

Reformed Confessionalism and the “New Perspective” on Paul:

A New Challenge to a Fundamental Article of Faith

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Luther’s oft-quoted dictum that the doctrine of justification is the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*, has fallen on hard times yet again. Though severely challenged by the Roman church at the Council of Trent, the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone on account of Christ alone not only managed to withstand the opposition of Popes and Cardinals, but the doctrine became the center of orthodox Protestant theology. It was affirmed by virtually all of the historic Protestant confessions and catechisms.¹ If these confessions were correct, the Reformers were setting forth nothing more and nothing less than the very gospel as taught by the Apostle Paul himself—a gospel which teaches that God justifies the wicked by means of the imputed righteousness of Christ received through faith alone.

But another serious challenge has arisen to the orthodox Protestant doctrine of justification. This time the opponents of Luther’s doctrine are not mitred cardinals with flowing purple robes gathering for yet another definitive ecclesiastical response to a renewed Protestant menace. This time, those challenging Luther’s interpretation of the *kerygma* of the Apostle Paul are themselves self-consciously Protestants, and ironically, in many cases, ministers and theologians in churches that bear Luther’s name.

While the new challenge to Luther’s interpretation of Paul is the inevitable fruit of the long-

¹ See, for example: Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 3 Vols., reprint ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983); Arthur C. Cochrane, *Reformed Confessions of the 16th Century* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1966); and Theodore G. Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959).

standing tension between the static formulations of dogmatic theology and the dynamic freedom of biblical studies,² nevertheless a number of critical issues simply will not go away. Now, it is Protestant theologians such as Krister Stendahl, a Lutheran biblical scholar working in the name of *sola Scriptura*—the formal principle of the Reformation—who informs us that in Luther's own troubled and overtly introspective mind the essential message of Paul's letters “has been reversed into saying the opposite to his original intention.”³ Martin Luther can no longer be trusted as a reliable interpreter of Paul for in Luther's hands, Paul's essential message is utterly distorted. According to Stendahl, the great Reformer misunderstood Paul's true theological center and subsequently, generations of Protestants have unfortunately followed suit, collectively arguing that “the Law is the Tutor *unto* Christ,” and that “nobody can attain a true faith in Christ unless his self-righteousness has been crushed by the Law.”⁴

The law-gospel antithesis which enabled Luther to challenge the synergistic semi-Pelagian soteriology of the medieval Roman church is now itself seen to be a gross misreading of the text of

² Several recent monographs attempt to deal with this tension. See for example: Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993); Richard A. Muller, *The Study of Theology: From Biblical Interpretation to Contemporary Formulation* (Grand Rapids: The Zondervan Corporation, 1991); and James D. G. Dunn and James P. Mackey, *New Testament Theology in Dialogue: Christology and Ministry* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1987). Also see the important essays by: D. A. Carson, “Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: The Possibility of Systematic Theology,” in *Scripture and Truth*, ed., D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: The Zondervan Corporation, 1983), pp. 65-95; and David Wenham, “Appendix: Unity and Diversity in the New Testament,” in George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, revised ed., Donald A. Hagner, ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), pp. 684-719. The recent *Festschrift* for Kenneth Kantzer contains a number of essays dealing with related matters: John D. Woodbridge and Thomas Edward McComiskey, eds., *Doing Theology in Today's World: Essays in Honor of Kenneth S. Kantzer* (Grand Rapids: The Zondervan Corporation, 1991).

³ Krister Stendahl, “Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West,” in *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), pp. 86-87. Stendahl speaks of Luther as a kind spiritual explorer, a kind of “Christopher Columbus,” who refused to take “the wise and sound consolation from his spiritual directors,” and who now seeks to find “new and good land on the other side of what was thought to be the abyss (p. 83).”

⁴ *Ibid.*

Scripture. Indeed, if Stendahl is correct, Luther's understanding of Paul is the result of reading his own misguided and intense struggle with personal guilt back into the Pauline *corpus*.⁵ If true, this would mean that the historic Protestant understanding of justification has much more to do with Martin Luther's own guilt-ridden and introspective conscience than with the Apostle Paul's robust missionary appeal to the Jews of the first century.

Of course, it goes without saying that if Luther's fundamental understanding of Paul was in error, so was Calvin's. While there are no doubt subtle differences between the two magisterial Reformers, there can also be no doubt that as far as the matter of justification goes, they are in essential agreement.⁶ Like a long line of carefully positioned dominos falling one upon another, if Calvin's view of justification is erroneous, the entire confessional Reformed tradition which developed in his shadow, on both ecclesiastical and academic levels, will be forced to undertake a drastic revision of its understanding

⁵ E. P. Sanders puts it this way. "Stendahl had argued that...the usual (Lutheran) interpretation of Paul's view of righteousness by faith is historically erroneous, since it understands the doctrine as freeing one from the guilt of an 'introspective conscience', while Paul had not suffered such a dilemma." E. P. Sander, Paul and Palestinian Judaism (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), pp. 436-37.

⁶ See the helpful discussion of this point in: Alister E. McGrath, Iustitia Dei (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), II.1-53. McGrath contends that while some (i.e. Alexander Schweitzer) have argued that Luther's central dogma was justification by faith, and that Calvin was primarily concerned with the *decretum horrible*, such is not the case. In the 1559 edition of the Institutes, McGrath notes that "Calvin thus expresses systematically what Luther grasped intuitively—the recognition of the fact that the question of justification was essentially an aspect of the greater question of man's relation to God in Christ, which need not be discussed exclusively in terms of the category of justification. In effect, all the watchwords of the Reformation relating to this theme—*sola fide*, *sola gratia*, and even *sola scriptura*—may be reduced to their common denominator: justification is through *Christ alone*." See Iustitia Dei, pp. 38-39. Moises Silva contends that Calvin's view is closely tied to Luther's, though Calvin has a differently nuanced discussion of law-gospel, especially in regard to the so-called "third use of the law." Nevertheless, Calvin and Luther stand in fundamental agreement regarding the "faith/works antithesis in soteriology." See Moises Silva, "The Law and Christianity: Dunn's New Synthesis," in The Westminster Theological Journal, Vol. 53 (1991), pp. 339-340. Richard A. Muller has also compellingly argued that the center of Calvin's thought is "an interrelation and interpenetration of predestination and Christology," since election is "in Christ." Therefore, any attempt to drive a wedge between Calvin's understanding of election and union with Christ is fallacious. See Richard A. Muller, Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology from Calvin to Perkins (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986), pp. 17-38.

of the nature of the gospel and the central article of its faith. The church *semper reformanda* will indeed need to reform its own gospel. It is hard to imagine a more radical undertaking this side of 1517.

For many, the notion that Luther and Calvin may have been incorrect and misguided on this point is simply not a pressing issue. The great Reformers were certainly not infallible. No doubt, they were great men. Nevertheless, they were men of their age, standing on the ideological boundary marking the birth of the modern world. The magisterial Reformers lived and worked before the development of many of the critical tools so essential to contemporary biblical scholarship. In the four-hundred and fifty year old Protestant tradition, so rich in biblical scholarship, Luther and Calvin stand at the fountainhead of that great stream, itself the fruit of *sola scriptura*. But confessional boundaries set forth by their theological heirs are meant to be crossed—for confessional documents stand as testimonies to the churches' prior reflection upon a particular doctrine, but cannot continue to serve a normative function in subsequent ages. In what amounts to an ironic overthrow of the material principle of the Reformation, critical scholarship has demonstrated to the satisfaction of many of our contemporaries, that not only were Luther and Calvin men of their age, but Martin Luther in particular, was positively wrong about the nature of Paul's gospel thereby steering much of historic Protestant tradition away from Paul's true purposes and meaning.

This is no small matter on several accounts. If true, it is quite possible that one of the most bitter fruits of this misunderstanding of Paul can be seen today in much of the anti-Semitism and nativistic anti-Catholicism that characterizes so much of Protestant Christianity.⁷ Luther's misreading of Paul not only

⁷ On the question of anti-Semitism, for example, one thinks of the work of "two covenant" theologians, Lloyd Gaston, *Paul and the Torah* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1987), and John G. Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism: Attitudes Toward Judaism in Pagan and Christian Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983). See the response to these "two covenant theologies" in: David E. Holwerda, *Jesus & Israel: One Covenant or Two?* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995); and Frank Thielman, *From Plight to Solution: A Jewish Framework for Understanding Paul's View of the Law in Galatians and Romans* *Novum Testamentum*, Supplement 61 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1989), pp. 123-132.

divided Western Christendom—Luther, quite unintentionally to be sure, laid the groundwork for much of German anti-Semitism which ultimately manifested itself in *Kristallnacht* and the Holocaust. The new perspective regarding Paul very likely does not create a sense of crisis for many New Testament scholars and non-confessional Protestants. Indeed recent developments are understood to be an important breakthrough in the advance of our knowledge of the formation of Christianity and can only serve the cause of undoing past injustices.

