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## ***Paul's Doctrine of Justification: Ecclesiology or Soteriology?***

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**Abstract:** The new perspective on Paul places the doctrine of justification primarily in the category of ecclesiology, as a declaration of covenant membership that is common to Jews and Gentiles alike. However, Paul's use of key terms in the realm of "righteousness" terminology, as well as the phrase "works of the law" indicates that Paul's doctrine of justification belongs in the category of soteriology, referring primarily to the standing of individuals before God. Nevertheless, this traditional Protestant understanding of justification has significant implications for the doctrine of the church, which the new perspective has rightly pointed out.

**Key terms:** new perspective on Paul, justification, righteousness, works of the law, soteriology, ecclesiology.

### **Background: The Newness of the New Perspective**

In an article appropriately titled for the current climate of Pauline studies, Stephen Westerholm remarks, "Justification by Faith is the Answer: What is the Question?"<sup>1</sup> Since the rise of the so-called "new perspective on Paul" anticipated by Krister Stendahl,<sup>2</sup> pioneered by E. P. Sanders,<sup>3</sup> and developed and promoted by N. T.

1. Stephen Westerholm, "Justification by Faith is the Answer: What is the Question?" *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 70 (2006): 197-217.

2. Krister Stendahl, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," *Harvard Theological Review* 56 (1963): 199-215; reproduced in Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 78-96.

3. E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1977); idem, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983); idem, *Paul, Past Masters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

Wright<sup>4</sup> and James D. G. Dunn,<sup>5</sup> that question has become a pressing one. The newness of the new perspective is relative to the mainstream Protestant reading of Paul that prevailed until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Central to the new perspective project is the claim that Protestants have misinterpreted Paul for centuries by abstracting him from his first-century context and forcing out of him answers to questions that he never meant to address. As a result, Paul's doctrine of justification has been distorted into a legal transaction aimed to soothe individual consciences before God rather than a covenantal declaration that binds Jews and Gentiles together in Christ.

While not all new perspective proponents speak with one voice on the issue of justification, they do stand united in an attempt to discard the Lutheran<sup>6</sup> baggage that has accrued to it since the sixteenth century and place the doctrine squarely within the context of Jew-Gentile relations encountered in the Pauline mission. Certainly, all faithful interpreters of Scripture should seek to place Paul in his own context, and the importance of Jew-Gentile relations in Paul's development of the doctrine of justification, especially in the book of Galatians, should not be missed. Insofar as it has drawn attention to a neglected aspect of Protestant doctrinal formulation, the new perspective has done a great service to the church. However, this essay will argue that, to the degree that the new perspective defines justification as an element that belongs primarily under the doctrine of the church (ecclesiology) rather than the doctrine of salvation (soteriology), it distorts Paul's teaching. For Paul, justification is a soteriological doctrine that addresses the standing of individual sinners before God, and it is from this individual, soteriological base that the important ecclesiological ramifications addressed in the Pauline mission emerge. Therefore, the argument will proceed by defining the new perspective's doctrine of justification as ecclesiology, drawing

4. N. T. Wright, "The Paul of History and the Apostle of Faith," *Tyndale Bulletin* 29 (1978): 61-88; idem, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991); idem, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997); idem, "Romans and the Theology of Paul," in *Pauline Theology*, vol. 3, *Romans*, ed. David M. Hay and E. Elizabeth Johnson (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), 30-67; idem, *The Letter to the Romans*, in vol. 10 of *The New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck et al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 393-770; idem, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005); idem, "New Perspectives on Paul," in *Justification in Perspective: Historical Developments and Contemporary Challenges*, ed. Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 243-64; idem, *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009); idem, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 2 vols. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013).

5. James D. G. Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul: Collected Essays* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005); idem, *Jesus, Paul, and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990); idem, *Romans*, Word Biblical Commentary, vols. 38a-38b (Dallas: Word, 1988); idem, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

6. The Lutheran tradition is often regarded as the primary example of the "old perspective" on Paul, viewing his doctrine of justification as a legal declaration regarding the standing of individuals before him. However, it is important to note that many Protestants outside the Lutheran tradition—especially in the Reformed tradition—have held to the same view of justification and have read Paul in the same way.

from the proposal of its most prominent voice, N. T. Wright.<sup>7</sup> It will then proceed by critiquing this definition in light of exegetical insights from Paul's letters, and offering an alternative way to integrate ecclesiology into the discussion without distorting the doctrine of justification.

### **Justification as Ecclesiology: The Claim of the New Perspective**

The new perspective on Paul emerged from a new perspective on Second Temple Judaism proposed by E. P. Sanders in his 1977 work, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. One of Sanders's stated purposes in this work was "to destroy the view of Rabbinic Judaism which [was at the time] still prevalent in much, perhaps most, New Testament scholarship," namely, the view that Judaism was a legalistic religion where righteousness before God was earned by good works.<sup>8</sup> By contrast, Sanders proposed that the diverse strands of Judaism from the years 200 B.C. to A.D. 200 exhibited a common pattern of religion that was essentially gracious in character, a pattern he termed "covenantal nomism." He described this pattern of religion in eight propositions:

(1) God has chosen Israel and (2) given the law. The law implies both (3) God's promise to maintain the election and (4) the requirement to obey. (5) God rewards obedience and punishes transgression. (6) The law provides for means of atonement, and atonement results in (7) maintenance or re-establishment of the covenantal relationship. (8) All those who are maintained in the covenant by obedience, atonement and God's mercy belong to the group which will be saved. An important interpretation of the first and last points is that election and ultimately salvation are considered to be by God's mercy rather than human achievement.<sup>9</sup>

7. It is impossible in the scope of this essay to investigate in detail the views of other scholars, but an ecclesiological focus can be discerned in both James D. G. Dunn and Richard B. Hays as well. See Dunn, "The New Perspective on Paul"; Richard B. Hays, "Justification," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 3, H-J, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1129-33. Dunn's more recent work, however, indicates that he may be seeking a rapprochement between the ecclesiological emphasis of the new perspective and the soteriological emphasis of traditional Protestant theology. See James D. G. Dunn, "The Justice of God: A Renewed Perspective on Justification by Faith," in *The New Perspective on Paul: Collected Essays* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 187-205 [originally published in *JTS* 43 (1992): 1-22]; idem, "Paul and Justification by Faith," in *The New Perspective on Paul: Collected Essays* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 361-74 [originally published in *The Road from Damascus: The Impact of Paul's Conversion on His Life, Thought, and Ministry*, ed. R. N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 85-101]; idem, "Philippians 3.2-14 and the New Perspective on Paul," in *The New Perspective on Paul: Collected Essays* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 463-84; idem, "The New Perspective: Whence, What, and Wither?" in *The New Perspective on Paul: Collected Essays* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 1-88; idem, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 334-89.

8. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, xii.

9. *Ibid.*, 422.

For Sanders and his followers, this new light from Paul's Jewish context demands a new approach to the Pauline writings, for Paul can no longer be read as the apostle of grace who fought off a (non-existent) Jewish legalism. Instead, his polemic must be reinterpreted, and along with it his doctrine of justification.

