JAMES D.G. DUNN AND THE SOCIAL FUNCTION OF THE LAW

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The “New Perspective on Paul” represents one of the sharpest challenges to traditional Protestant readings of Paul. It also articulates one of the clearest Pauline theological responses to racial and ethnic divisions. A key New Perspective scholar, James D.G. Dunn, believes that Paul, when arguing against “works of the law,” was specifically advocating for a salvation that transcended ethnic boundaries and against a salvation bounded by Jewish culture. This “social function of the law,” he contends, was at issue in both of Paul’s extended expositions of justification by faith, namely, Galatians 2-3 and Romans 2-3. While erring on some details, Dunn makes a compelling case that Galatians 2-3 more directly represents an argument against ethnic assimilation than against earning salvation. Similarly, he builds a generally plausible case that Romans 2-3 was composed to undermine Jewish superiority in particular, and not primarily to establish universal human sinfulness in general. Understood accurately, and with a few modifications, Dunn’s “social function” reading is a valid and important perspective on Paul’s theology of the law. Such a perspective can and should offer necessary insights that are complementary and not contradictory to traditional understandings of the law and legalism.
For Kaylee, Daniel, and Christopher,
That you might grow up seeing and being witnesses to the many-colored wisdom of God
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CHAPTER 1.

INTRODUCTION

I remember where it was, but not exactly when: junior high, I think, but definitely on the school bus. Two boys across from me were discussing a particular girl in our grade—an acquaintance of mine. She had, apparently, refused some sort of compromising behavior (compromising, at least, for junior high kids in the early ‘80’s) on the grounds that she was a “born-again Christian.” That was it. The day I discovered the existence of White Christians.

From birth I had been a part of a Chinese immigrant church in Cincinnati. All the adults were “uncles” and “aunts,” virtually all social time was spent in the presence of church members, and (as theological and social conservatives) we had been adequately warned about the dangers of “the world.” The pagan world, for me, was public school—where the White people were. There were a few data points that didn’t fit—the occasional “American” (as we called them) who came to help out in our children’s programs, the handful of Black children who might mention Jesus, and the mysterious non-Christian Chinese parents of a couple of church kids. But, for the most part, all Christians were Chinese, and all Chinese were Christians. The rest were “non-Christians.” Until that point I hadn’t actually known of a White peer being a Christian.

After I went away to college, that all changed. There my Christian contact on campus and in church was almost exclusively majority culture. That was also where I began to hear
“race” discussions in Christian terms. Some upperclassmen in InterVarsity talked about something called “racial reconciliation.” I took a New Testament Background course from a doctoral student named Craig Keener, who made the statement, “Romans is about racism”–to which I immediately replied (internally) with an incredulous, “No it isn’t!”

When I began work in campus ministry, I led a student fellowship of mostly White students. Our Asian members, generally speaking, stayed on the periphery (especially those who had Asian friends). Over a period of years we worked to bring some of those Asian students into core leadership. As soon as that happened, the participation of Asian students sharply increased. At the exact same time, White students began to stop coming. The same sorts of things were being experienced and processed throughout our national organization.

Meanwhile, my wife (who is European-American) was teaching in a school where most of her peers and virtually all her students were African-American. We became good friends with a coworker and her husband, and would occasionally have dinner together. Even in the very racially diverse city of Durham, NC, it was striking to see that we would be the only integrated table in the Golden Corral. The contrast was even more pronounced whenever we ventured into our friends’ church circles, or invited Black friends into our church circle.

During those years, our family’s concern over racial and ethnic divisions grew. We have both observed and participated in the sorts of social dynamics described by Michael Emerson in *Divided by Faith*. Emerson, a sociologist and a Christian, mounted an impressive study of White and Black Americans’ views on racial inequality. Not surprisingly, he found differences between the two groups. The chilling discovery, though, lay in the comparison between evangelical Blacks and Whites. Emerson found that, “the
divide in how whites and blacks explain racial inequality is actually greater for religious conservatives than for other Americans...conservative religion intensifies the different values and experiences of each racial group, sharpening and increasing the divide between black and white Americans.”

Very few Americans would be shocked to learn that Blacks and Whites see things differently. The surprise, perhaps, is that participation in an evangelical church serves to increase that difference. Emerson theorizes that “the organization of American religion is characterized by disestablishment, pluralism, competition, and consumer choice. This organization is partly shaped and often capitalized on by evangelicals… [these factors] all push congregations, and volunteer organizations in general, continually toward internal similarity.”

In layman terms, whenever people have a proliferation of choice, they tend to associate with more and more similar groupings. Since church attendance in America is characterized by free association and freedom of choice, churches tend toward social homogeneity. Thus, conservative church members (who are generally more religiously active than mainline members) will have friendship circles that are less racially diverse than the average person, and their attitudes will derive to a greater extent from those similar friendship circles. Emerson’s findings suggest that ethnically determined congregations may not be as benign as some might suppose.

Through my leadership in both church and para-church contexts, I have attempted to express a concern for racial reconciliation and inter-ethnic understanding. As an evangelical, I have additionally tried to root my concern in Scriptural truth. Over the years, I have seen many themes in Scripture that reinforced an “all nations” mandate to the Christian church. (World mission advocates have been drawing attention to some of these themes for years.)

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2 Ibid., 151.
In 2004 I taught a semester-long Sunday School class on “Race, Ethnicity, and the Bible.” During that time I employed oft-used passages on the subject of ethnic inclusion—Jonah, Acts, Revelation 5 and 7. But I became increasingly fascinated with the apostle Paul. The Reformed roots from which evangelical theology springs lay firmly in the soil of the Apostle. As a result there will never be a truly compelling evangelical voice on race and ethnicity if Paul is silent on the topic.

In James D.G. Dunn, I found an intriguing proposition. Dunn contends that the core issue in Romans and Galatians was this very issue of ethnic exclusion. The conception of “race,” in the modern sense, was still eighteen centuries away. But the ancient world saw plenty of ethnic divisions, of which the Jew-Gentile division was paramount in the world into which Jesus and Paul were born. Arguably, Christianity became Christianity as the followers of “the Way” debated whether allegiance to Christ would be an ethnically inclusive or ethnically exclusive path. Arguing most forcefully for the path of inclusion was the Apostle Paul.

According to Dunn, Paul was arguing precisely against a salvation bound by ethnic boundary markers (Dunn’s rendering of “the works of the law”) and for a salvation that would transcend ethnic boundaries. If Dunn is right, then culture-crossing and inter-ethnic reconciliation are at the heart of the Pauline gospel. If he is not, then they are specialized callings—present in Scripture to be sure, but essentially optional choices for some Christians some of the time. The evangelical church needs more than a slogan or motivational campaign to join the cause of reconciliation. We need a Biblical and theological mandate. Dunn provides the foundation for such a mandate.
At last I had found a hermeneutical insight that put ethnic division in a theological context. That insight also provided a spiritual diagnosis for Emerson’s sociological ailment: according to Paul, ethnic divisions in the body of Christ were a deadly threat. As a matter of fact, they were the original threat to Paul’s gospel. Appropriating James Dunn’s “social function” theory, though, is not without peril. He stands in the tradition of the “New Perspective” on Paul, along with E.P. Sanders and N.T. Wright. As such he denies that Paul was arguing against legalism when he argued against the “works of the law.” If the New Perspective is correct, and Paul was not confronting works-righteousness as his opponent in Romans and Galatians, then Luther erred in reading medieval Catholic merit theology back into second temple Pharisaical Judaism. Consequently, the Protestant antithesis between “justification by faith” and “justification by meritorious good works” would NOT be “What St. Paul Really Said” (a book by N.T. Wright contending for much the same position).

According to many proponents and critics of the New Perspective, the thorny issue is whether or not Luther was wrong in formulating “justification by faith,” or at least wrong in attributing such a formulation to Paul. Serious matters, indeed.

So along with the powerful motivation for racial reconciliation we have a powerful challenge to the traditional understanding of justification by faith, an understanding that has fueled the very heart of Protestant thought and spirituality for the past five hundred years. Indeed, if justification is, as Luther claimed, the “article on which the church stands or falls,” then the New Perspective may well be a threat to the very foundation of the church.

It is well beyond the scope of this thesis to assess the New Perspective as a whole. The issues are far too numerous and the publication of relevant literature far too copious for
such an undertaking. Instead, this thesis will focus specifically on Dunn’s theory about the social function of the law. It will further focus on the primary passages where Paul contrasts justification by faith with works of the law—Galatians 2:15–3:29 and Romans 2:17–3:31.

The intent will be to show that Dunn is correct in positing exclusivism as the primary position against which Paul argues in those passages. By exclusivism I mean the view that God has a preferred ethnic culture and confers certain benefits only to those who are members or become members of that culture. In addition to arguing for an anti-exclusivism view of Galatians 2-3 and Romans 2-3, this thesis will attempt to demonstrate how this perspective is complementary with and not in opposition to the traditional understanding of those passages.

Following a literature review, chapter three will lay the historical ground work for this thesis, surveying a few antecedents and successors to E.P. Sanders, leading up to James D.G. Dunn. This survey will delineate traditional interpretations of “justification by faith” and “works of the law,” challenges to those interpretations that gave rise to the New Perspective, and the nature of the New Perspective controversy. Following this survey, chapter four will examine Galatians 2:15–3:29 and Romans 2:17–3:31 in greater depth. Rather than a strict exegesis, this chapter will outline Dunn’s explication of the social function of the law and his understanding of “the works of the law” through a series of exegetical questions. Through these questions, Dunn’s view will be compared with some other interpreters, and evaluated in detail. While differing with Dunn at some points, the chapter will contend that his reading of those passages is essentially sound, and that Paul was there arguing specifically against Jewish ethnocentrism. Chapter five will begin by evaluating Dunn’s position theologically, summarizing valid and invalid charges from

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3 For instance, we will not deal directly with the historical merits of “covenantal nomism,” whether Paul experienced “conversion” or “call,” whether Paul reasoned “from plight to solution,” whether dikaosyne Theou is retributive or restorative, the definition of justification, or which genitive is in use in pistsis Christou.
traditional “Lutheran” critics. Then it will proceed to show how Dunn’s view and traditional views on Paul and the law are essentially compatible. Finally, chapter six will highlight the practical importance of a “social function” reading of Paul and the law for the church today.
CHAPTER 2.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter we will briefly survey the literature informing what follows.

Obviously, the first source for understanding Dunn’s exegesis of Paul would be his commentaries, namely, his 1993 Epistle to the Galatians,1 and one of his signature achievements—the two-volume Word Biblical Commentary Romans.2 For the sake of comparison, I also consulted some representative “traditional” commentators from various eras. For Galatians, I used F.F. Bruce’s Epistle to the Galatians,3 Luther’s A Commentary on St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians: Based on Lectures delivered by Martin Luther at the University of Wittenberg in the year 1531,4 and selections from the Ancient Christian Commentary volume on Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians.5 For Romans, I chose Thomas Schriener’s Romans6 (1998—interacts with the New Perspective), Charles Hodge’s 1896 Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans7 (pre-dates the New Perspective debate), Luther’s

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2 James D.G. Dunn, Romans (Columbia: Word Incorporated, 1988).
4 Martin Luther, A Commentary on St. Paul’s Letter to the Galatians based on Lectures Delivered by Martin Luther at the University of Wittenberg in the year 1531 (London: James Clarke & Co., 1956).
7 Charles Hodge, Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans (New York: A.C. Armstrong and Son, 1896).
Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans,¹ and the Ancient Christian Commentary volume, Romans.²

Fortunately, Dunn’s most important journal articles on Paul and the law have been reprinted in two books. Jesus, Paul, and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians³ was published in 1990 and contains articles written between 1982 and 1988 (preceding his commentaries). The re-prints contain additional notes responding to critics. Of particular interest would be his masterful “Incident at Antioch (Galatians 2:11–18),” “Works of the Law and the Curse of the Law (Galatians 3:10–14),” “‘A Light to the Gentiles’ or ‘The End of the Law’? The Significance of the Damascus Road Christophany for Paul,” “Pharisees, Sinners, and Jesus,” and “Jesus and Ritual Purity: A Study of the Tradition-History of Mark 7:15.” This volume also contains “The New Perspective on Paul,” based on Dunn’s 1982 Manson Memorial Lecture, in which he coined the now ubiquitous phrase, “New Perspective on Paul,” and also first introduced his thesis on the “works of the law.”

The second book, The New Perspective on Paul (revised 2008 edition)⁴ reprints 20 of Dunn’s articles (minimal overlap with Jesus, Paul, and the Law) and publishes two new chapters, written for this volume. The book is particularly useful because it reflects Dunn’s most up-to-date views, and interacts with the important rebuttal work Justification and Variegated Nomism.⁵ Especially illuminating is Dunn’s systematic response to critics in the

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opening article, “The New Perspective on Paul: whence, what and whither?” Also useful to this thesis were “4QMMT and Galatians,” “Paul’s Conversion–A Light to the Twentieth Century,” “Paul and Justification by Faith,” and “Paul and the Torah: The role and function of the Law in the theology of Paul the Apostle.” This compilation additionally includes “In Search of Common Ground,” Dunn’s summary of a 2001 conference attended by a handful of the best Pauline scholars of the time, focusing on New Perspective issues.

A few more primary works bear mentioning. Dunn’s “Response to Peter Stuhlmacher” is an instructive part of an ongoing debate with a conservative scholar (not reprinted in either of the volumes above). Also, because of the strong influence on Dunn’s (and, indeed, all New Perspective) critiques of Luther, I consulted two of Krister Stendahl’s works, “The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West,” and Paul Among Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays. For many of the same historical reasons, I also consulted William Wrede’s Paul. The volume of secondary literature on the New Perspective is of daunting, and growing, it seems, by the day. The definitive evangelical rebuttal to the New Perspective is the two-volume Justification and Variegated Nomism, edited by D.A. Carson, Peter T. O’Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid. I consulted the second volume of JVN, The Paradoxes of Paul, because it interacted most directly with the issues in this thesis. (Volume 1 deals mainly with E.P. Sanders and his historical claims about Palestinian Judaism.) The 14 articles in JVN II interact with the biblical and theological issues at the highest level.

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10 Carson, et. al., Justification and Variegated Nomism.

The most complete single-author work examining the debate between New Perspective and the Lutheran/traditional perspective is Westerholm’s Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The “Lutheran” Paul and His Critics. This book presents a very useful historical survey and summary of biblical issues. In a shorter work, Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul: A Review and Response, Guy Waters gives an essential survey of precursors and successors to E.P. Sanders, followed by a theological repudiation of the New Perspective from a confessional PCA stance. Three other books contesting the New Perspective were helpful. A. Andrew Das, in Paul and the Jews, reconstructs the relationship with Paul and the law in a way that contrasts with the New Perspective. Simon Gathercole, one of Dunn’s students, adapted his dissertation into Where is Boasting? Early Jewish Soteriology and Paul’s Response in Romans 1–5, which argues significantly against a New Perspective interpretation. Peter Stuhlmacher’s brief volume, Revisiting Paul’s

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*Doctrine of Justification*, with an essay by Donald A. Hagner, takes a theological approach to the central questions raised by the New Perspective. In addition to these books, I employed a chapter on the law from Richard Kingsley Moore’s *Reification (‘Justification’) in Paul, in Historical Perspective and in the English Bible: God’s Gift of Right Relationship Part 1: Paul’s Doctrine of Reification*.

Many journal articles have been written to introduce and respond to the New Perspective. Some of the more helpful have been James A. Meek’s “The New Perspective on Paul: An Introduction for the Uninitiated,” Robert Smith’s “Justification and the ‘New Perspective on Paul’,” and Paul Zahl’s “Mistakes of the New Perspective on Paul.” These all disagree with the New Perspective with a greater or lesser degree of vehemence. A number of additional articles address James Dunn’s ideas specifically. Noteworthy among those are Matlock’s “Sins of the Flesh and Suspicious Minds: Dunn’s New Theology of Paul,” and Silva’s “The Law and Christianity: Dunn’s New Synthesis.” Also interesting, for comparison’s sake, is a different sort of critique in Douglass Campbell’s “The DIATHEKE from Durham: Professor Dunn’s *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*.” Finally,
on the specific issue of the meaning of “works of the law,” Douglas Moo’s thorough article, “’Law,’ ‘Works of the Law,’ and Legalism in Paul”\(^\text{23}\) was invaluable.

Some authors were useful in that they represented somewhat mediating positions between typical “New Perspective” and “traditional” views of Paul and the law. Frank Thielman, who earned his doctorate under a faculty that included E.P. Sanders, disagrees substantially with Sanders but shows a significant affinity for some of Dunn’s thinking. Thielman’s *Paul and the Law: A Contextual Approach*\(^\text{24}\) is an integrative theology of the Law, drawing from all of Paul’s letters. Bruce Longenecker’s *Triumph of Abraham’s God: The Transformation of Identity in Galatians*\(^\text{25}\) presents a theology of Galatians that integrates both a “legalism” and “ethnocentrism” view of the problem. Longenecker’s article, “Different Answers to Different Issues: Israel, The Gentiles, and Salvation History in Romans 9–11”\(^\text{26}\) highlights the issue of ethnocentrism in Romans. Finally, Michael Bird, in “When the Dust Finally Settles: Coming to a Post-New Perspective Perspective,”\(^\text{27}\) offers a concise and irenic personal attempt at reconciling traditional and New Perspective insights.

There were a few sources important to this thesis that did not deal with New Testament studies or the New Perspective on Paul. John Frame’s *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*\(^\text{28}\) provided some epistemological concepts crucial to my theological synthesis of


Dunn and traditional perspectives. Kenneth Scott Latourette’s *History of Christianity*²⁹ was consulted for some background information on Luther. Finally, I referenced Michael O. Emerson’s *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*³⁰ in my introduction.

CHAPTER 3.

THE CRUX OF THE CONFLICT:

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE NEW PERSPECTIVE CONTROVERSY

In order to understand James Dunn’s thinking on the law, we will need a basic familiarity with some key figures in the history of Pauline studies. These figures will illuminate how Dunn’s thought developed, and also the controversies associated with it. Since the primary dispute today is between “Lutheran”¹ views and “New Perspective” views, we will begin with Luther and his view of the law, before sketching some precursors to E.P. Sanders and Sanders himself. At that juncture we will be prepared to summarize Dunn’s idea of the “social function of the law” and the points of contention between him and traditional “Lutheran” perspectives.

Luther, Justification, and the Law

Prone to depressive episodes as a youth, Martin Luther vowed to become a monk in July 1505, after being terrorized by a bolt of lightning. Within a month he had enrolled in an Augustinian monastic order. Following an apparently peaceful novitiate, Luther’s guilt returned when he was ordained in 1507. He continued to lack assurance of salvation, until relief gradually came through his teaching of theology at Wittenberg. That process

¹ By “Lutheran” I follow S. Westerholm’s lead in denoting those Christian traditions that substantially trace themselves to the Protestant Reformation, not only denominational or theological Lutherans. These include most conservative evangelical traditions, particularly those of the Reformed persuasion.
culminated in 1516–17 during which time Luther lectured on Galatians and first articulated
his doctrine of “justification by faith.” It was this doctrine in particular that helped him cope
successfully with his ongoing depressive episodes. Thus we see the general pattern that
Luther’s interaction with Scripture, and particularly Paul, helped to resolve a long and
profound struggle with guilt and assurance. ¹

Neither Luther’s teaching on justification nor his preaching moral reform in the
church seemed to cause much controversy until October of 1517, when Luther challenged the
practice of selling indulgences. The Roman church at the time taught that sufficiently
righteous people could earn excess merit, and that such merit could be dispensed by the
church after their deaths. In this manner, souls suffering in purgatory could have this alien
merit applied to them, outweighing their transgressions and delivering them into paradise.
Indulgences were essentially “get out of purgatory free” cards, which at the time were being
distributed in return for contributions to the church. Luther, according to the custom of his
day, posted a list of theses on the castle church door in Wittenberg to provoke public debate.
The “95 Theses,” as they are now known, challenged not only the selling of indulgences but
also the entire merit theology behind indulgences in the first place. To his surprise, these
theses were printed and spread rapidly across the nation.

