



The New Perspective on Paul... Selected

Now as come down to the end of our study on covenant theology and to the last couple of lessons, I want to take one lesson to introduce you to one current controversy within Reformed circles concerning covenant theology and the doctrine of justification.

Now we haven't talked very much about the historical development of covenant theology but that's alright. There are a number of books that I might recommend and at the end of the study I will post both a recommended reading list and a bibliography and a number of journal articles that might also be helpful.

Now, the doctrine of covenant theology developed both during and after the Reformation. In that regard it is a little like the doctrine of justification. Both doctrines were clear enough in the Bible but not adequately thought out and systematized until the battles of the Reformation.

In fact, I think it is fair to say that the early church held these doctrines in both truth and simplicity. That is, the early church affirmed the biblical account of

Christ's atoning work, the doctrine of justification and the importance of God's covenantal dealings with man without really trying to flesh out all the details.

Let me illustrate what I mean using the church's understanding of the atonement.

The early church held its doctrine of the atonement in both truth and simplicity. It is not that it did not care about the details. It did care and it understood, quite clearly I think, enough of the details to know that the Bible focused on the substitutionary and penal nature of Christ's atoning work. That is, it understood that Christ's death was in the place of sinners bearing the judgment due sinners.

But the early church had other issues facing it.

Because of that, the early church was not particularly quick to hammer out any sort of formalized or systematic doctrine of the atonement. It accepted the basic truths of Christ's substitutionary, atoning work on behalf of sinners without bothering to fill in all the blanks.

More than likely that happened because the initial concerns faced by the early church tended to deal more with the person of Christ than with the work of Christ. But as the church grew and expanded and matured, that changed. It changed because men like Pelagius forced it to change by promoting their own unbiblical, aberrant views...views that distorted the apostle's doctrine and teaching. When that happened, the church found itself having to think through the extent and nature of the atonement and when it did that it responded to the

aberrant views it faced by means of the great creeds, councils and confessions. Practically, it found itself saying, **“No, not that but this.”**

Now as the church formulated its response to men like Pelagius, it inevitably found itself forced into thinking about how Christ’s atonement was actually applied. In other words, the church had to grapple with the question of how Christ’s atoning work was made available to sinners. To say it another way, it began to think about how sinners might lay hold of the benefits connected to Christ’s atonement.¹

Now, I think you can see that the question is an important one. In fact, I think you can see that it is just about the most important question that anyone could ever ask or answer. Certainly, both Luther and Calvin thought the question cut straight to the heart of things.

Luther said that the doctrine of justification, his answer to how Christ’s atoning is applied to elect sinners, was the article by which the church stands or falls. In other words, Luther believed that justification was the most important thing the church could address. He believed that if the church messed up the doctrine of justification it was in fact, no longer a church.

This doctrine is the head and the cornerstone. It alone begets, nourishes, builds, preserves, and defends the church of God; and without it the church of God cannot exist for one hour...Whoever departs from the article of justification does not know God and is an idolater... If the article of justification is lost, all Christian doctrine is lost at the same time... When the article of justification has fallen, everything has fallen...Of this article nothing may be yielded or conceded.²

Nothing in this article can be given up or compromised, even if heaven and earth and things temporal should be destroyed. For as St. Peter says, "There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). "And with his stripes we are healed." (Isaiah 53:5). On this article rests all that we teach and practice against the pope, the devil, and the world. Therefore we must be quite certain and have no doubts about it. Otherwise all is lost, and the pope, the devil, and all our adversaries will gain the victory.³

And Calvin believed pretty much the same thing. He said that the doctrine of justification was the hinge upon which all religion turns. That's a wonderful metaphor. It is the hinge upon which the door of religion turns. In other words, Calvin believed that without the doctrine of justification there was no open access to God...no such thing as religion.

Now let's discuss this matter (that is, justification) thoroughly. And we must discuss it reminding ourselves that this is the main hinge, on which religion turns, so that we devote even more attention to it.⁴

Now think about that.

