

Judaizers and Justification:

Bridging the Gap Between Contemporary Pauline Studies and New Testament Theology

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Depending upon one's point of view, the current state of Pauline studies is either exciting or alarming. Traditional interpretations of Paul's letters are being called into question with increasing frequency as scholars diligently work to reconstruct Paul's historical context. The fact that these studies undermine classical Protestant ideas of sin and salvation can be used either as the basis for discounting and attempting to refute the growing consensus or for rethinking and perhaps restructuring contemporary doctrines of soteriology. Whereas "evangelicals" feel challenged to respond with apologetics, less "orthodox" Christians, particularly those of the various Adventist traditions, may take advantage of these developments and rise to the task of providing a unique theological framework for these studies.

The central issues in this debate are Paul's view(s) of the law and the meaning of the controversy in which Paul was engaged. Paul strongly argued that we are "justified by faith in Christ [or "the faith of Christ"] and not by doing the works of the law" (Gal. 2:16b).¹ Since the time of Martin Luther, this has been understood as an indictment of legalistic efforts to merit favor before God. In fact Judaism in general has come to be construed as the very antithesis of Christianity. Judaism is earthly, carnal, proud; Christianity is heavenly, spiritual, humble. It is a tragic

¹Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from the New Revised Standard Version.

irony that all of Judaism has come to be viewed in terms of the worst vices of the sixteenth-century institutionalized church.

When Judaism is thus cast in the role of the medieval church, Paul's protests become very Lutheran and traditional Protestant theology is granted divine sanction. In hermeneutical terms, then, the historical context of Paul's debate lies at the very heart of the doctrine of justification in the church.

Obviously an in-depth analysis of the Pauline corpus and its place in the context of first-century Judaism would take us far beyond the scope of this brief article. We can, however, quickly survey the topography of Paul's thought in context, particularly as it has emerged through the efforts of recent scholarship, and note some salient points which we may use as the basis of a refurbished soteriology. This will entail, first, a survey of recent Christian studies of first-century Judaism and Paul's view of the law, then a look at Paul's thought in context, and finally a brief reassessment of Pauline soteriology in relation to other New Testament soteriologies and contemporary theology. In the process I hope to demonstrate that a revamping of the doctrine of justification is exegetically sound as well as theologically expedient. If I am right, then the fragmenting discipline of biblical theology can be somewhat salvaged in the thinking of the church without its findings being rejected outright. The catch is that traditional theology cannot emerge unscathed. The remaining issue (which will not be addressed here) is whether such radical shifts in theology can be acceptable outside the confines of "unorthodox" church groups — that is, conferences such as ours — or whether even we as a whole can or should reevaluate our ongoing appropriation of "evangelical" soteriology.

I. JUDAISM AS LEGALISTIC: THE MAKING AND BREAKING OF A PARADIGM

Traditional Protestant soteriology, focused as it is on the plight of the conscience-smitten individual before a holy God, must be carved from the rock of human pretentiousness in order to be cogent. Thus it is no accident that the Reformers interpreted the burning issues of Paul's day in light of their struggle against legalism. "The Reformers' interpretation of Paul," writes Krister Stendahl, "rests on an analogism when Pauline statements about Faith and Works, Law and Gospel, Jews and Gentiles are read in the framework of late medieval piety. The Law, the Torah, with

its specific requirements of circumcision and food restrictions becomes a general principle of 'legalism' in religious matters."²

This caricature of Judaism was buttressed by such scholars as Ferdinand Weber, who arranged a systematic presentation of rabbinic literature.³ Weber's book provided a wealth of Jewish source material neatly arranged to show Judaism as a religion of legalism. Emil Schürer, Wilhelm Bousset and others were deeply influenced by Weber's work.⁴ These scholars in turn have been immensely influential. Rudolf Bultmann, for instance, relied on Schürer and Bousset for his understanding of first-century Judaism.⁵

Weber's interpretation of Judaism did not go unchallenged, however. The Jewish theologian Claude G. Montefiore⁶ pointed out that Weber had not approached rabbinic literature with sufficient sensitivity to its nature and diversity. Weber had imposed a systematic grid on the rabbinic literature and wrested passages out of context. The law in Judaism was not a burden which produced self-righteousness. On the contrary, the law was itself a gift from a merciful and forgiving God.

A second challenge came from a non-Jewish scholar, George Foot Moore.⁷ Moore's treatment of Weber was even more devastating than Montefiore's. Moore clearly demonstrated that Weber had little firsthand knowledge of rabbinic literature and in fact took most of his quotations from earlier Christian works against Judaism. He demonstrated Schürer's and Bousset's reliance on Weber and, like Montefiore, pointed out that rabbinic Judaism was not a religion of legalism.

This point was not sufficiently driven home, however, until the publication in 1977 of E. P. Sanders' book *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. A New Testament scholar with a good grasp of rabbinic literature, Sanders drove the final and most powerful nail into the coffin of the traditional Christian caricature of Judaism. Sanders' extensive treatment

²"The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," *The Writings of St. Paul*, Wayne A. Meeks, ed., New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1972, 426.

³Cf. Frank Thielman, *Paul and The Law*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994, 25; E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1977, 33.

⁴Thielman, 26; Sanders, 33.

⁵Thielman, 26; Sanders, 39, 42-47.

⁶Thielman, 27.

⁷Thielman, 28; Sanders, 33, 34.

of the Tannaitic literature, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha was designed, like the efforts of Montefiore and Moore, to describe and define Palestinian Judaism on its own terms, not as the mirror image of Christianity. Unlike Montefiore and Moore, Sanders has been immensely successful in convincing New Testament scholars. Sanders has coined a now well-known phrase to describe the character of first-century Palestinian Judaism: “covenantal nomism.” The meaning of “covenantal nomism” is that human obedience is not construed as the means of entering into God’s covenant. That cannot be earned; inclusion within the covenant body is by the grace of God. Rather, obedience is the means of maintaining one’s status within the covenant. And with its emphasis on divine grace and forgiveness, Judaism was never a religion of legalism.

There are scholars who have tried to accommodate some of the corrective work of Sanders and salvage Protestant doctrine as well. Among them is Frank Thielman, who in his book *Paul and The Law* posits general agreement between Paul and first-century Judaism on the principle that justification is not by the works of the law. The difference, according to Thielman, is eschatological. Drawing largely on Josephus and the Apocrypha, Thielman argues that most Jews agreed they had broken the law and were under a curse (foreign domination). They looked to a time when God would change their hearts so that they could obey the law. According to Paul, that time had already come with the death of Christ.

Even if Thielman is correct, however, we should point out that Jews could believe in widespread national disobedience without implying that every individual person in Israel was wicked and disobedient. Commenting on *Psalms of Solomon* 17:19, 20⁸ and the use of Psalm 14 (cf. 14:3, “there is no one who does good, no, not one”) in Romans 3, Stanley K. Stowers writes:

The psalmist’s statements are just as bold and exceptionless as Paul’s, but interpreters have learned to provide historical contexts for such statements in *1 Enoch*, the Qumran writings, and the

⁸“For there was no one among them who practiced righteousness or justice: From their leader to the commonest of the people, (they were) in every kind of sin: The king was a criminal and the judge disobedient; (and) the people sinners” (James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1985, Vol. 2, 666).

