

What Constitutes the New Perspective on Paul?  
T. David Gordon

I. Donald Hagner's List

1. "Judaism was not and is not a religion where acceptance with God is earned through the merit of righteousness based on works" (76)
2. "Justification by faith is not the center of Paul's theology but instead represents a pragmatic tactic to facilitate the Gentile mission." (77)
3. Saul the Pharisee and Paul the Christian
  - 3.1 "Paul's theology has been misunderstood because it has been read through the lenses of Luther and the Reformation" (78)
  - 3.2 "Paul experienced not a conversion to a new faith, not a change of religion, but a call and commission to bring the gospel to the Gentiles" (79)
  - 3.3 "Paul's main concern was the Jewish-Gentile problem, specifically the conversion of the Gentiles, rather than any universal human problem" (80)
  - 3.4 "Paul had no quarrel with the law (and hence Judaism) *per se*" (80)
  - 3.5 "Paul's arguments against 'works of the law' do not concern the issue of righteousness by obedience to the law, but simply Jewish badges of identity that separated Jews from the Gentiles" (81)
  - 3.6 "The covenantal nomism of the Old Testament is God's way of salvation for Israel, while the law-free gospel is God's way of salvation for the Gentiles" (82)
- n.b. Hagner says not all NPPers affirm this
4. My addition (not Hagner's): The Käsemann hypothesis ("The 'Righteousness of God' in Paul," in *New Testament Questions of Today* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969] pp. 168-182.) The thesis: That the expression "righteousness of God" in Romans 1:17 is a reference to God's "saving power", not a "property of the divine nature." Further, "All that we have been saying amounts to this: δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ is for Paul God's sovereignty over the world revealing itself eschatologically in Jesus. And, remembering the Greek root, we may also say that it is rightful power with which God makes his cause to triumph in the world which has fallen away from him and which yet, as creation, is his inviolable possession." 180

II. My list of conceded and contested points

A. Conceded points

1. Stendahl's warning regarding anachronism regarding introspective conscience.
2. Various warnings regarding anachronistic reading of 1st century Judaism in light of 15th century Catholicism; specifically caution exercised regarding a blanket condemnation of Palestinian Judaism as meritorious.
3. "Law" (and "works of the law") does not mean "God's general moral will;" but is a reference to the Sinai covenant-administration (some are clearer on this;

others conflate Sinai with the Abrahamic covenant-administration), an administration that excluded Gentiles (few NPPers affirm this, however).

4. Recognition that the doctrine of justification has a future/eschatological aspect.
5. Recognition that many NT texts address corporate aspects of redemption, rather than individual aspects.
6. Recognition that the Damascus event is a call to serve the Gentiles, not necessarily a “conversion” in the ordinary sense.

B. Objectionable points (n.b. not all representatives of the NPP hold all of these views; there are individual differences among them)

1. Limiting “works of the Law” exclusively to the boundary laws, the “badges” of the covenant (Dunn), rather than perceiving the expression as comprehensive of all that the Law requires.
2. Finding no fundamental differences between first-century Judaism and Christianity other than that the former is not the latter (Sanders). Whatever “gains” Paul had in Philippians 3, almost all were gains he had as a Jew, and he surrendered all of those gains for the “surpassing worth” of Christ.
3. Limiting justification to a corporate doctrine that excludes individual considerations (Dunn, Wright). In some texts, e.g. Rom. 4 and Phil. 3, the doctrine is also individual.
4. Denying that justification is forensic, and/or that “righteousness of God” refers to his role as a judge (Wright), which is essentially a recapitulation of the Käsemann hypothesis [“The ‘Righteousness of God’ in Paul,” in *New Testament Questions of Today*, pp. 168-182.].
5. Tendency to overlook the Adamic administration (and, with it, God’s judgment) altogether.
6. Tendency (with nineteenth century Liberalism) to evade/avoid NT teaching about propitiating God’s wrath.

C. Which of these various points matter, and in what way? For instance: has any Christian confession or creed ever rendered an opinion on the character of first century Palestinian Judaism? Could a Protestant confession or creed do so, consistently with its own commitment to *sola scriptura*? Do any historic creeds or confessions render an opinion about what happened to Paul at Damascus, or about whether he did or did not have a “robust conscience”?

