

WAS LUTHER RIGHT?

Thomas R. Schreiner

The Impact of Luther

Martin Luther turned the world upside down in the sixteenth century by proclaiming the Pauline gospel. Luther, who was a professor of biblical exegesis for many years, slowly came to an understanding of the righteousness of God in Rom. 1:17. For many years he believed that God's righteousness was a divine attribute, so that the Pauline meaning was that God rendered to a person according to his works. In other words, Rom. 1:17 referred to the judging righteousness of God. Through intensive biblical exegesis, both in Romans and the Psalms, it began to dawn on Luther that this conception of God's righteousness was incorrect. God's righteousness in Rom. 1:17 was not his judging righteousness but his saving righteousness. The righteousness of God did not refer to God's just judgment of human beings. Instead, it referred to God's saving righteousness by which human beings were righteous in his sight. When Paul speaks of the righteousness of God in Rom. 1:17, he has in mind the righteousness which is valid before God. The righteousness of God here does not refer to his just and impartial judgment of people. It refers to his saving righteousness by which human beings may stand before him as not guilty. This righteousness before God is not based on our works, nor can it ever be earned or merited. Righteousness which is valid before God is available by faith alone. Right-standing before God is obtained not by *doing* but by *believing*. It cannot be earned since it is a gift of God.

Luther warned over and over again that human beings were prone to legalism. Legalism exists when people attempt to secure righteousness in God's sight by good works. Legalists believe that they can earn or merit God's approval by performing the requirements of the law. Luther's polemic against legalism was grounded in his exegesis of the Pauline letters. He drew a correspondence between the Judaizers of Paul's day and the Roman Catholics of his. Just as the Judaizers believed that they could gain righteousness in God's sight by the works of the law, so too the Roman Catholics of Luther's day were attempting to secure righteousness by observing God's commandments. According to Luther the legalism of the Judaizers had manifested itself in the theology and behavior of mainstream Roman Catholicism in his day. Many Roman Catholic exegetes insisted that Luther's exegesis was mistaken. They argued that the works of the law in Paul (Rom. 3:20, 28; Gal. 2:16; 3:2, 5, 10) referred to the ceremonial law alone, and thus they deflected the parallel between the Judaizers and themselves. Luther struck back by arguing that works of law in Paul referred to *whole law*, both ceremonial and moral. Paul did not merely criticize the Judaizers because they wanted to impose the ceremonial law on Gentiles. He also attacked them because they compromised the fundamental truth of the gospel. The Judaizers were attempting to secure eternal life by virtue of their own works and goodness instead of trusting solely in the atoning work of Jesus Christ on their behalf. Their focus on good works inevitably led to boasting, for if eternal life is obtained by virtue of one's good works, then the person who performs the good works deserves praise and honor for accomplishing such a remarkable feat. The true gospel, Luther insisted, is exactly the reverse. All the praise, glory and honor belong to God because he has effected our salvation. We can do nothing to merit or earn salvation. Faith gives glory to God because it receives the gift of salvation which he has provided.

This helps explain Luther's uncompromising stance on the freedom of the will in his famous book *The Bondage of the Will*. Fallen human beings, according to Luther, are in bondage to sin. This means that they do not have any ability to do what is good in God's sight. The idea that

unregenerate human beings have the freedom to do what is good is a myth, explains Luther, for all people are slaves to sin (Romans 6). Slavery to sin does not mean that people are forced to sin against their wills. Neither God nor the devil puts a gun to our heads and says, "you must sin!" The slavery to sin which characterizes humanity expresses itself in *a willing servitude to sin*. When human beings sin, they simply carry out the desires in their hearts. Righteousness cannot be obtained by works of law because all human beings are born into the world as slaves of sin, condemned in Adam. They can never secure righteousness by performing good works, for they do not and cannot carry out the requisite works. As Paul said in Rom. 8:7-8, "For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, indeed it cannot; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God" (RSV). The idea that human beings can obtain righteousness by works is the highest folly since we are totally dominated by sin and cannot perform the works required for justification.