But the new perspective on Paul certainly creates a crisis for those confessional Protestants who have gone so far as to divide Christendom because they believed that Luther and Calvin, while by no means infallible, were nevertheless reliable interpreters of Paul and that the Roman church was, therefore, preaching a different gospel from that which Paul preached, thereby falling under the apostolic anathema (Galatians 1:6-9) making division inevitable. The present situation is exacerbated by additional tensions and urgencies, since it comes at the very time when the Reformed tradition is itself experiencing a renewed and vigorous call for a return to confessional orthodoxy in light of questions of a new ecumenicity developing between evangelicals and Roman Catholics, especially those questions surrounding the meaning of the doctrine of justification.⁸

Thus, the purpose of this essay is two-fold: (1) To examine the development of this new perspective on Paul and evaluate the work of its primary proponents, Krister Stendahl, E. P. Sanders and James D. G. Dunn; and (2) To describe the challenge that the new perspective raises for confessional

⁸ Richard Muller, for one, has written that it is important for Reformed Christians to recover a sense of their own confessional identity in “On Being Reformed in America,” *Calvin Seminary Forum*, Vol. 2 No. 3 (Fall 1995), pp. 1-2. The recent book by popular Reformed author and lecturer, R. C. Sproul also makes a similar point: R. C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1995). The on-going debate over the acceptable level of co-operation on a theological-cultural level between confessional Reformed Christians and Roman Catholics has also produced a new call to confessional fidelity. See Michael Horton and J. I. Packer, “Resolutions for Roman Catholic and Evangelical Dialogue,” *Modern Reformation* (July/August 1994), pp. 28-29. In these resolutions it is stated “the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone because of Christ alone has since the Reformation been acknowledged by mainstream Protestants as ‘the article by which the church stands or falls,’ and the tenant that distinguishes a true from a false church (p. 28).”

Reformed Christians and to investigate possible responses and directions for further research.

*The "New Perspective on Paul"*⁹

In the opinion of Mark A. Seifrid, “most contemporary Pauline scholarship is a reaction against Rudolf Bultmann’s quintessentially modern reading of Paul, which was based upon an existential appropriation of Paul’s theology of justification.”¹⁰ Writing largely in reaction to the moralistic theology of Albrecht Ritschl, Bultmann’s effort constituted what is, perhaps, the high-water mark of the modernist impulse. Building upon Marburg neo-Kantianism, Bultmann’s existentialist interpretation of the Pauline doctrine of justification fit quite nicely into the intellectual framework of a Europe so brutally torn apart by two horrible world wars. Bultmann’s influence, however, reached its zenith in the years immediately after World War Two, and has been in marked decline since.¹¹ This decline was brought about, in part, because of an increasingly vocal protest by a new generation of New Testament scholars contending “that Paul was not concerned with ‘isolated individuals’ (or their consciences)” as Bultmann’s

⁹ On the development of this so-called “new perspective” see: Donald A. Hagner, “Paul and Judaism: The Jewish Matrix of Early Christianity: Issues in the Current Debate,” Bulletin for Biblical Research 3 (1993), pp. 111-130; Douglas Moo, “Paul and the Law in the Last Ten Years,” Southern Journal of Theology, 40 (1987), pp. 287-307; Frank Thielman, From Plight to Solution, pp. 1-27; Paul and the Law: A Contextual Approach (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), pp. 14-47; P. T. O’Brien, “Justification in Paul and Some Crucial Issues of the last Two Decades,” in Right with God: Justification in the Bible and the World, ed., D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992); Moises Silva, “The Law and Christianity: Dunn’s New Synthesis,” pp. 339-353; and Stephen Westerholm, Israel’s Law and the Church’s Faith: Paul and His Recent Interpreters (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), pp. 1-100.

¹⁰ Mark A. Seifrid, “The Pauline Gospel in a Postmodern Age” in The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement, ed. David S. Dockery (Wheaton: VictorBooks, 1995), pp. 190-191. Bultmann’s most complete discussion of this can be found in Theology of the New Testament, 2 Vols., (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1951-55), I.270 ff.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

existentialism demanded, “but [instead] with believing communities of Jews and Gentiles.”¹²

This changing intellectual climate brought with it a significant effort to re-evaluate Bultmann’s interpretation of Paul’s gospel. Much of the flourish of activity in Pauline studies during the last thirty years or so is a direct response to Bultmann’s “faulty understanding of Judaism that prevailed especially in German Protestant scholarship around the turn of the century,”¹³ and which, it is argued, negatively influenced Bultmann’s reading of Paul. While one of Bultmann’s own students, Ernst Käsemann, was one of the more significant figures to react to his mentor,¹⁴ it is Swedish Lutheran Krister Stendahl, who perhaps dealt the most serious blow to the Bultmannian interpretation of Paul. Building largely upon the prior work of Johannes Munck,¹⁵ and W. G. Kümmel, most notably the latter’s work on one of the most disputed passages in the New Testament, Romans 7,¹⁶ Stendahl succeeded in shifting the focus away from Luther’s supposed individualistic reading of Paul to a new ground, namely the Apostle’s “robust conscience.”

¹² Ibid., p. 193.

¹³ Ibid., p. 192.

¹⁴ Käsemann’s 1961 lecture on the righteousness of God, given at the 1961 Oxford Congress on “The New Testament Today” indicated an outright rejection of his mentor’s “existentialist-anthropological perspective which is oriented around the individual.” Käsemann thereby shifts the discussion to new ground, namely a “unified interpretation of the Pauline *dikaiosyne theou* in the context of Paul’s ‘universalizing’ of God’s covenant-faithfulness in terms of a ‘new creation’ theology.” See Manfred T. Brauch, “Perspectives on ‘God’s Righteousness’ in Recent German discussion,” which is an appendix in, E. P. Sanders, Paul and Palestinian Judaism, pp. 534-535. Also see; Stephen Neill and Tom Wright, The Interpretation of the New Testament: 1861-1986 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 416-421.

¹⁵ Seifrid notes that “Stendahl takes up...Munck’s insistence that salvation-history thought and missionary claims are crucial to understanding Paul.” See Mark A. Seifrid, “The Pauline Gospel in a Postmodern Age,” p. 192.

¹⁶ Stephen Westerholm, Israel’s Law and the Church’s Faith, pp. 52-69. Stendahl refers to Kümmel’s exegesis of Romans 7 as an “epoch making study,” in; Krister Stendahl, “Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West,” p. 92, n. 19. Cf. W. G. Kümmel, Römer 7 und das Bild des Menschen im Neuen Testament (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1974).

According to Stendahl's ground-breaking essay, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," first published in 1961, it is extremely problematic to seek for a kind common universal human experience which can transcend the ages. Human experience is not static but dynamic. Therefore, we cannot make the supposed "introspective conscience" of the modern Western world into a kind of interpretive common denominator between the modern west and the ancient east, and then read ancient texts, such as Paul's writings, accordingly.¹⁷ Stendahl argues that

. . . The problem becomes acute when one tries to picture the function and the manifestation of introspection in the life and writings of the Apostle Paul. It is the more acute since it is at exactly this point that Western Interpreters have found the common denominator between Paul and the experience of man, since Paul's statements about "justification by faith" have been hailed as the answer to the problem which faces the ruthlessly honest man in his practice of introspection. Especially in Protestant Christianity—which, however, at this point has its roots in Augustine and the piety of the Middle Ages—the Pauline awareness of sin has been interpreted in the light of Luther's struggle with his conscience. But it is exactly at this point that we can discern the most drastic difference between Luther and Paul, between the 16th and the 1st century, and, perhaps between Eastern and Western Christianity.¹⁸

What is needed by way of corrective, according to Stendahl, is "a fresh look at the Pauline writings themselves," especially those which will ultimately demonstrate that "Paul was equipped with what in our eyes must be called a rather 'robust' conscience."¹⁹ In Stendahl's interpretation of Philippians 3:4-6,²⁰ Paul speaks "most fully about his life before his Christian calling and there is no indication that he

¹⁷ It is quite interesting in this regard that the widely influential work in the field of history of science, Thomas Kuhn's The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962), reaches much the same conclusion about the nature of historical and scientific investigation, and was written just one year later.

¹⁸ Krister Stendahl, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," p. 79.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

²⁰ Stendahl's thesis has not gone unchallenged. See the important essay by John M. Espy, "Paul's 'Robust Conscience' Re-examined," in New Testament Studies, Vol. XXXI (1985), pp. 161-188. Moises Silva, contends that "Stendahl's interpretation of this. . . I am convinced, is quite wrong." See Moises Silva, Philippians: The Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988), p. 175.

had any difficulty in fulfilling the law.”²¹ In fact, the “statements about the impossibility of fulfilling the Law stand side by side with” Philippians 3:6, where Paul can say “‘I was blameless as to righteousness’— of the Law, that is. So Paul speaks about his subjective conscience— in full accordance with his Jewish training.”²² Thus Paul’s problem is not the subjective sense of guilt which is associated with the introspective conscience of the modern world. According to Stendahl, Paul “never urges Jews to find in Christ the answer to the anguish of a plagued conscience.”²³ The Western mind errs, as did Luther, by reading transgression language individually and therefore psychologically, rather than corporately as Paul intended. This means that Paul’s point is not about an individual finding peace with a gracious God and relief from personal guilt, but about how Jew and Gentile, as distinct ethnic groups, fit into salvation-history respectively. “The actual transgressions in Israel—as a people, not in each and every individual— show that the Jews are not better than the Gentiles.” They have sinned as a people, hence “they stand before God as guilty as the Gentiles.”²⁴ Thus salvation is now found in Christ, not law, “an avenue which is equally open to Jews and Gentiles, since it is not based on the Law, in which the very distinction between the two rests.”²⁵

This, then, means that Luther's notion of *simul justus et peccator*, which may have some foundation in Paul's writings, “cannot be substantiated as the center of Paul’s conscious attitude toward personal sins. Apparently, Paul did not have the type of introspective conscience which such a formula

²¹ Krister Stendahl, “The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West,” p. 80.

