, by and large, lost the ability to exegete Scripture. There is plenty of eisegesis; precious little exegesis. Defenders of Reformed theology are unequipped to

answer the exegetical arguments advanced by Bishop Wright and others. As one person has put it recently, “We do not believe that an appeal to a Reformed or Lutheran tradition carries any weight unless it is supported by proper exegesis”. Yet in practice many unsupported appeals are being made, and are being ignored.

Where does this leave the Reformed doctrine of justification by faith, Luther’s mark of a standing and a falling church? If the challenge is unconvincing, nothing changes, and Reformed theology can continue after it has shown the fundamental errors of the challenge. However, if the challenge does carry conviction, and I believe it does, then either of two things are required.

Either, Reformed scholars are going to have to work a good deal harder to answer the challenge, being prepared to go back again and again to the Bible, to read the prodigious output of the new schools, and to take up their arguments and deal with them fairly and squarely.

Or, we shall be able to wave farewell to the Reformers, the Reformation, and the Puritan legacy, and step into a bright new future.

Now if we consider that the doctrine of justification by faith has at its very core the salvation of men and women and children, who justly face the wrath of God because of their sins, and if we consider that the postliberal challenge and the NPP challenge are equally damaging to sinners like ourselves, then it will be of necessity the first course we adopt. But if we do adopt this course, let us do so in the knowledge that at least some of those with whom we deal are fellow believers, and that it may be that we have to face the possibility that our own positions need correcting in places, and that, above all, we are not seeking our own glory.

Soli deo Gloria!

EDWARD J MALCOLM
Reading