Psalms of Solomon, while in Paul interpreters read them as the most literal universal philosophical propositions about human nature. The writer of the *Psalms of Solomon* did not think that every single inhabitant of Jerusalem or the land of Israel was totally evil but only that the representatives of the nation had been co-opted and that unfaithfulness had reached unheralded proportions.⁹

In fact Psalm 14 itself distinguishes between the wicked (v. 4) and the righteous (v. 5), a common and very real distinction in the Old Testament and Jewish literature. Turning to Stowers again:

Paul has an unambiguous belief in the last judgment of every individual, including faithful believers in Christ. He also believes in degrees of sin, reward, and punishment. These beliefs about individual judgment and degrees of reward have a close relation to the distinction between the lawless (*ho anomos*) person and the righteous person (*ho dikaios*). Speaking of the concept of the wicked in the Synoptic Gospels, E. P. Sanders writes, "It refers to those who sinned willfully and heinously and who did not repent." These conceptions of the wicked and the righteous have been erased by interpretations which have Paul claiming that it is necessary to keep the law perfectly in order to be considered righteous. Paul neither argues nor suggests that doctrine. All of this flies in the face of the dominant Western understanding of Paul's doctrine of justification by faith alone.¹⁰

This critical point deserves to be elaborated. Paul's argument against the Judaizers could hardly have been that the law cannot be obeyed, *therefore* righteousness comes through faith. According to Paul's own testimony, he had kept the law blamelessly as a Pharisee (Phil. 3:6). Similarly, Luke writes that Zechariah and Elizabeth "were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord" (1:6). This is fully in accord with the teaching of the law itself. Moses assured the Israelites: "Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach" (Deut. 30:11, NIV). Far from being crushed by the impossible demands of an unfulfillable law, the righteous person's "delight is in the law of the LORD" (Psa. 1:2).

⁹A *Rereading of Romans*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1994, 186.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 140.

This does not mean that the blameless person literally never sins. The perfectionistic standard that is read back into the law simply does not fit the context. The pious author of Psalm 119 may have confessed sin (119:176), but from the remainder of the psalm it is clear that the overall pattern of his life was one of faithfulness and blameless law-keeping and that he was a righteous man.

There is another fatal flaw in the tradition of the all-or-nothing perfectionistic law: The sacrificial system of Israel. George Howard writes:

Paul, who by his own admission knew the law well (Gal. 1:14), knew that the cultic aspect of the law implied the imperfection of man. The Levitical system of sacrifices provided a means whereby man, when he sinned, could obtain forgiveness. In fact observance of the law to a large degree involved the offering of sacrifices for the atonement of sins. To keep the law was, among other things, to find cultic forgiveness for breaking the law. For Paul to have argued that the law demanded absolute obedience and that one legal infraction brought with it unpardonable doom, would have been for him to deny what all the world knew, namely, that the Jerusalem temple stood as a monument to the belief that Yahweh was a forgiving God who pardoned his people when they sinned.¹¹

The tide of opinion is clearly turning against the Lutheran-Weberian interpretation of the role and function of the law within Judaism. Protestants can no longer assume that Paul was up against a legalistic Judaism which taught that salvation was to be “merited” or “earned” by self-reliance. Nor were Paul’s opponents against faith, grace, and forgiveness. The sticking point of the Judaizing controversy must be located elsewhere.

II. PAUL IN CONTEXT

If Paul was not protesting against legalism in Galatians and Romans, what is it he was up against? If Judaism and Judaizing Christians also

¹¹*Paul: Crisis in Galatia*, Cambridge University Press, 1979, second edition 1990, 53. In a footnote Howard anticipates the objection that James 2:10 teaches that the law is unfulfillable: “James 2:10 spurs the people on to greater vigilance in keeping the law by arguing that one is guilty of the whole law if he stumbles in one point. But James does not say, nor does he imply, that one sin is the end of the line with no possible means of forgiveness” (93).

believed in faith and grace, to what did Paul object? These questions have proven more difficult for scholars. Montefiore suggested that Paul was contending not with the Palestinian Judaism which would evolve into rabbinic Judaism but with a colder, more pessimistic Hellenized Judaism of the diaspora in which God really was more remote and less forgiving.¹² However, subsequent scholarship has not vindicated this thesis. Most scholars today agree that though there were differences between Hellenistic Judaism and Palestinian Judaism, the differences were not as great as Montefiore's suggestion would demand.

Other solutions are even less convincing. For some, like Heikki Räisänen,¹³ Paul's criticisms of the law are not only inaccurate but contradictory as well. They are to be understood not as representing a carefully formulated doctrine but as expedient arguments derived from his conviction that Christ is Savior of the world. Similarly, E. P. Sanders concluded that Paul worked backward from solution to plight rather than from plight to solution. If salvation comes to all, both Jews and Gentiles, through Christ, then it cannot come through the law.

This approach certainly places more emphasis on the nature of the Judaizing conflict as a Jew/Gentile issue rather than a philosophical debate about human nature and divine sovereignty. Sanders writes, for instance:

The dispute in Galatians is not about "doing" as such. Neither of the opposing factions saw the requirement of "doing" to be a denial of faith. When Paul makes requirements of his converts, he does not think that he has denied faith, and there is no reason to think that Jewish Christians who specified different requirements denied faith. The supposed conflict between "doing" as such and "faith" as such is simply not present in Galatians. What was at stake was not a way of life summarized by the word "trust" versus a mode of life summarized by "requirements," but whether or not the requirement for membership in the Israel of God would result in there being "neither Jew nor Greek." . . . There was no dispute over the necessity to trust God and have faith in Christ. The dispute was about whether or not one had to be Jewish.¹⁴

¹²Thielman, 31-33.

¹³Thielman, 37-39.

¹⁴Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1983, 159. Similarly, George Howard writes about "the belief that Paul's concern is with a dichotomy between works and faith. Works supposedly imply a system of merit in which a man is justified by keeping the law. Faith, on the other

For Sanders the language of justification is “transfer terminology.” To be justified is to enter into the covenant people. The distinction between “getting in” and “staying in” is important in this regard. The debate between “faith” and “law,” he writes, is a debate about entry requirements, not about life subsequent to conversion. The law is excluded as an entry requirement into the body of those who will be saved; entrance must be by faith apart from the law. Once Gentiles are “in,” however, they must behave appropriately and fulfill the law in order to retain their status. Elements of the law which create social distinctions between Jews and Gentiles — circumcision, Sabbath-keeping, food laws — also have to be discarded, even though Paul never sought a rational explanation for such a selective use of the law.

Thus in Sanders’ view Paul’s letters do not provide a consistent view of the law. Paul’s central convictions — the universal aspects of Christology and soteriology, and his standards of Christian behavior — led Paul to give different answers about the law, depending on the question. “When the topic changes, what he says about the law also changes.”¹⁵ When the topic is entrance requirements, the law is excluded. When the topic is behavior, the law is to be fulfilled. The arguments to which Paul is driven to defend these answers are construed as less consistent yet.

