

# Understanding the New Perspective on Paul

By Scot McKnight, [www.jesuscreed.org](http://www.jesuscreed.org)

## Beginnings: E.P. Sanders

Filed under: [Paul](#) — Scot McKnight, August 6, 2007

In *Christianity Today*, Simon Gathercole of Cambridge University has a lengthy and fine study of the good and bad of the New Perspective on Paul (see [“What Did Paul Really Mean?”](#), *Christianity Today*, August 2007). What is the New Perspective on Paul? The most significant development, outside of historical Jesus studies, in biblical studies in the last 50 years. Today I want to begin at the beginning and see if I can explain it. I will continue this throughout the week as we take a readable look at the New Perspective and hope to stand next to Simon’s piece in *CT*.

The opposition to certain elements of the NPP has become so fierce for some that denominations have gathered to see if pastors who represent that denomination adhere to the NPP or not — if they do, they’re out.

The NPP begins, oddly enough, with a public lecture on 4 November of 1982 by my then-mentor in PhD studies, Jimmy Dunn. I didn’t hear it; but I heard plenty about it. It was published the next year and it changed NT studies by giving a handle to what was going on. But it took awhile for what was going on to take on the name “The New Perspective.”

What was that Jimmy said? In 1977, five years earlier, E.P. Sanders published [Paul and Palestinian Judaism](#) and Jimmy basically captured the shift in perspective that Sanders unleashed in his expression “new perspective on Paul.” At the time, nearly everyone was captivated by Sanders but there were voices like this: “Let’s not get too excited” or “He’s basically right but that’s not the whole story” or “This is so innovative we have to think about this some more” or “There are some problems here but I’ll have to do some careful work in Judaism to show it.” Some said, with Dunn, “The tide has changed. We have entered a new world.”

Here’s what Sanders in essence said:

1. Judaism was not a religion of works where if you built up enough credits you’d find final approval with God. Paul can’t be understood saying that about Judaism.
2. Turning Judaism into a “works” religion flies in the face of all of Jewish scholarship, emerges from Luther’s problem with the Catholic Church and gets imported onto Paul, and is out of touch with the vast bulk of ancient Jewish sources. (Sanders allowed some, but not much, works-type religion in Judaism.)
3. Judaism’s understanding of salvation (which is a Christian way of capturing the reality) is rooted in two themes: God’s *election* and *the covenant*. God *chose* Israel and this gave Israel salvation; Jews were not worried about final redemption and were not striving to gain eternal life by accumulating merit. The *Covenant* is the foundation of all of Jewish religion. To suggest that Jews were accumulating merit because this is human nature is not true according to Sanders.
4. The Law, or observing and obeying the Law, is how Jews “maintained” their relationship to the covenant and God and not the way of entering into that covenant. To say Jews followed the Law to get salvation misses why Jews loved the Torah.
5. Righteousness describes behavior that conforms to that Torah.

Thus, Sanders put all this together in what he called “covenantal nomism” — a covenant that creates a community

called to obey the Law (*nomos*); any offense of the Torah requires appropriate sacrifice and atonement. Those who live this way — within the bounds of the Torah — are righteous.

This basic set of factors is at the heart of the New Perspective on Paul. Sanders himself proposed that Paul believed the Church had entered into the eschatological day — he called Paul’s theology participationist eschatology. But Sanders’ proposal on Paul wasn’t his major contribution.

It was Jimmy Dunn who took Sanders’ view of Judaism and gave us a new Paul and a new understanding of Paul’s relationship to Judaism and therefore a new perspective on Paul. Part 2 tomorrow.

Note to CT: I see resemblance in the caricatures of Beza, Luther, Calvin, Wright and Sanders, but that picture of Jimmy Dunn looks more like Bruce Chilton than Jimmy. Anyone else observe this?

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## **Second Phase: James D.G. Dunn**

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Today we will look at the second phase of the New Perspective on Paul. The first phase is the work of E.P. Sanders in 1977. The second phase was the work of Jimmy Dunn, and that began in 1982 and came to full fruition with his pumpkin book, [The Theology of the Apostle Paul](#), in 2000.

Dunn basically agrees with Sanders on Judaism: election-based, covenant-shaped relationship for Israel with God to whom God gives the Torah to know how to live as God’s people.