Dunn and Wright have accepted the basic contours of Sanders's approach to Second Temple Judaism, but both have found Sanders's work on Paul inadequate.<sup>10</sup> While they agree with Sanders that Paul's polemic is not aimed at legalism, they have moved beyond Sanders by proposing a new target for Paul: Jewish nationalism. According to Dunn and Wright, Paul's polemic takes on Second Temple Judaism for its boast in national privilege to the exclusion of the Gentiles. The Pauline phrase "works of the law" does not refer to Jewish attempts to earn favor with God through good works. Rather, it focuses primarily on Jewish boundary markers, badges that divide Jews from Gentiles, most notably circumcision, Sabbath, and food laws.<sup>11</sup> And since Paul's doctrine of justification by faith stands opposed to justification by works of the law, they argue that justification addresses primarily the issue of Jew-Gentile relations.

Because Wright has been most explicit in defining justification by faith as an ecclesiological doctrine, this study will focus entirely on his proposal.<sup>12</sup> His argument stems from his understanding of righteousness as covenantal in nature. The key Pauline phrase "the righteousness of God" (Rom 1:17; 3:21, 25-26; 10:3; 2 Cor 5:21) refers, according to Wright, to God's faithfulness to his covenant with Israel.<sup>13</sup> Given this basic understanding of righteousness terminology, Wright unfolds his doctrine of justification primarily in covenantal terms. He argues that justification is God's declaration that one is in the covenant, and that faith is the identifying mark (i.e., a badge) by which God makes this declaration. For example, the righteousness of the law that Paul rejected in Philippians 3:9 "is not a moralistic or self-help righteousness, but the

10. James D. G. Dunn, "The New Perspective on Paul," in *The New Perspective on Paul: Collected Essays* (Tübingen, 2005), 89-95; Wright, "The Paul of History," 81-84.

11. Dunn, "The New Perspective on Paul," 98-101; Wright, *Romans*, 460-61.

12. Of course, my argument does not assert that all new perspective proponents stand in agreement with Wright on everything. In fact, there are numerous differences between them. Nevertheless, because every study must have limits, this response to the new perspective will focus on N. T. Wright and assume that where Wright's views overlap with those of others, the argument of this paper will also be pertinent to them. Where other new perspective proponents may depart from Wright is outside the scope of this study. I believe this approach is justified because there is widespread agreement that what constitutes the "new perspective" is a new way of viewing Paul's polemic, which in turn results in a new way of interpreting his doctrine of justification. All proponents of the new perspective, to one degree or another, share this hermeneutical and theological paradigm shift.

13. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 95-111; idem, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 2:795-804; see also Wright's unprecedented interpretation of 2 Corinthians 5:21 in idem, "On Becoming the Righteousness of God: 2 Corinthians 5:21," in *Pauline Theology*, vol. 2, *1 & 2 Corinthians*, ed. David M. Hay (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 200-08. On the righteousness of God as his covenant faithfulness see also Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 340-46; Richard B. Hays, "Justification," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 3, *H-J*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1129-33.

status of orthodox Jewish covenant membership.”<sup>14</sup> By contrast, Paul desired “a righteousness from God,” which Wright defines as “the status of covenant *membership*; it is the gift of God, not something acquired in any way by the human beings involved; and this gift is bestowed on faith.”<sup>15</sup> Instead of relying on the badge of circumcision to define his covenant membership, Paul recognized faith as the badge that identifies God’s true covenant people, a badge accessible to Gentiles without requiring them to convert to Judaism.

Crucial to Wright’s doctrine is the non-initiatory nature of justification. In other words, for Wright, justification is not about becoming a Christian but about marking out those who are already Christians. By demarcating members of the covenant in his justifying declaration, God does not change anyone’s status; rather, he recognizes who already belongs to him:

Justification in this setting, then, is not a matter of *how someone enters the community of the true people of God*, but of *how you tell who belongs to that community*, not least in the period of time before the eschatological event itself, when the matter will become public knowledge . . . ‘Justification’ in the first century was not about how someone might establish a relationship with God. It was about God’s eschatological definition, both future and present, of who was, in fact, a member of his people. In Sanders’s terms, it was not so much about ‘getting in,’ or indeed about ‘staying in,’ as about ‘how you could tell who was in.’ In standard Christian theological language, it wasn’t so much about soteriology as about ecclesiology; not so much about salvation as about the church.<sup>16</sup>

Justification by faith is, then, the present anticipation of final justification, when God’s covenant people will be vindicated publicly. For Wright, final justification is not based on faith; it is, as Paul affirms in Romans 2:13, by works: “[Justification] occurs in the future, as we have seen on the basis of the entire life a person has led in the power of the Spirit—that is, it occurs on the basis of ‘works’ in Paul’s redefined sense.”<sup>17</sup> Jus-

14. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 124.

15. *Ibid.*, 124-25, emphasis original.

16. *Ibid.*, 119, emphasis original; see also *idem*, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 121-22. In “New Perspectives on Paul,” 258, he argues, “The word *dikaioō* is, after all, a declarative word, declaring that something is the case, rather than a word for making something happen or changing the way something is.” Yet in a later work, Wright appears to contradict himself: “When the judge in the lawcourt justifies someone, he does not give that person his own particular ‘righteousness.’ He *creates* the status the vindicated defendant now possesses, by an act of declaration, a ‘speech-act’ in our contemporary jargon” (*Justification*, 69, emphasis original). If this and similar statements in more recent publications (*Justification*, 91, 135; *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 2:945-46) indicate that he has changed his mind and now regards the verdict of justification as one that changes a person’s status rather than merely recognizing a status he or she already possesses, then it is a most welcome development. Nowhere, however, does Wright say that he has changed his mind, and thus the apparent contradiction remains in his work.

17. Wright, “New Perspectives on Paul,” 260.

tification in the present by faith, then, serves the crucial purpose of marking off God's covenant people (including Jews and Gentiles) in anticipation of their eschatological vindication.<sup>18</sup> It offers assurance to those who possess the badge of faith that they belong to the covenant people and that God will complete the work he began in them (Phil 1:6), issuing in their final justification at the last judgment.

Concluding this brief survey, it is important to recognize the steps that have resulted in a new perspective on justification. Years after Stendahl had raised important questions about Protestant interpretations of Paul, Sanders offered a groundbreaking study of the pattern of religion of Second Temple Judaism, arguing that Jews in Paul's day were not legalists but covenantal nomists who believed strongly in the grace of God. This observation suggested that Paul's polemic against Judaism, and especially against "works of the law," had long been misunderstood. Dunn and Wright adopted Sanders's view of Second Temple Judaism and concluded that Paul's polemic was aimed at Jewish nationalism, primarily exemplified in the boundary markers of the Mosaic Law. The old Lutheran paradigm, in which Paul's writings addressed questions about individual standing before God, had to be discarded. For new perspective proponents, then, the doctrine of justification must be understood in terms of covenant membership, not primarily in terms of guilt and its removal. If justification by faith is the answer, the new perspective proposes that the question is something like this: "How can we know who belongs to the people of God?" Or, perhaps more specifically, "How can Jews and Gentiles be united as the one people of God?" Justification has become primarily a doctrine about the makeup of the church.