In his famous debate with Erasmus Luther also insisted on the reality of divine election. If human beings are slaves to sin and cannot do their own works, then the only means by which they can be liberated from the dominion of sin is God's sovereign electing grace. Luther's favorite verses in propounding this theme were Rom. 11:5-6, "Thus therefore also in the present time a remnant has come about according to gracious election. And if it is by grace, then it is no longer by works. Otherwise grace is no longer grace." We see from these verses that Luther's theology of divine election was closely conjoined with his theology of justification. Righteousness cannot be by works, for if it is then salvation is no longer by God's grace. And God's grace manifests itself as an electing grace by which he liberates his elect from the bondage of sin. Luther did not defend the doctrine of election for philosophical reasons. He defended it because it was part and parcel of his theology of justification. The doctrine of election reminds us that our good works cannot merit right-standing before God. Our salvation is wholly due to his grace. And if salvation is ascribed to his grace alone and not our works, then all the praise and glory and honor redound to God. Human beings cannot boast before God that they have gained salvation by virtue of their good works.

The Consensus and Rudolf Bultmann

John Calvin and Luther were in remarkable agreement in terms of the law. The most significant difference that surfaced was on the role of the law in the Christian's life, i.e., on the third use of the law. Nonetheless, they were in substantial agreement on justification, works of the law, and the parallel between the Judaizers of Paul's day and the Roman Catholics of their era. Indeed, the theology of the law and justification which was hammered out by the Reformers became the Protestant consensus. Despite the many changes which were introduced in the following years, Luther's articulation of the relationship between the law and justification continued to hold firm well into the twentieth century and was never seriously threatened. This is illustrated by a brief glance at the contribution of Rudolf Bultmann. Bultmann was probably the most towering figure in New Testament studies in our century. He is famous for his attempt to fuse existential philosophy with the message of the New Testament. Obviously, he departed from Luther in many significant respects. But he did not abandon Luther's theology of justification and the law, even though he adjusted it to fit with his existentialism. Bultmann maintained that the Judaizers were criticized by Paul because of their legalism. Indeed, he insisted that legalism was the fatal weakness of Judaism. Like Luther, he trumpeted the Pauline message that righteousness is by faith alone. The attempt to be right with God through the law signifies the human effort to gain security through self-effort.

The desire to obey the law indicates a longing for approval from people instead of from God. The Pauline gospel teaches that security is only available through Jesus Christ, not the observance of the law.

The Consensus Shattered: E. P. Sanders

In the early part of the twentieth century a few dissenting voices were raised which called into question the consensus which had emerged since the Reformation. Both George Foote Moore and Claude Montefiore protested that Judaism was not legalistic, and that such a view of Judaism was a distortion of Jewish documentary sources.¹ Despite the erudition of these scholars, their protests against the consensus did not have a significant impact on New Testament studies. New Testament scholars continued to describe Judaism as legalistic and to argue that Paul's creative genius was displayed in his rejection of Jewish legalism. This consensus was shattered in 1977, however, by the publication of the most influential book in Pauline studies in recent years, viz., *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* by E. P. Sanders.² Sanders conducted a careful inductive study of Jewish writings found in the Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, Dead Sea Scrolls, and the Rabbinic literature. He concluded that the notion that the Jews in Paul's day were legalists was a myth imposed on the evidence by Christian scholars who read the disagreement between Paul and certain Jews through the lenses of the struggle between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. The problem with Luther and subsequent NT scholarship was that they imposed their polemic against Roman Catholicism onto the NT documents. Luther naturally interpreted the Judaizers to be guilty of the same legalism he detected in his Roman Catholic opponents. But this understanding of Judaism cannot be sustained or defended historically, for it is an egregious error to interpret Judaism through the lenses of the Roman Catholic-Protestant struggle. NT scholars, especially Lutherans, have been guilty of imposing their own struggle with Catholicism onto the Judaism of Paul's day.

