

THE REFORMERS' UNDERSTANDING OF PAUL AND THE LAW

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For about two thousand years the doctrine of justification by faith has been the bedrock of Christianity, but recently the New Perspective on Paul (NPP) has proposed that such a teaching rests on a misunderstanding of Paul that was propagated by the Reformers. The NPP advocates a view of second-temple Judaism that was free from legalism and focused on an exclusivism based on racial privilege. Such texts as Acts 13:38-39, Luke 18:14, and Rom 9:30-32 show that Judaism of that day was definitely legalistic, however. Rabbinic writings of the same period confirm that fact. Writings of early church fathers such as Clement of Rome, Tertullian, Chrysostom, and Augustine reflect the church's belief in justification by faith as a contrast with early Jewish legalism. Thomas Aquinas and other Roman Catholic sources of the Middle Ages show a belief in Paul's picture of Judaism as teaching justification by human merit. Luther continued the tradition of the church's belief in justification by faith and its antithesis, the works of the law. Though differing slightly from Luther's view of the law, Calvin concurred with him that justification before God was unattainable without divine intervention in regeneration. Evidence is clear that the Reformers were not merely reacting to conditions of their day as the NPP contends, but continued a tradition of justification by faith alone handed down from the early church.

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No doctrine is of greater importance throughout the history of mankind than the doctrine of justification. Since the opening pages of human history, man has had an insatiable hunger to know how to have his sins atoned for and how to propitiate the demands of a holy God (Job 9:2; 25:4). Furthermore, in the evangelical world, no doctrine has been of greater import and significance than justification by faith alone—the Reformation principle of *sola fide*. Martin Luther rightly contends that

“if the doctrine of justification is lost, the whole of Christian doctrine is lost.”¹

Despite the bedrock foundation of this marvelous truth, history’s earliest records display mankind’s repeated abandonment of God’s gracious provision of divine accomplishment. The pentateuchal records of Moses to the epistles of Paul tell of a recurring infiltration of human efforts to attack and overrun the simple gospel of grace.

Until recently, Protestants rarely questioned the *sola fide* principle. The doctrine of justification by faith alone, which reverberates with clarion precision throughout the pages of NT history and echoes through the corridors of the early church, was clearly heard, understood, and embraced. From Jesus to the NT writers to the stalwarts of the early church and beyond, the doctrine of justification by faith was considered to be the soteriological “pearl of great price.”

But the integrity of this *sine qua non* was not maintained without a price, a fact all-too-vidently recorded in the annals of church history. In the fifth century, it was the central battleground in the theological contest between Augustine and Pelagius.² So significant was this dispute that it is said to have been the fountainhead of the Reformation more than a millennium later. N. T. Wright ties the two together when he notes that the Reformation doctrine of justification “owes a good deal both to the controversy between Pelagius and Augustine in the early fifth century and to that between Erasmus and Luther in the early sixteenth century.”³ But in acknowledging this connection, Wright quickly adds that this historic Protestant view of justification “does not do justice to the richness and precision of Paul’s doctrine, and indeed distorts it at various points.”⁴ In agreement with this accusation, proponents of the New Perspective on Paul (mostly NPP hereafter) claim that church historians and theologians, regardless of the era in which they spoke and wrote, have misunderstood Paul’s teaching on the law.

In general, NPP adherents expressly argue against *sola fide*, lobbying vigorously for Protestants to rethink the historic teaching in light of a more recent understanding of what Paul really meant. Responding to the claim that justification—namely, a description of how persons become Christians—is the central theme of the entire Roman epistle, Wright asserts that “this way of reading Romans has systematically done violence to that text for hundreds of years, and that it is time for the text itself to be heard again.”⁵

Although NPP advocates have expressed dismay with a wide spectrum of

¹Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians*, in *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1963) 26:9.

²Historians have appropriately stressed that it was Pelagius who was provoked by Augustine’s earlier declarations in his *Confessions*: “His mature views on human weakness and divine grace were essentially in place long before the Pelagian conflict erupted” (Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004] 3-4). Also cf. Friedrich A. Loofs, “Augustine,” *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1949) 1:369.

³N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 113. Also cf. E. P. Sanders, *Paul* (Oxford: University Press, 1991) 44.

⁴*What Saint Paul Really Said* 113.