### **Justification and Ecclesiology: A Response to the New Perspective**

It is impossible to deny that Paul's doctrine of justification has important implications for ecclesiology, particularly in light of the importance of Jew-Gentile relations in the Pauline corpus. However, the new perspective wrongly reduces justification to a declaration of covenant membership, bypassing the important soteriological categories that define the nature of justification in Paul.<sup>19</sup> Reacting to the Lutheran tradition, new perspective arguments appear to ride on a pendulum that has swung too far, minimizing concerns about the salvation of individuals and collapsing ecclesiology into justification. In what follows, it will be demonstrated that for Paul, justification by faith is a soteriological doctrine by which individual sinners are given a new status

18. Wright, *Justification*, 133-36, 251.

19. Gathercole agrees: ". . . one of the problems with a number of New Perspective accounts of justification is that too much importance is frequently attributed to the function of justification as an ecclesiological doctrine, such that its fundamentally soteriological structure is relegated to secondary significance." Simon J. Gathercole, "The Doctrine of Justification in Paul and Beyond: Some Proposals," in *Justification in Perspective: Historical Developments and Contemporary Challenges*, ed. Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 232.

before God, namely, a status of righteousness, on the basis of Christ's atoning work and through the instrument of faith. Then, on the basis of this justifying verdict that puts sinners in the right before God, the new covenant community is formed without reference to human distinctions, whether ethnic or moral. The argument will proceed by addressing two important terms in the debate, along the way offering observations on important Pauline passages. It will then conclude with an exposition of the ecclesiological implications of the traditional Protestant doctrine of justification.

## Terminology

Crucial to the new perspective doctrine of justification outlined above are the terms "righteousness" and "works of the law." The former has been redefined by the new perspective in terms of covenant membership, and the latter in terms of distinctive Jewish boundary markers. Redefining these terms in such a way leads to redefinition of the phrase "justification by faith." God justifies—that is, recognizes as covenant members—those who have faith (the new covenant identity marker) rather than merely those who are of the "works of the law" (the old covenant identity markers). However, these redefinitions do not fit the biblical evidence, as will be demonstrated below.

**Righteousness.**<sup>20</sup> Is it true, as Wright claims, that "'Righteousness,' when applied to humans, is, at bottom, the status of being a member of the covenant."<sup>21</sup> If so, then one must ask why it does not have the same significance when applied to God. New perspective proponents have argued unequivocally that "the righteousness of God" is his faithfulness to the covenant (not his membership in the covenant), so that God is righteous when he fulfills the obligations that he took upon himself by entering into covenant with Israel.<sup>22</sup> The shortcomings of this definition of God's righteousness will not be pursued here.<sup>23</sup> For now, it will suffice to acknowledge that covenant faithfulness is at least one aspect of God's righteousness. In any case, taking the new perspective argument on its own terms, one would expect some kind of explanation for the clear equivocation that occurs when "righteousness" is applied to God and when it is applied to humans. For the new perspective, to say that God is righteous is to say that he has fulfilled every covenant obligation, but the same connotation does not seem

20. Of course, it is important to keep in mind throughout this discussion that justification belongs in the category of righteousness terminology, as both the Hebrew root קָדַשׁ and the Greek root δεικναι demonstrate. Unfortunately, this semantic relationship has been obscured in English.

21. Wright, *Romans*, 491; see also idem, *The Climax of the Covenant*, 214.

22. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 95-111; idem, *Romans*, 403-06; Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 340-46; Hays, "Justification," 1129-32.

23. See Mark A. Seifrid, "Righteousness Language in the Hebrew Scriptures and Early Judaism," in *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, vol. 1, *The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism*, ed. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 415-42; Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The "Lutheran" Paul and His Critics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 284-86.

to be present when applied to human beings. A human being's righteousness consists merely in his or her covenant membership. As the long and tortured history of Israel's disobedience demonstrates, covenant membership does not always entail righteousness. In fact, Moses rebuked Israel by saying, "Know, therefore, that the LORD your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness, for you are a stubborn people" (Deut 9:6).<sup>24</sup> It is obvious (even in the immediate context, vv. 7ff.) that Moses did not deny that they were true members of the covenant. He rebuked them for being unfaithful to the covenant. Israel was an *unrighteous* covenant member, which would apparently be oxymoronic for the new perspective.

One could respond by appealing to the redemptive-historical shift that has occurred in Christ, arguing that in this new age the work of the Son and of the Spirit creates a new covenant people that fulfills what Israel anticipated, such that all who are new covenant members are, in fact, faithful to the covenant obligations and are, therefore, righteous.<sup>25</sup> However, this correct biblical observation does not in any way mitigate equivocation on the term "righteousness." To say that all members of the new covenant are righteous does not entail that righteousness equals covenant membership, anymore than saying that all country club members are wealthy entails that wealth equals country club membership. The mere observation that two terms ("righteous" and "covenant member") apply to the same group in the new covenant era does not justify collapsing their meanings together.<sup>26</sup> New perspective proponents have yet to provide a satisfactory explanation for their equivocation on righteousness terminology.

As mentioned before, "covenant faithfulness" does not exhaust the meaning of righteousness, but it certainly comes closer than "covenant membership." If new perspective proponents consistently interpreted "righteousness" as "covenant faithfulness," no matter to whom it was applied, then their doctrine of justification would improve overnight, as Gathercole observes: "The cash value of this for the interpretation of Paul is that when he speaks of the reckoning of righteousness, it is not just that Christians stand before God as members of the covenant but, rather, that *it is as if they have done everything that God requires*."<sup>27</sup> If, then, one proceeds to explain this reckoning of the fulfillment of covenant obligations on the basis of Christ's obedience and atoning death, one has entered the territory of traditional Protestant soteriology.

24. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version.

25. Indeed, as a Baptist I would applaud this move!

26. Westerholm [*Perspectives Old and New on Paul*, 291], makes the same point: "Here [in the eyes of some Jews], to be sure, the categories of 'sinners' and 'outsiders' on the one hand and 'righteous' and 'faithful members of the covenant' on the other *overlap* entirely; yet the terms (like 'Cretan' and 'liar') do not *mean* the same thing. If 'sinner' meant 'outsider to the covenant,' then human sinfulness would have originated, not with the disobedience of Adam, but with the divine granting of the covenant to Abraham. To the best of my knowledge, evidence of such a notion is not forthcoming."

27. Gathercole, "The Doctrine of Justification in Paul and Beyond," 237, emphasis original.

The preceding argument only exposes an inconsistency within the new perspective. It is now necessary to present a positive case from Paul's own usage of righteousness terminology, a case that will proceed in three steps. First, the primarily ethical meaning of righteousness terminology in Paul must be noted.<sup>28</sup> The main point here is that Paul uses "righteousness" and related terms to refer either to the fulfillment of ethical obligations or to the status one has as a result of fulfilling those ethical obligations. In this sense, a righteous person is defined as one who has done what one ought to do, not as one who is in the covenant. A number of passages make this point forcefully by defining righteousness in opposition to negative terms that are clearly ethical in nature. The string of Old Testament quotations in Romans 3:10-18 begins with the assertion, "None is righteous, no, not one," and this claim is explicated in terms of sinful speech, sinful actions, and a sinful disposition toward God.<sup>29</sup> In Romans 5:7-8 Paul contrasts "a righteous person" for whom one would scarcely die with "sinners" for whom Christ did die, virtually defining righteousness as that which is opposed to sin.<sup>30</sup> In Romans 6:20 the same contrast appears, for Paul writes, "When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness." In 2 Corinthians 6:14-16 he identifies pairs of opposites (light/darkness, Christ/Belial, believer/unbeliever, temple of God/idols), the first of which opposes "righteousness" to "lawlessness." In 1 Timothy 1:9 he contrasts "the just" with "the lawless and disobedient," "the ungodly and sinners," "the unholy and profane," and then he identifies such people as those who violate, in various ways, the second table of the law (vv. 9-11). In 2 Timothy 2:22

28. Westerholm [*Perspectives Old and New on Paul*, 263-73] refers to righteousness in this sense as "ordinary dikaioσness."

