

New Perspective on Paul with Special Reference to N.T.Wright

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1. Background

The New Perspective on Paul (NPP) is not a unified movement but there are most probably as many sub-views as there are proponents (Wessels, 2013:321-322). Due to the wide spectrum of the views this research only touches lightly the phenomenon and mainly through the writings of its well-known proponent N.T. Wright. The focus of the article is to present critically the views of the New Perspective on Paul and especially approach the NPP through N.T. Wright's writings and views on Judaism and soteriology.

2. Nicholas Thomas Wright

Nicholas Thomas Wright was born in 1948. He has earned a Bachelor's degree in theology, a master's in Anglican ministry, and a DPhil, and a Doctor of Divinity all from the University of Oxford. In addition to that, he has been rewarded with several honorary doctorates. He has had a long and productive academic career starting from fellow and chaplain at Cambridge (1978-1981). After that, he served as an assistant professor of New Testament language and literature at McGill University in Montreal, and then he was a chaplain, tutor, lecturer, and fellow at Oxford in 1986. Wright was the dean of Lichfield Cathedral (1994-1999), then the canon theologian of Westminster Abbey in 2000, and the bishop of Durham from 2003 to 2010. Since his retirement from Durham, he has been a professor of New Testament and early Christianity at St. Andrews University. His academic work is usually published under the name 'N.T. Wright,' but his works written for a popular readership were published under the name of 'Tom Wright.' He is one of the most prominent proponents of the New Pauline Perspective.

3. The New Perspective on Paul (NPP) and N.T. Wright

Wright entered into the New Perspective on Paul (NPP) controversy by delivering the Tyndale New Testament Lecture, at Tyndale House, Cambridge, on 4 July 1978. It was an article that was originally published in Tyndale Bulletin 29 (1978): 61-88. The article is dealing with a controversy between German scholar Ernst Käsemann (1971:60-78) and the Swedish scholar Krister Stendahl (Wright, 1978:61). Stendahl (1963) suggested in his article 'Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West' that Jews did not need to follow the Law of Moses to earn salvation—the Law was needed to maintain their position as saved persons. Stendahl postulated the New Testament analogy that good works cannot earn salvation, but the evaluation of the works will take place on the eschatological judgment. Stendahl thought that the traditional Protestant view of justification by faith alone was more rooted in Augustinian influence than in the early Christian perspective.

Stendahl suggested, that Paul did not suffer introspection but has a robust conscience. Wright (1978:63) agrees with Stendahl in this regard and writes: "Stendahl is absolutely right to draw attention to Paul's robust conscience". The New Perspective on Paul (NPP) as presented by

Wright (1978:64) is rooted in that controversy and the respective articles presented by Käsemann and Stendahl. N.T. Wright's (1978:71) position is to incorporate the strengths of both parties while avoiding their weaknesses. This research considers that Stendahl's and N.T. Wright's claim that western Christianity should not be introspective is justifiable. Hence, the NPP and N.T. Wright can contribute to Protestant theology including Greater Grace thinking. The contribution could be especially positive to the field of spiritual transformation. However, the agreement concerning Paul's robust conscience does not demand to agree with other main arguments of the NPP and N.T. Wright.

E.P. Sanders, J.D.G. Dunn, and N.T. Wright "are often considered to be the three musketeers" of the New Perspective on Paul" (Gathercole, 2002:16). All of them, have developed the NPP at least partially based on Stendahl's theological breakthrough. The common thing to this NPP scholarship is that they reject Luther's concept of imputed righteousness, a crucial component of the doctrine of justification by faith alone. The term "imputed righteousness" refers to the divine forensic act that those who believe in the death and resurrection of Christ, are "declared righteous" by God with the result that Christ's righteousness is "imputed" on them (Anderson, 2012; 101; Grudem, 2004:722). The doctrine of "imputed righteousness" has traditionally been regarded as a cornerstone in Protestant theology. The imputed righteousness and justification through faith alone is considered as a core doctrine within protestant theology. It is proposed by most Arminian, Dispensational and Reformed scholarship. Traditional perspective on Paul (TPP) has criticized the NPP formulations of the justification. Wright (PFG:925-966) defines that justification is a declaration of membership of the one people of God. This research agrees with traditional protestant view of justification through faith and the concept of imputed righteousness. For him justification does not mean who enters to eternal salvation.

