

Romans: God's Good News for the World

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## 2. New challenges to old traditions

It has long been taken for granted, at least since the Reformation, that the apostle's chief emphasis in Romans is on God's justification of sinners by grace, in Christ, through faith. For example, Calvin wrote in his introductory essay on 'The Theme of the Epistle of Paul to the Romans' that 'the main subject of the whole Epistle is that we are justified by faith'.<sup>18</sup> This is not to deny that Paul goes on to handle the further themes of assurance (chapter 5), sanctification (chapter 6), the place of the law (chapter 7), the ministry of the Spirit (chapter 8), God's plan for both Jews and Gentiles (chapters 9— 11) and the varied responsibilities of the Christian life (chapters 12— 15). Nevertheless, the assumption has been that Paul's main preoccupation was with justification, and that he developed those other topics only in relation to justification.

During this century, however, and in particular during the last thirty years, this thesis has been challenged. In 1963 an article by Professor Krister Stendahl, who later served as Lutheran Bishop of Stockholm, appeared in the *Harvard Theological Review*, entitled 'The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West', which was subsequently incorporated in his book *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*.<sup>19</sup> He maintained that the traditional understanding of Paul in general and of Romans in particular, namely that their focus is on justification 'by faith, is wrong. This mistake, he continued, is due to the western church's morbid conscience,<sup>20</sup> and specially to the moral struggles of Augustine and Luther, which the church has tended to read back into Paul. Justification, according to Bishop Stendahl, is not 'the pervasive, organizing doctrinal principle or insight of Paul',<sup>21</sup> but 'was hammered out by Paul for the very specific and limited purpose of defending the rights of Gentile converts to be full and genuine heirs to the promises of God to Israel'.<sup>22</sup> Paul's concern was not his own salvation, for he himself had a 'robust conscience',<sup>23</sup> claimed to be 'blameless',<sup>24</sup> and experienced 'no troubles, no problems, no qualms of conscience, no feelings of shortcomings',<sup>25</sup> but rather the salvation of the Gentiles, that they could come to Christ directly and not through the law. Consequently, 'the climax of Romans is actually chapters 9— 11, *i.e.* his reflections on the relation between church and synagogue, the church and the Jewish people',<sup>26</sup> and chapters 1 — 8 are 'a preface'.<sup>27</sup> Romans is 'about God's plan for the world and about how Paul's mission to the Gentiles fits into that plan'.<sup>28</sup>

To some degree this is a necessary corrective. For justification is certainly not Paul's exclusive preoccupation, as we have seen. Nevertheless, Romans 1 — 8 cannot be downgraded to the status of a mere 'preface'. Bishop Stendahl seems to have set up an unnecessarily sharp antithesis. Paul was indeed deeply exercised, as the apostle to the Gentiles, about the place of the law in salvation and about the unity of Jews and Gentiles in the one body of Christ. But he was also evidently concerned to expound and defend the gospel of justification by grace alone through faith alone. In fact, the two concerns, far from being incompatible, are inextricably interwoven. Only loyalty to the gospel can secure unity in the church.

Whether Paul's pre-conversion conscience was as cloudless as Dr Stendahl makes out, and whether we in the West have unduly introspective consciences which we have projected on to Paul, only careful exegesis of the crucial texts can settle. But in 1:18 — 3:20 it is Paul (not Augustine or Luther) who establishes universal and inexcusable human guilt. And Paul's own claim to have been 'blameless' in law-righteousness<sup>29</sup> must have referred to an *external* conformity to the law's demands. For in those revealing autobiographical verses in the middle of Romans 7 (if that is what they are) he tells how it was the commandment against covetousness, being an *internal* sin of heart, not action, which provoked in him 'every kind of evil desire' and so brought him to spiritual death. Professor Stendahl does not refer to this passage. Besides, it is not necessary to polarize between a 'morbid' and a 'robust' conscience. A truly healthy conscience disturbs our security and shames our pride, especially when the Holy Spirit comes to 'convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment'.<sup>30</sup> We should not therefore expect any unregenerate

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<sup>18</sup> Calvin, p. 5.

