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## **New Perspectives on Paul**

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### Introduction

I am grateful for the invitation to this conference, and for the sensitive way in which the organisers responded to my comments on the initial outline of the programme. I am aware that fresh interpretations of Paul, including my own, have caused controversy in evangelical circles, and particularly reformed circles. My own name has been linked with proposals which have been variously dismissed, scorned, vilified and anathematized. Having heard the papers yesterday morning and afternoon I suggested to David Searle that I should take two hours not one to say what needs to be said just now; but when I heard Tony Lane last night I realised I would need, like Cardinal Seripando at Trent, two days to establish my own orthodoxy. We shall see.

There are several different agendas coming together at this point. The issue is sometimes treated as a variation on old modernist controversies, at other times as a clash between a Christian absolutism and a religious relativism, and at other times as a variation on a perceived protestant/catholic divide (or even a high-church/low-church divide), with the so-called new perspective focussing on ecclesiology rather than soteriology and being condemned for so doing. And that's just the beginning. From time to time correspondents draw my attention to various websites on which you can find scathing denunciations of me for abandoning traditional protestant orthodoxy and puzzled rejoinders from people who have studied my work and know that I'm not saying what many of my critics say I'm saying. Go to amazon.com and look at the comments which anonymous correspondents have appended to some of my books.

Faced with that kind of problem, it would take a whole book to unpick the strands, to disentangle them from other issues, to explain what the so-called New Perspective is and isn't, and to argue exegetically step by step for a particular reading of Paul. Clearly I can't do that here. What I shall do instead is to make two opening remarks about my aim and method on the one hand and the problem of the New Perspective on the other, and then to attempt once more to say briefly what I think needs to be said about Paul and justification, sharpening up the issues here and there.

First, as to aim and method. When I began research on Paul, thirty years ago this autumn, my aim was to understand Paul in general and Romans in particular better than I had done before, as part of my heartfelt and lifelong commitment to scripture, and to the *sola scriptura* principle, believing that the better the church understands and lives by scripture the better its worship, preaching and common life will be. I was conscious of thereby standing methodologically in the tradition of the reformers, for whom exegesis was the

lifeblood of the church, and who believed that scripture should stand over against all human traditions. I have not changed this aim and this method, nor do I intend to. Indeed, the present controversy, from my own point of view, often appears to me in terms of a battle for the Reformers' *aims and methods* – going back to scripture over against all human tradition – against some of their theological positions (and, equally, those of their opponents, since I believe that often both sides were operating with mistaken understandings of Paul). I believe that Luther, Calvin, and many of the others would tell us to read scripture afresh, with all the tools available to us – which is after all what they did – and to treat their own doctrinal conclusions as important but not as important as scripture itself. That is what I have tried to do, and I believe I am honouring them thereby.

Allow me, if you will, a moment of autobiography, for reasons similar to those of Paul in Galatians 1 and 2. In my early days of research, before Sanders had published *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* in 1977 and long before Dunn coined the phrase 'The New Perspective on Paul', I was puzzled by one exegetical issue in particular, which I here oversimplify for the sake of summary. If I read Paul in the then standard Lutheran way, Galatians made plenty of sense, but I had to fudge (as I could see dozens of writers fudging) the positive statements about the Law in Romans. If I read Paul in the Reformed way of which, for me, Charles Cranfield remains the supreme exegetical exemplar, Romans made a lot of sense, but I had to fudge (as I could see Cranfield fudging) the negative statements about the Law in Galatians. For me then and now, if I had to choose between Luther and Calvin I would always take Calvin, whether on the Law or (for that matter) the Eucharist. But as I struggled this way and that with the Greek text of Romans and Galatians, it dawned on me, I think in 1976, that a different solution was possible. In Romans 10.3 Paul, writing about his fellow Jews, declares that they are ignorant of the righteousness of God, and are seeking to establish 'their own righteousness'. The wider context, not least 9.30–33, deals with the respective positions of Jews and Gentiles within God's purposes – and with a lot more besides, of course, but not least that. Supposing, I thought, Paul meant 'seeking to establish *their own* righteousness', not in the sense of a *moral* status based on the *performance* of Torah and the consequent accumulation of a treasury of merit, but an *ethnic* status based on the *possession* of Torah as the sign of automatic covenant membership? I saw at once that this would make excellent sense of Romans 9 and 10, and would enable the positive statements about the Law throughout Romans to be given full weight while making it clear that this kind of use of Torah, as an ethnic talisman, was an abuse. I sat up in bed that night reading through Galatians and saw that at point after point this way of looking at Paul would make much better sense of Galatians, too, than either the standard post-Luther readings or the attempted Reformed ones.

The reason I'm telling you this is to show that I came to the position I still hold (having found it over the years to be deeply rewarding exegetically right across Paul; I regard as absolutely basic the need to understand Paul in a way which does justice to all the letters, as well as to the key passages in individual ones) – that I came to this position, not because I learned it from Sanders or Dunn, but because of the struggle to think Paul's

thoughts after him as a matter of obedience to scripture. This brings me to the complexity of the so-called New Perspective and of my relationship to it.

When Sanders's book was published in 1977, I devoured it with both eagerness and puzzlement. Eagerness, because his exposition of first-century Palestinian Judaism supported in all kinds of ways the picture to which I had been coming through my reading of Paul (I was not, then, well up in Judaism itself). Puzzlement, because when he came to Paul Sanders seemed muddled and imprecise. This is partly, I now realise, because he was not dealing with theology (and so seemed confused about basic things like justification and salvation), but rather with religion, and patterns of religion in particular. His agenda, there and elsewhere, included a desire to make Christianity and Judaism less antithetical; in other words, to take a large step away from the anti-Judaism of much Pauline scholarship. I need hardly say that I never embraced either Sanders's picture of Paul or the relativistic agendas which seemed to be driving it. Indeed, for the next decade much of what I wrote on Paul was in debate and disagreement with Sanders, not least because his proposals lacked the exegetical clarity and rootedness which I regarded and regard as indispensable. For me, the question has always been 'But does this make sense of the text?', not 'But will this fit into some abstract scheme somewhere?'