⁵*Ibid.*, 117.

prominent historical church leaders, it appears that the ax-head of NPP theology is aimed most directly at the roots of the Reformation. The Reformers and their *sola fide* teaching—the very core of the split with the Roman Catholic Church—are the focal point of the assault. The frontal attack seems directed primarily at Luther and Calvin, who, it is claimed, have misunderstood Paul's teaching in Romans and Galatians and have seriously misconstrued the doctrine of justification. E. P. Sanders, another proponent of NPP, agrees. Writing on Galatians 2–4 and Romans 3–4, he argues, “The subject-matter is not ‘how can the individual be righteous in God’s sight?’ but rather ‘on what grounds can Gentiles participate in the people of God in the last days?’”⁶

According to the NPP, Reformers viewed the apostle Paul's writings through a works-righteousness lens of medieval times and perspectives.⁷ In doing so, they misunderstood, misconstrued, and mistook the true perspective of second-temple Judaism, resulting in a radical misinterpretation of Paul's true teaching. Attempting a more direct hit on the Reformers, Sanders contends that Luther interpreted Paul's teaching on justification through the eyes of a guilt-ridden conscience. He writes,

Luther, plagued by guilt, read Paul's passages on ‘righteousness by faith’ as meaning that God reckoned a Christian to be righteous even though he or she was a sinner. . . . Luther's emphasis on fictional, imputed righteousness, though it has often been shown to be an incorrect interpretation of Paul, has been influential. . . . Luther sought and found relief from guilt. But Luther's problems were not Paul's, and we misunderstand him if we see him through Luther's eyes.⁸

Simply put, Sanders is arguing that first-century Judaism was not a religion that taught “bootstrap” justification, i.e., the Pharisees were not teaching a works-based righteousness.

The Judaism of Paul's day, according to the NPP, understood salvation in terms of the covenant community of Israel—a community brought together *by God's grace*. Jews, it is argued, were not made right with God through their own merits but through His covenant. Consequently, their emphasis on keeping the law had nothing to do with salvation but with maintaining one's place in the covenant community. Thus it is believed that Paul's concern is not Judaistic legalism; it is not a belief whereby one could merit God's final acquittal on the basis of good works. Rather, they contend that the apostle's focus was Jewish exclusivism, the feeling that covenant membership is derived on the basis of racial privilege.⁹ Obviously, in the thinking of this new perspective, the Reformers had gotten it wrong. Neither they nor the apostle Paul needed to defend *sola fide*. Rather, the Reformers had mistakenly

⁶Sanders, *Paul* 50.

⁷Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* 114.

⁸Sanders, *Paul* 49.

⁹Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* 129. Earlier, he explains: “Justification, in Galatians, is the doctrine which insists that all who share faith in Christ belong at the same table, no matter what their racial differences” (122).

read back into first-century Judaism their own medieval perspectives.

Or had they? Had the Reformers misconstrued the Pauline doctrine of justification? Did the Pharisees believe that their hope of heaven rested on God's gracious choice? Has the church been misled by the church fathers and more recently by the Reformers in its understanding of the nature of justification? These are the questions that must be answered.

Justification in Early Judaism

First-Century Perspective. Taking a brief look at first-century Judaism, the NPP argues that the concept of justification is not to be understood in a soteriological sense but in an ecclesiological sense.¹⁰ In other words, Paul's statements against trusting in the works of the law focus on the Jewish understanding of who could (or could not) share in *their* covenant-community. These second-temple Jews were insisting on an exclusive Jewish membership in the covenant. Paul was addressing that issue, arguing that covenant-status was available to both Jew and Gentile through the Messiah.

But does NT literature substantiate this understanding of justification? Is first-century justification to be viewed ecclesologically rather than soteriologically? A look at a few passages indicates otherwise.

In Acts 13:38-39, while preaching at Antioch on his first missionary journey, Paul proclaims: "Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through Him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and through Him everyone who believes is justified from all things, from which you could not be justified through the law of Moses." Most notably in these verses, the apostle equates the forgiveness of sins with justification (contra the NPP). Justification deals with soteriology, not ecclesiology (contra the NPP).

Jesus, explaining His parable of the Pharisee and the tax-gatherer, directly connects justification with soteriology, not ecclesiology. He remarks, "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other..." (Luke 18:14). Romans 9:30-32 is equally definitive in its discussion of works-salvation within the teachings of Judaism. Speaking of this passage, Leon Morris observes: "It is quite clear that righteousness is being used to denote a standing, a status, a verdict of acquittal, and not an ethical quality."¹¹

¹⁰In *What Saint Paul Really Said*, Wright contends: "Justification in the first century was not about how someone might establish a relationship with God. It was about God's eschatological definition, both future and present, of who was, in fact, a member of his people.... In standard Christian language, it wasn't so much about soteriology as about ecclesiology; not so much about salvation as about the church.... Those who adhered in the proper way to the ancestral covenant charter, the Torah, were assured in the present that they were the people who would be vindicated in the future.... Justification in this setting, then, is not a matter of *how someone enters the community of the true people of God*, but of *how you tell who belongs to that community*..." (119, emphasis in the original).