Where Dunn shifted things was with Paul, and he argued at first that Paul’s problem with his Judaizing opponents (not the same as “Judaism” as a whole) was that they were constructing a nation-based righteousness, a nationalistic righteousness, that kept Gentiles out because it was simply a nation’s faith.

Over time Jimmy shifted his language to the “sociological markers” of a community so that “works of the Torah” were not “merit-seeking works” but “boundary-marking works.” That is, the Judaizers were trying to make the Gentile Christians become Jews. The “works of the Law,” then, were not merit-shaped works but specific things like sabbath, food laws and circumcision. Think concretely, Jimmy was asking us to do, when we get to this expression “works of the Law.” Avoid thinking of the expression the way Augustine and Luther and Calvin do.

For Paul, one was a member of the Church, the people of God, by faith and not by works (by adhering to such things as circumcision, sabbath, and food laws — the works that separated Jews from Gentiles). So, Paul’s idea of faith was the way all people — Jews and Gentiles — could gain access to and enjoy the saving work of God in Christ.

Fundamentally, Paul’s mission was to form a new people of God, the Church, on the basis of faith and because it was by faith and not works (boundary markers) it was a people of God that could include Jews and Gentiles. Justification was God’s work of declaring and making righteous those who had faith in Jesus Christ.

Much more could be said, but our focus this week is on the core issues that are causing a stir for so many.

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## Third Phase: N.T. Wright

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The first phase of the New Perspective on Paul was E.P. Sanders; the second was the work of James Dunn; the third phase is the work of N.T. Wright, whose earliest book was a study of Paul and who then began to unleash his massive set of volumes on Christian Origins and the Question of God.

[Note added: As Tim Gombis reminds us in a comment, it is not like 1-2-3 in the relationship of Sanders-Dunn-Wright; it is not that Sanders said it, Dunn then added, and then along came Tom Wright to add some more. The relationship of these three scholars can be said to be post Dead Sea Scrolls and part of the awakening to Jewish sources of the 70s. The three are actually dialectically related to one another and they sharpened one another's ideas in mutual interaction and debate. When it comes to formative writings, writings that shaped us, the relationship can be reasonably said to be Sanders-Dunn-Wright.]

Wright's books begin with [is \*Climax of the Covenant\*](#), move to [What Saint Paul Really Said](#), and now in [Paul: In Fresh Perspective](#). It's a bit hard to sum up Wright in a paragraph or two but I'll give it a whirl and let the experts on Paul chime in for corrections and modifications.

Wright's early work was a macroscopic understanding of Paul in light of how he understood Jewish history unfolding. His big insight, which he applied with potency and probably too often, was the theme of *exile*. Israel was "in exile" still at the time of Jesus and Paul — even though Israel was back in the Land, the promises of Isaiah and others hadn't been completely fulfilled. Paul's theology was shaped by this conviction and by covenant and by new creation.

But Wright agreed basically — as did Dunn — with Sanders' perspective on Judaism: election-based, covenant-shaped work of God, to form God's people to whom God gave the Torah, to show to them how to live before God in righteousness.

In other words, Judaism was a religion of covenantal nomism. It's pretty hard to read the OT and not see the potency of Sanders' perception of the pattern of religion for Israel.

Where Wright differed from Sanders (participationist eschatology) and Dunn (sociological markers of the Torah and community of Israel) was on how Paul reworked that covenantal nomism — and Wright's view of Paul is hard for me to bring to a single expression. End of exile, Jesus as recapitulating Israel's covenantal history and the need to be "in Christ," the yearning for new creation, and — his most recent augmentation — anti-empire ideology.

Justification, of course, gets revisioned in the New Perspective. Sanders isn't known for this so much and Dunn's view has shifted a little over time, but Wright came out swinging on this one and has recently done a little shifting as well. But, Tom said that justification described not how to get into the people of God but identified who was in the people of God. It was not a "salvation" term but a "covenant" or "ecclesial" term. It said something about who was already in and not something about how to get into the people of God.

Tom has suffered from serious misrepresentations; he has made some adjustments; and his view of justification has some breadth and depth and some width.

What perhaps annoys most is that he's intent on out sola-scripturing the Reformed camp; what annoys someone like me is that I hear too much on the part of the Reformed camp that Wright's views are not consistent with the Reformation. How ironical is that? Isn't the question: What does the Bible say?