At this point the corrective work of James D. G. Dunn becomes critical to fully appreciating Sanders’ reconstruction of Palestinian Judaism and making good sense of Paul at the same time.¹⁶ Dunn demonstrates that the language of justification is not just “transfer terminology.” There are

hand, supposedly excludes works by definition and belongs to a system of grace. Faith and works are considered to be opposite ways to righteousness and are in fact incompatible. As one has so clearly put it: ‘The whole matter is now on a different plane — believing instead of achieving’ . . . But the coexistence of works of law and faith in Christ in Jewish Christianity suggests that the two are not absolutely incompatible from the standpoint of early Christianity. To argue that the law was done away because it demanded the impossible task of legal purity, and that to accept circumcision was to assume the obligation of this impossible task and to nullify the effects of faith in Christ is out of harmony with the facts. If Jewish Christianity practised the law while accepting faith in Christ Jesus as the way to salvation, how can it be said that the early church, including Paul, considered the two as mutually exclusive principles of life?’ (51, 52).

¹⁵Sanders, *Paul*, 143.

¹⁶Cf. *Jesus, Paul, and the Law*, Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990; *Romans*, Word Biblical Commentary 38, Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1988, two volumes; *The Epistle to the Galatians*, Black’s New Testament Commentary, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993.

ongoing and future elements of justification, as well as the initial act of acceptance.

“To be justified” in Paul cannot, therefore, be treated simply as an entry or initiation formula; nor is it possible to draw a clear line of distinction between Paul’s usage and the typically Jewish covenant usage. Already, as we may observe, Paul appears a good deal less idiosyncratic and arbitrary than Sanders alleges.¹⁷

Also unlike Sanders, Dunn provides a coherent framework for both Paul’s positive statements about the law and his negative statements. It was not the law itself which Paul criticized, but rather its misuse as a social barrier. This misuse of the law is what Paul means by the term “the works of the law”:

“Works of law,” “works of the law” are nowhere understood here, either by his Jewish interlocutors or by Paul himself, as works which *earn* God’s favor, as merit-amassing observances. They are rather seen as *badges*: they are simply what membership of the covenant people involves, what mark out the Jews as God’s people; . . . in other words, Paul has in view precisely what Sanders calls “covenantal nomism.” And what he denies is that God’s justification depends on “covenantal nomism,” that God’s grace extends only to those who wear the badge of the covenant.¹⁸

The “badges” or “works” particularly at issue were those of circumcision and food laws, not simply human efforts to do good. The ramifications of this observation for traditional Protestantism are far-reaching:

More important for Reformation exegesis is the corollary that “works of the law” do *not* mean “good works” in general, “good works” in the sense disparaged by the heirs of Luther, works in the sense of achievement. . . . In short, once again Paul seems much less a man of sixteenth-century Europe and much more firmly in touch with the reality of first-century Judaism than many have thought.¹⁹

Dunn also emphasizes the ramifications for the traditional dichotomy between faith and works:

¹⁷*Jesus*, 190.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 194.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 194, 195.

We should not let our grasp of Paul's reasoning slip back into the old distinction between faith and works in general, between faith and "good works." Paul is not arguing here for a concept of faith which is totally passive because it fears to become a "work." It is the demand for a *particular* work as the necessary expression of faith which he denies.²⁰

The more we consider Paul's writing in this context the less we see the acute psychological dilemma characteristic of the Augustinian-Lutheran interpretation as a whole. Krister Stendahl masterfully explores this in his groundbreaking essay "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West." Paul was certainly aware of his own shortcomings, but, Stendahl asks, "does he ever intimate that he is aware of any sins of his own which would trouble his conscience? It is actually easier to find statements to the contrary. The tone in Acts 23:1, 'Brethren, I have lived before God in all good conscience up to this day' (cf. 24:16), prevails also throughout his letters."²¹ Far from being "simultaneously a sinner and a saint" (*simul iustus et peccator*), Paul testifies of his clear conscience: "Indeed, this is our boast, the testimony of our conscience: we have behaved in the world with frankness and godly sincerity" (2 Cor. 1:12a). He was aware that he had not yet "arrived" (Phil. 3:12-14), that he still struggled with the flesh, yet he was confident of the value of his performance (1 Cor. 9:27). He looked forward to a day when "all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil" (2 Cor. 5:10), and he anticipated a favorable verdict (v. 11). He acknowledged that his clear conscience did not necessarily ensure this verdict (1 Cor. 4:4), but he was confident nevertheless. These are hardly the convictions of a man who plans to rest entirely on the merits of an alien righteousness imputed to his account.

Some may point out that Paul considered himself the least of the apostles (1 Cor. 15:9a; cp. Eph. 3:8) and in fact chief of sinners (cf. 1 Tim.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 198. Not surprisingly, Dunn has been criticized on this point, most notably by Stephen Westerholm (*Israel's Law and the Church's Faith: Paul and His Recent Interpreters*, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1988) who focuses on Romans 4:1-5 with a view to preserving the traditional Protestant distinction between faith and "works" as human effort generally. Dunn's response is that in Romans 4:1-5 Paul still has covenantal nomism in view (in keeping with the context) and that Paul's play on words need not imply that his opponents believed in "payment-earning work" (*Jesus*, 238, 239; *Romans*, Vol. 1, 228, 229).

²¹Stendahl, "Paul," 429.

1:15). But this is not the paradigmatic expression of humility and contrition, as if every believer should regard himself more sinful than the next. Paul's chief sin was that he had violently persecuted the church (1 Cor. 15:9b; 1 Tim. 1:13-16). This confession is obviously concrete, objective, and historical — not subjective, existential, and universally comparable to every person's experience. At any rate Paul had put all of that behind him and made up for his sordid past (1 Cor. 15:10); he did not languish in guilt. From what we know of his extant writings, he did not seem to experience the unrelenting introspection which became so characteristic of Western man after Augustine. Nor, many historians agree, could he have in his time and culture.²²

All of this would seem to be at loggerheads with Romans 7, where Paul writes that "I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do" (v. 19). Is this not the despairing cry (whether pre-conversion or post-conversion) of a man smitten by his conscience? Stendahl reminds us that this passage is part of a larger argument about the law. In defending the holiness of the law Paul assigns guilt to sin and the flesh. But Paul does not simply identify the *ego* with sin and flesh. Verse 19 does not lead directly into verse 24 as a cry of despair, but into verse 20 which on the contrary exonerates the *ego* and blames the principle of Sin. Paul's trivial observation that a person often does what he or she knows is wrong serves to preserve the holiness and goodness of the law. Stendahl writes:

Paul happened to express this supporting argument so well that what to him and his contemporaries was a common sense observation appeared to later interpreters to be a most penetrating insight into the nature of sin. This could happen easily once the problem about the nature and intention of God's Law was not any more as relevant a problem in the sense in which Paul grappled with it. The question about the Law became the incidental framework around the golden truth of Pauline anthropology. This is what happens when one approaches Paul with the Western question of an introspective conscience. This Western interpretation reaches its climax when it appears that even, or especially, the will of man is the center

²²Cf. Stowers: "The more one learns and understands about the world of the Roman empire and the Jews in the Greek East, the more difficult it becomes to imagine the Paul known from modern scholarship in that world. The Paul of traditional theological scholarship seems to have dropped directly out of heaven" (6).

of depravation. And yet, in Rom. 7 Paul had said about that will: “The will (to do the good) is there . . . ” (v. 18).²³

To sum up, the growing consensus about the nature of first-century Palestinian Judaism and the agreement that Judaism was never a religion of “legalism” has generally been followed by the observation that whatever else Paul was protesting, he was not protesting self-righteous²⁴ efforts to merit favor before God. Nor was Paul grappling with the Western question of the introspective conscience. The most satisfying interpretation to me seems to be that of Dunn, who contends that Paul was engaged in a controversy about how the law should be obeyed and the implications of such obedience. No one involved in that controversy, including Paul, ever questioned the importance of human obedience in the process of justification.