<sup>19</sup> First published in 1976.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 11ff., 78ff.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p.27.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2..

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 14, 40, 80.

<sup>24</sup> Phil. 3:6.

<sup>25</sup> <sup>25</sup>Stendahl, p. 13.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p.4; cf. p. 28.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p.29

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>29</sup> Phil. 3:6.

<sup>30</sup> Jn. 16:8ff.

person to have a completely clear conscience.

In 1977 the major work of the American scholar Professor E. P. Sanders was published, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. Describing the prevailing picture of Palestinian Judaism as ‘a religion of legalistic works—righteousness’,<sup>31</sup> and of Paul’s gospel as self-consciously antithetical to Judaism, he declared that his purpose was to ‘destroy that view’ as being ‘completely wrong’ and to show that it ‘is based on a massive perversion and misunderstanding of the material’.<sup>32</sup> He conceded that his thesis was not altogether new, since, as Dr N. T. Wright has written, G. F. Moore ‘set out substantially the same position’ in the three volumes of his *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era* (1927—30).<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, Professor Sanders went further. He surveyed with immense erudition the rabbinic, Qumranic and apocryphal literature of Judaism from 200 BC to AD 200. And the religion which emerged from this study he characterized as ‘covenantal nomism’. That is, God had brought Israel into a covenant relationship with himself by his grace, and had then asked for obedience to his law (nomism) as their response. This led Professor Sanders to portray Judaism’s ‘pattern of religion’ in terms of ‘getting in’ (by God’s gracious election) and ‘staying in’ (by obedience). ‘Obedience maintains one’s position in the covenant, but it does not earn God’s grace as such.’<sup>34</sup> Disobedience was atoned for by repentance.

Part II of Professor Sanders’ book is simply headed ‘Paul’. Even though it is only about a quarter the length of Part I, it is of course impossible to do it justice in a single paragraph. Highlights of Professor Sanders’ thesis are as follows: (1) that Paul’s starting-point was not the belief that all human beings are guilty sinners before God, but rather that Jesus Christ is Lord and Saviour of both Jews and Gentiles, so that ‘for Paul the of a universal solution preceded the conviction of a universal plight’<sup>35</sup> (2) that salvation is essentially a ‘transfer’ from the bondage of sin to the lordship of Christ; (3) that the means of transfer is ‘participation’ with Christ in his death and resurrection;<sup>36</sup> (4) that the reason salvation must be ‘by faith’ is not to obviate human pride, but that if it were ‘by law’ the Gentiles would be excluded and Christ’s death would have been unnecessary the argument for faith is really an argument against the law’;<sup>37</sup> and (5) that the resulting saved community is ‘one person in Christ’.<sup>38</sup> Professor Sanders calls this way of thinking ‘participationist eschatology’.<sup>39</sup> It will readily be seen, however, that in this attempted reconstruction of Paul’s gospel the familiar categories of human sin and guilt, the wrath of God, justification by grace without works, and peace with God in consequence, are conspicuous by their absence.

In his second book, *Paul, the Law and the Jewish People*<sup>40</sup>, Professor Sanders replies to some of his critics and seeks to clarify and develop his thesis. He is surely right, in general, that Paul’s ‘argument concerns the equal standing of Jews and Gentiles — both are under the power of sin — and the identical ground on which they change that status — faith in Jesus Christ.’<sup>41</sup> But he then insists that ‘the supposed objection to Jewish self-righteousness is as absent from Paul’s letters as self-righteousness itself is from Jewish literature.’<sup>42</sup> That is a much more questionable statement. At least five issues need to be raised.