The ensuing controversy reached all the way to the highest authorities in Rome, with
whom Luther was to have increasingly polemical exchange for the next five years. Those
exchanges culminated in the now famous Diet of Worms in 1521 where he delivered his
famous speech concluding, “Here I am. I cannot do otherwise.” Luther was

excommunicated, and events were set into motion which would birth the Protestant branches of Christianity.

Stephen Westerholm summarizes Luther’s thought with the following statements:

1) In our relationship with God, faith in his goodness rather than the good works we do is decisive.
2) The law…is meant to crush human self-righteousness and to drive human beings, made aware of their sinfulness, to seek mercy from the Savior.
3) We are justified by Jesus Christ, not by the works we do.
4) Though believers are righteous in God’s eyes, they remain sinners throughout their earthly lives.
5) The law must be banished from the thinking of believers when their relationship with God is the issue. Yet it must continue its role of identifying and judging their sin.
6) God predestined believers to salvation.2

Key to Luther’s theology was the “alien” righteousness of God. Since human beings are unable to earn their salvation through good works, their only hope would be the righteousness of another, imputed to them. That righteousness is the sole possible ground of salvation, and faith is the sole criterion for receiving it:

When Luther writes that ‘the righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel’ (Rom. 1:17), the ‘righteousness of God’ is not (as Luther once believed, to his terror) the justice and wrath with which God punishes sinners, but the gift of God to sinners by which he declares them righteous for Christ’s sake.3

A corollary to this thought was the absolute antithesis between faith and effort, which Luther saw reflected in Paul’s antithesis between gospel and law. So Luther explains:

The office of the law is to work, as the office of faith is to assent unto the promises…as the law hath his proper office, so hath the promise. To the law pertaineth doing, and to the promise believing. Wherefore, as far as the law and the promise are separate asunder, so far also are doing and believing.4

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3 Ibid., 32.
4 Martin Luther, A Commentary on St. Paul’s Letter to the Galatians based on Lectures Delivered by Martin Luther at the University of Wittenberg in the year 1531 (London: James Clarke & Co., 1956), 265.
When he uses law, Luther normally denotes *any* requirement placed on humanity by God (and by extension could mean *any* moral code we might follow). Again from Westerholm:

In his typical references to “law,” Luther has in mind neither the law of nature as such nor the Mosaic code, but Scripture wherever it places requirements on people, all that “we are to do and give to God.” The whole of Scripture can be treated under two headings: command and promise... The Old Testament is primarily (though by no means exclusively) “a book of laws” teaching what we “are to do and not to do”... The New Testament is principally (though, again, not exclusively) the “proclamation of grace and peace through the forgiveness of sins in Christ.”

For the discussion that follows, it is important to highlight how Luther saw this gospel-law conflict in *both* Paul’s dispute with his Judaizing opponents *and* his own debates with the Roman Catholic church. The threat to “justification by faith in Christ” was equivalent in the two cases:

We deny not that the faithful ought to follow the example of Christ, and to work well; but we say that they are not justified thereby before God. And Paul doth not here reason what we ought to do, but by what means we are made righteous... therefore as the Jews follow a working, and not a believing Abraham, even so the Papists and all that seek righteousness by works, do behold and apprehend, not a justifying, but a working Christ.

Peter Stuhlmacher surmises, “The further Luther came into conflict with the representatives of the traditional Catholic doctrine of justification... the more he identified himself with Paul’s struggle against Judaizing false teachers.”

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**E.P. Sanders and the “New Perspective on Paul”**

The so-called New Perspective on Paul positions itself as a major challenge to Luther’s understandings of justification and law, among other topics. Although the advent of

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5 Ibid., 29.
6 Luther, *Galatians*, 239.
the New Perspective is widely regarded to be 1977 (the publication of Sanders’ *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*\(^8\)), our discussion will be greatly aided if we take into account a few preceding figures in the history of Pauline studies. Specifically, we will examine Wilhelm Wrede, Rudolph Bultmann, and Krister Stendahl.

Wrede and Paul’s “Polemical Doctrine”

Wilhelm Wrede (1859–1906) was one of the first major Pauline scholars to pit Paul’s original context against Luther’s interpretation of Paul.\(^9\) He questioned of the centrality of justification by faith to Paul’s theology, arguing that it only appears in the context of the struggle against Judaism:

The Reformation has accustomed us to look upon [justification by faith] as the central point of Pauline doctrine: but it is not so. In fact the whole Pauline religion can be expounded without a word being said about this doctrine… it only appears where Paul is dealing with the strife against Judaism… It is the *polemical doctrine* of Paul, is only made intelligible by… his controversy with Judaism and Jewish Christianity, and is only intended for this.\(^10\)

Instead, justification was Paul’s “polemical” or “defensive” doctrine. That is, Paul formulated it not as an independent article of faith, but rather to oppose, on the one hand, universalization of Jewish culture, and on the other, Jewish (works-salvation) soteriology:

The attack on the Jewish religion is but a means toward an end, that of defending and establishing his own view of faith… We have here a defensive doctrine to guard that of grace… Two purposes then, come really into play: (1) the mission must be free from the burden of Jewish national custom; (2) the superiority of the Christian faith in redemption of Judaism must be assured. *The doctrine of justification is nothing more than the weapon with which these purposes were to be won.*\(^11\)

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\(^9\) Guy Waters traces the root of the New Perspective further back, to F.C. Bauer (Waters, *Justification*, 4ff.) There are a great many precursors to the New Perspective that I have chosen to omit, for brevity’s sake. I chose Wrede because of the direct line that can be drawn from himself to Stendahl to Dunn in wanting to define Paul’s conflict with the Jews, and wanting to ascertain the shape of his polemic in terms of that conflict.


\(^11\) Ibid., 124-127.
So Wrede observes that Paul speaks of justification only and always when there is a dispute with Judaism. Since Paul does not seem to expound it elsewhere, it could not be properly characterized as “central” to his theology. It must therefore have been important principally because it was useful in debating Judaism on the issues of (1) ethnocentrism, and (2) legalism.

We should highlight the ways in which Wrede does agree with Luther. First, he affirms that Paul’s doctrine of justification draws a contrast between Christ’s work and meritorious law-keeping:

The way to [redemption] lay in the keeping of the commandments, in doing… The recognition of this revealed in Paul’s mind a divergence of principle. On the one side–God alone accomplishes all in sending Jesus Christ; on the other–it is the works of the Law which obtain the reward.\(^\text{12}\)

In Wrede, Luther’s law-gospel antithesis remains intact. It simply is not central to Paul.

Secondly, Wrede, while admitting the presence of grace in Judaism, does understand the central difference between Christianity and Judaism to lie in the law-gospel, or achievement-grace antithesis:

[The Jewish religion] was not ignorant of grace; it even laid stress on grace. But the prevalent feature of that religion is nevertheless touched upon when the principle of its piety is found in performance of tasks or in earning of rewards. And it was a perception of the highest possible kind which seized on Christianity as a religion with a peculiar principle of its own, that is, as something entirely new.\(^\text{13}\)

Bultmann, Jewish Legalism, and

Humanity’s Universal Problem

Rudolph Bultmann (1884–1976) drew his understanding of Judaism from Wilhelm Bousset (1865–1920) and Emil Schürer (1844–1910). These two depended heavily on

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 124.
\(^{13}\) Ibid., 127.
Ferdinand Weber’s (1836–1879) *Jewish Theology on the Basis of the Talmud and Related Writings*, a book which cited Jewish writers, but writers from much later than the first century.\(^\text{14}\) Most NT scholars contemporary to Weber focused on Christianity as fulfillment of Jewish hope, which foreshadowed Christ, and therefore on Christianity’s *continuity* with Judaism. In contrast, Weber’s characterization set up a sharp antithesis, with Christianity a religion of grace and Judaism of cold legalism. That legalism weighed good and bad deeds, the balance of which resulted in either self-righteousness on one hand or anxious uncertainty on the other.\(^\text{15}\)

By the time of Bultmann, the prevailing view had changed. The consensus was that the gracious covenantal framework of the early OT had been lost by the time of the NT, and that Jewish religion had evolved into crass legalism.\(^\text{16}\) (This regression-of-religion theory paralleled the construction of OT history promulgated by Julius Wellhausen and the “Documentary Hypothesis” school.\(^\text{17}\)) Bultmann accepted this view and therefore considered first-century Judaism bankrupt with respect to grace. Furthermore, Jewish works-orientation was for Bultmann but a reflection of man’s universal impulse toward self-reliance. He believed that self-reliance, and not individual actions, constitutes the essence of sin. So all people have an unachievable need to be self-justified, and are therefore left with a universally uneasy conscience. Their only escape is “faith”—the renunciation of that self-reliance in favor of complete existential dependence on God.\(^\text{18}\) Through these proposals Bultmann carried the Reformation antithesis one step farther. Paul’s “works of the law vs. faith in

Christ” had become Luther’s “law (effort) vs. gospel (believing God’s promises)” and with Bultmann became “self-reliance vs. dependence.” It is important to realize that the New Perspective critiques that follow are a reaction to the Luther-to-Bultmann theological trajectory, and that not all “traditional” conceptions of the law are equally vulnerable to these critiques.

**Stendahl and Luther’s Introspective Conscience**

Krister Stendahl protested the development of Pauline theology toward increasingly universalized and individualized formulations. In doing so he carried forward Wrede’s program and opposed Bultmann’s:

> It will be my contention…that the main lines of Pauline interpretation…have for many centuries been out of touch with one of the most basic of the questions and concerns that shaped Paul’s thinking in the first place: the relation between Jews and Gentiles.\(^{19}\)

But Stendahl is most notorious for the direct way in which he criticizes Luther. This criticism was first expressed through a paper presented at the meeting of the American Psychological Association in 1961, entitled, “The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West.” In it, he argues that Luther’s internal struggle with sin was situated in the medieval system of Penance. Penance originally involved detailed reflection on one’s sins to prepare for baptism. Over time, its use migrated toward use in preparation for the Mass, which, unlike baptism, was repeated, regular and frequent. This created an environment conducive to obsession over sins, constant guilt, and the absence of assurance. Although such angst did have some precedent before the medieval period (particularly in Augustine), its emphasis is absent pre-Augustine—nor does it appear in the writings of

Eastern Christianity. In short, Luther’s quest for assurance and personal justification were
typical of himself and of the “introspective West,” but they were not universal to Christianity
(much less paradigmatic for mankind, a la Bultmann). Furthermore, Stendahl considered
Luther’s concern for personal absolution alien to Paul. In contrast to Luther, Paul’s
autobiographical statements revealed a “robust” conscience, not particularly self-aware of
sins, whether he speaks of himself pre- or post-conversion.

Like Wrede, Stendahl located “justification by faith” in Paul’s dispute with Judaizers.
But he takes it several steps further. He did not accept the law-gospel antithesis as relevant
to Paul’s doctrine of justification. Moreover, he did not believe that Paul presented
justification by faith as a difference between Jewish and Christian soteriology. Justification,
for Stendahl, was not a universal solution for a universal problem. It was a doctrine
developed for and applied to Gentiles only, opposing the need for them to submit to Jewish
laws. The Gentile mission was the starting point for Paul, not personal salvation:

> Justification by faith 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.

So for Stendahl, justification meant only that Gentiles were “justified” to be legitimate
members of the covenant. Justification had no particular relevance for Jews. Stendahl’s
Paul did not even think that non-believing Jews needed to be converted to Christ at all.
Indeed, Stendahl understood Romans to be addressed to Gentile Christians and Jewish non-
Christians, advocating a coexistence “in which the missionary urge to convert Israel is held

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21 Ibid., 203.
in check.”24 Very few New Perspective proponents have adopted this reading of justification. But Stendahl is important because virtually all of them accept his critique of Luther, and accept it in basically unchanged form.

Sanders and Palestinian Judaism

Paul Zahl’s boils down the New Perspective to four concepts: “Reformation spectacles,” “covenental nomism,” “solution to plight,” and “boundary markers.”25 We’ve already seen “Reformation spectacles” critiqued in Wrede and Stendahl. They contended that Luther read Paul too much through his own experience and so obscured some (or all) of what Paul was really saying. We will now turn to Sanders for an explication of “covenantal nomism” and “solution to plight,” before finally arriving at James Dunn’s discussion of “boundary markers.”

E.P. Sanders is considered the instigator of the “New Perspective on Paul” less because of his insights on Paul than because of his insights into Judaism. We have seen how previous “experts” on the Jewish background of the NT possessed a bad habit of basing their views on Jewish writing that far postdated the advent of Christianity. In Paul and Palestinian Judaism, Sanders corrects this with voluminous quotes drawn from the centuries actually surrounding Jesus and Paul. In doing so he constructs an interpretation of Judaism that (at least partially) influences nearly every New Testament scholar that has followed him.

Sanders develops a concept for analysis that he calls the “pattern of religion.” A “pattern of religion” is “the description of how a religion is perceived by its adherents to

24 Ibid., 3-4.
function...the ways in which a religion is understood to admit and retain members.\textsuperscript{26} So instead of defining a religion by a list of things done or believed by its members, Sanders chooses to define them by how an outsider would “get in” and how an insider would “stay in.” The “pattern of religion” in Palestinian Judaism, was, in Sanders words, “covenantal nomism.” That is, it was based on a covenantal relationship initiated and sustained by God’s unmerited election. “Getting in” was always by the grace of God, and never by earning one’s way in. However, once a person was “in,” the law existed as a description of how one lived and remained in the covenant—the means of maintaining the relationship or “staying in.” For Sanders, this represented a sharp departure from previous depictions of Judaism as legalistic. Most scholars of his era assumed that Judaism functioned soteriologically as a weighing of good deeds against bad. Those who had more good deeds were saved; those who had more bad deeds were not. Sanders wrote \textit{Paul and Palestinian Judaism} to debunk that view.\textsuperscript{27} Covenental nomism was the alternative, in which one “gets in” by grace, but “stays in” by the intent to obey the law. (One would be placed “out” not by occasional violations of the law, but only by blatant rejection of the law.) Under such a definition, Judaism would not be legalistic, for “covenental nomism differs from legalism in that the keeping of the law always functioned within a covenantal framework.”\textsuperscript{28}

Sanders then advanced a corollary to his description of Judaism: Paul disagreed with Palestinian Judaism on neither the primacy of grace nor the necessity of works. Both Christianity and Judaism believed that a person became one of God’s people through God’s initiating grace, apart from any desert on the part of the person. Both additionally believed

\textsuperscript{27} Meek, 208.
that living as one of God’s people was necessarily characterized by good works. We will see later that Sanders’ account of legalism was a bit of a straw man, and that there are more nuanced definitions of legalism which are not as easily dismissed.

In Sanders’ account, Paul did not arrive at justification by faith to solve the problem of sinners guilty before a just God. Rather, when Christ revealed himself as lord and savior on the Damascus road, Paul adopted an *a priori* conviction that Christ was the answer. The question, however, remained to be determined. In other words Paul reasoned “from solution to plight.” He did not face the plight of sinful and guilty humanity and search until he found a solution to that guilt. (That’s what Luther did.) Rather Paul first accepted Christ’s lordship and his (Paul’s) commission to the Gentiles, requiring a retro-actively inferred “plight” to which Christ was the solution.

Because Paul reasoned in this manner, because his arguments about the law were polemical rather than systematic in nature, Sanders believed they lead to inconsistencies. Paul did not immediately see in the law a deficiency that only Christ could fulfill. Instead, if Christ were the way to salvation then, by definition, alternatives could not be. Therefore he assumed that the law was deficient—but principally because it was not Christ. Other reasons for the failure of the law were merely employed in an *ad hoc* manner, whenever necessary. In other words, Judaism was principally wrong just because it did not accept Christ, but, when challenged, Paul needed to find other ways to justify the superiority of Christ. This gives Paul the appearance of a divided mind, at times making positive assessments on the law, and at times negative. Sanders believed that Paul was nevertheless able to maintain an overall coherent theology, but a theology that contained some internal inconsistencies.
Sanders’ assessment of Paul (which has won far fewer adherents than his assessment of Judaism) has elicited a number of responses. Heikki Raisanen, for instance, accepts Sanders’ analysis of Judaism. But he argues in a more straightforward manner for Paul’s fundamental inconsistency concerning the actual “plight.”²⁹ Sanders inconsistency-but-coherence in Paul’s ad hoc arguments became for Raisanen just plain inconsistency. He further asserts that Paul himself misunderstood Judaism. According to Raisanen, Paul contradicts himself when discussing the relevance of the law to Gentiles, whether the law is still binding, the possibility of keeping the law, and God’s intended purpose for the law. In addition, although Paul does not portray Jews as merit legalists, he does misrepresent Jews as understanding the law as a way of salvation.³⁰

In contrast to Raisanen, some scholars reject (at least parts of) Sanders’ analysis of Judaism and his interpretation of Paul, seeking to defend a traditional Pauline theology. Yet a third group of scholars do accept Sanders’ depiction of Judaism but do not accept his (or Raisanen’s) view of an inconsistent Paul. For them the task is to construct a consistent theology of Paul free from the distortions of “Reformation spectacles.” Among this second group are N.T. Wright and the scholar to which we now turn, James D.G. Dunn.

James D.G. Dunn and the Social Function of the Law

James Dunn was unsatisfied with Sanders’ description of Paul’s “solution to plight” reasoning, where Paul grasped willy-nilly for a question for which Jesus was the answer. Paul did not fault Judaism simply because it was not Christianity:

³⁰ Westerholm, Perspectives Old and New, 170-175.
Dunn (in contrast to Sanders) is adamant that Paul’s critique of Judaism is much more than a reflex of the salvation-historical shift brought about by the advent of Christ. Paul is attacking actual disobedience and with it an attitude of presumption (characterised [sic] by boasting) which failed to take that disobedience seriously.\(^\text{31}\)

What then was Paul’s problem with Judaism and the law? To answer that we will need to understand Dunn’s reconstruction of second-temple Judaism and the rise of Christianity.