¹¹Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 275. It could be claimed that the Pauline epistles never directly contrast law and gospel, and thereby maintained that Paul's argument against the works of the law is not connected with soteriology. However, Paul "does frequently set law in opposition to grace, faith, and promise; and he similarly juxtaposes works of the law and faith as mutually exclusive ways of seeking God's righteousness" (Douglas J. Moo, "'Law,' 'Works of the Law,' and Legalism in Paul," *Westminster Theological Journal* 45/1 [Spring 1983]:74).

Rabbinic Perspective. The rabbinical writings of early Christianity reflect similar perspectives. The rabbis taught that mankind could, by some means, acquire merit with God by personal efforts. A rabbinical account, dated at the end of the first century A.D., relates,

When R[abbi] Eliezer fell ill, his disciples went in to visit him. They said to him, Master, teach us the paths of life so that we may through them win the life of the future world. He said to them: Be solicitous for the honor of your colleagues, and keep your children from meditation, and set them between the knees of scholars, and when you pray know before whom you are standing and in this way you will win the future world.¹²

The context of Paul's warnings and the explicit statements expressed by some first-century rabbis indicate that Judaism of that day was teaching that justification before God required human merit. That is what Paul was objecting to so tenaciously.¹³ His concern was *not* ecclesiology; it was soteriology.

Justification in the Early Church Fathers

A similar understanding of first-century Judaism is continued in the early church fathers, regardless of whether they were writing from the perspective of the Western Church, the Eastern Church, or the North African Church. Such earliest voices reiterate the apostle Paul's understanding of *sola fide*.

Clement of Rome (late 1st c.). Of those writings attributed to Clement, the most important is his Epistle to the Corinthians. Denying that the works of the law can make a contribution to justification by faith, he writes: "We, therefore, who have been called by His will in Christ Jesus, are not justified by ourselves, neither by our wisdom or understanding or piety, nor by the works we have wrought in holiness of heart, but by the faith by which almighty God has justified all men from the beginning."¹⁴

Tertullian (mid 2nd c.). Born in Carthage, North Africa, upon conversion to Christianity in mid-life, Tertullian turned away from the study of law to studying

Thus, Wright's argument that "justification" in Pauline writings lacks connection with NT soteriology is without foundation. Also cf. the *Book of Jubilees* 15:25ff.

¹²B Berakoth 28b (Soncino trans., 173). The Mishnah has similar implications: "Salvation for Tannaitic Judaism is essentially national—the nation's enjoyment of peace and prosperity in its own Land. It is not, however, overtly messianic.... The individual who keeps the commandments will be rewarded by God, but ultimately his salvation consists of enjoying the blessings of the fulfilled covenant as a member of the Community of Israel. The rewards of righteousness are essentially this worldly.... Tannaitic Judaism can be seen as fundamentally a religion of works-righteousness.... There is little hint in Tannaitic sources that God can simply forgive sinners without any action whatsoever on the sinner's part" (Philip S. Alexander, "Torah and Salvation in Tannaitic Literature," *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, eds. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001] 2:300).

¹³Augustine, quoted by Luther in his Romans commentary, notes that the apostle Paul "vehemently inveighs against the proud, arrogant persons who glory in their works" (Martin Luther, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, trans. J. T. Mueller [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1976] 28).

¹⁴W. A. Jurgens, *The Faith of the Early Fathers* (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1970) 1:9.

theology. Though many of his writings have been lost, occasional glimpses of how he understood the law and its role remain.

One such glimpse is found in his debate with Marcion. Tertullian there argues that Paul

remembered that the time was come of which the Psalm spake, "Let us break their bands asunder, and cast off their yoke from us;" since the time when "the nations became tumultuous, and the people imagined vain counsels;" when "the kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against His Christ," in order that thenceforward man might be justified by the liberty of faith, not by servitude to the law, "because the just shall live by his faith." Now, although the prophet Habakkuk first said this, yet you have the apostle here confirming the prophets, even as Christ did. The object, therefore, of the faith whereby the just man shall live, will be that same God to whom likewise belongs the law, by doing which no man is justified.¹⁵

Chrysostom (mid 4th c.). Despite being born into wealth in Antioch of Asia Minor, John Chrysostom eschewed the pleasures of the world, choosing instead to live a very simple life in the study of Scripture and preaching. It is said that he was easily "recognized in his sober exegesis, occupied with determining the literal sense of his text."¹⁶

His sermons, some of which provide glimpses into his understanding of Paul and the law, cover almost every book of the Bible. In his sermon on Rom 1:17, he notes that man's righteousness is "not thine own, but that of God... For you do not achieve it by toilings and labors, but you receive it by a gift from above, contributing one thing only from your own store, 'believing.'"¹⁷

In his Rom 3:31 homily, he contends that good works are the result of justification by grace: "But since after this grace, whereby we were justified, there is need also of a life suited to it, let us show an earnestness worthy the gift."¹⁸ Speaking on Rom 4:1ff, he interprets the apostle Paul as arguing

that it was impossible to be saved otherwise than by faith. He is now intent upon showing that this salvation, so far from being matter of shame, was even the cause of a bright glory, and a greater than that through works.... For reflect how great a thing it is to be persuaded and have full confidence that God is able on a sudden not to free a man who has lived in impiety from punishment only, but even to make him just, and to count him worthy of those immortal honors.¹⁹

Augustine (mid 4th c.). Like Tertullian two centuries earlier, Augustine

¹⁵Quintas Tertullian, "Against Marcion," in vol. 3 of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968) 5.3.432.

