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## Justification, Ecclesiology and the New Perspective<sup>1</sup>

*Tim Chester*

In many quarters the so-called *New Perspective* on Paul has become the accepted norm. This reading of Pauline theology involves a radical reassessment of the Reformed doctrine of justification. The response of proponents of the traditional understanding has often been disappointing as they frequently resort to a simple restatement of the traditional view without directly interacting with the arguments of the New Perspective.

The Reformed doctrine of justification was characterised by the following features:

- Justification is a forensic act in which the image of a law court is central – justification is an act of divine acquittal.
- In justification the alien righteousness of Christ is reckoned or imputed to us. We are counted righteous with a righteousness that comes from outside us – that is from Christ. So justification is not based on having righteousness imparted or infused within us and then living a righteous life.
- Imputation means that justification is by faith alone. Justification does not involve a beginning by faith and then depend on a continuation by faith and works in co-operation.
- We are justified now on the basis of Christ's finished work in anticipation of the divine verdict on the final day. As a result we can have an assured future.

This understanding of justification was founded on Luther's rediscovery of Pauline soteriology so that Paul's thought is at the heart of the Reformed soteriology. But it is this understanding of Paul that has been challenged in recent years by the New Perspective.

### **Krister Stendahl**

In a famous essay entitled 'The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West' (1960, ET 1963), Stendahl argued that Luther's understanding of justification was borne out of his struggle with existential guilt. Luther's view was shaped by his opposition to Medieval Catholicism which he read back into Paul's opposition to first century Judaism, interpreting them as parallel phenomena. Whereas in fact, argued Stendahl, Paul shows little sign of a struggle with existential guilt. He is proud of his past (Phil. 3:6–9). Of Paul's 'conversion' experience, he writes: 'There is not – as we usually think – first a conversion, and then a call to apostleship; there is only the call to the work among the Gentiles'.<sup>2</sup> In other words, Paul did not convert to a new faith – he received a commission to take the gospel beyond the Jewish confines. So the Protestant view of justification is based on an anachronistic misreading of Paul. 'The West for centuries has

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<sup>1</sup> First published as Tim Chester, 'Justification, Ecclesiology and the New Perspective,' *Themelios* 30:2 (Winter 2005), 5-20.

<sup>2</sup> Krister Stendahl, 'The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West', *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays* (Fortress/SCM, 1976/1977), 84–85.

wrongly surmised that the biblical writers were grappling with problems which no doubt are ours, but which never entered their consciousness'.<sup>3</sup>

### **E. P. Sanders**

In 1977 E.P. Sanders published *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (SCM, 1977). It is probably the most influential book on Pauline theology in recent years. The majority of the book is a detailed examination of first century Judaism. The remainder is a reappraisal of Paul in the light of Sanders' findings. Sanders argues that first century Judaism has been grossly misrepresented in Protestant theology. It was not a religion of legalistic works-righteousness, but a religion of grace and forgiveness. Sanders describes it as what he calls 'covenantal nomism' (from *nomos* the Greek word for 'law'). 'Covenantal nomism' is a way of looking at the law which is in contrast to legalism. In 'covenantal nomism' you become part of the covenant by grace and remain part of the covenant by keeping the law or you are identified as a member of the covenant by the law. Even if you break the law you can find forgiveness within the covenant through repentance. It is a gracious system.

Covenantal nomism is the view that one's place in God's plan is established on the basis of the covenant and that the covenant requires as the proper response of man, his obedience to its commandments, while providing means of atonement for transgression ... Obedience maintains one's position in the covenant, but it does not earn God's grace as such ... Righteousness in Judaism is a term which implies the maintenance of status among the group of the elect.<sup>4</sup>

When it comes to Paul, Sanders says that Paul rejected covenantal nomism in favour of what Sanders calls 'participationist eschatology' – we are united with Christ in his death and resurrection and will remain so unless we form another participatory union. The problem with Judaism is that it is unenlightened. Sanders says Paul argued from solution to plight. Paul saw nothing wrong with the works of the law until he realised that salvation was found in Christ. Having found the solution (Christ), Paul realised that the Law could not be crucial to salvation. 'In short, this is what Paul finds wrong with Judaism: it is not Christianity'.<sup>5</sup> In fact, for Sanders, when Paul is seen against the backdrop of first century Judaism he appears somewhat incoherent in his thinking.

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*It is true that there is not much evidence of a subjective experience of existential anguish in Paul. It is clear, however, that Paul views guilt as an objective reality leading to judgement and death (Rom. 1–3). The guilt of sin plays a central role in defining the problem for which Christ (and the justification which comes through faith in him) is the answer.*

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But the important contribution of Sanders is not his work on Paul, but his work on first century Judaism. His view of Judaism has become the accepted view among scholars. I will move on to assessment later. First I want to make two interim points:

- It is true that there is not much evidence of a subjective experience of existential anguish in Paul. It is clear, however, that Paul views guilt as an objective reality leading to judgement and death (Rom. 1–3). The guilt of sin plays a central role in defining the problem for which

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>4</sup> E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (SCM, 1977), 75, 420, 544.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 552.

Christ (and the justification which comes through faith in him) is the answer.

- One of the motives behind the New Perspective is the desire to correct prejudiced caricatures of Judaism. This is post-holocaust theology. Anti-Semitism has clearly been a problem that has plagued the church down the centuries. We, however, need to recognise that, just as the New Perspective believes Luther's theology of justification was shaped by his context, so the view of proponents of the New Perspective is shaped by their context.

### James Dunn

It is James Dunn who is usually credited with coining the phrase 'the New Perspective on Paul' in an essay by that name first published in 1983<sup>6</sup> (although Stendahl talked about 'a new perspective' back in 1960<sup>7</sup>). Dunn acknowledges the role of Stendahl and particularly Sanders in revitalising Pauline scholarship. But, while Sander's new perspective on Judaism makes Paul seem less comprehensible to Sanders (according to Dunn, Sanders makes Paul 'idiosyncratic'), Dunn believes this new perspective on Judaism can in fact be shown to make Paul more comprehensible. Dunn focuses his argument on Galatians 2:16.

We who are Jews by birth and not 'Gentile sinners' know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no-one will be justified (Gal. 2:15–16).

Galatians 2:15–16, Dunn argues, appeals to the shared background understood by Jewish Christians (We who are Jews ... know that). So justification is defined in OT terms. In other words:

God's righteousness is precisely God's covenant faithfulness, his saving power and love for his people Israel. God's justification is God's recognition of Israel as his people, his verdict in favour of Israel on grounds of his covenant with Israel.<sup>8</sup>

Elsewhere Dunn calls on us to set aside our Western notions (influenced by Greek thought) of abstract justice – justice as an ethical absolute by which claims could be measured (the notion of 'blind justice'). In Hebrew thought justice (righteousness) was a relational term expressing fidelity to relational obligations.<sup>9</sup> As a result:

In talking of 'being justified' here Paul is not thinking of a distinctly initiatory act of God. God's justification is not his act in first making his covenant with Israel, or in initially accepting someone into the covenant people. God's justification is rather God's acknowledgment that someone is in the covenant – whether that is an initial acknowledgment, or a repeated action of God (God's saving acts), or his final vindication of his people.<sup>10</sup>

### *Works of the law*

In Galatians these, according to Dunn, are covenant works; that is, circumcision, food laws and festivals. These were widely regarded as marking Jewish distinctiveness. They were 'identity markers'.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Published in James D.G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (SPCK, 1990), 183–214.

<sup>7</sup> Stendahl, 'The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West', 95.

<sup>8</sup> Dunn, 'The New Perspective on Paul', 190.

<sup>9</sup> James D.G. Dunn and Alan M. Suggate, *The Justice of God: A Fresh Look at the Old Doctrine of Justification of Faith* (Paternoster, 1993), 32–33.

<sup>10</sup> Dunn, 'The New Perspective on Paul', 190.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

The devout Jew of Paul's day would regard observance of the laws on clean and unclean foods as a basic expression of covenant loyalty ... It is not exaggeration to say that for the typical Jew of the first century ad, particularly the Palestinian Jews, it would be virtually impossible to conceive of participation in God's covenant, and so in God's covenant righteousness, apart from these observances, these works of the law.<sup>12</sup>

Therefore:

When Paul denied the possibility of 'being justified by works of the law' it is precisely this basic Jewish self-understanding which Paul is attacking – the idea that God's acknowledgement of covenant status is bound up with, even dependent upon, observance of these particular regulations – the idea that God's verdict of acquittal hangs to any extent on the individual's having declared his membership of the covenant people by embracing these distinctly Jewish rites.<sup>13</sup>

What [Paul] denies is that God's justification depends on 'covenant nomism', that God's grace extends only to those who wear the badge of the covenant.<sup>14</sup>

So works of the law are not good works in general. Nor do they earn favour. They are instead 'badges' of covenant membership.<sup>15</sup> The boasting of Romans 3:27 is boasting in Jewish identity – not in good works in general.

*Righteousness is through faith in Christ and this renders the covenant works redundant*  
In Galatians 2:16a Paul begins by stating the position of Peter: justification is 'not by works of the law except through faith in Christ'. Some translations have 'but' instead of 'except' – 'but' implies contrast while 'except' implies a narrowing of focus: you are justified by works of the law provided you also have faith in Jesus as Messiah. This makes faith in Christ complementary or additional to the covenant works of the law. It is essentially Jewish faith that has come to expression in belief in Jesus as the Messiah.

Dunn, however, argues that Paul himself goes further. Paul's position is that justification is 'by faith in Christ and not by works of the law' (v. 16b). The two are seen not as complimentary, but as antitheses. Faith in Christ is not a narrowing of the definition of the elect (the covenant plus faith in Jesus as the Messiah). Faith in Christ is an alternative definition of the elect which renders all other identity markers superfluous. 'What [Paul] is concerned to exclude is the racial not the ritual expression of faith; it is nationalism which he denies not activism'.<sup>16</sup>

This is how Paul continues in Galatians 3. The covenant is no longer racially defined, but has come to its fulfilment in the blessing of the nations. The history of salvation has reached a new stage with the coming of Christ. Now 'the more fundamental identity marker of God's people (i.e. Abraham's faith) reasserts its primacy over against the too narrowly nationalistic identity markers of circumcision, food laws and sabbath'.<sup>17</sup>

### **N.T. Wright**

Tom Wright is the most conservative of the leading proponents of the New Perspective. He himself prefers to talk about 'new perspectives' (plural) because he is highly critical of some formulations of it.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 194; see also Gal. 5:6.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 198.

Like Dunn, Wright sees Paul's doctrine of justification by faith as worked out in opposition to Jewish national superiority and exclusivity. The works of the law are the distinctive features of Judaism that not only demonstrate membership of the covenant, but also divide Jews from Gentiles.

The distinctive contribution of Wright is his contention that the majority of people in first century Judaism saw Israel as still being in exile. While it had come back from Babylon, the nation remained in subjugation and the land in defilement by Gentile occupiers. Underlying this was a spiritual exile from God. The underlying problems of the exile – sin and judgement – had not been dealt with. The restoration promised by the prophets had not happened in the terms in which they had spoken of. This new stage in the history of salvation was an era in which the blessing to the nations promised to Abraham would be realised. The purpose of the covenant with Israel was to deal with the universal problem of sin and bring salvation.<sup>18</sup>

What Paul realised was that this restoration had happened in the middle of time in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

When Paul was faced with the fact of Jesus' resurrection, he concluded that the return from exile had in fact happened. Exile had reached its height in Jesus' death; now he had come through death, through the ultimate exile, and was set free not just from Greece and Rome, from Herod, Pilate and Caiaphas, but from sin and death, the ultimate enemies (1 Cor. 15:25–26). This meant that the Age to Come, the Eschaton of Jewish expectation, had already arrived, even though it didn't look like Paul had expected. It meant that Israel had in principle been redeemed, in the person of her anointed representative. It meant that the Gentiles were now to be summoned to join Israel in celebrating the new day, the day of deliverance.<sup>19</sup>

An example of this is Wright's exegesis of Galatians 3:13–14:

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.' He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit (Gal. 3:13–14).<sup>20</sup>

Paul quotes from Deuteronomy where the curse is the curse of those who break the covenant. These curses are fulfilled when Israel's faithlessness is judged in the exile. The exile is the outworking of the Deuteronomic curse. But now Christ has taken that curse on himself, redeeming Israel from exile. So when Paul says 'Christ redeemed us', he is not talking people in general, but about Israel in particular. Israel has been redeemed from the exile so that as a result she can once again realise the vocation promised to Abraham – that of bringing blessing to the nations (= Gentiles).

Wright, I believe, is correct to see the exile coming to an end in the work of Jesus. The return from exile under Ezra and Nehemiah is portrayed in the OT as incomplete (in Neh. 9:36 the people are still in slavery). The NT sees Jesus as the fulfilment of the promises of restoration and return from exile (Mark 1:2–3 citing Is. 40:1–3). Jesus deals with the underlying problems of the exile – sin and judgement.

Wright, however, goes too far when he sees it as the dominant idea by which NT theology should be understood. Wright's thesis is only

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<sup>18</sup> Tom Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, (Lion, 1997), 118.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 51. See also N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, (SPCK, 1992), 458.

<sup>20</sup> See N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (T&T Clark, 1991), 137–74.

sustainable because he adopts a fairly broad and fluid definition of exile.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, in Romans 10:18–19 Paul quotes the warnings of exile in Deuteronomy (32:21) to suggest that by rejecting the Messiah and through the inclusion of the Gentiles Israel is in fact beginning its true exile. The exile was a picture of humanity’s plight (this is Ezekiel’s message as he addresses the nations in 25–32 – Israel’s fate will be their fate). The cross of Christ represents the end of exile to those who accept him. To those who reject him, though, it is the beginning of an eternal exile from God – the curses of Deuteronomy fall irrevocably.

When it comes to justification, Wright believes that the righteousness of God should be understood in two inter-related ways. First and essentially, God’s righteousness is his faithfulness to the covenant on account of which he intervenes in history to vindicate his people. God’s righteous acts are his saving acts on behalf of his people – and specifically his intervention to end the exile. In this respect his position is similar to Dunn’s, but Wright adds a second dimension which Dunn avoids. The language of righteousness and justification also evokes the law court. It is forensic. The judge is righteous when he is impartial. A plaintiff is righteous when he or she is vindicated or justified by judge’s decision. Israel and the nations stand as two sides of a legal dispute before God the Judge. Because of his righteousness, God declares in favour of Israel. He declares Israel to be righteous, justified, vindicated. Wright stresses that in this legal scenario the declaration of justification is a statement that a person is already righteous. It is not the declaration itself that confers a righteous or justified status. Like justification in Judaism (as defined by Sanders), it is not about getting in, but about staying in. Justification is essentially an eschatological reality. It is acquittal or vindication on the day of Israel’s restoration. But it can be a present reality to those who maintain their status within the covenant community.

How, then, do people come into a relationship with God? Wright answers: as the gospel of Christ’s death and resurrection is proclaimed, God’s Spirit brings people to faith. They join the Christian community through baptism and begin to share its common life. ‘That is how people come into relationship with the living God’.<sup>22</sup> Paul, argues Wright, does not use justification language to denote this. Justification is not how one joins the covenant community.

So justification is based on two things: (1) the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus, and (2) the regenerating work of the Spirit. Justification is the recognition that our sins have been dealt with through the cross and that we are new people through the Spirit. It does not affect a change of status. It is the recognition of what has happened. Although Wright can be somewhat unclear at this point, justification is also on the basis of sanctification: ‘Present justification declares on the basis of faith, what future justification will affirm publicly on the basis of the entire life’.<sup>23</sup>

Wright argues that justification is not the gospel – it is an implication of the gospel. The gospel is the message of the death and resurrection of the Messiah. The doctrine of justification is an ecclesiological doctrine. Justification is about who is part of Christ’s covenant community (the church). ‘The dikai-language is best rendered in terms of “membership within the covenant”’.<sup>24</sup>

[Justification] wasn’t so much about soteriology as about ecclesiology; not so much about salvation as about the church ... ‘The gospel’ is the announcement of Jesus’ lordship, which works with power to bring people into the family of Abraham, now redefined around Jesus Christ and characterised solely by faith in him. ‘Justification’ is the doctrine which

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<sup>21</sup> Mark Seifrid, *Christ, Our Righteousness: Paul’s Theology of Justification* (Apollos, 2000), 24.

<sup>22</sup> Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 117.

