

BY FAITH ALONE

Answering the Challenges to the Doctrine of Justification

EDITED BY
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Foreword by David F. Wells

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List of Abbreviations

ARCIC	Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission
BAG	Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich
CTJ	<i>Calvin Theological Journal</i>
ECT	Evangelicals and Catholics Together
FV	Federal Vision
LDS	Latter-day Saints
NPP	The New Perspective(s) on Paul
IDB	<i>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i>
WCF	Westminster Confession of Faith
WLC	Westminster Larger Catechism
WSC	Westminster Shorter Catechism
WTJ	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>

Foreword

DAVID F. WELLS

It is a mark of our times that the language of *sola fide* has become quaint, sometimes incomprehensible, but mostly irrelevant. What once carried the full freight of reformational understanding, today seems like a *shibboleth*, an inconsequential matter, something which is of interest to those with a prickly doctrinal sensibility but of no practical consequence to those busy building the church.

What are we to make of this situation? Evangelical estimates vary all the way from deep misgivings on the one end to yawns or smiles on the other end. There are those who see in this the passing of historical orthodoxy, and this is something which they mourn. There are those who see either a matter of no consequence at all or they see in this their liberation, and this is something which they celebrate.

My own view is that this development is a signpost to a very different future, and it is one that we are going to rue. The evangelical world, in fact, is now coming apart because its central truths, what once held it all together, no longer have the binding power that they once had and, in some cases, are rejected outright with no following outcry.

When I was growing up in Rhodesia where my father was a civil servant and a judge, it never even crossed my mind that before long—in fact, even before I had graduated from university—the whole empire of which it was a part would begin to come tumbling down. But so it was. The British Empire, which, at its height, had spread itself over one-third of the earth, reached the point that all empires eventually reach, and it began to disintegrate. Despite brave words from London, it simply could not resist the centrifugal forces, in country after country, that were pulling away from

the center in the name of freedom. In the space of a few years the empire had evaporated, though the former members do get together periodically for fraternal exchanges and, perhaps, to remember old times.

This image of a decaying worldly power has come to my mind from time to time as I have thought about evangelicalism. Despite some rather obvious differences between these two empires, there are nevertheless also some parallels. In both empires—the one purely worldly and the other believing—it was common ideas that held things together. In the case of the British Empire, the bond between its many peoples, willing or not, was notions about law with all of the mechanisms to make that law work and ideas about civilization, and these were not always bad. In this other empire, this post-World War II evangelical world, what has held things together amidst its rambunctious, enterprising, and entrepreneurial movers and shakers—not to mention its churches and a multitude of quite ordinary believers—has been a core of beliefs that has been taken with sufficient seriousness until relatively recently. This moderated what possibilities might be tolerated in the ways in which evangelical belief was expressed, and it moderated centrifugal forces intent upon pulling away from the center. This core was what had been secured and defined at the Reformation as it sought to reclaim biblical truth. In the post-World War II period and until relatively recently, evangelicals have followed in this tradition of belief, at least to the extent that they have been committed to the high functional authority of Scripture—*sola Scriptura*—and to the necessity and centrality of the death of Christ understood in a substitutionary way—*solo Christo*. It is believing these doctrines that has defined them as evangelical, held them together, and given them their agenda.

Of course it is also the case that these commitments have been held alongside, and together with, a welter of competing and conflicting views of a secondary order. Evangelicals have taken different positions on church government, baptism, the work of the Holy Spirit, the future of Israel, how election works out, politics and many, many other issues. However, as long as the center held, things evangelical also held together; once that center began to disintegrate, evangelical believing splintered away in all directions, losing conviction along the way or, alternatively, developing misplaced passion and intensity in the secondary matters that now fill the vacated center. What was once an extremely effective coalition of believers that drew into working partnerships people from around the world, people from many different cultures and countries during the twentieth century, has now lost its cohesion, coherence, and direction. Evangelicalism as both a movement and as a significant doctrinal position is in disarray.

There are, no doubt, many different ways in which we might lay out the new topography following this disintegration. Sketches as to where things

are and as to how the land now lies might change depending on whether one were looking strictly from within the academy or more broadly in the churches. I want to look more broadly. What I suggest is that there are currently three main constituencies in evangelicalism. There is one in which the historical doctrines of evangelical believing are still maintained and even treasured. There is one that is oblivious to these doctrines and considers them an impediment to church growth. Finally, there is one that is thumbing its nose at both of these first two constituencies, in the one case because its orthodoxy is too confining and in the other because its church life, glitzy as it may be, is too empty.

The reformational doctrines, part and parcel of which is *sola fide*, are still preserved among churches and by individuals in the first major church constituency. This understanding about faith and its function does not, of course, stand alone but has a doctrinal context, and it has connections in the Word of truth which God has given us. The reason that people believe, and the reason that the New Testament affirms, that faith is the sole means of receiving God's saving grace is because of its connections to two other beliefs: *sola gracia* and *solo Christo*, to use the language of the Reformation.