29. Significantly, the word "righteous" does not appear in either Psalm 14 or Psalm 53, from which Paul quotes in verse 10. This indicates that Paul, quoting loosely from the text, felt that the phrase "None is righteous" expressed the same truth as "no one does good," implying that one who does good is righteous.

30. It makes little difference how one sees "a good person" in verse 7 in relation to "a righteous person," for it would not affect the basic contrast between "a righteous person" and "sinners." However, the argument here presented tightens up slightly when it is recognized that the words "righteous" and "good" are being used synonymously. Paul draws no contrast between "a righteous person" and "a good person" but rather considers them to be the same. See John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 167-68. For an alternative view that distinguishes between "a righteous person" and "a good person," see Wright, *Romans*, 518-19; Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 261-62.

he urges Timothy to “flee youthful passions [that lead to sinful behavior] and [instead] pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace.”<sup>31</sup>

Paul’s use of the terms ἀδικία (*adikia*, “unrighteousness”) and ἀδικος (*adikos*, “unrighteous”) likewise demonstrates that for him righteousness has to do primarily with one’s ethical behavior and standing, not one’s covenant membership or lack thereof. “Unrighteousness” is paired with “ungodliness” (ἀσέβεια, *asebeia*) in Romans 1:18, and both terms are connected to suppression of the truth about God, leading to creature-worship and its resulting dehumanizing behavior (vv. 18-32).<sup>32</sup> Clearly, in this context God’s wrath is directed against people for their sinful rejection of the truth about him, not for their position with respect to the covenant.<sup>33</sup> The “unrighteous” in 1 Corinthians 6:9 are further described as “the sexually immoral,” “idolaters,” “adulterers,” “men who practice homosexuality,” “thieves,” “the greedy,” “drunkards,” “revilers,” and “swindlers” (vv. 9-10). That these people lack membership in God’s new covenant people may be true, but their unrighteousness consists specifically in their attachment to these kinds of sinful behavior. Further examples could be given, but the previous ones demonstrate amply that righteousness terminology in Paul relates primarily to the ethical sphere of meaning, involving the fulfillment (or lack thereof) of one’s ethical obligations.<sup>34</sup>

The second step in this argument proceeds to identify the concept of justification in Paul as a legal declaration of righteousness. In its ordinary sense the verb “to justify” (δικαίωω, *dikaioō*) refers to a recognition and legal affirmation that one has

31. Throughout this argument it will be presupposed that Paul the apostle wrote all thirteen New Testament letters attributed to him. The most significant of the disputed letters for this study are Ephesians and the Pastoral Epistles. For convincing arguments of their authenticity, see D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 305-09, 359-71. Even for those scholars who do not share this presupposition (Dunn denies that Paul wrote any of these letters, and Wright places 1 Timothy and Titus in a non-Pauline category, along with some hesitations about 2 Timothy), these letters should still carry weight in this discussion. Even if Paul did not write them, they certainly stand in the Pauline tradition, and thus one would not expect the use of terminology in these letters to be radically different from Paul or his thought world. Significantly, Dunn argues that the doctrine of justification by grace alone instead of works (in the “Lutheran” sense of these terms) was part of Jewish covenant theology and was presupposed by Paul, though it was later made explicit by the later Pauline epistles (Ephesians and the Pastoral Epistles). Thus, Dunn sees significant continuity between the authentic Pauline epistles and the pseudonymous ones. See James D. G. Dunn, “Whatever Happened to ‘Works of the Law’?” in *The New Perspective on Paul: Collected Essays* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 387-88.

32. Most commentators argue that “unrighteousness” and “ungodliness” do not describe distinct aspects of rebellion but rather overlap in meaning in Romans 1:18. See C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 1, ICC (New York: T & T Clark, 1975), 111-12; James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, WBC, vol. 38a (Dallas: Word, 1988), 55-56; Schreiner, *Romans*, 88; contra Murray, 36.

33. Paul also contrasts unrighteousness with the truth in Romans 2:8; 1 Corinthians 13:6; and 2 Thessalonians 2:10, 12.

34. For additional examples see Romans 3:5; 6:13, 16, 18, 19; 10:5; 14:17; 2 Corinthians 9:9-10; 12:13; Ephesians 4:24; 5:9; 6:14; Philippians 3:6; 4:8; Colossians 4:1; 1 Timothy 6:11; 2 Timothy 2:19; 3:16; Titus 1:8; 3:5.

fulfilled his or her ethical obligations.<sup>35</sup> Romans 2:13 reads, “For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified.” Several observations about this verse are noteworthy. First, Paul speaks of justification in the future tense, indicating that he has the final judgment in mind. Second, the parallel structure of the verse indicates clearly that the phrase “righteous before God” and “justified” mean the same thing. Thus, justification for Paul has to do with the legal standing of individuals before God, not primarily with covenant membership. Third, those who will be justified are identified as “the doers of the law” as opposed to the “hearers of the law.” Throughout this section (Rom 2:6-16) Paul argues that God’s judgment is impartial, so that mere possession of the law provides the Jews with no advantage. What counts before God is what one has done, whether with or without the written law. Justification, therefore, in this context, constitutes a legal declaration that one has fulfilled one’s ethical obligations before God, not that one belongs to his covenant people.<sup>36</sup>

First Corinthians 4:4 moves in a similar orbit, for Paul writes, “I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted [δεδικαιώμαι, *dedikaiōmai*]. It is the Lord who judges me.” Here again, justification is associated with the final judgment and refers to the divine verdict concerning the ethical standing of a person. Quoting from Psalm 51:4 (51:6 in Hebrew and 50:6 LXX) in Romans 3:4, Paul writes of God being justified. Clearly, God does not stand under the authority of a higher court that declares that he has fulfilled his obligations, but this use of the term refers to public vindication, thereby retaining a meaning that is primarily legal in nature (cf. Luke 7:29). God is justified before human beings when he is shown to be just, that is, to have fulfilled his ethical obligations as ruler and judge of creation (Rom 3:25-26). Justification, then, in its normal sense, involves a legal recognition of righteousness. The new perspective’s reassignment of the concept to the domain of mere covenant membership finds no support in the use of δικ-terminology in Paul.

The third step in this argument is to point out that justification *by faith* in Paul represents a departure from the ordinary use of the term “justify/justification” and

35. The distinction between the ordinary sense of justification and its extraordinary usage in Paul (the latter explained below) is drawn from Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul*, 263-85.

