

The New Perspective on Paul

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Bible Version

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(Note: All underlining of Scripture quotations for emphasis has been added by the author.)

This article examines the so-called “New Perspective on Paul”, popularized in the lectures and writings of N.T. Wright and James Dunn.¹ Building on the work of earlier scholars, Wright and Dunn claim that Paul has been seriously misunderstood, and that his opposition to “works of the law” for justification (Rom 3:20, 28; Gal 2:16; 3:2, 5, 10) relates not to moral works, but only to external Jewish “identity” or “boundary markers”. Supposedly Paul wasn’t concerned with how sinners are declared right before God, but only with the standing of Gentiles within the covenant community; he wasn’t objecting to moral works *per se* for justification, but only to certain ceremonial works that promoted Jewish exclusivism.

The New Perspective claims that:

1. Paul could not have been opposing a works-righteousness system because such a system did not exist in first-century Judaism. Judaism in Paul’s time was a grace-based soteriological system:
One entered the people of God by election and grace and stayed in through obedience to the covenant.
2. Accordingly, the traditional Protestant view — that Paul was opposing works-righteousness for justification — is wrong!
3. Paul’s “works of the law” refers mainly to three Jewish identity markers: circumcision, food laws, and Sabbath observance. These demarcated Israel from “Gentile sinners” (Gal 2:15).
4. Paul’s Gentile mission (Gal 2:7-9) provides the context for his emphasis on faith alone.
Gentiles converts were to be accepted by Jewish Christians into the covenant community (the Church) without the need for adopting these identity markers.
5. Justification consists of two components:
An initial act whereby one is admitted into the Church, becoming part of the covenant community.
One enters through grace, Christ’s work, and faith.
Final justification takes into account one’s works, although these are done in the power of the Holy Spirit.
Crucially in the New Perspective, there’s no individual conversion/regeneration, nor is there a crediting or imputation of Christ’s righteousness to the believer.

¹ See N.T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997). See also James D.G. Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*, The Manson Memorial Lecture delivered at the University of Manchester on 4 November 1982: <http://markgoodacre.org/PaulPage/New.html>.

Both the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches have largely been supportive of the New Perspective, and for good reason — it aligns closely with their understanding of Paul.

Thus we find contemporary Catholic scholar Frank Matera claiming that:

“... works of the Law” [in Galatians 2:16] refers primarily to circumcision, dietary regulations, and Sabbath observance In my view Paul was not arguing against legalists who required righteousness by works so much as he sought to integrate Gentiles and Jews by pointing to the Christ event as the fulfillment of God’s promises.²

Therefore, there’s nothing new about the New Perspective!

Response to the New Perspective

Some initial comments concerning justification in Galatians:

It’s true (as the New Perspective claims) that Paul was seeking to counter legalists in the Galatian churches who were trying to impose Jewish identity markers on Gentile converts.

These Judaizers sought to uphold Israel’s privileges, to which circumcision itself clearly pointed:

Jews were God’s elect people from birth; Gentiles were by their very nature uncircumcised “sinners” (Gal 2:15).

So, just as the Mosaic Law itself prescribed (Ex 12:48), Gentile converts were to become Jews via circumcision.

This was the very issue that, soon after Paul wrote Galatians, was dealt with at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15).³

Not that the Judaizers intended to bypass God’s grace in Christ — they were rather adding to it.

But Paul saw this as attempt at self-justification; adopting this approach was to be severed from Christ and fallen from grace (Gal 5:4).

One of the problems with the New Perspective is that it uncritically interprets “law” in Paul’s writings not as he himself intended, but in terms of his Galatian opponents’ focus and understanding.

But it needs to be asked why the New Perspective bases its view predominantly on the Galatian context, when Paul has a great deal more to say elsewhere. His epistle to the Romans comes nearest to providing a systematic treatment of justification, so it’s primarily to that letter that one should go to determine his meaning.

We seek now to show that Paul’s “works of the law” refers not in the first place to Jewish identity markers, but to a person’s attempt to earn a right standing with God through obedience to the Law of Moses:

1. When Paul speaks of God’s Law, he usually has its moral stipulations in view, not ceremonial markers:
 - Moral law is referenced or clearly intended in Romans 2:17-24; 13:8-10 and Galatians 5:14, 22-23; 6:2.
 - The law that Gentiles have “written on their hearts” and consciences is moral law (Rom 2:14-15).
 - Paul considered ceremonial obedience to be of far lesser importance than obeying the Law’s moral stipulations (Rom 2:25-27).
 - One of the Law’s main functions was to highlight and expose sin (Rom 3:20; 4:15; 5:13, 20; 7:7). Sin is primarily disobedience to God’s moral commandments.