The actual soteriology of the Jews, Sanders asserted, was not legalistic at all. Instead Palestinian Judaism is better described with the term "covenantal nomism." The covenant which God enacted with the Jews was based on his grace by which he elected them to be his people. God did not demand a certain level of works before entering into covenant with his people. And the idea that Jews had to keep 51% of the law in order to be saved is a myth which cannot be sustained from reading the source documents. God mercifully forgave his people's sins and entered into a relationship with Israel. How does the word "nomism" fit into Sanders' understanding of Jewish soteriology? Certainly the law was a central feature of Palestinian religion, but, says Sanders, the Jews never understood obedience to the law as a way of earning or meriting salvation. The observance of the law was a way of maintaining salvation once one was inducted into the covenant. The keeping of the law, then, was conceived as a grateful response to God's covenantal mercy in redeeming his people. Nor should we criticize the Jews because of the detailed regulations and prescriptions found in their law. Detailed obedience of the law indicates a heart desire to follow

¹See Claude G. Montefiore, *Judaism and St. Paul* (London: Max Goschen, 1914); George Foote Moore, "Christian Writers on Judaism," *Harvard Theological Review* 14 (1921): 197-254.

²(Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977).

God in every area of one's life. This is not legalism but heart felt devotion to God. Sanders admits that there are statements in Jewish literature which could be construed as legalistic. For instance, the Jews accounted for their election by appealing to the merits of the fathers, and they said that God chose Israel because all of the other nations rejected the Torah and only Israel consented to obey it. Sanders warns, however, that we should be careful about reading legalism into these statements. The Jews were not systematic theologians and thus we should avoid the temptation to read these explanations as if they were precise soteriological formulations. In making these statements the Jews were attempting to explain why God was not arbitrary in selecting Israel to be his people.

Sanders' understanding of Judaism was an idea whose time had come, for we have already noted that others before Sanders suggested that Judaism was not a legalistic religion and yet their work did not exert a significant influence on New Testament scholarship. Sanders' book, however, has changed the direction of Pauline studies, for he has convinced many scholars that the traditional picture of Judaism constructed by New Testament scholars does not accord with Palestinian Judaism as it really was. The probative force of his work is partially due to the thoroughness of his research. It is probably also the case that his thesis has gained acceptance because it was written after the Holocaust, for Christians were deeply troubled that a horrible destruction of the Jews could occur in a country deeply influenced by Lutheran theology. Christian scholars have become keenly aware of the mistreatment of the Jewish people by Christians throughout history. Indeed, Luther himself made some statements about the Jews which are indefensible and have been used to justify Jewish persecution.

Sanders' work on Judaism raised a fundamental question, in identifying Paul's opponents as legalistic Jews have we been seeing correctly what is really there in the text? Or have we been imposing a traditional soteriological paradigm onto the Pauline letters so that we are blinded by our own presuppositions from understanding his message? Have we accepted the Reformation position simply because it accords with tradition? As the sons and daughters of Luther, we salute his emphasis on *sola scriptura*. It is imperative to ask, therefore, whether the scriptures teach the theology that Luther himself propounded. Sanders' work has been helpful in provoking scholars to ask afresh whether we have been "seeing" what Paul actually says about Judaism or if we have been guilty of "creating" a polemic against Judaism that does not accord with the text. We are all influenced by our culture, and so perhaps we have labelled Judaism as legalistic simply because it fit our biases and the Protestant desire to tar Roman Catholicism with the legalistic brush. Richard John Neuhaus in a recent article in *First Things* argues that justification by faith alone may have been appropriate in the first century, but it is not necessarily a key issue in the twentieth. In any case, Sanders raises the question whether we have been interpreting Judaism accurately.

A Reappraisal of Paul's Criticism of Judaism

A paradigm shift has undoubtedly occurred in the understanding of Judaism due to Sanders' work. Many scholars are now persuaded that Sanders is correct and that Judaism was not legalistic. Judaism was a religion of grace and mercy. The notion that Christianity is more gracious than Judaism is a myth. Both religions taught that God was gracious and merciful, and neither taught that one must earn salvation by good works. Many evangelicals are simply unaware of the fact that Sanders' bombshell has changed the landscape of scholarship. Some do not even know that many scholars (perhaps most) would no longer subscribe to the view that Judaism was legalistic. But if

Sanders rightly describes Judaism, then how should we understand Paul's critique of the Mosaic law in his letters? If Paul does not attack the legalism of his Jewish contemporaries, what is his complaint with reference to the Mosaic law? A number of scholars have proposed answers, but three scholars--Sanders himself, Heikki Räisänen, and James Dunn--have been particularly influential, and thus we will limit ourselves to them in the following discussion.