Lots of those who joined the Sanders bandwagon, not least in America, did so because they shared his post-Holocaust re-evaluation of Christian-Jewish relations, and the implicit relativism which that engendered. I have spent considerable energy arguing against this position, and explaining that Paul's critique of Israel is not based on, or productive of, anti-Judaism as such, still less anti-semitism, but involves a far more delicately balanced and nuanced theology which cannot be reduced to such slogans.

Likewise, when Jimmy Dunn added his stones to the growing pile I found myself in both agreement and disagreement with him. His proposal about the meaning of 'works of the law' in Paul – that they are not the moral works through which one gains merit but the works through which the Jew is defined over against the pagan – I regard as exactly right. It has proved itself again and again in the detailed exegesis; attempts to deny it have in my view failed. But Dunn, like Sanders (and like some other New Perspective writers such as John Ziesler) has not, I think, got to the heart of Paul. Again, much of my writing on Paul over the last twenty years at least has been in at least implicit dialogue with him, and I find his exposition of justification itself less than satisfying. For one thing, he never understands what I take to be Paul's fundamental covenant theology; for another, his typically protestant anti-sacramentalism leads him to miss the point of Romans 6. I could go on.

I say all this to make it clear that there are probably almost as many 'New Perspective' positions as there are writers espousing it – and that I disagree with most of them. Where I agree is as follows. It is blindingly obvious when you read Romans and Galatians – though you would never have known this from any of the theologians we discussed yesterday – that virtually whenever Paul talks about justification he does so in the context of a critique of Judaism and of the coming together of Jew and Gentile in Christ. As an exegete determined to listen to scripture rather than abstract my favourite bits from it I

cannot ignore this. The only notice that most mainstream theology has taken of this context is to assume that the Jews were guilty of the kind of works-righteousness of which theologians from Augustine to Calvin and beyond have criticised their opponents; and, though Sanders's account of Judaism needs a lot more nuancing, I regard the New Perspective's challenge to this point as more or less established. What I miss entirely in the Old Perspective, but find so powerfully in some modern Pauline scholarship, is Paul's sense of an underlying narrative, the story of God and Israel, God and Abraham, God and the covenant people, and the way in which that story came to its climax, as he says, 'when the time had fully come' with the coming of Jesus the Messiah. How all this works out is still very controversial within the New Perspective. But at these points, for good exegetical and historical reasons, I find myself saying Here I Stand.

What has happened, then? Like America looking for a new scapegoat after the collapse of the Cold War, and seizing on the Islamic world as the obvious target, many conservative writers, having discovered themselves in possession of the Pauline field after the liberals got tired of it, have looked around for new enemies. Here is something called the New Perspective; it seems to be denying some of the things we have normally taught; very well, let us demonize it, lump its proponents together, and nuke them from a great height. That has not made a pretty sight. Speaking as one of those who is regularly thus carpet-bombed, what I find frustrating is the refusal of the traditionalists to do three things: first, to differentiate the quite separate types of New Perspective; second, to engage in the actual exegetical debates upon which the whole thing turns, instead of simply repeating a Lutheran or similar line as though that settled matters; and third, to recognise that some of us at least are brothers in Christ who have come to the positions we hold not because of some liberal, modernist or relativist agenda but as a result of prayerful and humble study of the text which is and remains our sole authority. Of course, prayer and humility before the text do not guarantee exegetical success. We all remain deeply flawed at all levels. But that is precisely my point. If I am *simul iustus et peccator*, the church, not least the church as the scripture-reading community, must be *ecclesia catholica semper reformanda*. Like Calvin, we must claim the right to stand critically within a tradition. To deny either of these would be to take a large step towards precisely the kind of triumphalism against which the Reformers themselves would severely warn us. But if we are siblings in Christ there are, I think, appropriate ways of addressing one another and of speaking about one another, and I regret that these have not always characterized the debate.

There is much more that I could say under both these initial headings, but this must suffice for now. I turn to what I regard as the central issues around which the debate ought to turn.

### Understanding Righteousness in Paul: The Central Issues

Let me, as a good Calvinist, offer you five points about Paul which I regard as crucial in the present debates, justification itself being the fifth. There are of course many other things vital to Paul, not least Christology, about which I have written much; all of these need careful integration into the picture, for which now is not the time. Ideally, one

would walk slowly round the piece of the Pauline jigsaw labelled ‘justification’, commenting on each other piece of the jigsaw and noting how justification fits into it. Obvious examples, each of which is dear to my heart and most of which I have written about elsewhere, are the cross, the resurrection, the spirit, the Jewish law, union with Christ, the sacraments, election, and love. Please do not think that because there is no time to expound any of these I am forgetting or marginalising them. And, again because of time, I simply state each point in the barest outline, relying on my other works, not least my recent Romans commentary, to back me up with details.

## **1. The Gospel**

I begin where Romans begins – with the gospel. My proposal is this. When Paul refers to ‘the gospel’, he is not referring to a system of salvation, though of course the gospel implies and contains this, nor even to the good news that there now *is* a way of salvation open to all, but rather to the proclamation that the crucified Jesus of Nazareth has been raised from the dead and thereby demonstrated to be both Israel’s Messiah and the world’s true Lord. ‘The gospel’ is not ‘you can be saved, and here’s how’; the gospel, for Paul, is ‘Jesus Christ is Lord’.