²² Ibid., p. 81. Espy contends that “Stendahl uses this single verse to call into question a great deal, but he does not examine it in its context.” See John M. Espy, “Paul's ‘Robust Conscience’ Re-examined,” p. 164.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

seems to presuppose.”²⁶ This would explain, in part, why it is that Paul so infrequently makes reference to forgiveness of sin,²⁷ and why the Ante-Nicene fathers and the Eastern church have focused upon “doxology or meditative mysticism or exhortation,” and not with the “plagued consciences” of the west.²⁸

Notes Stendahl in this regard:

The problem we are trying to isolate could be expressed in hermeneutical terms somewhat like this: The Reformers' interpretation of Paul rests on an analogism when Pauline statements about Faith and Works, Law and Gospel, Jews and Gentiles are read in the framework of late medieval piety. The Law, the Torah, with its specific requirements of circumcision and food restrictions becomes a general principle of “legalism in religious matters.” Where Paul was concerned about the possibility of Gentiles to be included in the messianic community, his statements are now read as answers to the quest for assurance about man's salvation out of a common human predicament.²⁹

With this incorrect analogism as the interpretive framework, Paul's meaning is reversed and “the original framework of `Jews and Gentiles' lost, and the Western problems of conscience become its unchallenged and self-evident substitute.”³⁰

Thus writes Stendahl, “we look in vain for a statement in which Paul would speak about himself as an actual sinner. When he speaks about his conscience, he witnesses to his good conscience before men and God.”³¹ Anticipating that his reader might recall to mind certain Pauline statements found in Romans 7, Stendahl appeals to Kümmel's work, and concludes that Paul “is not primarily concerned about man's or his own ego or predicament.”³² In fact, when Paul asserts that “*it is not I who do it*, but

²⁶ Ibid., p. 82.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 85.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 86.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 87.

³¹ Ibid., p. 91.

³² Ibid., p. 92.

the sin which dwells in me,” Stendahl points out that “the argument is one of acquittal of the ego, not one of utter contrition.”³³ His conclusion is now obvious: “We should venture to suggest that the West for centuries has wrongly surmised that the biblical writers were grappling with problems which no doubt are ours, but which never entered their consciences.”³⁴

Stendahl’s article, “like a cloud no bigger than a man’s hand, gave promise of the coming storm. The storm broke with the publication in 1977 of Paul and Palestinian Judaism,” by E. P. Sanders.³⁵ Described by one reviewer as “the most important work on the subject to appear in a generation,” there is no doubt that Paul and Palestinian Judaism has exerted a huge influence upon subsequent Pauline studies.³⁶ The ground-breaking work of Sanders gives us a truly “new perspective” on Paul, to use the title given us by James D. G. Dunn. Notes Dunn in this regard,

If Stendahl cracked the mould of twentieth-century reconstructions of Paul’s theological context, by showing how much it had been determined by Luther’s quest for a gracious God, Sanders had broken it altogether by showing how different these reconstructions are from what we know of first-century Judaism from other sources.³⁷

According to one writer, Sanders’ work has in fact led to “the collapse of the Reformational consensus regarding the Pauline view of the law,” a point especially germane to the subject of this essay.³⁸

The basic thesis of Paul and Palestinian Judaism is, in the words of one writer, “not so much that Paul has been misunderstood as that the picture of Judaism drawn from Paul’s writings is historically

³³ Ibid., p. 93.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 95.

³⁵ Stephen Neill and Tom Wright, The Interpretation of the New Testament, p. 372.

³⁶ R. H. Gundry, “Grace, Works, and Staying Saved in Paul,” Biblica, Vol. 66 (1985), p. 1.

³⁷ James D. G. Dunn, “A New Perspective on Paul,” reprinted in Jesus, Paul and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians (Louisville: Westminster/Knox, 1990), p. 186.

³⁸ Thomas R. Schreiner, The Law and its Fulfillment: A Pauline Theology of Law (Baker Book House, 1993), p. 18.

false, not simply inaccurate in part but fundamentally mistaken.”³⁹ According to Sanders, “I intend to exclude one of the traditional ways of setting up the discussion of Paul’s theology; by describing first the plight of man to which Paul saw Christ as offering a solution.”⁴⁰ This can be effectively accomplished by demonstrating that “Paul’s thought did not run from plight to solution,” as the Protestant orthodox following Luther had argued, “but rather from solution to plight.”⁴¹ This is a fundamental reversal of the way in which orthodox Protestants had historically framed the discussion of justification. Sanders’ work in this regard, it has been noted, builds largely upon the prior work of William Wrede and Albert Schweitzer.⁴²

The most important contribution by Sanders to Pauline studies, however, is not to be found so much in his re-interpretation of Pauline theology, but in his efforts to overturn the long-standing assumption that the Palestinian Judaism of the second temple period was a religion of legalistic “works righteousness,” to use Reformation language.⁴³ The religion of the Jews of Paul’s day can be best described by the nomenclature “covenantal nomism,” and was not, contrary to the historical Protestant interpretation, in any sense, a religion which demanded a perfect obedience to the law. According to Sanders, Second Temple Judaism was clearly a religion of *sola gratia*, not a religion of works-righteousness.

The theme of mercy—whether it be in terms of God’s mercy in electing Israel, God’s mercy in

³⁹ Ibid., p. 184.

⁴⁰ E. P. Sanders, Paul and Palestinian Judaism, p. 442.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 443. Sanders goes on to contend that “attempts to argue that Romans 7 shows the frustration which Paul felt during his life as a practicing Jew have now mostly been given up, and one may rightly and safely maintain that the chapter cannot be understood in this way.” Thus the Kümmel-Stendahl interpretation of Romans 7 seems to be an important presupposition of the “new perspective.”

⁴² Thomas Schreiner, The Law and its Fulfillment, p. 17. Cf. E. P. Sanders, Paul and Palestinian Judaism, pp. 434 ff.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 19. Cf. James D. G. Dunn, Jesus, Paul and the Law, p. 186.

accepting repentant sinners (repentance does not earn a reward, but is responded to by God in mercy), or God's 'rewarding' the righteous because of his mercy—serves to assure that election and ultimately salvation cannot be earned, but depend upon God's grace. One can never be righteous enough to be worthy in God's sight of the ultimate gifts, which depend only on his mercy.⁴⁴

Therefore, one does not enter into the covenant through obedience and good works, and to argue otherwise, as the Protestant consensus had simply assumed, is to Dr. Sanders' way of thinking, a fundamental misrepresentation of the religion of Paul before his conversion.

Covenantal nomism is defined by Sanders 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."⁴⁵ Obedience to the law cannot serve as the basis for entry into the covenant. As Sanders puts it, "obedience maintains one's position in the covenant, but it does not earn God's grace as such."⁴⁶ This enables Sanders to reinterpret the notion of "righteousness" along lines quite different from the historic Lutheran interpretation.

The righteousness terminology is related to the righteousness terminology of Palestinian Judaism. One does not find in Paul any trace of the Greek and Hellenistic Jewish distinction between being righteous (man/man) and pious (man/God); nor is righteousness in Paul one virtue among others. Here, however, there is also a major shift; for to be righteous in Jewish literature means to obey the Torah and to repent of transgression, but in Paul it meant to be saved by Christ. Most succinctly, righteousness in Judaism is a term which implies the maintenance of status among the group of the elect; in Paul it is a transfer term. In Judaism, that is, commitment to the covenant keeps one in it. In Paul's usage, 'be righteous' ('be justified') is a term indicating getting in, not staying in the body of the saved. Thus when Paul says that one cannot be made righteous by works of law, he means that one cannot, by works of law, 'transfer to the body of the saved'. When Judaism said that one is righteous who obeys the law, the meaning is that one thereby stays in the covenant.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, pp. 421-422.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 420.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 544.