In the sixteenth century, Luther stood his ground where Paul, many centuries earlier, had done so. Despite the light that the New Perspective claims to have cast on Paul's doctrine, I am still persuaded that Luther actually got it right and that Paul thought about justification as the church, following Luther, has always judged that he did and not as the New Perspective now imagines. The Judaizers then and the medievals in Luther's day alike thought that by the keeping of the law, salvation could be merited. Paul first, then Luther later, rejected this, and Luther rejected it because Paul had done so. The reason, quite simply, was their far deeper, far more realistic, and, indeed, far more biblical reckoning with the depths of human sin, its pervasiveness, and the innate corruption it has wrought throughout human nature. How, then, are humans to render up an obedience to the law which is not itself corrupt? The apple of our best works, while rosy and attractive on the outside, is always inhabited by a worm that has destroyed it from within.

So it was that Paul, and indeed the New Testament, led us to see that we contribute nothing to our salvation except, as Archbishop William Temple would later say, the sin from which we need to be redeemed. We are as paupers who stand empty-handed and gratefully accept whatever kindness is offered to us. That kindness comes in the form of Christ's substitution on our behalf, in our place, dying the death that we deserve, bearing in himself God's righteous judgment for our sin, and clothing us in a righteousness not our own. That is the New Testament gospel. That is what Paul calls God's "inexpressible gift," one received by the empty

hand of faith alone, and that has always been the evangelical message. Believing this gospel, believing it in its New Testament formulation, is what evangelicalism has always been about.

In the last few decades, however, a second church constituency has been emerging, first in America, and now, like so many other things American, it is being exported overseas. It is made up of a generation of pragmatists, initially Baby Boomers but now spilling out generationally, who have lived off this reformational understanding as does a parasite off its host, separate but surreptitiously using its life and slowly bringing about the death of its host. These pragmatic entrepreneurs, these salesmen of the gospel, may not always deny reformational understanding overtly, but even if they do not, they always hide it from view. They shuffle off this orthodoxy into a corner where they hope it will not be noticed. To the seekers who are so sensitive and who are their target audience, this orthodoxy would be quite incomprehensible, not to say off-putting. So, it is covered up because it is judged to be irrelevant to what is of interest to them and to those who are in the business of selling Christianity; it is likewise judged to be irrelevant to their work.

They want to reconfigure their churches around the marketing dynamic, and that is something quite different. It is this experiment of borrowing off the mechanisms of capitalism, this skimming off of business savvy and the niche-marketing that follows, that makes up the second major constituency in evangelical faith, as I see it.

However, let it be said immediately that this is only second on my list of enumeration. In fact, it is the *dominant* constituency in American evangelicalism today, which is why it is pandered to so shamelessly by *Christianity Today*. And that is also why it passes unchallenged by many evangelical leaders who might know better. Its stunning success has placed it beyond accountability or criticism. Its success has made it invulnerable and impervious.

The idea at the heart of this experiment was always rather simple. If Coca-Cola can sell its drinks, if Lexus can market its cars, why can't the church, using the same principles, the very same techniques, market its message? After all, this is the language that all Americans understand because all Americans are consumers. And so it was that the seeker-sensitive church emerged, reconfigured around the consumer, edges softened by marketing wisdom, pastors driven by business savvy, selling, always selling, but selling softly, alluringly, selling the benefits of the gospel while most, if not all, of the costs were hidden. Indeed, it got worse than this. Sometimes what was peddled was a gospel entirely without cost, to us and apparently also to Christ, a gospel whose grace is therefore so very cheap. And it has gotten even worse. Just as often, the gospel has vanished entirely and been replaced only by feel-good therapy. The message

has been about a God without wrath, bringing man without sin, into a kingdom without a judgment, through a Christ without a cross . . . all that we might feel good about ourselves and come back to “church” next week. This, actually, is how Niebuhr described the old, defunct Liberal gospel! But, never mind. Buoyed by George Barna’s statistics and flushed with success, seeker-sensitive pastors have sallied forth into the consumer fields in ever more inventive and extraordinary ways to bring in the harvest now ripened, now ready to be gathered and fetched into their auditoriums.

But to what are these seekers coming? Gone are all the signs of an older Christianity. Churches that once looked like churches, symbols of a message transcendent in origin, have now been replaced by auditoriums, and some of them might even be mistaken as business convention centers. Indeed, they might even pass as showrooms—boats and home appliances on display during the week and Jesus on the weekend. And why not? Gone, after all, is the transcendent message, and what remains, really, is quite this-worldly. And this is subtly broadcast visually. Pews have been replaced by chairs, the pulpit by a stage or, maybe, a plexiglass stand, the Scripture reading by a drama group, the choir by a set of sleek and writhing singers who could be straight out of a show in Vegas, and everywhere the Jumbotrons, the technology, the wizardry of a control so complete that it all comes off as being super-casual. This church stuff is no sweat; it’s fun! It is to *this* that seekers are coming. Indeed, far more frequently than we might wish to know, it is *only* to this that they are coming.