This announcement draws together two things, in derivation and confrontation. First, Paul is clearly echoing the language of Isaiah: the message announced by the herald in Isaiah 40 and 52 has at last arrived. Saying ‘Jesus is Messiah and Lord’ is thus a way of saying, among other things, ‘Israel’s history has come to its climax’; or ‘Isaiah’s prophecy has come true at last’. This is powerfully reinforced by Paul’s insistence, exactly as in Isaiah, that this heraldic message reveals God’s righteousness, that is, God’s covenant faithfulness, about which more anon. Second, since the word ‘gospel’ was in public use to designate the message that Caesar was the Lord of the whole world, Paul’s message could not escape being confrontative: Jesus, not Caesar, is Lord, and at his name, not that of the Emperor, every knee shall bow. This aspect lies at the heart of what I have called ‘the fresh perspective on Paul’, the discovery of a subversive political dimension not as an add-on to Paul’s theology but as part of the inner meaning of ‘gospel’, ‘righteousness’, and so on.

For Paul, the announcement or proclamation of Jesus as Lord was itself the ‘word of God’ which carried power. Putting together the various things he says about the preaching of the gospel, the word, and the work of the Spirit, we arrive at the following position: when Paul comes into a town and declares that Jesus is Lord, no doubt explaining who Jesus was, the fact and significance of his death and resurrection, and so on, then the Spirit is at work, mysteriously, in the hearts and minds of the listeners, so that, when some of them believe in Jesus, Paul knows that this is not because of his eloquence or clever argument but because the announcement of Jesus as Lord functions as (in later technical language) the means of grace, the vehicle of the Spirit. And, since the gospel is the heraldic proclamation of Jesus as Lord, it is not first and foremost a suggestion that one might like to enjoy a new religious experience. Nor is it even the take-it-or-leave-it offer of a way to salvation. It is a royal summons to submission, to obedience, to allegiance; and the form that this submission and obedient allegiance takes

is of course faith. That is what Paul means by ‘the obedience of faith’. Faith itself, defined conveniently by Paul as belief that Jesus is Lord and that God raised him from the dead, is the work of the Spirit, accomplished through the proclamation. ‘No-one can say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit.’ But this already jumps ahead to my fourth point, and before we get there we must take in the second and third.

## 2. The Righteousness of God

The second point concerns the phrase ‘the righteousness of God’, *dikaiosune theou*. I became convinced many years ago, and time and exegesis have confirmed this again and again, that Paul always uses this phrase to denote, not the status which God’s people have from him or in his presence, but the righteousness of God himself. This is not to say that there is no such thing as a righteous status held by believers. There is. It is to deny that this is the referent of Paul’s phrase *dikaiosune theou*. Here a Pauline exegesis rooted in Paul’s own understanding of Jewish scripture and tradition must challenge the fuzzy thinking that, listening to yesterday’s papers, I discover characterised most of the great, but basically Latin-speaking, theologians.

The main argument for taking *dikaiosune theou* to denote an aspect of the character of God himself is the way in which Paul is summoning up a massive biblical and intertestamental theme, found not least in Isaiah 40—55 which I have argued elsewhere is vital for him. God’s *dikaiosune*, his *tsedaqah*, is that aspect of his character because of which, despite Israel’s infidelity and consequent banishment, God will remain true to the covenant with Abraham and rescue her none the less. This ‘righteousness’ is of course a form of justice; God has bound himself to the covenant, or perhaps we should say God’s covenant is binding upon him, and through this covenant he has promised not only to save Israel but also, thereby, to renew creation itself. The final flourish of Isaiah 55 is not to be forgotten, especially when we come to Romans 8. Righteousness, please note, is not the same thing as salvation; God’s righteousness is the *reason why* he saves Israel.

But this covenant-fidelity, this covenant-justice, is not purely a matter of salvific activity. As Daniel 9 makes clear, it is a matter of God’s severe justice upon covenant-breaking Israel, and only then a matter of God’s merciful rescue of penitent Israel. This is why the gospel – the announcement that Jesus Christ is Lord – contains within itself, as Paul insists in Romans 2.16, the message of future judgment as well as the news of salvation. What God’s righteousness never becomes, in the Jewish background which Paul is so richly summing up, is an attribute which is passed on to, reckoned to, or imputed to, his people. Nor does Paul treat it in this way. What we find, rather, is that Paul is constantly (especially in Romans, where all but one of the occurrences of the phrase are found) dealing with the themes which from Isaiah to 4 Ezra cluster together with the question of God’s righteousness: how is God to be faithful to Israel, to Abraham, to the world? How will the covenant be fulfilled, and who will be discovered to be God’s covenant people when this happens?

This is precisely what Romans 9–11 is about, not as an appendix to the letter but as its proper climax. And this is anticipated in several earlier parts of the letter conveniently

screened out by the great tradition in its quest for a non-Jewish soteriology, not least the second half of Romans 2, the first nine verses of Romans 3, and the fact that in Romans 4 Paul is demonstrably arguing about God's faithfulness to the Abrahamic covenant, not simply using Abraham as an example of someone justified by faith.

Part of the tragedy of reformation exegesis, not least Lutheran exegesis, is that this entire line of thought was screened out. Thus even Käsemann, who sees clearly that *dikaiosune theou* must refer to God's own righteousness, cannot allow that it has anything to do with the covenant, but insists, against the evidence, that it has become a technical term denoting 'God's salvation-creating power', with a cosmic reach. He fails to notice a point I have come to regard as central and crucial: that the covenant with Israel was always designed to be God's means of saving and blessing the entire cosmos. You get the cosmic reach, as in Genesis 12, as in Isaiah 40—55, as in the Psalms, as in Romans 8, as in 1 Corinthians 15, not by bypassing the covenant but by fulfilling it.

