

## WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

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When the “New Perspective on Paul” first appeared on the theological scene (1982), the original point of James Dunn (following E. P. Sanders) was that ancient Judaism should be understood not in terms of “legalism” but of “nomism,” i.e., covenantal service. Therefore, Paul’s main polemic (for Dunn, not Sanders) against his Jewish contemporaries pertains not to such “legalism” but to a righteousness that was nationalistically restrictive. However, not long thereafter, especially with the rising influence of N. T. Wright, another actor took to the stage—the place of “works” in the scheme of eschatological justification. While not altogether “justifiable,” the notion that the outcome of the final judgment hinges on Christian obedience, or perseverance, has become part and parcel of the NPP, at least in the popular conception.

It is in light of the seemingly never ending NPP debate that I want to ask an honest question, What’s it all about? I pose this query because of some recent “revelations.” In Tom Schreiner’s hot-off-the-press, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 546-616 (on Paul, 573-85), there is a first-rate discussion of the relation of faith and obedience in the New Testament. In point of fact, Schreiner’s following remark makes one wonder why there was ever a controversy in the first place: “...scholars have often failed to see that he [Paul] also stresses the necessity of good works for justification. No contradiction exists in Paul’s theology here. Indeed, it seems that Paul and James, though they emphasize different truths, are compatible after all” (ibid., 585). Schreiner’s lectures at Oak Hill College (London), accessible on Ardel Caneday’s blog (<http://www.trsbu.blogspot.com>), are to the same effect. By a simple reflection on texts such as Rom 2:13, Schreiner’s comments are like listening to, or reading, various representatives of the NPP (or its “sympathizers”), who have commended the same interpretation of that verse for at least 20 years now.

Moreover, Moisés Silva, commenting on Paul’s use of Hab 2:4 in Gal 3:11, sounds rather “adventurous” in the present climate: “Faith always involves waiting for fulfillment and thus is always in danger of being shaken; therefore, steadfastness and constancy are of its essence. In other words, for Habakkuk, there was no such dichotomy between faith and faithfulness as we often assume...” (“Galatians,” *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* [eds. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007], 802).

Additionally, Mike Bird (<http://euangelizomai.blogspot.com>) has provided a summary and paraphrase of Martin Bucer’s understanding of Rom 2:13:

Bucer identifies a ‘tacit irony’ directed against the Jews who presupposed their advantages but did not translate hearing the law into practice of the law. But the statement of 2.13 can be taken at face value because, for Bucer, the ‘doer’ of the law is one who has a regenerate heart. The logic of

Bucer's argument is that those who do the law in 2.13 are those who are genuinely 'doers' of the works of the law and it is according to works that God will judge humanity. But to do the law means to devote oneself seriously to what the law commands and not merely to perform some of the actions demanded by the law. This can be done only by those who truly believe in the Lord. For Bucer, the actual deeds performed are not those of the believer, but the works of Christ in us! This is not simply Christ inspiring works of law, rather, believers are justified by the merits of Christ (i.e., Christ's life, death, and obedience) which become ours through union with Christ by faith. He writes: 'God saves us of his pure mercy and by contemplating the merit of Christ, which is given to us and becomes our own we believe in Christ. For the deeds [of the law] according to which God justifies us...are Christ's works in us, given with him, out of a sheer and gratuitous benevolence of God. So the goodness of God is always, *per se*, the first and complete cause of our salvation'.

Bird further notes: "It appears that in the early days of the reformation Rom 2.13 was handled in basically three ways: (a) reconciled with Medieval catholic view of merit, grace and penance (e.g., Cajetan, Sadoletto); (b) treated it as a hypothetical statement (e.g., Melancthon, Calvin); or (c) God works his works in the believer through the works of Christ (Bucer)." He then refers to a lecture on justification by Mark Seifrid (apparently on the website of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary), in which Seifrid, says Bird, is decidedly Bucerian in sympathies.

Finally, there are the exegetical observations on Rom 1:5 by Bill Mounce (<http://zondervan.typepad.com/koinonia>):

Paul begins his letter to the church at Rome by saying that through Jesus Christ "we have received grace and apostleship unto obedience of faith among all the nations" (1:5).

There are several interesting challenges to translating this verse.... But the most difficult question has to do with the phrase "obedience of faith" (*hypakoen pisteos*); "faith" is in the genitive case. The Greek genitive case has much the same flexibility that the English "of" carries.... There are two basic options here.

1. "Obedience, that is, faith." Paul could be saying that the purpose of his apostolic ministry is to bring the Gentiles to the point of faith (as opposed to works); this faith is the obedience for which the gospel calls. In grammar this is categorized as an expegetical genitive, where the word in the genitive is explaining ("exegeting") its head noun.
2. "Obedience that stems from faith." This is the idea that once a person comes to faith in Jesus, their lives will start to change and move from disobedience to obedience, putting off the old and putting on the new. This would be a source or subjective genitive.

So what is it? It is interesting that the TNIV thinks that it means both. They translate: “to call all the Gentiles to faith and obedience.” One of the great dangers is to think of grammar as an apple pie cut into a set number of pieces, thinking that every passage must fall into one of the prescribed categories. This is how we tend to teach intermediate grammar, but it is not always helpful. For a native speaker in any language, grammar is much more on a continuum; and their use of a case in any one place may sit squarely on the cut between the two pieces of pie. That is what the TNIV is saying; “obedience of faith” doesn’t fit in any one piece of grammatical pie, and they are probably right.

The purpose of Paul’s ministry is to be the herald, to announce how people can live in relationship with the King. This means we come to a point in understanding that there is nothing we can do to establish the relationship; it is by God’s grace and at his initiation. “Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to your cross I cling” sings the old song. It is by faith and not our works.

But is it possible to experience God’s cleansing sent to us through faith without our hearts being changed? Of course not. In the New Covenant our old heart is removed and a new softer, pliable heart of flesh is put in its place. But if our heart is changed, is it possible for our lives also not to change? Of course not. Changed people live in a changed way. This is why judgment (outside of John) is always done on the basis of our lives (i.e., works). Our changed lives of obedience show the reality of the heart changed through faith....

*This is the obedience of faith. It is an obedience that first shows itself in a response of faith, and an obedience that necessarily moves into a life of ever-increasing faithful obedience (italics added).*

I ask again, What’s it all about? If the likes of Bucer, Schreiner, Caneday, Seifrid, Dunn, Wright, Bird, Mounce, Shepherd, and others of us, are in essential accord as to Rom 1:5; 2:13 (and other texts), then why does there continue to be internecine warfare among believers of the same stripe? Or, more pointedly, why is there a persistent double standard imposed on those who are more alike than different? There are times at which certain biblical texts become especially appropriate. For this reason, I would commend to all a rereading and reconsideration of John 13:34-35; Rom 12:18 and kindred passages.