Both Luther and Calvin thought the doctrine of justification was the center of Christian thought and faith. In other words, they thought that the doctrine of justification was the main thing.

I hope this sounds familiar.

Now to understand why Luther and Calvin thought justification was so important, you have to understand something about Roman Catholic soteriology both before and after the Reformation.

Before the Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church taught that the benefits of Christ's atoning work were applied to sinners at their baptism. Now this application of Christ's atonement was an act of God's grace. It was not an act based upon the sinner's merit. That is, it was not based upon the sinner's works or deeds. The Catholic Church believed that God graciously washed away the sinner's sin on the basis of Christ's redemptive work at the time of their baptism.

To say it even plainer, they believed in baptismal regeneration.

Now that fact is fairly difficult for modern evangelicals to grasp so let me explain it this way.

The Catholic Church believed that grace was infused into the sinner at baptism. That is, it believed that grace was poured into the sinner, almost like water into a bathtub, filling the sinner up and producing in them a state of justification.

Now notice, I did not say that they believed that baptism caused a person to be justified. The reason I did not say it that way is because that would have implied that they believed the sinner's justification was a completed act...a done deal. The Catholic Church did not (and does not) believe that the sinner's justification was complete at baptism. In fact, it really believed that the sinner's justification was only started at baptism. It believed that baptism put the sinner into a state of justification. But it believed that maintaining that state of justification was dependent upon the sinner's making use of another means of grace, namely the sacrament of penance.

Actually, the Catholic Church still teaches the exact same thing today. The following quotes demonstrate that fact. The quotes are taken from the U.S. Catholic Bishops webpage for the Office of the Catechism. They are unaltered except where I put certain phrases in bold print to help make my point.⁵ (Cf. Catechism Part 1, Section 2, Chapter 3, Article 10)

977 Our Lord tied the forgiveness of sins to faith and Baptism: "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation. He who believes and is baptized will be saved." **Baptism is the first and chief sacrament of forgiveness of sins because it unites us with Christ**, who died for our sins and rose for our justification, so that "we too might walk in newness of life."

978 "When we made our first profession of faith while receiving the holy **Baptism that cleansed us, the forgiveness we received then was so full and complete that there remained in us absolutely nothing left to efface**, neither original sin nor offenses committed by our own will, nor was there left any penalty to suffer in order to expiate them...**Yet the grace of Baptism delivers no one from all the weakness of nature**. On the contrary, we must still combat the movements of concupiscence that never cease leading us into evil."

979 In this battle against our inclination towards evil, who could be brave and watchful enough to escape every wound of sin? "If the **Church has the power to forgive sins, then Baptism cannot be her only means of using the keys of the Kingdom of heaven** received from Jesus Christ. **The Church must be able to forgive all penitents their offenses, even if they should sin until the last moment of their lives.**"

980 It is through the sacrament of Penance that the baptized can be reconciled with God and with the Church: Penance has rightly been called by the holy Fathers "a laborious kind of baptism." **This sacrament of Penance is necessary for salvation for those who have fallen after Baptism, just as Baptism is necessary for salvation for those who have not yet been reborn.**

Do you get the idea? To get into a state of justification, you must be baptized. To stay in a state of justification, you must do works of penance when you sin.

Let me say that again.... It is one thing to get into a state of justification. It is another thing to stay in a state of justification. Getting into a state of justification is by grace plain and simple. Staying in a state of justification is by grace and by the faithful use of means. Still, I think it would help to keep the two concepts of getting in and staying in, in mind.

Now you might be thinking, **“O.K., I see your point but the Catholic Catechism doesn’t use the word justification in any of the previous quotes.”**

That is true of course but the idea is certainly there.