What then can we say about the status of 'righteous' which, in many Pauline passages, is enjoyed by the people of God in Christ? For Paul, there is a clear distinction. God's own righteousness is *dikaiosune theou*. The status of 'righteous' which people enjoy as a result of God's action in Christ and by the Spirit is, in Philippians 3.9, *he ek theou dikaiosune*, the righteous status which is 'from God'. Ignoring this distinction, and translating *dikaiosune theou* as 'a righteousness from God' or something like that, makes nonsense of several passages, most noticeably Romans 3.21–26 (as, for instance, in the appalling and self-contradictory NIV!), where the great theme is the way in which God has been faithful to the covenant, the astonishing way whereby all alike, Jewish sinners and Gentile sinners, are welcomed, redeemed, justified.

You can see this most clearly if you remember the context of the Jewish lawcourt which forms the background for Paul's forensic use of the *dikaiosune* theme. Despite some odd recent attempts to deny this, if you want to understand forensic justification you must go to the law-court and find how the metaphor works. In the Jewish lawcourt Paul would have known, there is no Director of Public Prosecutions; there is a judge, with a plaintiff and a defendant appearing before him. When the case has been heard, the judge finds in favour of one party and against the other. Once that has happened, the vindicated party possesses the status 'righteous' – not itself a moral statement, we note, but a statement of how things stand in terms of the now completed lawsuit. As someone said to me yesterday, it all depends what you mean by 'righteous'. But this status of righteousness has nothing to do with the righteousness of the judge. For the judge to be righteous, it is necessary that he try the case fairly, refuse bribes or other favouritism, uphold the law, and take special note for the helpless, the widows, and so on. When either the plaintiff or the defendant is declared 'righteous' at the end of the case, there is no sense that in either case the judge's *own* righteousness has been passed on to them, by imputation, impartation, or any other process. What they have is a status of 'righteous' which comes *from* the judge. Let me stress, in particular, that when the judge finds in favour of one party or the other, he quite literally makes the righteous; because 'righteous' at this point is *not* a word denoting moral character, but only and precisely the status that you have

when the court has found in your favour. If this had been kept in mind in earlier centuries a great deal of heartache and puzzle might have been avoided.

What then about the ‘imputed righteousness’ about which we are to hear an entire paper this afternoon? This is fine as it stands; God does indeed ‘reckon righteousness’ to those who believe. But this is not, for Paul, the righteousness either of God or of Christ, except in a very specialised sense to which I shall return. There are only two passages which can be invoked in favour of the imputed righteousness being that of God or Christ. The first proves too much, and the second not enough. The first is 1 Corinthians 1.30f., where Paul says that Christ has become for us wisdom from God, and righteousness, sanctification and redemption. Wisdom is the main point he is making, and the other three nouns come in as a way of saying ‘and everything else as well’. ‘Yea, all I need, in thee to find, O Lamb of God, I come’; that line sums it up well. I doubt if this will sustain the normal ‘imputation’ theology, because it would seem to demand equal air time for the imputation of wisdom, sanctification and redemption as well. The second passage is 2 Corinthians 5.21, which as I have argued elsewhere is not, as a matter of good exegesis, a statement of soteriology but of apostolic vocation. The entire passage is about the way in which Paul’s new covenant ministry, through the death and resurrection of Jesus, is in fact God’s appointed means for establishing and maintaining the church. ‘So that we might become God’s righteousness in him’ means that in Christ those who are called to be apostolic preachers actually embody God’s own covenant faithfulness. I do not expect to convince you by this microcosmic summary of the point, but I submit that it deserves careful exegetical consideration, not dismissing with a wave of the hand and a reference to Brother Martin.

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’. But this, too, is pushing towards my fifth point, and I must proceed with the third.

### **3. Final Judgment According to Works**

The third point is remarkably controversial, seeing how well founded it is at several points in Paul. Indeed, listening to yesterday’s papers, it seems that there has been a massive conspiracy of silence on something which was quite clear for Paul (as indeed for Jesus). Paul, in company with mainstream second-Temple Judaism, affirms that God’s final judgment will be in accordance with the entirety of a life led – in accordance, in other words, with works. He says this clearly and unambiguously in Romans 14.10–12 and 2 Corinthians 5.10. He affirms it in that terrifying passage about church-builders in 1 Corinthians 3. But the main passage in question is of course Romans 2.1–16.

This passage has often been read differently. We heard yesterday that Augustine had problems with it (perhaps the only thing in common between Augustine and E. P. Sanders). That is hardly surprising; here is the first statement about justification in



Romans, and lo and behold it affirms justification according to works! The doers of the law, he says, will be justified (2.13). Shock, horror; Paul cannot (so many have thought) have really meant it. So the passage has been treated as a hypothetical position which Paul then undermines by showing that nobody can actually achieve it; or, by Sanders for instance, as a piece of unassimilated Jewish preaching which Paul allows to stand even though it conflicts with other things he says. But all such theories are undermined by exegesis itself, not least by observing the many small but significant threads that stitch Romans 2 into the fabric of the letter as a whole. Paul means what he says. Granted, he redefines what 'doing the law' really means; he does this in chapter 8, and again in chapter 10, with a codicil in chapter 13. But he makes the point most compactly in Philippians 1.6: he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion on the day of Christ Jesus. The 'works' in accordance with which the Christian will be vindicated on the last day are not the unaided works of the self-help moralist. Nor are they the performance of the ethnically distinctive Jewish boundary-markers (sabbath, food-laws and circumcision). They are the things which show, rather, that one is in Christ; the things which are produced in one's life as a result of the Spirit's indwelling and operation. In this way, Romans 8.1–17 provides the real answer to Romans 2.1–16. Why is there now 'no condemnation'? Because, on the one hand, God has condemned sin in the flesh of Christ (let no-one say, as some have done, that this theme is absent in my work; it was and remains central in my thinking and my spirituality); and, on the other hand, because the Spirit is at work to do, within believers, what the Law could not do – ultimately, to give life, but a life that begins in the present with the putting to death of the deeds of the body and the obedient submission to the leading of the Spirit.