E. P. Sanders

Sanders followed up *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* with a book titled *Paul, the Law and the Jewish People*.³ In this latter work he defends the thesis that Paul's soteriology led him to reject the Mosaic law as a way of salvation. However, it is completely wrong-head, according to Sanders, to conclude that Paul rejected the Mosaic law and Judaism because it was legalistic. The *ultimate reason* for Paul's rejection of Judaism was that it was not Christianity. To be specific, Paul reasoned that since salvation was obtained through Christ, then it follows that the law could not be the means to salvation. Sanders coins the phrase *solution to plight* to explain his understanding of Pauline soteriology. Once Paul believed that salvation was only available through Christ, then he reflexively concluded that salvation was not available through the law, for if salvation is only through Christ then it could not be obtained via the law. Sanders' study of Paul leads him to reject the anthropological emphasis found in Bultmann and other scholars. He argues that the problem with the law is not that it was impossible for anyone to keep it perfectly. Nor did Paul believe that adherence to the law led to legalism and meritorious works righteousness. The law is set aside as a soteriological path for salvation historical reasons. Now that Christ has come salvation must be through him rather than through Torah. In other words, the reason Paul rejects Judaism is that it is not Christianity. Paul does not reject Judaism because of any defect in the law or Judaism (such as legalism or the inability to keep the law). Paul has become convinced that Jesus is the answer, and if Jesus is the answer then it follows that Judaism must not be the solution.

Heikki Räisänen

Heikki Räisänen, a Finnish scholars, acknowledges his debt to Sanders and agrees that the latter has demonstrated that Judaism was not legalistic. Thus, Räisänen represents a scholar who is utterly convinced that Sanders has proven that Judaism is not a legalistic religion. If this is the case, then how does one explain Paul? Sanders admitted that at times Paul's arguments in favor of his conclusions were torturous and even inconsistent, but Räisänen moves even further in this direction than Sanders. The notion that Paul was a great theologian and a profound thinker needs to be dispelled says Räisänen. On the contrary, Paul's theology is filled with contradictions and inconsistencies. For instance, in a number of texts Paul asserts that the law is abolished and should no longer play any role in the lives of believers (Rom. 7:1-6; 2 Corinthians 3; Gal. 3:15-4:7). In other texts, however, he claims that believers should fulfill the law (Rom. 8:4; 13:8-10; 1 Cor. 7:19; Gal. 5:14). Both of these teachings, observes Räisänen, could scarcely be true at the same time. To say that the law is set aside and that believers should keep it violates the law of non-contradiction. Scholars have labored to harmonize these two different kinds of statements, but Räisänen argues that we should honestly concede that Paul said different things in different contexts which do not ultimately cohere logically.

³(Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).

Similarly, Paul asserts strongly that no one can keep the law and that all fall short of keeping its commands perfectly (Rom. 1:18-3:20; 3:23; Gal. 3:10). And yet in Rom. 2:14-15, 26-27 he claims that even non-Christian Gentiles are able to keep the law. This demonstrates, says Räsänen, that Paul argues inconsistently to accomplish his own purposes. When he desires to argue against the Jewish Torah in favor of Christianity, then he claims that no one can keep the law. But his attack on fellow Jews who are devoted to the Torah becomes so all consuming that he forgets to notice, when he says Gentiles can observe the law, that he has already previously denied that anyone can keep it. A troubling characteristic of Paul emerges here, according to Räsänen, for he sharply attacks the Jews for their violations of Torah and claims in contradistinction that Christians keep the law. But in matter of fact we see that Christians scarcely kept the law any better than Jews. An examination of 1 Corinthians alone seems to bear this out. Thus, Räsänen concludes that Paul is guilty of blatant partisanship in trumpeting Christianity and denigrating Judaism.

Moreover, Paul's explanation of the origin and purpose of the law is filled with problems according to Räsänen. Usually Paul says that the law comes from God but he becomes so carried away with his argument in Gal. 3:19 that he even denies this and concludes that the law stems from the angels rather than God. Nor is Paul consistent as to the purpose of the law. In Rom. 7:10 he says that the law was given to produce life but in Gal. 3:19 and Rom. 5:20 he says that God's intention in giving the law was to multiply sin. These two statements seem to be directly irreconcilable. And even if one or the other of these two statements fits reality, other problems emerge. If God gave the law to lead to life, then he must be lacking in wisdom. A wise God would surely have foreseen that life would not be obtained through the law. On the other hand, a God who enacted the law in order to increase sin seems to be rather cynical. How could God be good and give a law that would increase misery for human beings?