<sup>23</sup> Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 129, (my emphasis).

<sup>24</sup> Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant*, 148.

insists that all those who have this faith belong as full members of this family, on this basis and no other.<sup>25</sup>

## Assessment

### Justification and works

First century Judaism was a complex phenomenon about which we have few direct sources. Most of the sources are pre-first century (the Apocrypha) or post-first century (Rabbinic writings). Sanders for example depends heavily on Rabbinic sources from 200 AD and beyond. In fact one of the best sources we have from the period itself is the NT. Therefore we should be careful to suppose we know better what first century Judaism was like than the writers of the NT – especially someone like Paul who was schooled deeply in it.

A major study of the case for covenantal nomism produced by scholars from a variety of theological backgrounds has been published recently under the title *Justification and Variegated Nomism: The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism* (Baker, 2001). It examines in detail different Jewish genres. Don Carson provides a summarising chapter. He writes: ‘Several of the scholars found that at least parts of their representative corpora could be usefully described as reflecting covenantal nomism’. But, he goes on, ‘there is strong agreement that covenantal nomism is at best a reductionist category ... covenantal nomism is not only reductionistic, it is misleading’.<sup>26</sup>

While the New Perspective has corrected the caricature of first century Judaism as uniformly consisting of a harsh legalism, it actually involved a spectrum of attitudes to the law. These ranged from an emphasis on grace to an emphasis on the necessity of adherence to the law. Legalism was a reality in the first century.<sup>27</sup> There are some sources (Josephus, the Books of Maccabees, the Additions of Daniel, Tobit and Judith) which Sanders does not deal with and which present a more legalistic outlook.<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, popular expressions of religion are often more legalistic than official teaching – a phenomenon to which many Christians can relate!

While first century Judaism may have taught that, in principle, inclusion among the people of God depended upon God’s election and grace and not upon the observance of the law, in practice that teaching often degenerated into something else.<sup>29</sup>

It is not just first century Judaism that the New Perspective is in danger of over-simplifying. The New Perspective begins with the accusation that Luther misread Paul because he viewed Paul from the perspective of his own conflict with medieval Catholicism. Luther opposed works-righteousness, we are told, and he mistakenly supposed that Paul likewise opposed works-righteousness in Judaism.<sup>30</sup> But, says the New Perspective, Paul is not in fact opposing works-righteousness, but faith plus works (however those might be defined).

In fact faith plus works sounds much more like medieval Catholicism than some crass version of works-righteousness. Rather than Luther misreading Paul’s conflict with first century Judaism, it is the proponents of the New Perspective who have misread Luther’s conflict with medieval Catholicism. Works-righteousness may be a Protestant Sunday School caricature of medieval Catholicism, but it is doubtful whether Luther viewed Catholicism in these terms. Luther and Catholicism both agreed

<sup>25</sup> Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 119, 133.

<sup>26</sup> Carson et al, *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, 543–44.

<sup>27</sup> See Seifrid, Christ, Our Righteousness, 15–16 and D.A. Carson, Peter T. O’Brien and Mark Seifrid (eds.), *Justification and Variegated Nomism: The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism* (Baker, 2001).

<sup>28</sup> Rob Smith, ‘Wright Up Close’, *The Briefing*, Issue No. 220 (16 June 1999), 7.

<sup>29</sup> Colin G. Kruse, *Paul, the Law and Justification* (Apollos, 1996), 296.

<sup>30</sup> Dunn and Suggate, *The Justice of God*, 14.



that salvation was by faith. The distinctive of Luther was the claim that it was by faith alone. In medieval Catholicism God graciously imparted righteousness to the believer through faith. Justification then became a process which involved both divine grace and human effort. For Luther salvation was by faith alone – it is not a co-operation between God and man.

Both Catholicism and Judaism root salvation in God’s grace. With a beginning in grace (in the form of election or regeneration), the help of the believing community, the guidance of the law and the possibility of repentance, people can live a righteous life. Both Paul and Luther, however, saw the human problem as much more intractable. ‘This human inability to meet the demands of God is what lies at the heart of Romans 3. On this point, at least, the Reformers understood Paul correctly.’<sup>31</sup> Medieval Catholicism saw human sin as a weakness that could be healed by grace. One of the decisive moves in Luther’s rediscovery of justification is his return to Augustine’s (and Paul’s) understanding of sin as rebellion – as a fundamental opposition to, and rejection of, God. A case can be made for saying that Reformed soteriology begins with a rediscovery of biblical anthropology. It is not just that we have tendency to commit sinful acts. We are God’s enemies. This is the problem which justification must address if we are ever to enjoy peace with God (Rom. 5:1).

*To say that we get in by grace  
and stay in by grace plus works still gives works an  
instrumental place within salvation.*

This is not just a question of historical accuracy. To say that we get in by grace and stay in by grace plus works still gives works an instrumental place within salvation.

When we consider the matter from the perspective of the final judgement – which we must in Jewish theology – it is clear that ‘works’, even in Sanders’ view, play a necessary and instrumental role in ‘salvation’. But this is what Paul denies, by equating ‘initial’ justification with the final verdict of salvation and by stressing faith alone as the necessary corollary to the grace of God. In effect, then, while not denying the role of faith, Jews were insisting on works as a means of justification. But this is just what Paul denies in 3:20, and why he distinguishes in principle between faith and works (see 3:27–28; 4:1–5).<sup>32</sup>

In other words, covenantal nomism is a form of legalism or works-righteousness. It may be a form that has a place for grace, but grace is all or nothing. If Paul was opposing legalism and works-righteousness – or something that tended towards legalism and works-righteousness – then we should accept his response to be soteriological, rather than simply ecclesiological as the New Perspective claims.

### **Justification and salvation**

‘The righteousness of God’ has variously been understood as:

<b>1. A quality of God</b>	1a. God’s moral purity and judicial impartiality	What Luther originally thought and feared: God’s justice by which he will condemn us
	1b. God’s covenant faithfulness	God’s righteous acts = his saving acts for his people (Dunn and Wright)

<sup>31</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NIGCT (Eerdmans, 1996), 217.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 215–16.

<b>2. A gift from God</b>	2a. Imputed righteousness	The position of later Luther and Protestant orthodoxy
	2b. Imparted righteousness	The position of Catholicism.

Dunn argues that righteousness is a relational term (covenant faithfulness), not a judicial term. Wright likewise believes it is covenant faithfulness, but he also believes that this covenant faithfulness is expressed through the picture of the courtroom in which God must act with impartiality.

If we use the language of the law court, it makes no sense whatever to say that the judge imputes, imparts, bequeaths, conveys or otherwise transfers his righteousness to either the plaintiff or the defendant. Righteousness is not an object, a substance or a gas which can be passed across the courtroom ... to imagine the defendant somehow receiving the judge's righteousness is simply a category mistake. That is not how the language works ... There is of course a 'righteous' standing, a status, which human beings have as a result of God's gracious verdict in Christ ... but Paul does not use the phrase 'God's righteousness' to denote it.<sup>33</sup>

But the language of God's righteousness is more fluid than either Dunn or Wright allow.<sup>34</sup> It is used by Paul of:

*1. God's saving intervention on the basis of his covenant faithfulness.*

This is, I think, how Romans 1:17 should be understood: 'For in the gospel a righteousness (*dikaioynē*) from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."' The revelation of God's righteousness is juxtaposed with the revelation of his wrath in the following verse (Rom. 1:18). Just as God acts in wrath against sin so he acts in righteousness in the gospel.

*2. God's impartial quality of justice which must be upheld or vindicated in salvation*

'He did it to demonstrate his justice (*dikaioynēs*) at the present time, so as to be just (*dikaion*) and the one who justifies (*dikaionta*) those who have faith in Jesus.' (Rom. 3:26) This is expressed in God's righteous wrath against sin.<sup>35</sup>

*3. God's gift of righteousness in Christ which is imputed to believers*

'For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness (*dikaioynēs*) reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.' (Rom. 5:17) Righteousness, here, is a gift. Just as the trespass of Adam brings death to humanity so the righteousness of Jesus is given to all who believe that they might have life.

The same Greek word is used in all these examples and it is a mistake to make all of these uses precisely synonymous.

Psalm 143 is alluded to by Paul in two of the key passages on justification (Rom. 3:20 and Gal. 2:16) so we can reasonably assume it is formative in his understanding of the righteousness of God. The Psalmist says:

O Lord, hear my prayer, listen to my cry for mercy; in your faithfulness and righteousness come to my relief ... For your name's sake, O Lord, preserve my life; in your righteousness, bring me out of trouble. In your unfailing love,

<sup>33</sup> Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 98, 107.

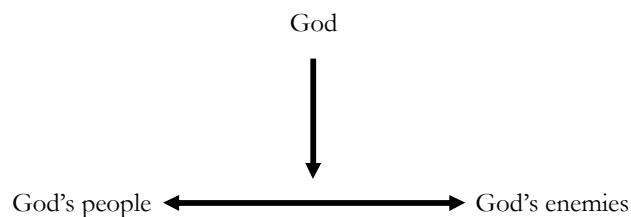
<sup>34</sup> On the OT usage see Seifrid, *Christ, Our Righteousness*, 44.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 171–72.

silence my enemies; destroy all my foes, for I am your servant (Ps. 143:1, 11–12).

The Psalmist cries out to God for justice – for God to act in righteousness – and that means delivering him from his enemies. To cry to God for justice and to appeal to God’s righteousness is to ask God to intervene to rescue his people, to vindicate them and to judge their enemies (see also Ps. 98:1–5). God intervenes on the side of Israel not because Israel is more righteous or more deserving, but because of his faithfulness to his covenant promises. So in this sense God’s righteousness is closely connected to his covenant faithfulness (see also Neh. 9:8).

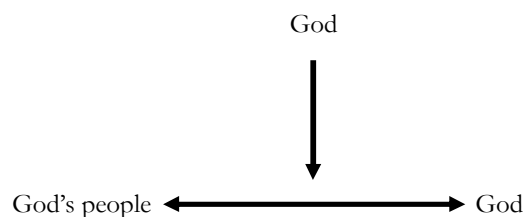
In a Hebrew court there was no state prosecuting council. There were just the two parties in the dispute and judge (or the elders) to preside. So the verdict was not so much guilty or not guilty, as the vindication of one side of the debate. You had two versions of truth or two sides of an argument and the judge found in favour of one side – the judge vindicated one side. And so that side was declared justified or righteous.



The Psalmist calls upon God to intervene in the dispute between God’s people and God’s enemies, and to vindicate his people. This will be God acting in saving righteousness.

But what the image of the law court reveals is that in the act that justifies one party, the other party is inevitably, and at the same time, declared to be in the wrong. They come under judgement. There can be no justification without judgement. One party cannot be vindicated without the other being condemned.

Returning to Psalm 143, consider verse 2: ‘Do not bring your servant into judgement, for no-one living is righteous before you’. There is another reality, another dispute, another conflict, another court case.



In the court case between God and humanity ‘no-one living is righteous’ – no-one can be vindicated before God. When this dispute is brought to the point of judgement, it is God who will be vindicated. He will be declared righteous, and so we will be condemned. It is in this way that God can be declared righteous through the defeat of Israel (see, for example, Neh. 9:33). In the case of Psalm 143, the Psalmist realises that the only way that God can intervene to save his people from their enemies is for God to suspend judgement in the other case – the case that God himself brings against his people. But God will not suspend that judgement forever.

In the court case between God and humanity ‘no-one living is righteous’ – no-one can be vindicated before God. When this dispute is brought to the point of judgement, it is God who will be vindicated. He will be declared righteous, and so we will be condemned. It is in this way that God can be declared righteous through the defeat of Israel (see, for

example, Neh. 9:33). In the case of Psalm 143, the Psalmist realises that the only way that God can intervene to save his people from their enemies is for God to suspend judgement in the other case – the case that God himself brings against his people. But God will not suspend that judgement forever.

This is a saving act. Justification belongs at the heart of salvation. It is not something that comes only as a recognition of a prior event as Wright argues. It is not simply about ecclesiology. In Romans 4:6–8 God counting someone righteous is synonymous with God *not* counting their sins against them.

David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits (*logizētai*) righteousness apart from works:

‘Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven,  
whose sins are covered.  
Blessed is the man whose sin  
the Lord will never count (*logisētai*) against him.’

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*According to Wright ...*

*justification follows reconciliation with God.*

*In Romans 5:1, however, Paul’s logic is quite explicit:  
justification is the precondition for reconciliation with God.*

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In Romans 5:16 justification is the opposite of condemnation: ‘The judgement followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification.’ Paul’s discussion of justification in Romans is set against the background of God’s wrath against humanity (Rom. 1:18). Justification is God’s solution to universal sin and guilt. Justification does have implications for ecclesiology, but it is a transaction between people and God (not just between people and people). The fruit of justification is peace with God (Rom. 5:1) and escape from his wrath (Rom. 5:9). According to Wright justification is an ecclesiological reality that flows from salvation through participation with Christ and regeneration by the Spirit. In other words, justification follows reconciliation with God. In Romans 5:1, however, Paul’s logic is quite explicit: justification is the *precondition* for reconciliation with God: ‘Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.’

### **Justification and assurance**

If justification in the present is a recognition of covenant membership rather than the act by which we are reckoned righteous, then we cannot have assurance. If justification in the future is our vindication at the final judgement, based on the work of Christ *plus* the life we live in the power of the Spirit, then we cannot have assurance. Assurance is grounded in justification as the divine declaration of acquittal on the basis of the finished work of Christ.

Wright is more ambiguous on this than some of his critics recognise. Although he avoids the term ‘imputed’, he does talk of righteousness being ‘reckoned’ to us. He strongly refutes the charge of making justification a process like that in traditional Catholicism. ‘I do not “interpose” extraneous elements between the effectual call and God’s declaration “righteous”. I never have, never would, never (please God) will.’<sup>36</sup> Yet he also says: ‘present justification declares on the basis of faith, what future

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<sup>36</sup> N.T. Wright, ‘The Shape of Justification’ (2001, [www.angelfire.com/mi2/paulpage/shape.html](http://www.angelfire.com/mi2/paulpage/shape.html))

justification will affirm publicly on the basis of the entire life'.<sup>37</sup> Wright surely knows the issues too well for this to be an unconsidered statement.

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*Wright is more ambiguous on this than some of his critics recognise ... Yet he also says: 'present justification declares on the basis of faith, what future justification will affirm publicly on the basis of the entire life'. Wright surely knows the issues too well for this to be an unconsidered statement.*

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If justification is, even in some secondary sense, 'on the basis of the entire life' then we cannot know complete assurance. We cannot speak of our justification with the confidence that Paul does: 'since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!' (Rom. 5:9). Justification, according to Wright, is grounded in Christ's work for us and the Spirit's work in us. But Paul argues that the verdict has already decisively been given (Rom. 5:1) because Christ has already died and risen (Rom. 4:25; 5:9). 'God ... justifies the wicked' (Rom. 4:5).

Wright says justification is not about either 'getting in' or 'staying in', but about how you identify 'those who are in'. But people are 'in' because they 'got in' and because they 'stay in'. The distinctions are false, and that is Paul's point in Galatians. The Gentile Christians have 'got into' the covenant community by faith in Jesus and because of this they should be identified as being in and afforded the status of covenant members (which, in the case of the Galatian church, means an invitation to the meal table). It is the link back to their becoming Christians by faith (their justification) that provides the basis for their current recognition as full members of the community.

### **Justification and ecclesiology**

I want to argue that the New Perspective is correct to see 'the works of the law' as a definition of Jewish distinctiveness. This may be law as a whole (Rom. 3:20), but often it is focused on the emblems of distinctiveness, especially circumcision (Galatians). Dunn says the works of the law are those works 'by which a member of the covenant people identified himself as a Jew and maintained his status within the covenant'.<sup>38</sup>

In Galatians 5:3 Paul says: 'I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is required to obey the whole law.' This does not mean Paul's opponents advocated keeping the whole of the law. Rather, Paul is making the logical step that his opponents were not making. If they are going to make part of the law a requirement for community membership then logically they should make the whole law a requirement. In other words, to make identity markers based on the law a definition of inclusion in the covenant community is works-righteousness even if Paul's opponents will not admit this (especially since the law was used by the Pharisees and Essenes to distinguish themselves not only from Gentiles, but from some of their fellow Jews). Part of Paul's argument in Galatians is to take the view of his opponents to its inevitable conclusion and then contrast it with justification through faith in Christ. The opponents want Gentiles to adopt Jewish identity markers. Paul takes this to its logical conclusion: justification by works. Then he contrasts this with justification by faith alone.