In short, Paul’s view of “law” is much broader than the narrow focus of the Galatian Judaizers — hence his rejoinder that those who submit to circumcision must keep the entire Law (Gal 5:3).

The impossibility of obeying “all things written in the Book of the Law” means that those who attempt justification through works are under God’s curse (Gal 3:10).

² Frank J. Matera, *Galatians*, Sacra Pagina series, Volume 9, General Editor Daniel J. Harrington (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), p. ix.

³ Paul likely wrote Galatians from Syrian Antioch soon after his First Missionary Journey but prior to the Jerusalem Council of 49 AD.

2. For Paul there were but two ways to attain “righteousness” — that freely provided by God in Christ, and that earned through obedience to the Law.

Paul’s view is succinctly stated in Philippians 3:8-9:

... that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.

Paul contrasts these two ways to attain righteousness in Romans 9:30 — 10:13:

9:30: Gentiles had attained righteousness through faith.

9:31: Israel sought righteousness through the Law and failed.⁴

9:32: They failed because righteousness cannot come through works.

10:3: Israel’s self-righteousness prevented them from submitting to God’s gift.

10:4: Faith in Christ brings righteousness for all who believe; the Law has no part to play in this.

10:5: “Righteousness that is based on the law” refers to obeying God’s moral laws fully and from the heart, so as to attain eternal life (Lev 18:5; Lk 10:25-28; Rom 2:13).⁵

10:6: Paul contrasts the works approach with “the righteousness based on faith”.

10:8-13: Salvation as God’s free gift is readily available to all who will trust in Jesus — Gentiles included.

3. The New Perspective is wrong to deny Jewish self-righteousness as a part of the problem addressed by Paul. First-century Jews were proud of their spiritual privileges (Rom 2:17ff.). After all, didn’t circumcision and the food laws and Sabbath observance mark them out as superior to “Gentile sinners” (Gal 2:15)? (Never mind that the Law’s primary role was to expose sin and point to the need for a Savior!)

And what about those proud Pharisees we encounter in the gospels?

Their superficial understanding of God’s Law led to defective views of sin and of their need for God’s grace, which in turn manifested in self-justification and contempt for others (Lk 7:47b; 10:29; 16:15; 18:9).

It was self-righteousness that hindered Jewish acceptance of God’s free gift of righteousness (Rom 10:3).

As Paul saw it, the imposition of Jewish markers was an attempt to be “justified by the law” and would result in a person being “severed from Christ” and “fallen away from grace” (Gal 5:4).

4. Justification by faith is, for Paul, God’s answer to the (universal) human sin problem. Jews and Gentiles are equally sinners who have disobeyed God (Rom 1:18 — 3:20). Both alike are justified by faith and apart from works (Rom 3:21-24; Gal 2:15-16; cf. Ac 15:11). God justified Abraham and David apart from works (Rom 4:1-8). Both were “ungodly” and in desperate need of forgiveness; their justification had nothing to do with Jewish boundary markers.
5. For those not under the Mosaic Law, Paul refers not to “works of the law” but simply to “works”: He does so for Abraham and for others not under the Law (Rom 4:2; 9:11; Eph 2:8-9; 2Tim 1:9; Tit 3:5). “Works” are whatever we do to contribute to our salvation. (Jewish markers are certainly not in view here!).
6. Justification itself is a legal term. It refers to our status before God: All stand guilty before God on account of disobedience to his commandments (Rom 3:9-20). To be justified is to be declared “not guilty” before the bar of God. It’s to have our sins forgiven, our guilt removed, our slate wiped clean (Ac 13:38-39). Justification means an end to God’s wrath and condemnation (Rom 5:9; 8:1). It brings lasting peace and reconciliation with God (Rom 5:1, 9-11).

⁴ Paul throughout Romans 9 – 11 is discussing Israel’s unbelief. Whereas 9:6b-29 surveys God’s sovereign action as a major cause, 9:30 – 10:21 considers Israel’s own fault and responsibility. Self-righteousness hindered their acceptance of God’s free gift. The way of faith isn’t difficult, notes Paul — salvation is readily available to anyone who believes and calls upon the Lord (10:6-13).

⁵ See John Gill’s Exposition notes for Romans 10:5: <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/gill/romans/10.htm>.