Räsänen observes that Rom. 2:12 and 5:13 are also contradictory. In the former verse Paul says that those who do not have the law will perish without the law. The thought seems to be that they will be judged in terms of their obedience to the unwritten law that is written in their hearts (Rom. 2:14-15). And yet Paul says in Rom. 5:13 that sin is not reckoned when there is no law. Now if sin is not counted against someone when there is no law, then how can those who do not have the law be held responsible for their sin? Paul cannot have it both ways. Either people without the law are held responsible for their sins per Rom. 2:12, or sin is not counted against those who do not possess the law. Paul says different things on different occasions and does not perceive that he actually ends up contradicting himself.

How can we account for such incoherent statements from Paul? Räsänen remarks that Paul's motivation was laudable, for he desired to see the Gentiles included into the people of God without requiring them to observe the Mosaic law. But at the same time Paul retained the idea that the law was authoritative. Attempting to hold both of these convictions at the same time proved to be irreconcilable for Paul, and yet he could not bring himself to admit, says Räsänen, what moderns do not find to be so unpalatable, viz., that not everything found in the Old Testament is from God.

James Dunn

James Dunn also celebrates the new perspective that Sanders has opened up to New Testament scholars through his study of Second Temple Judaism. He also concurs that it is a

mistake to read the New Testament through Reformation spectacles. Sanders' thesis that Judaism at the time of Paul was not legalistic should be accepted. Dunn argues, however, that both Sanders and Räisänen have failed to take advantage of the paradigm shift when it comes to understanding Paul. In particular, the Paul reconstructed by Sanders is too idiosyncratic and arbitrary, for he rejects Judaism only because it is not Christianity. An analysis of the Pauline writings reveals, says Dunn, that Paul's criticism of Judaism was deeper than this. Paul's christology was not the sole reason he criticized the law as a way of salvation. Nonetheless, Dunn concurs with Sanders that the Pauline critique of Judaism is not directed against Jewish legalism or inability to keep the law. Dunn contends that we must take our Reformation eyeglasses off in interpreting Paul. If Judaism was not legalistic and if the root problem of the Jews does not relate to inability to keep the law, then how can we account for Paul's critique of the Torah in his letters? Dunn suggests that the fundamental objection leveled against Torah observance is that thereby Gentiles were excluded from participation in the people of God. It is interesting to note that much of the controversy over the law related to circumcision, food laws, and the sabbath. These functioned as boundary markers between Jews and Gentiles, and Gentiles felt that in subscribing to these requirements they were surrendering their ethnic identity and becoming Jews. Indeed, Dunn argues the term "works of law" in Paul (Rom. 3:20, 28; Gal. 2:16; 3:2, 5, 10) focuses on those laws which create a sociological rift between Jews and Gentiles. What Paul opposed, then, was not legalism or meritorious works-righteousness. He objected to the ethnocentrism and nationalism of certain Jews who were requiring Gentiles to become Jews in order to enter the people of God.

An Evaluation of the new perspective on Paul

The revolution in Pauline studies is salutary in that it stimulates us to examine the text afresh to discern what Paul actually says. The issues raised by Sanders, Räisänen, and Dunn cannot be explored in detail here, although I have examined their contribution in more detail elsewhere.⁴ At this juncture a few comments of a general nature will be made and it is hoped that they will at least prime the pump for further reflection.

E. P. Sanders

Sanders' work has provided an important service for all too often Judaism and particularly the Pharisees are portrayed in a caricatured manner. The impression given is that the Jews were consumed with pettifogging legalism and trivia, while Christians are spared from these faults. Reading the texts in this way blinds us the fellow-humanity of the Jews who are criticized. Nonetheless, Sanders goes to the other extreme when he attempts to establish the thesis that the Jews were not criticized for legalism at all. Surely Sanders is correct in emphasizing that one reason Paul rejected the law was the salvation historical shift between the Testaments. However, his claim that Paul only argued from solution to plight is questionable as Frank Thielman has demonstrated in his careful study of the OT, Second Temple Judaism, and Galatians and Romans.⁵ Sanders is less convincing in his attempt to peel away any anthropological dimension to Paul's

⁴See *The Law and Its Fulfillment: A Pauline Theology of Law* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993).