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<sup>37</sup> Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 129 (my emphasis).

<sup>38</sup> James D.G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, WBC (Word Books, 1988), 158.

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*The New Perspective is right to say that Galatians is about the identity of the Christian community. It is ... however, wrong to see this as antithetical to a soteriological view of justification. It is, instead, the practical out-working of a soteriological view of justification.*

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So the New Perspective is right to say that Galatians is about the identity of the Christian community. It is about ecclesiology. The New Perspective, however, is wrong to see this as antithetical to a soteriological view of justification. It is, instead, the practical out-working of a soteriological view of justification.

Paul's opponents in Galatia are not people advocating justification by works (the traditional reading). They are those who demanded that Gentiles adopt the markers of the Mosaic law (circumcision, food laws, Sabbath) not as a condition of salvation per se, but as a condition of membership of the church (the reading of the New Perspective). Paul's point, however, is that if you make works of the law a condition of membership of the church (an ecclesiological issue) you in fact will fatally undermine justification by faith (a soteriological issue). You might say, 'You are saved by faith alone, but now you need to practise the works of the law to be a full member of the Christian community.' But the result, argues Paul, will be that salvation itself comes to be viewed as being dependent on the works of the law.

The traditional reading of Galatians starts with Paul's reassertion of justification by faith and assumes the opponents advocated justification by works (or faith plus works). The New Perspective believes that the opponents advocated covenantal nomism and believes Paul simply advocated covenantal fideism. I want to suggest that the issues in Galatia are ecclesiological, but Paul's responds by a proper outworking of soteriology.

	<b>Paul's opponents advocated:</b>	<b>Paul opposed them by pointing to:</b>
<b>Traditional Reading</b>	salvation by works	salvation by faith
<b>The New Perspective</b>	community membership by works	community membership by faith
<b>Galatians</b>	community membership by works	salvation by faith

In fact the situation is a more complicated because in Galatians 6:12 Paul tells us why his opponents advocated circumcision. 'Those who want to make a good impression outwardly are trying to compel you to be circumcised. The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ.' Their motive is not theological, but sociological. They want to be accepted by the Jewish community and so avoid persecution – this is a theme running through the book.

## Summary

The New Perspective, especially as expounded by Tom Wright, helps us see:

- That salvation (including justification) is set in a covenantal context in the NT. It is the fulfilment of God's promises to Abraham. Wright's covenantal exposition of Romans is a joy to read.<sup>39</sup>
- The righteousness of God refers to his saving acts in faithfulness to his covenant promises to Israel and, through Israel, for the world.
- 'The works of the law' are a definition of Jewish distinctiveness.
- Justification is eschatological – the declaration on the final day of our righteousness (Gal. 5:5) – which is anticipated now by faith (Rom. 5:1).
- Justification has major ecclesiological implications which are a central concern in Galatians and a significant concern in Romans.

We have argued, however, that the New Perspective is unsatisfactory in the following ways:

- The New Perspective makes justification simply the recognition of salvation rather than an act by which God declares us righteous through faith in Christ. The New Perspective separates justification from salvation whereas Paul sees justification as the basis of reconciliation with God (Rom. 5:1).
- The New Perspective makes assurance, and ultimately salvation, dependant on continuing in the covenant community. Justification is eschatological, but it is decisively anticipated in the present (Rom. 5:9).
- By making justification an ecclesiological reality, the New Perspective actually weakens its ecclesiological impact. The ecclesiological implications of justification are rooted in its soteriological nature – in the gospel.

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<sup>39</sup> N. T. Wright, 'The Letter to the Romans' in *The New Interpreter's Bible Vol. X* (Abingdon, 2002), 393–770 and Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Romans Part 1 Chapter 1-8* (SPCK, 2004).

# The Old Perspective on the New Perspective: A Review of Some 'Pre-Sanders' Thinkers

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## Introduction

The year 1977 marked a distinct turn in the world of NT studies. It was this year in which E.P. Sanders published his watershed book, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*.<sup>1</sup> Ever since the debate between Luther and the Papacy, it has been commonly held in Protestantism that Paul's doctrine of justification by faith was a direct attack against Jewish legalism. However, Sanders performed extensive research in order to demonstrate that first century Judaism was not a religion of legalism, and that scholars since Luther have read a sixteenth-century debate into the NT. The significance of Sanders' thesis (now called the 'New Perspective')<sup>2</sup> could hardly be underestimated. It has shaken the world of NT studies to the point that it has been recognised as having the greatest influence on Pauline studies since the Reformation.<sup>3</sup>

Before the reader laments – 'Oh no, not another article on the New Perspective!' – let me briefly explain why I have chosen to write on such a well-trodden topic. First of all, although most NT scholars and students who have been around the field for a while will be well versed in the current discussion, many budding theologians are still discovering it for the first time. Those who can remember their first encounter with the so-called 'New Perspective' (whether it was in 1977 or 1997!) know that it has not produced the most reader-friendly literature. I therefore primarily wish to help those who are in the midst of an exegetical wrestling match with Paul and the law, trying to understand the flow of influence leading up to what has now been called the New Perspective.

Secondly, I hope to be a bit more novel by focusing on those scholars who wrote either before 1977 or not much later. This essay is not designed to be a critique, or a verification, of the New Perspective. Rather, I simply wish to review the work of some influential 'New Perspective-like' scholars who either wrote previous to, or relatively independent of, E.P. Sanders. To tie things together, I will conclude by looking at the monumental work of the man himself.

<sup>1</sup> Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1977.

<sup>2</sup> This term has been coined by James D.G. Dunn in his article, 'The New Perspective on Paul', *B/JRL* 65 (1983), 95–122.

<sup>3</sup> 'Since the Reformation, I think no school of thought, not even the Bulmannian School, has exerted a greater influence upon Pauline scholarship than the school of the New Perspective;' Seyoon Kim, *Paul and the New Perspective*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), xiv.



## Unearthing the Seedbed: Moore, Stendahl, Howard, Tyson, Dahl and Wright

George Foot Moore

It was George Moore who was one of the greatest influences on the subsequent work of Sanders in the late 1970s.<sup>4</sup> In a lengthy article published in 1921,<sup>5</sup> Moore exposed the highly fallacious studies of previous NT scholars, criticising both their method and use of the original sources. Focusing on three prominent NT scholars (Ferdinand Weber, Emil Schürer, and Wilhelm Bousset), Moore revealed their failure to perform a true historical study, which resulted in a distorted portrayal of first-century Judaism.

Moore begins by showing that writers since the early Christian Fathers have misrepresented first-century Judaism. Their primary goal was the edification of the Gentiles, not the conversion of the Jews.<sup>6</sup> This began to change through the ages as the conversion of Jews became the main desire. As Jewish/Christian dialogue began to heighten, Christian apologists quickly learned that the only way to achieve conversion was to argue from the Jewish literature (Targum, Talmud, and Midrash) and to demonstrate first-hand that early Jewish interpretation of the OT possesses much discontinuity with medieval exegesis.<sup>7</sup> In order to win Jews to Christ, Christian apologists had to look to the Jewish interpretations of the OT to demonstrate the folly of Judaism's own beliefs.<sup>8</sup> However, at the turn of the nineteenth-century, a new direction arose regarding Jewish studies. Moore writes:

These later authors would have described their aim as historical – to exhibit the beliefs and teachings of Judaism in the New Testament times or in the early centuries of the Christian era. For this purpose *they employed chiefly the material that came down to them from their predecessors*, without giving sufficient consideration to the fact that it had been gathered for every conceivable motive except to serve as material for the historian.<sup>9</sup>

This formed a gross misuse of these second-hand sources, which in their original context were never intended to give an accurate picture (or any picture really) of the nature of Judaism in the first-century.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, it is the work of Ferdinand Weber which Christian authors cite most. Moore characterises the work of Weber as a German systematisation of the inherently unsystematic theology of early Judaism.<sup>11</sup> Weber's systematic portrayal of early Judaism is that it is a legalistic system of works. Holiness is God's primary attribute at the expense of his love, and man can only please a virtually

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that even before the work of Moore, G. F. Montefiore recognised that the negative statements that Paul made against Judaism did not match up with what Early Judaism says about its own religion. Thus, Montefiore concluded, that Paul's attack was not against mainline Judaism, but against a lesser form of Judaism not represented by the original sources; see his *Judaism and St. Paul: Two Essays* (London: Max Goschen, 1914).

<sup>5</sup> George Foot Moore, 'Christian Writers on Judaism', *HTR* 14 (1921), 197–254.

<sup>6</sup> Moore, 'Christian Writers', 198.

<sup>7</sup> Moore, 'Christian Writer', 201–202.

<sup>8</sup> Moore, 'Christian Writers', 203–204.

<sup>9</sup> Moore, 'Christian Writers', 221 (emphasis added).

<sup>10</sup> Moore, 'Christian Writers', 222.

<sup>11</sup> Moore, 'Christian Writers', 229.

inaccessible God through strict adherence to a system of religion.<sup>12</sup> Though seeking to be apologetic in nature, Moore contends that Weber's work attempted to show that Lutheran Christianity is better than Judaism.<sup>13</sup>

Moore's main critique of Weber lies in his misuse of sources. Though at a first glance it may seem that he demonstrated a thorough acquaintance with the original Jewish documents, it is clear that he viewed them through the quotations of his predecessors. The original context is neglected, misinterpretations are frequent, and his desire to 'systematise' the thought of the Rabbis proved precarious.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, Weber restricted his comparison to a Palestinian Judaism which existed three to four hundred years after Christ.<sup>15</sup>

Equally devastating was Emil Schürer's work on Judaism which also sought to demonstrate that Judaism was a legalistic system far inferior to Christianity. This led Moore to conclude that Schürer (like Weber) was not widely read in the Jewish literature.<sup>16</sup> Bousset too, like his young contemporaries,<sup>17</sup> sought to demonstrate that Judaism was a legalistic religion by looking at the Pseudepigrapha and apocryphal writings contemporary to Jesus and Paul. His neglect, however, of the Rabbinic writings (because they were late), was roundly criticised by Moore since these are the most authoritative writings in early Judaism.<sup>18</sup>

Moore concludes that it was not a fresh and thorough study of first-century Judaism that unearthed 'legalism' as the dominant pattern of religion. Rather, it was 'a new apologetic motive' sought by 'NT theologians' to prove that the 'essence of Christianity' was far superior in comparison to Judaism.<sup>19</sup> Moore's plea, then, was for an unbiased and thorough examination of the original Jewish sources in order to gain an accurate picture of what first-century Judaism was all about.<sup>20</sup>

### *Krister Stendahl and Paul's 'Robust Conscience'*

While Moore demolished traditional thinking concerning Judaism, he made little connection with the theology of Paul. This road, however, was travelled later by Krister Stendahl who shook the world of Pauline studies with his groundbreaking article, 'Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West', which was published in 1963.<sup>21</sup> His main thesis was that Paul had been drastically misrepresented by scholars who have read his

12 Moore, 'Christian Writers', 229.

13 Moore, 'Christian Writers', 230.

14 Moore, 'Christian Writers', 231–35.

15 Moore, 'Christian Writers', 253.

16 Moore, 'Christian Writers', 239–40.

17 Moore complains that not only are all three New Testament scholars (as opposed to historians), 'the oldest of them (is) scarcely past thirty years old,' Moore, 'Christian Writers', 241.

18 Moore, 'Christian Writers', 243–48.

19 Moore, 'Christian Writers', 253.

20 Moore took up his own challenge in a massive three volume account of early Rabbinic Judaism; see his, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era: The Age of the Tannaim*, 3 vols., (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927–30), especially 1.125–216 for his look at the original sources.

21 Originally published in *Harvard Theological Review* 56 (1963), 199–215, and reprinted in, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles: And Other Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 78–96. All references will be made to the reprinted edition. For a good summary of Stendahl's thought, see Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 146–49.

letters in light of Luther and Augustine.<sup>22</sup> Unlike Luther, whose conscience was burdened with personal sin, Paul possessed a 'robust conscience'.<sup>23</sup> Paul, as a Jew, lived in a covenant relationship with YHWH, whereby forgiveness of sins was possible by means of repentance and sacrifice. In this sense Paul was faithful, for he was 'blameless' in regard to the Sinaitic legislation (cf. Phil. 3:6).<sup>24</sup> After Paul was called<sup>25</sup> to be an apostle to the Gentiles in Acts 9, he saw the Torah in a different light. The law, being a Jewish document, was an obstruction to his Gentile mission. Therefore, Paul did not view the law as a set of 'legalistic principles'. Such an outlook is a product of late medieval piety. For Paul, the law was primarily a barrier between Jews and Gentiles.<sup>26</sup> The overall framework for the apostle, then, is that of 'Jews and Gentiles',<sup>27</sup> (not 'works' versus 'faith') and 'the possibility for Gentiles to be included in the messianic community'.<sup>28</sup>

In light of this, the argument of Paul in Romans 2-3 is drastically affected. Paul is not primarily concerned with 'how to find grace and forgiveness before a holy God', but rather to point out that the transgressions of the Jews prove that they are not better than the Gentiles. The law is no help for the Jew, for he too stands in judgement before God, even more than the Gentiles.<sup>29</sup> Paul's purpose in the early chapters of Romans is to proclaim the 'new avenue of salvation' which is equally available to both Jews and Gentiles.<sup>30</sup>

Stendahl believes that the 'lost centrality of "Jews and Gentiles"' is most clearly to be felt in a study of Romans.<sup>31</sup> In Romans, Paul is not using the theme of 'Jews and Gentiles' as an example to show that all are guilty. Rather, 'Paul was chiefly concerned about the relation between Jews and Gentiles - and in the development of *this* concern he used as one of his arguments the idea of justification by faith'.<sup>32</sup> The purpose of Romans is to proclaim 'God's plan for the world and about how Paul's mission to the Gentiles fits into that plan'.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, the 'climax' and 'real centre of gravity' of Romans is not chapters 1-4, but 9-11.<sup>34</sup> It is in these chapters, Paul reflects on the relationship between 'church and synagogue, the church and the Jewish *people* - not "Christianity" and "Judaism," and not the attitudes of the gospel verses the attitudes of the law'.<sup>35</sup>

Stendahl's provocative thesis can be summarised in the following statement:

<sup>22</sup> Stendahl, *Jews and Gentiles*, 79, 82-83.

<sup>23</sup> Stendahl, *Jews and Gentiles*, 80.

<sup>24</sup> Stendahl, *Jews and Gentiles*, 80.

<sup>25</sup> Stendahl views Paul's Acts 9 experience as not a 'conversion', but a call to be an apostle to the Gentiles; Stendahl, *Jews and Gentiles*, 84-85; See also his lengthy defense on pages 7-23.

<sup>26</sup> Stendahl, *Jews and Gentiles*, 84, 86.

<sup>27</sup> Stendahl, *Jews and Gentiles*, 87.

<sup>28</sup> Stendahl, *Jews and Gentiles*, 86.

<sup>29</sup> Stendahl, *Jews and Gentiles*, 81.

<sup>30</sup> Stendahl, *Jews and Gentiles*.

<sup>31</sup> Stendahl, *Jews and Gentiles*, 3.

<sup>32</sup> Stendahl, *Jews and Gentiles*. Stendahl also points out that wherever the topic of 'justification by faith' occurs in Romans, it is found in the midst of a clarifying statement of the relationship between Jews and Gentiles (cf. Rom 1:17; 3:28-30); Stendahl, *Jews and Gentiles*, 26.

<sup>33</sup> Stendahl, *Jews and Gentiles*, 27.

<sup>34</sup> Stendahl, *Jews and Gentiles*, 4, 28; cf. 85.

<sup>35</sup> Stendahl, *Jews and Gentiles*, 4.

Thus even justification by faith, important though we have seen it to be, must be subsumed in the wider context of Paul's mission to the Gentiles, part of God's plan for his creation. Or perhaps we should say it this way: Paul's thoughts about justification were triggered by the issues of divisions and identities in a pluralistic and torn world, not primarily by the inner tensions of individual souls and conscience. His searching eyes focused on the unity and the God-willed diversity of humankind, yes, of the whole creation.<sup>36</sup>

So then, according to Stendahl, two major aspects of Paul's theology are in need of major revision. First of all, justification has been tragically misread by traditional exegetes. It does not reflect the core of Paul's theology. Rather it arose out of the Jew/Gentile issues that he encountered on his mission. Justification is not the battle cry of an individual who has found peace with a holy God, but a doctrine of identity that unites Jews and Gentiles into one family.<sup>37</sup>

Secondly, Paul's mission to the Gentiles is the framework in which all of his theology must be read. The community, not the individual, was Paul's major concern. What is significantly needed then, for a proper reading of Romans, is a freeing of Paul from the reformation fetters in which he is often bound? When this is done, the focus is moved away from the *individual to the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in the plan of God*.