That the Greek verb “justify” (*dikaioō*, Strong’s G1344) has the sense of *acquitted* or *freed from sin* is evident from its use in Luke 18:14,⁶ Acts 13:38-39, and Romans 6:7.

The related noun “justification” (*dikaiōsis*, Strong’s G1347), employed only in Romans 4:25 and 5:18, emphasizes one’s acquittal through Christ — no longer guilty/condemned but fully pardoned from sin.

7. But justification means far more than mere acquittal:

Fundamentally, to be justified means to be declared righteous.

The connection between *justification* and *righteousness* is evident from the Greek terms themselves:

The verb *dikaioō* (Strong’s G1344) actually means “to show to be righteous”, “declare righteous”.

There’s also the adjective *dikaios* (Strong’s G1342: “righteous”, “just”), and the noun *dikaionē* (Strong’s G1343: “righteousness”, “justice”).

Paul frequently employs the verb forms:

God is the One who justifies/declares righteous (Active Voice): Romans 3:26, 30; 4:5; 8:30, 33; Galatians 3:8.

And we are justified/declared righteous by him (Passive/Middle Voice): Romans 3:24, 28; 4:2; 5:1, 9; 6:7; 1 Corinthians 6:11; Galatians 2:16-17; 3:11, 24; 5:4; Titus 3:7. (Also employed by James in 2:21, 24-25.)

To be “justified” (Rom 5:1, 9, ESV) is the same as to be “declared righteous” (HCSB, LEB, NET, YLT).

Therefore, justification is *the act of making a person right with God*:

God declares the person who trusts in Christ to be righteous.

8. How does justification work?

Answer: Justification involves what theologians call the Great Exchange:

Christ takes up our sin and guilt, while his perfection and righteousness are reckoned/credited to us.

Here we have double imputation: Our sins are imputed to Jesus; his righteousness to us.

The crucial verse for this is 2 Corinthians 5:21 (my translation):

*God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*⁷

9. N.T. Wright flatly denies Paul’s teaching about imputation:

If we use the language of the law-court, it makes no sense whatever to say that the judge imputes, imparts, bequeaths, conveys or otherwise transfers his righteousness to either the plaintiff or the defendant. ... To imagine the defendant somehow receiving the judge’s righteousness is simply a category mistake.⁸

But the issue here is that God is no ordinary judge and the criminal is no ordinary criminal.

Our God is all-knowing and fully aware of how thoroughly bad we are.

And the problem for the prisoner in the dock (i.e., us) is no mere transgression of one particular law, but a total deficiency of the righteousness and perfection that God requires. For us to be accepted by God into his fellowship we absolutely need his righteousness.

“Righteousness” is far more than the absence of guilt. It refers to positive goodness. God not only declares us innocent, but righteous and holy as well.

⁶ In the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, the person justified is the one who humbles himself, admits his sin, and asks God to show him mercy (Lk 18:13-14). Jesus is here critiquing the self-righteousness of the Jewish religious leaders (Lk 18:9).

⁷ Charles Ellicott comments concerning 2 Corinthians 5:21: “God dealt with Christ, not as though He were a sinner, like other men, but as though He were sin itself, absolutely identified with it. ... The ‘righteousness of God,’ as in Romans 3:21-22, expresses not simply the righteousness which He gives, nor that which He requires, ... but rather that which belongs to Him as His essential attribute. The thought of St. Paul is that, by our identification with Christ ... we are made sharers in the divine righteousness.” (From Ellicott’s Commentary for English Readers, via the Bible Hub website: https://biblehub.com/commentaries/ellicott/2_corinthians/5.htm.)

Already, the Law of Moses sought to instill the concept of substitution: through the shedding of blood sin was atoned for (Lev 17:11). Identification with the animal was signified by placing one’s hand on its head prior to slaughtering it (Lev 1:4; cf. Lev 16:20-22).

⁸ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, p. 98.

