# Rescuing Paul from the Reformation?

## Reading Paul After the New Perspective

A significant part of the fuel that propelled the Reformation under Martin Luther was Paul’s letter to the Romans and its teaching about righteousness or justification (the same word in Greek) by faith. Luther speaks dramatically of the change Paul’s letter brought to his life and thinking:

Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God,…

Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience. Nevertheless, I beat importunately upon Paul at that place, most ardently desiring to know what St. Paul wanted.…

At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, “In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live.’” There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith….

Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Luther moved from an “extremely disturbed conscience” to a new birth that seemed as if he had entered paradise itself. Luther’s experience inspired other similar movements toward reform. John Wesley’s rebirth grew out of hearing Luther’s comments on Romans:

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther’s preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed.[[2]](#footnote-2)

For about 450 years from the time of the Reformation, Paul was read through the lens of Luther. Paul too was seen as a person of troubled conscience who struggled with the legalism of Judaism just as Luther had struggled with the legalism of Catholicism. Paul also found peace as he was freed from fear of an angry God. Righteousness through faith in Christ brought the assurance of personal salvation.

During the last half century, this reading of Paul has been questioned by what has been termed the “New Perspective” on Paul, although in reality there have actually been a series of somewhat diverse “new perspectives.” What they have in common is a challenge to the Reformation reading of Paul and the desire to rescue Paul from that misreading. A paper of this scope can only scratch the surface of this movement (N.T. Wright’s latest book on Paul has 1688 pages).[[3]](#footnote-3) What I will attempt to do is outline some of the main contours of the various challenges to the Reformation readings of Paul and offer some brief reflections.

## Paul’s Robust Conscience

Paul’s “troubled conscience” was one of the first ideas in the Reformation reading of Paul to be challenged. In 1961 Krister Stendahl delivered his famous lecture “The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West.”[[4]](#footnote-4) He argued that Paul and Luther had very different experiences, and that “righteousness by faith” answers different questions for them. Stendahl argues that in contrast to Luther:

A fresh look at the Pauline writings themselves shows that Paul was equipped with what in our eyes must be called a rather “robust” conscience.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

In Philippians 3 Paul can speak of himself as “blameless.” Even Romans 7 is to be understood not as Paul’s troubled conscience, but as an illustration about the law. For Paul the issue is not how one can be saved from a wrathful God, but how Jew and Gentile can be included in one, Messianic community. Stendahl says:

Where Paul was concerned about the possibility for Gentiles to be included in the messianic community, his statements are now read as answers to the quest for assurance about man’s salvation out of a common human predicament.[[6]](#footnote-6)

## Judaism as a Religion of Grace

In 1977 E.P. Sanders published *Paul and Palestinian Judaism[[7]](#footnote-7)* in which he challenged the notion that the Judaism of Paul’s day was legalistic and devoid of grace. He argues that the Old Testament was understood as a message of God’s grace. What Paul fought against was not legalism, but a “covenantal nomism” that excluded Gentiles from the covenant people.

## Justification Not About Personal Salvation

Scholars such as James Dunn and N. T. Wright have moved beyond Sander’s historical analysis to think theologically about Paul’s doctrine of righteousness by faith as a doctrine to show how God can be faithful to his covenant and include Gentiles in the covenant community as well. Although the two of them disagree on many details, they are in agreement on the basic contours of the “new perspective” (a term coined by Dunn). In a conversion between them[[8]](#footnote-8) Dunn says of justification by faith:

It’s not just about the problem of individuals trying to earn salvation by pulling their bootstraps. It begins as a statement of the way in which God accepts all who believe. The gospel is for *all* who believe, as Paul again and again emphasizes.

Dunn argues that Paul’s problem with the law wasn’t that Jews were trying to earn their salvation by works of law, but the law had become a collection of boundary markers to separate Jews from other people. He says:

Paul regularly warns against “the works of the law,” not as “good work” in general or as any attempt by the individual to amass merit for himself, but rather as that pattern of obedience by which “the righteous” maintain their status within the people of the covenant,…[[9]](#footnote-9)

Wright adds that it was always God’s intention that the covenant would be God’s way of embracing the Jews and through them reaching out to include all people. He says:

In Galatians 2, which is the first place we meet justification language in Paul, the point about justification is not “this is how I get saved,” it’s “this is how you and I sit at the same table and eat together, even though we come from different sides of the great cultural divide.” That is what Galatians 2 is about. And I think anyone who tries to resist that is simply resisting what Paul is clearly saying on the surface of the text.[[10]](#footnote-10)

At the heart of the new thinking on Paul is the recognition that justification or righteousness by faith is not primarily about how individuals get to heaven, but how God is the God of ***all***, Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, Scythian or barbarian, or any other category into which humans can be placed. Rescuing Paul from the Reformation means freeing him to be what he claimed to be, the apostle to the Gentiles (Romans 15:16, Galatians 2:8).