### *The Exegetes: George Howard and Joseph Tyson*

Generally George Howard is not seen as a major pre-contributor to the New Perspective. A brief look, however, at his exegetical discoveries will show that a lot of what Howard emphasised early on is now seen to be major elements in the writings of New Perspective advocates. Like Stendahl, Howard sought to reveal that Paul was greatly concerned with the inclusion of the Gentiles into the plan of God.

In looking at the soteriologically rich passage of Romans 3:21–31, Howard homed in on the universal thrust of Paul's argument.<sup>38</sup> Instead of *explaining* the atonement, Howard argues, Paul *uses* the atonement as a supporting argument to back up other dominant themes in the epistle.<sup>39</sup> Universalism, says Howard, is the overall theme in Paul's argument in the first three chapters in Romans.<sup>40</sup> 'Since Paul opens and closes with the theme of universalism, it is logical to look to it as the key to his theology in the present passage.'<sup>41</sup> It is the inclusion of the Gentiles, then, that is at the heart of the doctrine of justification, not some sort of forensic declaratory act.<sup>42</sup> This is to offset the modern understanding that justification by faith is a polemic against works of merit. Against this popular understanding, Paul uses the atonement in 3:21–26 to argue for the inclusion of the Gentiles in 3:27–31.<sup>43</sup> According to Howard, the connection

<sup>36</sup> Stendahl, *Jews and Gentiles*, 40.

<sup>37</sup> Stendahl evoked significant critiques from the German New Testament scholar, Ernst Käsemann, regarding justification (see his *Perspectives on Paul* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971], 66ff).

<sup>38</sup> 'Romans 3:21–31 and the Inclusion of the Gentiles', *HTR* 63 (1970), 223–33.

<sup>39</sup> Howard, 'Romans 3:21–31', 228.

<sup>40</sup> Howard, 'Romans 3:21–31', 230. He cites 1:5, 16; 2:10–11; 3:22, 23, 29–30 in support of his thesis.

<sup>41</sup> Howard, 'Romans 3:21–31', 230.

<sup>42</sup> Howard, 'Romans 3:21–31', 231.

<sup>43</sup> Howard, 'Romans 3:21–31', 232.

between Romans 3:27–30 is irresolvable in light of the common understanding of justification by faith. The text reads:

27 Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. 28 For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law. 29 Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, 30 since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith (NIV).

In light of Paul's argument for the inclusion of the Gentiles, the rhetorical question made in verse 29, that God is also the God of the Gentiles, makes sense. The modern understanding of justification by faith cannot explain the connection between verse 28 and the question raised in verse 29.<sup>44</sup>

Probably one of the greatest statements concerning the inclusion of the Gentiles, according to Howard, is the problematic passage of Romans 10:4ff.<sup>45</sup> This is another passage which is often misunderstood as teaching that the Jew insisted that they rely on their own works to merit salvation instead of recognising that Christ has brought an end to the system of works inherent in the law.<sup>46</sup> However, as G.F. Moore has sufficiently demonstrated, the Judaism of Paul's day 'believed very much in salvation by grace'.<sup>47</sup> In fact, 'this concept permeated the whole of Judaism in all of its divisions'.<sup>48</sup> So then, when Paul confronts the Jews for 'seeking to establish *their own* righteousness', (Rom. 10:3) he is not referring to individual legalistic merit, but rather 'collective righteousness, to the exclusion of the gentiles'.<sup>49</sup> The key to the passage, then, is the phrase 'to everyone who believes' (10:4b; cf. 10:11ff). The intended goal (*telos*) of the law was to point to 'the ultimate unification of all nations under the God of Abraham ... In this sense Christ is the *telos* of the law; he was its *goal to everyone who believes*'.<sup>50</sup>

Another exegetical study that had an incredible effect on subsequent scholarship was a short article by Joseph B. Tyson in 1973.<sup>51</sup> Tyson focused his study on Paul's use of the phrase, 'works of law', in his letter to the Galatians. The traditional perspective thought that Paul's pejorative use of the term was against 'works-righteousness'. Tyson attempted to show, however, that Paul 'uses the phrase, *erga nomou* [works of law], not to express the deeds of men accomplished in response to law but to describe the conditions out of which deeds may be accomplished'.<sup>52</sup> 'Works of law' for Paul is not 'human moral achievements' but 'nomistic service' or 'life under law'.<sup>53</sup> When Paul

<sup>44</sup> Howard, 'Romans 3:21–31', 232.

<sup>45</sup> George Howard, 'Christ, the End of the Law: The Meaning of Romans 10:4ff', *JBL* 88 (1969), 337.

<sup>46</sup> Howard, 'Christ, the End of the Law', 331.

<sup>47</sup> Howard, 'Christ, the End of the Law', 333.

<sup>48</sup> Howard, 'Christ, the End of the Law', 333.

<sup>49</sup> Howard, 'Christ, the End of the Law', 336.

<sup>50</sup> Howard, 'Christ, the End of the Law', 336 (emphasis original).

<sup>51</sup> "'Works of the Law' in Galatians', *JBL* 92 (1973), 423–31. Another study by Tyson that was influential in a similar way was his, 'Paul's opponents in Galatia', *NovT* 10 (1968), 241–56. For the sake of space, I will only review his former article.

<sup>52</sup> Tyson, 'Works of law', 425.

<sup>53</sup> Tyson, 'Works of law', 425. Tyson here is drawing on, and improving, an earlier study by Ernst Lohmeyer.

writes in Galatians 2:16 that 'we may be justified on the basis of faith rather than on the basis of "nomistic service"' (Tyson's translation of 'works of law'), he is arguing that 'nomistic service is not the system which provides the conditions on the basis of which man can be regarded as righteous'.<sup>54</sup> This 'system' has been superseded by a 'new set of conditions' opened up by the death of Christ.<sup>55</sup> If one, therefore, wishes to live in the old realm of existence marked out by 'nomistic services', he or she is in a sense 'saying that God has not really spoken in Christ'.<sup>56</sup>

In summary, Tyson concludes his study by saying that 'works of law': 1) are not human deeds in a generic sense; 2) are primarily associated with circumcision and food laws; 3) have been superseded by a new set of conditions in Christ; and 4) Paul rejected them because of a new vision of what (now) demarcates the people of God – faith. Like Howard, Tyson sought to show that Paul (at least in Galatians) was not primarily attacking works-righteousness.

### *Nils Alstrup Dahl: Justification in Paul's Mission*

Like Howard, Dahl is often overlooked as being a major contributor to the New Perspective. His influence, however, is rich with regards to the doctrine of justification, promoting much of what was expressed earlier by Stendahl. Unlike most traditional interpreters, Dahl says that Paul's doctrine of justification should be understood in light of its social context. It is not that it is primarily a sociological doctrine, but that 'the framework which Paul uses to locate the doctrine is social and historical rather than psychological and individualistic'.<sup>57</sup> Dahl does not fully agree with Stendahl, that Paul's theology was a rational defence for his Gentile mission,<sup>58</sup> but does concur that justification is not primarily focused on the individual. Justification, rather, is 'something more than a dogmatic doctrine or an answer to the question of how the individual is to find a gracious God'.<sup>59</sup> The doctrine not only concerns the individual, 'but is also of importance for the common life of Christians'.<sup>60</sup> Justification 'has a clear social relevance; it implies an understanding of what Christian community is, and it provides guidelines to show the members of that community how they ought to relate to one another'.<sup>61</sup> This becomes clear when one realises that Paul's missionary endeavours and his theology were inseparable from each other.<sup>62</sup> Rather than presenting a system of theological dogma, Paul 'argues theologically in order to make the missionary congregations understand their own place within the divine economy'.<sup>63</sup>

So then, while much of his work regarding Paul and the law remains rather traditional, his anti-individualistic approach, as well as his theological-social emphasis in

<sup>54</sup> Tyson, 'Works of law', 426.

<sup>55</sup> Tyson, 'Works of law', 430.

<sup>56</sup> Tyson, 'Works of law', 430.

<sup>57</sup> Nils A. Dahl, *Studies in Paul: Theology for the Early Christian Mission* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977), 110.

<sup>58</sup> Dahl, *Studies in Paul*, 74.

<sup>59</sup> Dahl, *Studies in Paul*, 95.

<sup>60</sup> Dahl, *Studies in Paul*, 95.

<sup>61</sup> Dahl, *Studies in Paul*, 108. Thus, the behavior of Peter and Barnabas revealed, according to Paul, that they disregarded that justification was by faith by their failure to preserve Christian unity at the Lord's table; cf. page 109.

<sup>62</sup> Dahl, *Studies in Paul*, 70.

<sup>63</sup> Dahl, *Studies in Paul*, 71.

Paul, had a significant effect regarding his doctrine of justification, and provides a valid seedbed for future critics of the Lutheran Paul.

### N.T. Wright

One may wonder why I have included N.T. Wright in a 'Pre-Sanders' discussion on the New Perspective. I have done so simply because it was only one year after the publication of Sanders' *magnum opus* that Wright expressed some of the most 'New Perspective-like' thoughts on Pauline theology. Even more remarkable is that he did this almost completely independent of Sanders' work (his citation of Sanders is fairly infrequent). It was in 1978 when Wright nudged his way into the dialogue regarding the relation of the Apostle Paul to first-century Judaism in the publication of his Tyndale Fellowship lecture.<sup>64</sup> Attempting to interact with the opposing views of Ernst Käsemann and Krister Stendahl regarding Paul and justification, Wright promoted a mediating position in order to present a 'new view of Paul'.<sup>65</sup>

Two primary points emerged from Wright's seminal study: 1) Judaism was not a Weberian religion of works righteousness;<sup>66</sup> and 2) justification was a polemical doctrine that has been abused by Lutheran thought. Regarding the former, Wright agrees wholeheartedly with Moore and Sanders<sup>67</sup> that according to the original sources, Judaism was not a legalistic religion and so Weber was way off in his depiction. The Apostle was not confronting a wrong view of works-righteousness, but rather Jewish 'national righteousness', namely, 'the belief that fleshly Jewish descent guarantees membership of God's true covenant people'.<sup>68</sup> Possession of the law was, for the Jew, a 'badge of national privilege'.<sup>69</sup> According to Wright, this was Paul's point in Romans 10:3 where he faults Israel for being ignorant of God's righteousness and 'seeking to establish their own righteousness' (i.e. 'national righteousness').<sup>70</sup>

Secondly, the doctrine of justification by faith needs to be revised. Rather than occupying the core of Paul's theological thought, justification by faith was a polemical doctrine 'because it declares that the way is open for all, Jew and Gentile alike'.<sup>71</sup> Contra Luther, justification is aimed at Jewish *national* pride, not moralistic self-reliance. In light of this, justifying faith is not 'easier than law' since 'both are impossible without grace'. Rather, faith, unlike law, 'is available world-wide'.<sup>72</sup>

### Summary

As the reader will see, E.P. Sanders was not thoroughly novel in his thesis. Although he is often credited with providing the foundation for subsequent New Perspective thinking, and rightly so, there were many before him who were embarking on the same path. Moore seemingly destroyed the traditional understanding of early Judaism by

64 N.T. Wright, 'The Paul of History and the Apostle of Faith', *TynBul* 29 (1978), 61-88.

65 Wright, 'The Paul of History', 61.

66 He recognises colourfully, that 'Moore said this fifty years ago, and nobody listened,' Wright, 'The Paul of History', 79; cf. 65.

67 Wright criticises Sanders for failing properly to apply the relevance of his thesis regarding first-century Judaism to Paul; Wright, 'The Paul of History', 78, 81.

68 Wright, 'The Paul of History', 65.

69 Wright, 'The Paul of History', 65.

70 Wright, 'The Paul of History', 83.

71 Wright, 'The Paul of History', 71.

72 Wright, 'The Paul of History', 72.

exposing the errors of past treatments. Stendahl agitated Lutheran exegetes by placing Paul in an apparently different world. Howard and Dahl cut against the grain of widely held beliefs about justification and Paul's ministry to the Gentiles. Wright, before the wake of Sanders was completely felt, tied many of these things together and presented a new Paul that was to become familiar in subsequent discussion. Nevertheless, it was E.P. Sanders who produced a weighty first-hand analysis of first-century Judaism, thus paving the way for the inroads of New Perspective thinking.

## The 'Sanders Revolution'

### *Sanders on Judaism*

The publication of Sanders' *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* marked a significant shift in Pauline studies. As the subtitle suggests, the motive of Sanders' revolutionary work is to compare the 'patterns of religion' of the Judaism that existed from 200 BC – AD 200 on the one hand, and with the Christianity promoted by the Apostle Paul on the other. 'What is needed', Sanders writes, 'is to compare Paul on his own terms with Judaism on its own terms, a comparison not of one-line essences or of separate motifs, but of a whole religion with a whole religion'.<sup>73</sup> Sanders criticises past comparisons in that they have focused on an individual motif of one religion (usually that of Paul), which is then compared with the same motif in another religion (namely, Judaism), in order to identify the origin of Pauline Christianity. This is erroneous, says Sanders, since: 'One starts with Pauline motifs and looks for their origins in Judaism, but the various elements of Judaism are not taken up for their own sake. It follows that there is no true comparison of the two religions'.<sup>74</sup> Therefore, Sanders undertakes in his study, 'to compare an entire religion, parts and all, with an entire religion, parts and all'.<sup>75</sup>

Sanders investigated the 'pattern of religion' inherent in Palestinian Judaism from 200 BC – AD 200 by examining the Tannaitic Literature (33–238), the Dead Sea Scrolls (239–321), and the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha (329–418). His conclusion regarding the nature of first-century Judaism may be summarised as follows:

The frequent Christian charge against Judaism, it must be recalled, is not that some individual Jews misunderstood, misapplied and abused their religion, but that *Judaism necessarily tends* towards petty legalism, self-serving and self-deceiving casuistry, and a mixture of arrogance and lack of confidence in God. But the surviving Jewish literature is as free of these characteristics as any I have ever read. By consistently maintaining the basic framework of *covenantal nomism*,<sup>76</sup> the gift and demand of God were kept in a healthy relationship with each other, the minutiae of the law were observed on the basis of the large principles of religion and because of commitment to God, and humility before the God who chose and would ultimately redeem Israel was encouraged'.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>73</sup> Sanders, *Palestinian*, 12.

<sup>74</sup> Sanders, *Palestinian*, 13.

<sup>75</sup> Sanders, *Palestinian*, 16.

<sup>76</sup> Sanders defines 'covenantal nomism' as 'the view that one's place in God's plan is established on the basis of the covenant and that the covenant requires as the proper response of man his obedience to its commandments, while providing means of atonement for transgression'; Sanders, *Palestinian*, 75.

<sup>77</sup> Sanders, *Palestinian*, 427 (emphasis original).



In light of the nomistic pattern of religion, Sanders gives a seven-fold structure of Judaism that may be outlined as such:<sup>78</sup>

1. God has chosen Israel.
2. God has given the law.
3. The law implies both God's promise to maintain the election and the requirement to obey.
4. God rewards obedience and punishes transgression.
5. The law provides for means of atonement.
6. Atonement results in maintenance or re-establishment of the covenantal relationship.
7. Therefore, all of those who are maintained in the covenant by obedience, atonement and God's mercy belong to the group which will be saved.