10. Believers are the righteousness of God “in him” (2Cor 5:21).
 Paul often speaks of Christians as being “in Christ” — united with or joined to him.
 Every spiritual blessing comes to us only as we are so joined to him — see Ephesians 1:3-7, 11, 13.
 In God’s estimation we’re identified with Christ; when God sees us, he sees his perfect Son whom he loves.
 Accordingly, Paul wanted to be “found in [Christ]” (Php 3:9).
 Righteousness is credited to us through union with our Covenant Head (Rom 5:19).⁹
 As John Piper notes: “Becoming the righteousness of God ‘in him’ implies that our identity with Christ is the way God sees his own righteousness as becoming ours.”¹⁰
11. Jesus was “delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (Rom 4:25).
 Jesus’ resurrection attested to the Father’s acceptance of him as our Substitute. It proved the efficacy of his sacrifice, showing that in his death he truly bore our sins and received the due punishment for them.
 And that he was no ordinary person but God’s chosen Messiah who has conquered sin and death.
 All of which is a great stimulus to, and foundation for faith (1Pet 1:3; cf. 1Cor 15:17).
12. Our union/identification with Jesus means that his death was our death, and his resurrection was ours too.
 Paul explains all this in connection with the symbolism of baptism (Romans 6):
 Our old (Adamic) self was crucified and put to death with Christ (Rom 6:6).
 Accordingly, we’re to count ourselves as dead to sin but alive to God (Rom 6:11).
 And we’re to live lives appropriate to our new status (Rom 6:12ff.).
13. So, for Paul justification is more than a mere wiping of the slate of past sins; it involves a positive crediting or reckoning of righteousness. The person so justified has, as it were, done everything that God requires of him. He’s viewed as having rendered perfect obedience to God’s Law.
 Paul brings out this aspect of justification in Romans 4:3-6, 9-11, 22-24.
 Justification, therefore, is God’s declaration that a person has not only been acquitted, but that he is also righteous and holy. In Christ we are “saints”, “sanctified”, “holy” (1Cor 1:2; 6:11; Eph 1:1; Php 1:1; Col 3:12).
 Justification brings lasting peace and reconciliation with God — his full acceptance and friendship (Rom 5:1, 9-11).
14. Summarizing what Paul meant by “God’s righteousness”:
- It’s a free gift (Rom 5:17; 10:3).
 Romans 5:17: “... those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness ...”
 - It’s received through faith (Rom 1:17; 3:22; 9:30; 10:6; Php 3:9).
 God credits righteousness to the one who believes (Rom 4:5, 22-24).
 - God credits his own (or Christ’s) innate righteousness to sinners (2Cor 5:21, see footnote 7).
- (Appendix 1 examines “God’s righteousness” in more detail.)

⁹ Martin Luther famously compared our relationship to Christ with that of a bridegroom and bride: all that each partner brings to the marriage now belongs to the other. The wife’s debts become his, and all of his assets become hers!

¹⁰ John Piper, *The Future of Justification: A response to N.T. Wright* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2008), p. 180.

15. Throughout his epistles Paul consistently contrasts “works” with faith and grace, and with God’s call of people to himself.

See for example, Romans 9:11-12; Ephesians 2:8-9; 2 Timothy 1:9; Titus 3:5-7.

Concerning FAITH:

True faith is a simple resting in, or reliance upon, God’s promise of forgiveness in Christ.

It’s the very antithesis of works (Rom 4:4-6).

It’s a trusting in God to do for us that which we cannot do for ourselves.

It’s a simple calling upon him to save us (Rom 10:13), just as David cried out for God’s mercy (Ps 51:1).

Faith is itself God’s gift, so that human boasting is utterly excluded (Eph 2:8-9; Ac 16:14).¹¹

16. Concerning GRACE:

God’s grace is wholly unmerited, given to the most undeserving (1Tim 1:13-16).

Indeed, grace and merit are antithetical principles (Rom 11:6).

Because grace is unmerited, God is entirely free to choose to whom he will extend mercy and free to bypass others — he’s under no obligation to extend grace to anyone:

So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills (Romans 9:18).

17. Concerning God’s CALL:

God outwardly calls people through the proclamation of the gospel.

But Paul also refers to a more specific, inner call whereby God irresistibly draws to himself those whom he has chosen for salvation (Rom 8:28, 30; 9:24; 1Cor 1:24, 26; Gal 1:15).

(Jesus said something similar in John 6:37: “All that the Father gives me will come to me ...”)

For all whom Jesus died, the Holy Spirit inwardly calls and imparts faith and new birth.¹²

The total lack of human contribution (“works”) to salvation is seen in the way Paul connects God’s grace and call with his eternal predestinating purposes — see Romans 8:30; 9:11; Galatians 1:15; 2 Timothy 1:9.

Paul’s doctrine of justification by God’s unmerited grace that’s received through faith helps us understand the threat he felt the Galatian Judaizers posed and his angry response to their teaching (Gal 1:6-9).