⁵*From Plight to Solution: A Jewish Framework for Understanding Paul's View of the Law in Galatians and Romans* (SupNovT 61; Leiden: Brill, 1989).

soteriology. Here the criticisms of Robert Gundry and Timo Laato have laid bare a serious weakness in Sanders' study. Moreover, a careful study of a number of texts (Luke 18:9-14; Rom. 3:27-4:5; 9:30-10:8; Gal. 3:1-14; Phil. 3:2-11) indicates that there is a polemic in the New Testament against legalism. These passages cannot be explained away so easily. Salvation history and anthropology are not at loggerheads but they both play a role in Pauline theology. Our existential knowledge of human beings confirms what we read in the NT. Our fundamental problem is pride, the desire to be great and admired by others. Pride expresses itself in a variety of ways, but one channel for pride is religious observance. We are all tempted to esteem ourselves above our fellow human beings because we have lived a morally superior (so we think!) life to them. It would be very surprising if the Jews of Paul's day did not struggle with the same problem, for the desire to impress God and fellow human beings with our works is at heart a human problem (not a Jewish problem!). Sanders strains the natural exegesis of the text (see Rom. 3:27-4:5; 9:30-10:8; Phil. 3:2-11) in denying legalism. For instance, in Rom. 4:4 Paul speaks against the one who does works in order to receive wages from God. These wages are a debt God owes to human beings who have done the requisite works. This text cannot be dismissed as a polemic against legalism. Sanders also seems tone deaf to what is a constant in human existence, the pride which C. S. Lewis calls the root sin. I would contend, from an exegesis of the forementioned texts, that Martin Luther's interpretation of the NT is more on target than his modern critics.⁶ He was profoundly right in detecting a polemic against legalism in the New Testament.

Heikki Räisänen

Evangelical students are tempted to dismiss and ignore Heikki Räisänen's work since he detects so many contradictions in Paul's theology. This would be a serious mistake for Räisänen raises all the right questions, and even if his answers are flawed he helps us see problems in the text with which we need to grapple. Adequate space is not available here to respond in detail to Räisänen. The fundamental problem, however, is that he fails to read Paul sympathetically and contextually. Wherever he detects a logical problem in Paul's statements on the law, Räisänen concludes that a logical contradiction is present. But in virtually every case an examination of context resolves the alleged difficulties. For instance, Jeffrey A. D. Weima has demonstrated that the so-called contradictions relating to the law and sin yield a coherent sense.⁷ And Frank Thielman, by studying the Pauline statements on the law in the particular context in which they were made, shows that his theology is consistent.⁸

James Dunn

Dunn's approach to Paul and the law is much more promising than either Sanders or Räisänen, for he attempts to understand and explain the Pauline theology of the law at a deeper

⁶See my book *The Law and Its Fulfillment* for a detailed exegesis of these texts.

⁷"The Function of the Law in Relation to Sin: An Evaluation of the View of H. Räisänen," *Novum Testamentum* 32 (1990): 219-235.

⁸*Paul and the Law: A Contextual Approach* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994). For a fuller evaluation of Thielman's work see my forthcoming review in *Trinity Journal*.

level than the former two scholars. Moreover, he correctly identifies a major theme in Pauline theology. The inclusion of the Gentiles into the people of God was a driving force in the Pauline mission, for it was Paul's ambition to plant churches where there were none and to bring about the obedience of faith among all nations (Rom. 1:5; 15:15-21; 16:26). Therefore, Paul passionately resisted Peter in Antioch (Gal. 2:11-14), for Peter's hypocritical actions in effect excluded the Gentiles from the people of God unless they became Jews. We can also agree with Dunn when he establishes a connection between the cessation of Torah and the inclusion of the Gentiles. Circumcision, food laws, and sabbath were boundary markers that erected barriers between Jews and Gentiles. When Paul heralds the end of the Mosaic law (Gal. 3:15-4:7; 2 Cor. 3:4-18), one of his purposes was to tear down the dividing wall that separated Jews and Gentiles (Eph. 2:11-22). The laws which signalled to all that Jews and Gentiles were profoundly different were now passé. Now Jews and Gentiles were fellow members of the body through the gospel of Christ which Paul was specially commissioned to preach (Eph. 3:1-13).