These questions are raised because there is an important difference between historical paradigm shifts, on the one hand, and theological paradigm shifts, on the other. While in our own personal understanding the two may often be closely related, it is entirely possible, in some circumstances, to revise one’s historical understanding without revising one’s confession of faith.

The New Perspectives on Paul are, more than anything, new perspectives on Palestinian Judaism. While not unrelated to Pauline studies, conclusions in this arena are not as determinative as one might think. Paul almost never addresses Palestinian Judaism overtly (Romans 9?); he addresses problems in Christian congregations (which may be or may not be similar to problems in Palestinian Jewish synagogues). Similarly, many of Paul's arguments about texts from the Hebrew Bible reflect the emerging contest between Judaism and Christianity over which of these emerging traditions is better grounded in Temple Judaism, or which is its true heir. But Jacob Neusner has already recognized that neither religion is Temple Judaism (neither has literal animal sacrifices any more), so each is as novel as the other, historically speaking [cf. Neusner's *Judaism in the Beginning of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984)].

"Both Judaism and Christianity claim to be the heirs and products of the Hebrew Scriptures...Yet both great religious traditions derive not solely or directly from the authority and teachings of those Scriptures, but rather from the ways in which that authority has been mediated, and those teachings interpreted, through other holy books. The New Testament is the prism through which the light of the Old comes to Christianity. The canon of rabbinical writings is the star that guides Jews to the revelation of Sinai, the Torah....The claim of these two great Western traditions, in all their rich variety, is for the veracity not merely of the Scriptures, but also of Scriptures as interpreted by the New Testament or the Babylonian Talmud" (11). ..."Both the apostles and the rabbis thus reshaped the antecedent religion of Israel, and both claimed to be Israel. That pre-Christian, prerabbinic religion of Israel, for all its variety, exhibited common traits: belief in one God, reverence for and obedience to the revelation contained in the Hebrew Scriptures, veneration of the Temple in Jerusalem (while it stood), and expectation of the coming of a Messiah to restore all the Jews to Palestine and bring to a close the anguish of history. The Christian Jews concentrated on the last point, proclaiming that the Messiah had come in Jesus; the rabbinic Jews focused on the second, teaching that only through the full realization of the imperatives of the Hebrew Scriptures, Torah, as interpreted and applied by the rabbis, would the people merit the coming Messiah." (12) "For the Christian, therefore, the issue of Messiah predominated; for the rabbinic Jew, the issue of Torah; and for both, the question of salvation was crucial." (13)

D. The critical issue for the NPP for interpreters of Paul is whether the doctrine of justification can be removed from its theological context of the coming eschatological judgment of God.

Theological doctrines are not like a thread we lift from a garment, toss in the air, and watch float away on the wind. They are like threads woven into the fabric of a garment, and make sense only within the garment of which they are part. So, e.g., if Paul says that "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3), such a sentence does not even make any sense unless we perceive it within a certain doctrinal framework, a framework that implies things like this:

- That we have sinned
- That committing sin merits death

- That the principle of substitution is part of God's economy
- That Christ did not die for any sins he committed
- That "the Scriptures" teach all these things

Historically, the doctrine of justification was a sub-component (logically) of the doctrine of judgment. After the Noahic flood-judgment, God pledged not to perpetuate such activity of judgment, but rather to suspend his judgment for a long season, and permit the human race to continue its activity "seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night" (Gen. 8:22), as it were, until the end, when he would consummate his judgment.

