

**A New Perspective on 'The New Perspective'.  
(Analyzing, Assessing, Appreciating and Applying)**

The saying that 'there is nothing new under the sun' is certainly applicable to the teaching that has the dubious title, 'The New Perspective'.

Its leading exponent N T Wright (Tom Wright) is a man with an incredible and impeccable academic pedigree. The purpose of this brief article is not to examine in detail the extent of Bishop Wright's theological writing. It is beyond the scope of this article and, at this stage, beyond the scope of the present writer. I have personally benefited from reading some of the theological material that has flowed from the pen of Tom Wright; there is much to stimulate and satisfy. But the premise that underscores 'the New Perspective' is, I believe, fundamentally flawed, and needs some critical examination. ***That premise relates, in the teaching of the 'New Perspective', to the manner (the boundary markers) through which men and women become part of God's Kingdom now that the gospel of Christ has been proclaimed.*** It is my purpose to consider only that premise (which I trust will grow clearer as we progress) and express, that this is yet another example of the fact that 'there is nothing new under the sun'. In other words, theological error is a constantly recurring phenomena within the Church according to the teaching of the New Testament!

The theological writing giving expression to the New Perspective is voluminous, both by its chief exponent and those who are seeking to make some critical reply. It is the voluminous nature of this New Perspective that, for many in the Church, makes it difficult to comprehend and critique in a simple manner, thus increases the danger of its acceptability by default.

A number of key considerations comprise the issue. Let me seek to simplify those considerations, but not, I trust, at the expense of being simplistic!

1. At the centre of the debate concerning the New perspective is ***the validity of the doctrine of justification by faith as expressed at the Reformation. This key theological understanding flowing from the Reformation has been a mistaken emphasis to those who hold the New perspective; the mistake arising from a defective understanding of the issues Paul was facing.*** Paul was not combating a legalistic Jewish faith which believed that salvation was based upon doing the works of the Law (the understanding of the Church from the Reformation).

2. The above conclusion has been based on the research of E P Sanders, who demonstrated that the religion of Judaism in the period 200BC-200AD was not based on 'legalism' (adherence to the Law) but grace.

3. If the above conclusion is correct, we are forced to ask at least two questions:  
(i) What place did the 'law' have in Judaism during the time of the Apostle Paul?

The answer is, according to Sanders and Wright, that it could best be described as **'covenantal nomism', ie., the keeping of the law (especially circumcision/dietary) was the means by which an individual 'stayed in' the community of those who were God's people by grace.**

(ii) What exactly then was the problem that Paul encountered with his Jewish opponents as he proclaimed the gospel?

The answer is that Paul was not attacking Judaism because they believed that justification was by the 'works of the Law', **but rather because they believed that such 'boundary markers' were necessary badges of covenantal nomism; badges that served to distinguish and preclude Gentiles from Judaism.**

4. Although Reformation theology has assumed that Paul was proclaiming the doctrine of justification by faith in the face of Jewish legalism (finding salvation by obedience to the Law) **no such legalism was present in Judaism.**

5. Paul's dispute with the Judaizers centered upon their unwillingness to accept that God's covenant promises extended to Jews as well as Gentiles!

Paul's concern then in the gospel is not one of how men are saved; the gospel is primarily about the proclamation that Jesus is Lord! **For Wright, 'faith' in Jesus Christ as Lord is the new 'boundary marker' that brings men and women into a state of 'covenantal nomism'. Expressed somewhat differently, people enter the Kingdom not by 'boundary markers' but by 'faith' in the Lordship of Christ; 'faith' is the new boundary marker' of the people who belong to the Kingdom.**

6. Hence, God's 'righteousness' in the scheme of the New Perspective is no longer tied to the justification of sinners (the Reformation view); God's righteousness is rather the expression of His 'covenantal faithfulness' to save a people for Himself, and 'justification' the term which defines those who are members of that covenant.

**'Faith' is NOT the instrumental means by which the believer in Christ receives Christ's righteousness and is 'justified'; faith is the boundary marker that distinguishes those who are members of the covenant community from those who are not!**

7. Because of the fact that the New Perspective as expressed by Wright sees the 'law' as the means by which people 'remain' within the 'covenant people' (see 3i)

**'justification' is both 'present' and 'future'. The final and future 'justification' of believers will be decided on the quality of their whole life of faith which means that ultimately 'salvation' rests on the quality of ones obedience to the law.**

The emphasis of Wright upon the essential requirements of the law (staying in the covenant) is a timely corrective to the current abuse of the doctrine of justification of

*faith which is little more than 'easy-believism'. Christians need to see the keeping of the law (fulfilled in Christ) as crucial to their salvation.*

*Luther saw that clearly; so too the other Reformers, but such truth has been largely 'lost' with the 'slick summaries' of the 'Solas' so current in the modern evangelical Church. Wright's position affirms that our relationship with God is a matter of faith plus works. In reply let me say that our relationship is not a matter of grace plus works equals salvation; but rather, grace and works! **Grace and works must be separated; but works must also be seen as a corollary to genuine faith, though not the grounds upon which justification is bestowed!***

*I have for a great many years been concerned by the dichotomy in modern evangelical thinking of faith/grace and works. Its strong tendency is to antinomianism with the acceptance of easy-believism. The emphasis brought by Wright has been a helpful corrective; **a refreshing reminder of the crucial importance of obedience to the law of those who claim to be part of the covenant community.***

*But does Wright's 'New Perspective' stack up contextually? The short answer is no!*

*Wright's position that the 'Lordship' of Christ represents the extent of God's grace in the New Testament (his ridicule and rejection of the cross as imputation) does not do justice to the New Testament teaching regarding God's righteousness, nor does it do justice to the principle of sacrificial atonement as instituted in Leviticus, together with its brilliant and breathtaking perfection / fulfillment within the New Testament. (Romans; Hebrews; 1 Peter)*

*The biblical expression of 'substitution' becomes incomprehensible within Scripture if Wright's position is adopted!*

*Grace simply does not exist in the New Testament by asserting the Lordship of Christ alone! Christ's Lordship springs from the cross, and it is in the cross that we see 'grace' operative in 'the one complete, perfect oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world' (2 Cor 5:21). Lordship is dependant on crucifixion. Justification in the light of the teaching of the Reformation is by faith alone and grace alone, **but true faith is more than intellectual assent to Christ; it is equally an intimate and imitating allegiance to Christ (thorough obedience). We have largely lost sight of this of this biblical balance at the expense of easy-believism!***

***Without the substitutionary atonement expressed in Scripture (Reformation) we possess no hope of salvation; having this hope we must purify ourselves as He is pure!***

***Pastor J Lowe***