No one has captured the young scholar more than Tom Wright. One reason is because there is no one out there who writes as well; combine that with a fertile, creative, courageous mind and a life dedicated to the church and you come up with Tom Wright. Do I agree with him all the time? Nope. But, like Jimmy Dunn and Ed Sanders, I read their every word.

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## [Correcting Some Misperceptions about New Perspective](#)

Filed under: [Paul](#) — Scot McKnight, August 9, 2007

With these three summaries now on the table, and with some fine clarifications by others, I wish now to state what we have to do when we start talking about the “New Perspective” because I'm hearing lots of things that I think are gross distortions. Simon Gathercole's piece in *CT* is a nice summary; I have only little quibbles with it but I have more than quibbles with what I sometimes hear.

First, there is no official “New Perspective Institution” or “NP Denomination” that filters everything through a grid to make sure it is sound. What Jimmy Dunn called “the new perspective” was a trend emerging out of the re-discovery of Jewish sources and how Paul fit into how people were re-construing Judaism. But, there is a wild diversity out there of people who have plowed their own furrow. Please avoid saying the “New Perspective” says “X.” Try to connect with a name as much as possible.

Second, the only “new perspective” I know that can be said to be represented across the board is a new perspective on “Judaism.” There is a common thread: Israel was elected by God, brought into the covenant and given the law to regulate how covenant people live. Thus, Sanders' *covenantal nomism* is a common thread — even if Dunn and Wright have modifications and differences with Sanders. Dunn's and Wright's modifications are really more than that: they have both investigated the Jewish sources themselves. And on top of them are all kinds of offshoots and variations, but there seems to me to be a general consensus that Judaism — and this is not the same as the “Judaizers” Paul went toe-to-toe with — was not a works-based religion but a covenant-based religion in which works played a prominent, sometimes more than other times, role.

Third, when it comes to Paul, there is wide variation in Sanders, Dunn and Wright. It is unfair to say these three are the same when it comes to what they think about Paul. I'm not sure there is such a thing as “*The*” New Perspective on Paul. Those who say this aren't reading the books of these authors. Sometimes they are drawing unities that don't exist. To speak of a unified theory of Paul in a New Perspective is inaccurate. What I'm hearing today is mostly criticism of NT Wright; what is being said about Wright would not always be applicable to Dunn and Sanders. Which means, perhaps most importantly for theological debates, that...

Fourth, there is no real “systematic theology” at work in this New Perspective on Paul. Much of the criticism I'm hearing attributes what “New Perspective” folks believe at the level of systematic theology. Sanders doesn't care about this; Jimmy Dunn is not a systematician; and Wright isn't really one either — they are biblical theologians and historians. NT Wright, of course, is the Bishop of Durham and that means he's Anglican — and if anyone knows what systematic theology that is you'll have to tell us, but the 39 Articles really isn't a “systematic theology.” Let's not forget this. To suggest there is a systematic theology at work here, and to suggest there is one systematic theology

at work, is poppycock. Most of what I hear at this level is an invention by those who infer *what the systematic theology would look like if Sanders and Dunn and Wright composed one*. It is never wise to make up a theology and then criticize it.

Fifth, the NPP does give rise to exegesis of Paul that, however, can lead to some major shifting in theology and, in particular, how to understand salvation. Next I will give a final consideration and I hope it will give us something to understand.

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## [Augustinian Anthropology and Criticism of New Perspective](#)

Filed under: [Paul](#) — Scot McKnight, August 10, 2007

The crux of the fierce criticism of the New Perspective on Paul is what I will call an *Augustinian anthropology*. Hear me out because I think this is behind nearly every criticism I'm hearing of the NPP, and many times I'm not hearing that it is this that is actually prompting the criticism.

Behind the Reformation is Augustine; behind much of modern evangelicalism, especially in the Reformed circles today, is the Reformation. Therefore, at the bottom of the evangelical movement in the Reformed circles is Augustine and his anthropology. The New Perspective, by and large, probably does not adopt a fully Augustinian anthropology but it is rare that such an issue arises in the discussion. At times I hear the NPP doesn't have an adequate theory of sin — well, I think NPP would say “Neither does the Reformation. So there!” So, let's dig into this just a bit today and see if we can shed some light on the NPP and help us all.