N.T. Wright as understood in Francois Wessels' (Wessels, 2013) article have asserted that in the Galatian Church the source of the Galatian conflict was not who was eternally saved and who was not. Both groups of the believers of Christ (Jews and gentiles) were a part of the covenant with God Both groups also agreed that all believers possess eternal life including those who did not observe the Mosaic Law. However, Jewish believers treated gentile believers as second-class members of the Church as long as they were uncircumcised and did not follow the kosher diet etc. Wright asserts that Paul presented the doctrine of justification as a solution to the conflict. The gentile believers did not need to convert to Judaism to be equal with Jewish believers of Christ. According to N.T. Wright God marked ahead of time those who he will effectively call to enter to covenant with him. Therefore, the works of Law are not needed to be experienced fully the covenant fellowship. He also applies this principle to the contemporary Jews who are the followers of Jesus Christ. For him justification is a declaration that someone is a member of the people of God. Justification also means that believers participate in Christ through mystical union with Christ. Some NPP proponents suggest that this mystical union needs to be personally experienced (Sanders, 1977, 2015), or having an experience in which God gives faith as a gift in a certain moment of life (Wright 2013).

A common element between Wright and the so-called Old Perspective is that justification leads to a changed status of the person before God and the remission of sins. In this regard, the difference between N.T. Wright and so-called "Old Perspective" might be smaller than the polemic debate hints. The keyword in the debate is 'δικαιοσύνη', meaning righteousness. Wright (PGF:804) asserts that it is "an attribute of God himself and more specifically of the attribute of covenant faithfulness". One of the purposes of this research is to assess how Wright understands the relationship between divine faithfulness and believers' response to the faithfulness of God as faithful living.

Another distortion from the traditional protestant thinking is the NPP's view on Judaism and especially Paul's opponents. A remarkable and pioneering proponent of the NPP is E.P. Sanders (1977, 2015), who claims, in opposition to the traditional scholarship, that Second Temple Judaism (STJ) was not a legalistic religion. In his book 'Paul and Palestinian Judaism' Sanders (1977:543) defines 'covenantal nomism' and the relationship between grace and works: "Salvation is by grace, but the judgment is according to works; works are the condition of remaining 'in' but they do not earn salvation". Though, Sanders assert that during the dispensation of the Church believers do not need to maintain the covenant membership by human effort. Only in an extremely case a person would be expelled from the covenant and eternal life.

Sanders' definitions of legalism and grace-oriented religion are self-contradictory because negative human effort may hinder to remain "in" and achieve eschatological salvation (Eskola, 1998:56, 271-272; Gathercole, 2002:23; Gundry: 1985:1-38) James Dunn (1983; 2008:16), who first introduced the term the "New Perspective on Paul," in 1983 developed his view based on Sanders' reconstruction of Second Temple Judaism. His conclusion regarding the soteriological relationship between grace and work largely follows Sanders' view. Dunn (2008:72-81, 97) sees eternal salvation as a synergistic process where the final justification in the final judgment depends on the believer's good works and love that works through faith. N.T. Wright developed his Pauline theology at least partially independently from E.P. Sanders and James Dunn but his assertions are in accordance with their views of the STJ as a grace-based religion and soteriological formulations.