III. PERTINENT PAULINE PASSAGES

To see how this thesis plays out in relation to specific Pauline texts, it will be helpful to consider first the different ways in which Paul writes about the law. Sometimes his statements are negative, sometimes positive. Making sense out of these references and preserving a consistent Pauline view of the law has been the sticking point for interpreters. For example, Paul writes that it is “doers of the law who will be justified” (Rom. 2:13). But he also writes that “no human being will be justified” . . . by deeds prescribed by the law” (Rom. 3:20). Now which is it? If obeying the law is the same thing as practicing the “works” or “deeds of the law,” then Paul is contradicting himself. Hence the importance of scrutinizing Paul’s vocabulary and seeking to appreciate the nuances of his thought.

First, Paul seems to write about the law in terms of ethnic distinction. Since the law was given to Israel, it follows that Gentiles are those who

²³Stendahl, 432. I would hasten to add that rather than start with the highly figurative Romans 7 I would prefer to take the clearer and less enigmatic Philippians 3 as my control text for interpreting Paul’s experience with the law and work into Romans 7 and other passages from there. When we take Philippians 3 as our starting point, a much different picture emerges.

²⁴The phrases “a righteousness of my own” (Phil. 3:9) and “their own righteousness” (Rom. 10:3) refer not to self-righteousness but the particular righteousness of Israel in contrast to the Gentile nations. Cf. Dunn, *Romans*, Vol. 2, 587, 595.

“do not possess the law” (Rom. 2:14) and live “apart from the law” (Rom. 2:12; 1 Cor. 9:21). In each of these verses one’s status with regard to the law is not relevant; in other words, one is not disadvantaged before God if one is not a Jew.

Second, Paul writes very negatively about one’s condition “under the law” (Rom. 2:12; 3:19; 6:14; 1 Cor. 9:20; Gal. 3:23; 4:4; 4:21; 5:18). In this state one is relying on “the works of the law,” another critical term that is used exclusively in a negative way (Rom. 3:21, 27, 28; Gal. 2:16; 3:2, 5, 10; cp. Rom. 9:32; Gal. 3:12). Similarly, the phrases “through the law” (Rom. 4:13; Gal. 2:21) and “from the law” (Gal. 3:12) are negative. And we hardly need to add “the law of sin and death” (Rom. 8:2), “the law weakened by the flesh” (Rom. 8:3).

Third, however, is the very positive category occupied by the “doers of the law” (Rom. 2:13), those who “do what the law requires” (Rom. 2:14), who “obey” or “practice the law” (Rom. 2:25), “keep the requirements of the law” (Rom. 2:26; contrast Gal. 6:13), “keep the law” (Rom. 2:27), “establish” or “uphold the law” (Rom. 3:31), who “fulfill,” have “fulfilled,” or are “fulfilling the law” (Rom. 13:8, 10; Gal. 5:14; 6:2). This is the “law of faith” (Rom. 3:27), the “law of the spirit of life” (Rom. 8:2), “Christ’s law” (1 Cor. 9:21).

So, then, in Paul’s own language, there are those who keep the law and there are those who don’t. Ironically, those “under the law” performing “the works of the law” are the ones who *don’t* keep the law (Rom. 2:23, 27; Gal. 3:10; 6:13)!

Can we be more specific? Can we move beyond the mere vocabulary words, fleshing out the distinctions among these contrasting ways of approaching the law?²⁵ I believe that we can, and that our effort hinges on a proper understanding of the specific phrase “the works of the law.” This phrase is important not only because it is one of Paul’s key phrases but also because of its central position in the very passages in which Paul articulates the doctrine of justification by faith. It is to these passages that we now turn.

Galatians 1-3

Like the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith alone, Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith did not evolve in a systematic theological

²⁵It may be argued that the difference is eschatological: The Spirit enables Christians to fulfill the law. True as that may be to one strand of Paul’s thinking, it does not explain all of the references cited above.

vacuum but in a very real historical setting in response to a very real crisis within the church. This setting is clearly articulated in Paul's first letter enunciating his understanding of justification, his letter to the Galatians. The fact that Paul would interrupt his opening greeting with a defense of his apostleship (Gal. 1:1) is telling. The gospel which he had preached among the Galatian churches was being undermined by "another gospel" (1:6-9). The brief autobiographical account which follows includes a rather difficult articulation of Paul's relationship with the Jerusalem church and its leading apostles.

Paul's narrative of the conflicts and treaty leading up to the crisis in Antioch revolves around circumcision (2:1-10) and food laws (2:12a). Insistence on observing these distinctively Jewish practices was contrary to "the truth of the gospel" (2:14a). Already we can see something of the dynamic of Paul's gospel and what it was that threatened it. It was not the relationship between the divine sovereignty and the human will which formed the core of the gospel, but the relationship between Jews and Gentiles. Paul's defense of the gospel directed toward Peter and "the circumcision faction" was not, "If you, a sinner, cannot earn your salvation before God, how can you compel others to earn their salvation?" His defense was rather, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew [cp. v. 12a], how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews [lit., "Judaize"]?"

Paul's use of the term "Gentile sinners" in verse 15 buttresses our observation. In the various factions of second-Temple Judaism, to be a "sinner" was to be excluded from the covenant people; hence by definition Gentiles were "sinners" (cp. Matt. 5:47//Luke 6:33; Matt. 18:17; etc.), i.e., not covenant people. They were outside of the law which marked the boundary between the "haves" and the "have-nots."

In this light it is also telling that the gospel which had been supernaturally revealed to Paul on the Damascus road was at the same time a commissioning to go to the Gentiles (Gal. 1:16; cp. Acts 9:15; 22:21; 26:17). From beginning to end, Paul's proclamation hinged on the destruction of the barrier between Jew and Gentile which restricted Gentile access to God and His kingdom. Hence compelling Gentiles to "Judaize" was tantamount to erecting the sociological barrier once again, undermining the gospel.

It is this context in which Paul uses the key term "the works of the law" for the very first time. Though naturally the term in theory would include all efforts to comply with the law, it is evident that in practice it boiled

down to a few test cases of covenant loyalty, i.e., circumcision (2:1-10) and food laws (2:11-14), “badges,” Dunn would say, of covenantal nomism. The Judaizing position criticized in 2:16, then, is that covenantal nomism plus faith in (or “the faith of”) Christ equals justification. Paul contends on the contrary that these two principles are mutually exclusive and that the latter rules out the former. It is in this way that the integrity of the gospel is preserved. To erect the barrier once again (v. 18) is to nullify the grace of God (v. 21).