## Covenant and New Creation

For N. T. Wright individual salvation is overshadowed by a “big picture” narrative that moves from God’s promises to Israel through Abraham that Israel would be the source of blessing to the world, through Israel’s failure to see the realization of these promises, to God establishing a new covenant community through Christ that embraces both Jew and Gentile. This covenant fulfills all of the promises of Israel’s release from exile, and truly becomes new creation. [[11]](#footnote-11) As Wright says of Paul:

He was in the business, not of rescuing souls from corrupting bodies and a doomed world, but of transforming humans as wholes, to be both signs of that larger new creation and workers in its cause.[[12]](#footnote-12)

## Our Faith or God’s Faithfulness?

Although it is not part of the original new perspectives agenda, many who seek new perspectives on Paul also challenge Luther’s understanding of the nature of “faith.” For Luther, although it is a gift from God, it is a human response to God that brings salvation. For many present interpreters, is not our faith in Christ, but Christ’s faithfulness*.[[13]](#footnote-13)* Sigve Tonstad gives a forceful presentation of this view throughout his major commentary on Romans.[[14]](#footnote-14) He holds that based on the original theodicy context of Habakkuk, in Romans 1:16 Paul’s concern is God’s faithfulness to his covenant. God’s “right-making” is revealed by the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, not by the believer’s faith in Jesus Christ.

## Paul as Political

A final element among some who advocate for new perspectives is the recognition that Paul has a political edge to his message. A collection of essays edited by Richard Horsley emphasizes Paul challenge to the political structures of his day.[[15]](#footnote-15) Although Dunn questions this emphasis,[[16]](#footnote-16) N. T. Wright affirms it by arguing that the Caesar cult was not only the fastest growing religion in Paul’s world, but in addition the empire announced justice, freedom and peace for the world (at a price) through an emperor who was the Son of God, Savior, and Lord. Given this we cannot ignore that Paul’s message offers explicit, and sometimes explicit, subversion of Caesar’s world.[[17]](#footnote-17)

At another point Wright speaks of Paul’s use of the term :

When Paul used it, not least in Galatians and Romans, he was conscious that for many of his hearers the “gospel” of Caesar would be the primary resonance; and he was determined to confront the grandiose imperial claims with the far superior claims of Jesus.[[18]](#footnote-18)

To summarize:

**Reformation** **New**

Paul has troubled conscience Paul has robust conscience

Judaism is legalistic Judaism is gracious but exclusive

Righteousness shows how I am saved Righteousness shows how God is

Inclusive

[Faith is my faith in Christ Faith is Christ’s faithfulness]

## Reflections

Many evangelical and reformed theologians have offered pushback and critique, most of it directed at N. T. Wright. For example, Kevin Vanhoover gives mixed reviews of Wright’s thinking under the clever title “Wrighting the Wrongs of the Reformation?”[[19]](#footnote-19) Critics such as John Piper have written whole volumes of strong pushback.[[20]](#footnote-20) I cannot begin to respond to these critiques. I wish rather to offer some brief reflections on reading Paul after these new perspectives.