¹⁶Erwin Preuschen, "Chrysostom," in *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1952) 3:74.

¹⁷John Chrysostom, *Romans*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, trans. J. B. Morris and W. H. Simcox (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 11.349.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 11.380.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 11.385-86.

originated from near Carthage, North Africa. Having had little childhood instruction in the Christian faith,²⁰ he took great delight in criticizing the OT Scriptures, scorning the sacraments of the church, and holding frequent debates with believers.²¹ However, after his conversion to Christianity in his early thirties, he turned his intellect and extensive education toward writing and defending the faith.

Augustine believed that the OT law had three expressions: the eternal, unchanging laws; the ceremonial laws that foreshadowed the coming of Messiah and His redemptive work; and the moral law, encapsulated in the Decalogue minus the Sabbath command.

Augustine was quite explicit as to his perspective of first-century Judaism. Speaking of Rom 3:20, he remarks, "The law brings the knowledge, not the overcoming, of sin."²² In Rom 9:31-32 Paul writes that Israel, in their pursuit of "a law of righteousness," "did not arrive at that law ... because they did not pursue it by faith, but as though it were by works." This passage, Augustine taught, indicates that they thought they could "establish their own righteousness."²³

Thus it is clear that Augustine taught justification by God's grace apart from any personal works or merit.²⁴

Justification in the Middle Ages

Thomas Aquinas. Born outside of Rome in 1225, Thomas Aquinas was first educated at a nearby monastery and then later studied in Germany with Albertus Magnus. Under the influence of this famous philosopher, Aquinas was introduced to the Greek philosophers, filling the framework of Aristotle with the dogmas of the church.²⁵

It can be argued that Roman Catholic theology, from the Middle Ages until the

²⁰While Augustine credits his mother for much of what he later became, "she was not always the ideal of a Christian mother that tradition has made her appear" (Friedrich Loofs, "Augustine," in *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1951] 1:365). He adds: "Her religion in earlier life has traces of formality and worldliness about it; her ambition for her son seems at first to have had little moral earnestness and she regretted his Manicheanism more than she did his early sensuality" (ibid.).

²¹Even his exposure to the allegorical interpretations by Ambrose (Milan) did not placate his ridicule and antagonism for the Scriptures.

²²Augustine, "On Grace and Free Will," in vol. 5 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 10.22.

²³Augustine, "The Spirit and the Letter," in *Augustine: Later Works*, trans. John Burnaby (London: SCM, 1955) 50.29.233-35.

²⁴Though Augustine did intimate that sins are pardoned in baptism (Augustine, "On the Trinity," in vol. 5 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* 14.17.23), Stephen Westerholm (*Perspectives Old and New on Paul* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004] 9-10) notes that Augustine elsewhere contends that the sacrament of baptism (like OT circumcision) accompanies faith ("On Marriage and Concupiscence," in vol. 5 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* 2.24).

²⁵"He owed not only his philosophical thoughts and world-conception to Aristotle, but he also took from him the frame for his theological system" (Reinhold Seeberg, "Thomas Aquinas," *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, ed. Samuel M. Jackson [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1950] 11:427).

present, has been influenced more by Aquinas than any other individual.²⁶ He was a prolific writer, and laid out the fullest expression of his theology in the *Summa*. Though he embraced the concept of justification by grace, believing that this justification includes the remission of sins, he also held that the sacraments were efficacious—they both contain grace and cause grace. “In a single statement the effect of the sacraments is to infuse justifying grace into men. What Christ effects is achieved through the sacraments.”²⁷

The Roman Church. Throughout the Middle Ages, the Roman Church continued to teach justification by grace through faith. Although it mistakenly held to a faith that is made active through good deeds (contra *sola fide*),²⁸ it continued to hold onto a form of justification by grace. Remarkably, while embracing a form of justification that required a works-based “cooperation,” they still maintained that Paul was teaching against a works-based justification in Romans and Galatians. Catholic theologian D. M. Crossan observes,