First, the evidence is plain that the language of ‘weighing’, that is, of ‘balancing merits against demerits’,<sup>43</sup> does not occur in the literature of Palestinian Judaism. But does the absence of this imagery of the scales prove the absence of the concept of merit? Cannot works-righteousness exist even when it is not ‘weighed’? Paul was not mistaken to describe some Jews as ‘pursuing’ righteousness and not attaining it’ (9:30ff.), and others as ‘trying to be justified by law’.<sup>44</sup>

Secondly, in Judaism entry into the covenant was understood as depending on God’s grace. This is hardly surprising, since in the Old Testament itself God is seen to take the initiative in his grace to establish his covenant with Israel. There could be no question of ‘deserving’ or ‘earning’ one’s membership. Yet Professor Sanders goes on to show that ‘the theme of reward and punishment is ubiquitous in the Tannaitic literature’,<sup>45</sup> specially with regard to gaining life in the world to come. Does this not mean that human merit, while not the basis (in Judaism) of entering the covenant, was yet the basis of remaining in it? But Paul would have been vehement in his rejection of this. To him ‘getting in’ and ‘staying in’ are both by grace alone. Not only have we been justified by grace through faith (5:1), but

<sup>31</sup> Sanders (1977), p.56.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>33</sup> Stephen Neill and Tom Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861—1986* (Oxford University Press, 2nd edn., 1988), p. 374.

<sup>34</sup> Sanders (1977), p. 420.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 474.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, e.g. pp. 453ff., pp. 506ff.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 491.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 547f.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p.549.

<sup>40</sup> Sanders (1983). See also Sanders (1991).

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156.

<sup>43</sup> Sanders (1977), p. 146.

<sup>44</sup> Gal. 5:4.

<sup>45</sup> Sanders (1977), p. 117.

we continue to stand in this grace into which we have been granted access by faith (5:2).

Thirdly, Professor Sanders concedes that 4 Ezra~ was the one exception to his thesis. For in this apocryphal, he writes, 'one sees how Judaism works when it actually does become a religion of individual self-righteousness'. Here 'covenantal nomism has collapsed. All that is left is legalistic perfectionism.'<sup>46</sup> If one literary example has survived, may there not have been others which did not survive? May not the lapse into legalism have been more widespread than Professor Sanders admits? Besides, he has been criticized for reducing the complexity of first-century Judaism into 'a single, unitary, harmonious, and linear development'.<sup>47</sup> Professor Martin Hengel makes the same point. He writes that 'in contrast to the progressive "unification" of Palestinian Judaism under the leadership of the rabbinic scribes after AD 70, the spiritual face of Jerusalem before its destruction was a markedly "pluralistic one. After listing nine different groups he concludes: 'Jerusalem and its environs must have presented the contemporary visitor with a confusingly varied picture.'<sup>48</sup> Again, 'perhaps there was no such thing as this *one* Palestinian Judaism with the *one* binding view of the law'.<sup>49</sup>

Fourthly, the case developed by E. P. Sanders and others rests on the meticulous examination of the relevant literature. But is it not well known that popular religion may diverge widely from the official literature of its leaders? It is this very distinction which leads Professor Sanders to write: 'The possibility cannot be completely excluded that there were Jews accurately hit by the polemic of Matthew 23 ... Human nature being what it is, one supposes that there were some such. One must say, however, that the surviving Jewish literature does not reveal them.'<sup>50</sup> A parallel could be drawn with Anglicanism. The *Book of Common Prayer* and the Thirty-nine Articles, that is, the official literature of the church, insist that 'we are accounted righteous before God only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ by faith, and not for our own works or deservings',<sup>51</sup> and that we may not 'presume' to approach God 'trusting in our own righteousness'.<sup>52</sup> Nothing could be clearer in the literature. Yet is it unfair to conjecture that the actual faith of many Anglicans remains one of works-righteousness?