36. How Romans 2:13 harmonizes with Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith has been debated. Wright [“New Perspectives on Paul,” 260] argues that final justification is not by faith but is based on works (in a redefined sense). Schreiner [*Romans*, 119, 144-45] links those who will be justified in 2:13 to the Gentiles mentioned in 2:25-29 and argues that “the doers of the law” are those in whom the Spirit has worked a transformation. However, Murray, 71, offers the best approach to this question: “It is quite unnecessary to find in this verse any doctrine of justification by works in conflict with the teaching of this epistle in later chapters. Whether any will be actually justified by works either in this life or at the final judgment is beside the apostle’s interest and design at this juncture. The burden of this verse is that not the hearers or mere possessors of the law will be justified before God but that in terms of the law the criterion is *doing*, not hearing. The apostle’s appeal to this principle serves that purpose truly and effectively, and there is no need to import questions that are not relevant to the universe of discourse.” See also Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul*, 270-71, n. 23, for the same view.

thus constitutes, not a recognition of righteousness, but a declaration of righteousness that changes the legal standing of the one concerning whom it is pronounced. As such, this extraordinary declaration constitutes an initial aspect of salvation that is connected to Christian conversion. Although Paul had previously argued that “the doers of the law will be justified” (Rom 2:13), he makes it clear that no one will belong to this group: “For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight” (Rom 3:20; cf. Gal 3:11; 5:4).<sup>37</sup> This dark assessment of the human predicament immediately gives way to the glory of “the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe” (Rom 3:22).<sup>38</sup> Although “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” both Jews and Gentiles “are justified by his grace *as a gift* through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Rom 3:23-24, emphasis added). It is precisely the gift nature of this justification that makes it extraordinary. Paul likewise speaks of “the gift of righteousness” that is to be received by fallen descendants of Adam in Romans 5:17. Justification in its normal sense refers to a legal declaration that one is or is not righteous, and it is based on whether one has or has not fulfilled one’s ethical obligations. But in this extraordinary sense, justification is the verdict of righteousness pronounced over those who have not fulfilled their obligations. Righteousness, then, comes to them as a gift.

Nowhere does Paul spell out this principle more clearly than in Romans 4:1-8, where he enlists Abraham as the example *par excellence* of one who was justified by faith as opposed to works. Crucial to the argument are verses 4-5: “Now to the one who works, his wages are not reckoned according to grace but according to debt, but to the one who does not work but trusts in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned for righteousness.”<sup>39</sup> Paul labors to spell out clearly the principle that justification by faith is an essentially gracious act of God, as opposed to justification by works, which would involve earning right standing with God, just as a worker earns his wages. The description of God as “him who justifies the ungodly” comes as a shock, not only because it describes Abraham as “ungodly,” but primarily because it accuses God of doing what he said he would not do in Exodus 23:7 (cf. Prov 17:15), namely, justify the ungodly. Paul’s argument from chapters 1-3 has already established that God’s righteousness has been demonstrated through the event of the

37. The important phrase “works of the law” will be discussed below.

38. See Wright, *Romans*, 470, and Richard B. Hays, “ΠΙΣΤΙΣ and Pauline Christology: What Is At Stake?” in *Pauline Theology*, vol. 4, *Looking Back, Pressing On*, ed. E. Elizabeth Johnson and David M. Hay (Atlanta: Scholars, 1997), 44-47 for arguments for the subjective genitive interpretation of πιστις Χριστου (*pistis Christou*) in Paul (“the faithfulness of Christ”). This interpretation is ultimately unpersuasive, but even if one adopts it, it only demonstrates that Christ’s faithfulness is the basis of our justification. One would then have to look to other passages to see how the believer’s faith relates to justification. For arguments against the subjective genitive and for the traditional objective genitive (“faith in Christ”), see Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 166-67; Moisés Silva, “Faith Versus Works of Law in Galatians,” in *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, vol. 2, *The Paradoxes of Paul*, ed. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O’Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 217-48.

39. My translation.

cross (3:25-26), so that his justification of the ungodly does not constitute injustice on his part. Furthermore, Gathercole draws attention to the ways God is described elsewhere in chapter 4: he is the one “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist” (v. 17) as well as “him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord” (v. 24).<sup>40</sup> Taken together with the description “him who justifies the ungodly,” each phrase indicates that God is the one who, by his declarative acts, creates a new reality. Thus, for God to justify the ungodly is to constitute them as righteous (cf. Rom 5:19), to change their legal standing on the basis of Christ’s atoning work. As such, the verdict of justification cannot be a mere recognition of the *status quo* (who is in the covenant, identified by the badge of faith). It must be, rather, a speech act that is declarative in nature, “a declaration by God which, solely because it is uttered, brings about the state of affairs specified by the propositional content.”<sup>41</sup> Therefore, it must be an event associated with Christian conversion, the decisive transfer from death to life. Confirmation for this argument may be found in Romans 10:10, where believing unto righteousness and confessing unto salvation are parallel concepts.<sup>42</sup>

Justification by faith, then, constitutes an extraordinary means of gaining righteousness before God, for it bypasses the normal means of doing the law (Rom 2:13) and relies on the grace of God in Christ alone. Does this mean, then, that God lowers his standard and accepts faith as a substitute form of righteousness? Wright repeatedly makes this charge against the traditional Protestant doctrine, but it is a charge that ignores the instrumental (as opposed to meritorious) character of faith.<sup>43</sup> Carson, commenting on Romans 4, explains:

In Paul’s understanding, then, God’s imputation of Abraham’s faith to Abraham as righteousness *cannot* be grounded in the assumption that faith is itself intrinsically righteous, so that God’s “imputing” of it to Abraham is no more than a recognition of what it intrinsically is. If God is counting faith to Abraham as righteousness, *he is counting him righteous*—not because Abraham is righteous in some inherent way (How can he be? He is ἀσεβής [*asebēs*, “ungodly”]!), but simply because Abraham trusts God and his gracious promise.

40. Gathercole, “The Doctrine of Justification in Paul and Beyond,” 225-29; idem, “Justified by Faith, Justified by His Blood: The Evidence of Romans 3:21-4:5,” in *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, vol. 2, *The Paradoxes of Paul*, ed. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O’Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 165-68.

41. Gregg R. Allison, “Speech Act Theory and Its Implications for the Doctrine of the Inerrancy/Infallibility of Scripture,” *Philosophia Christi* 18 (Spring 1995), 8. Allison is not addressing the issue of justification in this quote but is merely explaining the nature of a declarative speech act.

42. Wright [“New Perspectives on Paul,” 255-57] argues that “call” belongs to the vocabulary of conversion in Paul, and justification clearly comes after it (Rom 8:30), thereby implying that justification must not be confused with conversion. But see Piper, *The Future of Justification*, 93-98 for an effective response. As Piper argues, justification and conversion are not identical, but “Calling/faith/justification are parts of one event that brings us from God’s enmity to his acceptance.”

43. Wright, *Romans*, 491; idem, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 125.

In that sense, then, we are dealing with what systematians call an alien righteousness.<sup>44</sup>

The fact that Paul can speak of sinners being justified “by faith” (Rom 3:30; 5:1; 9:30; 10:6; Gal 2:16; 3:8, 24; Phil 3:9) as well as “justified in Christ” (Gal 2:17) and “justified by his blood” (Rom 5:9) indicates that the value of faith may be found in its object: Christ crucified. Thus, Paul can speak of Christ as our righteousness (1 Cor 1:30), and he can speak of Christ, who knew no sin, becoming sin for us (by imputation) so that we might become the righteousness of God (by imputation) in him (2 Cor 5:21). Faith itself is not righteousness, but it is counted as righteousness because it connects “the ungodly” to the one in whom they are justified.

Righteousness terminology in Paul moves consistently in the categories of ethical obligation and legal standing, not covenant membership. Justification involves a legal declaration of righteousness, either in the normal sense of recognizing as righteous those who have obeyed the law, or in the extraordinary sense of declaring sinners righteous, sinners who have, by faith, been granted a new standing in Christ.