In the Pharisaic theology, ... emphasis was placed on a growing and expanding system of laws and prescriptions. Two evils came from this change. The mass of Mosaic legislation took on the appearance of a burden, of an obligation, forced upon man from outside his own being; and secondly, the faithful, exact, and minute fulfillment itself of all these many prescriptions became the basis for one's union with God, the cause rather than the effect of one's relationship with Him....²⁹

Commenting on Phil 3:6, Crossan writes, “If one accepted Pharisaic norm that justification arises from a flawless fulfillment of all the law's requirements, he was perfect. According to such a theory, man really accomplishes his own justification.... Paul refers to the theory repeatedly as justification ‘in’ or ‘from’ or ‘by’ the Law and/or its works (Gal 2.21; Rom 3.20; 8.3; 10.5; 11.31).”³⁰

Given the works-based justification that is so indelibly imprinted on Roman Catholic theology, one might expect Romanists to understand Paul in accord with the NPP perspective. But that is not the case. Surprisingly, like many of the church fathers of the first fifteen centuries before, they believed that the apostle viewed first-century Judaism as teaching a justification by human merit.

²⁶Augustine, considered by many to be the “Father of Western Christianity,” also left an indelible mark on Christianity some 800 years earlier.

²⁷Seeberg, “Thomas Aquinas” 426.

²⁸According to the Council of Trent: “If anyone says that the sinner is justified by faith alone, meaning that nothing else is required to cooperate in order to obtain the grace of justification, and that it is not in any way necessary that he be prepared and be disposed by the action of his own will, let him be anathema” (Council of Trent, “Decree Concerning Justification,” [1547], Canon 9). Also cf. Georg Kraus, “Justification,” in *Handbook of Catholic Theology*, eds. Wolfgang Beinert and Francis Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1995) 418.

²⁹D. M. Crossan, “Justification,” in *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (reprint; Palatine, Ill.: Jack Heraty & Associates, 1981) 8:78.

³⁰Ibid. Crossan adds: “The Judaizers apparently argued for the continuing value of the Mosaic Law, based on a theory of justification through its works” (8:79).

Justification in the Reformation

Martin Luther's Perspective. The Reformers are charged by NPP proponents with misreading and misconstruing Paul's instructions on the role of the law in justification. That accusation is directed against the Reformers in general, but the attack is aimed most decidedly at the writings of Martin Luther. Luther's firm stand against the ecclesiastical giant of his day, his theological acumen, his articulate preaching, and his prolific pen placed him at the vanguard of the Reformation, and thus put him in the crosshairs of all who might take issue.

The impact of this former monk for more than half a millennium, together with his contribution to the discussion of Paul and the law, cannot be underestimated. Though reared in the strict religious environment of the Roman Catholic Church, Martin Luther gained little biblical knowledge in his early years. Greatly fearful of the wrath of God in his youth, a feeling that was intensified by the death of a friend, he left behind his law studies and entered the Augustinian monastery in 1505.³¹

During this time, Luther became greatly influenced by the twelfth-century Bernard of Clairvaux, an influence that prompted Luther to pursue a life of inner piety. At the same time Saint Augustine of Hippo was also leaving his mark on this young monk. While the influence of Bernard of Clairvaux ignited Luther's passion for piety and a longing for freedom from guilt, the thinking of Augustine a millennium earlier impacted his eventual understanding of the role of the law and its distinction from salvation by grace through faith.

A year after his ordination to the priesthood in 1507, Luther was assigned to Wittenberg, first as a professor of philosophy and later as a lecturer in theology. His lectures on Romans and Galatians began to influence him profoundly. Though he remained devoted to the Roman Catholic Church for more than a decade,³² his study in these Pauline epistles led him to embrace the doctrine of *sola fide*—a justification by faith alone apart from any works of the law. The impact of this newly discovered doctrine became, for Luther, the principal teaching of Paul's epistles and the central issue of his ultimate struggle with the Roman Catholic Church.

There is little ambiguity regarding Luther's perspective of the apostle Paul's teaching on the law. In his Introduction to the Epistle to the Romans, a book that he calls "the chief part of the New Testament and the very purest Gospel," Luther provides a reasonable summary:

Abraham was justified by faith alone, without any works.... The Scriptures, in Genesis 15, declare that he was justified by faith alone, even before the work of circumcision. But if the work of circumcision contributed nothing to his righteousness, though God commanded it and it was a good work of obedience; then, surely, no other good work will contribute anything to righteousness.... Then he brings forth another witness, viz., David, in Psalm 32, who says that a man is justified without works.... Then he gives the

³¹J. B. Clark, "Martin Luther," in *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1950) 7:69.