Fifthly, it is clear that Paul had a horror of boasting. This has traditionally been taken as a rejection of self-righteousness. We are to boast in Christ and his cross,<sup>53</sup> not in ourselves or each other.<sup>54</sup> Professor Sanders, however, interprets Paul's antipathy to Jewish boasting (*e.g.* 3:27ff.; 4:1ff.) as being directed against pride in their favoured status (2:17, 23), which would be incompatible with the equal standing of Jews and Gentiles in Christ, not against pride in their merit,<sup>55</sup> which would be incompatible with a due humility before God. But one wonders if this distinction can be maintained as neatly as Professor Sanders does. Paul seems to bracket them in Philippians 3:3—9, where he contrasts 'glorying in Christ Jesus' with 'putting confidence in the flesh'. And the context shows that in 'the flesh' (what we are in our unredeemed self-centeredness) Paul included both his status as 'a Hebrew of Hebrews' and his obedience to the law: 'in regard to the law a Pharisee, as for legalistic righteousness [that is, external conformity to the requirements of the law] faultless'. In other words, the boasting which Paul had himself renounced, and now condemned, was a self-righteousness compounded of both status-righteousness and works-righteousness. In addition, the apostle twice writes of a righteousness which can be described as our 'own' either because we think we 'have' it or because we are seeking to 'establish' it.<sup>56</sup> Both passages indicate that this righteousness of our own (*i.e.* self-righteousness) is based on law-obedience, and that those who 'pursue' it thereby indicate that they are unwilling to 'submit' to God's righteousness. In Romans 4:4—5 Paul also makes a sharp contrast between 'working' and 'trusting', and so between a 'wage' and a 'gift'.

Finally, I am grateful for Professor Sanders' reference, quoted in paragraph 4 above, to 'human nature being what it is'. For our fallen human nature is incurably self-centered, and pride is the elemental human sin, whether the form it takes is self-importance, self-confidence, self-assertion or self-righteousness. If we human beings were left to our own self-absorption, even our religion would be pressed into the service of ourselves. Instead of being the vehicle for the selfless adoration of God, our piety would become the base on which we would presume to approach God and to attempt to establish a claim on him. The ethnic religions all seem to degenerate thus, *and so does Christianity*. In spite of the learned literary researches of E. P. Sanders, therefore, I cannot myself believe that Judaism is the one exception to this degenerative principle, being free from all taint of self-righteousness. As I have read and pondered his books, I have kept asking myself whether perhaps he knows more about Palestinian Judaism than he does about the human heart.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 409.

<sup>47</sup> Jacob Neusner and Bruce Chilton, 'Uncleanness', *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 1(1991), pp. 63ff.

<sup>48</sup> Hengel, p. 44.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xi.

<sup>50</sup> Sanders (1977), p. 426.

<sup>51</sup> Article XI.

<sup>52</sup> The Prayer of Humble Access in the Holy Communion Service.

<sup>53</sup> *E.g.* 1 Cor. 1:31; 2 Cor. 10:17; Gal. 6:14.

<sup>54</sup> <sup>9</sup>*E.g.* 1 Cor. 1:29; 3:21; 4:6f.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Eph. 2:9.

<sup>56</sup> Phil. 3:9; Rom. 10:3.

Certainly Jesus included ‘arrogance’ among the evils which issue from our hearts and defile us.<sup>57</sup> In consequence, he found it necessary in his teaching to combat self-righteousness. For example, in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax-collector he emphasized divine mercy, not human merit, as the proper object of justifying faith in the parable of the labourers in the vineyard he undermined the mentality of those who demand payment and resent grace; and he saw little children as models of the humility which receives the kingdom as a free, unmerited gift.<sup>58</sup>

As for the apostle Paul, since he was well acquainted with the subtle pride of his own heart, could he not sniff it out in others, even when it hid under the cloak of religion?

In the end, however, it comes back to the question of exegesis. It is universally agreed that Paul’s gospel in Romans was antithetical. He was expounding it over against some alternative. But what was this? We must allow Paul to speak for himself, and not make him say what either old traditions or new perspectives want him to say.

It is hard to see how any interpretation of Paul can explain away either his negative conclusion that ‘no-one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law’ (3:20), or his positive affirmation that sinners are ‘justified freely by his grace’ (3:24).