I suggest that we need more “both/and” and less “either/or thinking in Pauline studies.”[[21]](#footnote-21) N.T. Wright is willing to admit this.[[22]](#footnote-22) The lines are often drawn too sharply, so that some who argue for new perspectives seem to make “Reformation” and “personal salvation” four-letter words, while more traditional evangelicals see “new perspective” as a four-letter word.[[23]](#footnote-23)

On the one hand, there is no doubt that Pauline interpretation needed rescuing from Reformation interpretation. The new perspective’s strong emphasis on the social and political realities of Paul’s gospel needs to be affirmed, and affirmed loudly, especially in today’s world and in our church. Nothing seemed to raise Paul’s ire more than the refusal to recognize that all barriers between peoples had been broken down in Christ. And for Paul this was not simply a theoretical doctrine. It had everyday consequences in real life, as we see when Paul withstands Peter to his face and calls him “self-condemned” and “hypocritical” for refusing to sit down and eat with Gentiles in Antioch (Galatians 2:11-15). One of the most important words in Romans and Galatians is “all.” Salvation is for “all” who believe (Romans 1:16-17). God’s plan is to have mercy on “all” (Romans 11:32). There are “no longer” distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female (Galatians 3:28). And although Paul’s specific focus was on the Jew-Gentile issue, his concern was broader. He called Christians to break down all barriers and create a new, Spirit-led community, not only a community of tolerance, not only a community avoiding discrimination, but in a community of positive embrace for all.[[24]](#footnote-24)

That Luther failed to grasp the significance of this central affirmation in Paul is seen in his attitude toward the Jews. Sigve Tonstad’s recent article in *Spectrum* vividly and alarmingly makes this clear.[[25]](#footnote-25) He quotes Luther’s deplorable statements that Jewish synagogues should be burned and Jewish homes razed, and reminds us that the sentiment of these statements came to life centuries later in the Holocaust.

We again live in a world where nationalism and racism are on the rise. We live in a church where an unbiblical (or anti-biblical) male headship doctrine gains favor and at best excuses and at worst encourages mistreatment of women.[[26]](#footnote-26) Paul’s message of inclusion has never been more vital.

On the other hand, pendulum swings often go too far, and it would be a mistake to emphasize the vital social and political aspects of Paul’s message to the exclusion of Luther’s experience of personal salvation and the assurance of God’s acceptance. Yes, his reading is far too narrow. Yes, he failed to see the broader dimensions of Paul’s thought. Yes, his issues were quite different than Paul’s. Yes, he could fail miserably to live out the implications of Paul’s message. And yes, he sometimes obscures Paul’s message with theological and forensic jargon. Yet there was an experience he found in the message of God’s grace that resonates with the experience of many from Augustine to Wesley to the present.

Whether we live in a communal society that experiences shame or an individualistic society that experiences guilt, and whether we have a troubled or robust conscience, there is a cross-cultural human recognition all is not right with the world and all is not right with us. We struggle with our mortality and that of our loved ones. There is a “common human predicament” that Paul’s message addresses.[[27]](#footnote-27)

The new perspectives are right in their insistence that God’s purpose is to set everything right, not merely the individual. Nevertheless, God’s right-making includes our personal predicament, our struggle with fear, suffering and death, as well as our communal life together and our need to transform our world. It is no accident that so many through the ages, including Luther, and including students and church members I have known, have found a profound experience of rebirth through Paul’s message of God’s grace and acceptance. To understand that God is a God of grace should and does bring, in Luther’s words, joy like that of entering paradise.

Something often happens in the heart when mortal humans hear words like:

“We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:1)

“God’s love has been poured out into our hearts” (Romans 5:5)

“While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8)

“The gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23)

“There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1)

“Death has been swallowed up in victory” (1 Corinthians 15:54), and

“My grace is sufficient for you” (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Luther’s experience of personal salvation through God’s grace, which he found in Paul’s message, should neither be forgotten nor disparaged. Personal salvation, rather than being in opposition to the message of God’s gracious inclusion of “all,” should serve as a foundation for it. Ideally, grasping the incredible grace of God for me should undergird the broader picture of God’s gracious love, not only for me, but for every one of God’s children.

I end with a story. I was speaking at a church retreat. Before every meeting there was a song service which always began with requests. A little preschool boy always raised his hand first and always requested not one but two songs. Always the same two songs. Always in the same order. “Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so,” and “Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world.” I think he captured the essence of Paul’s thinking. Jesus loves me. Jesus loves all. As Paul says when he comes to the end of the argument in Romans: “Welcome each other as Christ has welcomed you.” (Romans 15:7)

