



## The New Perspective on Paul: A Needed Corrective to Lutheran Readings

JOHN L. MEECH

**B**iblical scholar James Dunn has said, “The Judaism of what Sanders christened as ‘covenantal nomism’ can now be seen to preach good Protestant doctrine: that grace is always prior; that human effort is ever the response to divine initiative; that good works are the fruit and not the root of salvation” (*New Perspective*, 199). I start here because I believe that taking the new perspective seriously in teaching and preaching can help heal a grave Christian misunderstanding of Judaism. Nevertheless, Dunn’s stark claim makes clear why the debate has occasioned much ire. The situation Luther confronted with respect to the church’s interpretation of “justification”—which he prosecuted on analogy with Paul’s distinction between “faith” and “works of the law”—was sixteen centuries in the making. Should it be any surprise, then, that Luther’s interpretation would not adequately connect with what Paul meant in a different context? Yet, the hard work of sorting out the development in thought between Paul and Luther is obscured by Dunn’s claim, which seems to assert that Jews in Paul’s context could be aligned with one side or the other in a medieval debate, and that Luther had simply placed them in the wrong column. But were Jews even asking the same questions?

N. T. Wright puts it this way: “Paul’s entire understanding of Mosaic law is that it never was intended as a ladder of good works up which one might climb to earn ‘righteousness’ . . . *It is therefore a straightforward category mistake . . . to suppose that Jesus ‘obeyed the law’ and so obtained ‘righteousness’ which could be reckoned to those who believe in him.* To think that way is to concede . . . that ‘legalism’ was true after all—with Jesus as the ultimate legalist” (*Justification*, 204–205, Wright’s emphasis). At stake is not just Luther’s interpretation of works, but also a longstanding Christian preoccupation with a particular way of understanding justification: that to “justify” means to “make right” before God. The central claim of the new perspective is not that first-century Jews were Protestant rather than Pelagian, but that they had no such preoccupation: the Jewish field of meaning surrounding “righteousness” had much more to do with God’s saving action toward his elect people, Israel, than it did with establishing a right standing before God. (Read, for

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## The New Perspective on Paul: Not So “Un-Lutheran” as Thought

DIANE M. ROTH

**W**hile I believe that the new perspective on Paul can be helpful, particularly in healing our mischaracterization of Judaism as “works-righteous,” I also believe that we need to affirm our starting place as Lutherans: justification as true freedom. This starting place created an explosion in the sixteenth century, and, properly understood, it can create explosions in our congregations and in our communities even now.

The seeds of N. T. Wright’s assertion that it is “a category mistake...to suppose that Jesus ‘obeyed the law’ and so obtained righteousness” (*Justification*, 205) are right there in Luther, in his organic understanding of the relation between righteousness and works and in his (still radical) idea about Christian liberty.

Whenever I lead a Bible study, I inevitably recommend that the class read Luther’s 1520 treatise on *The Freedom of a Christian*. Why? In my experience as a pastor, these words are still radical:

A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.

A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.

(*Luther’s Works* 31:344)

When I teach this to people in my congregation, one of the first things I do is put Luther in a particular context. Remember, he was not living in a democratic republic, where people voted in elections, were free to get involved in political matters, or even, for the most part, do whatever work they chose to do. (Neither was Paul, actually; that’s another story.) I ask my congregation members how it must have felt to people to be told that they were “perfectly free lords of all.” What Luther said was radical, freeing, and frightening. In Christ, through faith, you have been given everything; as one of God’s people, you are a “lord.” Even these many centuries later, we sometimes fail to grasp hold of the significance of these words. “You are a perfectly free lord of all.” No one can put you down: not your boss who might be encouraging you to behave unethically; not your child’s coach who will tell you what you have to do for the sake of the team; not your church, which might be saying you “have to” vote one way or another to be considered truly righteous.

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example, the prophet Habakkuk—only three chapters—the book from which Paul draws the phrase “the one who is righteous will live by faith” (Rom 1:17; Hab 2:4). Which works better for “righteous” as used by Habbakuk: those experiencing “God’s saving justice” or those “made right before God”?