The debate about Paul in general and Romans in particular is now focused on the purpose and place of the law. A note of pessimism characterizes the writing of some contemporary scholars, since they are not persuaded that Paul knew his own mind on this topic. Professor Sanders is prepared to concede that Paul was ‘a coherent thinker’, while adding immediately that he was ‘not a systematic theologian’.<sup>59</sup> Dr. Heikki Raisanen, the Finnish theologian, is a good deal less complimentary. ‘Contradictions and tensions have to be *accepted*’, he writes, ‘as *constant* features of Paul’s theology of the law.’<sup>60</sup> In particular Paul is said to have been inconsistent about the present status of the Law. On the one hand, he states ‘in unambiguous terms that the law has been abolished’,<sup>61</sup> while on the other hand he claims that is fulfilled in the lives of Christians. Thus Paul contradicts himself, asserting ‘both the abolition of the law and also its permanently normative character’.<sup>62</sup> Also, ‘we find Paul struggling with the problem that a *divine* institution has been *abolished* through what God has done in Christ...’. Most of Paul’s difficulties are attributable to this. He even ‘tries to hush up the abolition’ by insisting that his teaching ‘upholds’ and fulfils’ the law. But how can it be fulfilled by being set aside?<sup>63</sup>

The difficulties which Dr. Raisanen hinged, however, seem to be more in his own mind than in Paul’s. It is true of course that, when Paul is responding to different situations, he makes different emphases. But is not impossible to resolve the apparent discrepancies, as I hope will become clear in the exposition of the text. Our deliverance from the law is a rescue from its curse and its bondage, and so relates to the two particular functions of justification and sanctification. In both areas we are under grace, not law. For justification we look to the cross, not the law, and for sanctification to the Spirit, not the law. It is only by the Spirit that the law can be fulfilled in us.<sup>64</sup>

Professor James Dunn seems to have accepted the main thesis of K. Stendahl, E.P. Sanders and H. Raisanen, and has sought to develop them further, especially in relation to the law. In a famous paper entitled ‘The New Perspective on Paul’ (1983), summarizing in the introduction to his commentary, he portrays Paul in Romans as being in dialogue with himself, the Jewish rabbi with the Christian apostle. When he declared that nobody could be justified by the works of the law’, he was not referring to ‘good works’ in a general and meritorious sense. He was thinking rather of circumcision, the sabbath and the food laws, which ‘functioned as an “identity marker” and “boundary”, reinforcing Israel’s sense of distinctiveness and distinguishing Israel from the surrounding nations’. Further, this ‘sense of distinctiveness’ was accompanied by a ‘sense of privilege’. The reason Paul was negative to ‘the works of the law’ was not that they were thought to earn salvation, but that (a) they led to a boastful pride in Israel’s favoured status, and (b) they fostered an ethnic exclusiveness incompatible with the inclusion of the Gentiles, to which he was committed.<sup>65</sup>

There can be no doubt that Paul saw these two dangers clearly. But Dr Stephen Westerholm is right, in his fine survey *Israel’s Law and the Church’s Faith* (1988), to question aspects of this reconstruction. For Paul, he argues, used ‘law’ and ‘works of law’ interchangeably, so that his reference was wider than to particular Jewish rituals; it was boasting in good works, not just in favoured status, which Paul opposed, as is clear from the case of Abraham (3:27; 4:1—5); and ‘the fundamental principle affirmed by Paul’s thesis of justification by faith, not works of the law, is that of humanity’s dependence on divine grace...’.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Mk. 7:22ff.

<sup>58</sup> Lk 18 9ff.; Mt. 20:1ff.; Mk. 10:13ff.

<sup>59</sup> Sanders (1977), p. 433. Cf. Sanders (1983), p. 148

<sup>60</sup> Raisanen, p. 11

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 264f.

<sup>64</sup> Je. 31:33; Ezk. 36:27; Rom. 7:6; 8:4; Gal. 5:44ff.

<sup>65</sup> Dunn, vol. 38A, pp. lxijiff.

<sup>66</sup> Westerholm, pp. 118ff., 167.

Clearly the last word has not yet been spoken or written about these controversial issues in Romans. We may not feel able to agree that Paul's pre-conversion conscience was as cloudless as is now being claimed, or that he was as muddled over the law, and as preoccupied with its ritual regulations, as some are arguing; or that first-century Judaism was, completely free from notions of merit and of works-righteousness. But we can be profoundly thankful for the scholarly insistence that the Gentile question is central to Romans. The redefinition and reconstitution of the people of God, as comprising Jewish and Gentile believers on equal terms, is a critical theme which pervades the letter.