Barna, at least, is now dismayed. His assiduous polling, which initially launched this experiment in how to “do church,” has now been following behind it and churning up some truly alarming findings. You see, none of this pizzazz and glitz has made an iota of difference to those who have been attending. They have been living on our postmodern “bread,” on technology and entertainment alone, and not on the Word of God. The result is that they are now living no differently from those who are overtly secular, he says. They have no Christian worldview, they exhibit no Christian character, and they show no Christian commitment. Their pastors, he says, measure their own success by the number of attendees and the square footage of the building, but the people who attend, those who are born again, show none of the signs of the radical discipleship that Jesus demanded. Am I just old-fashioned when I wonder to myself whether there might be a causal connection between this flagging discipleship and the abandoned biblical concerns about truth, the irrelevant orthodoxy, in these seeker-sensitive churches?

The Emergent church, the third of these church constituencies in evangelicalism, is a reaction which, in effect, is saying to the other two constituencies, “a pox on both your houses!” This pox is being pronounced

on the one because of its conception of truth and, on the other, because of its emptiness. However, while it expresses its double disaffection with an “in-your-face” attitude, it is most coy about what it is actually for.

To start with, the Emergent church is *not* a movement. No, no. It is only a conversation. Furthermore, it is *not* against historical orthodoxy, it says, well, not really; it just is not particularly for it and, besides, it thinks that the kind of doctrinal clarity and precision which the Reformation yielded is a figment of the “modern” imagination, forgetting that this modern Enlightenment world had not even been born when Luther and Calvin were struggling with Rome and produced such clarity and precision! The Emergent church is evangelical, of course, but it is also many other things too. Why be obnoxiously narrow in this age of wide-open acceptance? The categories in which evangelicalism has thought about itself, you see, came out of the *modern* world which has now collapsed. The Emergent are *postmodern* and that means that being evangelical, along with being everything else, must mean being different from what evangelicals always have been . . . if you are still following me.

The way the Emergent leaders make this distinction between being modern and postmodern is as fatuous as it is convenient. They have borrowed this from their academic gurus—people like Stanley Grenz, Len Sweet, Roger Olson, and John Francke—as a way of upending historical Christian faith. Historical orthodoxy was modern, you see; we, happily, have no option but to be postmodern, thereby allowing us to jettison the truth question that was at the heart of historical Christianity. In Brian McLaren’s *A New Kind of Christian*, Neo, the hip, with-it, cool, cutting-edge, suave, slick, postmodern pastor—in short, McLaren himself!—who was once himself benighted but now is wide awake to how things really are, observes that the old question was: which religion is true? The new question is: which religion is good?

Are we really to suppose that when we read the Bible, what we will discover is that the prophets and apostles actually said that whom we worship is not a matter of concern to God provided we are nice about it? But, of course! Here I am thinking that the words about absolute truth used in the Bible had specific meanings, whereas those who live in postmodern times as we do and are “with it” linguistically know that words are only self-referential. They know that words only tell us what some person was thinking at the moment in which the words were used, that these words do not correspond to anything outside that person, that their meanings are not self-contained, and that we who live so much later quite properly must understand them in ways diametrically opposed to what they appear to mean in their context! How silly of me to have thought that the God of the Bible demanded exclusive loyalty, or that he has given us his truth in languages in which that truth has a fixed cash

value when, of course, all of this was just a cultural way of looking at things, and one now quite obsolete and useless as we sashay through our postmodern moment.

It has always been the case that the church has had to struggle with aberrant views in its midst. Indeed, the apostle Paul goes so far as to say that “there must be factions [heresies] among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized” (1 Cor. 11:19). What is different, when compared with our more recent history, is that these aberrant views on matters so central and fundamental are not outside the evangelical church but inside it. Not only so, but today these views are masquerading as something that they are not. They are offered in all innocence as Christian orthodoxy, whereas, in fact, they come out of a different universe. What we have is church practice that obliterates the underlying understanding of truth, a methodology for success without too many references to any truth, and a sense that what was once so important in the life of the church can be left behind, unexplored, unappropriated, and without consequences.

That, it seems to me, is a rather different situation from what the Reformers faced, who at least held in common with their Catholic opponents the idea that orthodoxy was important. The argument was over what constituted that orthodoxy.

When all is said and done, Christianity is about *truth* and at the heart of that truth is the gospel, *sola gratia, sola fide, in solo Christo*. If Christianity is not about what is enduringly, eternally true, in all places of the world, in every culture, in the same way, in every time, then there is no reason to strive to find the most accurate ways of stating what it is, nor in other parts of the world would there be any reason to face persecution for it. But across time people have struggled to know it, because in knowing it they have come to know the God whose truth it is and some have had to die for it. Who, one wonders, would want to die for something that was only true at some point in time, to some person, and not for all people in all places and times, or who would want to die for something that actually is not that important to the life of the church, which can be quite successful without it?

I am grateful for this book because I am grateful for any clarity, any light, that can be brought to bear on our situation in the evangelical world, and this particular book brings a lot. This desire for doctrinal clarity that I share with all of these authors, this yearning for biblical truth, makes me hopelessly “modern” as it does them. However, I comfort myself with the thought that perhaps we all just might be “modern” enough to have caught some of the same deep truth-concerns that we also find in the prophets and apostles! And that is no small thing.