This theme extends into chapter 3, where the New International Version of the Bible badly obscures Paul’s meaning. “I would like to learn just one thing from you,” Paul asks in the NIV:

Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? . . . Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard? (vv. 2, 3, 5).

The contrast in the NIV is between observing the law/exerting human effort on the one hand and simply believing on the other. This introduces terrible confusion into the letter. In 5:7, Paul writes: “You were running well; who prevented you from obeying the truth?” If Paul had meant to disparage human effort, he chose the least appropriate metaphor to do it; running a footrace invokes an image of strenuous effort.

The contrast in Galatians 3:1-5 is not between exerting human effort and simply believing, but between covenantal nomism (“the works of the law”) and the appropriation of the gospel. The Galatians had not received the Spirit (i.e., entered the Christian community) “by doing the works of the law” (3:2b). Yet having started “with the Spirit,” some were “ending with the flesh” (not “trying to attain [their] goal by human effort”). The reference is likely to circumcision. The alternative is not “simply believing”:

There is no doubt as to the meaning of Gl. 3:2: ἐξ ἔργων νόμου τὸ πνεῦμα ἐλάβετε ἢ ἐξ ἀκοῆς πίστεως (cf. v. 5). The true reading is not πίστις ἀκοῆς but ἀκοῆς πίστεως, and in correspondence with ἔργα νόμου this does not mean “believing hearing” but the “preaching of faith”; i.e., proclamation which has faith as its content and goal.²⁶

²⁶G. Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., Vol. 1, 221.

When Paul brings Abraham into the discussion (vv. 6-9) he is not merely invoking an illustration. "It is to be doubted," Howard writes, "that Paul uses Abraham only as an example. His emphasis on the sons of Abraham (vss. 7, 29) and the blessing of Abraham (v. 14) suggests that Abraham, rather than being merely an example of justification by faith, is part of a salvific faith-process which works for the salvation of Gentiles. . . . The idea is that the Gentiles are blessed not simply like Abraham but because of Abraham."²⁷ The contrast here is not between "faith" and "works" but between promise and law, as the emphasis on the inclusion of the Gentiles makes clear (vv. 7-9; cf. vv. 14-22, 29).

In 3:10-14 Paul explains the nature of the barrier between Jew and Gentile and how that barrier was removed by Christ. The citation of Deuteronomy 27:26 in verse 10 is usually interpreted to mean that no one can obey the law. The stage is then set for the entire Protestant soteriology to fall into place. No one can obey the law (read "earn salvation"); everyone therefore falls under God's curse; Jesus takes that curse upon himself in his penal substitutionary atonement (3:13). But as we have seen, the law was not a means to earn salvation and the law could be obeyed. Furthermore, Paul instructs the Galatians to obey the law (5:14; 6:2). It is highly doubtful then that he is saying that the law cannot be obeyed.

If we are right about the meaning of the key phrase "the works of the law," then its presence in 3:10 affords us a more consistent understanding of the passage. "All who rely on the works of the law are under a curse" because (unlike those who have discounted sociological barriers like circumcision, 5:6, and fulfill the law in love, 5:14; 6:2) they are not obeying the law. How can it be that relying on "the works of the law" like circumcision is contrary to the law? After all, the law prescribes circumcision and instructs the Israelites to observe such works (cf. the citation of Lev. 18:5 in 3:12). The answer is that the law must give way to the promise based on faith, as the citation of Habakkuk 2:4 in 3:11 demonstrates. That is how the Gentiles may enter the covenant *as Gentiles*.

The tearing down of this barrier between Jew and Gentile happened on the cross. That is the point of verse 13, which affirms that Christ "redeemed us from the curse of the law." The "us" includes not only Jews but Gentiles, who because of the law were outsiders. Howard writes:

²⁷Howard, 54, 55.

Paul's whole discussion of the law in this section of Galatians aims at showing that the law suppressed the Gentiles and kept them from entering the kingdom of God in an uncircumcised and non-law-abiding state. Consequently, when Paul says that 'Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law,' and immediately adds 'in order that the blessing of Abraham might come unto the Gentiles' (vss. 13-14), his thought is that Christ, for the sake of universal unity, redeemed all men, including Gentiles, from the discriminating suppression of the law. When uncircumcised Gentiles were admitted into the kingdom of God on equal terms with the Jews, universal unity was achieved and the tyranny of the law came to an end.²⁸

In the remainder of the chapter Paul continues to emphasize the contrast between law and promise to the effect that "in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith" (v. 26). "There is no longer Jew or Greek" (v. 28) since all in Christ "are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise" (v. 29). The stage is now set for Paul to warn the Galatians not to revert to the old status (4:1-5:12) but instead to fulfill the obligations laid upon them by the freedom of the Spirit (5:13-6:10). In his concluding remarks he returns once again to the issue of circumcision (cf. vv. 13, 15), demonstrating that from beginning to end the issue at hand is the question of the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in Christ, not the question of "faith" or "works." This question apparently never entered Paul's mind.

Romans 1-3

Paul's articulation of his gospel in his letter to the Romans is entirely consistent with what we have seen so far. In his theme statement Paul presents the gospel as "the power of God for salvation to *everyone* who has faith, *to the Jew first and also to the Greek*" (1:16). This is followed by another citation of Habakkuk 2:4. Paul's primary concern here is no different than the concern we saw in Galatians 3; the issue at hand is still the Jew/Gentile question.

In 1:18-32 Paul describes the degeneration of the Gentiles with typically Jewish polemics against idolatry (1:20-23) and sexual immorality (1:24-27). We must be careful, however, not to invoke the doctrine of total depravity too quickly. That Paul's condemnation of Gentile immorality in 1:18-32 does not imply the moral degeneracy of every individual Gentile is apparent from his very positive assessment of obedient

²⁸*Ibid.*, 61.

Gentiles when he promises impartial divine judgment in chapter 2. Paul did not intend to say that every Gentile is an adulterer and a sexual offender. This fact is obscured by traditional interpretations. Stowers writes: “Commentators are so clear about their destination at 3:9 (“all are sinners in need of Christ”) that they tend to fly over chapter 2 quickly and at a high altitude, seeing only the message of 3:9 being worked out.”²⁹ A closer, more critical exegesis of 2:6-16 and 2:25-29, Stowers writes, reveals the serious difficulties of traditional interpretations.

Some scholars, like Sanders, have seen the difficulties. But by failing to sufficiently revamp the traditional Protestant reading he attributes the inconsistencies to Paul himself. “Paul’s case for universal sinfulness,” he writes, “as it is stated in Rom. 1:18-2:29, is not convincing; it is internally inconsistent and it rests on gross exaggeration.”³⁰ But can we fairly blame Paul for the incongruities of the received interpretation?

That Paul regarded all people in need of Christ is obvious. Paul was also very aware of the fact that everyone sins. It must be asked, however, whether those facts are the point of Romans 1-3 and whether the traditional reading of Paul’s argument can hold water. It seems to me that a renewed emphasis on the historical Jew/Gentile issue in the context of the first-century church makes far better sense of the passage. Stowers’ observations in this regard are invaluable. He writes, for instance:

The first two chapters of Romans speak of Jews and gentiles as peoples and not in abstract-individual-universal terms. Salvation does not concern a universal question about human nature. These chapters do not treat the philosophical question of the human condition or the root sin. Instead of an individual-universal perspective of the human essence, Paul’s perspective is collective and historical. . . . Rom. 1:18-2:16 is not about sin in general or the human condition but about the gentile situation in light of God’s impartial judging of both Jews and non-Jews.³¹

Far from establishing a universal doctrine of total depravity, the text before us actually assumes a very positive view of human nature *per se*. God’s impartial judging means that “those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality” will be granted eternal life

²⁹Stowers, 126.