Sanders concludes that this structure reveals that 'election and ultimately salvation are considered to be by God's mercy rather than human achievement'.<sup>79</sup> The Judaism that was attacked by Jesus and Paul, though it may be a correct picture of some individual Jews, is not a correct picture of the *type*, or *pattern*, of religion as revealed by the surviving Jewish literature.<sup>80</sup> 'Covenantal Nomism', rather, 'must have been the general type of religion prevalent in Palestine before the destruction of the Temple'.<sup>81</sup>

#### *Sanders on Paul*

Sanders' analysis on Paul is generally believed to be less helpful than his research in first-century Judaism, even among his own supporters.<sup>82</sup> Nevertheless, his work on the Apostle's thought shook the grounds of contemporary scholarship leaving various after-shocks that continue to be felt today. Perhaps the most significant contribution to Pauline scholarship made by Sanders was his reversed approach to Paul's theological thought. He believed that for Paul, the solution to man's problem preceded the problem itself. In other words, for Paul, 'the conclusion that all the world – both Jew and Greek – equally stands in need of a saviour *springs from* the prior conviction that God had provided such a saviour'.<sup>83</sup> This stands diametrically opposed to the traditional thought that views Paul's struggle with trying to keep the law as the 'plight' that preceded his 'solution' found in Christ. It is clear from his epistles, argues Sanders, that Paul 'did not start from man's need, but from God's deed'.<sup>84</sup> The order of thought in the book of Romans, then, does not in fact reflect Paul's actual missionary tactics. Instead, he preached the gospel, namely, God's action in Christ.<sup>85</sup>

<sup>78</sup> Sanders lists an eight-fold structure, but I have combined his points 3 and 4 into the present number 3; see Sanders, *Palestinian*, 422.

<sup>79</sup> Sanders, *Palestinian*, 422.

<sup>80</sup> Sanders, *Palestinian*, 426.

<sup>81</sup> Sanders, *Palestinian*, 428.

<sup>82</sup> See for instance, James D. G. Dunn, 'The New Perspective on Paul', in idem, *Jesus, Paul and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990), 186–88, 201–202; N.T. Wright, *What Paul Really Said*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 18–20.

<sup>83</sup> Sanders, *Palestinian*, 443. Cf. the critique by Frank Thielman, *Paul and the Law: A Contextual Approach* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1994), (emphasis original).

<sup>84</sup> Sanders, *Palestinian*, 444.

<sup>85</sup> Sanders, *Palestinian*, 444.

In light of this, Paul's soteriological contrast between 'faith and works' must be something vastly different than what is commonly perceived as a contrast between Jewish self-reliance and Christian reliance on God. It was Bultmann who championed the view that Paul's attack on the law is really an attack on man's inability to achieve salvation by keeping the law. Man, therefore, 'cannot exhibit "the works of the law" in their entirety'.<sup>86</sup> Sanders, however, in light of his 'Solution-Plight' scheme, thought that 'Paul's view that attempting to do the law is itself sin is not the *cause* of his keeping the law and being Christian are incompatible; it is the *consequence* of it'.<sup>87</sup> The basis for Paul's polemic against the law, and consequently against doing the law, was his exclusivist soteriology. Since salvation is only by Christ, the following of *any* other path is wrong.<sup>88</sup>

Sanders concludes that the pattern of Pauline Christianity is vastly different from the pattern of Judaism, but not in the relation of grace and works. The difference, rather, is in the 'total type of religion'.<sup>89</sup> Or, the problem that Paul had with Judaism, was that it 'lacks Christ'.<sup>90</sup> Sanders took up the question of Paul's thought in a subsequent work, though it falls chronologically out of the scope of this essay.<sup>91</sup>

Sanders' thought on Paul may be summarised as such:

1. The pattern of religion of Judaism does not reveal a religion of 'works righteousness', but rather one of 'covenantal nomism'.
2. In light of this, Paul's critique of Judaism was not an attack against legalism, but simply a denouncement of his former religion. The main problem that Paul saw with Judaism was that it lacked Christ.
3. Paul's polemic against 'works of the law', was not against legalism, but against a wrong definition of the people of God. Faith, not the law, is the defining mark of the elect.
4. The law, being a Jewish document reserved for a Jewish covenant (Mosaic) should no longer be kept as a means of staying in the covenant.

## Conclusion

While much contemporary literature will attribute the New Perspective 'seed' to Sanders' influential study, I have attempted to show that the seminal thoughts were expressed in many writers independent of Sanders. This study has attempted to give an unbiased exposition of the major proponents and theological tenets of the early stages of the so-called 'New Perspective' on Paul. I hope that this survey will help the reader to get a basic handle on the history of thought and major contributors in order to understand the various influences leading up to (and including) the work of Sanders and beyond. One thing that is lacking in this approach is an in-depth exegetical evaluation of relevant texts regarding the validity of the New Perspective. This, however, is a path left for the reader to travel.

<sup>86</sup> Sanders, *Palestinian*, 481.

<sup>87</sup> Sanders, *Palestinian*, 482 (emphasis original).

<sup>88</sup> Sanders, *Palestinian*, 550.

<sup>89</sup> Sanders, *Palestinian*, 548.

<sup>90</sup> Sanders, *Paul*, 47.

<sup>91</sup> *Paul, the Law and Jewish People* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1983). Furthermore, by the time Sanders published this second work, the novelty of his thesis began to fade as more scholars were beginning to make contributions to the New Perspective.

# Uneasy Consciences and Critical Minds: What the Followers of Carl Henry Can Learn From Edward Said<sup>1</sup>

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*The year 2003 saw the deaths of two men whose writings have interested me over the years: Edward Said, the great Palestinian literary critic and political activist died of leukaemia in September; and Carl Henry, one of the founding fathers of the new evangelicalism died in December.*

To those familiar with their work, they seem like strange bedfellows for anyone to link together in this way. Said was a polymathic scholar who also wrote widely on Middle Eastern affairs in a passionate and engaged way; Henry was a high-class journalist who, though undoubtedly very clever and accomplished, really devoted much of his life to a popular explication and application of the Christian faith in the contemporary world. Yet, like other 'heroes' of mine, from George Orwell to Alexander Solzhenitsyn, they both represented an ideal: the engaged intellectual. They both saw the importance of being what one might call informed amateurs in areas which were not within their own immediate fields of technical expertise. They also responded to the need to speak out uncomfortable truths to those who hold institutional power, whether on the international, national or local stage. I want to say more about the importance of engaged intellectuals later, but first it is probably wise to introduce Henry in context to those readers unfamiliar with the history and culture of American evangelicalism.

When Carl Henry died on 7 December 2003, aged 90, the world of evangelicalism lost the man who was undoubtedly its elder statesman, one whom Timothy George describes (with forgivable hyperbole) as the man who was central to the very invention of evangelicalism.<sup>2</sup> Certainly, Henry was a remarkable figure, the epitome of the American can-do mentality applied to the areas of evangelical theology and evangelism. Here are just a few of his achievements: he was a member of the founding faculty of Fuller Theological Seminary; the first editor of *Christianity Today*; lecturer at large for

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful for comments on this paper by colleagues and friends, especially Bill Edgar, Manny Ortiz, Rob Burns and Ian Glover.

<sup>2</sup> 'Inventing Evangelicalism', *Christianity Today*, March 2004; available at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/003/6.48.html>

World Vision; mentor to Charles Colson; and, through his writings, populariser and defender of evangelical orthodoxy, particularly on the issue of Scripture through his six volume work, *God, Revelation, and Authority* (1976–83; recently republished by Paternoster). Like John Stott or Martyn Lloyd Jones in the UK, he was one of the men who set some of the basic agenda for evangelical life in the post-war USA.

While Henry did work on the international stage, he was, as the short summary above indicates, essentially an American figure. It seems therefore appropriate to spend a few pages of *Themelios* introducing him to our predominantly British (or at least non-American) readership. This will facilitate a better understanding both of the man and his work and of the current state of American evangelicalism. Whether we like it or not, America sets the agenda here as in so many other areas. After all, American evangelical books fill study shelves around the world; and the larger culture of America has marked life in all parts of the globe. Understanding America is therefore important if only because even those who are most vigorously anti-American still define themselves in terms set by the USA.

To assess simultaneously both the contribution of Carl Henry and the culture of American evangelicalism is no easy task, and I will attempt no exhaustive presentation here. Instead, I have decided to take as my guide Henry's little book from 1947, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*. Though less than 100 pages in total, it was the work which brought Henry to national prominence and for which he will, in the long run, probably be best remembered.<sup>3</sup>

To understand the book, it is important to grasp something of the nature of American fundamentalism (basically a synonym for evangelicalism prior to the movement to which Henry belonged) in the 1930s. Essentially, the movement was characterised by a cultural and moral legalism, opposed, for example, to Hollywood, cinema, dancing, consumption of alcohol, and smoking (at least in the northern states whose economy did not depend upon tobacco). There was also an intellectual and theological obscurantism, where learning was regarded with deep suspicion. Both the legalism and the obscurantism were reinforced by a deep-rooted dispensational theology. When one combined these with public relations disasters such as Prohibition and the Scopes Trial, the evangelical world in which Henry cut his teeth in the thirties and forties was marked by its basic irrelevance to American society. It simply had nothing of any interest to say to the modern world.<sup>4</sup>

It was against this background that a group of younger evangelicals, including Carl Henry, along with others such as E.J. Carnell, George Eldon Ladd, and Paul K. Jewett, decided to launch a revised evangelicalism, indeed, a 'new evangelicalism', in post-World War II America. They obtained degrees from mainstream universities; they addressed themselves to the latest developments in theology and biblical studies. They also sought to defend and expound Christian evangelical orthodoxy in a way that avoided the vicious polemical tone of the past.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The work has recently been republished, with a new introduction by the current President of Fuller, Richard Mouw, and the original introduction by Harold Ockenga, by Eerdmans (2003).

<sup>4</sup> Good introductions to this period are George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism 1870–1925* (Oxford: OUP, 1980); D.G. Hart, *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> On the atmosphere and agenda of the new evangelicals, see George Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).

The agenda for this new movement was expressed nowhere more clearly, nor in briefer compass, than in Henry's book, *Uneasy Conscience*. In eight brief chapters, Henry offered very little in the way of specific suggestions for action and much in the way of general, inspiring rhetoric to goad his fellow evangelicals out of their social, cultural and political apathy and mobilise them for activism in all these fields. The major problem, as Henry saw it, was a basic indifference to the world around engendered by an indifference to the present, something which was intimately related to the faulty eschatology of dispensationalism. To quote Henry himself, 'Whereas once the redemptive gospel was a world-changing message, now it was narrowed to a world-resisting message' (19). What evangelicals needed to grasp was the fact that their message applied to all of life, and was transformative of all areas of human endeavour. They should therefore prepare themselves accordingly. Whether consciously or unconsciously, Henry seemed to know that the development of this programme required the development of a distinctive evangelical consciousness, and that required the production of the necessary cultural tools (68–71). Such could only be achieved by the proper education of leaders to manage these tools, and the creation of a popular evangelical front which set aside divisive secondary doctrines in favour of maintaining a unified policy in the face of the common secularising foe.

In light of this manifesto, we can see Henry's time at Fuller, his work on *Christianity Today* (CT), his involvement with the Evangelical Theological Society, and his various other activities on the evangelical stage, as part and parcel of his desire to see evangelicalism making a difference to the world around by engaging thoughtfully and relevantly with the world as it presented itself. On the occasion of his death, therefore, it seems appropriate to ask to what extent the project has proved successful, and whether we can learn from the strengths and weaknesses which it embodied.

Before doing so, however, it is important for me to state clearly my own position relative to the American evangelical scene so as to allow the reader the opportunity to play 'spot the prejudice' in my own analysis. I am, according to the US Immigration and Naturalisation Service a 'non-resident alien'; in other words, I live in America (and, indeed, I find that, generally speaking, I like living in America) but I do not belong to America; and that is a useful way of understanding my take on American evangelicalism. It is the world I inhabit, but I do not belong there, and thus perhaps have the ability to spot certain things which a native might miss through over familiarity. There is also the potential to misunderstand other things for precisely the same reasons. I am also familiar with only a relatively narrow band of American Christian life, that is, the white Reformed, generally suburban/urban professional middle class branch. Of Mennonite, Arminian, African American and Latino streams, to name but four, my knowledge is limited and mainly second hand. Yet this places me very close to the kind of evangelicals to whom Henry was making his appeal.

The first comment to make about Henry's book is that it is first and foremost a plea for evangelical engagement with society and culture at all levels. This is not to say that Henry is laying out a detailed plan of what such an engagement should look like. Unlike many of the current generation of American evangelicals, Henry, though clearly something of a Republican himself, stopped well short of identifying a particular brand of politics as being distinctively Christian, preferring instead to argue that Christians should be *involved*, not prescribing exactly what that involvement should look like. The dilemma he faced was this: on the one hand, those Christians who engaged in politics, the arts, et cetera were on the whole those of definite liberal or neo-orthodox convictions which gave the whole arena of cultural engagement a somewhat heterodox

feel. On the other hand, the fundamentalists, particularly as influenced by the 'pull up the drawbridge and wait for the end' mentality of dispensationalism, had tended to regard any engagement with the world as futile. Any attempt to improve the social, political, and cultural spheres was, at best, pointless and naive, at worst 'worldly' and positively sinful. In the late forties, of course, with the Iron Curtain, the Berlin crisis and the increasing anti-Red hysteria of American politics, this mentality was reinforced by a knee-jerk fear of anything which smacked of socialism.

Over against this, Henry argued that evangelical Christianity had developed a faulty eschatology which projected Christ's kingdom into the future and thus had lost sight of the nature of that kingdom in the present day and age. Eschatology became the reason – or perhaps the pretext – for retreating from fields of necessary Christian endeavour. One can understand the attraction of this. The collapse of orthodoxy in the mainline denominations in the 1920s, coupled with the various social forces unleashed by the economic policies of the 1930s and the trauma of the Second World War and the start of the Cold War, meant that many of the old certainties, whether social, political or theological, were no longer as impregnable as they had once seemed. Retreat in such circumstances must have seemed most attractive; and baptising that retreat with a theological rationale which made it appear biblical must have had tremendous appeal. Like the boy in the schoolyard who has been excluded from the soccer match and who then turns away in tears declaring that he never wanted to play anyway, so fundamentalist Christianity turned from the traditional public sphere and retreated into its own subculture.

Since Henry's day, of course, much has changed, and that in no small measure because of the life and work of Henry himself. Indeed, if we look at just two areas, those of theological and political engagement, we can see the difference that the kind of vision encapsulated in Henry's manifesto and pioneered by him and his colleagues has made to the American evangelical world.

## Theological Engagement

Henry's own life and work, supremely the six volumes of *God, Revelation and Authority* (GRA), indicate how seriously he took the need to work out evangelical orthodoxy in a contemporary context. There are times when this gives his work a bizarre and very dated feel – for example, the long interaction in GRA with the 'Jesus People' who have proved about as significant for Christianity since the 1960s as Rolf Harris's Stylophone has been for the music of Kraftwerk. Nevertheless, the central point of these volumes is that scriptural authority is significant; that it is not enough to say the Bible is true or authoritative without defining such notions with great care and relating them to other theological points; and that this must be done in a manner which is relevant to the challenges of today, not yesterday. And this point is well-made and well-taken. Indeed, one could argue that it was this issue, the relation between God, revelation and Scripture, that dominated much of Henry's early and mid-career. This was reflective of a more general concern in the wider theological world from the 1940s through the 1960s with the problem of what exactly constituted revelation. Of course, it is always relevant; but it had peculiar relevance at this point in time, and Henry's response indicated his sensitivity to the times.

Nevertheless, while Henry's dream of articulating evangelical theology in a thoughtful, nuanced way is admirable, the practical realities of the vision were flawed. The institutions which spearheaded the new evangelicalism (Fuller Seminary, *Christianity*

Today, the Evangelical Theological Society) were all interdenominational in order to produce a kind of popular front evangelicalism, focused on gospel essentials. This was done in order to combat the forces of theological liberalism and, to a much lesser extent, fundamentalism.<sup>6</sup> Such a vision is admirable, arguably representing an attempt to take seriously the NT teaching on the unity of all believers in Christ. Britain has its parallel institutions: the old London Bible College (now the London School of Theology); UCCF; the Evangelical Alliance; the British Evangelical Council (now Affinity). While the origins and agendas of these British groups differ somewhat from their American counterparts, the vision of a popular evangelical front is much the same. Yet the strength of this model – that of transcending traditional, denominational boundaries – also its weakness, in that it removes the activity of theology from the immediate church context. This has a twofold effect: first, it can foster a somewhat eclectic approach to theology, with a marginalising of areas where disagreement exists, regardless of how important they are; and, second, it removes the obvious mechanisms of accountability.