Introduction

Whatever Happened to Sola Fide?

GUY PRENTISS WATERS

In the sixteenth century, the Reformation thundered across Europe with the soul-abasing and God-glorifying gospel of grace. Today, nearly half a millennium later, the doctrines of grace cherished and proclaimed by the Reformers and their heirs—many of whom have sealed their witness with their own blood—are under renewed assault. From what quarter is this attack coming? Is it a philosophical naturalism that denies the existence of an almighty and sovereign God, who made out of nothing the world and all things therein, and who upholds all things by the word of his power? Is it a renewed paganism that calls men and women to worship the creation and to look for the divine within them? Is it a theological liberalism that denies the wrath of God against sin and that affirms the innate goodness of man?

While each of these remains a threat to the church at the turn of the twenty-first century, the renewed assault upon the doctrines of grace is coming from within the evangelical church itself. In what follows, we want to trace the background and development of two seemingly disparate movements that have surfaced within the evangelical and Reformed church—the New Perspective(s) on Paul and the Federal Vision. It will be the New Perspective on Paul and the Federal Vision that will garner the attention of many of the contributors to this volume. By way of introduction, we will ask and answer a few questions about the New Perspective

on Paul and the Federal Vision: What are their origins? What are they saying? What is at stake in all of this?

By Faith Alone

As the title of this volume suggests, the contributors will be addressing the state of *sola fide* (by faith alone) in the evangelical and Reformed church. How have the New Perspective on Paul and the Federal Vision challenged *sola fide*? In order to prepare ourselves to answer this question adequately, let us briefly review the Bible's teaching on the doctrine of justification by faith alone.¹ The Scripture teaches that all mankind descending from Adam by ordinary generation have sinned in Adam. We are guilty of Adam's first sin, and we are born corrupt (Rom. 5:12–20). We are not morally neutral people who commit some deeds that are spiritually pleasing to God and some deeds that are displeasing to God. We are conceived and born in iniquity (Ps. 51:5), and the Scripture likens us, even from the womb, to venomous serpents (Ps. 58:3–5). We are sinful by nature and, as such, the whole bent of our being is not to the good but to evil. We drink iniquity like water (Job 15:16). God's analysis of fallen humanity is devastating, "Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Gen. 6:5). As the apostle Paul sets out our common human condition in Romans 1:18–3:20, he comes to the stark and sobering conclusion, "by the works of the law no flesh will be justified in his sight; for through the law comes the knowledge of sin" (Rom. 3:20). The sons and daughters of Adam—Jew and Gentile alike—stand condemned by nature. Even the very best works of a Christian are in themselves as a "filthy garment" in the sight of a holy God whose eyes are too pure to behold evil (Isa. 64:6).

Is there any hope? The Scripture replies with a resounding "yes!" The Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of Man and the Son of God, has obeyed the law, suffered and died, and risen again from the dead for the elect. Christ answers the two problems that his people bear. First, they have failed to obey the whole law. The law says "do this and you will live" (Lev. 18:5; Rom. 10:5). And so God's people look to the Lord Jesus Christ through whose obedience the many will be constituted righteous (Rom. 5:18). Second, they have violated the law of God. "For as many as are of the works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone

1. I wish to extend my thanks to the Rev. James T. O'Brien for his review of and comments on this essay, particularly in this portion of it. His suggestions have strengthened the argument and clarity this introduction, for which I assume full responsibility.

who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, to perform them” (Gal. 3:10). Christ, however, has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (Gal. 3:13).

How does the work of Jesus Christ—his “perfect obedience and full satisfaction” (WLC 70)—come to be the possession of the believer? How does the sinner condemned in Adam come to be pardoned and accepted and accounted righteous in Jesus Christ? In his effectual calling, the believer is united by the Holy Spirit to Jesus Christ by faith (WLC 66). In union with Christ, the believer comes into possession of our Lord’s obedience and satisfaction for his justification. Faith is the sole instrument by which he “receives and applies Christ and his righteousness” in justification. By faith alone the believer receives for his justification what Christ has done (Rom. 3:21–26).

Theologians use two important words in connection with our justification. First, justification is *forensic*; that is to say, it is a legal declaration. We see Paul underscoring this very point at Romans 8:33–34, “Who will bring a charge against God’s elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns?” Second, justification entails the *imputation* of Christ’s merits to the believer. We see Paul teaching this point at 2 Corinthians 5:21, “He made him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him.” This passage has been called the double exchange—the Christ who was, is, and ever shall be sinless had the sins of the elect reckoned to him so that in him they might be reckoned righteous.

Justification, therefore, is not God “wiping the slate clean” in the sense that he forgives us and gives us a second chance, an opportunity to earn our acceptance before him. Yes, justification means that our sins are pardoned. But this is not all. Justification also means that we are accepted and accounted righteous because of what our Savior has done. We are clothed with the merits of the Lord Jesus Christ. In the words of a well-known hymn quoted elsewhere in this volume:

Jesus, thy blood and righteousness
My beauty are, my glorious dress;
’Midst flaming worlds, in these arrayed,
With joy shall I lift up my head.