Thus, if true, the historic Protestant notion of justification must be re-worked to fit this new data. Since we cannot argue from plight to solution—as Sanders wryly points out, “it seems unlikely that [Paul] followed the modern fundamentalist tactic of first convincing people that they are sinners and in need of salvation”⁴⁸—the old notion of justification as a forensic declaration is no longer tenable. As Sanders has said elsewhere, “the main thrust of Paul’s denial that justification comes by works of law is dogmatic in origin, rather than as a result of despair at achieving perfection Paul counts his perfection as worthless, since salvation only comes through Christ.”⁴⁹

As Frank Thielman notes, “to prove all this Sanders relied heavily upon his carefully argued thesis that Paul’s soteriology depends upon participationist rather than on juristic categories.”⁵⁰ Indeed, Sanders contends that “we must give up the view that ‘righteousness’ in Paul has strictly the same ‘forensic-eschatological’ meaning which it is supposed to have in Judaism. The righteous man in Judaism is actually the man who is properly religious, who obeys the law and repents of transgression.”⁵¹ Sanders goes on to conclude that righteousness is not the “gateway to life,” for

. . . Once we make a distinction between juristic and participationist categories, however, there is no doubt that the latter tells us more about the way Paul ‘really’ thought. One dies with Christ to the power of sin and lives in the Spirit, *which also concretely means* that one stops (and is

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 444. It seems to me at this point that Dr. Sanders is not above engaging in a bit of *ad hominem* argument, since most fundamentalists do not usually speak of justification *sola fide propter Christum*. Instead, most fundamentalists speak of conversion in semi-Pelagian and revivalist terms, i.e. “getting saved” and do not generally use the historic Protestant category of justification by an imputed righteousness.

⁴⁹ E. P. Sanders, “On the Question of Fulfilling the Law in Paul and Rabbinic Judaism,” in Donum Gentilicum: New Testament Studies in Honour of David Daube, ed., E. Bammel, C. K. Barrett and W. D. Davies (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1978), p. 126.

⁵⁰ Frank Thielman, From Plight to Solution, p. 16.

⁵¹ E. P. Sanders, Paul and Palestinian Judaism, p. 506. This point, for example, directly contradicts the argument set forth by Geerhardus Vos, as to the eschatological and forensic nature of Paul’s theology, now widely accepted among confessional Reformed Christians. See Geerhardus Vos, “Paul’s Eschatological Concept of the Spirit,” in Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation, ed., Richard B. Gaffin (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), pp. 91-125.

acquitted of) sinning and produces the fruit of the Spirit. But we cannot understand Paul's thought the other way around: that one is forgiven for transgressions and thereby begins to participate in the life of the Spirit. This is why . . . repentance and forgiveness are not substantial themes in Paul's writings; he did not begin with the problem to which they are a solution, namely, sin as transgression, but rather with the reality of the new life offered by Christ, which was first of all seen as accomplishing the beginning of the transfer of aeons, and not primarily as the accomplishment of atonement.⁵²

If correct in this regard, Sanders has succeeded in doing what Trent could not do— overturn the Reformation conception of justification as a forensic declaration marking the beginning of the Christian life.

It must also be noted, however, that Sanders' critics were quick to respond to Paul and Palestinian Judaism on several grounds. The first main avenue of criticism was directed toward Sanders' supposedly selective use of Palestinian sources, while a second line of criticism focused upon his peculiar reconstruction of Paul's own Jewish background and his relationship to his contemporaries.⁵³

As to the first line of criticism, R. H. Gundry has called attention to the fact that a number of reviewers have challenged Sanders' selective use of Palestinian sources and his focus upon purely soteriological concerns. "Reviewers have regularly noted that Sanders does not, in fact, compare whole patterns of religion; rather, he compares soteriologies dealing with 'getting in and staying in' (his phrase)."⁵⁴ If true, this would mean, in effect, that Sanders' rather selective use of Palestinian sources— ignoring or down-playing those which do serve to confirm the traditional notion that Second Temple Judaism was at least, in part, a religion of works-righteousness— amounts to a kind of sophisticated

⁵² Ibid., p. 507. The italics are in the original.

⁵³ Frank Thielman, From Plight to Solution, p. 18.

⁵⁴ R. H. Gundry, "Grace, Works, and Staying Saved in Paul," pp. 2-5. Gundry does note that some of Sanders' critics perhaps unfairly misjudge him on this score, since "a careful reading of [Paul and Palestinian Judaism] will falsify the charges that Sanders is inattentive to the atomistic nature of rabbinic literature when it comes to soteriology, to the differences among various sectors of Palestinian Judaism, to its historical developments" (p. 4). Gundry does, however, go on to offer a number of salient criticisms of Sanders' treatment of Paul.

proof-texting.⁵⁵

As representative of the second line of criticism, J. Christiaan Beker has argued that Sanders' "approach prevents the often pejorative accounts of Judaism as inferior, legalistic, meritorious, and so on. But the price paid for this irenic treatment is that we are prevented from asking the question what is vital to Paul: What actually was the interface between Paul the Pharisee and Paul the Christian?"⁵⁶

According to this second line of criticism, Sanders then, fails to give us a coherent explanation of the heated nature of the conflict seen in the New Testament between Paul and Jewish Christians, especially at Antioch and Galatia.

It was, in part, as a response to these various criticisms, that Sanders released a subsequent volume Paul, the Law and the Jewish People in 1983, which, in his words was written to "expand and clarify, and sometimes correct, the account of Paul's view of the law which was sketched in Paul and Palestinian Judaism."⁵⁷ As one writer put it, "Sanders' basic thesis in this monograph was that Paul's statements about the law can only be understood if they are seen from the vantage of Sanders' connection in Paul and Palestinian Judaism that Paul thought not from plight to solution, but from solution to plight."⁵⁸ Sanders re-affirms that "Paul attributed to God a changeless plan God's will to save by Christ is changeless."⁵⁹ He then goes on to state, "Paul's argument is that the law was *never* intended by

⁵⁵ Ibid., pp. 6-7.

⁵⁶ J. Christiaan Beker, Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), p. 237. Elsewhere Beker speaks of the need to "defend Paul's thought against detractors like E. P. Sanders . . . who posit that there are basic contradictions between Paul's convictions or intuitions and their rational explications." See J. Christiaan Beker, "Recasting Pauline Theology: The Coherence-Contingency Scheme as Interpretive Model," in Pauline Theology, Vol. 1, ed., Jouette M. Bassler (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), p. 20.

⁵⁷ E. P. Sanders, Paul, the Law and the Jewish People (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), p. ix.

⁵⁸ Frank Thielman, From Plight to Solution, p. 18.

⁵⁹ E. P. Sanders, Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People, p. 85. See also Paul and Palestinian Judaism, where Sanders' makes the related point that "what is wrong with Judaism is not that the Jews seek to

God to be a means of righteousness. It is only *lately* that it has come to an end as such.”⁶⁰ Since it was God’s intention to save both Jew and Gentile through faith in Christ from the very beginning, this notion of the true purpose of the law becoming such a point of division and contention *lately* is explained by arguing that a marked dispensation shift as occurred with the coming of Christ, which it is now Paul’s intention to explain and clarify. Sanders affirms that

. . . the only thing that is wrong with the old righteousness seems to be that it is not the new one; it has no fault which is described in other terms....The Jews will not be saved because they seek the righteousness based on the law, zealously to be sure, but blindly, because real righteousness is based on faith in Christ There is a righteousness which comes by law, but it is worth nothing because of a different dispensation. Real righteousness (the righteousness of or from God) is through Christ. It is this concrete fact of *heilsgeschichte* which makes the other righteousness wrong, not the abstract superiority of grace to merit.⁶¹

Thus the fundamental issue is not a law-gospel, grace-merit antithesis as Protestants have historically argued, but instead is to be located in the nature of salvation-history itself.

One biblical text to which Dr. Sanders must make appeal, and which is quite illustrative of the way in his overall approach to Paul’s soteriology is applied, is clearly seen in Philippians 3:2-11. Sanders states “I regard this passage as extremely revealing for Paul’s overall view of the law.” Thus he affirms, “here we may make the limited point that the passage lends support neither to the view that Paul regarded the law as impossible to fulfill, nor to the view that Paul regarded fulfilling it as wrong because it leads to self-righteousness.”⁶² Sanders’ interpretation is self-consciously and very carefully worked out in accordance with his presuppositions about the true nature of Palestinian Judaism. Contrary to the traditional Protestant understanding, which has affirmed that the phrase “my righteousness . . . in 3:9 is

save themselves and become self-righteous about it, but that their seeking is not directed toward the right goal. They are not enlightened. They do not know that, as far as salvation goes, Christ has put an end to the law and provides a different righteousness from that provided by Torah obedience” (p. 550).

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 86. The italics are in the original.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 140.