Paths diverge when interpreters try to make sense of some of Paul’s statements in terms of the new perspective. Take, for example, “For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God” (Rom 4:2). In Luther’s interpretation, Paul seems here to correct other Jews who were boasting of being made right with God on the basis of their own achievements. But other interpretive choices are possible: that Sanders mischaracterizes Judaism; that Paul mischaracterizes Judaism; or that Luther mischaracterizes Paul. I am inclined to believe that Luther mischaracterizes Paul, but with a caveat. Given that the tradition before Luther had become preoccupied with the question of how a person is made right before God, Luther’s appropriation of Paul’s faith/works distinction makes good sense: it is the proper development of Paul’s thought against that backdrop. Because we still stand in that tradition, Luther’s interpretation can still make sense for us, though it has to be carefully qualified.

First, we must remind ourselves that Paul is a Jew interpreting Jewish texts. To prove that boasting is excluded, Paul cites Jewish Scriptures, which (bear in mind) constitute the foundation for his notion of justification by faith. Yet, recognition of our shared heritage with Judaism is not enough, because, as Sanders and others have pointed out, our two traditions have very different fields of meaning surrounding “righteousness” and its cognates. My second suggestion, then, is to listen for an echo of “God’s saving justice” wherever Paul uses words like “righteousness” or “justify.” “For if God’s saving justice is present through Abraham by works, he has something to boast about....” This way of reading “justified” moves away from Abraham’s standing before God to God’s saving action through Abraham. Paul’s opponents boasted that their works (paradigmatically, circumcision) demonstrated their heritage from Abraham; they demanded that Paul’s Gentile converts observe these works or relinquish their claim to be children of Abraham. Paul countered that Abraham himself could make no such boast. The majority of Paul’s fellow Jews did not accept his conclusion that, therefore, faith—not works of the law—marked membership in Abraham’s family. Nevertheless, the shape of Paul’s argument is perfectly Jewish: God’s election of Israel is an utterly gracious gift, and works of the law are not a precondition but a loving response to the gift. That is the grace of the Jewish tradition—it may not be our traditional “Protestant” understanding, but it is grace nonetheless. ⊕

*JOHN L. MEECH, author of Paul in Israel’s Story: Self and Community at the Cross (Oxford University Press, 2006), teaches adult education activities at St Paul’s Lutheran Church in Waukegan, Illinois.*

(As an example: A young woman from our congregation wanted to go on our church's mission trip. Her mother expressed worry that she would need to check her summer sports schedule. The young woman replied that she was willing to face the disapproval of the coach and team, because she would rather go on the trip. She was free.)

On the other hand, we often still do not grasp the significance of Luther's statement that we are also perfectly dutiful servants of all, subject to all. We are free, but as people of God we are bound: to Christ and to one another. Here also we can see that Luther's ideas of justification and of freedom are not as individualistic as we might have thought. For with this statement the relational nature of salvation and of life in Christ becomes clear. Luther writes, "A man does not live for himself alone in this mortal body to work for it alone, but he lives also for all men on earth; rather, he lives only for others and not for himself" (*LW* 31:364). In other words, we are justified for life in community. We are also justified through life in community. For Luther, we hear the word of life, the word of freedom, in the midst of a community.

How does this relate to our (mis)understanding and interpretation of Judaism, especially in light of the "new perspective"? I believe that one thing preachers and teachers can point out right away is that these two statements—the believer is as the same time "a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none," and "a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all"—can be applied to Judaism as well. The Jewish people regard themselves as free people, not legalists. Yet they are bound by relationships. They have a relationship with the word of God, and a relationship with one another that marks out their activities, not out of a sense of obligation but out of a sense of love. Of course, Luther himself would not have made the connection to Jewish faith and life, but that doesn't mean that we can't.

Do we need the new perspective on Paul to help us to see past our individualistic blinders of biblical interpretation and our mischaracterization of Judaism? Yes. But Luther can also help us take off those blinders, if we let him. ⊕

*DIANE M. ROTH is associate pastor of Woodlake Lutheran Church, Richfield, Minnesota.*

For further reading: E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1977); N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997); Wright, *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009); James D. G. Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007); Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The "Lutheran" Paul and His Critics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003). For papers from the 2009 Convocation of Teaching Lutheran Theologians, see *The New Perspective on Paul: Opportunities and Challenges for Lutheran Theology and Practice*, ed. David C. Ratke (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, forthcoming).