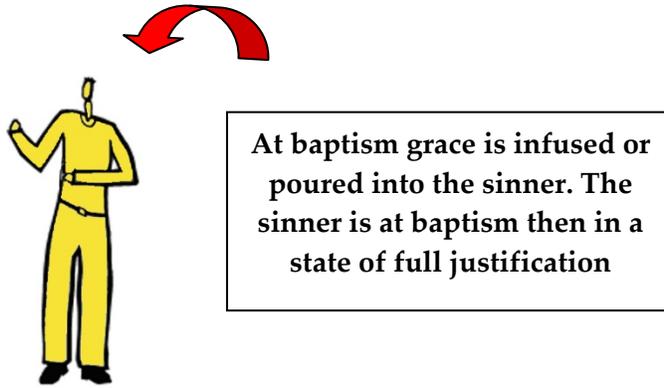
You can see that when you read the Catholic Catechism’s statement on the nature of justification which is contained later in Part 3, Chapter 3, Article 3.

Here’s what it says:

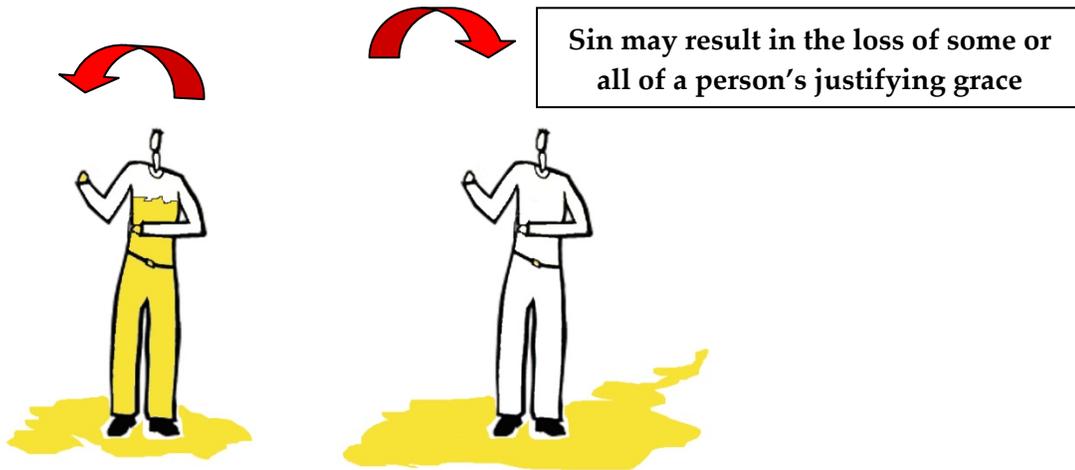
1992 Justification has been *merited for us by the Passion of Christ* who offered himself on the cross as a living victim, holy and pleasing to God, and whose blood has become the instrument of atonement for the sins of **all men**. **Justification is conferred in Baptism, the sacrament of faith.** It conforms us to the righteousness of God, who makes us **inwardly just** by the power of his mercy.

Do you see what I mean about the fact that they viewed baptism filling the sinner with grace and making them to be in a state of justification? You can see it especially in the phrase **“makes us inwardly just”**.

If you still don’t see it, it might be helpful to think of the Catholic view of justification this way.



However, when the person in a state of justification sins some of that justifying grace is lost. If the sin is venial, only a portion of that justifying grace is lost. If the sin is a mortal sin, all of that justifying grace is lost.



Now whenever that justifying grace is lost, it can only be regained through the sacrament of penance. In the Catholic view, doing penance is the means God uses to restore the sinner to their previous state of justification.

So the Catholic view was and is that a state of justification is obtained in baptism. It is maintained or restored, however, only through the use of the sacrament of penance.

Let me drive that point home letting you read with me the definition of justification from the Online Catholic Encyclopedia.