The very gospel of God’s grace was being undermined!

The contemporary New Perspective equally undermines the gospel of God’s grace and would surely elicit a similar response were Paul alive today.

¹¹ Paul regarded every aspect of salvation as God’s unmerited gift of grace (Rom 3:24; 5:15-17; 6:23; Eph 2:8-9; etc.). According to Ephesians 2:8, even the act of believing is God’s gift. See the Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges, notes for Ephesians 2:8: <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/cambridge/ephesians/2.htm>.

¹² Further references to this “effectual call” are found in Ephesians 1:18; 4:1, 4; 2 Thessalonians 2:14; 2 Timothy 1:9; Hebrews 9:15; 1 Peter 2:9; 2 Peter 1:10; Jude 1:1; Revelation 17:14.

For more detailed critiques of the New Perspective, see the following:

1. Peter Barnes, *Galatians* (Evangelical Press Study Commentaries).
Darlington: Evangelical Press, 2006. Pages 18-35.
2. John Piper, *The Future of Justification: A response to N.T. Wright*.
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3. Thomas Schreiner, *Faith Alone: The Doctrine of Justification*.
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Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015. Pages 98-111, 239-261.
4. The Gospel Coalition website: Essay by Robert J. Cara, *Justification and the New Perspective on Paul*.
<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/justification-new-perspective-paul/>.
5. The Ligonier Ministries website: Article by Phil Johnson, *What's Wrong with Wright: Examining the New Perspective on Paul*.
<https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/whats-wrong-wright-examining-new-perspective-paul>.
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Appendix 1: The significance of God's Righteousness

Paul states that "the righteousness of God" is revealed in the gospel (Rom 1:17).

What does he mean by the phrase?

God's righteousness refers or relates to:

1. his own attributes — his goodness, love, justice, etc.
2. what he requires of people (Mt 5:20).
3. how his wrath is appeased through Jesus' death, so that he can justly declare sinners "not guilty".
4. his gift of righteousness given to sinners.

Indeed, these are all closely connected:

God's righteousness (justice) is seen in his punishment of sin.

God's righteousness was demonstrated in his provision of Christ as the "propitiation" for sin who turns aside God's wrath (Rom 3:25a).¹³

His having "passed over former sins" could be construed as laxness, but now at the cross both his holiness and justice (and thus his "righteousness") have been revealed (Rom 3:25b).

God is therefore completely righteous (just) when he doesn't punish people for their sins but instead declares them "not guilty" (Rom 3:26).

Concerning the righteousness that God imputes to sinners:

- It's a free gift (Rom 5:17; 10:3).
- It's received through faith (Rom 1:17; 3:21-22; 9:30; 10:6; Php 3:9).
- God credits his own (or Christ's) innate righteousness to sinners (1Cor 1:30; 2Cor 5:21, see footnote 7). (Sanctification likewise involves a sharing in God's own holiness — see Hebrews 12:10.)

For more on the significance of God's righteousness, including the Old Testament background to Paul's use of the term, see the following:

1. Thomas Schreiner, *Faith Alone: The Doctrine of Justification*. The Five Solas Series, edited by Matthew Barrett. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015. Chapters 11-14 (pages 144-178).
2. The Gospel Coalition website: Essay by Thomas Schreiner, *The Righteousness of God in Justification*. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/righteousness-god-justification/>.

¹³ The term "propitiation" in Romans 3:25 (and in Hebrews 2:17; 1 John 2:2; 4:10) refers to the placating or satisfying of the wrath of God which is directed towards sin and sinners. Jesus accomplished this by acting as our Substitute on the cross. Propitiation is what allows a righteous God to show love and mercy to sinners (1Jn 4:10).

N.T. Wright explains the difference between propitiation and expiation thus: "Dealing with wrath or punishment is *propitiation*; with sin, *expiation*. You propitiate a person who is angry; you expiate a sin, crime, or stain on your character."

N.T. Wright, "The Letter to the Romans: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections." In: *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes* (Volume 10). Edited by Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), p. 476.

Or as George Hunsinger notes, "The wrath of God is removed (propitiation) when the sin that provokes it is abolished (expiation)."

Appendix 2: Grace vs. the Law in Galatians 5:4

5:4: You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. *Katērgēthēte* (“You are severed”) is from *katargeō* (Strong’s G2673), “to inactivate”, “abolish”, “sever”. *Tēs charitos exsepesate* — literally, “the grace you fell from.”

What is Paul’s logic here?