³²Initially his concerns were not directed specifically at the church, but at the sale of indulgences and the teaching that these indulgences were effective to reduce time in purgatory. That issue led him to nail the Ninety-five Theses to the Wittenberg church door and soon thereafter to confront directly a growing litany of the church's teaching.

illustration a broader application, and concludes that the Jews cannot be Abraham's heirs merely because of their blood, still less because of the works of the law, but must be heirs of Abraham's faith, if they would be true heirs. For before the law—either the law of Moses or the law of circumcision—Abraham was justified by faith and called the father of believers.... Therefore, faith alone must obtain the grace promised to Abraham.³³

Four major tenets of Luther's view of Paul and the law³⁴ are germane to this study:³⁵

1. The law is meant to crush self-righteousness and to drive sinful mankind to seek the mercy of the Savior.

Luther taught that the law was designed as a "great hammer" used by God to drive man to utter despair and show man his need for the Savior. He writes that the law "is the hammer of death, the thundering of hell and the lightning of God's wrath, that beats to powder the obstinate and senseless hypocrites. Wherefore this is the proper and absolute use of the law, ... to beat down and rend in pieces that beast which is called the opinion of righteousness...."³⁶ To Luther, this was the primary use of the law.

2. Mankind is justified before God, not by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ.

To Luther, Gal 2:16 is the apex of Paul's soteriology, highlighting God's provision in Christ as the only means of deliverance from sin's condemnation. Commenting on this verse, he writes,

The Law is a good thing. But when the discussion is about justification, then is no time to drag in the Law. When we discuss justification we ought to speak of Christ and the benefits He has brought us. Christ is no sheriff. He is 'the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world' (John 1:29). We must know that we are nothing. We must understand that we are merely beneficiaries and recipients of the treasures of Christ.³⁷

"In faith we approach Christ as a bride would her groom, for a marriage in which all possessions are shared: Christ, the Bridegroom, acquires our 'sins, death, and

³³Luther, *Romans* xx.

³⁴It must be understood here that Luther is not speaking of the God-ordained civil laws (*usus politicus*) that are applied to all of God's creation and serve as the foundation of human law (e.g., Rom 13:3-4). Rather, he is speaking of those laws of God (*usus theologicus*) that show man his hopeless despair and his need for the redemption. "Civil laws and ordinances have their place and purpose. Let every government enact the best possible laws. But civil righteousness will never deliver a person from the condemnation of God's Law" (Martin Luther, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians*, trans. Theodore Graebner [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1949] 106).

³⁵The four are adapted from Westerholm, *Paul* 23.

³⁶Luther, *Romans* 139-41.

³⁷Luther, *Galatians* 68.

damnation' while we receive his 'grace, life, and salvation.'"³⁸

3. Believers, though declared righteous in the eyes of God, remain sinners throughout their earthly lives.

Luther views sin as a present fact of life for the believer. The believer is both sinner and righteous at the same time (*simul justus et peccator*). "Sin is always present, and the godly feel it. But it is ignored and hidden in the sight of God, because Christ the Mediator stands between."³⁹ The Christian is a new creature and thus counted righteous, but the "old man" will always be there, attempting to pull one back under the law.

4. Believers' relationship with God is not determined by the law, though the law continues to identify and judge their sin.

As was noted earlier, Luther believed that the law had a twofold purpose. First, it was given to all mankind to govern civil life in general. Second, it was designed to show mankind their inability to keep the law and arouse them to the peril of their hopeless condition.⁴⁰ In spite of his occasional remarks to the effect that "the righteous need no law to admonish and constrain them,"⁴¹ Luther did concede that, within this second use, the law could show the believer his sin and call him to repentance. Speaking of the Ten Commandments in his Large Catechism, he writes, "Let all wise men and saints step forward and produce, if they can, any work like that which God in these commandments so earnestly requires and enjoins under threat of his greatest wrath and punishment...."⁴²

Luther's past struggles with the guilt of his sin and his need for personal piety inevitably led him to view the law in a largely negative way. "His focus centered on the law as condemnatory and as pointing up humanity's depravity, with little note of any beneficial function of the law beyond that of restraining sin."⁴³ In general, he held tenaciously to the two uses of the law, conceding only slightly that

³⁸Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, in *Luther's Works*, trans. W. A. Lambert, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1957) 31:351. "It is in fact an arranged wedding, planned by God so that when he looks at us, sinners though we are, he need see only the righteousness of Christ; and seeing us so, he can welcome us as his children into his kingdom" (Westerholm, *Paul* 31).

³⁹Luther, *Galatians* 26:133. Cf. Westerholm, *Paul* 36-37.

⁴⁰Calvin views Luther's "accusing" feature of the law to be accidental. Calvin argues that "it is an accident that the law inflicts a mortal wound on us...." (John Calvin, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, trans. Ross Mackenzie [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960] 145). Also see Calvin, *The Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, trans. T. A. Smail (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 44-45.

⁴¹Luther, *Galatians* 27:96.