Dunn draws on the sociological insight that any social grouping will have certain distinctive characteristics which constitute their self-identity in contrast to non-members. A group under threat will tend toward greater emphasis on defending boundaries, and thus on those peculiar identifying characteristics that distinguish themselves from outsiders. Palestinian Judaism was in just such a situation, particularly in the aftermath of the Maccabean crisis when forced assimilation was successfully resisted. This dynamic explains the particular importance of food laws and circumcision.\(^\text{32}\)

The word “Judaism” first appears in 2 Maccabees, and the term functions there not as a contrast with other religions, but with “Hellenism.” As such it focused not generally on that which is believed by Jews but more specifically on that which maintained distinctive Jewish identity and resisted compromise.\(^\text{33}\) Dunn also makes a great deal of the document named 4QMMT (discovered at Qumram cave 4, later named “Miqat Ma’ase ha-Torah” or “Some Precepts of the Law”) which contains a telling parallel with Galatians 2. In both there is the notable concern for “separating” from other people on the basis of “some of the works of the law.” Also in both, “works of the law” refer to practices whose importance was

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\(^{31}\) Smith, 24.


debated among various factions within Palestinian Judaism. One’s position on those disputed practices identified the faction to which one belonged:34

At Qumram ‘works of the law’ denoted a sectarian understanding of the law, denoted, indeed, the sect’s distinctive understanding and practice of the law… ‘Works of the law’ therefore was probably used initially in a polemical context…to denote particularly those obligations of the law which were reckoned especially crucial in the maintenance of covenant righteousness, in the maintenance of an individual Jew’s status within the covenant. In principle that meant all that the law required. But in practice the faithfulness of the sectarian was determined by his demonstration of loyalty to the sect’s distinctive interpretations of the law on disputed points. So too in Second-temple Judaism at large.35

It was into this Judaism that Christianity was introduced.

During his earthly ministry, Jesus entered into the Jews’ intramural purity debates through his association with “sinners.” In doing so he “questioned and challenged the normal understanding of (Palestinian) Judaism on boundary issues, that is, on the sensitive question of who and what were acceptable or unacceptable on religious grounds.”36 Early Christianity reflected Jesus’ practice, but it did so initially as a subset of Judaism. As such, the first Christian communities probably also participated in the Jewish debates of the day: What were appropriate levels of ritual purity? Were Pharisees right to apply Temple purity rules to daily life? And how (rooted in the Maccabean crisis) ought Jews maintain distinctiveness in contrast with other nations? The Christian community in Antioch probably thought of themselves as a Jewish community that was assimilating more and more God-fearing Gentiles. Those Gentiles forced the debates into greater intensity.37 As a result, Paul realized “‘justification by faith’…was not simply a statement of how the believer entered into

God’s covenanted promises…it must also regulate the life of a believer.” 38 That is, not only were distinctive Jewish practices not required for “getting in,” they were also no longer appropriate mandates for “staying in.”

We now come to Dunn’s approach to Paul’s letters. The Antioch incident (Galatians 2:11ff.) would set the terms for a developing discourse stretching from Galatians to Romans and Philippians. Key to this discourse is Paul’s consistent argument against the acceptability of Jewish boundary markers as boundary or identity defining characteristics for Christians. Those that argued in favor of such boundary markers did so by appeal to the Torah, employing what Dunn names “the social function of the law.” It is this social function of the law that Dunn recognizes in the Pauline term, “works of the law.”

For Dunn, works of the law are “what members of the covenant must do in order to attest their membership, to live their life as God’s people, to secure acquittal in the final judgment, and (when thought of life beyond death emerges) to ensure participation in the life of the age to come.” 39 If he is right, then Paul’s antithesis between works of the law and faith in Christ takes a decidedly different shape than that described by Luther and especially Bultmann. Says Dunn:

When Paul denied the possibility of ‘being justified by works of the law’ [he is attacking] the idea that god’s verdict of acquittal hangs to any extent on the individual’s having declared his membership of the covenant people by embracing these distinctively Jewish rites… ‘works of the law’ do not mean ‘good works’ in general. 40

38 Ibid., 159.
So Dunn’s Paul treats “works of the law” as social boundary rather than as moral standard. Similarly, he does not use the law-faith antithesis to argue against requiring personal moral achievement but rather to argue against requiring social membership:

Paul’s negative thrust against the law is against... the law misunderstood by a misplaced emphasis on boundary-marking ritual,... the law sidetracked into a focus for nationalistic zeal.\(^{41}\)

Paul’s argument therefore is not with the law itself, but with the law understood in its social function:

It is *works* of the law that Paul disparages, not the law itself or law-keeping in general... It is the law understood... as a Jewish prerogative and national monopoly, with which he takes exception.\(^{42}\)

In doing so, Paul expresses a degree of continuity with the OT and Palestinian Judaism on the use of the law: It exists to make people conscious of sin and to define the faithful life. But he also asserts a discontinuity, specifically, its use to maintain purity with respect to other nations. That use is no longer in force for Christians. Making a very Sanders-like point, Dunn therefore defines the main discontinuity between the OT and NT not as the law but Christ.\(^{43}\)

According to Dunn, Paul’s contrast between faith in Christ and Jewish identity markers broadened in its focus later in the NT. There (e.g. Eph 2:8–9) it is articulated as the more general principle of God’s grace over against human effort. Dunn argues, though, that such a principle was even then not the essence of the contrast between Christianity and Judaism, which would have shared the affirmation that God’s grace saved—not human

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Paul’s “emphasis on the initiative in divine grace within his teaching on justification…was simply a restatement of the first principles of his own ancestral faith.”

We see here his acceptance of Sanders’ covenantal nomism as applied to Paul.

So James Dunn picks up Wrede and Stendahl’s critique of “Reformation spectacles,” seeking to locate Paul’s thought within the disputes of his own time rather than in the disputes of Luther’s time. He agrees too with Sanders’ “covenantal nomism” as a description of second-temple Judaism. As such he doubts that Paul’s polemic revolved around disputes of grace vs. effort. Instead, Paul, particularly in Galatians and Romans, argued against the privileging of Jewish ethnic identity markers within the church. When good standing in the community required circumcision, when Jewish ethnicity conferred a privileged position before God, then justification (membership in the saved community) rested upon *works of the law*. That was the threat to faith in Christ alone, and the initial impetus for Paul’s preaching of justification:

These are the slogans which we should use to summarise [sic] Paul’s gospel—“to all who believe, Jew first but also Greek,” “no distinction between Jew and Greek…to all who call upon him” (Rom 1.16, 10.12)—not the dogmatically logical “from plight to solution”, still less Sanders’ somewhat contrived antithesis, “from solution to plight”.

**Summary: Lines Drawn in the Sand**

By now the contours of the controversy should be evident. The New Perspective has claimed that Paul and Judaism shared common ground about the role of grace and works, so that contrast could not, as Luther contended, have been the issue in question in his letters. In Westerholm’s words:

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We are left, it seems, with the following alternatives: Either the traditional (‘Lutheran’) view is correct, Pauline Christianity is distinguished from rabbinic thought by its doctrine of justification by faith, not works, and scholars such as...Sanders have misinterpreted Judaism; or...Paul himself is the one who (for whatever reason) misrepresented the faith of his fathers; or the traditional view is wrong...and Paul’s opposition to Judaism did not lie in a rejection of works. 48

So either Luther was wrong about Judaism, Paul was wrong about Judaism, or New Perspective scholars are wrong about Judaism. The first and second alternatives sit very uneasily for evangelicals.

The purpose of this thesis, however, is not to directly evaluate Sanders’ interpretation of Judaism. Rather we will examine a subsidiary debate between traditional and New Perspective interpreters, expressed thus:

The issue that divides the ‘Lutheran’ Paul from his contemporary critics is whether ‘justification by faith, not by works of the law’ means ‘sinners find God’s approval by grace, through faith, not by anything they do,’ or whether its thrust is that ‘Gentiles are included in the people of God by faith without the bother of becoming Jews.’ 49

We will try to isolate and investigate this particular issue, asking, “Is Dunn’s ‘social function of the law’ the issue in question when Paul teaches justification by faith in Christ?” Note that we will not argue, as Krister Stendahl did, that justification is not a statement about how sinners find acceptance before God. Indeed, virtually all traditional scholarship, and the most nuanced New Perspective scholars, recognize both anti-works-righteousness and anti-ethnic-exclusion teaching in Paul. But Dunn provides the most comprehensive case for the prominence of the anti-exclusion theme in Romans and Galatians, particularly in passages about the “works of the law.” Therefore our focus will now turn to Dunn’s treatment of the law in the primary passages where Paul contrasts faith in Christ and works of the law—Galatians 2:15–3:28 and Romans 2:17–3:21.

48 Westerholm, Perspectives Old and New, 133.
49 Westerholm, Perspectives Old and New, 257.
CHAPTER 4.

DUNN’S “SOCIAL FUNCTION OF THE LAW” IN GALATIANS 2:15–3:29
AND ROMANS 2:17–3:31


Argument against Law as Boundary or as Standard?

According to virtually all scholars, Paul wrote Galatians to combat agitators who were trying to compel Gentile Christians to undergo circumcision (Gal 5:2–12, 6:12–13). Such a requirement amounted, for Paul, to “another gospel” (Gal 1:6–9). After a defense of Paul’s apostolic authority (which apparently had been disputed by the agitators), Paul recounts an incident at Antioch where he confronts Peter for withdrawing from Gentile table fellowship (2:11–14). That narrative transitions from Paul’s defense of his own authority to the case against living under Law, which extends to 5:12. Galatians 2:15–3:29, our focus in this chapter, form the opening arguments in Paul’s case. In these passages Paul repeatedly contrasts justification by faith with works of the law. This passage is traditionally taught as an admonition against “legalism”–using the law as a moral standard by which one could earn salvation. While no doubt Paul would have agreed with that, James Dunn understands this passage to be more directly an admonition against using the law as a social boundary, or as an identifying characteristic for those who are the community of the saved. In chapter 5 we will argue that these two are not as conceptually different as some take them to be. Either, when taken as an additional requirement to faith, violate the general theological principle of
salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone. However, Dunn does believe that understanding the law as a social boundary best illuminates Paul’s overall argument in Galatians. We will not exegete this entire passage, but rather will examine and evaluate Dunn’s particular contentions regarding the law as a social boundary. Although we will disagree at some points, we will show that many of his general conclusions are warranted.

2:15–16: What are “Works of the Law”? James Dunn understands Galatians 2:15–16 to be the conclusion to Paul’s rebuke of Peter in Antioch (2:14). As such he is arguing that Jews should not have discontinued table fellowship Gentiles under pressure from “certain men from James.” Whether or not these verses belong properly with the preceding or following section, they certainly function as a thesis statement that bridges the Antioch incident and the situation in Galatia–two crises that Paul presents as analogous. In addressing the crises, Paul twice articulates the antithesis that will encompass the remainder of his argument–“not works of the law but faith in Christ.”

So, both abstaining from table fellowship (Antioch) and circumcision (Galatia) are examples of “works of the law.” Dunn’s interpretation of this section, indeed, all of Galatians, rests on associating works of the law with lines of demarcation, particularly the characteristically sectarian expression of those lines, so commonly debated in second-temple Judaism. He believes that this reading best bridges the disputes over table fellowship in Antioch (likely based on purity laws, cf. Acts 15) and over circumcision in Galatia:

’Works of the law, then, would probably reflect… the common concern within second-Temple Judaism to draw the lines of demarcation around covenant righteousness as clearly as possible… ‘Works of the law’ would mean in principle all that the faithful Israelite had to do as a member of the chosen people, that is, as

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1 I am aware that many NP proponents, notably N.T. Wright and R.B. Hays, translate πσῖτς Christou, “the faithfulness of Christ.” James Dunn, however, finds that unconvincing.
distinct from ‘Gentile sinners’. But in practice there were . . . boundary issues where the distinctiveness of Jew from Gentile was most at stake...The issue expressed in ‘works of the law’, in other words, was not whether membership of the people of God entailed various obligations (Paul had no doubt that it did), but whether it entailed an in effect sectarian interpretation of these obligations, whether it entailed obligations designed to excluded others, whether it entailed that Jew remain distinct from Gentile.2

Note that Dunn here highlights the sectarian connotations the term, “works of the law,” while disassociating it from the connotation of moral obligation. This instinct, though exegetically flawed, is not without precedent in the history of interpretation. It actually reflects a common issue, articulated by Augustine: “Could the apostle possibly not care whether a Christian were a murderer and adulterer or chaste and innocent, in the way that he does not care whether he is circumcised or uncircumcised in the flesh? He therefore is specially concerned with the works that consist in ceremonial ordinances.”3 In other words, let us suppose that some within a Christian community insisted that others abstain from sexual immorality. Augustine finds it implausible that Paul would protest such an insistence on the grounds that “we are justified by faith in Christ not by works of the law.” Theodoret makes a similar distinction between moral and ceremonial law, denoting the latter specifically with ethnically specific injunctions and the phrase “works of the law”:

The necessary commandments of the law were taught even by nature. That is, ‘You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder...and the rest of this kind.’ But the commandments about the Sabbath and circumcision and lepers and menstruation and sacrifice were peculiar to the [Jewish] law, since nature taught nothing about these matters. These are what he now calls works of the law.4

In contrast, Luther does not distinguish between moral and ceremonial law. For him the works of the law refer to all of the law, including the moral imperatives of the Decalogue

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4 Edwards, 31.
and Great Commandment. It is these that are presented as the antithesis to faith in Christ. We will examine this issue more deeply in our discussion of Romans. At this point, we will simply summarize that there is precedent for debating whether “works of the law” refer to some part of the law and not others (Augustine, Theodoret) or whether, for Paul at least, it centered on the law as whole (Luther). A superficial reading would assume Dunn to agree with Augustine\(^5\), but upon closer examination he is closer to Luther. Dunn affirms that the works of the law refer in principle to \textit{all} the obligations of a faithful Israelite. But in practice the particular works in question were social boundaries, thereby implying a \textit{particular perspective} on the whole law—\textit{that of the law as boundary}.

Besides the technical definition of “works of the law,” Dunn also makes an important point regarding the manner in which Paul states his argument. Paul begins by appealing to something over which there was apparently no dispute—\textit{that a person is not justified by works of the law but only through faith in Christ}:

The linking conjunction [in Gal 2:16] is exceptive and not adversive; that is it is not simply equivalent to ‘but’, but to ‘but only’…This ambiguity was nicely calculated precisely with a view to gaining Peter’s assent. For its ambiguity reflected precisely the ambiguity of Peter’s position—Peter who at Jerusalem had agreed that faith in Jesus Christ made circumcision unnecessary, but who now had acted as though Gentiles should be required to observe the Jewish food laws… Paul’s purpose in ii.16 was precisely to argue that these two beliefs could no longer be held together.\(^6\)

Andrew Das (a critic of the NP) interprets this passage in the same way—\textit{that “we know” points to common ground between Paul and his Jewish Christian opponents}.\(^7\) (It makes little difference if Paul is here opposing Peter or the Galatian Judaizers.\(^8\)) Paul’s

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\(^8\) An argument could be made that Paul was here appealing to common ground between himself and Peter, but not necessarily between himself and the Judaizing Christians. However, given that Paul chooses the Antioch incident as a parallel situation, and the continuities in the argument from 2:15 throughout the following
opponents would accept the premise of “not justified by works of law but only through faith in Christ,” but they would likely have taken that to mean “not works of law except when those works accompany faith in Christ.” Paul then proceeds to argue for the other possible meaning, “not justified by works but exclusively through faith in Christ.”

So for Dunn, 2:15–16 “boils down to the question, whether pīstis Christou is sufficient in and of itself to secure the full Christian standing of the one who believes and complete acceptability (table-fellowship) between believers.”

Virtually all commentators would agree. Dunn’s contribution is to draw attention to the fact that the specific rival to faith in Christ was a social boundary, and the extent to which the language of social boundaries suffuses Paul’s argument against “works of the law.” Dunn’s analysis of Paul’s terminology and rhetoric fit the context of Galatians well, except when he overly bifurcates the law’s boundary-defining function and morality-defining function. So we must add a caveat: The rival was the social boundary, but that social boundary had moral content as well (more on this later).

2:17–20: Are Jew/Gentile Distinctions in View?

This passage, taken by itself, does not refer explicitly to Jew/Gentile distinctions. However, Dunn sees in the text a few phrases that echo those distinctions. First, in 2:17 “finding ourselves ‘sinners’” is a reference back to 2:15, where “Jews by nature” is contrasted with “sinners from among the Gentiles.” Paul’s use of this contrast appears to be ironic, reflecting an attitude reflected, if not explicitly claimed, by his opponents. If 2:17

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hearkens to this same attitude, then it would speak of Jews being implicated as sinful by their association and shared practices with sinful Gentiles:

    Even though they all, Jew and Gentile alike, had ‘believed in Christ Jesus in order to be justified by faith in Christ’, the James faction still insisted on regarding Gentiles as ‘sinners’… The echo of ii.15 surely indicates that Paul’s thought went back at this point to the Antioch incident, with ‘sinner’ indicating conduct repugnant to traditionalist Jewish Christians…

In other words, Paul is not speaking of Jews’ generic need to confess their sinfulness in order to trust in Christ. Rather the “sinfulness” is “sinful just like Gentiles.” Dunn’s weakness in this passage is that he is ambiguous regarding whether the Jewish sinfulness in 2:17 is actual sinfulness (i.e. moral guilt no different than that of Gentiles) or whether it is quote-unquote “sinfulness”–in the way that “sinful Gentiles” is likely used in 2:15, indicting Gentiles as sinful by definition. Jews would then be sinful by association. F.F. Bruce does a better job of clearly showing how Paul’s reasoning might break down the Jew-Gentile distinction, but on the basis of real moral sinfulness:

    [Paul] may simply mean when law-abiding Jews like Peter and himself cease to look to the law as the basis of their justification before God…they put themselves effectively on a level with ‘sinners of the Gentiles’: they have, in that sense, ‘been found sinners’–they themselves (kai autoi) as much as lesser breeds without the law.

We now turn to 2:18, where Paul does not want to “rebuild” something that he “demolished,” lest he be guilty of transgression. Unfortunately he never bothers to identify that something. Bruce posits some potential referents: (1) rebuilding the social boundary between Jew and Gentile after he demolished it, (2) rebuilding the church which he once tried to eradicate, or (3) re-asserting circumcision once he had repudiated it (5:11). Whereas

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10 Dunn, Galatians, 141.
Bruce doubts that Paul actually refers to any one situation in particular,\footnote{Ibid., 143.} Dunn chooses the first option, and a variation on the second:

…the imagery is probably that of Israel protected as God’s own possession and marked off from the other nations by a wall (Isa v.2; Aristeas 139; Eph. ii.14). Paul, evidently, was still harking back to the Antioch incident... For Paul now to rebuild what he had torn down would be to revert to that old attitude, where such table-fellowship as he enjoyed at Antioch would make him not simply an involuntary ‘sinner’ like the Gentiles, but a conscious lawbreaker... For Paul now to be asked to accept that his whole life as a Christian, in its outreach to Gentiles, was one long act of transgression... was an impossible contradiction of what the gospel meant.\footnote{Dunn, Galatians, 142-143.}

That is, Paul refuses to rebuild his former way of life in Judaism (1:13), defined principally in terms of purity defined by the law.

There are two more terms which Dunn reads through the lens of Jew/Gentile distinctions. One is “flesh” in 2:20. He explains that flesh “means basically, in the normal human bodily existence in all its weakness and corruptibility... Paul’s references to the ‘flesh’ often and characteristically include an allusion to ethnic origin (as in Rom. i.3; iv.1; ix.3, 5, 8; xi.14) and particularly to Jewish trust ‘in the flesh’ (especially Phil.iii.3–4)”\footnote{Ibid., 146.} In other words, the life that Paul lives in the flesh (i.e. as a Jew) he now lives with a different orientation—that of faith in the Son of God. There are certainly many places where Paul uses “flesh” with an ethnic connotation, and many others when he does not (I Cor 1:26; II Cor 1:17, 10: 2–3). In this case there is no evidence to either confirm or deny the presence of such a connotation.