⁶² Ibid., pp. 43-44.

understood as 'my individual righteousness,' based on merit achieved by the performance of good deeds, which leads to boasting," Sanders concludes that "Paul does not say that boasting in status and achievement was wrong because boasting is the wrong attitude, but that he boasted in things that *were gain*." In fact, "they *became loss* because, in his black and white world, there is no second best."⁶³

Sanders puts it this way;

Thus 'my own righteousness' in Phil. 3:9 is indeed, as is commonly said, the same as 'their own righteousness' in Romans 10:3. It is not, however, what is thought of today as 'self-righteousness.' It is the righteousness which comes by law, which is therefore the peculiar result of being an observant Jew, which is *in and of itself a good thing* ("zeal" Rom. 10:2; "gain," Phil. 3:7), but which is shown to be "wrong" ("loss," Phil. 3:7f.) by the revelation of "God's righteousness," which comes by faith in Christ.⁶⁴

Thus, the oft-repeated criticism of Sanders' reconstruction is quite correct; In the mind of the Apostle Paul given us by E. P. Sanders, "Judaism is wrong because it is not Christianity."⁶⁵

While there can be no doubt Sanders' work has been extremely important and has opened up new vistas for understanding the diverse nature of first century Judaism, his various critics have pointed out notable weaknesses, apparent contradictions and large gaps in his reconstruction of Pauline theology.⁶⁶ It is University of Durham, New Testament professor James D. G. Dunn, who has done the most to "fill the lacuna which Sanders originally left between Paul and his background."⁶⁷ As Moises Silva notes, "we could say that the distinctiveness of Dunn's position lies precisely in his attempt to build upon Sanders' analysis of Judaism so as to provide a more satisfactory and consistent understanding of the law in the

⁶³ Ibid., p. 44.

⁶⁴ Ibid., pp. 44-45.

⁶⁵ Cited in P. T. O'Brien, "Justification in Paul and Some Crucial Issues of the Last Two Decades," p. 86. Cf. James D. G. Dunn, "The New Perspective on Paul," p. 187.

⁶⁶ Many of these are effectively summarized in: R. H. Gundry, "Grace, Works, and Staying Saved in Paul."

⁶⁷ Mark A. Seifrid, "The Pauline Gospel in a Postmodern Age," p. 196.

NT, especially in Paul.”⁶⁸ In a series of important articles originally published between 1983 and 1985, and reprinted with updated material in Jesus, Paul and the Law (1990),⁶⁹ not only has Dunn set forth his own unique perspective on Paul, additionally, he has raised a number of pointed criticisms of Sanders’ efforts to do the same. According to Dunn, Sanders’ work, in effect, begins with a bang— his groundbreaking insights into the true nature of Palestinian Judaism—but closes with a whimper, leaving us with the notion that “Paul’s religion could be understood only as a basically different system from that of his fellow Jews.”⁷⁰ Dunn, therefore, attempts to rectify one of the most glaring weaknesses in Sanders’ work, namely, to explain “how Paul’s differences with Judaism arose. For Dunn, this breach is found in Paul’s combating particularism and nationalism, rather than activism and merit theology.”⁷¹

James Dunn’s response to Sanders, as well as his own important re-interpretation of the Apostle Paul’s theology, centers primarily around the true meaning of the phrase, “works of the law,” as used by Paul in such texts as Galatians 2:16, 21; 3:11; 5:4; Romans 3:20, 28. In his 1983 essay “The Incident at Antioch (Galatians 2:11-18),” Dunn pointed out that Paul’s confrontation of Peter is the seminal incident in which Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith and Jewish notions of covenantal nomism come in sharp and heated conflict. According to Dunn:

The significance of Paul’s stand should not be underestimated. For the first time, probably, he had come to see that the principle of ‘justification through faith’ applied not simply to the

⁶⁸ Moises Silva, “The Law and Christianity: Dunn’s New Synthesis,” p. 340. Silva is careful to note that many of Dunn’s conclusions are explicitly tentative, hence Silva is hesitant to speak of Dunn’s work as a “new synthesis.” But Silva does note that there is a distinct “Sanders-Dunn trajectory.”

⁶⁹ Dunn has since produced yet another update in response to the criticisms raised against his position by the venerable C. E. B. Cranfield. See Charles E. B. Cranfield, “‘The Works of the Law’ in the Epistle to the Romans,” Journal for the Study of the New Testament, Vol. 43 (1991), pp. 89-101; and James D. G. Dunn, “Yet Once More—‘The Works of the Law’: A Response,” Journal for the Study of the New Testament, Vol. 46 (1992), pp. 99-117.

⁷⁰ James D. G. Dunn, “The New Perspective on Paul,” p. 186.

⁷¹ Mark A. Seifrid, Justification by Faith, p. 64. Seifrid notes that Dunn’s view “is not unlike that of Stendahl” (p. 63).

acceptance of the gospel in conversion, but also to the whole of the believer's life. That is to say, he saw that justification through faith was not simply a statement of how the believer entered into God's covenantal promises (the understanding of the gospel agreed at Jerusalem); it must also regulate his life as a believer. The covenantal nomism of Judaism and of the Jewish believers (life in accordance with the law within the covenant given by grace . . .) was in fact a contradiction of that agreed understanding of justification through faith. To live life 'in Christ' and 'in accordance with the law' was not possible; it involved a basic contradiction in terms and in the understanding of what made someone acceptable to God. Thus Paul began to see, as probably he had never seen before, that the principle of justification through faith meant a redefining of the relation between the believer and Israel—not an abandoning of that link (a flight into an individualism untouched by Jewish claims of a monopoly in the election and covenant grace of God), but a redefining of it—a redefining of how the inheritance of Abraham could embrace Gentiles apart from the law. To begin with the Spirit and through faith rules out not just justification by works of the law, but life lived by law (covenantal nomism) also—the very argument which he develops in the rest of Galatians.⁷²

This means that “Paul is concerned not with the Lutheran idea of justification by faith but ‘with the relation between Jew and Gentile.’ His basic assertion is that faith in Christ abolishes national and racial distinctions made on the basis of circumcision, food laws, and Sabbath observations.”⁷³

Dunn's second detailed response to Sanders came with the 1985 article, “The New Perspective on Paul.” According to Dunn, the most serious flaw in Sanders' work, even in its updated versions, is the fact that;

This presentation of Paul is only a little better than the one rejected. There remains something very odd in Paul's attitude to his ancestral faith. The Lutheran Paul has been replaced by an idiosyncratic Paul who in arbitrary and irrational manner turns his face against the glory and greatness of Judaism's covenant theology and abandons Judaism simply because it is not Christianity.⁷⁴

This idiosyncratic nature of Sanders' reconstruction is not only problematic given the data at hand, but confesses Dunn, “I find Sanders' Paul little more convincing (and much less attractive) than the Lutheran

⁷² James D. G. Dunn, “The Incident at Antioch (Gal. 2.11-18),” reprinted in Jesus, Paul and the Law (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), pp. 158-159.

⁷³ Frank Thielman, From Plight to Solution, p. 22.

⁷⁴ James D. G. Dunn, “The New Perspective on Paul,” p. 187.

Paul.”⁷⁵ In other words, as Dunn sees it, Sanders has missed what amounted to a golden opportunity to make full use of his important breakthrough in interpreting the Palestinian sources. “I am not convinced” notes Dunn “that we have yet been given the proper reading of Paul from the new perspective of first-century Palestinian Judaism opened up so helpfully by Sanders himself. On the contrary, I believe that the new perspective on Paul does make better sense of Paul than either Sanders or his critics have realized.”⁷⁶ This then, is what Dunn sets out to accomplish.

To make this new perspective on Paul more cogent in light of the Palestinian data and the New Testament, Dunn contends that Galatians 2:16 is one critical passage which requires significant re-interpretation. “This is the most obvious place to start any attempt to take a fresh look at Paul from our new perspective. It is probably the first time in the letters of Paul that his major theme of justification by faith is sounded.”⁷⁷ Contending that justification is a major theme in Paul, contra Sanders, Dunn develops what amounts to a significant redefinition and reworking of the doctrine from that of traditional Protestant orthodoxy:

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 in an *initial* acknowledgment, or a *repeated* action of God (God’s saving acts), or his *final* vindication of his people.⁷⁸

This re-interpretation enables Dunn to adopt virtually intact Sanders’ basic conception of Palestinian Judaism—his strongest point in Dunn’s estimation, but yet allows Dunn to significantly re-work Sanders’ unconvincing interpretation of Paul’s doctrine of justification. Indeed, Dunn is quite confident that in his own interpretation of the data, “Paul appears a good deal less idiosyncratic and arbitrary than Sanders

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 188.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 190. The italics are in the original.

alleges.”⁷⁹

Rather than argue that justification by faith is the dividing line between Paul and the Jewish Christians—as in the historic Lutheran and Protestant interpretation—according to Dunn, Sanders’ breakthrough as to the nature of Palestinian Judaism as a religion of *sola gratia*, allows us to see that the doctrine of justification by faith is actually common ground between the two parties.

Paul is wholly at one with his fellow Jews in asserting that justification is *by faith*. That is to say, integral to the idea of the covenant itself, and of God's continued action to maintain it, is the profound recognition of God’s initiative and grace in first establishing and then maintaining the covenant. Justification by faith, it would appear, is not a distinctively Christian teaching. Paul’s appeal here is not to *Christians* who happen to be *Jews*, but to Jews whose Christian faith is but an extension of their Jewish faith in a graciously electing and sustaining God.⁸⁰

This, of course, immediately raises the same troubling question for Dunn, which according to most of Sanders’ critics, the latter was unable to satisfactorily answer: “If the division between Jewish Christians and Paul was not over the question of justification by faith then what exactly was the issue dividing them?” Here, Dunn offers a more comprehensive and carefully argued solution than had his predecessor. “The most relevant factor is that Galatians 2:16 follows upon the debates, indeed the crises, at Jerusalem and at Antioch . . . [and] focused on two issues—at Jerusalem, circumcision; at Antioch, the Jewish food laws with the whole question of ritual purity unstated but clearly implied.”⁸¹ Thus it is in identifying the specific nature of the debate itself that we can find a satisfactory answer.