To take the first of these. The sidelining of issues which historically divide evangelicals can be a most positive thing. Should differing views of baptism, say, or eschatology, prevent informal fellowship between believers and churches in different traditions, or hinder joint evangelistic campaigns? Most are inclined to say not, as this might lead to a complete fragmentation of evangelicalism which would inevitably undermine effectiveness. Yet this raises the problem of which issues are central and which are peripheral. Given that many died on both sides of the eucharistic debate at the Reformation, should we see different views of the Lord's Supper as mere superficial differences or as disagreements which must disrupt all fellowship? Perhaps a more pertinent example for modern evangelicalism would be the disagreement between Calvinists and Arminians over the nature of human decision with reference to salvation, or between charismatics and non-charismatics with reference to the continuation or cessation of the spiritual gifts. To what extent are these differences significant?

It is tempting to argue that the answer to this question really depends upon the circumstances. Sharing a platform in the interests of a local evangelistic campaign with others with whom one disagrees on these issues would seem, all else being equal, an appropriate, modest, and charitable position to take, one which avoids the nasty excesses of narrow sectarianism. I would wish, at this point, to stress my agreement with such an attitude, allowing as it does for a manifestation of the heart of the gospel and a focusing of minds on that which unites, rather than that which divides. Yet here is the problem: who, in these circumstances, decides where the boundaries are to be drawn at each level of possible co-operation? On what basis do they do so (from, say, a common platform against abortion, where Protestants routinely speak with Roman Catholics, and even, on occasion, atheists and representatives of other religions – again, legitimately in many instances in my opinion – to a joint communion service or agreements regarding mutual eligibility of ministers)? Thus, the broad-based nature of evangelicalism is both its greatest strength and its most unfortunate weakness.

The most graphic example of this problem in action has been the events surrounding the debate over the openness of God which has taken place in the Evangelical

<sup>6</sup> It is interesting that Henry's criticisms of fundamentalism in *Uneasy Conscience* are carefully nuanced to ensure that there is no doubt in the reader's mind that, while theological liberalism is the enemy, fundamentalism has more the character of a misguided friend. He clearly saw it as having a grasp of the supernatural gospel, albeit in a somewhat truncated form, in a way that liberalism simply did not.

Theological Society. Here certain orthodox evangelicals made an attempt to rule that openness teaching was in conflict with the Society's position and that those holding to such should cease to be members. My own very personal take on this issue is twofold: I do not regard open theism as Christian orthodoxy and therefore see it as having no place in a Christian organisation. Yet, given the fact that the ETS is not a church and that its doctrinal basis of membership only requires belief in inerrancy and in a basic Trinitarianism, I see no constitutional grounds for the expulsion of individuals who sign this and believe it. The key issues for me theologically (e.g., divine foreknowledge, penal substitution, the nature of grace) are simply not dealt with in the DB, inferential arguments from inerrancy notwithstanding. Therein lies the problem: transdenominational organisations need to play down differences in order to function; yet in so doing they raise questions about the drawing of boundaries which cannot be easily answered.

This, yet again, brings us to the issue of accountability: who decides what the limits of fellowship are in these transdenominational organisations? Where doctrinal bases exist, who decides where the lines must be drawn or what can and cannot be embraced within them?

To deal with this in any detail would be too complex, but one significant issue which is often missed in discussion and which relates very closely to the way in which evangelicalism connects to American culture, is the need of these groups to raise money. Evangelicalism is costly: from the glossy pages of *CT*, to the payrolls of the seminaries, to the lecture fees of evangelical superstars, evangelicalism needs money. In practice this means that its public position is always a negotiation between various theological concerns and the willingness of those with money to underwrite the project. This is where the problems of accountability can become acute. Even the briefest glance at the pages of *CT* reveals how much the organ depends upon advertising for revenue; and this dependence is not theologically neutral. First, the kinds of ads carried are, by virtue of being in the pages of *CT*, invested with the authority of the magazine, whatever the editor might claim to the contrary. Editors may not personally approve of a particular product (and, one might add in passing that the existence of advertising for theology courses and books does turn theology into a product, to be packaged, branded and sold – itself an interesting phenomenon); but allowing them to be placed in their journal gives them formal approval. I should know, as I edit the journal you are currently reading, which, as you notice, carries almost no advertising as a matter of principle. When adverts for a veritable smorgasbord of seminaries appear in the pages of *CT*, the differences between them are inevitably relativised by virtue of their existence as part of the larger consensus being created by the magazine itself. When advertisements for Christian approaches to financial security appear in the pages of *CT*, placing personal wealth near the top of Christian priorities, then *CT*, and the evangelicalism it claims to represent, surrenders any possibility of compelling prophetic critique of the prosperity gospel within its pages.

Second, companies only place advertisements in organs that sell; so sales become very important; and this means that the editor needs to maintain circulation in order to maintain commercial income. Thus there will be a constant pressure to make sure that the content of the journal appeals to the widest range of readers possible. This almost certainly means a lowering of the intellectual level in order to net as big an audience as possible. Any comparison of the *CT* of Henry's day with that of ours would seem to confirm that the magazine has become glossier, more aesthetic, and less intellectually demanding, as the years have gone by. This is surely not unrelated to the way in which



it is financed and marketed. As commercial television is more likely to succeed by producing 'reality TV' instead of documentaries on AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa, so *CT* is more likely to maintain circulation by running interviews with Max Lucado than with some less photogenic character doing something less exciting than writing bestsellers. One might also note that when the organs which help to create and sustain the unity of one's movement are dependent upon the consumerist system of western society, it becomes very difficult to mount any effective critique of, or resistance to, that system. Evangelicalism internalises the system; and then the system is as unquestioned and unquestionable as the laws of gravity.

Third, given the transdenominational disparate nature of the evangelical world noted above, the very function of a media organ such as *CT* is in large part to manufacture a kind of consensus. It is to create at least the appearance of unity among dramatically different groupings. This again places at the heart of the new evangelical project a natural gravitational pull towards lowest common denominator themes. In turn this influences the mindsets of those who read the organ uncritically and with no awareness that the very nature of such a commercial media product is somewhat less than ideologically neutral. Organs such as *CT* do not simply reflect the evangelical world; they help to create and sustain it. In a certain sense they determine who and what gets covered; and the various demands of consensus and commerce mean that certain figures and issues will get better coverage than others.

This is not to say that these problems could be solved by dismantling transdenominational evangelical enterprises *tout court*. I suspect such would be disastrous and would militate against the Bible's teaching on the unity of the body. I would argue that Henry's vision needs to be modified, indeed radicalised, to include careful reflection upon how evangelicalism is to be held accountable to the church. I would also argue that it does not simply need to engage with society but that it also needs to subject the most unspoken orthodoxies of modern Western society to vigorous critique. It is this which the political engagement of the white middle class American evangelicalism has, on the whole, failed to do in any radical sense.

### *Political Engagement*

If the fundamentalism against which Henry was reacting was politically apathetic, looking for a kingdom which was projected pretty much into the future, much of white American evangelicalism today is tied to right wing politics of a fairly radical kind. Economically there is little to choose between Republican and Democratic options at the ballot box. One is dealing with debates about the weighting of tax burdens, with the basic free market system being an unquestioned orthodoxy for both parties. There are some key areas of disagreement on foreign policy, but the real division for many Christians is the issue of abortion.<sup>7</sup> Although reports seem to indicate that substantial minorities in both parties disagree with their official party lines (Republicans are pro-life;

<sup>7</sup> To be fair, the content of *World* magazine, whose readership is overwhelmingly white, would seem to indicate that other issues are starting to come to the fore, especially education (i.e., creationism; home-schooling) and family values (i.e., gay marriage). *World* is without doubt one of the principle means by which an apparent political consensus on a host of other issues (welfare, foreign policy etc.) has been created and sustained as normative orthodoxy among an influential segment of middle class white conservative evangelicals in the USA.

Democrats are pro-choice) this does not translate into grass roots nuancing of political allegiances. There is a fierce loyalty to the Republicans being exhibited by most white Christians. Henry himself in *Uneasy Conscience*, was careful to avoid the identification of any economic system with Christianity (e.g. 84–85). The current function, however, of abortion as the card which trumps everything has killed meaningful political thinking on other issues in many evangelical circles. Health care, foreign policy, and welfare are simply non-issues when compared to the termination of pregnancies. Eschatology is perhaps less significant, but US policy towards Israel is undoubtedly shaped to some extent by the power of groups which hold to a particular view of the role of the restoration of political Israel at the end of time. This is reinforced at a grass roots level by the popularity of the end times novels of Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, a popularity which is not restricted simply to Christians.

Underlying this is something that is perhaps more insidious. That is the belief among many American evangelicals that America has a special place in God's providential care. This is, of course, the archetypal error which all dominant political and economic powers have made, from Rome (see Augustine's *City of God*) to the British Empire. Yet America is so all-surpassingly powerful on the world stage. The language of manifest destiny is so deeply ingrained in her public discourse, from the mythologies of the Founding Fathers to those of Hollywood. Nationalism, intensified by being connected with the language of divine sanction, is a very real problem. The myth of American superiority in all areas is one which the popular media perpetuate by playing up America's undoubted strengths while ignoring her weaknesses and the contributions of other countries and societies. Even the allegedly liberal minded in Hollywood are deeply involved in this mythologising of America – witness films such as *The Last Samurai*. And then the cult of strength, beauty and superiority is long-established. Back in the 1930s George Orwell expressed concern that no ugly or poor people were generally allowed to spoil the aesthetics of American magazines and newspapers. Today the television provides an even more powerful way of reinforcing such national mythology. The myth of American superiority has also produced the perfect antibody for dealing with the microbes of criticism: any criticism can be seen as motivated by envy at American success and is thus actually more evidence of the superiority of the American way.

The American church should be ideally placed to act as the nation's conscience at this time, the role which Henry seemed to wish it to play in his manifesto. Yet too many churches are committed to being part of the myth rather than being the prophetic critics of the same. As if to symbolise this collusion, in many churches the American flag stands next to the pulpit. This is something which, in my experience of travel around the world, is a somewhat unique juxtaposition. It is bizarre given the constitutional commitment to separation of church and state. What is more the American way is routinely identified with God's will in sermons and on Christian television, sometimes in a rather worryingly direct fashion. Indeed, I have a colleague who prayed for world peace at a recent service and was admonished for praying an 'unAmerican' prayer. The fact that there is such a term as 'unAmerican' is itself interesting. There is no real equivalent as far as I know in other countries with which I am familiar: what would 'unDutch' or 'unBritish' mean, I wonder? This is because 'American' is not a term which speaks primarily of a geographical location or a birthplace but rather of a set of values. Such values can be defined in various ways; but, however that may be done, 'unAmerican' is regarded by all as a pejorative. That it can be used in a church context about a prayer for peace gives one worrying pause for thought. That these values can become implicitly (and often explicitly) nothing less than an eschatology is extremely disturbing.

The identification of America and the American way, with its freedom, democracy and free market philosophy, as identical with God's way probably owes much, at a sophisticated level, to the influence of the secular political mythologies of neo-Hegelians such as Fukuyama on certain leading Christian opinion-formers; at a popular level, I suspect the culprit is a basic human pride in anything that allows one to feel superior to others. That certain strands of evangelicalism have bought into this identification of right wing politics, the American way, and Christianity should be a cause for concern. Henry's call was for evangelicalism to take on a *prophetic* role, one of being involved in the political process but in such a manner that the politics of the secular world were not to be identified wholesale with the gospel. It was not to be there simply to baptise the politics of one party rather than another.

The relationship between the church and politics is always going to be complicated. This is not least because political thinking is a culturally specific, occasional activity, where the black and white moral categories of right and wrong do not always, or even often, apply. After all, every Christian who takes the Bible seriously should hate poverty and want the innocent protected from the violent and the oppressive. But is it necessarily sinful to believe that this is best achieved through free markets or through nationalised industries, or through particular configurations of tax burdens and welfare payments? Is one health care system biblical and another unbiblical? Only the crudest of Bible-thumping simpletons can possibly correlate the teaching of the Bible in a direct, no-nonsense way with the party political platforms of the early twenty-first century. British evangelicals need to remember this as they become increasingly active in their political involvement. They also need to be aware of the fact that the claiming of divine sanction for opinions which are, in themselves, morally indifferent or at least debatable, is the oldest trick in the book for foreclosing on intelligent discussion. Even black and white issues are not so black and white when it comes to specific party politics. Yes, God hates the slaughter of infants – but abortion is merely the most obvious way in which this takes place. Poor healthcare, unhygienic living conditions, lack of access to AIDS drugs, famine, sweatshops, unemployment, underemployment, war, environmental damage due to pollution and greed – these all kill infants too. Reflection on these makes party politics less black and white than many would wish. It is time for Christians to face up to these issues as well.

Looking at the world of 2004, one can therefore say that part of Henry's dream has been fulfilled: a professing Christian is in the White House; and evangelicals are involved in the formation of public policy. Yet the black and white, simplistic politics that have come to dominate large swathes of white evangelicalism in America are scarcely those for which Henry hoped. Modern American evangelicalism has neither critiqued nor transformed the political landscape. Instead it has largely bought into the polarised politics of the two party system and lost its ability to be critical of the American way. It has, if you like, become too worldly. Henry's original vision for politics has only partly been realised; and, lest this seem like more hackneyed America-bashing, let me stress that I say this because I like the country in which I now live and I long to see the church there become as strong spiritually and evangelistically as it is numerically.

This, of course, is the final problem with regarding a particular brand of politics as of the essence of the gospel. When individuals from other countries and cultures, with different political convictions, come to America, they are disenfranchised because the church has created unnecessary barriers to evangelism. Indeed, there is an unofficial colour bar which runs through American church life, particularly as it relates to whites and African Americans. This has roots deep in the history of the white churches' record

on slavery and more than a little to do with current economic and class divisions, and is not helped by the fact that most white evangelicals are identified as Republicans, while most African Americans are Democrats. Bluntly put, if I have to buy your political manifesto in order to buy your gospel, then your church is indulging in a dangerous confusion of categories and excluding individuals and groups from its congregation. They are excluded on grounds other than that of simply being outside of Christ. A gospel that is too American in this sense is no gospel at all.

This is where the work of Edward Said becomes something with which Christians should familiarise themselves. Said, a Palestinian intellectual who taught at the University of Columbia in New York for most of his career, was a controversial figure, not least for his articulation of the Palestinian cause in the United States. His scholarly contributions to literary theory and to classical music are noteworthy. It is, however, his insistence on the need for engaged intellectuals that is perhaps his greatest legacy to the wider world and one which the evangelical project of Carl Henry needs to hear.

### Speaking the Truth to Power

Said, a dazzlingly brilliant and eclectic thinker, was deeply influenced by the work of, among others, Antonio Gramsci, the Italian Marxist and fountainhead of much 'New Left' thinking, Michel Foucault, the French post-structuralist, and Frantz Fanon, the French-Algerian theorist of decolonisation.<sup>8</sup> From these he learned both the ways in which established power uses all aspects of wider culture in order to extend its own project of control and manipulation, and the need therefore to be critical of the culture in which one lives lest one be unwittingly co-opted into its wider agenda. His most famous articulation, perhaps overstatement, of this thesis was in his book *Orientalism*. Here he argued that 'the Orient' was a construct of Western ideology and thus part of the mechanism of Western imperial power.<sup>9</sup> Then, in his more nuanced work *Culture and Imperialism*, he studied Western literature with a view to demonstrating how even authors such as Jane Austen wrote literature which both reflected the social and political ambitions of the nascent British Empire and therefore helped to naturalise such ideas so as to lift them above criticism.<sup>10</sup>

Unlike Foucault, however, there is an underlying optimism in Said's work. This is probably drawn both from his own experience of political struggle and his reading of Fanon. Said is not simply mesmerised by power as if by some unavoidable, unopposable absolute; instead, he considers that resistance to power is both possible and desirable, nay, imperative.<sup>11</sup> And this is where the engaged intellectual has his or her role to play: intellectuals are not to allow themselves to be co-opted into the wider project of the imperialist establishment. They have no choice but to work within it. Yet they can offer dissenting, critical voices which offer alternative narratives and possibilities of resistance

<sup>8</sup> A good, accessible introduction to Said's thinking is that by Shelley Walla, *Edward Said and the Writing of History* (London: Totem, 2001); see also David Barsamian, *Culture and Resistance: Conversations with Edward W. Said* (Cambridge: South End Press); Gauri Wiswanathan, *Power, Politics and Culture: Interviews with Edward Said* (New York: Vintage, 2001). His autobiography (to age 21) is also of interest to understanding his thought: *Out of Place* (New York: Vintage, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> London: Penguin, 1978.