The last term Dunn reads with an ethnic lens is “righteousness through the law” in 2:21:

(Such righteousness) meant maintaining one’s status within the covenant by doing what the law laid down (‘covenantal nomism’).... Paul now rejected that
understanding as it was traditionally implemented: by over stressing human obligation the prior grace of God was being set aside—God’s righteousness was being made too much the corollary to human righteousness, rather than vice versa. And in particular, when Israel’s righteousness was understood to require discrimination between Jew and Gentile, and God’s righteousness was being made to depend on ‘works of the law’ like circumcision and food laws…then the grace of God on which the covenant itself had been based was itself rendered null and void… Paul’s object here is not the law per se, but the law understood as preventing Gentiles’ full and free participation in the grace of God as Gentiles… For Paul the death of Christ had evidently broken through that boundary and abolished the law in its boundary-defining role…Christ’s death had been effective precisely because it undermined the assumption that God was only for ‘the righteous’… Alternative explanations of Paul’s line of thought here do not give enough weight to the consistent ‘Jesus for Gentiles’ motif. 

Thus the general contrast was between divine and human righteousness (stressing human obligation over the grace of God), but the particular misapplication was the ethnic specific obligations of the Jewish covenant. Given the context of Galatians, that was no doubt the case. However, later in the quote Dunn posits exclusion not only as the example of misapplying the law, but as the (sole?) reason that such righteousness nullified God’s grace. This is not only wrong, it is unfortunate, because that dubious statement (that Paul objected not to the law but an exclusionary use of the law) undermines the credibility of a potentially more reasonable and equally powerful claim, namely, that the Gentile question was not just the precipitating occasion for Paul’s discourse on justification, but actually suffuses his argument throughout. Even if Dunn were to allow many ways, besides exclusivism, that the law sets itself in opposition to the death of Christ, there would still be no doubt that here Paul principally opposed ethnic assimilation or exclusion not achievement.

So we see in 2:17–20 several details compatible with Dunn’s contention that the Galatian dispute was over social boundaries rather than moral standards. In my judgment, Dunn’s reading of “sinner” and “righteousness” are likely correct, though he overplays his

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15 Ibid., 148-149.
hand at times. His understanding of “rebuilding” is plausible but not provable, and he may be reading too much into the term “flesh.”

3:10–14: Why the Curse?

Bruce Longenecker introduces this section, “If a survey were taken among professional students of Paul asking them to identify and rank the most difficult passages in the Pauline corpus, one might well expect Gal 3:10–14 to appear among the most frequently and highly ranked passages.” 16 At the heart of the difficulty is verse 10, which appears to say, “All who do the law are cursed, because all who don’t do the law are cursed.” Most interpreters posit the need for a “middle term” or second premise. Traditionally, the middle term is the impossibility of obeying the law. Such reasoning would proceed thus:

Doing the law = Impossible = Breaking the law = Curse

This view dates as far back as Chrysostom and Ambrosiaster, who understand this verse to imply the impossibility of obedience to the law and therefore the universal curse on universal sinfulness. 17 Luther concurred with that reasoning: “Indeed it is true that a man doing these things shall live in them…but such a one cannot be found.” 18 The traditional interpretation has held sway for so long that readers easily supply the implied middle term whenever 3:10 is read. However, Dunn questions the plausibility of such a middle term in the discourse of second-Temple Judaism. 19 He then embarks on an interpretation of the “curse” in 10–14 that he believes better fits the context.

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17 Edwards, 41-42.
18 Luther, Galatians, 267.
19 Here Dunn reflects one of the vulnerabilities of his exegesis in general. Namely, he relies so much on Sanders’ reconstruction of Palestinian Judaism, and so he presumes that all of Paul’s arguments need to be clearly intelligible within that framework. Since Paul was writing to Christians, and Gentile Christians at that,
Dunn’s principle objection is that “there is no hint in Deut. xxvii.26 or in Paul’s use of it that the obedience called for is impossible. Deuteronomy certainly did not think so (Deut. xxx.11–14).” Furthermore, “in Jewish thought to ‘abide within all that was written in the law and do it’ meant living within the provisions of the law, including all its provisions for sin… That the Judaism, against which Paul here reacts, called for an impossible perfection is not part of the context of the argument at this point.” So in the first place, says Dunn, the sinless perfection that is assumed in the traditional “middle term” would not have been assumed in any Jewish quotation of Deuteronomy 27:26. In the second place, “abiding” in the law (“staying in,” in the language of Sanders) actually included the reality of and provision for sin.

So Dunn then turns to his explication of the so-called “middle term”:

By the phrase, ‘those who rely on the works of the law’, therefore, Paul means those who, in his judgment, were putting too much weight on the distinctiveness of Jews from Gentiles, and on the special laws which formed the boundary markers between them, those who rested their confidence in Israel’s ‘favoured nation’ status, those who invested their identity too far in the presumption that Israel was set apart from ‘the nations’... To focus on the law’s requirements in this way... is itself an abuse of what God demands of those in relationship with him, since that relationship is always constituted by and dependent on faith... Since the ‘works of the law’ attitude thus prevented the fulfillment of a central feature of the covenant promise it was in fact being false to the covenant, it put itself outside the terms of the covenant, and consequently under a curse. If we add in the more thoroughgoing argument of Rom ii.1-iii.20, the point seems to be that the over-confidence in possession of the law, as marking out Israel’s distinctiveness from and advantage over those outside the law, blinds ‘the Jew’ to the seriousness of his sin. His assumption that he is safe ‘under

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then why would an interpreter assume Palestinian Jewish assumptions in his reasoning? The truth lies somewhere in between. It would be anachronism to consider Christianity a different religion at the time of Galatians. It would more accurately be one of many ways of being Jewish—in particular, by following Jesus as Messiah. Gentile converts would therefore be proselytes to one of the varieties of the Hebrew worldview. Add to that the fact that Gentiles in Galatians were likely being convinced by Jewish arguments, and Paul’s own rabbinic training, then Dunn’s presumption is a reasonable starting point. However, as we will contend below, there were distinctly Christian emphases on various Jewish themes that could render certain propositions (such as moral inability) more plausible than they would be to mainstream Jewish thought.

the law’ puts him all the more firmly ‘under sin’, together with sinners of the nations at large.\textsuperscript{21}

There seem to be two aspects to the argument. The first goes like this:

\textit{Works of the law = Exclusion of Gentiles = Not keeping all the law = Curse}

In other words, the curse comes from not just any law breaking but from denial of the eschatological inclusion of all nations, promised in the law. The second aspect of the argument, in which Dunn appeals to Romans, is as follows:

\textit{Works of the law = Presumption of superiority over Gentiles = Blindness to sin = Curse}

This second articulation of his middle term actually fits rather neatly within traditional interpretations of Romans 2, but his first articulation represents a significantly narrowed indictment of sin.

At this point Dunn’s construction of Paul’s reasoning becomes more complex. In 3:12, the antithesis between law and faith is attributed not to the impossibility of the law, but to the fact that law was ever the “nomistic” side of “covenantal nomism”–that it was (merely) the way those within the covenant were to live, not the basis of the covenant itself–which always was faith. In other words, the law was a response to grace, not the ground of justification. In this he is taking 3:12 in the exact opposite way of traditional readings, in which Paul states that the law was the gate-keeper to (eternal) life. The difference of course is rooted in the classic NP assertion that Judaism and Christianity had basically similar ideas about the role of grace in soteriology.

What then was the role of Christ with respect to the curse? The key to Dunn’s reading of 3:13–14 is his understanding of the curse:

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 172-173.
…all this talk of ‘curse’ had to do with what prevented the blessing of Abraham coming to the Gentiles (iii.10–14 as explaining the ‘mechanism’ by which the blessing of iii.8–9 came to effect). So long as the ‘outsider’ was under a curse, the Gentiles could not participate in the blessing reserved for the ‘insider’. But the effect of the ‘from works of the law’ attitude was to put those who held to it equally under the curse…because it was a fatal misunderstanding of the fact that covenant status is ‘from faith’ . . . . The death of Christ restored the position, because when God declared himself ‘for’ this crucified and cursed Jesus (by resurrection), he also declared himself for those affected by the curse (iii.13), particularly the Gentile ‘sinner’. The barrier between blessing had been broken down; now ‘in Christ’ …the blessing could come to Gentiles too…This is the conclusion Paul draws from his understanding of Christ’s death as bearing the curse of the law, that the effects of the 

*curse* have been abolished for Gentiles, that the restrictiveness of a law which marked off Jew from Gentile as such had been overcome, not that the *law* had been abolished, rendered null and void, or without further relevance to Christians.  

Here the curse does not denote a judicial verdict on violators, but a judgment of outsider status with respect to the covenant. Jesus’ death signified identification with covenant outsiders, and his resurrection the affirmation of those outsiders. In this manner “the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles,” i.e. to “cursed” covenant outsiders. And similarly the blessing can come to Jewish insiders who by their lawbreaking are indicted as cursed outsiders.  

The weaknesses of this argument are apparent. It requires such qualification and complexity of reasoning that one gets the distinct impression of great contortions being made to *avoid* the traditional reading, in which Christ bears the curse not *with* but *instead of* sinners, the curse being actual penalty for sin.  

Dunn does, however, raise valid questions regarding the traditional reading of Galatians 3:10–14. Namely, since Judaism did not believe that law-keeping was impossible, how could Paul have assumed such an impossibility—and assumed it to such an extent that he could employ it as an unstated premise in an argument? If the impossibility of law-keeping  

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22 Ibid., 178-179.
was the key to his argument, and it was not logically apparent to second-Temple Judaism, then how could he have failed to justify it, let alone left it unspoken entirely?

Bruce Longenecker gives the most satisfactory stab at this problem. He notes that Paul was not arguing against a *Jewish* position but rather a (Judaizing) *Christian* position. So, given that the “impossibility” axiom is present elsewhere in Paul, then it is at least conceivable that such an un-Jewish axiom may have been common ground among Christians.\(^{23}\) Longenecker also provides the best line of reasoning as to why a Judaism that did *not* require perfection for salvation could birth a Christianity that did:

> When saving grace is restricted to those ‘in Christ’, those beyond the boundaries of the Christian community are left with nothing but works to effect their salvation…And if works are the only other avenue possible, the performance of those works would need to be perfect and without error.\(^{24}\)

Longenecker’s reading shows how perfect obedience *could* be a plausible assumption behind Paul’s argument in 3:13 (and 5:3). At any rate, questions about the traditional reading are far exceeded by questions raised by Dunn’s reading of 3:10–14, which is the weakest part of his argument in 2:15–3:29. Particularly unconvincing is his attempt to identify the curse with something other than a curse on sin in general. This is particularly unfortunate in that it is not crucial to Dunn’s overall thesis: that Paul was arguing principally against the law as covenant identity marker. Indeed, in Romans we will see that Dunn does a better job of expositing Paul’s charge of universal sinfulness as just that–but also that the charge was meant to prove that boundary markers were illegitimate.

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\(^{23}\) Longenecker, *Triumph*, 140-142.

\(^{24}\) Ibid., 140-141.
3:19–29: Why the Law?

Paul’s explanation of the purpose of the law can also be read in terms of the overall Gentile question in Galatia. According to Dunn, Paul’s cryptic assertion about transgressions, angelic intermediaries, and the oneness of God may be explained thus:

Paul is playing on [a] well established motif in Jewish theology…that whereas God has appointed angels to direct other nations, he has chosen Israel for himself… Paul’s point is probably that the Jewish motif of the law given through angels was tantamount to abandonment of the claim that Israel was different from the other nations…making the law itself a kind of guardian angel, equivalent to the ‘elemental forces’ (iv.3) which ruled over the (other) nations. Hence the lament of iv.9–10: to submit to the law’s demands was a form of slavery to the elemental forces.  

The point being made in 3:19 was not simply that the law was given through an intermediary (in contrast with the promise in v.18). If that were the point, why mention that the law was given “through angels by the hand of a mediator” (presumably Moses)? The Jewish tradition of angelic deliverance of the law is invoked to counter another tradition—that all the nations had their angels, but Israel had God alone as their lord. In effect Paul was denying that Israel was any different from the other nations with respect to being under “elemental forces.” (cf. 4:3) The law was then analogous to the parochial spirits that superintended other nations (cf. Daniel 10:13). Since the ruling spirits of specific nations were obviously inferior to the one (universal) God who ruled all nations, so, by analogy, was the law, which likewise was appointed to rule but one nation. Bruce Longenecker makes a Dunn-like point perhaps better than Dunn himself: God’s oneness (i.e. the fact that he is the only and therefore universal God) is evidenced by His people being comprised of all nations. But “in 3:20a the law is given to a single national entity (Israel)…The contrast to this situation of national demarcation appears in 3:20b, where the one God is shown to oversee a collective people

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25 Dunn, Galatians, 192.
drawn from the entirety of nations.” The law, therefore, was an inapt regulator of the covenant, now that the age of “all nations” had been inaugurated.

What then was the purpose of the law? The idea of the law as analogous to the ruling spirits of the nations will help us answer this question. Paul says it was given “because of transgressions.” There have been many attempts at connecting law to transgression: the law was given to provoke and increase transgression; the law was given to make transgression explicit; and the law was given to restrain transgressions. At this point in his lectures on Galatians, Luther expounds his double use of the law, which includes restraint of sin but focused principally on the law driving us toward our need. The problem with that interpretation is that Luther believed that these uses of the law, especially the latter us, were abiding uses, whereas Paul’s use of the law in Galatians 3:19 is clearly a temporary one. Dunn adopts the understanding that the law’s temporary purpose was to help Israel deal with the reality of a sinful world, until the time of Christ:

The most natural sense is that the law was provided as an interim measure precisely to deal with the problem of transgression, until it could be dealt with definitively and finally in the cross of Christ.

What has come to an end, clearly, is the law’s role precisely as ‘custodian’ of Israel—that is, of protecting Israel from the evil of the world by separating Israel from the world.

The law was given to Israel indeed, but as marking a less direct relation with God, and interim measure to provide temporary protection for Israel until the more direct relation expressed in the promise to Abraham could be realized in its final form as and through faith in Messiah Jesus.

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26 Longenecker, Triumph, 57.
27 Luther, Galatians, 297-302, and 305.
29 Dunn, Galatians, 190.
30 Ibid., 200.
31 Ibid., 201.
Bruce Longenecker concurs with Dunn about the purpose of the Law as expounded here, particularly because it comports best with the pedagogue analogy and also with the parallel with guardian angels in 3:19 and 4:2–3. “It is not clear…what Paul intended by the law having been added ‘because of transgressions’ (3:19). This may suggest that the law brought Israel’s sinfulness to life and produced sins, or that the law made Israel’s state of sinfulness recognizable, or that it played a corrective role in relation to Israel. In my judgment, the third is most likely, although certainty on this matter will always be elusive.”

Although I tend toward the Dunn/Longenecker interpretation of “because of transgressions,” a reasonable case can also be made for the law as given to increase transgressions, as in Romans 5:20.

Summary

Some of Dunn’s particular assertions are stronger than others. However, on the whole he does an admirable job of showing just how many of Paul’s arguments directly or indirectly refer to the particular situation in Galatia. Reformed scholar Moises Silva concedes, “It would be misleading to say that ‘those of law-works’ refers to people in general (both Jews and Gentiles) who are ‘legalistic’… The reference must rather be narrowed…to those who, by counting on law observance as the source of life and righteousness, exclude believing Gentiles from the people of God.” In other words, Paul’s opponents were making a Judaizing claim (you must assimilate to observe Jewish boundary markers), which is a different sort of claim than a generally legalistic one (Christ is

32 Longenecker, Triumph, 128.
insufficient without adding your own works). That Paul argues by equating those two claims is clear to me (although not to Dunn). Dunn’s argument is weakest where he sees ethnocentrism in a few more places than it actually exists, and furthermore when he downplays the element of human achievement implied by the Judaizers’ ethnocentric claims. As we will explore in greater depth later on, Dunn (especially the early Dunn) also confuses what “works of the law” denotes with what it connotes. Qualified thus, Dunn’s overall reading of Galatians—–that it is a polemic against “compelling Gentiles to live like Jews”–varies little from the view of many traditional commentators. Silva points this out, though he concedes that these commentators “are not always explicit about it.” He further concedes, “We may thus be grateful indeed to the ‘new perspective on Paul’… for helping us see more clearly that Paul’s overarching interest in Galatians 2–3 was not precisely to expound the doctrine of justification but to address the Jewish-Gentile question in the church and thereby to clarify who are the true descendants of Abraham.” Dunn’s major contribution is to make explicit an emphasis that is prominent in the term “works of the law” but has not usually made prominent in the exposition of the text. Whether or not Judaizers viewed

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34 Legalism need not be defined in terms of Pelagian self-achievement or medieval merit theology. Indeed, if legalism means adding anything of yourself to faith in Christ (classical Reformed theology) or using the law in any way (straight semantic definition), then indeed ethnic assimilation by circumcision is “legalism.” Of course that is Paul’s view. However, the way legalism is traditionally taught, the clear overtone of ethnic assimilation, so obvious in Galatians, is passed over so quickly in favor of injunctions against individual effort, that the original situation is prevented from speaking to clearly analogous situations today.

35 Ibid., 226.


37 More controversial is Dunn’s writing on “justification” and “righteousness.” In “The Justice of God: A Renewed Perspective on Justification by Faith” (J. Theological Studies 43:1) Dunn says that “For Paul justification means that God accepts persons without reference to whether they have been born into a particular race or not.” (15) He also maintains that righteousness “is a relational concept” and the righteousness of God is “God’s action to restore his own and to sustain them within the covenant despite their repeated failures.” (16-17) These definitions differ significantly from the Reformed definition of justification as “pardon[ing] [the effectually called’]s sins, and… accounting and accepting their persons as righteous… by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them” and of God’s saving righteousness as Christ’s “obedience and satisfaction” which are imputed to the called and on which they rest by faith (W.C. XI.1) As I mentioned in the introduction, “justification” and “righteousness” are outside the scope of this thesis, but because they are very closely related to Dunn’s contention about the “works of the law,” they bear mentioning. Also, as mentioned in the
these ethnic boundaries were viewed as *soteriologically* necessary (as in Acts 15:1) or as *ecclesiollogically* necessary (presumably Peter’s view in 2:12)–I would tend toward the latter–there is no question that for Paul that a soteriological principle had been violated by the Judaizers’ ethnecentrism (3:2, 5:4).

**Part 2. Romans 2:17–3:31**

**Argument Against Status or Achievement?**

Romans 2:17–3:31 is the other pericope (besides Galatians 2:15–3:29) where Paul develops “works of the law” at length. As with Galatians, we will not attempt an exegesis of this passage, but will instead summarize and assess James Dunn’s particular assertions regarding the law contained within it. In a similar manner, I will substantially agree with Dunn, while drawing attention to some places where he errs. My assessments rest on a number of assumptions about the book of Romans, an extended defense of which are beyond the scope of this thesis. These assumptions pertain, first, to the audience of Romans; second, to the purpose of Romans; third, to the rhetorical flow of Romans 1–4; and fourth, to the identity of the interlocutor (“you”) in Romans 2.