The NPP scholarship has tried to reconstruct the understanding of the historical setting of Second Temple Judaism (STJ). Wright and other New Perspective scholars have taken advantage of the discoveries of archaeology and contemporary historical research relating to Second Temple Judaism. These resources, such as Qumran manuscripts, were not available to the scholars of past times. The claims of the NPP scholars have challenged some aspects of traditional Protestant thinking of Pauline theology. Especially they accuse the proponents of the traditional view of having anachronistic formulations especially the doctrine of justification by faith alone, Judaism as a religion of legalism and divine punishment of the believers. The NPP views that also believers are under the retribution of God. Though good works will be rewarded too.

Theological discussions have taken place among those who have been influenced by Reformed theology. The most notable opponents of the NPP have been Stephen Westerholm (1998, 2013), Peter O'Brien and D.A. Carson (2001, 2004), and John Piper (2002, 2007). These scholars have published books relating to the NPP debate. Some multi-author books where different positions are presented have been published which at least remotely related to the debate (Beilby, Eddy & Eenderlein, 2011; McCormack, 2006; Stanley & Gundry, 2013). In addition, numerous journal articles have been written from the Reformed camp and some from the Dispensational perspective.

One possible reason for critics from Reformed scholarship is that Wright defines himself as belonging to the Reformed camp. He further defines his Reformed position in his first scholarly article, where he sees that it is essential that *ecclesia catholica* is to remain *ecclesia semper reformanda*, meaning that the Reformed movement should always be reforming and giving the authority to the Spirit and the Word over tradition (Wright, 1978:88). Also, Wright (PFG:747) is clear that he wants to separate himself from Lutheran and to some degree from Augustinian thinking as he writes: "The standard assumption, since Augustine at least, and especially since Luther, was that Paul had been labouring under the problem of a guilty conscience."

Since the present essay is written in the Free Grace and evangelical perspectives it was natural to choose N.T. Wright as a thinking partner on the basis of his strong commitment to the *sola scriptura* principle (Wright, 2006:244), his critical standing within the tradition (Wright, 2006:244), his influence on the evangelical community and his incorrect view on the role of the works in the final judgment .

N.T. Wright follows the pattern of soteriology in which good works are needed for the final justification. He asserts that the good works in the life of the believer are the work of God through the Spirit. The believer's good works show who is justified, meaning who belongs to God (Wright, 2006:253-254). N.T. Wright (2006:254) writes about Paul's self-consciousness: "He is clear that the things he does in the present by moral and physical effort will count to his credit on the last day, precisely because they are the effective signs that the Spirit of the living Christ has been at work in him". His view differs from the standard protestant or Reformed positions in which good works are not the ground or basis for eternal salvation. There are different positions among the Reformed camp regarding the role of works in the final judgment. This researcher does not agree with the NPP position in which someone can lose salvation in the eschatological judgment or works are needed to maintain the position in the group of saved.

4. N.T. Wright and the Augustinian tradition

N.T. Wright and some proponents of the NPP approach eschatology through the metaphorical interpretation of the apocalyptic scenes told by Jesus, the New Testament authors and the authors of the Second Temple Judaism such as apocrypha and pseudography (Wright,

2013:162-165). Some proponents such as Fredriksen and Sanders are opposing metaphorical interpretation. The NPP is divided in this issue and also in their relationship to Augustine.

The metaphorical interpretation of apocalyptic language has been common in Christianity since Augustine shifted from pre-millennialism (Schaff, 1887:426) to Amillennialism. According to Fredriksen (1991:157), the shift was influenced by Tyconius' view of hermeneutics. Frey agrees with Fredriksen as he writes about N.T. Wright: "Hermeneutically, Wright follows an interpretation well-known in the interpretation of Revelation 20, going back to Tyconius and Augustine" (Frey, 2017:500). According to Anderson (2002:32-36), this shift influenced Augustine's soteriology. For example, the metaphorical interpretation of the Kingdom of God led Augustine to change his former literal interpretation of Matthew 24:131 to a metaphorical interpretation. To Augustine, perseverance in Matthew 24:13 used to mean survival from physical death, but when he changed his hermeneutics, perseverance meant moral endurance. Based on that he developed the new doctrine of perseverance. He understood that perseverance was an additional gift of God after regeneration that led a person to eternal salvation. The shift influenced all western Christianity (Fredriksen, 1991:151) including N.T. Wright. Although, he might not accept that assertion.