Justification...A biblio-ecclesiastical term; which denotes the transforming of the sinner from the state of unrighteousness to the state of holiness and sonship of God. Considered as an act justification is the work of God alone, presupposing, however, on the part of the adult **the process of justification** and the cooperation of his free will with God's preventing and helping grace. **Considered as a state or habit it denotes the continued possession of a quality inherent in the soul,** which theologians aptly term sanctifying grace. Since the sixteenth century great differences have existed between Protestants and Catholics regarding the true nature of justification.

The ideas on which the Reformers built their system of justification, except perhaps fiduciary faith, were by no means really original (*I would hasten to agree they go all the way back to Jesus and Paul*). They had been conceived long before either by heretics of the earlier centuries or by isolated Catholic theologians and had been quietly scattered as the seed of future heresies. **It was especially the representatives of Antinomianism during the Apostolic times who welcomed the idea that faith alone suffices for justification, and that consequently the observance of the moral law is not necessary either as a prerequisite for obtaining justification or as a means for preserving it.**⁶

Now you can see that the Catholic view of justification is that it is a process. It starts at baptism with the infusion of grace into the person's soul. That infusion of grace puts a person into a state of justification. But when that person sins their complete state of justification is lost. That complete state of justification is regained through the sacrament of penance.

Justification then may be...probably better to say will be...lost and regained over and over again over the span of a person's life. The Catholic Church believes that failure to view justification any other way will produce in Christians an abiding antinomianism (tendency toward lawlessness). Now I hope that you can see that their view rests squarely on the idea of infusion. That is, it rests on the idea that substantive actual grace is poured into the sinner making them genuinely and metaphysically holy.

The Reformers, however, believed that the righteousness God demanded was an imputed righteousness. It was real in that it was Christ's righteousness. Hence it was not a legal fiction. But it was not an infused righteousness. It was an imputed righteousness...a righteousness that lay entirely outside of the sinner...a righteousness derived from Christ and credited to or put on the account of sinners. That is why Luther could say and did say quite often that Christians were simultaneously justified and sinful (*simul justus et peccator*).

What he meant by that is that sinners were justified on the basis of Christ's imputed righteousness but still retained a measure of indwelling sin which the Spirit of God deals with in the process of sanctification over the course of a person's life.⁷

Now having said all that, you can see what the Westminster Shorter Catechism is getting at when it talks about justification.

Q. 33. What is justification?

A. Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.

Now the reason that I wanted to include a lesson on the doctrine of justification is because the issue of justification has come once again to the forefront in the Reformed Church. It has happened under the banner of a new movement...a movement called the New Perspective on Paul. Now to me, it is a bit surprising that such a movement should have gained very much of a hearing at all. But it has...it certainly has and it has attempted to turn the focus of the church away from the doctrine of justification to something called covenantal nomism. That is,

it focuses on how someone stays in the covenant and what it contends is pretty much what historic Catholicism contends...and that is that a person stays in the covenant by obeying the law.

It is particularly surprising, I think, that such a movement should have gained such a prominent hearing in the Reformed Church. I say that not because the issues that it raises are unimportant but rather because the men raising the issues are generally speaking almost all outside of the Reformed camp. It is a bit surprising to me that so many brothers in the Reformed church are willing to adopt the soteriology and ecclesiology of the New Perspective on Paul when the movement has its origin in men who do not adopt a reformed view of the Bible.

But alas, I am showing my cards too early.

And I did not want to do that.

Let me instead just introduce you to the names and characters involved. Let me give you an overview of the New Perspective on Paul and let me suggest a few things for you to read if you are interested.

The New Perspective on Paul is a movement in evangelicalism which has sprung up in just the last twenty-five years or so and which seeks to correct what it thinks is an historic reformed misunderstanding of the Apostle Paul and his doctrine of justification with a newer and more accurate understanding...an understanding that happens to be much more amenable to putting away the differences between Protestants and Catholics.

The phrase itself, the New Perspective on Paul, was coined by one of the early champions and chief proponents of the view, a man by the name of J.D.G. Dunn. But the principal credit or blame for the view (depending upon how you look at things) goes to a Texan, a former Grand Prairian, by the name of E. P. Sanders.