First, the audience of the letter was the Christian community in Rome. That community included both Jews and Gentiles. It is likely that the original believers were Jewish converts (Acts 2:10) but at some point Gentiles became prominent, and probably dominant (Romans 1:13). This may have happened during the period when Jews were expelled from Rome (Acts 18:2 and Seutonius, *Claudius* 25.4). If so, then by the time

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introduction, the New Perspective’s perceived threat to Reformed orthodoxy is actually more acute in the definition of justification than in anything else. Whether Dunn is right, wrong, or partly wrong on these related issues, I nevertheless believe that his concept of the “social function of the law” is worth investigating on its own merits and furthermore important to integrate into a Pauline theology of the law.
Romans was written, enough Jews had returned for there to be a Jewish influence in the church. For that reason, some portions of Romans appear to be addressed primarily to the Jewish portion of the church and some to the Gentile portion. Many, but not all, commentators would share this assumption.

Second, Romans was written for a number of purposes: to set forth a reasoned exposition of Paul’s gospel, to elicit support for his ongoing missionary enterprise, and to address pastoral concerns within the Christian community in Rome. Those pastoral concerns certainly included unity across differences (Romans 12:3-8, 14:1-15:13). Again, very few would dispute this. However, I further believe that Jew-Gentile differences were among the most significant differences (perhaps the most significant) addressed by Paul. Additionally, I assume that Paul’s pastoral desire for Jew-Gentile unity may be discerned not only in Romans 12–15, but also in the way that he structures and argues the more “theological” portions of the letter. Most traditional commentators understand Romans 1–11 as “indicative,” i.e. presenting a reasoned defense of the gospel, and 12–16 as “imperative” or “application.” Since Paul typically grounds his imperatives in theological indicatives, the temptation is to assume that Paul’s indicative influences his imperatives but not the other way around. However, just as Paul’s greetings and benedictions are commonly thought to echo themes pertaining to the recipient’s situation, I believe that Paul does compose the theological portion of Romans with an eye toward the situation in Rome. (For instance, might not the “judging” in 2:1–3 be addressed in part to the situation of “judging” in 14:1–13?) While I am not claiming that church unity was the sole purpose for Romans, I believe that Romans 12–15 justify an inquiry into ways that Paul might be “setting up” his appeal for unity in the previous chapters.
This brings us to my third and likely most contestable assumption, regarding the rhetorical flow of Romans 1:18–4:25. Many commentators understand Romans 1 to be a general thesis indicting all humanity, with Romans 2 serving as a rebuttal to an anticipated objection on the part of Jews. Others understand the general indictment of Romans 1:18–32 to imply a focus on Gentiles, with Romans 2 bringing a specific indictment on Jews. I would align myself with this second view, largely on the basis of Paul’s consistent reference to Gentiles as “they” (2:14–15, 3:9) and to Jews as “you” (2:17). Therefore I find it likely that “they” in 1:8–32 to refer to Gentiles, with “you” then turning to Jews in 2:1. Furthermore, I would contend that Romans 1:18–32 was written at least in part to elicit the assent of Jewish hearers (“you”), who would recognize in that indictment a typically Jewish assessment of Gentile godlessness (“them”). Romans 2–4 are then the “gotcha” that turn the condemnation back onto the Jewish hearer. In other words, the indictment of (Gentile) humanity functions as part of a larger argument that undermines Jewish presumption and pride. This undercutting of Jewish pride not only upholds the supremacy of the gospel, but very directly pertains to Paul’s pastoral aim in writing to Roman believers. (I also believe, with Bruce Longenecker,38 that Romans 9–11 undercuts Gentile pride in a rhetorically similar way, this time with “they” and “you” reversed. Thus both groups are given a theological basis for humility, in order to promote unity.) I am not contending that this is Paul’s only purpose in Romans 1–4. I do believe is that it is a prominent purpose, and therefore a view is incomplete which does not recognize this purpose.

Fourth, I assume that the interlocutor (“you”) in Romans 2 is not a specific person or a group of persons in Rome. Rather it is a theoretical and paradigmatic Jew, with whom Paul

debates to prove a point. (In a similar way, the “righteous Gentile” of 2:14–15 is a theoretical and paradigmatic Gentile, and not a real person who might be justified by following his conscience.) Therefore, we need not identify a historical person or group of persons with all the characteristics of “you.” However, Paul’s theoretical opponent is intended to exemplify characteristically Jewish attitudes–attitudes which likely were a temptation for Jewish Christians in the church. It is to these attitudes that our analysis will now turn.

2:17–24: What is the Source of the Boast?

Here Dunn examines the boasting of the Jew and asks whether it was primarily a status-based boast or an achievement-based boast. He uses the terms “nationalism” and “merit.” There are subtleties in defining “nationalism” and “merit” which prompt valid theological discussions, but these could sidetrack us from the exegetical issues. For the purposes of this chapter, we will focus on the heart of the issue (using my preferred terms, “status” and “achievement”). Namely, did Paul’s hypothetical debate partner believe himself superior because of something he earned through his behavior, or did he believe himself superior because of who he was as Jew? Essentially Dunn points out:

Jewish ‘possession of the law’ was hardly…regarded as ‘merit.’ Paul does not imply that the typical Jew is content simply to have the law; what the law supports is a whole way of life…But it was a way of life where distinctiveness of the Jew from the non-Jew was always to the fore…the implication is that such Jewish boasting tends to be nationally exclusive.

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39 For instance, nationalism carries a sociopolitical consciousness characteristic of colonialism and post-colonialism. I prefer ethnocentrism, but today that phrase can be understood as racism or racial prejudice – related but non-synonymous terms. We will return to “merit” in the subsequent section on Theological Analysis.

40 James D.G. Dunn, Romans 1-8 (Columbia: Word Incorporated, 1988), 110.
Note that here Dunn does not, as he is accused of doing, limit Jewish pride to national membership, divorced of any moral content. The law for Dunn does indeed describe a way of life with moral expectations. Indeed, Dunn affirms that the indictment against “you” in Romans 2 “embraced both the sense of superiority to those outside the law (2.4, 9–11, 13–16, 17–20, 25) and the actual law-breaking…(2.1–3, 9, 12–13, 21–27).”\textsuperscript{41} However, the contrast in v.19–20 is clearly between those who know the law and those who are outside the law, not between those who have kept the law and those who have not. Implied therefore is privilege before God due to the knowledge of the law. Both Chrysostom and Theodoret recognize the ethnocentricity inherent in this passage (admittedly with some oversimplification and overgeneralization):

The Jew may boast that he is loved by God and honored above all other men…[The Jews] misused this gift…to set themselves up against the rest of mankind and to despise them.\textsuperscript{42}

By boasting Paul means the proud spirits of the Jews and their excessive arrogance. For they thought they were the only ones who enjoyed God’s providence.\textsuperscript{43}

Without endorsing everything in the above quotes, we simply observe that ethnic superiority was recognized in this passage far before the New Perspective. By comparison, Augustine characterizes the Jewish error not as ethnic pride but as improper motivation, an interpretation which has inspired a significant following in subsequent generations:

[Jews] thought that they had fulfilled this law of God by their own righteousness, even though they were transgressors of it… Those who did what the law commanded without the help of the spirit of Grace did it through fear of punishment and not out of love for righteousness.\textsuperscript{44}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{41} Dunn, “In Search of Common Ground,” 297. \\
\textsuperscript{42} Gerald Bray, ed., Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Romans (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1998), 71. \\
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 104. \\
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 72. 
\end{flushright}
However, Romans 2 makes no mention of ignoring God’s enabling grace or the motivation of avoiding punishment. Paul’s indictment is simply that the privileged possessor of the law is himself a law-breaker.

Dunn goes on to make a characteristic assertion, that the “status” or “nationalism” of his interlocutor was the actual cause of the sin being condemned:

The law had become so identified with the people of God as a national entity with distinctively national characteristics that it was now preventing the covenant and covenant promises from opening out in full extent to the Gentiles.45

Delight in the law of the covenant has not been proof against breach of the law…Paul regards the doing of the law as something desirable and necessary (2:13). His criticism of the Jewish interlocutor is that his national pride in the law has resulted in his failing to do what the law requires, the real business of the law (2:14–15).46

As in Galatians, this assertion carries his otherwise strong argument one step too far, a fact pointed out by Schreiner.47 Dunn’s line of reasoning is logical enough—boasting in the law excludes Gentiles; including Gentiles is part of the law; therefore, the one who boasts in the law is a sinner. But if this is what Paul intended one might expect him to have spelled it out at least once in Galatians or Romans. Most likely Paul is arguing that any Jewish presumption of privilege is contradicted by sin in general, not that the sense of privilege is itself the proof of sinfulness. Surely, in Paul’s mind, national pride would have been among those sins, but Dunn’s exposition is too limiting.

So, in summary, Paul is trying to undercut Jewish presumption, and that presumption (for the interlocutor) is defined more in terms of covenant status (being a possessor of the law) than in terms of covenant obedience. As a matter of fact, it is by pointing out the interlocutor’s covenant disobedience that he undermines the presumption of status.

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45 Dunn, Romans 1-8, 112.
46 Ibid., 115.
47 Thomas R. Schreiner, Romans (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 129.
Furthermore, that covenant status is defined in comparison with Gentiles (those who are outside the Law). So what was the effect Paul wanted to have on his audience as a result of this hypothetical debate? I believe it reasonable that he was showing that any Jewish superiority arising from the law is rendered illegitimate by their lack of obedience to the law.

2:25–3:1: Why Bring Up Circumcision?

Dunn now builds his case by explaining the role of circumcision in Paul’s flow of thought. On Galatians 2:25, he writes:

The argument has narrowed from a vaguely defined ‘doing good,’ through the more specific ‘doing the law,’ and now to the single issue of circumcision…Paul’s Jewish interlocutor could be in no doubt that circumcision was obligatory and fundamental, the single clearest distinguishing feature of the covenant people, the most obvious boundary line which divided Jew from Gentile.  

So Paul employs circumcision as a paradigmatic example of national privilege. He then re-defines circumcision away from outward circumcision, and further broadens his argument by re-defining Jewishness away from outward Jewishness (2:27–29):

The circumcision God looks for is not an outward visible cutting… The circumcision God looks for is the circumcision of the heart, what the prophets called for (Deut 10:16; Jer 4:4) and promised (Deut 30:6, Ezek 36:26–27)… even the title ‘Jew’ comes into radical question…Paul is attacking a concept of law-keeping which was tightly tied to membership of the Jewish nation (what we can properly call ‘national righteousness’).  

So circumcision functions here as an apt example of national status, and Paul undercuts that status through his deconstruction of privilege-based-on-circumcision. The parallelism between inward and outward “circumcision” with the inward and outward “Jew” confirms explicitly that circumcision stands for the status of being a Jew, not the achievement of a moral standard.

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48 Dunn, Romans 1-8, 119-120.
49 Ibid., 127-8.
There have been other ways of explaining Paul’s choice of circumcision. Luther, for instance, believed that Paul used circumcision because it was an example of externalism, which he contrasted with true heart religion.\textsuperscript{50} To be sure, Paul does accuse his hypothetical opponent of externalism, but the interlocutor trusted in circumcision, not \textit{because} it was external, but because it connoted his status of being a Jew (3:1). So Paul chose circumcision because it was an example (the best example, for that matter) of ethnic identity markers—markers which supposedly conferred privilege on his opponent. Externalism is not what Paul is opposing but is instead the \textit{reason} Paul gives to invalidate the privilege.

Charles Hodge tries to read the circumcision passage as combating the classic salvation-by-merit position. He asserts that “the Jews regarded circumcision as in some way securing their salvation,” quoting a number of rabbinic sources that articulate circumcision in terms of keeping Jews out of hell.\textsuperscript{51} In other words, circumcision was an example of a “work” that averted judgment and secured paradise by its performance. However, Hodge’s very wording (and his need to marshal the rabbinic quotes) betrays his recognition that such a conclusion was not obvious from the text. Furthermore, none of his quotations date anywhere near the first century, and some of them were even his contemporaries. At any rate, circumcision is simply a poor example of meritorious good works, especially when compared with its strength as an example of ethnic privilege.\textsuperscript{52} Any number of other examples would have better exemplified a moral achievement, for instance, abstaining from sexual immorality or idolatry, treating the poor with justice, or tithing. Circumcision is


\textsuperscript{52} One could conceivably define “earning salvation” to include a corporate assumption of salvation on the part of a people who attained a right standing before God through their practice of circumcision. However, this stretches the conventional understanding of legalism to the point of near identity with “national righteousness” as articulated by Dunn.
something that is done to a person, not something they do. It is an inherited marker of an inherited status, not an example of “doing good,” except in an extremely broad sense.

The clearest evidence that, in addressing circumcision, Paul is attacking Jewish advantage, lies in 3:1—“Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the benefit of circumcision?” Paul anticipates a rebuttal challenging him to elaborate on the nature of Jewish advantage, implying that such advantage has just been attacked:

The very fact that the question can be put and put in such terms is clear confirmation of Paul’s target in chap.2: the ‘Jew’ in his self assurance as a Jew, i.e. Jewish overconfidence in the privilege of being God’s chosen people. It is the assumption that being a Jew is an advantage…that Paul has attacked—and attacked so effectively that the slightly agonized cry of Jewish self-identity responds in bewildered protest.53

Hodge explains 3:1ff. in a different way. He takes the question of Jewish privilege not as something that Paul attacked directly, but rather as an objection to Paul’s general assertion in chapter 2 that all will be judged and condemned by their works:

[Jews] great objection to Paul’s applying his general principles of justice to their case was that their situation was peculiar: “God has chosen us as his people in Abraham. If we retain our relation to him by circumcision and the observance of the law, we shall never be treated or condemned as the Gentiles.”54

So both Hodge and Dunn attribute the sense of national privilege to Paul’s debate partner, but Dunn identifies that sense with the partner’s original position, to which Paul objects, whereas Hodge sees it as a rebuttal to Paul’s position. I see no reason why the “objection” described by Hodge could not have been the attitude of superiority Paul was combating in the first place.55

53 Dunn, Romans 1-8, 137-138.
54 Hodge, Romans, 105-106.
55 Part of the difference between Hodge and Dunn is us attributable the degree to which they interpret Romans as an occasional letter–addressed to particular positions and concerns–and as an exposition of systematic theology–presenting general theses and then answering anticipated objections. If it is the former, then we look to the original audience for “what Paul was trying to prove” and Jewish status becomes the prime candidate.
In the end, 2:25–3:1 most easily conforms to an interpretation that places the accent on ethnic presumption of Jews over Gentiles, the same attitude which Paul is undermining in 2:17–24. It is the Jew’s basis for superiority that is being attacked. The accusations of externalism, like the indictment of sin in 2:17–24, are used as reasons to invalidate that superiority.

3:9–19: Jewish Audience or General Audience?

The OT quotations in 3:10–18 are traditionally quoted to establish the sinfulness of all individuals. Certainly they do that. However, Dunn makes the case that they function rhetorically in Romans in a more specific way:

The…five quotations (vv. 11–14, 18), all from the Psalms…would normally be read within the synagogue as bolstering the assumption that the (Jewish) righteous could plead against the (gentile) wicked…As soon as these scriptures are read without the blinkers of Jewish presumption of privilege, they become a devastating indictment of all peoples, Jews as well as Gentiles.56

Dunn’s claim about synagogue usage would be difficult to substantiate, and Gathercole points out that the quotations are not all in references to Gentiles; some clearly indict sinful Jews.57 It is of course apparent that Paul wants “to make it clear that all the world without exception is answerable to God and liable to judgment.” But, the exact identity of the quotes notwithstanding, they both begin and end with a clear statement of purpose. In verse 9 Paul says that “both Jews and Greeks are all under sin” as proof that “we” (Jews) are not better than “they” (Gentiles). And at the end of the quotations about universal sinfulness, “when both halves of [verse 19] are read together the implication is obvious that it is the Jews, those

56 Dunn, Romans 1-8, 157.
within the law, who need to be convinced on this point.’”\(^{58}\) In short, Gentile sinfulness is common ground between Paul and his interlocutor. *Universal* sinfulness is asserted in order to close the mouths of “those under the law” (3:19), to highlight *Jewish* sinfulness.

Schreiner (a strong critic of Dunn) explains the reasoning of 3:9–19 in much the same way. “Those texts that distinguished between the righteous and wicked are now turned against Jews who believed they were righteous, in order to prosecute the theme that all are guilty before God.”\(^{59}\) The significance of this reading is *not* to deny that Paul teaches universal sinfulness in Romans 3. He does. Rather it is to highlight that in this passage he teaches it in order to argue against a *Jewish* claim—and not a claim that Jews were sinless, but a claim that Jews had any moral advantage over Gentiles by virtue of being Jews.


Having built a case that, up to this point, Paul attacks Jewish presumption of privilege over against Gentiles, Dunn introduces his characteristic interpretation of “works of the law”:

> ‘Works of the law’ are *not* the same as *doing* the law (2:13–14), or *fulfilling* the law (2:27); ‘works of the law’ are *not* the same as ‘the work of the law written on the heart’ (2:15), ‘the circumcision of heart by the Spirit’ (2:29). ‘Works of the law’ are rather something more superficial, at the level of ‘the letter’ (2:27, 29), an outward mark indicative of ethnic solidarity (2:28)\(^{60}\)

The connection of thought in 3:20 does not run directly from ‘works of the law’ to ‘shall be justified’ and is not aimed directly at works of the law as a means to achieving righteousness and acquittal. The connection of thought is more indirect, of works of the law as a way of identifying the individual with the people whom God has chosen and will vindicate and of maintaining his status within that people. In a word, the hidden middle term is the function of the law as an identity factor, the social function of the law as marking out the people of the law in their distinctiveness.\(^{61}\)

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\(^{58}\) Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 157-158.

\(^{59}\) Schreiner, *Romans*, 167.

\(^{60}\) Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 158.

\(^{61}\) Ibid., 159.
It may be instructive at this point to survey other attempts at explaining “works of the law.” Several early church writers appeared to have a preference for distinguishing the ceremonial law from the moral law, and associating “works of the law” with the former. So Pelagius defines the works of the law in Romans\textsuperscript{62} in the same way as Augustine did in Galatians.\textsuperscript{63} Similarly Ambrosiaster summarizes justification by faith in Romans 3 as asserting “that a Gentile can be sure that he is justified by faith without doing the works of the law, e.g., circumcision or new moons or the veneration of the Sabbath.”\textsuperscript{64}

Since the Reformation there have been prominent attempts to identify “works of the law” not with some subset of the law, but with the law as understood in a certain way—the law from a distinct perspective, or the law with a distinct connotation. Luther identifies that distinctive connotation as that of reward and sanction:

He calls those deeds ‘works of the Law’ that are done without faith and divine grace, merely because of the law, moved either by fear of punishment or the alluring hope of reward.\textsuperscript{65}

Hodge understands the distinctive connotation as that of imperative. In a nod to Luther, he includes motive as part of the imperative:

The word nomos means that which binds, that to which we are bound to be conformed. It is that which binds the reason, the conscience, the heart, and the life, whether it be revealed in the constitution of our nature, or in the Decalogue, or in the law of Moses, or in the Scriptures.\textsuperscript{66}

The law of which the apostle speaks, is the law which binds all mankind… The whole of the preceding argument is designed to show that both Jews and Gentiles…are under sin…This law…[extends] not merely to the external act, but to the secret motives. It says, ‘thou shall not covet’…”…The contrast or opposition is

\textsuperscript{62} Bray, 97.
\textsuperscript{63} Edwards, 31.
\textsuperscript{64} Bray, 104.
\textsuperscript{65} Luther, Romans, 59.
\textsuperscript{66} Hodge, Romans, 123.
never between one kind of works and another...but the opposition is always between works in general, all works, and faith.\textsuperscript{67}

So Dunn stands in this tradition, except that his distinctive perspective on the law is that of national privilege. He mirrors Luther in saying, “If [Paul’s fellow Jews] had properly understood the law they would have realized it was not intended to provide a ground of confidence or boasting (2:17, 23), but rather to eliminate such confidence or boasting.”\textsuperscript{68} But that false ground of boasting, according to Dunn, is primarily their ethnic superiority not their moral achievement before God. (Of course, that ethnic superiority would include some element of moral superiority, as ethnic superiority usually does.)