Justification, therefore, is not a change that God makes within us (although every justified believer is also and of necessity sanctified). The basis of that declaration is not what God already sees in us, nor what God does in us, nor even what God foresees that we will do or he will do in us. Nor does God accept faith instead of good works as the basis of our acceptance. The sole basis of that declaration is without, or outside,

ourselves. That basis is the perfect obedience and full satisfaction of Jesus Christ (WLC 70).

What does faith *do* in justification? It receives. It receives the perfect obedience and full satisfaction of Christ. Could we possibly boast that we at least have put forward faith? Could we find some kernel of credit here? Not at all! Faith is the gift of God, lest any man boast (Eph. 2:8–10).

What about our good works? Saving faith, after all, must produce good works. Do those good works justify us? Are they part of the basis upon which God pardons us and accepts and accounts us righteous? Not at all. Those good works simply evidence that faith is genuine (see James 2:14–26). We must never rely upon those good works as even the smallest part of the basis of our justification. Justification is based entirely on what Christ has done, and all glory goes to our great God.

This, then, is what the Reformers meant when they affirmed *sola fide*. It is by faith *alone* that a believer is justified. It is this precious doctrine that is under renewed attack within the church today.

The New Perspective(s) on Paul

Let us trace, then, the first of two movements that have converged within the evangelical and Reformed churches—the New Perspective(s) on Paul.² The New Perspective on Paul has its origin within academic critical circles. In other words, its best-known proponents do not identify with the creeds and confessions of the Reformation.

It is important to recognize the foundational contribution of a scholar whose work provided much of the impetus for the New Perspective on Paul. In two famous lectures, Krister Stendahl argued that the Western church's understanding of Paul has been skewed by the experience of Augustine and Martin Luther.³ Both men were ridden with a guilty conscience. Both men sought and found relief in their understanding of Paul's gospel. Stendahl argued, however, that the historical Protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone owed more to Augustine's and Luther's anguish of soul than it did to Paul's teaching. Stendahl famously insisted that Paul had a "robust conscience," that the apostle was not burdened with personal guilt from which he found release through a forensic justification.

2. The following discussion of the New Perspective is a summarization of the argument set forth in my book on the subject, *Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004).

3. Stendahl, "The apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," in *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 78–96; "Paul Among Jews and Gentiles," in *ibid.*, 1–77. These were first presented in 1961 and 1963, respectively.

This conviction is tied to Stendahl's understanding of Paul's "Damascus Road" experience (Acts 9, 22, 26), historically understood among Christians to be the occasion of Paul's conversion. Stendahl claimed that while Paul experienced a "call" on the Damascus Road, he did not experience "conversion" in the customary sense of the word. Paul was now persuaded that Jesus Christ was the Messiah, and that Christ had called him to be apostle to the Gentiles. Paul did not discover in this encounter forensic justification as the solution to personal guilt. Paul's decisive transition from Judaism to Christianity was not to be explained in terms of "conversion" but in terms of the apostle's newfound call to preach to the Gentiles. Stendahl contends that Paul is not taken up with the question "How do I find a gracious God?" but with the following questions: (1) "What happens to the law (the Torah, the actual Law of Moses, not the principle of legalism) when the Messiah has come?" (2) "What are the ramifications of the Messiah's arrival for the relation between Jews and Gentiles?" and (3) "What is the 'place of the Gentiles in the Church and in the plan of God?'"⁴ Stendahl was advancing an insight that later New Perspective writers would develop at greater length: the burden and genius of Paul's thought fundamentally lies *not* in the realm of soteriology (the doctrine of salvation), but in the realm of ecclesiology (the doctrine of the church).

The New Perspective on Paul properly begins not with questions about Paul but with questions about the Judaism of Jesus' and Paul's day.⁵ Historically, Protestants had seen Paul opposing Judaism as a religion of works, i.e., a religion wherein one's works or deeds were understood to render the individual acceptable in God's eyes. Paul, particularly in his letter to the Romans, argues that it is impossible for any ordinary human being to be thus righteous. Rather, Paul announces in the gospel, sinners are justified by faith alone. Paul propounds, then, a gospel of grace.

New Perspective proponents have questioned whether this Protestant analysis of ancient Judaism is accurate. E. P. Sanders, in his epochal work, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, argued that ancient Judaism is most properly seen to be a religion of grace, not of works.⁶ If this is the case, then Paul is not opposing Judaism because it is a religion of works in opposition to his religion of grace. Yet, the apostle is most certainly opposing something in connection with Judaism. Given that Paul's doctrine of justification by faith alone is integrally tied both to his critique of Judaism and of the

4. Stendahl, quoted at Waters, *Justification*, 24.

5. We should note that many biblical scholars do not properly distinguish biblical religion, which is thoroughly gracious, from post-Old Testament Judaism, much of which was not. In this sense, much of first-century Judaism represents a declension from the Old Testament.

6. See the discussion at Waters, *Justification*, 35–58.

Judaizers within the church, justification has been brought to the forefront of New Perspective scrutiny.