**Works of the law.** Paul employs the phrase ἔργων νόμου (*ergōn nomou*, “works of the law”) six times in his letters: twice to affirm that no one is justified ἐξ ἔργων νόμου (*ex ergōn nomou*, “by works of the law,” Rom 3:20; Gal 2:16), once to affirm that one is justified by faith χωρὶς ἔργων νόμου (*chōris ergōn nomou*, “apart from works of the law,” Rom 3:28), twice in questions that imply that the Galatians did not receive the Spirit ἐξ ἔργων νόμου (*ex ergōn nomou*, “by works of the law,” Gal 3:2, 5), and once to affirm that all who are ἐξ ἔργων νόμου (*ex ergōn nomou*, “of the works of the law”) are under a curse (Gal 3:10). In every case faith is mentioned somewhere in the context as the foil to “works of the law.” New perspective proponents have seen in these passages dueling identity markers and have argued that what is at stake is the ethnic boundary, or lack thereof, of God’s covenant people, with the phrase “works of the law” denoting primarily marks of Jewish identity as opposed to Gentile identity. Paul opposes faith to “works of the law,” Jewish boundary markers, not primarily to ground salvation in the grace of God as opposed to human effort expressed through works done in obedience to God, but in order to make his case that Jews and Gentiles alike may be defined as God’s covenant people.

However, this interpretation of Paul’s language is reductionistic. It drives a wedge between ethnocentrism and legalism, arguing that first-century Jews in Paul’s day were guilty of the former but not the latter. Are we to imagine that Jews in the first century saw the identity markers of circumcision, food laws, and Sabbath as badges that marked them out as destitute sinners on the same level, morally speaking, as the Gentiles, except that they had been the recipients of God’s electing grace? Or would the badges, to their minds, mark them out as in some sense morally superior and,

44. D. A. Carson, “The Vindication of Imputation: On Fields of Discourse and Semantic Fields,” in *Justification: What’s at Stake in the Current Debates*, ed. Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Treier (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004), 60, emphasis original.

therefore, in a better position before God? Paul's statement to Peter in Galatians 2:15 implies the latter: "We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners." To the typical Jewish mind of the first century, to be a Gentile was to be a "sinner." Of course, this does not mean that Jews understood themselves to be sinless, or even that they did not recognize unfaithful Jews as "sinners" on the same level with the Gentiles.<sup>45</sup> What it does mean, however, is that for them ethnic categories overlapped considerably with moral categories, so that they saw themselves not only as more privileged than Gentiles (in terms of the divine grace they had received), but also as morally superior to them.<sup>46</sup> This kind of ethnocentrism cannot avoid legalism in some sense, for it maintains an anthropocentric focus wherein standing before God depends on human distinctions, including both ethnicity and personal piety.<sup>47</sup>

The phrase "works of the law" certainly does not exclude Jewish boundary markers, but neither does it reduce to them.<sup>48</sup> The phrase refers to all works demanded by the Mosaic Law.<sup>49</sup> Four observations support this conclusion. First, it is widely agreed that Paul uses the word "works" to denote works in a general sense, whether good or evil. God "will render to each one according to his works," Paul asserts (Rom 2:6). God's election of Jacob over Esau took place before they were born "and had done nothing either good or bad," so that it was "not by works" (Rom 9:11). Paul can speak of the works of darkness (Rom 13:12; Eph 5:11; cf. Col 1:21), the works of the flesh (Gal 5:19), of good works in general (Eph 2:10; 1 Tim 2:10; 5:10, 25; 6:18; 2 Tim 2:21; 3:17; Tit 1:16; 2:7, 14; 3:1, 8, 14) and of false apostles receiving judgment according to their works (2 Cor 11:15; cf. 2 Tim 4:14). All of these examples represent uses of the term "works" with clear moral connotations.

45. It must be kept in mind that the term "sinner" in first century Judaism was reserved for the outcasts of society. The term is often paired with "tax collectors" or refers to sexually immoral women (Matt 9:10, 11; 11:19; Mark 2:15, 16; Luke 5:30; 6:32-34; 7:34, 37, 39; 15:1, 2).

46. See Mark A. Seifrid, "Blind Alleys in the Controversy over the Paul of History," *Tyndale Bulletin* 45.1 (1994): 77: "There is little doubt that circumcision, along with obedience to food and Sabbath laws, served Jews as 'boundary markers.' It is highly questionable however, that these 'boundary markers' symbolised *mere* national identity. Ethnic traditions bear values which provide cohesion and continuity in community life. And while early Judaism was a 'national' religion, it was nevertheless a *religion*." Again, on p. 79: "Circumcision symbolised not merely separation from other nations, but an ethically superior monotheism."

47. See Piper's excellent discussion in *The Future of Justification*, 145-61.

48. It must be noted that new perspective proponents do not argue that the phrase "works of the law" refers only to the boundary markers of circumcision, food laws, and Sabbath. As Dunn [*The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 358] notes, the phrase "does, of course, refer to all or whatever the law requires" (cf. Wright, *Romans*, 460). The significance of this debate, then, is really not over the denotation of the phrase but rather its connotation. New perspective proponents insist that the connotation of the phrase lies exclusively in its boundary-defining role and not in any sense in deeds of merit that boost one's standing before God. So for all practical purposes, they do reduce the significance of the phrase to precepts of the law that define Jews over against Gentiles.

49. The following discussion leans on the insights of Thomas R. Schreiner, *The Law and Its Fulfillment: A Pauline Theology of Law* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 51-57.

Second, the phrase “works of the law” in Romans 3:28 clearly means the same thing as “works” in the surrounding context. The parallel structure of 3:27-31 and 4:1-25 shows this to be the case, for in chapter 4 Paul unpacks four claims he has made in 3:27-31:

faith excludes boasting	3:27	4:1-2
faith is necessary to preserve grace	3:28	4:3-8
faith is necessary if Jews and Gentiles alike are to be saved	3:29-30	4:9-17
Christian faith, then, far from overturning the OT, fulfills the OT anticipation <sup>50</sup>	3:31	4:18-25

If it can be established that “works” in Romans 4 refers (as elsewhere in Paul) to works in a general sense, then a compelling case would be made for seeing “works of the law” in 3:28 (and by implication elsewhere) as connoting (not just denoting) good works done in obedience to the Mosaic Law, not merely boundary markers of Jewish identity. This argument stands firm on the use of the term “works” in Romans 4:2, 4, and 6. Paul establishes that Abraham was not justified by works (v. 2) but rather by faith (v. 3). He then elucidates the principle (observed earlier) that righteousness comes as a gift of grace, not as a wage earned (vv. 4-5). As if this were not enough to establish that the term “works” clearly denotes (and connotes!) works performed to achieve a good standing before God, verse 6 solidifies the case: “just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works.” The quote that follows from Psalm 32 (vv. 7-8) has nothing to do with defining the covenant people of God apart from ethnic considerations but everything to do with forgiveness of sins. Whereas Abraham might suffice as an example of a “Gentile” who was justified apart from “works” as Jewish boundary markers (because he was justified prior to being circumcised, vv. 9-12), David in no way satisfies this criterion, for he bore all the outward marks of Jewish identity, and yet he still had no works to plead his case before God. In what sense, then, could David have been counted righteous apart from works? The only satisfactory answer from the context is that David’s sins were forgiven and he was accepted as righteous before God by faith and not on the basis of good works he had performed.<sup>51</sup> The tight connection between the arguments of 3:27-31 and chapter 4 implies, then, that “works of the law” in 3:28 (and by implication in 3:20) must refer to works demanded by the law in general, without the exclusive connotation of Jewish identity markers.