⁴²Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism*, trans. Robert H. Fischer (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959) 54 [1:333]. Cf. Paul M. Moyer, "Law and Gospel: With Particular Attention to the Third Use of the Law," *Concordia Journal* 6/5 (September 1980):198.

⁴³Robert K. Rapa, "The Meaning of 'Works of the Law' in Galatians and Romans," in *Studies in Biblical Literature* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001) 31:18.

the law might be of any benefit to the believer. "Justification by faith" and "the works of the law" were considered to be absolutely antithetical. Whether his focus was on first-century Judaistic thought or directed toward the Roman Church of his day, he was adamant that sinners are unable to propitiate God's wrath and merit divine favor by means of good works.

John Calvin's Perspective. Whereas Luther began his education by studying law and only later began to engage in theological pursuits, Calvin began preparing for the priesthood and then later switched to study law. A child prodigy by many accounts, by the age of twelve he became a chaplain at his hometown cathedral about 60 miles northeast of Paris. At nineteen, he left the priesthood to pursue a law degree and, having come under the influence of humanism, left a few years after that to begin studying the humanities.⁴⁴

While studying the humanities in Paris, he came under the influence of Professor Melchior Wolmar, a highly-regard humanist who spoke favorably of the Reformation. This encounter was one of the factors that led to his "sudden conversion" and his renewed study of the Scriptures.

Like Luther, he had no intention of leaving the Roman Church at this time. But the growing persecution of Protestants in France led him to reconsider, as he suddenly found himself being driven from place to place within France, Germany, and Switzerland. While passing through Geneva, his close friend Farel convinced him to stay.

Calvin was more of a quiet type, desiring to find a place of solitude where he might study and write. However, hearing that his French countrymen were being falsely accused and subsequently burned at the stake for their faith, Calvin concluded that he had no choice but to support them to the utmost of his ability. In the preface to his commentary on the Psalms, he reveals his motivations:

This was the consideration which induced me to publish my Institutes of the Christian Religion. My objects were, first, to prove that these reports were false and calumnious, and thus vindicate my brethren, whose death was precious in the sight of the Lord; and next, that as the same cruelties might very soon after be exercised against many unhappy individuals, foreign nations might be touched with at least some compassion towards them and solicitude about them.⁴⁵

Although Calvin is often remembered for his strong theological perspectives, he viewed practical theology as preeminent. He felt passionately about the need to live according to the Word. Warfield writes: "Ethics and theology were handled in the closest connection.... In opposition to the lax views of sin and grace which the Roman Church inculcated, he revived the Augustinian doctrine in order by it to conquer Rome."⁴⁶

⁴⁴Benjamin. B. Warfield, "John Calvin," in *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1950) 2:353-55.

⁴⁵John Calvin, *Commentary upon the Book of Psalms*, Calvin's Commentaries, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: AP&A, n.d.) 118.

⁴⁶Warfield, "John Calvin" 356.

Two aspects of Calvin's understanding of the law call for delineation—first, his definition of “law,” and second, his perspective on the uses of the law.

Calvin defined “law” in two different ways. In one sense, he believed that it could refer to “the whole ‘form of religion handed down by God through Moses.’ ... This Mosaic religion was a reminder (or renewal) rather than a replacement of the covenant of mercy God made with Abraham.... Thus, when the ‘entire law’ is in view, the gospel itself must be seen as confirming, not supplanting, it.”⁴⁷ Calvin pointed to Psalm 19, where the psalmist gives a glowing tribute to the law, as an example of this type of the law.

In a narrower sense, however, Calvin argued that “law” could have reference to God's righteous requirements, given to Moses on Mt. Sinai, in contrast with the gospel of God's grace.⁴⁸ The apostle Paul, according to Calvin, speaks of this type in Rom 8:2 as “the law of sin and death.”

Calvin concludes that it is this narrower sense that Paul has in mind when he discusses the law. “Although the covenant of grace is contained in the law, yet Paul removes it from there, for in opposing the Gospel to the law he regards only what was peculiar to the law itself, viz. command and prohibition, and the restraining of transgressors by the threat of death. He assigns to the law its own quality, by which it differs from the Gospel.”⁴⁹

In addition to these two definitions of the law, Calvin contends that the law has three primary uses or roles in the lives of mankind. His perspective in this regard is, generally speaking, a reflection of Martin Luther and other early Reformers. For the most part, Calvin borrows Luther's view of the two uses of the law (though in reversed order),⁵⁰ and then adds a third use.