I am fascinated by the way in which some of those most conscious of their reformation heritage shy away from Paul's clear statements about future judgment according to works. It is not often enough remarked upon, for instance, that in the Thessalonian letters, and in Philippians, he looks ahead to the coming day of judgment and sees God's favourable verdict not on the basis of the merits and death of Christ, not because like Lord Hailsham he simply casts himself on the mercy of the judge, but on the basis of his apostolic work. 'What is our hope and joy and crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus Christ at his royal appearing? Is it not you? For you are our glory and our joy.' (1 Thess. 3.19f.; cp. Phil. 2.16f.) I suspect that if you or I were to say such a thing, we could expect a swift rebuke of 'nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling'. The fact that Paul does not feel obliged at every point to say this shows, I think, that he is not as concerned as we are about the danger of speaking of the things he himself has done – though sometimes, to be sure, he adds a rider, which proves my point, that it is not his own energy but that which God gives and inspires within him (1 Cor. 15.10; Col. 1.29). But he is still clear that the things he does in the present, by moral and physical effort, will count to his credit on the last day, precisely because they are the effective signs that the Spirit of the living Christ has been at work in him. We are embarrassed about saying this kind of thing; Paul clearly is not. What on earth can have happened to a *sola scriptura* theology that it should find itself forced to screen out such emphatic, indeed celebratory, statements?

The future verdict, when it is positive, can be denoted by the verb 'justify'. This carries its full forensic sense, rooted in the ancient Jewish belief that the God of Israel, being the creator of the world and also the God of justice, would finally put the world to rights, in other words, that he would conduct a final Assize. On that day there will be 'glory, honour, immortality and the life of the age to come' for all who do right (Romans 2.7); in other words (verse 13) they will be justified, declared to be in the right. This ought to have highlighted long ago something which I believe has played too little part in discussions of Paul: justification by faith, to which I shall come in a moment, is the *anticipation in the present* of the justification which will occur in the future, and gains its meaning from that anticipation. What Augustine lacked, what Luther and Calvin lacked, what Regensburg lacked as a way of putting together the two things it tried to hold on to, was Paul's eschatological perspective, filled out by the biblical fusion of covenantal and forensic categories. But before we get there I want to address a question which Paul seldom touches explicitly but about which we can reconstruct his thought quite accurately. This is just as well because it has played an important role in protestant discussions of soteriology and lies, I think, at the heart of today's controversies about justification.

#### **4. Ordo Salutis**

I refer to the question known as *ordo salutis*. I take this phrase to refer to the lining up in chronological sequence of the events which occur from the time when a human being is outside the community of God's people, stuck in idolatry and consequent sin, through to the time when this same erstwhile sinner is fully and finally saved. This question has been closely bound up with that of justification, but I shall suggest in this and the next section that when Paul uses the word and its cognates he has in mind one step only within that sequence, and – critically, as you will see – not the one that the word has been used to denote in much Christian dogmatics. At this point I am implicitly in dialogue with a general trend, at least since the sixteenth century, to make 'conversion' and 'justification' more or less coterminous; a trend which has been sped on its way when 'conversion' is understood as 'the establishment of a personal relationship with God', and justification has been understood in a 'relational' sense with the meaning, not of membership in the covenant as in the Old Testament, but of this personal relationship between the believer and God.

I have already described how Paul understands the moment when the gospel of Jesus as Lord is announced and people come to believe it and obey its summons. Paul has a regular technical term for this moment, and that technical term is neither 'justification' nor 'conversion' (though he can use the latter from time to time): the word in question is 'call'. 'Consider your call', he says to the Corinthians; 'God called me by his grace', he says of himself. (This is why, incidentally, Krister Stendahl's suggestion that we should think of Paul's 'call' as opposed to his 'conversion' misses the point. For Paul, the word 'call' denoted not merely a vocation to a particular task but also, more fundamentally, the effective call of the gospel, applied by the Spirit to the individual heart and life and resulting in a turning away from idolatry and sin and a lifelong turning to God in Christ in believing allegiance.)

But if the ‘call’ is the central event, the point at which the sinner turns to God, what comes before and after? Paul himself has given the answer in Romans 8.29–30. Though he does not often discuss such things, he here posits two steps prior to God’s ‘call’ through the gospel: God’s foreknowledge, and God’s marking-out-ahead-of-time, the mark in question being the mark of the image of the Son. (I translate with a paraphrase because of the problems associated with the word ‘destiny’ within the word ‘predestination’.) These serve to emphasize, of course, the sovereignty of God in the call itself, while Paul never engages with the questions we want to ask about how precisely these things work out. (The closest he comes is of course Romans 9, which simply restates the problem for us; the parallel statement in Ephesians 1.3–14 is a celebration rather than an explanation.)