Third, within the context of Galatians there is good reason to see the phrase “works of the law” as encompassing all things demanded by the Mosaic Law, without a primary focus on Jewish identity markers. In 3:10 Paul writes, “For all who rely on

50. Carson, “The Vindication of Imputation,” 63.

51. See Simon J. Gathercole, *Where Is Boasting? Early Jewish Soteriology and Paul’s Response in Romans 1-5* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 247: “It is crucial to recognize that the New Perspective interpretation of 4:1-8 falls to the ground on this point: that David although circumcised, sabbatarian, and kosher, is described as without works because of disobedience” (emphasis original).

works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.'" Paul's logic in this verse has been debated, for on the surface it is not obvious why he quotes Deuteronomy 27:26, which pronounces a curse on those who disobey the law, in order to prove the point that all who rely on the law (by obeying it) are under a curse. Dunn argues that Paul pronounces a curse on those who misuse the law as a boundary marker to exclude Gentiles from the covenant people.<sup>52</sup> However, it is highly unlikely that Paul would envision the curses of Deuteronomy 27-29 falling on Israel for an exclusive attitude rather than for disobedience to the precepts of the law itself. Wright argues that Paul's logic builds on the narrative of Israel's history, so that he pronounces a curse on all those who attach themselves to Israel-in-exile by taking on Jewish identity markers ("works of the law").<sup>53</sup> His view founders on a too heavy reliance on the continuing exile theme in Second Temple Judaism.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, when taken on its own terms, Wright's view renders Paul's argument vulnerable to his opponents. For if Paul and the Judaizers shared a common understanding of Israel's continuing exile, as well as a common understanding that Jesus the Messiah had brought the exile to an end, then what would stop the Judaizers from pressing for Torah observance even more by claiming that the end of the exile marked the occasion to go back to the law and get it right this time around?<sup>55</sup>

In light of the failure of the alternatives, it is best to retain the traditional interpretation of Galatians 3:10, which holds that Paul has left unstated a premise that makes his argument coherent: human inability.<sup>56</sup> The reason why those who rely on works of the law are under a curse is because the curse pronounced in Deuteronomy 27:26 applies to all sinful human beings for their inability to keep the law. Therefore, Paul explicates "works of the law" in terms of "all things written in the Book of the Law," not just the outward signs that mark off Jews from Gentiles.<sup>57</sup> Paul's argument

52. James D. G. Dunn, "Works of the Law and the Curse of the Law (Galatians 3.10-14)" in *The New Perspective on Paul: Collected Essays* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 111-30; idem, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* (London: A & C Black, 1993), 170-74.

53. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant*, 137-56.

54. For a critique of this view, see Mark A. Seifrid, *Christ, Our Righteousness: Paul's Theology of Justification* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 21-25; idem, "Blind Alleys," 86-92;

55. Seyoon Kim, *Paul and the New Perspective: Second Thoughts on the Origin of Paul's Gospel* (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 2002), 136-41.

56. Martin Luther, *Commentary on Galatians*, Modern English Edition (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1988), 159-89; Moisés Silva, *Interpreting Galatians: Explorations in Exegetical Method*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 217-35; Schreiner, *The Law and Its Fulfillment*, 44-63; Steve Jeffery, Mike Ovey, and Andrew Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* (Nottingham: IVP, 2007), 89-95; F. F. Bruce *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 157-67.

57. Significantly, the MT does not include the word "all" in Deuteronomy 27:26. This indicates that Paul either added the word himself or deliberately chose to quote this portion of the verse from the LXX. Either way, Paul's intention seems to be to emphasize the full range of the Mosaic legislation.

in verses 11-12 substantiates this observation. In verse 11 Paul argues from Habakkuk 2:4 that justification comes by faith, not by the law, and then in verse 12 he shows why the two ways of righteousness are mutually exclusive: “But the law is not of faith, rather “The one who does them shall live by them” (cf. Rom 10:5). Here he draws a boundary around the law, indicating, as he does in Romans 4:1-8, that doing and believing are mutually exclusive principles in the realm of justification. “Works of the law” fall under the category of “doing” (Lev 18:5), which stands in contradiction to God’s method of justification by grace through faith. Confirmation of this reading comes from Galatians 5:3, where Paul argues that taking on the identity marker of circumcision obligates one to obey the whole law, an obligation that Paul apparently believes should not be taken on because of the impossibility of fulfilling it.

The fourth and final observation in this discussion of “works of the law” has to do with the use of the term “works” in key passages in Ephesians and the Pastoral Epistles.<sup>58</sup> The most significant of these for the present discussion may be found in Titus 3:5-7, where a works/mercy antithesis appears (v. 5) and where believers are said to be justified by God’s grace (v. 7). Significantly, Paul writes that God saved us “not because of works done by us in righteousness” (v. 5), clearly indicating that the kinds of works he has in view are good works in a general sense. In a context that mentions justification by grace, the parallel between the works/mercy antithesis and the works of the law/faith antithesis presented elsewhere (Gal 2:16; 3:2, 5; 3:10-14; Rom 3:20-22; 27-28) strongly implies that “works of the law” in Paul belongs in the same sphere of discourse as “works done by us in righteousness,” just as “faith” belongs to the realm of “mercy” (see Rom 4:16). The same dynamic appears in Ephesians 2:8-9, where the vocabulary of justification does not appear but the concept seems to be present: “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works so that no one may boast.” Here works stand opposed to both grace and faith, and there is no hint that the works mentioned are mere Jewish identity markers.<sup>59</sup> In fact, the reference to “good works” that God has prepared beforehand for believers to do (v. 10) strengthens the observation that the “works” of verse 9 are general in nature. Thus, the antithesis presented in Ephesians 2:8-9 coheres with the traditional Protestant reading of the same kind of antithesis presented in

58. Again, while I presuppose, based on my understanding of the nature of inspiration, that Paul wrote these letters, the argument still carries weight even if a later Paulinist (or two or more later Paulinists), seeking to commend Paul’s theology to a new generation of believers, actually wrote some or all of them. His/Their interpretation of Paul’s theology, standing much closer to Paul in time and culture, surely would not reflect a view that was foreign to Paul.

59. Dunn fully recognizes that “works” in Ephesians 2:9 are good works in general. He argues that a later Paulinist has made explicit the principle of salvation by grace alone that was well-known in Judaism and presupposed by Paul. See Dunn, “Whatever Happened to ‘Works of the Law?’” 387-88. But Dunn needs to be pressed on two issues. First, how likely is it that a later Paulinist would use terminology so similar to Paul’s, with the same faith/works antithesis, and yet mean something very different from what Paul meant? Second, how might an acceptance of Paul’s authorship of Ephesians impact Dunn’s reading of Romans and Galatians?

Romans and Galatians. A final verse that deserves mention here is 2 Timothy 1:9, where Paul again draws the antithesis between works and grace in salvation, with no hint that “works” refers to Jewish boundary markers. These observations confirm the argument by highlighting the unlikelihood that Paul would create the same kind of antithesis over and over and yet equivocate on the nature of the contrast.