The answer to this pressing question, is, according to Dunn, to be found in the phrase, “works of the law,” since “Paul's forceful denial of justification by works of law is his response to these two issues. His denial that justification is from works of law is, more precisely, a denial that justification depends on

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid., pp, 190-191.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 191.

circumcision or on observation of Jewish purity and food laws.”⁸² Thus notes Dunn, “we may justifiably deduce, therefore, that by ‘works of the law’ Paul intended his readers to think of particular observances of the law like circumcision and the food laws.”⁸³ This means that ‘works of law’ are nowhere understood . . . as works which earn God’s favour, as merit amassing observances. They are rather badges: they are simply what membership of the covenant people involves. . . . They serve to demonstrate covenant status.”⁸⁴ In other words, when Paul denies that works of the law justify, he is really denying that “God’s justification depends upon ‘covenantal nomism,’ that God’s grace extends only to those who wear the badge of the covenant.”⁸⁵ What Paul does mean is that “God’s verdict in favour of believers comes to realization through faith, from start to finish, and in no way depends on observing the works of law which hitherto had characterized and distinguished the Jews as God’s people.”⁸⁶

Thus, according to Dunn, historic Protestant exegesis has erred, in that this phrase “does not mean ‘good works’ in general, ‘good works’ in the sense disparaged by the heirs of Luther.”⁸⁷ Dunn summarizes his argument as follows:

In other words, in verse 16, Paul pushes what began as a qualification of covenantal nomism into an outright antithesis. If we have been accepted by God on the basis of faith, then it is on the basis of faith that we are acceptable, and *not* on the basis of works. Perhaps, then, for the first time, in this verse faith in Jesus Messiah begins to emerge not simply as a narrower definition of the elect of God. From being one identity marker for the Jewish Christian alongside the other identity markers (circumcision, food laws, Sabbath), faith in Jesus as Christ becomes the primary

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 194.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 200.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 194.

identity marker which renders the others superfluous.⁸⁸

Thus in Dunn's reconstruction, "Paul does disparage the law as such, but only certain aspects of the law which identify with the Jewish nation. This . . . explains why Paul evaluates the law positively on occasion and why he could say what he did in Galatians without breaking entirely with Judaism."⁸⁹

Hence, we have come full circle:

All this confirms the earlier important thesis of Stendahl, that Paul's doctrine of justification by faith should not be understood primarily as an exposition of the individual's relation to God, but primarily in the context of Paul the Jew wrestling with the question of how Jews and Gentiles stand in relation to each other within the covenant purpose of God now that it has reached its climax in Jesus Christ.⁹⁰

By now the conclusion should be obvious. If the new perspective on Paul is in fact supported by the evidence at hand, then we can no longer believe that Paul was writing to answer the question as to how a guilty sinner could be declared righteous before a Holy God. Instead, we must see the Apostle as addressing the question of how Jew and Gentile relate to one another within the context of membership of the covenant. The critical phrase, "works of the law" can no longer be interpreted as Protestants have historically argued, as an attempt to earn reward-merit from God through human effort. Now the phrase must be limited to mean only those external nationalistic badges, i.e., food laws and circumcision, that tragically divided Jew from Gentile. The new perspective on Paul is therefore, a serious and formidable challenge to the fundamental article of historic Protestant faith, the doctrine of justification *sola fide*.

Possible Responses to the New Perspective

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 196.

⁸⁹ Frank Thielman, From Plight to Solution, p. 23. Westerholm puts it this way: According to Dunn, "Paul is attacking Jewish exclusivism, which had 'taken over' and distorted the law.'" See Westerholm, Israel's Law and the Church's Faith, p. 117.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 202.

In responding to the many issues raised by the “new perspective” on Paul, the place to begin, perhaps, is with a candid admission. It should be openly admitted from the outset that *if* the new perspective on Paul does indeed represent the true picture of Paul the Apostle, then there can be little doubt that historic Protestantism’s central article of faith, the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone, on account of the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ, is no longer tenable. Reformed Christians should not only revise their confessions, they should collectively repent for dividing the church and laying the groundwork for anti-Semitism and anti-Catholicism. Perhaps sack-cloth and ashes would be in order! But, as the response to the new perspective by a number of apologists will demonstrate, it is certainly a bit too early to panic! In fact, the case for the orthodox Protestant understanding of Paul's gospel, at least in a slightly modified form, is still quite compelling. Indeed, it can be argued that “Apostle of faith,” not the “Paul of history”—to use N. T. Wright's delightful phrase⁹¹—applies far more to the Paul of the Stendahl-Sanders-Dunn reconstruction than it does to the Paul of Martin Luther.

There are a number of important avenues of response to the new perspective on Paul open to confessional Reformed Christians. In this essay, we will focus upon three primary avenues of response. First, there is a serious question as to the general accuracy of the historiography on the part of those advocating the new perspective, especially the treatment afforded to Martin Luther and his supposed introspective conscience. The Luther portrayed by the likes of Stendahl, and those who have uncritically followed him, is a Luther who has more to do with their own imaginations, perhaps, than they would care to admit. Taken by itself, this line of response does nothing to falsify the conclusions reached directly by working from the Palestinian sources or the biblical data. But it does serve to demonstrate, at least in part, the erroneous nature of several of the working assumptions of those advocating this new

⁹¹ See N. T. Wright, “The Paul of History and the Apostle of Faith,” *Tyndale Bulletin*, 29 (1978), pp. 61-88.

perspective. Second, it is important to point out that there are a number of excellent volumes, monographs and journal-length articles written in response to the new perspective. While varying greatly in scope and slightly in perspective, these efforts collectively serve to demonstrate that not only are there a number of significant weaknesses and omissions in the arguments made for the new perspective, especially in regard to Sanders' use of the Palestinian sources, but that a good case can still be made for the historic Protestant understanding of justification. In fact, several of these writers contend that the case is made even stronger, perhaps, by taking into account Sanders' insights into the nature of Palestinian Judaism, and modifying Paul's understanding of law and gospel accordingly. Third, and certainly most important for the subject under review here, are the "false dilemmas and forgotten verses," to use Silva's phrase,⁹² which ultimately demonstrate that the new perspective is a house built upon a very tenuous foundation. The new perspective is credible, in large measure, only because it is built upon several false dichotomies as working presuppositions, and which when exposed, clearly demonstrate the artificial nature of the overall reconstruction. In addition, there are a number of Paul's own assertions which stand in direct opposition to the statements made by Sanders and Dunn in particular, which are simply dismissed as irrelevant when they are not re-interpreted through the lens of these faulty presuppositions.

Certainly, the most amazing irony in this whole discussion, and too often overlooked by those advocating the "new perspective," is that there is a striking similarity between Sanders' "covenantal nomism" and that view of justification set forth by the *via moderna* of the schoolmen, who Luther so vociferously opposed.⁹³ While the historian-theologian is often kiddingly chided by his New Testament colleagues for being bound to the fixed documents of the past, and therefore, not able to explore the

⁹² Moises Silva, "The Law and Christianity: Dunn's New Synthesis," p. 350.

⁹³ See Alister McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, I.70-91. Mark Seifrid has also made this point. See Mark A. Seifrid, "The Pauline Gospel in a Postmodern Age," p. 202.

biblical data for ground-breaking new insights with the same degree of dynamic freedom as they have, in this case, the shoe may be on the other foot. There are important lessons to be learned from the past, and Sanders has certainly missed one of them. In this case, we learn that the new perspective is not “new” in at least one very important sense. Sanders “astonishingly . . . overlooks altogether the theological implications of [his] statements. . . . [He] offers no explanation for—indeed, shows no awareness of—what looks to be a fairly blatant view of self-salvation.”⁹⁴ As one scholar has pointed out, “Sanders’ ‘covenantal nomism’ is at root quite similar to the medieval understanding” of justification, typical of the *via moderna*, with its notion that “God gives His grace to the one who by effort and intent is faithful to the covenant.”⁹⁵ Indeed, we must ask ourselves, “How seriously can we entertain any view of Paul advocating a ‘works-righteousness’ scheme of human salvation in the face of a mountain of biblical evidence which apparently teaches otherwise?”— a point to which we will return momentarily.