But what matters for our purposes even more is the question of what comes *after* the ‘call’. ‘Those he called, he also justified’. In other words, Paul uses ‘justify’ to denote something other than, and logically subsequent to, what we have often thought of as the moment of conversion, when someone who hasn’t before believed the gospel is gripped by the word and the Spirit and comes to believe it, to submit to Jesus as the risen Lord. Here is the central point in the controversy between what I say about Paul and what the tradition, not least the protestant tradition, has said. The tradition has used ‘justify’ and its cognates to denote conversion, or at least the initial moment of the Christian life, and has then debated broader and narrower definitions of what counts. My reading of Paul indicates that he does not use the word like that; and my method, shared with the reformers, insists that I prefer scripture itself to even the finest traditions of interpretation. The fact that the Christian tradition has since at least Augustine used the word ‘justify’ to mean ‘become a Christian’, whether broadly or narrowly conceived, is neither here nor there. For Paul, ‘justification’ is something that *follows on from* the ‘call’ through which a sinner is summoned to turn from idols and serve the living God, to turn from sin and follow Christ, to turn from death and believe in the God who raised Jesus from the dead. This points on to my fifth and final point, to which we shall come shortly.

But before that, we note that the final verb in Paul’s sequence is not ‘sanctified’. He would say that this has already happened to all baptised believers (see 1 Corinthians 6.10f.). It is ‘glorified’. Paul regards it as a fixed point that those who belong to the Messiah by faith and baptism already share his glorious life, his rule over the world, and that this rule, this glory, will one day be manifest. There is no time to develop this here, but I note, as a point which much dogmatics has yet to come to terms with, the fact that both Paul and John the Seer place great emphasis not just on being saved, not just on being raised from the dead, but on sharing the glorious rule of Jesus Christ as Lord over God’s new world. What this rule will consist of, who or what will be in subjection under this rule, and so on, are questions which have fallen off most people’s radar screens. I suggest it’s time we got them back on.

I hope I have said enough in this short section to convince you of two things. First, my understanding of how Paul supposed someone became a Christian is, I think, basically orthodox and indeed reformed. 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. My central point is that *this isn't what Paul is referring to when he speaks of 'justification'*. But the substance of what reformed theology, unlike Paul, has referred to by means of that word remains. Faith is not something someone does as a result of which God decides to grant them a new status or privilege. Becoming a Christian, in its initial moment, is not based on anything that a person has acquired by birth or achieved by merit. Faith is itself the first fruit of the Spirit's call. And those thus called, to return to Philippians 1.6, can be sure that the one who began a good work in them will complete it at the day of Christ.

Second, it is simply not true, as people have said again and again, that I deny or downplay the place of the individual in favour of a corporate ecclesiology. True, I have reacted against the rampant individualism of western culture, and have tried to insist on a biblically rooted corporate solidarity in the body of Christ as an antidote to it. But this in no way reduces the importance of every person being confronted with the powerful gospel, and the need for each one to be turned around by it from idols to God, from sin to holiness, and from death to life.

## 5. Justification

What then is 'justification', if it is not conversion itself, not the establishment of a 'relationship' between a person and God, but something which is, at least logically, consequent upon it? This is where confusion inevitably creeps in. I have argued again and again that Paul uses *dikaioo* and its cognates to denote something other than conversion itself; but several critics have not listened to this, but have imagined that what I say about Paul's use of the *dikaioo* word-group is my proposed description of his theology of conversion; and they have then charged me with all kinds of interesting heresies. To make this clear, let me use instead a near-synonym, and speak here not of 'justification' but of 'vindication', recognising that this is itself controversial.

My proposal has been, and still is, that Paul uses 'vindication' language, i.e. the *dikaioo* word-group, when he is describing, not the moment when, or the process by which, someone comes from idolatry, sin and death to God, Christ and life, but rather the verdict which God pronounces consequent upon that event. *dikaioo* is after all a declarative word, declaring that something is the case, rather than a word for making something happen or changing the way something is. (Nor do we need to get round this, as many have done, by saying that when God declares something to be the case he brings it into being; that's not the point here.) And if we work backwards from the future vindication I spoke of earlier I believe we can see what this declaration amounts to, and why Paul insisted on it, especially in Romans and Galatians.

The language of vindication, the *dikaioo* language, is as we've seen lawcourt language. Lawcourt imagery is appropriate because God is the God of justice, who is bound to put the world to rights, has promised to do so, and intends to keep his promises. But the means by which he will do so, from Genesis 12 onwards, is through the covenant he has made with Abraham; so that God's covenant faithfulness on the one hand, and God's justice on the other, are not two quite different things, but closely interlinked. Both are

indicated, as we have seen, in the phrase *dikaiosune theou*. When we talk of God's vindication of someone we are talking about God's declaration, which appears as a double thing to us but I suspect a single thing to Paul: the declaration (a) that someone is in the right (their sins having been forgiven through the death of Jesus) and (b) that this person is a member of the true covenant family, the family God originally promised to Abraham and has now created through Christ and the Spirit, the single family which consists equally of believing Jews and believing Gentiles. I submit that this way of lining things up draws together the various categories which are otherwise left untidily around the place: forensic in Luther versus adoption in Calvin, lawcourt versus incorporative in Schweitzer and Sanders. Once you grasp Paul's underlying covenantal theology these dichotomies are overcome. My first main point in this subsection is therefore that these two things – declaring sinners to be in the right, with their sins forgiven, and declaring someone to be a member of the single multi-ethnic covenant family – go very closely together in Paul's mind, and that to point out the importance of the latter (belonging to the family) in passages like Romans 3 or Galatians 3 in no way undermines the importance of the former (being one of those now declared 'in the right' in God's lawcourt). The underlying point here is crucial: the reason God established the covenant with Abraham, according to scripture in general and Paul in particular, was to undo the sin of Adam and its effects and thereby to complete the project of the good creation itself. Thus God's declaration of forgiveness and his declaration of covenant membership are not ultimately two different things. I freely grant that some of those who have highlighted the importance of the Jew-plus-Gentile point in Paul have used it as a way of saying that Paul is therefore not after all interested in God's dealing with sins and putting sinners in a right relation to himself. But just because people draw false inferences one way, that is no reason why we should draw them the other way. Let me take two obvious examples.