How was submitting to circumcision an attempt at justification by law?

How was it a fall from grace?

Why was there a concomitant requirement to obey the entire Law (Gal 5:3)?

The Greek term translated “grace” (*charis*, Strong’s G5485) carries a number of meanings but for Paul it usually denotes “God’s unmerited favor”. Grace and works are antithetical principles (Rom 11:6).

Thus, God’s grace (favor) is shown to the undeserving — as exemplified in Paul the persecutor (Gal 1:15).

The total lack of human contribution is seen in the way Paul elsewhere links grace with predestination:

[God] saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace [charis] which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began.
(2 Timothy 1:9, my translation, based on the KJV.)

God’s ability to show grace is tied to the atoning work of Christ — without Christ, grace would be impossible.

To choose justification by Law-works is to therefore reject God’s grace in Christ.

Such self-righteousness evidently characterized first-century Judaism (Romans 10:3):

For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness [in Christ].

It would seem that, like the Judaizers in Antioch (Ac 15:1), the Galatian “agitators” (Gal 5:12, NIV, NET) regarded circumcision as necessary for salvation — though perhaps to complete the work of Christ rather than replace it.¹⁴

From their reading of the Old Testament, they saw the Law’s rituals as demarcating Israel as the privileged and holy people of God in contradistinction to “Gentile sinners” (Gal 2:15). Circumcision served as the badge and guarantee of God’s favor. Food laws prevented table-fellowship with Gentiles — with clean and unclean foods symbolizing the contrasting status of Jews and Gentiles (Lev 20:24-26; Am 7:17; Ac 10:12-15, 28).

Likewise, Sabbath observance functioned to demarcate Israel as God’s holy people (Ex 31:13).

But the Law also permitted Gentiles to be incorporated into Israel via circumcision (Ex 12:48).

The imposition of circumcision was indeed an attempt to make Gentile converts “holy” and justified.¹⁵

The agitators’ focus on ceremonial rules shows they were in essence Pharisees who neglected God’s moral laws (cf. Mt 23:23-26; Mk 7:3-4; Lk 18:17). But, as Paul notes (in Galatians 5:3), commitment to the principle of works-justification requires obedience to the entire Law — moral stipulations included — and such an approach, doomed to failure, places one under God’s curse (Gal 3:10).

¹⁴ F.F. Bruce in *The Epistle to the Galatians*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary series (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1982), p. 160, suggests the agitators probably at least understood that the Law’s sacrificial rituals had been rendered obsolete by Christ’s death.

¹⁵ Relevant to this discussion is the way Peter, at the Jerusalem Council, explained how God had “cleansed” the Gentiles through faith (Acts 15:9).

The so-called “New Perspective on Paul” maintains that Paul’s opposition to “works of the law” for justification (in Galatians 2:16, etc.) relates not to moral works, but only to certain outward Jewish “identity markers”.¹⁶ Supposedly Paul wasn’t concerned with how sinners are declared right before God, but only with the standing of Gentiles within the covenant community; he wasn’t objecting to moral works *per se* for justification, but only to ceremonial works such as circumcision, food laws and Sabbath observance that promoted Jewish exclusivism.

The New Perspective’s problem is that it uncritically interprets “law” in Paul’s writings not as he himself intended, but in terms of his Galatian opponents’ focus and understanding. The Galatian context is emphasized at the expense of Paul’s overall theology.

But Paul’s view of God’s Law is much broader than the narrow focus of the Galatian agitators. Hence his rejoinder (in Galatians 5:3) concerning their obligation to obey the entire Law.

Likewise, in Galatians 3:10-11, he contrasts justification by faith with obedience to “all things written in the Book of the Law.” Moral law is included, and it’s no doubt also intended in Galatians 5:14, 5:18, 5:23 and 6:2.

Throughout his epistles Paul consistently contrasts “works” with faith and grace and God’s call.

Justification by faith is God’s answer to mankind’s universal sin problem (Rom 3:21-24). Such faith — a resting in, or reliance upon, God’s promise of forgiveness in Christ — is the very antithesis of works (Rom 4:4-6).

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2. Dunn, James D.G. *The New Perspective on Paul*. The Manson Memorial Lecture delivered at the University of Manchester, 4 November 1982. <http://markgoodacre.org/PaulPage/New.html>.

¹⁶ See James D.G. Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*, The Manson Memorial Lecture delivered at the University of Manchester on 4 November 1982: <http://markgoodacre.org/PaulPage/New.html>.