Calvin believes the first use is to reveal mankind's sinfulness and depravity in the searching headlights of the righteousness of God.⁵¹ Justification before God is unattainable apart from divine intervention in regeneration. “This punitive function of the law serves both to terrify the wicked and make the believer realize how dependent upon God one really is.”⁵²

The second use, according to Calvin, is to restrain the lawlessness of mankind, protecting society in general from the criminal element of the unregenerate. He writes,

The second office of the law is to cause those who, unless constrained, feel no concern

⁴⁷Westerholm, *Paul* 50. Cf. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) 2.7.1, 2.9.4.

⁴⁸Calvin, *Institutes* 2.9.4.

⁴⁹Calvin, *Romans* 168-69.

⁵⁰Calvin, *Institutes* 2.7.6-13. According to Luther, the first use of the law was to restrain civil disobedience, and secondly, to awaken within mankind his hopeless condition. Philipp Melancthon, a contemporary of Luther, was the first to add a third use.

⁵¹Calvin, *Institutes* 2.7.6-9.

⁵²Rapa, “Works of the Law” 18.

for justice and rectitude, when they hear its terrible sanctions, to be at least restrained by a fear of its penalties. And they are restrained ... because, being chained as it were, they refrain from external acts, and repress their depravity within them, which otherwise would have wantonly discharged.⁵³

Calvin adds a third use that encompasses the dimension of exhortation and admonition for believers. Luther only alluded to the idea that the law could instruct believers on how to live. After all, he was writing to a people who felt the full burden of the wrong use of the law under Roman Catholicism. He wanted to avoid having people feel that, after they had believed, they would again need to work at obtaining heaven.⁵⁴

Calvin, on the other hand, makes this third use the principle role of the law. He writes that this use “finds its place among believers in whose hearts the Spirit of God already lives and reigns.... To this flesh the law serves as a whip, urging it, like a dull and tardy animal, forwards to its work; and even to the spiritual man, who is not yet delivered from the burden of the flesh, it will be a perpetual spur that will not permit him to loiter.”⁵⁵ Thus for Calvin, the law has a much more prominent role in the life of the believer than it does for Luther. For Luther, the law does not prompt good works within the believer—that is the role of the Spirit of God.

Conclusion

Are the Reformers guilty as charged by the advocates of NPP? Was Luther's reaction to Paul the consequence of his own guilt-ridden conscience? Did Calvin view Pauline literature through the lens of medieval struggles with the Roman Church? Are the Reformers mistaken about Paul?

The evidence clearly indicates otherwise. Luther and the Reformers were not merely reacting to the medieval philosophies of their day. On the contrary, they were reacting to the Roman Church's growing endorsement and embrace of the same doctrinal fallacies that were rampant in first-century Judaism.

There is little doubt that, to a degree, the Reformers compared some of Paul's words in his epistles, especially Romans and Galatians, to the current situation of their day. Luther, for example, applied the Galatians arguments both to Paul's opponents and to the circumstances of his own day. He remarks: “If the law of God is weak and useless for justification, much more are the laws of the pope weak and useless for justification”⁵⁶

⁵³Calvin, *Institutes* 1.321.

⁵⁴Paul M. Moyer, “Law and Gospel” 194. Later, Luther would write that “the law is to be retained so that the saints may know which works God requires” (Quoted from Luther's “Second Disputation Against the Antinomians” [Jan. 13, 1538] by Werner Elert, *Law and Gospel*, trans. Edward H. Schroeder [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967] 1)

⁵⁵Calvin, *Institutes* 1:323. Cf. Moyer, “Law and Gospel” 197.

⁵⁶Luther, *Galatians* 26:407. Also cf. Westerholm, *Israel's Law and the Church's Faith: Paul and his Recent Interpreters* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 5.

Though Calvin does not discuss the works of the law with the same focus as Luther, he does reject any hint of man's ability to propitiate the demands of a righteous God through human merit. In the matter of justification by faith alone, Luther and Calvin walked side by side. As with Luther, Calvin understood justification by faith as "the main hinge upon which religion turns."⁵⁷

Wright, along with other NPP proponents, has claimed that the Reformers' perspective of Paul is mistaken. On the contrary, the evidence indicates that their understanding of Paul, so eloquently stated and warmly embraced for the past 500 years, has been the predominant understanding throughout NT history, from the days of Christ until now.

The accusation that Luther's theology of Paul was misguided by his guilt-ridden conscience misses a greater point, namely, that the Reformation's perspective of the "works of the law" in Pauline literature was not something new. Rather, it was a continuation of understanding that permeated the perspective of the first-century church and reverberated in the pulpits of the early-church fathers. Its sometimes-flickering flame was carefully fanned down through the Middle Ages to the Reformation, where valiant, faithful men put their lives on the line to re-ignite it in the hearts of men.

The evidence is undeniable. The doctrine of justification by faith alone is not just 500 years old. It is a sacred legacy that has been passed down over the past two millennia. May all who come behind us find us faithful.

⁵⁷Calvin, *Institutes* 3:14.