First, in Romans 3.21–31, by anyone's showing a vital and central passage, Paul makes what most commentators in the reformation tradition regard as a strange shift in verse 29, when he asks 'Or is God the God of the Jews only?' (Notice how the NIV, for instance, omits the word 'Or'.) If he had been talking all along simply about individual sinners being put right with God, we should indeed regard this as a sudden intrusion of ethnic questions. But he hasn't. As chapter 4 will reveal, when we allow it to play its full role, he has been talking about God's faithfulness to the covenant with Abraham, and about God's creation of a single family from both halves of sinful humanity. God's declaring that sinners are now in a right relation to himself and God's declaring that believing Jews and believing Gentiles belong in the same family are inextricably bound up with one another.

The same point emerges in Galatians 2.11–21. Here, beyond cavil I think, the point of vindication is not 'how someone becomes a Christian' but the question of table-fellowship: with whom may I, indeed must I, share table-fellowship? Peter's action in separating himself from Christian Gentiles was not implying that they needed to perform moral good works; it was implying that they needed to become physically Jewish. Paul's argument against him was not to do with the mechanism of how people come from being sinful idolaters to forgiven members of Christ's people, but with the equality within the people of God of all who believe the gospel, Jew and Gentile alike. That controversy,

indeed, dominates the entire letter in a way that, alas, I think Martin Luther never saw (though specialists may correct me).

What then is this vindication, this *dikaiosis*? It is God's declaration that a person is in the right; that is, (a) that their sins have been forgiven, and (b) that they are part of the single covenant family promised to Abraham. Notice that opening phrase: God's *declaration that*. Not 'God's bringing it about that', but God's authoritative declaration of what is in fact the case. This is the point, of course, where some have accused me of semi-Pelagianism. That might be so if I intended to denote, with the word 'justification', what the tradition has denoted. But I don't. Paul, I believe, uses vindication/justification to denote God's declaration about someone, about (more specifically) the person who has been 'called' in the sense described above. Vindication is not the same as call.

And we now discover that this declaration, this vindication, occurs twice. It occurs in the future, as we have seen, on the basis of the entire life a person has led in the power of the Spirit – that is, it occurs on the basis of 'works' in Paul's redefined sense. And, near the heart of Paul's theology, it occurs in the present *as an anticipation of that future verdict*, when someone, responding in believing obedience to the 'call' of the gospel, believes that Jesus is Lord and that God raised him from the dead. This is the point about justification by faith – to revert to the familiar terminology: it is the *anticipation in the present* of the verdict which will be *reaffirmed in the future*. Justification is not 'how someone becomes a Christian'. It is God's declaration about the person who has just become a Christian. And, just as the final declaration will consist, not of words so much as of an event, namely, the resurrection of the person concerned into a glorious body like that of the risen Jesus, so the present declaration consists, not so much of words, though words there may be, but of an event, the event in which one dies with the Messiah and rises to new life with him, anticipating that final resurrection. In other words, baptism. I was delighted yesterday to discover that not only Chrysostom and Augustine but also Luther would here have agreed with me.

Traditional protestants may not like this much, but it is I submit what Paul is saying. And I want you to notice right away, before I draw some broader conclusions from all this, three things that follow. First, Paul's doctrine of what is true of those who are in the Messiah does the job, within his scheme of thought, that the traditional protestant emphasis on the imputation of Christ's righteousness did within that scheme. In other words, that which imputed righteousness was trying to insist upon is, I think, fully taken care of in (for instance) Romans 6, where Paul declares that what is true of the Messiah is true of all his people. Jesus was vindicated by God as Messiah after his penal death; I am in the Messiah; therefore I too have died and been raised. According to Romans 6, when God looks at the baptised Christian he sees him or her in Christ. But Paul does not say that he sees us clothed with the earned merits of Christ. That would of course be the wrong meaning of 'righteous' or 'righteousness'. He sees us within the *vindication* of Christ, that is, as having died with Christ and risen again with him. I suspect that it was the mediaeval over-concentration on righteousness, on *iustitia*, that caused the protestant reformers to push for imputed righteousness to do the job they rightly saw was needed. But in my view they have thereby distorted what Paul himself was saying.

Second, it emerges that justification, for Paul, is not (in Sanders's terminology) how one 'gets in' to God's people, but about God's declaration that someone *is* in. In other words, it is all about assurance – as we should have known from reading Romans. I've said it before and this is the place to say it again: if we are thinking Paul's thoughts after him, we are not justified by faith by believing in justification by faith. We are justified by faith by believing in the gospel itself – in other words, that Jesus is Lord and that God raised him from the dead. If, in addition, we believe in justification by faith itself, we believe that, amazingly considering what God knows about us, we are now and for ever part of the family to every member of which God says what he said to Jesus at his baptism: you are my beloved child, with you I am well pleased.