This does not mean that Sanders’ reconstruction is *necessarily* false because someone has taught something like it before. But it does mean that Christians have spent a great deal of time reflecting upon these matters and Sanders’ apparent failure to notice this and thereby profit from this discussion, cost him the only serviceable compass available which could have kept him from using his “dynamic freedom” to end up getting himself lost down a theological dead-end with little way out. What those such as Stendahl have failed to notice in this regard, is that it was the *via moderna* which tended to create guilt and doubt in the sinners’ self-consciousness. On the contrary, it was Luther’s stress upon the “theology of the cross and his affirmation that the righteousness of Christ is given to the believer by faith [which] marks a radical departure from the introspection of the medieval theology of humility.”⁹⁶ While Sanders and Dunn lament the caricature of Palestinian Judaism by historic Protestants, and perhaps justly

⁹⁴ Moises Silva, “The Law and Christianity: Dunn’s New Synthesis,” pp. 348-349.

⁹⁵ Mark A. Seifrid, “The Pauline Gospel in a Postmodern Age,” p. 202.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

so, they nevertheless insist upon perpetuating Stendahl's fallacious polemic against Luther and his Paul who pointed sinners to a gracious God.

Indeed, Martin Luther and the Protestant doctrine of justification have not been without defenders of late, and we can but survey the central themes of some of them here. On the Lutheran side, one thinks of the work by Stephen Westerholm, for example. Westerholm's Israel's Law and the Church's Faith, has been described as a "beautifully written book"⁹⁷ which defends the thesis that the law-gospel antithesis is the key to interpret Paul's writings, and that Luther's interpretation of Paul was therefore, substantially correct. Confessional Reformed Christians cannot help but cheer on Westerholm when he asserts "there is more of Paul in Luther than many twentieth-century scholars are inclined to allow. . . . Students who want to understand Paul but feel they have nothing to learn from a Martin Luther should consider a career in metallurgy. Exegesis is learned from the masters."⁹⁸

Other capable defenders of the historic Protestant doctrine of justification from the Reformed side include the work of Thomas Schreiner, especially his recent book, The Law and its Fulfillment, which convincingly argues that Dunn errs by drawing the meaning of the phrase "works of law" far too narrowly.⁹⁹ Schreiner concludes that "works of law do not save because no one can obey the law

⁹⁷ Thomas Schreiner, The Law and its Fulfillment, p. 27. Cf. the generally favorable reviews by Reformed writers of Westerholm's work: Dennis E. Johnson, "Review of Stephen Westerholm, *Israel's Law and the Church's Faith*," in The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society, Volume 34, (December 1991), pp. 523-526; and Moises Silva, "Review of Stephen Westerholm, *Israel's Law and the Church's Faith*," in The Westminster Theological Journal, Volume 51, (Spring 1989) pp. 174-177. Silva notes that "to the extent that Westerholm corrects Luther, it is usually in the direction of Reformed thought" (p. 176).

⁹⁸ Stephen Westerholm, Israel's Law and the Church's Faith, p. 173.

⁹⁹ Thomas R. Schreiner, The Law and its Fulfillment. Cf. "Paul and Perfect Obedience to the Law: An Evaluation of E. P. Sanders," in The Westminster Theological Journal, Volume XLVII (Fall 1985), pp. 245-278; "'Works of the Law' in Paul" in Novum Testamentum, 33 (1991), pp. 217-244. Cf. Silva's helpful discussion of this in, "The Law and Christianity: Dunn's New Synthesis," p. 346. Silva calls Dunn's understanding of the phrase, "works of law," as "easily the most objectionable exegetical idea in the whole book."

perfectly,” contra Stendahl and Sanders.¹⁰⁰ According to Schreiner, despite some of Sanders’ very important insights into the exact nature of first century Judaism, there are several very “good arguments for the existence of legalism in Sanders’ own depiction of Palestinian Judaism. To see the Judaism of Paul’s day as legalistic is not anti-Semitism.”¹⁰¹ Thus, if Schreiner is correct, Sanders is quite possibly guilty as charged of a kind of selective proof-texting from those sources which contain statements that seem to mitigate against his basic thesis.

Frank Thielman’s book From Plight to Solution, on the other hand, argues that there is little evidence that Paul opposes legalism *per se*, and in this regard appears “influenced by Sanders. Nonetheless, the major thesis of his book contends that Sanders fundamentally errs in organizing Paul’s reasoning from solution to plight.”¹⁰² This is, as James Dunn notes, “an effective attempt to rebut Sander’s influential thesis,”¹⁰³ since it serves to further demonstrate Sanders’ quite selective use of the Palestinian sources. Thielman’s effort represents a formidable challenge to Sanders’ thesis since he develops his argument for plight to solution from the same source materials as Sanders, demonstrating at the very least, that these sources are far more diverse than Sanders will concede. Furthermore, Thielman attempts to defend a modified formulation of Calvin’s so-called “third use” of the law in the life of the Christian believer.¹⁰⁴

Yet another writer, Mark Seifrid, in his book Justification by Faith has attempted to defend the thesis that “although the idea of forensic justification by faith is not a theological ‘center’ from which the

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 241.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 243.

¹⁰² Thomas Schreiner, The Law and its Fulfillment, p. 29.

¹⁰³ See James D. G. Dunn, The Theology of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 148.

¹⁰⁴ Frank A. Thielman, From Plight to Solution, pp. 120-121. Cf. Paul and the Law, p. 244.

whole of Paul's thought may be derived, concepts associated with this theme were integral to his conversion and to his later interpretation of the Gospel."¹⁰⁵ Drawing heavily upon Christiaan Beker's coherence-contingency model and appreciative of the work of both Stephen Westerholm and Frank Thielman, Seifrid nevertheless expresses some minor reservations about Westerholm's methodology which, according to Seifrid blocks out "any allowance for the development of Paul's thought . . . or the recognition that Paul's letters were contingent upon specific situations."¹⁰⁶ Seifrid also has several reservations about the work of Thielman, noting that "despite the cleverness of Thielman's appeal to early Jewish traditions, several problems attend to his use of the materials," most notably that he has granted too much to Sanders, and as a result, grants more continuity between Paul and Jewish soteriology than the evidence seems to allow.¹⁰⁷ For Seifrid, then, "Paul's understanding of 'justification' underwent at least three stages of development. The initial stage involved his coming to recognize Jesus' death (and vindicating resurrection) as a divine offer of righteousness apart from law."¹⁰⁸ The second phase then, "was initiated by interaction with his Judaizing opponents. It was in this period that arguments for 'justification by faith apart from Law' such as those found in Galatians were formed."¹⁰⁹ The third stage is seen in "Paul's use of forensic justification in relation to Gentile believers, as is evidenced by his letter to Rome."¹¹⁰ Thus, if true, the doctrine of justification becomes the fundamental grid through which to understand Paul's missionary activity to the Gentiles.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁵ Mark A. Seifrid, Justification by Faith, p. 77.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 73 ff.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 270.

But perhaps the most telling weakness regarding the new perspective on Paul is the tendency to ignore critical biblical evidence which flies directly in the face of the basic presuppositions about the nature of Paul's gospel and which too often results in the tendency on the part of those contending for the new perspective to "see as mutually exclusive what Paul does not; it is also true that Paul uses sharply antithetical language where contemporary writers prefer to blur the lines."¹¹² Indeed, Moises Silva goes so far as to speak of "Dunn's ignoring of some crucial evidence. I refer to the fact that in the original publication of his articles on Paul, Dunn completely neglected some of the apostle's most explicit statements on the subject at hand, including Rom 4:5; 11:6; Eph 2:8-10; and Phil 3:9."¹¹³ According to Silva, the methodology consistently "ends up lording it over the data."¹¹⁴

In this regard Romans 4:4-5 is especially damaging to the Sanders-Dunn thesis since "Paul states so sharply the antithesis between working and believing that the latter is virtually defined by the negation of the former."¹¹⁵ The import of this is only enhanced by the fact that Paul is dealing with the Jew-Gentile question, which, it is argued, is the key to understanding Paul's theology, especially in Galatians and Romans. "The whole argument of Romans is built consistently and even relentlessly in opposition to the Judaizing thesis, which chap. 4 in particular stresses that the great national marker of Judaism,

¹¹² Moises Silva, "The Law and Christianity: Dunn's New Synthesis," p. 352.

¹¹³ Ibid. Silva is very careful to point out that Dunn does treat Philippians 3:9 - "even here Dunn does not deal with Paul's rejection of his own righteousness" - and Romans 4:4-5 - [Dunn] seeks to get rid of the evidence by erecting a straw man"— but in a less than objective manner. The Ephesians text is seen by Dunn as non-Pauline, but "even though the authenticity of this letter is widely rejected, it still counts for evidence that, at least among the earliest Pauline disciples, and thus before the supposed Augustinian introspection took over, first-century Christianity understood that— in some sense, but not in every sense— faith and works were theologically opposed" (p. 352, n. 24).