Establishing a definition of “works of the law” must wait until the Theological Analysis chapter. We simply note that very few interpreters have defined it with a straightforward linguistic translation of the phrase \textit{erga nomou}. We must additionally admit that the phrase carries with it multiple possible connotations. At this point the question for us is, would any particular connotation best fit Paul’s specific usage of “works of the law” in 3:20? It seems to me that Dunn’s case (works of the law are viewed as that which make Jews consider themselves superior to Gentiles) can be made on the basis of previous verses. Let us review what has been stated thus far: Romans 2-3—by all accounts addressed to a Jewish audience—compare Jews with Gentiles explicitly or implicitly in no less than sixteen verses (2:9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 19, 20, 21, 24, 26, 27, 3:1, 3, 9). The question is, \textit{why} does Paul do this? 2:1 and 2:3 suggest that the attitude being attacked is not only presumption before God, but also includes presumption of superiority. The dyads in 2:19-20 clearly connote superior-inferior (guide-blind, light-those in darkness, corrector-foolish, teacher-immature). Paul does not deny the advantage of the Jew, but he does go on to undermine the advantage

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 131-132.
\textsuperscript{68} Dunn, \textit{Romans 1-8}, 160.
on the basis of covenant disobedience. The point then would not merely be that Jews are under condemnation for their sins, but additionally that they are condemned *just like Gentiles*, and that “we” are no better than “they,” (3:9) again implying that there was a belief in superiority. In fact, Dunn’s case would be more compelling if he did not overplay his hand occasionally. He does so whenever he appears to regard “works of the law” as synonymous with the social function of the law, rather than simply *connoting* it. (This is why he is often misrepresented as holding the “ceremonial law” position.) He does so especially when he implies that Paul’s *only* objection to “works” or “law” comes when they function with a connotation of national privilege, and otherwise he is fine with them. Although he never says this, one can get the impression that Dunn’s Paul would permit boasting in the law in some other sense, as long as it was not a nationalistic boast. This is unfortunate, since it could elicit unnecessary skepticism to his otherwise compelling case that ethnic superiority is what Paul combats in Romans 2–3.

In reality, Dunn’s understandings of 3:9–18 (the preceding section), and of 3:28–30 (the following section) are sufficient warrant to presume that Paul, when he denies that the works of the Law can justify (verse 20), is denying the efficaciousness of Jewish works. This is not to imply that other kinds of works can justify, but instead that the denial in this particular passage functions as a sub-argument in an overall case against Jewish privilege.

3:27–29: Nationalistic Boast or Legalistic Boast?

At the end of Romans 3, Paul echoes many of the themes we have seen previously: boasting (2:17, 23), justification by faith apart from the works of the law (3:20 and 3:28), even God’s oneness (Gal 3:20). He also makes a very explicit reference to Jews and
Gentiles: “Is God the God of Jews only? Is He not the God of Gentiles also? Yes of Gentiles also.” (3:29) Dunn recognizes in this passage one of the strongest pieces of evidence for his case, that Paul was more directly arguing against status from the law than achievement through the law:

What is in view here is not the self-confidence of the religious person…. Rather Paul attacks the self-confidence of the Jew as Jew, the boasting in God as Israel’s God, the pride in the law as indicating God’s commitment to his people and as marking them off from other nations… the typical Jew of Paul’s time could not think of the law other than in its distinctiveness as the Jewish law.69

According to Dunn, Paul then advocates an alternative perspective on the law from the errant nationalistic perspective he has been criticizing:

“The law of faith” then must mean the law understood in terms of faith… It is two ways of looking at the law as a whole which he here sets in opposition; when the law is understood in terms of works it is seen as distinctively Jewish and particular features come into prominence (particularly circumcision); but when the law is understood in terms of faith its distinctive Jewish character ceases to hold center stage, and the distinctively Jewish works become subsidiary and secondary matters.70

Only when the universal function of the law is recognized can it fulfill its proper role, as the word of the Creator to his creatures by which he calls them to their proper creaturely response and by which he will in the end judge them all—Jew and Gentile. The law understood thus… is the ‘law of faith’.71

As we have now come to expect, this view contrasts with that of Luther, who does equate the Jewish boast with the “self confidence of the religious person,” and faith therefore with the humble attitude of the Christian:

[Jews] who are of the Law say to God…”We have done what thou has commanded us. On the other hand, those who are of faith say: ‘WE cannot do it, nor have we done it; but grant us grace that we may do what Thou has commanded us.’ While therefore they who are of the Law are arrogant and boastful, they who are of faith are humble and despise their own righteousness.”72

69 Dunn, Romans 1-8, 185-186.
70 Ibid., 186-187.
71 Ibid., 191.
72 Luther, Romans, 63.
Here we must highlight that, although many New Perspective proponents deny Jewish self-righteousness, for our purposes that is beside the point. Our question is not whether self-righteous boasting was historically present or possible among second-temple Judaism. It is whether that sort of boasting best corresponds to what Paul specifically argues against in Romans 3:27, or whether a “nationalistic” or “status” boast would fit better.

Dunn then proceeds to explain 3:28. He treats the “we maintain” in a manner similar to the “we know” statement in Galatians 2:16: In order to counter nationalistic boasting, Paul makes an “appeal to what was a basic and agreed statement of the gospel common to all the earliest Christians, loyal Jews as well as Gentiles,”73 namely that justification comes by faith apart from works of the law. I fail to see how Dunn can take this axiom to be common ground between Paul and his audience if he defines “works of the law” as denoting the ethnocentric attitude being opposed. The argument actually works much better if “works of the law” simply means doing the Jewish law. Then the axiom would serve as a general principle invoked to exclude boasting in law-derived social boundaries. At any rate, “we maintain” may or may not indicate common ground with Paul’s audience. It could just as easily reflect that fact that Paul has already presented this exact truth eight verse earlier in 3:20.

With regard to 3:29, Dunn stakes his strongest claim in this passage. The question, “is God the God of the Jews only?” proves that Paul was opposing an attitude that effectively implied that God was God of the Jews, an attitude that he counters by appealing to God’s oneness, and therefore His universality.74 (Tellingly, Luther makes no mention whatsoever

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73 Dunn, Romans 1-8, 192.
74 Ibid., 193.
of verse 29 in his commentary.\textsuperscript{75} Paul, in consecutive verses, denies (1) boasting, (2) justification by works of the law, and (3) that God is the God of Jews, suggesting that those three concepts were closely related in his mind.

Thomas Schreiner and Simon Gathercole have both advanced alternative explanations of 3:27–29. They construct Paul’s argument in such a way to break the logical connection between verses 28 and 29. Of particular significance to them is the fact that Paul chooses the connector “or” not “for.” Schreiner in particular takes the “or” as introducing a “fresh argument” for justification by faith, not direct reference to the boasting of verses 27–28. This argument is that God, as the universal lord, would surely justify Jews and Gentiles on the same basis, that of faith.\textsuperscript{76} So for Schreiner:

**PREMISE: JUSTIFICATION IS BY FAITH**

**ARGUMENT 1:** v. 27–28 Boasting excluded because justification is not by works of the law

**ARGUMENT 2:** v. 29 God justifies everyone on the same basis

For my part, I see no reason why the “or” could not be introducing a “fresh argument” against boasting. Thus,

**PREMISE:** v. 27 Boasting (over against Gentiles) is excluded

**ARGUMENT 1:** v. 28 Justification is by faith not works of the law

**ARGUMENT 2:** (fresh argument) v. 29 God is the God of Gentiles as well as Jews

Gathercole, for his part, understands the rhetorical questions in verse 29 as a \textit{reductio ad absurdam}. They do not represent the position Paul was opposing, but rather the ridiculous consequence of the position he was opposing. That is, if Torah was required for salvation,

\textsuperscript{75} Luther, \textit{Romans}, 64.

\textsuperscript{76} Schreiner, \textit{Romans}, 204-206.
then that would imply that God had no concern for the Gentiles, something that was self-evidently untrue. Actually, Dunn understands the rhetorical questions in the same way—as a reductio ad absurdum. “God being God of only the Jews only” for Dunn, did not represent the position Paul was opposing, but was rather the ridiculous consequence of boasting in the law.

It is significant that, after mounting an attack against Dunn’s reading of verses 27–29, both Schreiner and Gathercole backpedal and admit at least the possibility of exclusivism in Paul’s discussion:

Even if verses 27–29 were directed against Jewish exclusivism, boasting in achievement would probably still be involved in their exclusivism. Many Jews believed that their observance of the law was a sign that they were morally superior to Gentiles.

I would certainly affirm that Gentile inclusion is prominent in 3:29–30, but that cannot serve to minimize the anthropological content of the doctrine of justification.

So it turns out they are not so much arguing against Dunn’s highlighting of exclusivism, but arguing that moral achievement should be emphasized as well.

So what, then, was the nature of the “boast” in 3:27? We have tried to highlight the prominence of Jew-Gentile comparisons in 2:17–3:31. For that reason, plus the close connection with 2:29 (I find the for/or argument unconvincing) it is plausible that Dunn is right, and that the boast being excluded is one of ethnic superiority. But it unlikely that the boast is only that. In the subsequent text Paul explicates a boast that is before God and based on works, not works of the law. (Romans 4 does however continue the thread of comparing circumcised (Jews) and uncircumcised (Gentiles) and undermining exclusivism on the part of

77 Gathercole, Boasting, 231-232.
78 Schreiner, Romans, 205.
the circumcised.) Romans 4:1–8 describes a boast that does fit rather neatly into “earning salvation through moral achievement.” But because the boast was one of presumption before God, it does not follow that the boast was not also a boast of ethnic superiority, especially based on the evidence presented thus far. The answer is not either-or, but both-and, with one or the other side receiving more prominence at particular points. That is, Paul undermines works of the law in at least two ways: in terms of law—with its more ethnic connotations—and in terms of works—with its more achievement oriented connotations. For this reason, we need to add that Dunn insufficiently acknowledges this second aspect, i.e. the moral achievement inherent in the Jewish national boast, and also the implication of future salvation implied in it as well. In the words of Gathercole, 3:27 is a national boast, but is a boast both in election and also in confidence in future vindication before God (based on obedience). So 3:27 evidences “confidence that God would vindicate Israel on the basis of both election and obedience, that that he would vindicate them both before and over against the Gentiles.”

Summary

Although I do not endorse everything Dunn says about the “works of the law,” I do agree with him that Romans 2:17–3:31 argue quite directly against Jewish presumption of superiority. (I do not think it argues this exclusively.) As in Galatians, we have tried to show how Jew-Gentile relations generally, and Jewish ethnic superiority specifically, form a backdrop to Paul’s theological disputation with his audience. So in both of Paul’s extended contrasts between justification by faith and works of the law, ethnocentrism is woven throughout the argument. Does this mean that the contrast is not about human effort versus trust in Christ alone? Not at all. As a matter of fact, if we define “works” as anything added

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80 Gathercole, Boasting, 225-226.
to faith in Christ, then ethnic background would technically be a “work” and ethnocentrism
would in a sense be “legalism.” We are better off taking the position of Frank Thielman:

There is no need to choose between Dunn’s emphasis on nationalism and the
Reformation’s emphasis on human effort as the proper background for Paul’s
polemic. Paul argued against both, with the issue of nationalism uppermost in his
thinking in some texts (Rom 1:1–29, 3:27–30, and Gal 2:15–21), the issue of human
effort in others (Rom 3:9-20; 4:4–5, 9:30–10:13, 11:6), and both issues receiving
roughly equal weight in still others (Rom 9:10–13, Gal 3:10–14). 81

Furthermore, we would be wise to follow the lead of Simon Gathercole in seeing that, even
when one of the two emphases is prominent, the other is present as well. 82

Therefore, when we ask whether Paul opposes status or achievement in Romans 2–3,
the answer in general is both-and. As in Galatians, he argues for faith in Christ alone. In
doing so, he clearly makes statements that would exclude justification based on status and
ones that would exclude justification based on achievement. (We will show in the following
chapter that the two are much more connected than either side typically admits.) Dunn’s
contribution is to insist that in Paul’s Romans 2–3 discussion of “works of the law,” status is
prominent, and that Paul’s opposition to achievement here rhetorically serves his opposition
to status. As we will explore more fully in the next chapter, this does not mean that his
contradiction of achievement is any less important than his contradiction of status. But it
does suggest that faithful exegesis of Romans 2–3 (and Galatians 2–3), and a faithful Pauline
theology of justification, must at least include the idea of social boundary markers along with
individual moral achievement.

81 Frank Thielman, “Paul as Jewish Christian Theologian: The Theology of Paul in the Magnum Opus of James
82 Gathercole, “Justified by Faith, Justified by His Blood,” 155-156.
CHAPTER 5.

THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF DUNN’S “SOCIAL FUNCTION OF THE LAW”

Thus far we have traced the development of the New Perspective-Lutheran Perspective conflict, as the background for Dunn’s thinking, particularly his idea of the “social function of the law.” We have additionally examined two representative examples of Dunn expounding the social function of the law in Paul–Galatians 2:15–3:28 and Romans 2:17–3:21. Now we turn to a theological analysis of Dunn’s “social function” concept and an attempted synthesis between “New” and “Lutheran” perspectives on that particular issue. The chapter will begin by enumerating three key valid critiques of Dunn, followed by three invalid critiques. Afterwards we will explore two key questions about the “social function” concept itself, in hopes of illuminating some common ground.

Part 1. Evaluation of Dunn’s “Social Function” reading of the law

Valid Critiques of Dunn

The following quote from Thomas Schreiner, targeting the New Perspective in general, includes the essential critiques of Dunn:

An increasingly influential view, which owes its impetus to E. Sanders’ groundbreaking *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (1977), is that *erga nomou* focuses on those portions of the law that erect barriers between Jews and Gentiles. The defect with works of law as a way of salvation is not imperfect obedience, nor is there any critique of Jewish legalism. According to these scholars, Sanders has demolished the
idea that there was legalism in Judaism.¹

Namely, we shall fault Dunn for (1) incorrectly defining the “works of the law,” (2) minimizing the moral or “legalistic” element in Paul’s critique, and (3) under-representing the differences between Judaism and Christianity.

**Defining “Works of the Law”**

A central exegetical dispute exists over Dunn’s treatment of the phrase, “works of the law,” or *erga nomou*. Dunn contends emphatically that the phrase “works of the law” has a special reference to identity markers, in a way that is distinct from either “works” or “law” on its own. He bases this on his reading of Paul but also on a notable parallel in 4QMMT where “works of the law” are clearly expounded in the context of boundary marker debates. A. Andrew Das contests this reading of 4QMMT. He notes that the key phrase in question (where boundary markers are discussed) actually reads “*some* of the works of the law.” In other words, 4QMMT establishes only that “some of the works of the law” refer to boundary markers. It is unclear whether boundary makers might just be *some* of the works of the law, and not others.² Since we can infer either from the sentence, 4QMMT may or may not corroborate Dunn’s interpretation of “works of the law.”

Douglas Moo’s has provided an outstanding study of *erga* and *ta erga tou nomou*, and in my view the best definitions of those terms. “Paul uses *nomos* most often and most basically of the *Mosaic law* [emphasis mine],”³ and furthermore that “Paul consistently confines the scope of *nomos* to Israel…[He] is careful to speak of ‘works’ rather than ‘works

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of the law’ when people before the time of Moses (Rom 4; 9:10–12) and Gentiles (Eph 2:9; 2 Tim 1:9; Titus 3:5) are the subjects.\textsuperscript{4} Moo argues in his word study that \textit{ta erga tou nomou} is used in the same way as \textit{erga}, in reference to doing good actions, with the only difference being the specific source of the \textit{erga}.\textsuperscript{5} “Works of the law,” then, most simply means “doing law.” (Dunn denies this.\textsuperscript{6}) To Jewish ears, “doing law (Torah)” obviously meant “doing the \textit{Jewish law}.” As such, it could (and likely would) connote the social function of the law, but it would not as a term \textit{necessarily} do so. Whether it primarily connotes social function in Galatians and Romans is another matter. I believe it does, but the term “works of the law” does not establish the fact.

We should note, once more from Moo, that traditional “Lutheran” use of “law” departs from his definition:

The Reformers, as most theologians today, use ’law’ to mean anything that demands something of us…What is crucial to recognize is that this is not the way in which Paul usually uses the term \textit{nomos}…This is not to contest the validity of using ‘law’ of the theological category here described. But it is vitally important that the Pauline use and the theological use not be confused.\textsuperscript{7}

So Moo considers \textit{neither} the Lutheran nor Dunn’s treatment of \textit{nomos} adequate.

Moral Content in the National Boast

Moo articulates our second critique of Dunn: Dunn’s social boundary view of the law underestimates the “religious and ethical values attached by Jews to these ‘markers’.”\textsuperscript{8} Henri Blocher similarly asserts that “a distinction between commutative justice and covenantal

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{4} Ibid., 80-81.
\bibitem{5} Ibid., 94-97.
\bibitem{6} James D.G. Dunn, \textit{Romans1-8} (Columbia: Word Incorporated, 1988), 158.
\bibitem{7} Moo, 88.
\end{thebibliography}
markers would be entirely foreign to Paul.”9 (However, if we accept Blocher’s critique, then we must also ask whether we are giving adequate weight to “covenantal markers” in our discussions of commutative justice.) So Moo and Blocher are noting that, even if the Jewish boast was over boundary markers, those markers were clearly moral in nature. Signs of Jewish superiority over against Gentiles were signs of moral superiority. Simon Gathercole summarizes second-temple Jewish literature:

> There can be no confidence in relation to the nations that is not also confidence in God…This confidence is directed toward both God and the Gentiles; it is a confidence in that fact that God vindicates Israel in face of the Gentiles, either by destroying the Gentiles or by not allowing the Gentiles to harm Israel.10

Gathercole’s sees 4QMMT as a prime example of his reading:

> Of course this Qumram community perceives itself as opposed to other branches of Judaism…Yet the issue of separation is subsidiary to the…theological factor of the need to obey Torah in order to be vindicated.11

> The New Perspective’s emphasis on ‘works of Torah’ as boundary defining to the detriment of their role in final salvation is hard to sustain in light of this eschatological focus.12

What the scholars above have shown is that the Jewish national boast, with its emphasis on identity markers, had an essentially moral content. Furthermore, the moral superiority conferred by fidelity to identity markers was thought to result in God’s favorable judgment of Israel. Thus, Moises Silva charges Dunn with representing that “Paul’s concern was not with self-righteousness but rather with national markers—as though these were mutually exclusive concepts.”13 Indeed we have seen in previous chapters that Dunn has a tendency to do just that. Instead, Dunn could have maintained just as firmly his construction

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10 Ibid., 194.
11 Ibid., 110.
12 Ibid., 94-95.
of Paul’s ethnocentric opponents, and of Paul’s purposes for writing Galatians and Romans, while not drawing an antithesis between ethnocentrism and legalism. Bruce Longenecker shows how this can be done:

While the kind of Judaism Paul seeks to undermine in Romans is ethnocentric…he nonetheless finds that, from a Christian perspective, Judaism’s ethnocentric covenentalism reduces to nothing else than legalism.¹⁴

Continuity between Judaism and Pauline Christianity

A major thesis of Sanders is that Judaism believed in the primacy of grace and the role of works as a response to grace. As such Sanders ardently states that Paul and Judaism had a common shape to their soteriology. Our third dispute with Dunn is over the degree to which he accepts Sanders’ view. Guy Waters notes that “each [New Perspective] proponent is agreed on the fact that works of the law cannot refer to Jews’ efforts to achieve a state of righteousness by the activity of obedience to the law.”¹⁵ As a result, Dunn tries too hard to maintain that Paul’s Jewish opponents were good Lutherans on the issue of grace and works. Barry Matlock faults Dunn for denying “that Judaism ever offends against Protestant scruples on ‘grace’ and ‘works,’ or that Paul ever imagines anything different…if an anti-legalism reading of Paul is a distortion, then so is an anti-anti-legalism reading.”¹⁶ Sanders and Dunn react correctly against the Bultmann-Weber assumption of absolute antithesis between Judaism and Christianity. There is a definite and strong continuity between the testaments on

the priority of grace. However, that does not exclude the reality of very substantial
differences as well.