<sup>10</sup> London: Vintage, 1993.

<sup>11</sup> See his essay, 'Foucault and the Imagination of Power', in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 239–45.

to dominant powers. They are to learn to understand the way in which the media, scholarly guilds, indeed, all cultural institutions can be used to make the status quo appear as an absolute and all alternatives as mediocre. The engaged intellectual is 'to speak the truth to power', to stand against the popular tide and to offer prophetic criticism of the abuse of power, no matter how 'natural' that abuse may have been made to appear by the media or by the political and cultural traditions to which we may belong.<sup>12</sup>

Said identifies two aspects of modernity/postmodernity that are particularly lethal to this critical project. The first is the cult of specialisation whereby those who speak outside of the sphere of competence for which they have the culturally approved credentials are regarded as illegitimately crossing boundaries. As we British would say, they are speaking out of their hats. The example which Said uses on occasion is that of left-wing American social critic, Noam Chomsky. Chomsky has made significant, if highly controversial and hotly contested, contributions to the field of theoretical linguistics. It is this area where he has formal academic qualifications, and his work is taken very seriously by the scholarly establishment. He has also made major contributions to understanding how propaganda functions, how the West has frequently played a duplicitous game with regard to human rights abuses and geopolitical issues. Yet in this area he has no formal qualifications – his work is often denigrated. This is not by virtue of it being intrinsically wrong or bad, but on the basis that he has no formal academic qualifications which would entitle him to speak to these matters. In other words, Said would say that the culture of academic specialisation is being used by a political establishment to marginalise a dissenting voice. The academic culture effectively colludes in extending the power of the politicians by making illegitimate the contributions of those who do not possess the right membership card.

The second aspect of modernity/postmodernity which Said sees as lethal to the idea of the engaged intellectual is the fragmented and disengaged attitude fostered by the various forms of relativism. These present themselves as the vanguard of trendiness in the postmodern world.

Not for Said the simplistic metanarrative announcement of the 'death of metanarratives'. As with others on the Left, Said is both appreciative of the truly critical impulse which is to be found in aspects of such approaches but also deeply suspicious of the verbal Gnosticism and ultimate trivial sterility which has marked so much of this trajectory. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said gives passionate expression to this sentiment:

As for intellectuals whose charge includes values and principles – literary, philosophical, historical specialists – the American university, with its munificence, Utopian sanctuary, and remarkable diversity, has defanged them. Jargons of an almost unimaginable rebarbateness dominate their styles. Cults like post-modernism, discourse analysis, New Historicism, deconstruction, neo-pragmatism transport them into the country of the blue. An astonishing sense of weightlessness with regard to the gravity of history and individual responsibility fritters away attention to public matters and to public discourse.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Said's view of the role of intellectuals, indebted as it is to figures such as Gramsci, Mary McCarthy, and Noam Chomsky, is most clearly articulated in his Reith Lectures, published as *Representations of the Intellectual* (London: Vintage, 1994).

<sup>13</sup> *Culture and Imperialism*, 366–67.

Said then lists racism, poverty, the environment, and disease as topics which receive less and less serious attention. The trivialisation of intellectual pursuits is thus seen as part of the overall programme of exalting Western society. Those who spend their time studying and lecturing on soap operas, cyberdating and the Simpsons, often do so without any reflective understanding of how these studies are themselves involved in wider cultural and political agendas. They are in danger of allowing the cultural relativism that is so loved by Western consumer society to destroy their capacity for criticism and to co-opt them into the project of ignoring the things that really matter. The intellectual is not there just to go along with the dominant ideological patterns; he or she is there to offer criticism of those patterns to the extent that that is possible.<sup>14</sup>

## What can the Jerusalem of Henry learn from the Athens of Said?

The lessons for evangelicals from Said are profound. Speaking personally, of all the non-Christian authors I have read, Said is the greatest influence on my own thinking. I believe that his insights speak quite clearly to weaknesses which have emerged in Henry's vision for the new evangelicalism. Indeed, his voice is one which evangelicals can hear with profit (and, given his graceful style, with pleasure too).

First, Said's notion of an engaged intellectual is very close to Henry's call for evangelicals to be culturally and politically engaged. It is, of course, true that no-one can stand outside of culture; everyone exists in a particular time and place and is shaped by their environment. What Henry failed to anticipate in 1948 was the way in which the evangelical project would become part and parcel of the American project. He did not see how it would so identify with various American causes in a highly polarised political environment, that, to many outsiders anyway, evangelicalism would become identified with certain political positions, and that self-criticism in the evangelical community would be effectively non-existent. This is as true of the political right as of the political left in evangelical circles. The left are very quick to grab hold of culturally trendy – dare one say safe? – causes, such as racism and sexual egalitarianism. But less popular concerns, such as Third World Debt, the Palestinian question, the environment, and AIDS/famine in sub-Saharan Africa, are of little importance in the religious politics of the evangelical left, just as they are of little interest to the secular left.<sup>15</sup> To those who hold to the Pauline teaching on sin there would appear to be a horrible Pelagianism at work in such easy cultural accommodation. Said's notion of the engaged intellectual as one who sees the collusive nature of culture and power, is one thus which anti-Pelagians should understand and appreciate. The role of engaged intellectuals, the modern-day prophets, begins with root and branch criticism of the culture to which they themselves belong. We need theologians and church leaders who are prepared to look at evangelicalism and see how and where this is being co-opted and corrupted by the agenda and priorities of the wider world. For my part, I would suggest that in the West the enemy at the moment is consumerism, reinforced by the old mythology of Western

<sup>14</sup> This trivialisation of intellectual pursuits in the wake of postmodernism has been noted by Terry Eagleton in *After Theory* (London: Penguin, 2003).

<sup>15</sup> This is, of course, a very broad statement about the contours of general evangelical concerns. It is true that there are a growing number of exceptions: for example, the work by Gary Burge of Wheaton College, on the Palestinian question; the various writings of figures as diverse as Ron Sider and Os Guinness; magazines such as *Sojourners* and *Books and Culture*; and Joni Eareckson Tada's organisation, *Joni and Friends*.

superiority. These foes are deadlier in many ways than the Red menace if only because they are that much more insidious and seductive. The internal enemies, those which insinuate themselves within our own ways of life, are always harder to spot and more difficult to defeat. The prophetic voice *must* speak to this in the coming years if the church is not to become a religious form of wholly secular substance. Henry was very careful not to make his call for political engagement a partisan appeal. Given the current polarisation, it would seem that evangelicals need to heed the cultural criticism of a Said if they are to avoid a simplistic and idolatrous identification of Christianity with a particular political project, whether of the right or of the left.

Second, the cult of specialisation needs to be resisted. I must be careful here: it is not wrong for Christians to aim to be as good as they can be in their chosen fields, and that applies to theological studies as much as to anything else. Specialisation is acceptable, indeed, in many cases desirable. The *culture* of specialisation, however, must not be allowed to render any particular group immune by default from criticism by any other group. That creates a context for the abuse of power, through the disempowerment of those who do not possess the right membership card to a particular guild, not because what they say is intrinsically wrong. Henry's appeal for Christians to obtain the appropriate educational qualifications and to be involved at the highest level in scholarly discussion was right and proper and necessary. To achieve this, evangelicals needed to negotiate with the non-evangelical academy as it set the terms and determined the frameworks for debate. At times, though, this negotiation has come to look more like capitulation. One aspect of this is the way in which specialisation and disciplinary fragmentation has led to the erection of walls between scholarly guilds. An example of this can be the way synoptic scholars and systematicians feel unable to comment outside of their own fields and indeed resent any attempt by others to intrude on their own territory from outside. How this is to be overcome is not immediately obvious to me as I write; I am confident though that this is not simply a technical problem to be solved by training and expertise. It is also a deeper, cultural problem, and the solution will involve changes in attitude. It will also involve changes in vocabulary, since the generation of pretentious and opaque verbiage in many areas of specialisation is surely as much a function of trying to reinforce the mystique of specialisation as of the need to express oneself clearly and precisely in a technical context. If it is the latter which is the intention, someone needs to inform our hermeneutical brethren, preferably in words of just one or two syllables, this is certainly not what is actually being achieved. Specialisation which assumes to itself an invulnerability to criticism from outside is specialisation which has made itself, and the power it wields, unaccountable to no-one but those it chooses.

Finally, Said's warnings about the deleterious effects of the trivialising and absolute relativising power of various strands of postmodernism need to be grasped. New evangelicalism in America has grabbed hold of such strands with a vengeance, and some good has come from this. For example, a serious desire for engagement with popular culture; also an awareness that the past – even the writing of the past – is in many ways problematic; and an apparent sensitivity to our own cultural situatedness and the need to respect other cultures. But if Said's comments on the way such relativist philosophies ultimately collude with wider cultural trends, either by shrinking all issues down to the same trivial moral level or by removing any basis for social criticism are true, then we need to ask whether trendy evangelical postmodernism is anything more than a surreptitious and devastating attempt to 'defang', to use Said's term, the gospel of its critical power. Is Christian postmodern relativism simply another example of how

evangelicalism has mortgaged its soul to Western consumerism and now pays uncritical – and often unwitting – homage to the idol of Western values?<sup>16</sup> Again, the answer to the problem is not easy. An awareness, however, that postmodernism, in its crude, popular forms, may be part of the problem rather than part of the solution, will mark a starting point for further critical reflection on how it functions as an ideology in the contemporary Christian world and beyond.

Strange bedfellows indeed. One was the all-American Christian journalist with a vision for evangelicalism that shaped a generation. The other, the secular Palestinian intellectual and exile whose writings on politics and culture consistently challenged the ruling consensus and presented the claims of the marginalised to an indifferent or hostile world. Neither man, I am sure, would appreciate the company of the other. Yet Henry's ambitious project clearly needs the critical edge of a Said if it is to be faithful to its task of true engagement rather than mere cultural collusion. Henry spoke of the uneasy conscience of fundamentalism. Yet the various sects of modern American evangelicalism, while very angry with just about everybody else, too often seem very comfortable and at ease with themselves. Indeed, they seem to have the easy consciences of those Pelagians who see the enemy everywhere except their own hearts. And yet in this context there seem no creeds better designed to maintain this easiness of the modern evangelical conscience than those which rejoice uncritically in the Western way, whether right of left; or which delight in differences and offer no satisfactory basis for discerning the good from the bad, the vitally important from the utterly trivial; or which fail to see the way in which evangelicalism, often at the very point where it smugly thinks of itself as most engaged and cultural savvy, is too often the unwitting and uncritical ally of larger political and cultural agendas which have nothing to do with biblical Christianity. At this hour, we do not need yet another trendy pundit to salve consciences through superficial cultural commentary involving Christian approaches to Britney Spears, dental floss, or beer commercials. Such characters are next to useless in the struggles which Christianity faces at this time. Instead we need Christian Sais who will not waste time on junk but rather will dare to speak the truth to power in all circumstances and however uneasy it might make our consciences.

<sup>16</sup> I am also persuaded by the arguments of Frederic Jameson, Perry Anderson, and Terry Eagleton (and articulated in a Christian context by individuals such as Stanley Hauerwas) that there is a connection between postmodern relativist epistemologies and consumerism. If this is the case, then the rise of postmodern evangelical thinking, the entrepreneurial culture of American evangelicalism, and the apparent ideological chaos of an organ such as *Christianity Today*, which I mentioned above, can be seen as part and parcel of one and the same agenda – a classic, Saidian connection of ideological, institutional, cultural, and economic power. On the whole, Christian postmodern pundits have not taken with sufficient seriousness the material conditions in which the various philosophies routinely categorised as 'postmodern' occur.



# Are We Confronted with a New Italian Denominationalism? Marginal notes on a book on the relationships between Evangelicals and Catholics

Leonardo De Chirico, *Evangelical Theological Perspectives on post-Vatican II Roman Catholicism*, Peter Lang, Oxford, Bern, Berlin, Bruxelles et al., 337 pp.

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In *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, Mark Noll, discussing the intellectual renewal among evangelicals after the Second World War, asks why this renewal had more success in philosophy:

That question hinges on the distinction between evangelical thinking and Christian thinking done by evangelicals that is, between thought guided by the distinctive of evangelicalism itself and thought inspired by other Christian traditions that take root among evangelicals ... The conclusion of this chapter suggests that, at least into the 1990s, the renewal of evangelical thought that has indeed taken place is mostly a matter of evangelicals' overcoming the encumbrances of the evangelical heritage and finding themselves in a position to exploit patterns of thought offered by other Christian tradition.<sup>1</sup>

For a young Italian evangelical scholar (such as myself and surely as Leonardo De Chirico), this question entailed another question concerning the relationships with Catholicism. He had to determine if there was the possibility to get intellectual resources from the cultural tradition deriving from the Catholic Church. The decision was not simple. There was a cluster of intellectual elements to consider: living in Italy he knew all the aspects of popular Catholicism and the complicity of ecclesiastical authority with this phenomena very well. As well as that, he watched all the flirtations between Catholicism in its theological and spiritual expressions and international evangelicalism at large. This situation had an impact upon his proper identity because his dissatisfaction with the alternatives led him to a further *folding* on himself. So, in the last quarter of the twentieth century, many chose the first alternative of Noll's dilemma: to look for all their intellectual resources only in the evangelical traditions (dispensationalist or Reformed). But this solution was not, and I believe is not, a satisfactory solution, particularly on the philosophical and theological planes. In this area the depth of the

<sup>1</sup> M. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, 212.

history of thought does not permit one to just cut things out! Necessarily, the neo-denominationalism ensuing from this *folding* was confronted with two alternatives. Which was it to be: either a new theological war and controversy, or the quest for a new distribution of forces in the Italian ecumenical and ecclesiastical dialogue with the Catholic Church, in which the most important role is carried out by the historical Protestant churches (Waldensian, Lutheran, Methodist)?

All of these feelings moved me when I read the beautiful book by Leonardo De Chirico. He does not fully develop this intellectual level of analysis, but is not completely unconcerned with it and with the importance of a general ideological stance. We can demonstrate this thesis by indicating the interesting clarification that De Chirico tried to provide on a linguistic and semantic level (28, n. 1). He proposes to separate 'evangelical' Italian Christianity from Italian historic Protestant Christianity on one side, and from Italian fundamentalist Christianity on the other side by adopting a new term for the Italian translation of 'evangelicals' and 'evangelicalism'. Generally, we translate the terms with 'evangelico', 'evangelismo' and we further add an adjective to qualify the subject theologically (above all 'conservative'). De Chirico proposes instead the term '*evangelicale*'. In Italian that is not a beautiful word, having certain negative connotations: it looks auto-referential and has a separatist tone.

Leonardo De Chirico wrote a beautiful book! Well-informed and very deep. This is the dissertation he presented to King's College (London). In it he reviews the evangelical perspectives on Roman Catholicism (RM) after the Second Vatican Council. He examines firstly the thought of some evangelical thinkers (G. Berkouwer, C. Van Til, D. Wells, D. Bloesch, H. Carson and J. Stott). Secondly, he discusses the work undertaken by the World Evangelical Fellowship. Finally he discusses the American dialogues between evangelicals and Catholics (ECT). In the second part of the book he presents his personal proposal and in the last chapter, on the base of his approach, he tries to delineate the systemic elements of contemporary Catholicism.

The book is very elaborate and the reason for that is represented by the different levels which are covered. The title could suggest an examination of Roman Catholicism, but catholicism stays on the horizon. This is even the case when the author marks for us the two main elements that he considers central in a systemic understanding of Catholicism (the relationship between nature and grace, and the doctrine of the church). The subject of the book is: 'evangelical theological perspectives on ...', and as a result: 'what is really at stake in an Evangelicals' appraisal of Roman Catholicism' (14). When De Chirico speaks about the American dialogues between evangelicals and Catholics, he has this comment: 'The process which has led from ECT to GOS has shown that while confronting Roman Catholicism, evangelicals reflect and act upon their own identity' (161). The problem of evangelical identity seems to me the real focus of the book!

For the author, evangelical approaches to Catholicism in the last fifty years don't grasp the systemic character of Roman Catholicism. They are atomistic and inadequate, if not immediately begging the question. Also the work of the *World Evangelical Fellowship* is hardly sufficient as an approach to Roman Catholicism! He speaks continually of an 'atomistic perspective':

the whole thrust of the thesis revolves around the rather defective theological evaluation that evangelical theology has been able to produce in terms of systemic approach. Instead of applying a systemically oriented assessment, evangelical analyses of Roman Catholicism have been characterised by more

atomistic perspectives, resulting in fragmented critiques which concentrate more on theological aspects of the system rather than on the system as a complex, yet unified whole (305).