Before we proceed, we should observe that, while Sanders has persuaded many scholars that Judaism is gracious, he has not persuaded all scholars. Sanders has established that Judaism was not a crass religion of “merit-mongering” in the fashion represented by turn-of-the-twentieth-century German scholarship. Judaism was, in fact, conversant with the language and with the concept of grace. Sanders, however, is mistaken in concluding that just because Judaism made room for grace it was a thoroughly gracious religion. One of our Lord’s own parables illustrates this point. He introduces the parable of the Pharisee and the publican this way: “He also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt” (Luke 18:9). Jesus represents two people praying to God. The Pharisee prays: “God, I thank you that I am not like other men: extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector” (18:11). Jesus acknowledges that the Pharisee admits that God has played some role in his being morally different from the notorious sinners whom he mentions in his prayer (“God, I thank you . . .”). Yet, notice Jesus’ verdict on the man: he was not justified at all (18:14). This parable captures the temper of the Judaism of many in Jesus’ day. It was conversant with grace. It gave a place to grace. It was not, however, thoroughly and radically gracious. This Pharisee looked to his works and not to divine mercy alone to render him acceptable before God.

If one is inclined, however, to argue that Paul’s opposition to Judaism was not because Judaism was a religion of works and Christianity a religion of grace, then he must try to explain how and why Paul opposed Judaism. He must explain what Paul meant by *justification*, how and why justification is not “by works,” and how and why justification is “by faith in Christ.” He must further do so in the wake of Stendahl’s trenchant critique that Paul had not experienced a conversion from one religion to another and of Stendahl’s insistence that Paul’s fundamental concerns lay in the direction of ecclesiology and not soteriology.

Partly from dissatisfaction with Sanders’s own responses to such questions as these, James D. G. Dunn offers an important New Perspective reading of Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith alone.⁷ Dunn asked and answered the question “to what is Paul objecting in Judaism?” by advancing a certain definition of the “works of the law” that Paul opposed. The “works of the law” were not generic human efforts to earn salvation through law-obedience. They were, rather, preeminently those

7. For Dunn’s views on “works of the law” and on justification, see especially “The New Perspective on Paul,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 65 (1983): 95–122; and *A Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).

“boundary-marking” laws within Judaism that served to distinguish Jew from Gentile. Examples of these, for Dunn, include circumcision, the Jewish dietary laws, and the laws governing the Sabbath.

What then is justification? For Dunn, justification does not describe how one enters the people of God. It is a declaration that the believer is already a member of the people of God. The true boundaries, then, of God’s people are not defined by these Jewish boundary-marking devices (works of the law). They are defined rather by “faith.” This principle of justification by faith and not by works of the law, Dunn insists, is Paul’s effort to reclaim a faith—manifested in the biblical testimony concerning Abraham—the importance of which had gone awry among his Jewish contemporaries.

In so defining justification by faith as a doctrine primarily relating to ecclesiology rather than to soteriology, Dunn does not altogether exclude questions of salvation from the doctrine. He contends that the distinction “declare righteous” and “make righteous” often used in attempting to translate the Greek word “to justify” (*dikaioō*) is a false dichotomy. Justification, then, includes the inward transformation of the sinner. Justification therefore is not by faith alone. It is by faith *and* the works that result from the inward transformation of the sinner.

Most influential, perhaps, of all New Perspective proponents within the evangelical and Reformed church is Bishop N. T. Wright.⁸ Wright, whose ministerial credentials are in the Church of England, has earned a reputation as a moderate biblical scholar, a concerned churchman, and a winsome and engaging public speaker. As such, his substantial (although unfinished) body of writings on the apostle Paul must be taken seriously. Wright has granted Sanders’s basic thesis regarding Judaism and manifests affinities with Dunn’s understanding of Paul’s phrase “the works of the law.”

Wright’s understanding of justification is not dissimilar to that of Dunn. Justification is not a declaration of how one becomes a Christian. It is, rather, a declaration that the believer is already in the people of God. Characteristic of Wright is his insistence that Paul speaks both of a “present justification” and a “future justification.” In present justification, *faith* is said to be a boundary-marking device. Unlike the works of the law, *faith* delineates the people of God as they are constituted around Jesus the Messiah. Future justification is said to take place at the last day. As in present justification, future justification is by *faith*. Faith, however,

8. See N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997); the unpublished “The New Perspectives on Paul,” a lecture given at the 10th Edinburgh Dogmatics Conference (2003); and most recently *Paul in Fresh Perspective* (London: SPCK / Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

will not function in future justification merely as a boundary-marking device. *Faith*, in final justification, includes one's faithfulness. That faithfulness will constitute at least part of the basis upon which the verdict of (future) justification is declared. We have, in such statements, essential agreement with one of the fundamental principles of justification in the Roman Catholic Council of Trent: justification is based, at least in part, on the work of God *in* the sinner. As with Dunn, Wright has rejected the Protestant doctrine of *sola fide*.