What is Augustine's anthropology? (I'm no specialist on this, but this is how I understand it. Experts chime in.)

1. Humans are born in original sin.
2. Humans are bound to their sinful natures.
3. *Humans have an incurable itch to justify themselves and seek merit.*
4. But humans cannot please God because they are bound to those sinful natures that cannot please God.
5. Humans are therefore “naturally” condemned before God.
6. They are in need of God's awakening grace and new life — through the Holy Spirit.
7. The only way out of this condition of self-justification and merit-seeking is to surrender that selfish, proud self-image and cast oneself on God in the mercy of Christ through the regenerating power of the Spirit.

*[A friend and colleague, an Augustinian scholar, reworks my points into this:*

*I think Augustine would agree to some form of each of the statements you have listed. However, I don't think it quite gets at the core of Augustine's thoughts or concerns. or to put it differently, it identifies Augustine's positions as they emerged in his debate with Pelagians and not so much with the rest of his thought.*

*I think he always remained a rhetorician rather than a systematic thinker, so the images he employs are often more fundamental than an abstract statement of his doctrine. In the Confessions, the guiding image is that of the prodigal son (kind of overlaid on some semi-Plotinian metaphysics). I don't think Augustine's first word in his anthropology is “sin”. I think it is “love.” Sin is just love gone bad — as evil is good gone bad. So maybe to rephrase it, using the vocabulary of the earlier Augustine.*

*1. Humans, like God, are lovers.*

*2 and 3. Humans though are bad lovers, redirecting their love from God to the good things God made. This creates in them disordered desires.*

4. *Humans have become incapable of loving God for himself (instead of themselves) and loving other things “in” God.*

5. *Humans are incapable of being happy, like the prodigal son who exchanged his father’s table for eating husks with the pigs. etc.]*

Each of these elements shapes the Reformers’ perception of the gospel, salvation, and how to understand Paul. But there is more...

Standing next to Augustine’s anthropology is the way *to attack the human* [is this too strong?] in preaching the gospel: show that human that they are selfish, merit-seeking people who are in need of seeing their sinfulness and need of grace. Show them they need to trust and give up on their own works. The starting point for Reformed gospel preaching is an anthropology; that anthropology for many is Augustinian; that anthropology is pure selfishness.

The Law factors into this as far as I can tell in this way: the Law is how corrupted humans seek to earn favor with God; they climb the Law to find their way to God.

But, Paul is interpreted to say that’s not the way; that way is legalism and death. The gospel, which this view tends to pit over against the Law in the severest of ways, is the way to redemption — through grace, by faith, and faith alone.

If the New Perspective teaches — rightly or not — that neither the opponents of Paul nor Jews in general were merit-seeking humans, then the central foil of the gospel — how to understand the human condition and how to attack human nature — is undercut and the entire framework of the gospel is changed. Thus, the critics of the New Perspective are aiming at the soteriological framework of the NPP that they (the critics) have assumed to be right, that they have inherited from Calvin-Luther-Augustine, and which they believe was at the heart of Paul’s theology. I am not saying that all of the Reformed contention here is what I sometime ago called “[grace grinding](#)” (talking about grace but doing so only to grind a human into selfish dust), but what I am saying that the Reformed tradition operates with a self-conscious anthropology that derives from Augustine (who provided an interpretive grid for the NT texts).

Stendahl and Sanders laid blame on Luther for seeing in the Judaizers the Roman Catholic Church. That may or may not be the case. What to me *is* the case is that the real opponent of Paul for the old perspective is not the Catholic Church but *Pelagius*. NPP folks need to harp less on Luther and his Catholic polemic and start focusing on Augustine and Pelagius. Did Augustine get it right? Did Augustine get it right when he saw in Pelagius the human condition writ large?

The question is this: Was this the anthropology of Paul? Of Judaism? of the Old Testament? Was Paul’s gospel shaped by this anthropology?

There are, of course, other elements, and one of them is central and I’d beg you to listen to this one: if one finds an element or two in the NPP inaccurate that does not mean that the whole thing has to be tossed overboard. I’m seeing far too many “all or nothing” approaches to this issue — from both sides.

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