Wright might be correct in his view that the apocalyptic passages do not always refer to the events of the end of the world, but he is taking his view beyond that by neutralizing apocalyptic language merely to symbolism (Frey, 2017: NTPG: 284-285). N.T. Wright (PFG:175) also asserts that "apocalyptic is deeply political" which gives strong socio-political reference to his alliance with 'the hermeneutical turn in the New Testament studies'². Furthermore, he understands eschatology within the creational and covenantal narrative which determines in advance what the apocalyptic images mean (PFG:461). His inaugurated eschatology gives priority to the "already" over "the yet to come" which reduces the future reign of Messiah to the battle against cosmic powers (Frey: 498; PFG:480, 1101, 1235).

Wright's position also disagrees with E.P. Sanders' (2015:214) view that Paul's eschatology refers "to concrete descriptions of the end based on visions or other revelatory events". Sanders' statements are in accordance with some experts of the STJ. For example, Heiser (2015:363) asserts that "Jews expected a military deliverer" and "the regathering of all the tribes of Israel and Judah". Fredriksen connects the expectation of violent national redemption of the Jews to the future hope of Christians in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, where the language has a military tone, and 1 Corinthians 15:22-26, which deals with the establishment of the

¹ Matt 24:13: "But the person who endures to the end will be saved."

² The hermeneutical turn that took place in the 1970s is a relevant phenomenon relating to Pauline studies. One form of the hermeneutical turn is that metanarratives have partially replaced the grammatical-historical principles. According to Thomas (2005:294), the NPP, and N.T. Wright has been a part of that turn. Thomas (2005:292) asserts that the NPP system is supported "through a neglect of the established principle of single versus multiple meanings for a given passage and through disregarding the importance of immediate context in interpretation".

Kingdom of God. Another way to interpret The Millennium literally is to present the coming Millennium as 'a Celestial Millennium'. This view argues that a Celestial Millennium can be understood as retaining much of the theological notions normally associated with Amillennialism (Du Toit, 2015:126). This research argues that a Celestial Millennium view does not water down the literal interpretation of the Scripture or demythologize the apocalyptic language. However, dispensational premillennialism is more consistent with the historical-grammatical-literal interpretation.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Effective Call Originates in Stoicism and Manicheanism

The doctrine of effective call is an early Middle Age import to Christianity. It replaced a universal call to which everyone can respond when Augustine wrote his 'Ad Simplicianum' in 396 first it replaced general call in 396 (Wilson, 2018:145) and later in his other works between years 396-412 (Burns: 1992:326-327; 2002:307). Pre-Augustine theologians exclusively taught that humans can respond to God's call and without the kind of divine assistance that overcomes human free choice (Wilson, 2017:36-45, 2018:11-94). This claim does not exclude an interplay between human volition and the work of the Spirit in conversion. It is always up to the individual to genuinely reject or accept the persuasion of the Spirit. Augustine's (and N.T. Wright's) view of the effective call reflects Stoic Manichean readings (Wilson, 2018:12-17).

5.2. The Concept of Faith as a Gift Originates in Gnosticism

The removal of faith as a response to divine initiation both in the conversion and believer's life after the conversion has origins outside of orthodox Christianity. It first originated in the writings of the Manichean Basilides in his interpretation of Ephesians 2:8-9. The gnostic Valentinus was the first who presented faith as a gift of God, based most probably on his reading of Ephesians 2:8 (Clemens, Stromateis:2.3-4; Wilson, 2017:48). Also, the doctrine of effective call was imported to Christianity relatively late by Augustine around the year 412 (Burns: 1992:326-327; 2002:307).