New Perspective scholars like Dunn consider Luther to have confused the “merit
legalism” in medieval Christianity with the pattern of religion found in Palestinian Judaism.
They assert that Judaism was not a religion that accumulated merit based on good works,
subtracted it based on sin, and then bought salvation from God with the difference.
However, just because Judaism did not believe in that sort of legalism, it does not follow that
it could not have been characterized by any sort of legalism. On closer examination,
medieval theology does not reveal an absence of grace either. Catholic doctrine included
God’s mercy and enabling grace in ways very similar to Sanders’ “covenantal nomism.”
Perhaps the difference between Judaism and medieval Catholicism was not that wide after
all, and we will have to admit some over-simplifications in popular accounts of Luther’s
controversy. Reformed scholars point out that, even if he is correct, that Sanders has only
proven that Judaism did not have a Pelagian soteriology, in which humans could achieve
salvation through moral effort. It could still have held a semi-Pelagian or synergistic
theology that affirmed the need of human work to cooperate with God’s grace in order to
attain salvation. In other words, at best, Sanders’ Judaism could be seen as compatible with
some forms of Christianity, but not those in the Lutheran-Calvinist stream.

Dunn, with the New Perspective, contends that Judaism did not believe in salvation
by works because Jewish salvation was only made possible through forgiveness, just as in
Christianity. “Keeping the law,” after all, included the employment of the sacrificial system
to receive forgiveness for sins, which were assumed. This contention creates a problem for a
traditional interpretation of Paul: that salvation under the law requires perfect obedience. If
the requirement of “perfect obedience” does not appear in second-temple Jewish literature, how could it have been part of Paul’s appeal? (We have seen this in Dunn’s discussion of the curse in Galatians 3:10–14, where Dunn stretches to find an alternative explanation.) This conundrum has been addressed in two ways. Most traditional commentators follow Simon Gathercole in citing OT admonitions to obey the “whole law” or “all that is in the law.” (Deut. 28:58, 29:28, 32:46, and Josh 1:7–8, 22:5, 23:6)\(^ {17}\) They contend that Judaism \textit{did} require perfect obedience. Andrew Das gives another account of how “perfect obedience” could have arisen. For Das’ Paul, “the gracious elements of Judaism have been redefined in terms of grace centered on the person and work of Christ.” Therefore the requirements of the law post-Christ would amount to the requirements pre-Christ, but \textit{minus} the gracious provisions for lawbreaking.\(^ {18}\) Thus, the only option was perfect obedience. Either of these two solutions would offer a more plausible resolution than Dunn’s. (Das’ is more nuanced and is therefore preferable.) But he cannot consider either of them while retaining soteriological continuity between Judaism and Christianity.

\textbf{Invalid Critiques of Dunn}

Not all the critiques mounted against Dunn are valid, though. Many of them either misrepresent or misunderstand what he tries to say.

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\(^{17}\) Gathercole, \textit{Boasting}, 92.

\(^{18}\) Das, \textit{Paul and the Jews}, 42-46. Similarly, the grace in Jewish election was abrogated, since faith in Christ became the new identity marker for God’s people.
“Works of the law” are only ceremonial markers

Because Dunn associates “works of the law” with Jewish identity markers, some have criticized him for unjustifiably limiting the phrase to a subset of the law—the ethnic-specific or ceremonial portions. For example, Moises Silva says:

The phrase erga nomou “includes those ceremonial elements of the Mosaic law that served to highlight the distinction between Jew and Gentile. But we have no good reason to infer that this phrase overshadows—much less excludes—the requirements of the Sinaitic covenant more generally.”

Because they believe Dunn equates boundary markers with the ceremonial law, some scholars use Paul’s quotations of the OT against Dunn. Paul could not have been dealing with the social function of the law, they say, because he quotes from passages that are not about the ceremonial law. For instance, Das notes that Paul in Galatians 3:10 quotes Deuteronomy 27:26, a passage that did NOT focus on boundary-marking laws, and thus Paul could not be arguing against boundary markers. Likewise, Bruce Longenecker makes a similar point about Galatians 3:12’s quoting of Leviticus 18:5, which is followed by sexual prohibitions not a prescription of ceremonial markers.

As we have shown earlier, Dunn does mis-define “works of the law.” At no point, however, does he define it as a subset of the law or as ceremonial markers (as Augustine and Pelagius did). He has always defined “works of the law” as the whole law understood from a particular perspective, with a particular motivation—that of ethnocentrism or nationalism. This move is no different from Luther defining “works of the law” as obeying the law with a

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20 Das, Paul and the Jews, 40.
22 Of course, if he is right, then a certain subset of the law would become more prominent. But that doesn’t change the basic contention that all of the law was meant to serve (partially) as a social boundary.
particular motivation of punishment or reward, or Bultmann, with the particular motivation of self-sufficiency. (The traditional categories of “ceremonial,” “civil,” and “moral” laws could each be used with any of those motivations. though with Bultmann it would be a stretch.) Since Dunn believes that “works of the law” encompasses the whole law, Paul could in principle quote any OT verse about the law in order to make a point about how the law should be understood, not only verses that pertain to ceremonial law.

In addition, Dunn has nuanced his position considerably over the years. The later Dunn has acknowledged that his earlier writings have left him vulnerable to the critiques leveled against him:

It has been a matter of regret to me that my initial formulation of the case I was making (regarding ‘works of the law’) allowed it to be so readily dismissed. I have no doubt that ‘works of the law’ refer to what the law requires, the conduct prescribed in the Torah; whatever the law requires to be done can be described as ‘doing’ the law, as a work of the law…I do not want to narrow ‘the works of the law’ to boundary issues…the fact remains that the issue which caused the first recorded statement of the principle of justification by faith alone were the works of the law by which Judaism distinguished itself and kept itself separate from the (other) nations.  

I do not say that [boundary defining] is all that is wrapped up or implied in the phrase ‘works of the law.’ But I would like some recognition from those who debate with me on it that there is an identity-marking, boundary-defining dimension in its use which has been given insufficient recognition in more traditional treatments of the theme.  

So Dunn, especially the early Dunn, makes too much of identifying “works of the law” with the social function of the law as a term. He narrows excessively the connotation of the term to one particular use of the law. (Such a specifying of connotation may be exegetically justified in certain passages, but not in defining the term.) Careful reading, however, shows

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that he never narrowed the meaning of the term to specifically denote boundary-marking or ceremonial parts of the law.

**Paul Objects Narrowly to Social Exclusivity**

Mark Seifrid writes:

[Paul’s] argument in Romans 2:17–29 (and subsequently in Romans 3:27-31; 4:9–12)…suggests that full assimilation [of Gentiles] through circumcision, with its rather obvious ethnic implications, remained the [Jewish] ideal. Paul has a debate with this ethnocentrism, but not over its supposed refusal to share Israel’s benefits with the Gentile world, as the new perspective on Paul generally has supposed.  

So Seifrid misreads “social exclusion” to simply denote “wanting to keep others out of the club.” That is not the view of Dunn (or of N.T. Wright, who, along with Dunn and Sanders, are considered the three main spokespersons for the New Perspective). It would instead be accurate to say, Paul objected to Jewish “refusal to share Israel’s benefits with the Gentile world” unless it were on their cultural terms, i.e. unless Gentiles observed Jewish boundary markers (which did have moral content, as we have already admitted). This is no different than Seifrid’s belief that “full assimilation through circumcision…remained the ideal.”

Similarly, Timothy George writes:

What was at stake in [the Antioch] incident was not mere social egalitarianism but, as Paul put it, “the truth of the gospel.” …Racism of any brand in any culture is incompatible with the truth of the gospel, not because it leads to social exclusivism, but because it stands in opposition to the ‘new creation’ God is bringing into being: the body of Christ based not on caste, color, gender, or social condition but on grace alone.  

I am baffled as to how this constitutes a critique of the New Perspective. George’s invective against racism sounds exactly like something from Dunn (or N.T. Wright). Nowhere in

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Dunn do we read that “Racism is incompatible with the gospel because it leads to social exclusivism.” Rather he claims that ethnocentrism (superiority based on culture-based norms) is a form of social exclusivism (community acceptance or rejection) that stands in opposition to the gospel of God’s “new creation.”

And again, we read the critique of Paul Zahl:

How could Paul have become so worked up and written in such exalted and large theological language about boundary markers? That would be like saying that the problems of young people today are a matter of tattoos and body-piercing. Would Paul have crossed and criss-crossed the Roman world, would he have agonized and hurt as he did, for a mess of pottage such as diet, seventh-day customs, and an act of … body-piercing?

We note first that Zahl is guilty of making the first invalid critique—that Dunn refers to “works of the law” as ceremonial laws. But he also exhibits the same pattern as Sefrid and George, who portray Paul’s diatribe as opposing something trivial, thus making Dunn a straw man. Dunn does not say that all Paul’s teaching on the law opposed ethnocentrism (as we will see below), much less the truncated caricature of ethnocentrism presented by some of his critics.

A “Social Function” Reading of the Law Necessarily Undermines a Traditional Reformation Reading

 Silva writes:

The NT does reflect certain sociological concerns not fully appreciated by the Reformers, but it hardly follows from this fact that other elements they saw in the text are false.

27 The differences between “ethnocentrism” and “racism” are not often acknowledged in the vernacular, but I do think that the conflict between NP and “Lutheran” scholars is occasionally confused by both sides’ interchangeable use of the terms.


In this he typifies traditional, Reformation-influenced scholars’ resistance to Dunn and the New Perspective in general. Even when these traditional scholars acknowledge blind spots on the part of the Reformers (Silva does, but many do not) they suspect that behind the critique is a denial of the world-shaking truths that were articulated (or re-articulated) in the Reformation.

Without trying to assert Dunn’s overall orthodoxy (Reformed or otherwise), we simply observe that his aim has never been that of Stendahl’s, to overturn the Reformation reading of Romans and Galatians. He is, however, making a claim that the most ancient formulations of those tenets—those made by Paul—contained very prominent elements that are virtually never rendered thus in classic Reformed formulations:

The point that I am trying to make is simply that there is another dimension (or other dimensions) of the biblical doctrine of God’s justice and of Paul’s teaching on justification which have been overlooked and neglected, and that it is important to recover these aspects and to think them through afresh.30

I do not say that [boundary defining] is all that is wrapped up or implied in the phrase ‘works of the law.’ But I would like some recognition from those who debate with me on it that there is an identity-marking, boundary-defining dimension in its use which has been given insufficient recognition in more traditional treatments of the theme.31

Even a cursory reading of Dunn would find that he is not a Calvinist, nor a conservative evangelical (at least as it is typically defined in American theological circles). But I believe that on this particular point—that the social function of the law is prominent in Paul’s discussion of justification—we must at least consider his insights as an additive rather than alternative vision to traditional reading. Indeed, Reformed scholar Moises Silva, though a critic of Dunn, is willing to make the concession that Dunn asks:

It would also be misleading to say that ‘those of law-works’ refers to people in general…who are ‘legalistic’…The reference must rather be narrowed…to those who

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31 Dunn, “Response to Peter Stuhlmacher,” 386.
are preoccupied with *the observance of the Mosaic law*, and especially the provisions that highlight the distinction between Jew and Gentile. But it must be further narrowed to those who, by counting on law-observance as the source of life and righteousness, exclude believing Gentiles from the people of God… Given the historical context of Galatians, however, it seems incontrovertible that he had primarily in mind those within the Jewish church—and particularly his opponents in Galatia—who insisted that Gentile Christians must become Jewish proselytes before they could be received into Abraham’s fold.  

We may thus be grateful indeed to the ‘new perspective on Paul’… for helping us see more clearly that Paul’s overarching interest in Galatians 2-3 was not precisely to expound the doctrine of justification but to address the Jewish-Gentile question in the church and thereby to clarify who are the true descendants of Abraham.

It would be folly to deny that (exclusivistic) national and sociological commitments on the part of Paul’s Jewish contemporaries were an integral part of the attitudes the apostle was combating.

So to sum up, Dunn at least believes that his view of the social function of the law is compatible with the truth claims associated with traditional “Lutheran” soteriology. I would tend to agree (again, confining my statement to this particular element of Dunn’s thought).

As a matter of fact, at least one scholar has critiqued Dunn’s soteriology for this very reason:

Dunn’s account of Paul bears all the hallmarks of a traditional contractual understanding of Christian soteriology. Despite protestations, redefinitions, and, at times, a conceptual layering, his account is actually an object lesson in the structural concomitants of that model, namely, extensive *a priori* theological commitments (natural theology, monotheism, divine omnipotence and the revelation of law); a passive and basically penal substitutionary (*sic*) role for Christ; the fulfillment of a necessary criterion of appropriation by the Christian in order to receive salvation; and ethical incapacity (i.e. the difficulty of affirming any moral action beyond faith).

Some points of contention do remain. Principally, to what extent did Paul differ from Judaism in the matter of soteriology? Specifically, Dunn still doubts that Paul and Judaism differ on ideas of anthropology (particularly, the requirement of perfect obedience and

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humanity’s inability to keep the law). For my part, it seems likely that, in Christianity, certain real but peripheral themes from the OT, such as perfect obedience and inability, did indeed move to the center, much as the themes of resurrection or the Messiah did. These shifts could easily have combined to bring about a distinct soteriological model. However, at the end of the day, if Paul’s contrast between Judaism and Christianity boiled down to Jesus, then we could certainly do worse for ourselves.

**Part 2. The Key Exegetical and Theological Questions**

The second part of our theological analysis will ask two related questions—one framed more exegetically, one more theologically. These are questions generally used to distinguish “social boundary” views of the law from traditional ones. Our task will be to answer the questions in a way that synthesizes the views as much as possible, in hopes of proposing common ground.

**The Exegetical Question: Soteriological Claim**

or Ecclesiological Claim?

When Paul argued for “faith in Christ” rather than “works of the law,” what sort of claim was he making? Was it that people could not get into heaven by what they do? Or was it that people could be full and equal members of Christ’s body without observing Jewish boundary markers? First of all, both sides should agree that either claim can and should be motivated by zeal for the supremacy of Christ. Faith in Christ should have no rivals, whether for admittance into heaven or inclusion in God’s people. As Luther says:
Whosoever seeketh righteousness apart from faith in Christ, whether by works, by
satisfactions, or by affections, or by the law, rejecteth the grace of God and despiseth the
death of Christ.36

Exegesis, though, must identify the particular rival to faith in Christ—whether an alternative
soteriology or an alternative ecclesiology. Was human achievement or ethnic exclusivism in
question?

In the previous chapter we have tried to show how, in the two Biblical passages
which directly speak to “works of the law,” the situations addressed involved ethnic
exclusion (Galatians) or superiority (Romans). In other words, he makes both ecclesiological
and soteriological statements, but his overall aim, the response he was trying to “get” from
his audience, was ecclesiological in nature. However, Paul reasoned for those responses by
appeal to anti-achievement principles. He used soteriological categories in the interest of
making an ecclesiological point. In Galatians 2–3 this point was that Gentiles should be full
members of the church without assimilating to Jewish culture. In Romans 2–3 the point (or
at least a point) was that Jewish identity was no basis for superiority.

Very few would disagree with my contentions with respect to Galatians (although I
acknowledge that many would, with respect to Romans). Even those who disagree, though,
would likely admit that my points are legitimate applications of the main point. However,
we note that the rhetoric in this debate centers on distinguishing the “main point” from
“application” or “implication.” The reason for making this distinction is to assign relative
importance to “application” or “implication.” For Westerholm, the Jew-Gentile controversy
was simply the “occasion,” but the “Lutheran” emphases were the “point”—“and it is the

36 Martin Luther, A Commentary on St. Paul’s Letter to the Galatians based on Lectures Delivered by Martin
Luther at the University of Wittenberg in the year 1531 (London: James Clarke & Co., 1956), 185.
point rather than the historical occasion of the formulation that is crucial.” 37 Interestingly
enough, Stendahl uses similar language in the reverse: The historical occasion was “original”
but Luther’s insights were “translation.” 38 Westerholm’s distinction is more true to the text,
but he and Stendahl both share the assumption that application is subordinate to meaning.
Although neither state it explicitly, both implicitly minimize application (occasion,
translation) in comparison to meaning (main point, original). We will contest their
assumption, first, by questioning the distinction between meaning and application, and,
second, by dealing with the concept of logical priority. For both contentions we will appeal
to the epistemology of John Frame.

Frame believes that, aside from the authoritative text of Scripture itself, no
substantive distinctions exist between “meaning” and “application”:

There is, in fact, no important distinction between meaning and application…To find
‘meaning’ is to ask a question of Scripture, to express a need, and to have that need
met. To ‘apply’ is to learn more of what is in the text, to see more of its potential, its
powers, its wisdom. I understand the distinction between meaning and application as
a remnant of objectivism, as an attempt to find somewhere a ‘bedrock’ of pure
facticity (meaning) on which all other uses of the text are to be based. But the true
bedrock of the meaning of Scripture is Scripture itself. 39

Frame says that what we call the “meaning” of Scripture and “applications” of that meaning
are both derivations from the text. They are conceptual constructions to help us either
understand the text (meaning) or to expand its use (application). Frame then proceeds to
show how even that distinction is difficult to maintain, since we are always doing both at the
same time. 40 So, from Frame’s point of view, distinctly separating meaning from application

37 Stephen Westerholm, Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The “Lutheran” Paul and His Critics (Grand
38 Krister Stendahl, “The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West,” Harvard Theological
Review 61, no. 3 (July 1963): 215.
39 John M. Frame, The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed
40 Ibid., 83.
is conceptually vague and probably impossible. As such, the “meaning” and “application” distinction fails as a criterion for assigning relative importance.