Despite the strengths of Dunn's contribution, some weaknesses remain in his analysis. For instance, he has not sufficiently emphasized that "works of law" refers to the whole law and instead detects a focus on the laws that separate Jews from Gentiles. Joseph A. Fitzmyer has demonstrated that in the Qumran literature that "works of law" denotes the law as a whole and that a restriction to or focus upon a portion of the law cannot be sustained.⁹ That "works of law" refers to the entire law is the most satisfactory way to understand Paul's usage of the term as well. Rom. 3:20 and Gal. 3:10 are particularly illuminating here, for both of these verses indicate that failure to keep the works of the law is the reason people (including the Jews!) are guilty before God. The fundamental problem with the Jews, as Rom. 2:17-29 confirms, is that they did not keep the law which they proclaimed and taught to others. The Jews are not primarily indicted for *excluding* Gentiles. They are condemned for disobeying the very law that they charged Gentiles with disobeying (Rom. 2:1-2). Dunn wrongly makes the exclusion of the Gentiles the central fault of the Jews when in fact Paul's central criticism is that they did not keep the law themselves.

Similarly, Dunn's contention that the problem with the Jews was ethnocentrism or nationalism rather than legalism is unpersuasive. He wrenches apart here what should be kept together, for the Jews believed that they were superior to other nations not only because of their ethnic identity but also because of their devotion to the Torah. This is reflected in the tradition which said that God offered the Torah to all nations but only Israel accepted it.¹⁰ Paul takes aim at the same conception in Romans 2. He does not merely criticize the Jews for nationalism but he strikes also at the root of their nationalism, a sense of moral superiority because of their adherence to Torah. The Jews did not believe that they were favored over the Jews by virtue of their Jewishness alone. No, what marked them apart was their devotion to and observance of God's law. They were separate from the Gentiles both ethnically and morally. Such a stance is not necessarily

⁹"Paul's Jewish Background and the Deeds of the Law," in *According to Paul: Studies in the Theology of the Apostle* (New York: Paulist, 1993), 18-35.

¹⁰See the reference in C. G. Montefiore and H. Loewe, *A Rabbinic Anthology* (New York: Schocken, 1974) 121; so also Sanders, *Palestinian Judaism*, 88-89.

legalistic, for some people may be superior to others morally. What both the Old Testament and New Testament teach, however, is that moral growth is due to the powerful electing and sustaining work of God's grace, not to the inherent virtue of human beings. Those who are chosen by God are easily inclined to believe that it is their own virtue and nobility that sets them apart from other human beings. The temptation to praise oneself rather than God is always lurking at our side, and we may begin to think that God is paying us a debt for our good works (Rom. 4:4-5). In conclusion, Paul's indictment of Jewish nationalism cannot be separated from legalism, for the texts in question show that the Jews believed that they were better than the Gentiles because of their performance of the law. We need only remark again that the inclination towards legalism is not a Jewish problem per se; it is a fundamental human problem, for we are inclined to praise ourselves instead of the God who is the giver of all gifts.

Conclusion

In my critique of Dunn I have argued that Luther was substantially correct regarding both the meaning of "works of law" and the presence of legalism in Judaism. We should seriously listen to people like Sanders and Dunn because they may be correct in charging that we have read the NT through Reformation spectacles. It should also be observed, however, that such a charge cuts both ways. Perhaps they have interpreted Judaism and Paul in a way that fits with modernity (or postmodernity). I would argue that an exegesis of the relevant texts in Paul shows that this is in fact the case. Luther's exposition of Paul was more in accord with the meaning of the Pauline texts than the recent interpretations of Sanders and Dunn. Indeed, the views of Sanders and Dunn are somewhat suspicious because they fit the postmodern agenda so well, for one could conclude from their study that all religions are equally viable and that inclusivism is the banner of the gospel. Martin Luther is a more reliable guide in maintaining that there is one true gospel and that false gospels must be resisted.

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