The Federal Vision

In at least one important respect the Federal Vision is radically different from the New Perspective on Paul: The New Perspective has its origins in scholarship that self-consciously opposes itself to the Protestant confessions. The Federal Vision sees itself as calling the Reformed world to a more thoroughgoing commitment to the Reformed tradition. As such its proponents are ministers, elders, and congregants within church bodies that identify with the Westminster Standards and the Three Forms of Unity.

Even so, Federal Vision proponents have expressed appreciation for the New Perspective on Paul.⁹ For the most part, Federal Vision proponents believe that certain aspects of the New Perspective and Reformed theology are soteriologically compatible. Some Federal Vision proponents, consequently, have been critical of recent Reformed attempts to emphasize the differences between the New Perspective and Reformed theology. Yet, Federal Vision proponents are not all entirely agreed on which aspects of the New Perspective merit some degree of approval. Nevertheless, Federal Vision proponents have often been supportive of Reformed efforts to embrace Wright's and Dunn's insights on matters related to justification, particularly in their efforts to recast the doctrine as primarily ecclesiological.

Is it true that insights from the New Perspective on Paul can be incorporated into Reformed theology as easily as some Federal Vision writers claim that they can be? Two examples suffice to answer this question in the negative. One Federal Vision writer has expressed appreciation for certain New Perspective(s) definitions of the "righteousness of God" as *covenantal faithfulness* (rather than the righteousness of Christ imputed to the believer for his justification) at key points in the letters of Paul.¹⁰

9. For elaboration upon and full documentation of the points raised in this and in the following paragraphs, see chap. 3 of Waters, *The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology: A Comparative Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2006).

10. See Peter Leithart, "Judge Me, O God": Biblical Perspectives on Justification," 203–35 in ed. Steve Wilkins and Duane Garner, *The Federal Vision* (Monroe, LA: Athanasius, 2004).

In so doing, he proposes that the Reformation has illegitimately restricted justification to the legal or forensic sphere. Such a definition of righteousness means that we need to see the Bible's teaching on justification to encompass divine deliverance from the power of sin as well as from the guilt of sin. He therefore proposes that we should broaden our definition of justification to embrace what he terms definitive sanctification. This proponent consequently defines justification in terms of non-forensic, transformational categories. To put it simply, he conflates justification and sanctification. In so doing, his definition of justification cannot sustain the doctrine of *sola fide*.

Another Federal Vision proponent has argued that the Reformers were mistaken to see the apostle Paul's faith/works antithesis as contrasting faith and activity in justification.¹¹ This antithesis is intended, rather, to contrast faith with specifically Jewish practices as markers of one's inclusion within the covenant community. In so doing, however, this proponent also fails to exclude the believer's obedience from the basis of justification. To say that one is "justified by faith" need not exclude one's believing "faithfulness." Again, this construction of justification by faith cannot sustain the doctrine of *sola fide*.

Federal Vision challenges to *sola fide* have come from yet another quarter: its innovative re-reading of covenant theology. Its claims to the contrary notwithstanding, the Federal Vision compromises and undermines rather than refines and advances historic covenant theology. Historic Reformed covenant theology sees God having made two covenants with men: the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. God entered into a covenant of works with Adam in the Garden of Eden. The condition of that covenant was personal, perfect, and perpetual obedience, manifested in the command to Adam not to eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The sanction set forth was death. Adam, representing in that covenant all his posterity descending from him by ordinary generation, sinned, and this posterity sinned in him and fell with him. God has purposed to redeem his elect by the covenant of grace. The Second Adam, the Lord Jesus Christ, represents the elect as their mediator. In behalf of the elect, the Lord Jesus Christ obeys the law perfectly and makes full satisfaction to divine justice. It is this perfect obedience and full satisfaction that are imputed to the believer and received by faith alone for his justification. The covenant of grace is a covenant of *grace* to the elect because it is a covenant of *works* to Jesus Christ.

11. See Steve Schlissel, "Justification and the Gentiles," 237–61 in *The Federal Vision*.

Federal Vision proponents question this doctrine at a number of points.¹² Some proponents have criticized the doctrine of the covenant of works. One proponent in particular objects to the “works” principle of the first covenant.¹³ This principle, he argues, misconceives and distorts the relational and familial character of this covenant.¹⁴ He also argues that the work of Jesus Christ for the elect should not be understood in terms of *merit*. Consequently, the believer does not receive the merits of Christ for his justification. Jesus’ active obedience—his perfect obedience to the law—is not imputed to the believer for his justification, but rather is said to be a precondition for the believer’s justification. The believer, in union with Christ, partakes of the verdict pronounced over Jesus at the resurrection. Jesus had to obey the law in order to receive this verdict. The believer, in union with Christ, is said to share in this verdict. He does not, however, have Christ’s obedience imputed to him.

Other Federal Vision proponents reason in similar fashion, some affirming this conclusion regarding imputed righteousness more forthrightly than others. None believes that he is setting out to attack the Protestant doctrine of justification. We must nevertheless press the question, what kind of doctrine of justification emerges when one denies the imputation of Christ’s merits to the believer? It cannot be the doctrine of the Westminster Standards or of the Scripture.