But, one might object, is there not some hierarchy of importance implied by the order of logical reasoning? If ethnocentrism were the situation, and if Paul combated the situation with an appeal to human inability, would not one of them possess logical priority? The trouble is that, logically, we could claim either of them as “prior.” Frame points out the vagueness in the term “priority” in logic, and then proceeds to give thirteen different examples of logical priority. Depending on which sense of “priority” we use, we get different answers. Ethnocentrism is prior by the standards of teleological priority. (Frame’s example #8: A is prior to B when A is the purpose for which B exists.) However, human inability can be prior in the sense of premise-as-ground-of-conclusion (Example #2) or in the sense of instrumental priority (Example #12: An instrument is prior to its purpose). Frame notes that example #12 is the exact opposite of example #8. He also notes that in example #2, premise and conclusion are often logically reversible, which would then reverse the priority.41 It is not at all evident which sort of “logical priority” properly denotes greater significance. The bottom line for Frame is that logical priority is a weak tool for establishing hierarchies of importance, because there are so many ways to define logical relations.

We have employed all this technical reasoning to show the dubious grounds—semantically and logically—for considering “meaning” more important than “application.” If Frame is right, then there is limited significance to our question, “Was Paul making a soteriological claim or an ecclesiological claim?” Historically, it is an interesting and helpful question. I believe that Dunn is essentially correct in his reading of Galatians 2–3 and Romans 2–3, but that does not mean that ethnocentrism supersedes legalism in importance

41 Ibid., 260-264.
theologically. If I am wrong, and if legalism really was the main rival to faith in Christ, and ethnocentrism is "application," then the same is true. Neither point need be diminished in its importance.

The Theological Question: What Ought to be "Central"

in Paul’s Theology of the Law?

We have shown that, exegetically, legalism and ethnocentrism are both present in Paul’s discussion of the law. Paul would consider either as misuse of the law. But which one is properly central to a Pauline theology of the law? To answer this question, we must enter another technical discussion on the part of John Frame, this time about his concept of "perspectivalism." (Be aware that he doesn’t use "law" in the way we have been using it. For the purposes of his book, Frame uses "law" more or less synonymously with God’s Word.):

I discussed ‘perspectival’ relationships earlier in this book. There we saw that law, object, and subject, as aspects of human knowledge, are perspectively related. That means, for example, that when we come to know the law, inevitably we come to know the object and subject at the same time (and similarly for the other two perspectives)...within theology there are a great many relationships of this sort...Understanding these matters perspectively helps us to avoid the rather fruitless arguments about ‘priority’ that have taken place in theology...although prior in theology is highly ambiguous, it has played a large role in the history of theology, because, in my opinion, theologians have neglected the options of seeing relationships perspectively...in the modern period there have been many ‘theologies of this and that’...Each of these theologies has advanced cogent arguments to show why it expresses the ‘central message’ of Scripture. Well, one can agree with all of them, up to a point! Almost all of these theologies have some genuine insight into Scripture. Each has discovered a concept or doctrine that can be used to summarize the whole gospel. Each has discovered a ‘central doctrine’...Although we may agree with these theologians in their affirmation[s]...we must disagree with them over their attempt to exclude rival ‘centers.’ If these concepts are perspectively related, then they do not exclude one another; we do not have to choose among them.42

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42 Ibid., 191-193.
In summary, Frame observes that a great many truths in scripture can be viewed
“perspectively.” That is, when two or more truths can adequately summarize a body of
knowledge, and when they mutually imply one another (i.e. getting to know one of them
entails getting to know the others), then they relate as different “perspectives” on the same
body of knowledge. In such a case, each truth can properly be considered a “center” and we
do not have to choose a single center—so long as the center does not exclude rival centers. I
will attempt to show how legalism and ethnocentrism are perspectivally related with respect
to Paul’s view of the law.

I have made a case that ethnocentrism is at least an adequate summary of Paul’s use
of “works of the law.” Protestant theology since Luther has shown how legalism likewise
can summarize “works of the law.” Both ideas suffice as summaries because the law was
used both for establishing group identification and establishing moral standards. Thus, ethnic
boundary markers and moral achievement represent connotations of “doing Torah.” In
Galatians and Romans, I have argued that ethnic identity was the primary connotation.43 Due
to the needs of his time, Luther recognized in Paul’s argumentation the connotation of moral
achievement in “works of the law.” The New Perspective, and especially James Dunn, has
brought the ethnocentric connotation to our attention once more. Social boundaries, when
they form the basis of justification, become ethnocentrism, which repudiates the principle of
“faith in Christ alone.” In the same way moral achievement, when it forms the basis of
justification, becomes legalism, which likewise repudiates “faith in Christ alone.”

It should be evident how legalism and ethnocentrism both can summarize Paul’s
critique of “works of the law;” it should also be evident that they mutually imply one

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43 However, Israel’s ethnic identity was also a moral/religious identity, so proper boundary observation would
involve moral achievement. As such Paul used arguments against both moral achievement and ethnic
boundaries interchangeably when he taught against justification by “doing Torah.”
another. Indeed, virtually all social boundaries are functionally defined in terms of certain (quasi-)ethical imperatives (i.e. things that “must” be done to be a “good” Jew, Catholic, American, or hockey fan). Furthermore, almost all moral standards functionally derive from a community that perpetuates them, enforces them, and gives them coherence. So “faith in Christ, not works of the law” can imply at least two scriptural truths. Ethnocentrism in the church by definition is a rival to faith in Christ and thus is to be excluded. Legalism as well by definition is a rival to faith in Christ and is likewise to be excluded. Moreover these two truths are closely and intricately related. For these reasons, we should be hesitant to use “centrality” and “priority” arguments when comparing them, and we certainly should not use one to minimize the importance of the other.
CHAPTER 6.
PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS:

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SOCIAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE LAW

In examining Dunn and his critics, I have observed an implied question behind the arguments. It has arisen occasionally throughout this paper, but needs to be made explicit now. The question is primarily a pastoral one, namely, how important actually is the problem of social and ethnic division? And how important is the problem of human self-reliance? Several scholars seem concerned to defend the universal legalistic tendency among humans, perceiving in Dunn a threat to this pastoral emphasis:

[Legalism] is hardly the exclusive property of Judaism or medieval Christianity. On the contrary, it belongs to the heart of sin in its universality… The inclination toward self-righteousness is thus not a unique Jewish problem: it is endemic to the human condition, and even the most deeply sanctified believer is vulnerable to its power.¹

Surely the apostle’s greatest concern was ultimately that common human attitude of self-confidence in one’s achievements or worth, of pride, and of false assumptions before the Creator and Redeemer, which runs completely counter to the reality of how God views things.²

Justification by faith has been effectively pushed to the periphery of Paul’s teaching since it is thought to be dealing with the ecclesiological problem of Jew-Gentile relationships in the body of Christ rather than the universal problem of human sinfulness.³

It would be folly to deny that (exclusivistic) national and sociological commitments on the part of Paul’s Jewish contemporaries were an integral part of the attitudes the apostle was combating. It is no less ill-advised, however, to deduce that first-century Judaism was free from the universal human tendency to rely on one’s own resources rather than on God’s power.¹

Everything in my experience teaches me that legalism is a universal human sin. But that does not change the fact that Paul nowhere argues for universal legalism; he argues for universal sin. As such, universal legalism cannot be deduced from Paul, but only from sociological insight. On the same grounds, I am inclined to believe that ethnocentrism is equally universal. Indeed, I have argued in the previous chapter that legalism (or “me-ism”) and ethnocentrism (or “we-ism”) are often two ways of saying the same thing.

Another line of argumentation evidencing the “importance” question is the accusation that New Perspective proponents are motivated by the modern concern for inclusiveness, particularly in the wake of the Holocaust. New Perspective scholars are actually fairly transparent on this matter. Most of them declare it explicitly, and Dunn even accuses Sanders of erring due to this bias.² However, the key question is whether or not this modern concern is right or important. If it is, then it need not cause us to suspect misinterpretation—at least not so quickly! On the other hand, we might ask the same question of the New Perspective: For interpreters who question Luther’s Biblical judgment on account of his own Reformation “biases,” was Luther’s concern right? Was it important? Our answers to those questions will determine the degree to which we are comfortable dismissing his conclusions. Dunn addresses the question of bias well:

I readily recognize that the ‘new perspective’ Paul speaks to 20th and 21st century concerns, just as the ‘Lutheran’ Paul spoke to 16th century concerns. My point would be rather that the concerns of both periods made readers of Paul sensitive to

dimensions of Paul’s teaching on justification which had been neglected or misperceived.  

The “importance” question is also stated more directly in the following quote from Dunn (who, one might notice, concedes the “more fundamental” point to the traditional view):

In pushing so hard to the more fundamental need of humankind before God, so many commentators ignore or play down the seriousness of the issue [emphasis mine] which actually brought the more fundamental point to such vital and all-consuming relevance for Paul.

Behind Dunn’s exegesis is a conviction that social and ethnic exclusion were important issues to Paul and are important issues today–important on the same level perhaps as “legalism.” We see the same “importance” issue - expressed in the opposite form–from opponents of Dunn:

Paul Zahl: “How could Paul have become so worked up and written in such exalted and large theological language about boundary markers? That would be like saying that the problems of young people today are a matter of tattoos and body-piercing. Would Paul have crossed and criss-crossed the Roman world, would he have agonized and hurt as he did, for a mess of potage such as diet, seventh-day customs, and an act of … body-piercing?”

Peter O’Brien: “Justification by faith has been effectively pushed to the periphery of Paul’s teaching since it is thought to be dealing with the ecclesiological problem of Jew-Gentile relationships in the body of Christ rather than the universal problem of human sinfulness.”

Timothy George: “What was at stake in [the Antioch] incident was not mere [emphasis mine] social egalitarianism, but, as Paul put it, ‘the truth of the gospel.”

Guy Waters: “The gospel, as [New Perspective advocate N.T.Wright] defines it, consists of community inclusion and Christ’s lordship, not salvation. Necessarily downplayed is the doctrine of regeneration–or the new birth–the decisive transition

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4 Ibid., 36.
7 George, “Modernizing Luther,” in Justification and Variegated Nomism, 458.
whereby, according to evangelical religion, the sinner experiences the transition from
darkness to light, from death to life.”

These scholars seem to reason with the following syllogism: Paul opposed a very important
problem; ethnocentrism is not a very important problem; therefore, Paul could not have been
opposing ethnocentrism. Strictly speaking, the logic is fine, but it rests on a pastoral or
cultural judgment (and a questionable one at that) for an exegetical conclusion. In my view,
our exegesis of Paul places the burden of proof on these traditional scholars to prove why
ethnocentrism is not worthy of the same sort of pastoral consideration as legalism.

Additionally, most of the above authors fear that an emphasis on the
social/ecclesiological implications of the gospel will undermine the importance of individual
implications: Community inclusion and Christ’s universal lordship will “necessarily”
downplay the doctrine of regeneration. Certainly it could. But necessarily so? If it is, then I
might ask the question in reverse: Does defining the gospel in terms of new birth (and not
community inclusion) “necessarily” downplay the doctrine of one, holy, catholic, and
apostolic church? We should hope not.

At any rate, I would prefer not to frame the issue in such oppositional terms. Instead,
I would like to simply ask New Perspective interpreters, is legalism a problem for today’s
church? How important a problem is it? How might other Christians, and those outside the
church, answer that question? And how might my answer to these questions affect my ability
to hear what the Spirit of God is saying to the churches? To New Perspective opponents I
would ask the same sort of questions: Are ethnocentrism, nationalism, and social exclusion a
problem for today’s church? How important a problem are they? How might Christians
from other social groupings, nearby and around the world, answer that question? How might

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my answer positively or negatively affect my ability to hear what the Spirit of God says to the churches? Christians on both sides of the debate need to be honest about any \textit{a priori} assumptions of which issues we \textit{expect} to see in Paul. Furthermore, we should not assume that contemporary concerns will \textit{necessarily} cloud our ability to see the Biblical message. They may very well do the opposite.

When faced with the problem of legalism in his day, Luther expanded on Paul’s sense of the law. He generalized it from Jewish moral achievement to \textit{any} moral achievement: If Jewish law does not justify, then neither (or how much less) do other sorts of “law.” This was not only legitimate, it was necessary, even if he stretched Paul’s sense of \textit{erga nomou} in order to do so. In the same way James Dunn has provided the exegetical basis for an analogous application. If Jewish social boundaries may not constitute identity markers for right standing in the church, then neither (or how much less) do other social boundaries—be they ethnic, national, or cultural. This too is legitimate, even if he truncates Paul’s sense of \textit{erga nomou} in order to do so.

Michael Bird writes:

It would seem that Augustine and Luther did not misunderstand Paul, though; like all of us they also interpreted Paul for their own times. Nevertheless, Paul does indeed as a primary facet of his pastoral theology confront elements of ethnocentrism, and his ministry must be seen in light of trying to normalize Jewish and Gentile relations in the early Church, an aspect which I think Reformed theology has never really appreciated.\footnote{Michael Bird, “When the Dust Finally settles: Coming to a Post-New Perspective Perspective,” \textit{Criswell Theological Journal} 2, no. 2 (Spring 2005) : 57-69.}

As for me, I maintain that, just as Jewish-Gentile relations threatened to \textit{practically} repudiate faith in Christ alone in Paul’s day, so there are similar “social boundaries” today that threaten to do the same. Political persuasion, philosophies about schooling, and versions of the Bible frequently constitute spoken and unspoken boundary markers for good standing.
in Christian communities. Moreover, we have still made little progress on the *very first*
repudiation of “faith alone”—the requirement of ethnic assimilation for community inclusion.

It has become trite to speak of the “most segregated hour of the week in America.” Yet the worship of Jesus Christ has absolutely failed to bring about examples of “Jew and Greek, male and female, slave and free” in our country, and in most of the world. Our witness in this respect stands publicly shamed in comparison with rival saviors such as corporate America or the “godless” university. Where do we see diverse groups being made one, dividing walls of hostility broken down, and the creation of unified communities? In the military, where you can “be all that you can be”? And wretched people that we are, who will save us from our historical enmities and this body of sin and death? Thanks be to God—professional sports will!

We justify our undisturbed social boundaries with appeals to homogeneous unit principles, or worship styles, or “living in a safe school district.” We protest that doctrinal unity must precede ecclesiastical unity, while our doctrine booms with silence on how or why we expect that to ever happen. Meanwhile Hutu Christians leave their comfortable homogeneous units to hack Tutsi Christians into pieces, Chinese Christian parents forbid marriage between their children and the children of Japanese Christians, and some American Christians want to not only avoid but outlaw Biblical hospitality toward certain foreign brothers in Christ. Will no one raise a cry of zeal for the glory of the name of Christ? Will no one unleash the great voice of the Apostle in this cause? Dare we, in the face of the myriad of ethnic-related challenges of our time, muzzle the one who considered zeal for his own pedigree as loss, and instead preached the mystery of a trans-ethnic Body of fellow-heirs, fellow-members, and fellow-partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus?
Given our moment in history, we cannot afford to ignore or minimize Paul’s teachings on ethnic harmony and the gospel. Instead, the church needs to plumb the depths of his passion and profundity in order to “be presented in all [our] glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that [we] should be holy and blameless.” James Dunn’s exposition of the “social function of the law” is one significant contribution to that task. Without minimizing or ignoring the important Reformation themes in Paul, the “social function of the law” must be an essential part of seminary education on Pauline theology. It must be expounded in the local church through preaching and teaching of Galatians and Romans (and Philippians and Ephesians, for that matter). Philosophies of ministry for church growth, missions work, and mercy/justice ministry need to be informed by Paul’s passion for one church from among all nations. We need to see his message not as a reflection of the “politically correct” spirit of the age, but as a true message from the Spirit for our age. Only then can we bring to bear the full truths of the Scripture to this pressing need of our time. As the power of Paul’s gospel has revolutionized the church and the world throughout the ages, may it once again bring about renewal of the church in our day—and may that renewal result in a witness to the socially transformative power of Christ. It is that sort of witness, as much as any other, that will speak good news to our lost world.
CHAPTER 7.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has tried to show that James Dunn’s exposition of the *social function* of the law offers a necessary and complementary perspective to the traditional “Lutheran” reading of Galatians and Romans. We have seen how the “Lutheran” and “New” perspectives on Paul developed into adversaries. Luther’s world-changing insights into justification shaped a particular reading of the epistles in Protestant theology, with Bultmann carrying his perspective forward in a more individual direction, and with Wrede and Stendahl registering a protest against that line of thinking. Sanders framed the contemporary rebuttal to Luther with his “New Perspective” on Judaism. One of the responses to Sanders has been James Dunn’s exposition of the “works of the law,” in which Paul is understood to argue not against individual self-righteousness, but ethnocentrism.

We have examined the two Biblical passages where Paul addresses the “works of the law” in the most detail. In doing so we tried to show that Dunn’s “social boundary” view of the law, though not perfect, is essentially the issue addressed by Paul in those key passages. Galatians 2–3 bear the clear marks of argument against the Jewish law as a *boundary*, an identity marker for the people of God, rather than against the law as a standard for earning salvation. Furthermore, Romans 2–3 shows evidence that Paul was building a case against Jewish ethnic/national status, rather than a generic human achievement (although that ethnic status did contain a moral content). The anti-legalism message is present, but it functions as the primary evidence in Paul’s overall case against ethnocentrism.
In addition, we have demonstrated how a pro-Dunn conclusion can be maintained while recognizing and affirming the equally central truths of “Lutheran” readings.

Bruce Longenecker summarizes well:

The target of Paul’s attacks in Galatians and elsewhere is precisely a Christian form of traditional Jewish ethnocentric covenentalism, but Paul frequently depicts and engages with that phenomenon in ways that are determined more by his Christian convictions than by the terms thought to be appropriate in traditional forms of Jewish theology…Most likely, Paul’s stance against nomistic observance resulted primarily from his anxieties about the social function of the law in distinguishing and separating Jew from Gentile. By undermining the attraction of observing the law, Paul sought to ensure the preservation of a socially-united community which thereby testified to the eschatological transformation of God. In the process, his strategy included undermining the law’s attractiveness by portraying it in ways that went against the grain of covenantal traditions altogether—ways that often coincide with traditional interpretations of Paul’s letters…The suggestion being made here is not that the ‘Lutheran’ and ‘new’ perspectives are really one and the same thing. Nonetheless, there is a large area where the two can and should be seen to overlap.¹

Arguments about the “priority” or “centrality” of legalism or ethnocentrism are not helpful. Indeed, both connotations are so closely associated with a proper understanding of “law” and “works of the law” that Longenecker’s description of “overlap” is far more useful than the model of antithesis. (Dunn is occasionally guilty of articulating such an antithesis, but taken as a whole he does so rarely. The same cannot be said for many others, on both sides.)

Finally, we have made a case for the importance of the ethnocentrism theme in Pauline theology. The inclusion of the Gentiles was important to Paul—no one doubts that. This thesis has explained that importance in terms of its logical connection with Christ being Lord of all, and salvation being through Christ alone. Ethnocentrism was and is a repudiation of the gospel in the most direct way possible. The age to come, for Paul, was characterized by all nations coming under the rule of Israel’s God, through faith in His

Messiah alone. We believe that characteristic to be a sign of the kingdom in today’s world as well.
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