According to Wilson's (2018:250) doctoral dissertation, Augustine quoted Ephesians 2:8-9 in at least eight different works to support his view that faith is a gift of God. He also claimed that pre-Augustine theology taught exclusively that humans can respond to God's call and without the kind of divine assistance that overcomes human free choice (Wilson, 2017:36-45; 2018:41-64).

5.3. The Need to Earn Salvation is contrary to the law of noncontradiction

In Ephesians 2:9³ salvation by grace through faith is contrasted with salvation by works. “Faith is not a ‘work’.”⁴ It does not merit salvation; it is only the means by which one accepts God’s free salvation” (Hoehner, 1985:624). Salvation is something that involves both divine and human agency but as a concept or a process, it should be understood as a gift of God.

5.4. The Possibility to Lose Salvation is contrary to the faithfulness of God

2 Timothy 2:11–13 draws special interest in eternal security because it sets Paul’s arguments to rekindle the spiritual gift (2 Tim 1:6) in a framework where true assurance is experienced. This research presupposes that the framework includes the elements of security and unconditional love. 2 Timothy 2:11–13 is a conclusion of the second argument:

- 2:11 This saying is trustworthy:
If we died with him, we will also live with him.
- 2:12 If we endure, we will also reign with him.
If we deny him, he will also deny us.
- 2:13 If we are unfaithful, he remains faithful, since he cannot deny himself.

The passage is arranged in the form of poetry. Most probably it is a quote from someone else. “The hymn discusses conversion and how it works itself out in different lives” (Mounce, 2000:515). The first line deals with the beginning of the spiritual life. The second line confirms the examples in the spiritual realm. Endurance (in-co-suffering) is rewarded (also in Rom 8:14-30). Co-reigning is something that is added to enduring believers. The third line means that the denial of Christ leads to a situation where Christ will deny a believer. The context does not support the idea that it relates to eternal life because dying with Christ is most probably referring to a once-and-for-all situation. It is suggested here that the denial refers to a believer’s right to co-reign with him. The fourth line gives additional support to the “co-reign view”. It deals with a possible apostasy: the word ἀπιστοῦμεν is first person plural active indicative present and means “being without faith” or being unfaithful. The faithfulness of God carries a Christian through apostasy or unfaithfulness. The faithfulness of God is “the basis for the assurance of the gospel promises” (Knight, 1992:407).

5.5. The Possibility to Lose Salvation is contrary to the STJ theology

Within STJ, the divine punishment of believers was a possibility, but it dealt with believers (Jews) and divine punishment in the New Testament context should be understood as an inclusion to the Body of Christ, not exclusion (Sanders 2015:550). Paul believed in the principle of believer’s punishment (1 Cor. 5:5). “The spirit of even the man who was to be expelled for

³ Eph 2:9: “it is not from works, so that no one can boast.”

⁴ The works in this context refer to the good works, and not to the works of the law as it can be read from the next verse (Eph 2:10).

legal incest would be saved when the Lord returned" (Sanders, 2015:373) but the sinning believer came under the temporal punishment. Paul applied the same principle to Christians concerning temporal and eschatological salvation (1 Cor 3:15).

In 2 Timothy 2:11-13 the possible punishment needs to be defined within the immediate context. In that case, the exegetical decision would be denial to co-reign with Christ. This principle does not contradict the fact that Paul congruently comforted Timothy with eternal security and assurance of salvation and challenged him to co-suffer with Christ. Had the eternal security and the assurance of salvation been denied, it would have been more likely that Timothy would have continued in fear. In that case, he would probably have been a fearful minister who had done his ministry as a duty, only to avoid eternal damnation. So, the explanation is that the faithfulness of God refers here to "the benefits enjoyed by believers, not into eternal punishment" (Mounce, 2000:517). Paul uses the word πιστός meaning faithfulness as an attribute of God exclusively in that sense (1 Cor 1:9; 7:25; 10:13; 2 Cor 1:18; 2 Thess 3:3).

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