³⁰Sanders, *Paul*, 125. Sanders’ opinion is that Paul took 1:18-2:29 from Diaspora Judaism and worked it into his letter because some aspects of it support 3:9.

³¹Stowers, 107, 108.

(2:7) and that “the doers of the law . . . will be justified” (2:13), even if they are Gentiles “who do not possess the law” (2:14). These verses, together with 2:25-29, are fatal to the traditional reading. These law-keeping Gentiles cannot be swept away as merely theoretical. If they were, then Paul’s polemic would be undermined.

What is Paul’s argument, then, and what is his point? To answer this question we should consider the true identity of Paul’s hypothetical dialogue partner who is explicitly named in 2:17: “But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast of your relation to God. . . .” At first blush it may be tempting to regard this dialogue partner as the archetypal Jew, but this identification should not be made so quickly. This *particular* Jew, after all, is a hypocrite; he does not obey the law (2:21-23; cp. Gal. 6:13). Furthermore he believes he knows best because he is “instructed in the law” (v. 18) and is “a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of children” (vv. 19, 20a). Yet “the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles” because of him (v. 24). His identity is unmistakable: He represents Paul’s rival missionaries to the Gentiles, the Judaizers.

Nor should we regard pride in his achievement as the Judaizer’s principal sin. His downfall is not that he boasts but that he boasts in the law (2:23). The boasting itself is not necessarily a bad thing. Paul writes that “we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God” (5:2). The contrast, again, is not between proud Jew and humble Christian, but between the Christian whose pride is the law and the Christian whose pride is Christ apart from the law. That the issue at hand was not human self-sufficiency versus sovereign grace but the status of the Gentile as the ethnic-religious other is clear from the fact that Paul immediately brings the discussion back to the subject of circumcision (2:25-29).

It is in this context also that we must read 3:9-20. As “both Jews and Greeks are all under sin” (3:9, NASV), seeking refuge in the ethnic-oriented “works of the law” (3:20) will be of no avail. Again this does not negate 2:6-16, 25-29 or imply the total depravity of the human race. As we have seen earlier, “doing good” does not imply achieving moral perfection or never sinning at all. When Romans 2:15 depicts the consciences of righteous Gentiles bearing witness to their behavior, their conflicting thoughts accuse them of some things but excuse them from others. The highly figurative apocalyptic language of the string of proof-texts in 3:10b-18 does not negate this fact either; not every human person, for instance, is literally a murderer (cp. 3:15).

When Paul writes in 3:19 that “whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law,” he is bringing out the aspect of the law as accuser and revealer of sin, a theme he will elaborate later. Of course we can hardly emphasize enough that this is only *one* of the functions of the law, certainly not the sole function. But the argument suffices to yank the rug out from under the Judaizers’ reliance on the works of the law.

Paul next turns to the real solution, the righteousness disclosed apart from the law in Christ, “for there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (3:22b, 23). Years of exposure to these words in Sunday School and evangelistic sermons have conditioned us to think of them strictly in relation to individuals (no one person is any better than another), but that is not Paul’s point. The assumed words here are “Jew and Gentile.” “There is no distinction [between Jew and Gentile] since all have sinned. . . .” Again Paul is thinking in terms of ethnic peoples. All of this is driven home by 3:27, 28, which affirms that it is the law of faith, not the law of works, by which a person is justified. The reason Paul gives for this fact is not that no one is capable of living up to God’s expectations but that God is God of the Gentiles as well as of the Jews (v. 29).³² Hence “he will justify the circumcised on the ground of faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith” (v. 30). In so doing the law is not overthrown but upheld (v. 31). This is perhaps most strongly what suggests that “the law” and “the works of the law” are two different things in Paul’s mind. The law is upheld when the works of the law are set aside. And as in Galatians, so in Romans Paul emphasizes Christian responsibility, urging Gentiles to embrace “the obedience of faith” (1:5; 16:26).

Ephesians 2:8, 9; 2 Timothy 1:9

Significantly, where justification is expounded in Paul’s letters the Judaizing issue is close at hand. Ephesians 2:8, 9 is unquestionably one of the most popular proof-texts to demonstrate justification apart from any human involvement whatsoever. True, Paul emphasizes the divine source of salvation (“not of yourselves,” NASV), but it should be asked whether verse 9 (“not the result of works, so that no one may boast” in such works) truly excludes all human efforts to cooperate with God in the salvation process. The most common approach is to invoke verse 10 and

³²Paul invokes the doctrine of monotheism to argue for his doctrine of justification in Galatians also (3:19, 20).

argue that one is not saved “by good works” but “to good works.” As we will see below, this is a most artificial distinction.

In light of what we have seen so far, there is a more likely explanation for these verses. The “works” by which we are not saved in verse 9 is shorthand for “the works of the law.” As such these works are not the “good works” to which we have been called in verse 10. That Paul still has the Jew/Gentile issue in mind is clear from what follows in 2:11-3:13. “So then,” Paul writes in verse 11, explicitly connecting his thought with verses 8-10, “remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called ‘the uncircumcision’ by those who are called ‘the circumcision’. . . .” The problem of “works” in Paul’s letters is not the problem of human achievement or divine sovereignty but the problem of discrimination. Gentiles have now been included in God’s people because Christ:

has made both groups [Jew and Gentile] into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances [i.e., the law of works], that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it (vv. 14-16).

The principle of atonement and justification here is identical to that of Galatians 3:10-14. The text is dominated throughout not by the question of human achievement but by the Jew/Gentile issue. The “works” of verse 9 are not “good works” but the “commandments and ordinances” of verse 15. The abolition of this barrier of works lies at the heart of Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith and (as in Galatians 1) is closely bound up with his conversion and commissioning as an apostle to the Gentiles (cf. Eph. 3:1-13). Even 2 Timothy 1:9, which declares that we are saved “not according to our works,” is followed by an assertion of Paul’s commissioning as an apostle (v. 11), and false teachers “desiring to be teachers of the law” (1 Tim. 1:7; cp. Rom. 2:17-20) are not far on the horizon (and may we not compare 1 Tim. 1:8-11 to Rom. 2:25-3:20?). From Galatians to the Pastoral Epistles, one end of the Pauline spectrum to the other, the doctrine of justification is tightly bound up with and clearly defined by the fact of Gentile inclusion into God’s covenant people. In no way is human obedience excluded from consideration in the

salvation process.³³ “The works of the law” are excluded, but “good works,” true obedience to the law of Christ, are certainly a condition for salvation.

IV. JUSTIFICATION IN THE REST OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

One notable advantage of the interpretation of Paul’s doctrine of justification suggested here is that it dissolves the perceived tension between Paul and the rest of the New Testament. If the doctrine of justification by faith alone rests on dubious exegesis in Paul’s letters, it cannot withstand unbiased exegesis in the teaching of Jesus. This fact has embarrassed Protestant commentators to no end.