In 1977, Sanders wrote a book entitled *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. In the book he argues that the historic, reformed understanding of Paul and his doctrine of justification was wrong and that the fault lay not with Paul but instead with that rascal Martin Luther.

Sanders argues that Luther was so deeply influenced by his own neurotic sense of sinfulness that he more or less read his own demons...his conflict with sin and salvation and the Catholic Church...back into the text of both Romans and Galatians. Sanders argues that when Luther did that he forced upon the text an understanding of Jewish works righteousness that never existed either in the mind or writing of Paul or in actual history.⁸

In other words, Sanders argues that Luther misunderstood Paul and assumed that the first century Jews about whom Paul wrote were guilty of believing in works righteousness in the same way that the semi-Pelagian Catholics of Luther's day were guilty in believing in works righteousness. Sanders point, his chief argument in the book, is that the Jews of Paul's day did not believe in works righteousness at all. In fact, Sanders argues that the whole of Jewish literature from the period of second temple Judaism argues against the idea that Jews ever believed in anything other than salvation by God's grace.⁹

In fact none of the advocates of the New Perspective believe that first century Judaism advocated anything like a Pelagian works-righteousness. To a man they all affirm that first century Jews advocated salvation by grace alone. All of which raises the question, of course, as to why the first century Jews did not get along famously with Paul. The reason they offer, and this is especially true of those who follow Sanders, namely James D.G. Dunn and N.T. Wright, is that they rejected Christ as the Messiah.

Now that is an important point. In fact, it is an epic point.

The adherents of the New Perspective on Paul do not believe that the issue for the Jews was ever works-righteousness (as misunderstood and propagated by Luther and Calvin and others) but was rather their acceptance of Christ as the Messiah.

Now I want you to consider for a moment what the practical impact of holding such a view might do to how one views the whole debate between Catholics and Protestants. Forget for a moment about whether the New Perspective position is right or wrong. Rather consider how holding the New Perspective position might influence the way a person views the historic debate between Catholics and Protestants.

What it does...what the New Perspective on Paul does...is lead one to the conclusion that the whole Catholic Protestant debate must set aside as a terribly unfortunate misunderstanding.

In other words, a person holding to the New Perspective on Paul will come almost inevitably to the conclusion that the whole Catholic Protestant debate was a tempest in a teapot and had nothing to do with either justification or Paul or first century Judaism. Now that's the negative aspect. The New Perspective guys are quick to point out that there is a positive aspect. And here it is. Since the whole Protestant Catholic debate was an unnecessary in the first place, it can now be finally laid aside and we can start mending our fences. In case you think I am making this stuff up, listen to how N.T. Wright, the most prolific writer on the New Perspective, puts it:

Paul's doctrine of justification by faith impels the churches, in their current fragmented state, into the ecumenical task. It cannot be right that the very doctrine which declares that all who believe in Jesus belong at the same table (Galatians 2) should be used as a *way* of saying that some, who define the doctrine of justification differently, belong at a different table. The doctrine of justification, in other words, is not merely a doctrine which Catholic and Protestant might just be able to agree on, as a result of hard ecumenical endeavor. It is itself the ecumenical doctrine, the doctrine that rebukes all our petty and often culture-bound church groupings, and which declares that all who believe in Jesus belong together in the one family.¹⁰

Now I have to tell you, I think Wright is wrong and I don't mind saying that at all. I also think he is wrong when he insists that the differences between Catholics and Protestants are petty and culture-bound. I think he is wrong about Paul and I think he is wrong about Luther. In fact, I think he is not just wrong but terribly wrong.