Third, it follows at once that justification is the original *ecumenical* doctrine. The first time we meet justification, that is, in Galatians 2, it is about people from different cultures and traditions sharing table-fellowship on the basis of nothing other than their shared faith in Jesus as Messiah and Lord. Once we relocate justification, moving it from the discussion of how people become Christians to the discussion of how we know that someone is a Christian, we have a powerful incentive to work together across denominational barriers. One of the sad ironies of the last four hundred years is that, at least since 1541, we have allowed disputes about how people become Christians – that which we thought was denoted by the language of justification – to divide us, when the doctrine of justification itself, urging us to unite across our cultural divides, went unheard. Not that there are not large and important problems in ecumenical relations. I am horrified at some of the recent Anglican/Roman statements, for instance, and on things like the Papacy, purgatory, and the cult of saints (especially Mary), I am as protestant as the next person, for (I take it) good Pauline reasons. But justification by faith tells me that if my Roman neighbour believes that Jesus is Lord and that God raised him from the dead then he or she is a brother or sister, however much I believe them muddled, even dangerously so, on other matters.

### Conclusion

I have, I suspect, said enough to put the cat among the pigeons, but not enough to get it back into its basket. That will have to come, if at all, in question and answers. But let me conclude with four brief propositions about the importance of taking at least this version of the New Perspective seriously, and one flagrantly homiletic plea.

First, to restate the point of method. I remain committed to understanding Paul in his own right and his own terms against all traditions about him, including my own. I remain convinced that Luther and Calvin would say Amen to that point of principle. And I believe, and have argued in my various exegetical works, that this reading of Paul makes far more sense of his letters, in whole and in their various parts, and in their mutual relations, than all other readings known to me. Part of that exegetical task is to relate Paul to the Jewish world of his day, and this reading I believe does that far better than the traditional one, though debates naturally remain about many aspects of the Jewish context.

Second, this reading of Paul allows fully for the challenge to each person to hear and believe the gospel and live by it, while at the same time allowing fully also for three other contexts, each of which is vitally important to Paul, to have their place. These three other contexts are the cosmic, as in Romans 8; the ecclesiological, as in his constant emphasis on the unity of Jew and Gentile in Christ; and the political, as mentioned earlier. Many have tried to play these off against each other; I believe they are instead mutually reinforcing. The united multi-ethnic church is a sign of God's healing and remaking of the cosmos and also thereby a sign to Caesar and his followers that his attempted unification of the world is a blasphemous parody. This is part of what Ephesians and Colossians are all about, though that is another story. It is also, I believe, a point in urgent need of emphasis today.

Third, this new perspective reading of Paul enables us to understand, crucially for some current debates in my church at least, why Paul is very tolerant of differences on some points (particularly food, drink and holy days) and completely intolerant on others (particularly sexual ethics). The boundary lines he insists on blurring (in, for instance, Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8) are precisely those between different ethnic communities, particularly Jew and Gentile. The boundary lines he draws the more firmly are those between the holy lifestyle required of those who have died and been raised with the Messiah and the unholy lifestyle of those who behave as if they had not, but were still living 'in the flesh'. This, too, is urgent today.

Fourth, I discover an irony in the anti-New Perspective reaction in specifically Reformed circles. The New Perspective launched by Sanders and taken up eagerly in many American contexts was always a reaction, not to Reformed readings of Paul, but to Lutheran ones and the broader protestantism and evangelicalism that went along for the Lutheran ride, particularly in its negative assessment of Judaism and its Law. Had the Reformed reading of Paul, with its positive role for Israel and the Law, been in the ascendancy rather than the Lutheran one, the New Perspective might not have been necessary, or not in that form. For myself, it may surprise you to learn that I still think of myself as a Reformed theologian, retaining what seems to me the substance of Reformed theology while moving some of the labels around in obedience to scripture – itself, as I have suggested, a good Reformed sort of thing to do.

I end with a plea. I have lived most of my life in and around evangelical circles in which I have come to recognise a strange phenomenon. It is commonly assumed that Luther and Calvin got Paul right. But often when people think of Luther and Calvin they see them, and hence Paul, through three subsequent lenses provided by western culture. The Enlightenment highlighted the abstract truths of reason over against the messy facts of history; many Protestants have put Lessing and Luther together and still thought they were reading Paul. The Romantic movement highlighted inner feeling over against outer, physical reality; many have thence supposed that this was what Paul, and Luther and Calvin, were really saying (hence the knee-jerk protestant anti-sacramentalism). More recently, existentialism has insisted that what matters is being true to my inner self, rather than being conditioned by history, mine or anyone else's; many people, not only Rudolf Bultmann, have read Paul and Luther in that light.



At a popular level, this mess and muddle shows up in a general sense that anything inward, anything to do with strong religious emotion, anything which downplays outward observance, must be striking a blow for the Pauline gospel of justification by faith. This is as worrying as it is absurd. All these movements are forms of dualism, where Paul believed in the goodness and God-givenness of creation, and in its eventual promised renewal. Together they reinforce that gnosticism which is a poison at the heart of much contemporary culture, including soi-disant Christian culture.

It is time to turn away from all this; to rub our eyes, and look clearly at the path by which we and our culture have come. It is time to turn back again, following the old *sola scriptura* principle, to the source and origin of one of the great doctrines of the New Testament: that when, through God's effective call (*sola gratia*) in the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ (*solus Christus*), someone comes to believe that he is the risen Messiah and Lord, God thereupon (*sola fide*) declares in advance what he will declare on the last day when he raises that person from the dead: this person is in the right, their sins have been forgiven, they are part of the single, true, worldwide covenant family promised to Abraham, the sign of the coming new creation and the counter-sign to the boast of Caesar. Justification is ultimately about justice, about God putting the world to rights, with his chosen and called people as the advance guard of that new creation, charged with being and bringing signs of hope, of restorative justice, to the world. Let's put the justice back in justification; and, as we do so, remind ourselves whose justice it is, and why. *Soli Deo Gloria!* Having thus stolen Luther's slogans, I thought I might end with 'Here I stand'; but let me rather say it in Paul's language. *hode hesteka; allo ou dunamai.*