The fundamental issue of the book is that we will have a proper approach to Catholicism – a proper evangelical approach – only when we interpret catholicism as a system. For this to be done, however, we need to approach Roman Catholicism from another well-built theological system. It is necessary to have a theological system to recognise and to define the catholic system as a whole. The criticism of the atomistic perspectives of evangelicals with regard to Roman Catholicism, also includes the present-day stream in evangelical theology in which, according to De Chirico, the dismissal and erosion of what should be considered as 'foundations' or 'essentials', are evident:

In the end, a systemic analysis of a given theology, e.g. Roman Catholicism in the case of the present research, can be carried out only by using a theology which is self-consciously and thoroughly systemic ... The main reason why present-day Evangelical theology has not been able to elaborate a systemic approach to Roman Catholicism is perhaps the fact that Evangelical theology itself is not very perceived and thought of as a theological system by many Evangelical theologians themselves (307).

In these lines a pessimism is present as often appears in the theological work of Italian evangelicals; but we will return to this later on.

The theological category urged by De Chirico for evangelicals as central to the interpretation of Catholicism is taken from the ideological and philosophical speculation of the Dutch thinker, Abraham Kuyper, through the mediation (this is my interpretation) of the Vantilian stream of American neocalvinism. De Chirico considers the late idealistic concept of a worldview or life-system as used by Kuyper, to be both appropriate to Calvinists and Catholics, and as 'a suitable category for interpreting Roman Catholicism without reducing it to one or more of its constitutive elements, thus losing sight of the oneness of its essence' (182).

It is no accident that, in order to ground an Evangelical systemic approach to Roman Catholicism historically and theologically, the 'natural' place to start was the Dutch Calvinist Abraham Kuyper ... (whose insistence on conceiving Calvinism and Romanism as competing religiously based systems ... played an even more fundamental role in shaping his perception of his Calvinist theology and protestant culture constituting a whole (307).

In a few paragraphs De Chirico 'reinforces' his proposal by reviewing some Roman Catholic thinkers (J.H. Newman, R. Guardini, H.U. von Balthasar, A. Dulles, R. McBrien) in whom there would be a consciousness of the systemic structure of Catholicism. It goes without saying that all these Catholic thinkers, as with some Protestant thinkers, are people who worked and faced up to a new face of modernity, sometimes in a defensive context.

We can address the book by De Chirico on a different two levels, without forgetting the cluster of intellectual implications quoted above.

First: the historical level.

The attempt of De Chirico is not a novel one in the Italian evangelical context. At this point it is useful to quote another attempt that was elaborated in the golden century of Italian evangelicalism, the nineteenth century. In 1863 Teodorico Pietrocola Rossetti, a leader of the Brethren movement (the largest denomination in Italy in those days) wrote a powerful little book entitled: *Principii della Chiesa Romana, della Chiesa Protestante, e della Chiesa Cristiana* (literally translated: *Principles of the Roman Church, the Protestant Church, and the Christian Church*). It would be interesting to compare these two publications and to understand all the presuppositions and implications of them, but this is not my aim here. Surely, it can be said that both books present a first level of discussion of Roman Catholicism, and attempt to reduce it to a simpler system. There is a second level – that of evangelical identity. Both books work on the first level with a positive tone. On the second level they both present a pessimistic appreciation of the general Protestant world with a subsequent stressing of the novelty and originality of their own work (see especially in De Chirico's book pp. 22–25, particularly n.6). Naturally the final appeals in the two books are very different: there is the traditional Anabaptist stance of Christianity, in Rossetti's book and the neocalvinism of Van Til in the case of Leonardo De Chirico. The general schema however is more or less the same: Roman Catholicism as a case study to evaluate evangelical identity and eventually to correct or reinforce it.

Between these exceptionally similar hermeneutical experiments, the Italian evangelical developed his approach to Roman Catholicism by learning from another little book. This was written by J. Blocher and entitled, *Le Catholicisme à la lumière de L'Écriture Sainte*, and was translated into Italian in 1971. This book had a great impact because it answered a particular charge that Italian evangelicals tried out new ideas and that this was done on the evangelistic level. This understanding is a child of the nineteenth century evangelical revival, and we could also find the similar thinker (Rossetti) as a source of this thinking. At an evangelistic and apologetic level, it seems to me, we Italians feel a very strong need to challenge our fellow Catholic people to confront themselves directly with the Word of God and not with another theological system.

De Chirico makes a strong case for the speculation of Abraham Kuyper and I find this most appealing, considering the great importance of Kuyperian legacy. De Chirico (?typically) provocatively challenges the reader to enter self-consciously into his or her own worldview and thus to recognise the Catholic world view as such.

The reference to Kuyper is founded on the antithetical logic that is present in Kuyperian thought; but there is also the correlate, if not the reverse, the logic of common grace. All thinkers that are working in the wake of A. Kuyper, with the notion of 'common grace' have tools necessary for putting forward very interesting ideas in theology as in philosophy, all reaffirming the 'reformed' roots of this experiments. I am thinking here of the well-known project of Reformed epistemology (A. Plantinga and N. Wolterstorff) and of the manner in which it has been able to interact with Catholic thought.<sup>2</sup> We can say that the intellectual movements originating in the thought of Kuyper, at least in its most significant expressions, have continually relativised the

<sup>2</sup> N. Wolterstorff, 'The Migration of the Theistic Arguments: From Natural Theology to Evidentialist Apologetics', in R. Audi and W. Wainwright eds., *Rationality, Religious Belief & Moral Commitment. New Essays in the Philosophy of Religion*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1986, pp. 38–81; A. Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, see particularly pp. 167–98.

denominational reference. For example, we can think of H. Dooyeweerd who begins his philosophical life as a 'Calvinistic thinker', and closes his career with an emphasis on 'Christian philosophy'. In Kuyper, the necessity to reinforce the borders of an evangelical identity not only at a theological but also, and above all, at a sociological level, was central to a political strategy in which an alliance with the Catholic party enabled him to confront a relativistic and pluralistic strand in Dutch society. People who have studied this extraordinary moment in the history of Holland know very well the difficulties in explaining this relationship. The relationship between the dialectic reinforcement of a religious identity and the successive alliances before the Second World War, and the post-war secularisation that practically erased all the symbols of the precedent religious based society after the war.

Second: the theological and philosophical level.

Leonardo enhances the notions of worldview and life-system: Catholicism, finally, is a particular worldview, and we need to assume our own worldview in order to understand it better. The worldview concept has recently enjoyed a very interesting revival among evangelicals: I am thinking of D.K. Naugle's<sup>3</sup> book and the hot off the press title, *Naming the Elephant* by J.W. Sire.<sup>4</sup> But all this debate, it seems to me, is concentrated on the possibility and value of a 'Christian' worldview that can confront other non-Christian worldviews (secular or religious, Islamic for example) in this post-modern context. So, the call of Leonardo De Chirico for a more Protestant worldview confronts us with a problem that is not simple: is it possible to build a Christian worldview? If this is possible, who will assume the responsibility, before the Lord, to say that there are absolutely no elements in Catholic theology that could be part of this Christian worldview? How do we confront ourselves with the history of Christianity? What would be the denominational identity of Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, and so on?

This brings me to my most critical remark on the necessity, underlined by De Chirico, of a system as a hermeneutic and epistemological presupposition which enables us to recognise, interpret and interact with Roman Catholicism. It seems to me that De Chirico does not explain why the evangelicalism he reviews in his interaction with Catholicism did not feel the need of an explicit and clearly-defined theological scheme. All the people quoted and reviewed by De Chirico (from Berkouwer to Stott) were and are famous evangelical theologians! A possible explanation is perhaps lodged in the desire of all these people to find a better plan in their interactions with Catholicism: this plan is very well formulated in the title of Blocher's book: *Lumiere de l'Écriture Sainte*, 'The Light of the Holy Scripture'. Here is my suggestion. There is an approach to Roman Catholics not only in theological reflection, but also in bilateral dialogues, and above all in the witness of women and men to their Catholics friends. This has compelled the evangelicals of all times to leave their own Protestant identity and be understood as people who are engaged in hearing the Word of God.

It seems to me that the Bible is the great absentee in De Chirico's book, *even when he is obliged to recognise that the evangelicals he criticises use the Bible*: 'the GOS presentation of the doctrine of justification makes ample use of biblical language but adamantly avoids attempt to pursue a distinct systemic slant' (158). Obviously, I am not assuming a position on the American ECT dialogues in this article, nor am I discrediting

<sup>3</sup> D.K. Naugle, *Worldview. The History of a Concept*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> J.W. Sire, *Naming the Elephant. Worldview as a Concept*, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004.

systematic theology. I am only suggesting that a biblically oriented approach helps us to assume a de-structured stance in our perspectives and relationships with the Catholic world. I believe that a careful study of the Bible could help us to find out biblical models for the interaction with a reality (RC) that we can assume is not ours, surely, but is not completely alien.

As an application of this proposal (a biblically oriented, not systemic, approach) I am taking the liberty of a little conclusive digression. In the missionary call to his disciples (Acts 1:8) Jesus had a strategic plan for the propagation of the gospel. We too, must adopt this plan (Jerusalem, Samaria and the ends of the earth) and that not only in geographical terms. Indeed, the three areas are charged with great theological significance<sup>5</sup>. Let us concentrate on the Samaritan context. In the four Gospels we can find three perspectives from which we can look at the relationships between the Jews and the Samaritans. There is obviously the Jews' perspective on the Samaritans and conversely the Samaritans' perspective on the Jews (see, for example, John 4). We can assume that these two perspectives were very systemic, and we can find out many evidences for that. There was, however, a third perspective on this relationship: Jesus' perspective. In this he systematically tried to pull down the ethnic and theological barriers. His aim was to put the question of his identity to the two theological communities. Later, in the book of Acts (ch. 8) we read that the mission among Samaritans revealed the very difficult problem of a strong syncretistic context. This led the disciples to look for new evangelistic strategies and a missionary creativity.

In conclusion, this seems to me a good biblical way to stimulate our reflection on the issues of confrontations and relationships with Catholic world. If we assume the Jews' perspective, sooner or later we could probably find Jesus inviting us to look at our (Samaritan/Catholic) fellow to listen and learn a strong lesson about our own hypocrisy (think about Jesus' account of the good Samaritan!)

I fear the proposal of De Chirico does not assume the perspective of Christian (evangelical) witness to the Catholic context. He does not discuss the consequences of his proposal, but probably this was not the principal aim of the book. We, however, can think about it and we can challenge the readers to confront Catholic people in the universities, at work, in the streets with a reformed-oriented, or dispensationalist-oriented approach. You will discover, sooner or later, that you are doing something that is very different from presenting the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

I conclude this article-review with thanks to Leonardo for his deep and *stimulating* book. Personally, I am waiting for future and serious reflections, in Italy, on the issues of a Christian worldview, on the danger of denominationalism, and above all, on the honour we have to bear witness to the Gospel of Christ in a nation like Italy.

*I would like to express my thanks to Maria Laura Ciccone for her help in translating this article.*

<sup>5</sup> A.J. Köstenberger, P.T. O'Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth. A biblical theology of Mission*, Leicester: Apollos, InterVarsity Press, 2001, p.130.

# The Last Word

## The Soothing Sin of Self-Esteem

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I often hear Christians summarise salvation as 'Jesus saved me from my sins'. They will then summarise the sins as a list of things 'I've done wrong'. Embedded in this anaemic understanding of salvation is an estimation of one's self that really isn't all that bad or at least isn't as bad as lots of other people. Christians are so glad they are saved from their sins when we look at really rotten people on TV or read about them in the newspaper and think to ourselves, 'How can someone do something like that? I can't imagine!'

Well, that's the problem. Why can't we imagine ourselves as equally rotten? As just as sinful? Apart from God's grace in our lives, 'those people' are you and me. And that's true because sin isn't just 'bad stuff we do' and that's not the problem Jesus saves us from. No, Jesus has in fact saved us, who we are. The problem is our sin nature and this is not what we do, but who we are. When Christians reduce salvation to sin-management and living self-controlled lives, the Saviour becomes just a part of self-esteem therapy and grace is swallowed like a 'happy pill'.

Taking a look at our lost-ness, our capacity for depravity, the real source of our sinful behaviour is hard. Christian bookstores have lots of books about boosting our self esteem, but books that take our sin nature seriously are either non-existent or old and out of print. No publisher today would touch these titles: 'Bad to the Bone: The Reality of Humanity' or 'Totally Depraved: Maybe Calvin was Right!' Christians today skip the Bad News and just sell the Good News. 'Jesus saved from my sins', so why worry?

Why worry? Why linger on the bad news before the good news? Because not taking our sin seriously means we don't take the utter necessity of our salvation seriously. God is so serious about sin, that his response is wrath. Scripture tells us from beginning to end that sinful people are only spared the wrath of God because God's grace is greater, deeper, higher, wider, fuller. When we don't take sin seriously, we also don't take grace seriously. Until we believe that, apart from the salvation of Christ Jesus, we are fully deserving of God's wrath, we don't know who we really are or our potential for sin.

This came to my attention this past year through three particular situations that I've been aware of that illustrate the dynamics of reducing 'sin' to behaviour and 'salvation' to a 'happy pill' blessing. One situation involved adultery, one involved an abortion, and one involved divorce. Two things were striking in how these Christians reflected on the mess they found themselves in when they came to talk to me. First was their summation that 'low self esteem' contributed to their sinful actions. All of them talked about how they got into these relationships to feel better about themselves. None of them ever thought it would 'lead to this'. And second was their absolute confidence summarised

nearly word-for-word as, 'But I know I'm saved and that Jesus has forgiven me.' All of them were bewildered by 'how this happened to me'.

I've come to believe that these people didn't suffer from self-esteem that was too low, but too high. They didn't 'know how this happened' because they didn't know who they were as sinners, as people with a sin nature. Their sinful behaviour just got more costly step by step, and was, albeit reluctantly, excused by a desire to 'feel better about myself' until the price got too high or until the evidence got too public. Sin didn't look so sinful in those decisive moments because, at the core, these Christians didn't believe they were capable of really being sin-full.

The real problem was thinking too highly of themselves. As I reflected on this, I asked myself, 'What if each of these people had taken their sin nature more seriously? What if they had really believed they had the capacity to do the worst in every situation?' Would they have run instead of succumbed? When we take our sin nature seriously, we can believe that we are capable of the very worst – and we must, because that is what is true about us.

We can look at horrible pictures of naked Iraqi prisoners at the end of a leash held by a person we consider 'disgusting!', but, if we don't think 'That could be me!' holding that leash, we don't know who we really are. And we don't know what salvation is.

Paul tells us not to think more highly of ourselves than we ought to think. John's admonition is 'If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.' If I do not know who I am as a person born with a sin nature, I cannot really know what it means to be a person born again because the wrath of God was poured out on Jesus, the Son and not on me. And not on you.

Who are we? We are sinners. We are people born with a sin-nature that makes all of us capable of the very worst and deserving objects of God's wrath. Who are we? We are the crowning work of creation's sixth day, imprinted with the very image of God, implanted with eternity in our hearts, and, by grace and in Christ, beloved objects of God's mercy.

Our problem is a deep ontological problem – a problem with our very being that must be made right again. This requires a Saviour who is not me. Not sinful. Not fallen, not lost, not a fraud. And, this requires a Saviour who is 'me'. A Saviour who is truly human, who 'sympathises with my weakness and tested in every way as I am, and ... yet without sin'.

This requires a Saviour, fully God and fully man, the Lord Jesus Christ.

This Saviour is the one that overcomes me, and makes me who I was always intended to be: a human being bearing in joyous freedom and perfect obedience God's own image – a herald, a signpost, an icon of the Creator, being brought to completion in Christ, being perfected day by day in Christ.

Who are we? We are awful sinners, saved by an awesome Saviour. We need to be sinners who don't pretend we aren't capable of the worst. We are sinners who must take seriously the need for armour, for protection, for the Name of Jesus, for praying prayers of deep repentance, honest confession, deep gratitude and sold-out praise. We are the worst of sinners in whom God has begun a good work. We are the least of saints being brought to perfection in the 'Day of Jesus Christ' – the day of days when all that is lost is found, all that is blind sees, all in us that limps along, jumps for joy!