I agree rather with Stephen Westerholm that Luther has a lot to say about Paul and that almost all of it is right. Westerholm puts it like this:

There is more of Paul in Luther than many twentieth-century scholars are inclined to allow....Students who want to understand Paul but feel they have nothing to learn from a Martin Luther should consider rather a career in metallurgy. Exegesis is learned from the masters.¹¹

You see I think Wright and all the other proponents of the New Perspective are wrong about a great many things. I think they are wrong about Paul and they wrong Luther but they are mostly wrong about justification and how justification ought to be defined. None of them see the doctrine of justification relating the imputation of Christ's righteousness to sinners. Take for example the following written by Wright:

If you respond that the entire epistle to the Romans is a description of how persons become Christians, and that justification is central there, I will answer, anticipating my later argument, 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. Paul does indeed discuss the subject-matter which the church has referred to as 'justification', but he does not use 'justification' language for it. Paul may or may not agree with Augustine, Luther or anyone else about how people come to a personal knowledge of God in Christ; but he does not use the language of 'justification' to denote this event or process.¹²

But the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Shorter and Larger Catechisms disagree. They see the doctrine of justification in the same way Luther and Calvin and the Reformers did. I am making the point here because I want you to realize that you are, in voting for officers of the church, asking them to affirm the faith of Westminster and Luther and Calvin and the Reformers. And you should, because in doing so, you will also be asking them to affirm the biblical theology of Romans and Galatians and what Paul really said as well. You see we get into the covenant community by baptism by we stay in by the righteousness of Jesus

imputed to us and received by faith alone.

Let's pray.

¹ Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 703. Reymond writes, "How does the elect sinner 'get in on' its virtues and benefits? The response we give here takes us into the area of application and answers the question, How is the elect sinner made partaker of the redemption purchased by Christ?"

² Ewald M. Plass, comp., *What Luther Says: An Anthology*, 3 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 2:703-4, 715,718.

³ Smalkald Articles Part 2, Article 1 by Martin Luther

⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press) Book 3, Chapter 11.1

⁵ <http://www.usccb.org/catechism/text/pt1sect2chpt3art10.htm>

⁶ <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08573a.htm>

⁷ Ewald M. Plass, comp., *What Luther Says: An Anthology*, 3 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 1:237. 705 Christians Are Holy Despite Residual Sin. This is our comfort and confidence. For a good reason we are able to boast with assurance and to say: "We are holy people and holy brethren at Wittenberg, Rome, Jerusalem, etc., and wherever Holy Baptism and the Gospel are; and we regard one another in no other light than that of God's saints." Although we still are sinners and many frailties permanently stay in our flesh and blood, yet if we continue to cling to Christ, remain loyal to His Baptism, and rely on His blood, He covers our sin and impurity and moves God to consider us entirely pure and holy...if we are to confess the Creed aright: "A holy Christian Church," we must not doubt we are holy; just as you must not doubt that you are baptized and that Christ has shed His blood for you. If you believe this, you must also confess that you are holy; for it is certainly the Holy Spirit who gives you Christ and His holiness and works faith in you. It is true, the Holy Spirit at times allows Christians to err and stumble and allows sin to remain in them. And He does so for the very purpose of keeping us from taking pleasure in ourselves, as if we were holy on our own account. Rather we are to learn what we are and from whom we have our holiness; otherwise we would be too arrogant and presumptuous."

⁸ E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 492. Sanders writes in footnote 57, "The term 'forensic' is somewhat ambiguous, since it can refer to God's declaring one to be righteous (though he is not), a meaning conveyed by the term 'imputation' and the catch-phrase *simul justus et peccator*. This meaning arises from Luther's theology (see, for example his Commentary on Galatians), and it is a meaning which I do not find in Paul. Paul does use the term forensically in the sense of the acquittal of past transgressions (= forgiveness), and this is the sense referred to here."

⁹ This view is answered rather convincingly by D.A Carson and others in *Justification and the Variegated Nomism: The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001).

¹⁰ N.T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1997), 158.

¹¹ Stephen Westerholm, *Israel's Law and the Church's Faith*

¹² Wright, 117.