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 353.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 352. Cf. Stephen Westerholm, Israel's Law and the Church's Faith, p. 113-114; and Thomas R. Schreiner, The Law and its Fulfillment, pp. 97-98. Gundry comments that this text indicates a clear contrast between faith and works, meaning that faith alone thereby forms "the overarching principle of soteriology, staying in as well as getting in." See "Grace, Works and Staying Saved in Paul," p. 10.

circumcision, is unnecessary to belong to the seed of Abraham.”¹¹⁶ Silva is quick to note that this does not support the conclusion that Paul did not speak often of the forgiveness of sin and that the Apostle did not see justification as initiatory or forensic. Looking at the data, says Silva, “it makes even less sense to deny that Paul views working—in some aspect at any rate—and personal righteousness-through law as producing fleshly confidence that is diametrically opposed to saving faith.”¹¹⁷ Thus there is no need to pit Paul’s concern for the relationship between Jew and Gentile against his assertion that God justifies the wicked, not by works, but through faith. Thus, it would appear, that the advocates of the new perspective do indeed downplay, if not ignore, the import of Romans 4:5, choosing to set up a false dichotomy between Paul’s missionary emphasis on the one hand, and the traditional understanding of justification on the other. Silva laments the fact that “even if Dunn could come up with a plausible understanding of Rom 4:4-5 that is consistent with his thesis, one would still have to ask why this crucial passage seems to have played no role whatever in the development of the thesis.”¹¹⁸

Equally problematic for the new perspective is Philippians 3:9. “In Philippians we have Paul’s most personal description of his conversion to Jesus Christ: here he defines gaining Christ as having God’s righteousness by faith, and that righteousness is set in explicit opposition to his own righteousness-through-law.”¹¹⁹ Thus it strikes Silva as utterly baffling that Dunn “can put together a book like this one [Jesus, Paul, and the Law] without so much as quoting Phil 3:9. No doubt, all of us have our blinders and we unwittingly tend to disregard evidence which does not support our theories,” but nevertheless, “no explanation of Paul’s theology can prove ultimately persuasive if it does not arise

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 353.

¹¹⁹ Ibid. Cf. Stephen Westerholm, Israel’s Law and the Church’s Faith, p. 115; and Thomas R. Schreiner, The Law and its Fulfillment, pp. 107, 110.

from the very heart of Paul's explicit affirmations and denials."¹²⁰ In this regard, the new perspective remains utterly unpersuasive.

One last avenue of response is closely related to the previous point and is to be found by taking a renewed look at Romans 7:14-25. If Luther's thesis was dependent upon an individualistic reading of Paul, then the new perspective on Paul is certainly dependent upon a non-individualistic reading. Thus, if Romans 7:14 ff. is autobiographical in any sense, the tables are turned and the axe is now laid at the root of the Kümmel-Stendahl interpretation which is foundational to much of the new perspective reading of Paul. While the majority report among Paul's interpreters today would be to argue that Romans 7 is rhetorical and has little if anything to do with Paul's own personal predicament, a compelling case can still be made for the traditional Augustinian reading, upon which Reformed confessionalism heavily depends. Though a number of those who stand bravely in defense of Luther in particular or Reformed confessionalism in general, have nevertheless declared themselves in basic agreement with Kümmel-Stendahl,¹²¹ a number of scholars, including C. E. B. Cranfield, and no less than James D. G. Dunn himself, have defended the view that Romans 7:14 ff. is indeed talking about a Christian's struggle with sin.¹²² If true, this provides an important basis to understand Paul as presenting Christ as the solution to man's plight. This would be additional evidence that the doctrine of justification stands at or near the center of Paul's theology.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 353. Cf. R. H. Gundry, "Grace, Works and Staying Saved in Paul," p. 13. Says Gundry in this regard, "Salvation-history does not account for all that Paul says," as Sanders would lead us to believe, "we are dealing with an autobiographical as well as a dispensational shift."

¹²¹ See Stephen Westerholm, Israel's Law and the Church's Faith, pp. 58-64; Herman Ridderbos, Paul an Outline of His Theology, trans., John Richard DeWitt (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), pp. 126-130; Anthony A. Hoekema, The Christian Looks at Himself (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), pp. 61-67; and Seyoon Kim, The Origins of Paul's Gospel, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), pp. 51-55.

¹²² C. E. B. Cranfield, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), Vol. 1, pp. 355-370; James D. G. Dunn, Romans WBC 38a (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), pp. 387-412.

Mark Seifrid has offered an intriguing potential solution to the problem of Paul's use of $\epsilon\gamma\omega$. Seifrid argues that "Paul does not demarcate 7:14-25 as belonging solely to his present, contrary to what those who read the text as belonging to Paul's Christian experience suppose. But he does indicate that the condition of the $\epsilon\gamma\omega$ extends into his present, contrary to what those who read the passage as a depiction of Paul's past argue."¹²³ Drawing upon Stanley E. Porter's work with verbal aspect,¹²⁴ and Peter Stuhlmacher's efforts¹²⁵ to point out the striking parallel between this passage and "penitential prayers and confessions of the Hebrew Bible and early Judaism. . . . Like Rom 7, a number of these prayers and confessions include not only a rehearsal of past transgressions, but a description of the resultant state of the repentant in imperfect aspect and present time."¹²⁶ This, according to Seifrid, enables us to take seriously Kümmel's primary point, namely that Paul's comments are largely rhetorical, and yet ensure that Paul's use of $\epsilon\gamma\omega$ is seen in reference to his own experience—the natural reading of Romans 7. Seifrid concludes:

This re-reading of Rom 7:14-25 vindicates an important aspect of Kümmel's work. Although the ego of Rom 7 cannot be divorced from Paul's own experience, we have seen that recognition of the rhetorical nature of the presentation is essential to a proper interpretation of the passage. The confessing first-person is used both in early Jewish materials and in Rom 7:14-25 to reinforce theology and behavior. In a pendulum swing therefore, the questions which have characterized much of the interpretation of the text in the last sixty years have missed its central feature. The significance of Paul's use of this way of viewing himself should not be overlooked, either. He portrays himself in order to move his readers to agree that the condemnation worked by the Law is still applicable to them, even though it has been overcome extrinsically in Christ. . . . Such a reading of the text calls into question the tendency of Pauline scholarship in recent decades to assign a secondary status to Paul's arguments in forensic justification—a trend which has given considerable impetus by Krister Stendahl's attempt to interpret Rom 7 as Paul's analogy for the

¹²³ Mark A. Seifrid, "The Subject of Rom 7:14-25," in Novum Testamentum, Vol. XXXIV, (1992), p. 322. Also see the same author's work, Justification by Faith, pp. 226-244.

¹²⁴ See Stanley E. Porter, Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the New Testament with Reference to Tense and Mood (New York: Peter Lang, 1989).

¹²⁵ Peter Stuhlmacher, Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Commentary, trans., Scott J. Hafemann (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994, pp. 108 ff.

¹²⁶ Mark A. Seifrid, "The Subject of Rom 7:14-25," p. 322.

Law instead of his defense of the Gospel. The text does entail the paradoxical state of the Christian which Luther once perceived, *simul justus et peccator*, and indicates that Paul, apart from any introspection, was much more fundamentally influenced by his understanding of “justification by faith” than many have thought.¹²⁷

This would indeed represent not only a significant exegetical breakthrough, but a clear vindication of the historic Protestant reading of Paul. This is all the more important in this regard, especially since both Stendahl and Sanders candidly admit that their own respective interpretations of Paul depend upon the over-throw of traditional Augustinian and historic Protestant exegesis of Romans 7.¹²⁸ As Richard Gaffin puts it, Seifrid’s work offers “a stimulating proposal...that warrants further consideration.”¹²⁹ In any case, it is simply too early to concede the point that the traditional Augustinian interpretation of Romans 7 has no merit.

In conclusion, there is certainly much to learn from the work of E. P Sanders and James Dunn. Sanders in particular has demonstrated that the monolithic interpretation of Palestinian Judaism as a religion of works righteousness typical of much of Protestant scholarship, is certainly in need of correction. The Palestinian sources do undoubtedly contain (but not exclusively so) a *sola gratia* element. Dunn has also positively contributed to our understanding of the “Mosaic Law (particularly its ceremonial elements) as playing a social role that lies behind much of the controversy in the first century . . . [and is] an important and valid insight, if only it is not allowed to obscure other elements that are

¹²⁷ Ibid., p. 330.

¹²⁸ Krister Stendahl, “The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West,” p. 92. Stendahl admits that Romans 7:19 would “witness . . . directly to a deep and sensitive introspective conscience” if the traditional exegesis was correct. Sanders, after dealing with the passage, is forced to conclude that “we must back away from strict exegesis of Romans 7 to understand Paul’s thought.” See E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, p. 81. This, according to Robert Gundry, is telling evidence of the overall weakness of Sander’s position. See R. H. Gundry, “Grace, Works, and Staying Saved in Paul,” p. 23.

¹²⁹ Richard B. Gaffin, “Review of Mark A. Seifrid: *Justification by Faith: The Origin and Development of a Central Pauline Theme*,” in *The Westminster Theological Journal*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (Spring 1994), p. 196.

every bit as significant.”¹³⁰

When all is said and done, Martin Luther’s gracious God who justifies the wicked through faith alone is still the God of the Apostle Paul. Luther’s Atlas remains standing, and the confessional Reformed tradition's central article of the faith has withstood yet another challenge, bloody perhaps, but nevertheless unbroken.

¹³⁰ Moises Silva, “The Law and Christianity: Dunn's New Synthesis,” p. 353.