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BOEKBESPREKINGS / BOOK REVIEWS

Dunn, J D G 2007 - *The new perspective on Paul*

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Reviewer: Dr M Cromhout (Johannesburg)

Now and again biblical scholarship and theology undergo what can be called a paradigm shift in interpretation. The "New Perspective on Paul" (NPP) certainly is such a paradigm shift. The "new perspective" is a term Dunn originally used for E P Sanders' work on Early Judaism and Paul, but it has since developed to now being mainly associated with the work of Dunn himself. Ever since the now famous Mansion Memorial Lecture delivered by Dunn in 1982, Pauline studies - at least in some circles - have challenged the received Protestant/Reformed tradition's interpretation of what Paul meant by "works of the law". The point of the enterprise was to understand that Paul's argument *also* had a social and ethnic dimension to it when appreciated context, and therefore should not exclusively be seen through the lens of Martin Luther's basic theology as it developed in reaction against Roman Catholicism. Employing social studies, Dunn opened up new understanding Paul, serving to enlighten those who welcome it, and soliciting vigorous opposition from those who fear that threat that will destroy the very foundation of the Protestant/Reformed theological tradition.

Dunn's basic thesis is that "works of the law" do not refer to "legalistic works righteousness", or to the one's salvation through "works". What Paul opposed, rather, was the insistence of Israelite believers in a social boundary between Israelite and Gentile. The "works of the law" - mainly circumcision, dietary laws, and Sabbath observance - which the Gentile believers had to adopt, were important "badges" of identity, or "test cases" of the covenant with God. As far as these Israelite believers were concerned, Gentiles had to become members of the covenant and so adopt "Jewish" identity through circumcision and/or observing purity laws and the Sabbath. Paul argued that to exercise their faith in Jesus by remaining Gentiles. It is the Gentile adoption of these "badges" of identity that Paul strongly opposed. He attacked the social function of the law, a certain attitude towards the law.

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served as a boundary marker between "Jew" and Gentile.

Dunn also insists, however, that "works of the law" refer to the *entire* law, yet it specifically focuses on covenant fidelity and matters for which "Jews" were persecuted during the Maccabean period. In this argument that the law still had a positive function for Paul, that is, when it is "denationalized" and no longer a possession and boundary marker of Israel, and so can still be a guide for everyday life, especially in its command. Paul had a narrow and a broad approach to the law: one will not be justified by doing the works (the social function of the law), yet one will still be judged by the law (where it still reveals God's command). In Dunn's interpretation is an aspect which still needs to be resolved.

Related arguments are Paul's reproach of Israelite "boasting". This is not "boasting" about one's own works but Paul's attack is on "Jews" and their self-perceived covenant "set-apartness", their sense of having the eyes of God, and not being liable to condemnation as the Gentiles were. Paul moved away from his focus on the tradition of Phinehas, focused on protecting Israel's "set-apartness" to God.

The above argument formed part of the reason, so Dunn has maintained for nearly 30 years, why Paul developed his theology of justification by faith. It was to help remove the social boundary between "Jew" and Gentile (boundary making) attitude to the law in view of the all embracing gospel.

This is the NPP of Dunn in a nutshell, which of course, contains many more nuances and aspects of it not discussed here. These can be discovered and digested from the book that contains Dunn's continuous NPP. The majority of the articles (chaps. 2-21) were published between 1983 to 2004, comprising 20 articles that develop, and answer objections to the NPP. There are also two "new" additions: chapter one sets out the NPP, while chapter 22 looks at Philippians 3:2-14, a passage that had not yet received serious attention from Dunn.

So does the NPP undermine the Protestant/Reformed theological basis and tradition of justification by faith? Dunn repeatedly denies. "I affirm", Dunn maintains, "as a central point of Christian faith that God's acceptance of a person is by his grace alone and through faith alone ... For my own part, even though it is not the language of the Reformed tradition, I have no particular problem in affirming that the doctrine of justification ... is *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae* ... I am astonished by and repudiate entirely the charge that 'the new perspective on Paul' constitutes an attack on that Lutheran fundamental ... It is *not* opposed to the classic Reformed doctrine of justification. It simply adds an ethnic dimension which was part of the doctrine from its formulation, was indeed integral to the first redefinition of the doctrine - 'Jew first but also Greek'" (pp. 21, 33). On the whole, Dunn attempts to address these misunderstandings, confusions and objections triggered by the NPP in the first chapter. If Romans was Paul's defense of his doctrine, then chapter 1 in this book is Dunn's own defense of the NPP.

Chapter 22 looks at Philippians 3:2-14, as the bulk of Dunn's work on the NPP focused on Galatians and Paul addressing a situation in which his mission is challenged as indicated by verses 2-4, and again he has to address the "Jewish" confidence in their ethnic identity. Paul turns to his own reasons for having confidence in the gospel which is based in the things listed in 3:4-6. For Dunn, 3:4-5a lists matters pertaining to confidence in ethnicity and 3:6 pertains to matters of choice, and Paul's extra commitment and sense of self-achievement in terms of his faith. Dunn notes, "if the first half of the list of Paul's pre-Christian grounds for confidence before God gives substantial emphasis of the new perspective, then it could equally be said that the second half of the list gives as much emphasis of the old perspective" (p 474). Needless to say, Dunn goes on to deny the latter, and this ends in the vindication of the NPP and the theological nuances it brought to light.

What Paul lists, he goes on to describe as "rubbish" or "excrement". It is the all consuming life as a Pharisee, a circumcised Israelite that Paul has in mind. Yet, it does not mean he denied these things of having a value. That Paul still saw continuing value in circumcision, the Law, and his own status as an Israelite (Rm 3:1-2) is clear. "The sharpness of the contrast is not so much to denigrate what he had previously counted as gain, as to enhance the value he now attributes to Christ, to the knowledge of Christ, and to the prospect of gaining Christ" (p 475). If Galatians was a situational letter, it has to be asked what value, if any, can be attached to something described as "rubbish" and "excrement" as Paul himself writes of Paul seeing these things as comparatively "valueless and entirely unsatisfactory under the new righteousness required by God" (p 483).

Another motif also evident in the NPP is Paul describing the process of salvation in vv 9-11. The righte only secure at the resurrection from the dead - it is not something he already attained. This points to p the process of personal transformation "in Christ", and therefore justification should not be understoc righteousness" imputed to the believer, or the cross as atonement. In contrast with his previous confic humility that there was still much to be done on his part, requiring intense personal exertion in order the prize "of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (3:14). What we find here is Dunn's insistence in o distinguishing between initial justification and final justification - salvation for Paul is a process!

Dunn and his work on the NPP have brought to light the importance of ethnic identity in the New Test Paul faced in his attempt to make one people out of the many. This book is a testimony to Paul's strug as Dunn's identification of that struggle when appreciated in its social and historical context, dimensio ignored in the development of Paul's theology. If you are a supporter of the NPP, this book is a convey work on the topic and a necessary addition to your library. If not, it will be a principal dialogue partne a testimony to Dunn's contribution to New Testament theology, and, I believe, a testimony to how a so understanding of Paul and his doctrine of justification by faith.



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