John Brunt

Lynnwood, Washington

1. *Luther’s Works*, Volume 34, Career of the Reformer IV (St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 1960),p. 336-337. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. John Wesley’s *Journal,* Ed. Percy Livingston Parker, (Chicago, Moody Press, 1951) in *Christian Classics Ethereal Library,* entry for May 24, 1738. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God,* “Christian Origins and the Question of God” Vol. 4 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. It appears in Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1976), p. 78-96. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Stendahl, p. 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Stendahl, p. 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1977). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. An Evening Conversation of Paul with James D. G. Dunn and N. T. Wright. This is an edited version of a conversation from October, 2004. It can be found on the web at <http://www.thepaulpage.com/an-evening-conversation-on-paul-with-james-d-g-dunn-and-n-t-wright/>. Unfortunately the pages are not numbered. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. James D. G. Dunn, “The New Perspective on Paul and the Law,” in *The Romans Debate: Revised and Expanded Edition,* Ed. By Karl P. Donfried (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), p. 299-308; p. 307. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Wright, Evening Conversation. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, see especially chapter 10, beginning on p. 774. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Ibid.*, p. 1489. Related to this is the critique that Luther’s understanding of justification fails to capture the vision of moral transformation in Paul. Richard Hays holds that Luther’s slogan *simul Justus et peccator* underestimates the transformative power of God’s grace and obscures the major emphases of Paul’s moral vision. Justification does not make obedience religiously irrelevant. The Holy Spirit is a source of power enabling Christ’s people to “walk” in a way that fulfills the real meaning of the law. See Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996) p. 44-45. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Richard Hays argues for this in a monograph titled *The Faith of Jesus Christ: An Investigation of the Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1-4:11*SBL Dissertation Series (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Sigve K. Tonstad, *The Letter to the Romans: Paul among the Ecologists,* The Earth Bible Commentary (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Richard A. Horsley, Ed., *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Dunn, “Evening Conversion” [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Wright, “Evening Conversation.” [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God,* p. 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Kevin Vanhoozer, “Wrighting the Wrongs of the Reformation? The State of the Union with Christ in St. Paul and Protestant Soteriology” in *Jesus, Paul and the People of God: A Theological Dialogue with N. T. Wright,* N. Perrin and R. B. Hays Eds., (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; London: SPCK, 2011), p. 235-259. This is also available in lecture form in a video on YouTube. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. J. Piper, *Counted Righteous in Christ: Should We Abandon the Imputation of Christ’s Righteousness?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2002), and *The Future of Justification: A Response to N. T. Wright* (Wheaton IL: Crossway Books, 2007). See also D. A. Carson, P. T. Obrien, and M. A. Seifrid, *Justification and Variegated Nomism: Vol. 1: The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism; Vol. 2: The Paradoxes of Paul* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001-2004). YouTube has several critiques by James White and dialogues between James White and N. T. Wright [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Vanhoozer suggests that both sides of the debate are often more correct in what they affirm than in what they deny. See especially his YouTube video. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. For example, in “Evening Conversion” he can say: Some recent writing continues to polarize justification by faith in terms of “how I get saved and how I get into a personal relationship with God,” on the one hand, and on the other hand, how Jews and Gentiles come together, and the fact that Gentiles don’t have to get circumcised. These are not two separate things to be polarized in Paul. It is because of the one that the other is true. They go absolutely together and it’s not an either-or. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Perhaps “both/and” thinking is also needed for the issue of the meaning of . Certainly, Paul does point to the faithfulness of Christ, but even if the phrase is taken as Jesus’ faithfulness, Paul can nevertheless speak of having faith in ()Christ (Galatians 2:16). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Some passages that are generally taken to be about personal salvation actually have to do with community when viewed in context. In Philippians 2 when Paul tells Christians: “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling,” the word “your” is plural. The whole chapter has been addressing how Christians should be unified in humility and mutual caring with the same attitude that Christ had. Working out their own salvation focuses on community. The Philippians are to work together on living out this this vision of unity together, among themselves, in their community, because God is working among them. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Sigve Tonstad, “Luther and Romans; Five Hundred Years Later,” *Spectrum*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (2017), p. 26-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Some will argue that Paul himself contributes to this discrimination, but see my refutation of this view in "Ordination of Women: A Hermeneutical Question" *Ministry,* September 1988, p. 12-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Stendahl’s term. Yet I wonder if Stendahl might have partially agreed, for I once heard him tell a moving story of his own experience at age 13, when he came to recognize that in spite of being teased for his clumsiness on the ball field (caused by a disease that would only later be diagnosed), God loved him. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)