To sum up these exegetical observations, the notion that Paul’s doctrine of justification pertains primarily to marking out the covenant people by the badge of faith rather than by the badge of Jewish identity markers finds little support from his use of the relevant terminology. Righteousness language in Paul refers consistently to ethical and legal realities: those who have fulfilled their ethical obligations are righteous, and those who have not are unrighteous. Justification is the legal recognition that one has fulfilled one’s obligations and thus is righteous, although Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith departs from this ordinary sense of the term by affirming that God justifies the ungodly, thus granting them a new standing before him because of Christ’s redeeming work. Justification by faith, then, cannot be a mere recognition of who is “in”; it must refer to the legal aspect of Christian conversion, a transfer in status from unrighteousness to righteousness. When Paul uses the phrase “works of the law” in opposition to faith, the evidence suggests that he does not envision merely dueling identity markers but that he is driven by the principle outlined in Galatians 3:12 and Romans 4:4-5: the principle of faith, as a passive reception of righteousness, standing over against good works, as an active pursuit of righteousness. Thus, Paul’s doctrine of justification has to do primarily with the legal standing of individual sinners before God, not with the definition of God’s covenant people. Justification belongs in the realm of soteriology, not ecclesiology.

### **Ecclesiological Implications**

But does Paul’s doctrine of justification have anything to say to ecclesiology? The answer is an emphatic “Yes!” In spite of its deficiencies, the new perspective has done the church a service by drawing attention to the ecclesiological context in which Paul’s doctrine of justification was expounded, especially in the letter to the Galatians. Careful attention to Paul’s argument demonstrates how the doctrine of justification, while not directly an element of ecclesiology, impacts the nature of the church by summoning believers of various backgrounds to cross human barriers (preeminently the Jew-Gentile barrier) and accept one another as God has accepted them in Christ. A robust doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone implies a church that is international in character, drawn from every caste of society, and united together in love because of their mutual recognition that human distinctions mean nothing under the shadow of the cross.

Paul’s report of his confrontation with Peter illustrates this point. When Peter, joined by Barnabas and the other Jews at Antioch, withdrew from table fellowship

with the Gentiles, Paul confronted him with this question: “If you, though a Jew, have eternal life in the manner of a Gentile and not in the manner of a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to Judaize?” (Gal 2:14).<sup>60</sup> Peter’s act of withdrawal implied that he expected the Gentile believers to put themselves under the Jewish law before he would resume table fellowship with them, thereby indirectly forcing them to become Jews. Significantly, Paul expounded his argument by appealing to the doctrine of justification by faith rather than by works of the law (vv. 15-16). The implication of his argument is that believers should not exclude one another on the basis of human distinctions that do not affect one’s legal standing before God. Jews who abandon faith in the law and seek justifying grace in Christ alone admit that they are sinners on the same level with Gentiles (v. 17).<sup>61</sup> The common sinful condition they share before God, along with their common basis of acceptance before him, leads to a practice of mutual acceptance. Justification by faith, once it is grasped as a glorious vertical reality, also reaches out horizontally.

A similar dynamic appears to be at work in Romans 2:29, where Paul suddenly asks the question, “Or is God the God of Jews only?” Wright argues that this question makes no sense if the boast of verse 27 is that of “the successful moralist.” It must be, he maintains, “the racial boast of the Jew” over against the Gentile.<sup>62</sup> Along with a truncated view of boasting,<sup>63</sup> this interpretation fails to note the logic of the traditional interpretation. The oneness of God (v. 30) implies that there is only one way of to be right with him, and that is the way of faith as opposed to works of the law, so that it is open to all, both Jews and Gentiles (vv. 27-29).<sup>64</sup> If, therefore, God is one, and there is only one “universally accessible and universally humbling way of justification,”<sup>65</sup> then Jews and Gentiles have no basis on which to exclude each other (see also Eph 2:1-22).

Now that the Jew-Gentile question lies in the distant past, how do churches today apply the doctrine of justification by faith to their ecclesiological practice? They do it by fostering unity in the gospel alone, which stretches across the diverse spectrum of human communities, rather than by gathering into intentionally monolithic congregations. Churches that exist in ethnically diverse areas should strive to reflect the same kind of ethnic diversity as their surroundings. The same goes for diversity in socioeconomic status. Rather than catering to the wealthy, churches should recognize that all sinners stand on level ground before the cross. In light of Paul’s teaching, niche churches seem very problematic. While certain churches may have special

60. My translation. Although most English translations do not reflect it, I take the verb “live” in Gal 2:14 to mean in a spiritual sense, as in “have eternal life.”

61. Bruce, 140-41.

62. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 129; idem, *Romans*, 480-82.

63. See Gathercole, *Where Is Boasting?*, for an extended argument that boasting in this context is directed both toward God and the Gentiles and that it is based both on Israel’s election and obedience to the law.

64. Piper, *The Future of Justification*, 146-47.

65. Ibid., 147.

opportunities to minister to particular groups (college students, factory workers, military personnel, ethnic groups, etc.), it seems that the attempt to begin a new church for the specific purpose of reaching only one segment of a diverse society runs counter to the horizontal dimension of justification by faith.<sup>66</sup> Churches that unify because of their common backgrounds or interests run the risk of defining themselves by those human features rather than by the gospel.

There is also a moral dimension to this discussion. Sinners saved by grace must have open arms for other sinners. A church made up of morally respectable justified sinners (e.g., suburbanites whose sins are less public or less shocking than those of others) denies the gospel if it refuses to welcome the “tax collectors and sinners” of its society. May the church be a place for recovering alcoholics, the sexually broken, and juvenile delinquents, for by faith the perfect righteousness of Christ covers their sins every bit as much as it does anyone else’s. And may the practice of patience, love, and forgiveness characterize the human-human relationship within the church just as it does the divine-human relationship. Piper’s observation about marriage could just as easily apply to relationships between believers in the church:

What makes marriage almost impossible at times is that both partners feel so self-justified in their expectations that are not being fulfilled. There is a horrible emotional dead-end street in the words, “But it’s just plain wrong for you to act that way,” followed by, “That’s your perfectionistic perspective,” or “Do you think you do everything right?,” or hopeless, resigned silence. The cycle of self-justified self-pity and anger seems unbreakable.

But what if one or both of the partners becomes overwhelmed with the truth of justification by faith alone, and with the particular truth that in Christ Jesus God credits me, for Christ’s sake, as fulfilling all his expectations? What would happen if this doctrine so mastered our souls that we began to bend it from the vertical to the horizontal? What if we applied it to our marriages?<sup>67</sup>

And what if we labored to view our brothers and sisters in the church through the lens of the grace that we ourselves have received? Justification by faith speaks volumes about what the church should be.

## Conclusion

The ecclesiological insights provided by the new perspective on Paul are not wrong in themselves. Jews and Gentiles are indeed united together under one God by faith in one common Savior, where ethnic badges mean nothing. Paul’s concern to uphold

66. I am by no means opposing the attempts by missionaries to target specific unreached people groups for evangelism, so long as the aim of the ministry is to plant churches that will in time develop a missional outlook that seeks out and welcomes outsiders.

67. John Piper, *Counted Righteous in Christ: Should We Abandon the Imputation of Christ’s Righteousness?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2002), 27.

this glorious truth cannot be denied. However, in their exposition of the doctrine of justification in Paul's writings, new perspective proponents tend to skip an important step on their way to Jew-Gentile unity: the sinner's relationship to God. Yet the evidence from Paul's letters indicates that justification is primarily soteriological, addressing the predicament of guilty sinners before a holy God, delivering them from his wrath, ending the hostility, and creating peace (Rom 5:1, 9-11). Only when this crucial vertical dimension is grasped can one proceed to specify the important implications for ecclesiology. If justification by faith is the answer, then what really is the question? It would seem to be something like this: "How can guilty sinners escape their awful predicament and stand in the right before God?" And sinners who have found that answer cannot help but become channels of grace to one another.