But then, the problem became this: How could sinners stand in such a judgment? As Mal. 3:2 puts it: "But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?" God disclosed himself to be a righteous judge, one who could not be bribed, who said such things as: "Keep far from a false charge, and do not kill the innocent and righteous, for I will not the wicked acquit (οὐ δικαιοῦσαι τὸν ἀσεβῆ)" (Ex. 23:7). Such a God brings judgment on those who "who acquit the guilty (οἱ δικαιοῦντες τὸν ἀσεβῆ) for a bribe, and deprive the innocent of his right!" (Is. 5:23). Yet Paul later says: "And to the one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly (τὸν δικαιοῦντα τὸν ἀσεβῆ), his faith is counted as righteousness" (Ro. 4:5), implying that God *does* acquit/justify the ungodly! How can God remain morally upright (δίκαιος) while justifying the unrighteous or ungodly? Does this not impugn his proven character as an upright judge, "who will by no means clear the guilty" (Ex. 34:7)? Yet Paul refers to Christ being set forth as a "propitiation...by his blood" in order that God might be both "just and a justifier" (δίκαιον καὶ δικαιοῦντα) of the one who has faith in Christ Jesus.

What we call the doctrine of justification is simply the answer to Malachi's question. Who, if anyone, can endure his coming, and by what means? For some Palestinian Jews, perhaps the answer resided in the doctrine of election (an answer Paul repudiated in Romans 2, whether because the view actually existed or whether he repudiated it rhetorically). For Paul, the answer was substitution: Christ, as propitiation, has borne God's punitive justice on the cross for others, who are justified by faith in what he has done. Justification, that is, is not just about who God's people are, but about whether God who will by no means clear the guilty can even *have* a people. Similarly, justification is not merely about re-establishing a relationship, but about re-establishing a relationship between a just Judge and sinful people who merit his judgment. Effectively, many NPP authors remove the doctrine of justification from its context in the doctrine of God's judgment. This will not do. First, that is the matrix in which Paul addresses it (esp. Rom. 1-3), and secondly, even if we were to re-define "justification" to mean something about God's people or relationships, or God's saving power, we would still need to *address* the biblical issue (both OT and NT) about God's coming wrath and judgment and how we would escape it and would need to develop *some* term, if not "justification," to address the matter.

For Paul, no less than for Malachi, God’s judicial wrath remains a future, threatening reality, spoken of as “the day,” or “the day of the Lord,” or “the day of judgment”:

Rom. 2: 3 Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the *judgment of God*?...5 But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up *wrath* for yourself on the *day of wrath* when God’s righteous *judgment* will be revealed.

Rom. 2:8 but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be *wrath and fury*.

Rom. 5:9 Since, therefore, we have now been *justified* by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the *wrath* of God. [n.b. here that “since” we have been *justified*, we will be saved from the *wrath* of God.]

1Cor. 1:4 I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, ...7 so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the *revealing* of our Lord Jesus Christ, 8 who will sustain you to the *end*, guiltless in *the day of our Lord Jesus Christ*.

1Cor. 3:13 each one’s work will become manifest, for the *Day* will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done.

1Cor. 5:5 you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the *day of the Lord*.

2Cor. 1:14 just as you did partially acknowledge us, that *on the day of our Lord Jesus* you will boast of us as we will boast of you.

Phil. 1:6 And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the *day of Jesus Christ*... so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the *day of Christ*...

Col. 3:5 Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. 6 On account of these the *wrath* of God is coming.

1Th. 1:9 For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, 10 and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the *wrath to come*.

1Th. 5:2 For you yourselves are fully aware that the *day of the Lord* will come like a thief in the night.

Paul mentions this reality so frequently, and in such significant contexts, that it cannot be dismissed as a remnant of OT faith or Palestinian Jewish faith. It is a central, controlling element of Christian faith also. For Paul, those who “serve the living and true God” are also those who “wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the *wrath to come*.” And to the Romans he said: “Since, therefore, we have now been *justified* by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the *wrath* of God.” Justification is not *unrelated* to God’s coming wrath and judgment; to the contrary, it only makes Pauline sense *in light of* such wrath and judgment. Perhaps it would help occasionally to take this religious term “justification” and use instead its secular counterpart (that also appears in many ETs) of “acquittal,” as it does at Romans 5:18: “Then as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man’s act of righteousness (δικαιώματος) leads to acquittal (δικαίωσιν) and life for all men” (RSV; ESV says “justification and life”). The advantage of this is that it would remind us of the essentially forensic/courtroom/judicial nature of the term. “Acquittal” is a judicial verdict; it is not a condition, nor even, in any ordinary sense, a relationship. It is a status of innocence before a court.