The Sermon on the Mount is a prominent case in point. Far from teaching forensic justification by the imputation of an alien righteousness, Jesus there impresses upon his disciples that their righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees if they are to enter the kingdom (Matt. 5:20). Sin must be excised at all costs; those who do not uproot sin from their lives will be cast into gehenna (5:29, 30; cp. 18:7-9). Furthermore divine forgiveness will be granted only to those who forgive; those who do not forgive others will not be forgiven by God (6:12, 14, 15; Luke 6:37, 38; 11:4; cp. Matt. 18:22-35). Human obedience is clearly a condition for salvation in Matthew 7:21: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.” The parable which concludes the sermon (Matt. 7:24-27; Luke 6:46-49) reinforces the point. Those who hear the words of Jesus and act on them are “like a wise man who built his house on rock,” whereas those who hear his words and do not act on them are “like a foolish man who built his house on sand” (Matthew) or “without a foundation” (Luke). “When the river burst against it, immediately it fell, and great was the ruin of that house” (Luke 6:49).

The incompatibility of much of this with traditional Protestant soteriology compelled an earlier generation of dispensationalists to question the relevance of the Sermon on the Mount.³⁴ But Jesus’ teaching

³³Cf. also John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1972, 215-232.

³⁴Cf. Paul Lee Tan, *The Interpretation of Prophecy*, Rockville, MD: Assurance Publishers, 1974: “A casual reading of the Sermon reveals that it contains an

on obedience and discipleship is of course reiterated elsewhere: “Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me” (Matt. 10:38; Luke 9:23). Jesus assured his disciples that everyone will be repaid “for what has been done” (Matt. 16:27), and in a remarkable parable of judgment Jesus plainly teaches that ultimately our salvation hinges on how we treat other people (Matt. 25:31-46). Justification by faith alone is clearly absent from the Synoptic Gospels.

Hence it is no surprise that both Luther and Calvin considered the Synoptic Gospels inferior to the Gospel of John.³⁵ Indeed with its emphasis on believing in Jesus the Gospel of John ostensibly sounds like the Gospel counterpart to the Protestant Paul. Yet believing in Jesus in no way detracts from the necessity of *obeying* Jesus. “Those who have done good” will be raised to life in the resurrection, while “those who have done evil” will be raised to condemnation (John 5:29). The allegory of the vine and the branches (15:1-10) is no less forceful. Whoever does not abide in Jesus is “thrown into the fire, and burned” (15:6). Abiding in Jesus consists of keeping his commandments (v. 10). The commandment Jesus expounds in 15:12-17 is to love one another, and in 1 John 3 we are told that “whoever does not love abides in death” (v. 14). Again, this does not mean that static moral perfection is expected. God extends forgiveness to us when we fail and repent (1 John 1:9). But our overall lifestyles must be characterized by Christian love and commitment if we hope to be saved.³⁶

That is also the teaching of Hebrews, which says that Christ “became the source of eternal salvation for all who *obey* him” (5:9; cp. Acts 5:32). The reality of apostasy is frequently expressed in Hebrews as a method

embarrassing absence of church truths. Nothing is said regarding Christ’s sacrifice for sin (found as early as John 3), the faith which brings salvation, prayer in the name of Christ, the Holy Spirit, and even the church itself. . . . If this most lengthy and didactic of Christ’s teachings were truly intended to be primarily related to the Christian church, its omission of basic church truths would be highly irregular . . . the Sermon on the Mount . . . has no primary application in the church and should not be so taken” (121, 122); John Walvoord, *Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come*, Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1974: “The Sermon on the Mount, as a whole, is not Church truth precisely” (44).

³⁵Anthony F. Buzzard, *Our Fathers Who Aren’t in Heaven*, Morrow, Georgia: Atlanta Bible College and Restoration Fellowship, 1995, 237, 238.

³⁶Cf. also Steve Jones, “Calvinism Critiqued by a Former Calvinist, Part Two,” *A Journal from the Radical Reformation*, Winter 1994, Vol. 4, No. 2, 28-31.

of exhortation (6:4-12; 10:26-39; 12:14).³⁷ In a metaphor reminiscent of John 15:1-10, we are told that ground that produces thorns and thistles “is worthless and on the verge of being cursed; its end is to be burned over” (6:8). “To realize the full assurance of hope to the very end” believers must be diligent in their Christian lives (6:11). That there are those who in reality cease to be diligent is evident from 10:39, which states that “we are not among those who shrink back and so are lost, but among those who have faith and so are saved.” Similarly 2 Peter 2:1 describes false prophets who “even deny the Master who bought them,” an incomprehensible statement if the Christian, once saved (“bought”), is always saved. These false prophets who have turned away will be destroyed (vv. 3, 12, 13, 20-22; cp. Jude 4, 14-16). All of this is entirely consistent with Paul’s teaching.³⁸ Paul warns the Galatians that those who have Judaized “have fallen away from grace” (5:4). Similarly he writes to the Romans of “God’s kindness toward you, provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off” (11:22).³⁹

Finally we would be remiss if we did not consider Acts 10:34, 35, in which Peter for the first time expresses the truth that characterized and defined Paul’s entire ministry: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.” Again this truth is all about the inclusion of the Gentiles, and again it does not exclude human obedience from the equation by which God finds people acceptable.

The doctrine of justification by works as well as faith, then, is hardly a dubious principle that grows out of a handful of “difficult texts.” On the contrary it is the very warp and woof of the New Testament’s collective soteriology. By contrast the doctrine of justification by faith alone stands

³⁷I might add that if these verses do not support “once saved, always saved,” I do not believe they teach “once fallen, always fallen” either. I interpret Heb. 6:4-6, the unforgivable blasphemy “against the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 12:32; Mark 3:29; Luke 12:10), and the “mortal” sin of 1 John 5:16 as personal apostasy, full and knowing rejection of God. We cannot of ourselves persuade a blasphemer and apostate to return to God (Heb. 6:6; 1 John 5:16). As long as he or she persists in unbelief he or she cannot be forgiven.

³⁸Cf. Sanders, *Paul*, 109-113.

³⁹Cp. Col. 1:21-23a: “And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him — *provided* that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard.”

entirely on an interpretation of Paul which is buckling beneath the weight of modern scholarship.