Federal Vision innovations in the arena of covenant theology cause problems not only for the doctrine of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to the believer for his justification, but also for the doctrine of *sola fide*. One encounters the argument that *merit* should be excised entirely from covenantal thinking. As we have seen, one proponent contends that it is illegitimate to extend this term to Christ’s own work on behalf of the elect. But this objection to *merit* extends in another direction as well. Rightly asserting that the believer can in no sense merit favor or acceptance with God, some Federal Vision proponents wrongly create a place for what is said to be the believer’s non-meritorious obedience in

12. For elaboration upon and full documentation of the points raised in this and in the following paragraphs, see chaps. 2 and 3 of Waters, *The Federal Vision*.

13. See Rich Lusk, “A Response to ‘The Biblical Plan of Salvation,’” ed. E. Calvin Beisner, *The Auburn Avenue Theology, Pros and Cons: Debating the Federal Vision* (Fort Lauderdale, FL: Knox Theological Seminary, 2004), 118–48. Compare also Ralph Smith, *Eternal Covenant: How the Trinity Reshapes Covenant Theology* (Moscow, ID: Canon, 2003); James B. Jordan, “Merit Versus Maturity: What Did Jesus Do for Us?” 151–200 in *The Federal Vision*.

14. FV arguments against the covenant of works often illegitimately equate *works* and *merit*. In other words, objecting to the claim that Adam’s obedience in the first covenant was to be “meritorious,” they therefore dismiss the *works* principle of the first covenant. But such a conclusion does not follow. Many Reformed theologians, firmly committed to the confessional doctrine of the covenant of works, maintain its *works* principle without speaking of the obedience required of Adam in terms of merit.

justification. In other words, provided that the obedience in view is not meritorious but faith-produced, it is thereby said to be acceptable as at least part of the basis of the believer's justification.

This doctrine can have at least two significant consequences. Two Federal Vision proponents speak in such a way as to include one's works as part of the basis of his justification.¹⁵ One Federal Vision proponent will argue that one's faith-produced works may even be conceived as instrumental in justification.¹⁶ If that is the case, then justification is not by faith alone. Justification is by faith *and* works. To say that one's faith-produced works constitute even part of the basis upon which the believer is justified is to deny the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

Conclusions

As different as the New Perspective(s) on Paul and the Federal Vision are, they converge in this respect: they deny the doctrine of *sola fide*: justification by faith alone. Rather than calling men and women to rest on the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ alone for their justification, the New Perspective on Paul and the Federal Vision give us a modified covenant of works. They tell us "do this (with God's help) and you will live." Unanswered, however, are some crucial questions. How many good works must I produce in order to clear the bar of divine acceptance? How "good" must my good works be? Will certain wicked works disqualify me from my "final justification"—even if I have produced many good works? If so, which are they and where can I find a list of them? Will God lower his standard of justice in order to accommodate my sin-tainted works in justification? If not, how will I ever meet the divine standard of perfection (Matt. 5:48)?

Questions like these plagued adherents of an ancient Judaism that had in many respects departed from the thoroughgoing graciousness of biblical religion. Such questions were discussed among the theologians of the medieval church. Today we encounter them afresh in the New Perspective on Paul and in the Federal Vision. New Perspective proponents not infrequently deride the Reformers' readings of the apostle Paul because they are said to have read the Reformation's critique of late medieval theology into Paul's conflict with ancient Judaism. What such individuals fail to grasp is that the New Perspective on Paul (and the Federal Vision)

15. See Rich Lusk, "Faith, Baptism, and Justification" (2003); "The Tenses of Justification" (2003); and Steve Schlissel, "Justification and the Gentiles, in *The Federal Vision*, ed. Steve Wilkins and Duane Garner (Monroe, LA: Athanasius, 2004), 237–61."

16. See Rich Lusk, "Faith, Baptism, and Justification."

are but players in the current act of a drama that has been unfolding for centuries: the conflict between a thoroughly and wholly gracious religion and a partially gracious religion.¹⁷ The difference might seem to consist simply in an adverb (*alone*), but this adverb manifests the chasm that lies between two fundamentally different religions.

What is justification? How is a sinner justified before God? For those who have grasped the Bible's testimony to radical human depravity as *the* human problem, the answer does not fundamentally lie in the realm of who belongs and who does not belong to the people of God. Nor will it nor can it lie in anything within us. The biblical answer lies in the merits of Jesus Christ received by faith alone.

Justification has rightly been termed *articula stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*, the article on which the church stands or falls.¹⁸ The church is facing a threat that strikes at her foundations. I am grateful for the essays that follow in this volume. In them the reader will find a store of material that will both inform him and equip him for a reasoned defense of the doctrines of grace. May God grant that this book will fortify his people to grasp the truth with renewed understanding, and to love with deepened affection the God who has rescued his people from the pit of destruction and has placed their feet firmly upon a rock.

17. That is to say, to compromise *sola fide* is to compromise the graciousness of biblical religion.

18. Cited at John Theodore Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics: A Handbook of Doctrinal Theology for Pastors, Teachers, and Laymen* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing, 1931), 371.