Perhaps now more than at any other time we are in a good position to consider the testimony of James 2 in its own right rather than as a “difficult text” which must be harmonized with the Protestant interpretation of Paul. “What good is it, my brothers and sisters,” James asks, “if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you?” (2:14). In verse 24 James answers his question: “You see that a person is *justified by works and not by faith alone.*” Words could not be more plain. There is no verse in Scripture which says “by faith alone,” but there certainly is one that says “*not by faith alone.*” Nevertheless this clear scriptural testimony does not appear to command much serious consideration. John Jefferson Davis’ *Handbook of Basic Bible Texts: Every Key Passage for the Study of Doctrine and Theology* does not even list James 2:24 in its section on justification.⁴⁰ Why not? Surely James 2:24 speaks just as directly to the issue of justification as Galatians 2:16. But few dare treat it as a theological control text. (In *Basic Bible Texts* the control text for this issue appears to be the thirty-third question of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism.*)

The customary way of pouring James 2 into a Protestant mold is to argue that though justification really is by faith alone, true faith produces good works; hence one who does not do good works had no faith to begin with. True as this is, it does not explain the meaning of James 2:24. Furthermore it leads the interpreter into a muddle of logical inconsistency. A Unitarian of the nineteenth century, George Burnap, points out the difficulty of this interpretation:

It seems to my mind to be a great inconsistency, and to approach very near a contradiction, to say that faith without works is without value, and when good works accompany it, it is valuable, and still to affirm that those good works which give it all its value are worthless themselves. Certainly they are valuable for this very purpose of giving value to faith. Take away the works, and the faith will be without value. How can it be said then that works are not valuable? If faith be not acceptable without works, and is with them, then to a demonstration it is the works which render the faith acceptable. If a man cannot be accepted for faith without works, or, to use the technical language of theologians, his faith is not

⁴⁰Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books, 1984, 90-92.

acceptable, saving faith, unless it be accompanied by works, is it not plain that the works are in fact, however you may disguise the matter in words, the ground of his acceptance? With the works his faith is acceptable, without them it is not. It is all a mere quibble upon words to say that a man's faith is acceptable when his works are good, and still to deny that he is accepted on account of his good works. For according to this hypothesis it depends on the man's works at last, whether he is accepted or not. We say then that the theory which makes justification depend on faith alone, but at the same time maintains that no faith will justify a man unaccompanied with good works, admits what it seems so strenuously to deny, that the ultimate ground of justification is good works.⁴¹

V. RETHINKING JUSTIFICATION

Given the increasingly fragmenting state of biblical studies today it should come as no surprise that many Pauline scholars are not interested in synthesizing their findings with contemporary theology. Stowers writes, for instance: "If I challenge the historical accuracy of some standard interpretations of the letter [Romans], it does not mean that I intend to denigrate the contributions of its great commentators. But my purposes as a historian of early Christian literature differ from the purposes of the theologians and churchmen."⁴² But those of us who want our theology to be at the same time cogent *and biblical* cannot settle for this approach. Instead we must ask how Paul's real teaching, enmeshed so much as it is in its historical context, can be appropriated by contemporary theology. In so doing we affirm that New Testament theology is very much alive and a tenable undertaking in the twentieth century; that the canon of Scripture has continuing relevance as an authoritative guide in matters of Christian faith.

I propose two conclusions which may be drawn from Paul's real meaning in context. First, the Judaizing conflict and Paul's doctrine of justification which grew out of it continue to be relevant to our day. But we must recognize the relevance in analogy. Directly applying Paul's polemic against Judaizing to legalism in the church is not a correct appropriation of Paul's teaching. True as it is that no one can "earn" salvation before God, that was not Paul's point, and applying his

⁴¹*Lectures on the Doctrines of Christianity*, Boston and Cambridge: James Munroe and Company, 1848, 197, 198.

⁴²*Romans*, 4.

language that way involves serious consequences; human effort is then displaced from the salvation process entirely.

It is a hermeneutical truism that a New Testament teaching must be understood and appreciated in its context before it can be applied to that of the interpreter. Romans has been preserved for the benefit of the church, but it was written to first-century Christians living in Rome. The unity of the church at that time was threatened by ethnic and social conflict. The issues then at hand — circumcision, holy days, meat sacrificed to pagan idols — are no longer issues in the church. It must be asked, then, whether comparable issues currently exist. And our answer must be in the affirmative. We no longer fight over circumcision but we do fight over worship styles and a host of other issues. Even today Christianity is confused with culture and many are unable to distinguish between the substantial and the supplemental. Paul speaks to all of this by affirming that all cultural and ethnic groups stand before God on equal footing and that we are not justified on the basis of peripheral issues.

Second, the flip side of this is that human obedience — “good works” — is not excluded from the justification equation. On the contrary Paul invokes the principle of justification by works in order to make his primary point noted above. In addition the perceived tension between Paul and the rest of the New Testament evaporates. The fully scriptural principle of justification by faith *and works* may be articulated in our theology.

Throughout this article we have focused on the historical and exegetical aspects of the Scriptures which bear on the issue of justification, but we have dealt little with the doctrine in a contemporary theological context. For this reason I believe it critical that we clarify important points about what such a doctrine might and might not entail. First, such a doctrine should not be construed as one of legalism, burdening Christians with lists of arbitrary requirements and detailed standards of conduct and enforcing compliance with the threat of hell. It is in this way that the message of the Reformation may be fully appreciated in the church today. For all of his exegetical oversights and doctrinal overreaction, Martin Luther’s protests against penance, indulgences, and other abuses were entirely justified. Good Christians with troubled consciences may seek reassurance in Luther’s message of the acceptance of individuals before God apart from the extra-biblical demands of man-made ecclesiastical hierarchies. In short, the doctrine of justification by faith and works must not be characterized by the concept of “earning”

God's favor. Just because Paul was not up against that idea does not mean that it is acceptable.

However, many steeped in the Protestant tradition may find it difficult to distinguish between earning salvation by legalistic efforts on the one hand and fulfilling conditions for ultimate salvation on the other. To many the two are synonymous. This is partly because traditional theologies have tended to drive the principle of legalism into the very essence of the divine nature itself. In other words, God is himself construed as a legalistic perfectionist whose every demand must be met. Any moral imperfection or shortcoming on man's part, no matter how small, must be punished to the fullest extent. As we have seen, this perfectionism is equated with the Mosaic law (or at least a supposed part of it called "the moral law" as opposed to "the ceremonial law" and "the civil law"). Since no one is capable of living up to these expectations, salvation may be obtained only by resting on the imputed merits of the One who did earn salvation on our behalf.⁴³ In light of this paradigm it may be asked whether *traditional Protestantism* is guilty of legalism, of teaching that salvation is to be earned by merit before an exacting God.

Second, we cannot revamp the doctrine of justification without grappling with the meaning of "righteousness." We have alluded several times to what righteousness is *not*: Righteousness is not the imputed merit of another. But our criticism of traditional interpretations must go beyond that. We simply *must* get away from the Greek view that righteousness is an impersonal, abstract standard, a measuring stick or a balancing scale. Righteousness in scriptural terms grows out of covenant relationship.⁴⁴ Though I have heavily emphasized human ability and responsibility in this article, it must also be affirmed that human righteousness springs from divine election.⁴⁵ We forgive because we have been forgiven (Matt. 18:21-35); "we love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). But we must love and forgive; else we cannot continue to abide in the divine relationship. That is the meaning of the doctrine of justification by faith and works.

⁴³Mark M. Mattison, "What Covenant of Works?" *A Journal from the Radical Reformation*, Fall 1994, Vol. 4, No. 1, 1-3.

⁴⁴Cf. Dunn, *Galatians*, 134-135; James D. G. Dunn and Alan M. Suggate, *The Justice of God*, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1993, 32ff.

⁴⁵For a well-balanced non-Protestant view of human ability and divine sovereignty, cf. Steve Jones, "Calvinism Critiqued by a Former Calvinist, Part One," *A Journal from the Radical Reformation*, Fall 1994, Vol. 4, No. 1, 26-33; "Calvinism, Part Two," 20-23, 25-28.