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# Justification by Faith: A "Both-And" Approach

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# Justification by Faith: A "Both-And" Approach

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## Abstract

The Pauline *doctrine of justification* is a prevailing subject among biblical scholarship today. Especially, as a New Perspective on Pauline literature rises claiming that Luther was wrong in his view of justification, since he was blinded by his own context forcing it into his interpretation of the Pauline text. Consequently, the reformed view cannot be right since it interprets the doctrine of justification mainly through soteriological lens, whereas the Apostle had only ecclesiological purposes in mind when addressing the subject. In light of the previous thought, the purpose of the article is to criticize the New Perspective's exclusive method by proposing a "both-end" approach to Justification affirming the soteriological aspects of justification held by Luther, but also pointing out the reality of ecclesiological implications. The article is divided in two main sections. The first section highlights the NPP (New Perspective on Paul) definitions of key terms, such as "Works of the Law", "the Righteousness of God", and "Justification", followed by important observations concerning their view of the terms. The second portion of the article provides three main arguments for Paul's use of the doctrine of Justification having primarily in mind soteriological purposes. The hope for this work is not to solve the debate between both parties, but to demonstrate that the traditional (reformed) view concerning the doctrine of justification is not absurd, as some would say, and that it is possible to hold a soteriological position and still affirm ecclesiological implications to the Pauline doctrine.

## Keywords

New perspective on Paul, justification, righteousness of God, works of the law, soteriology, ecclesiology

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# Justification by Faith: A “Both-and” Approach

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## Introduction

In his preface to the epistle of Romans, Martin Luther writes concerning God’s righteousness and the doctrine of justification,

It is called ‘the righteousness of God’ because God gives it, and counts it as righteousness for the sake of Christ our Mediator, and makes a man to fulfil his obligation to everybody. For through faith a man becomes free from sin and comes to take pleasure in God’s commandments, thereby he gives God the honor due him, and pays him what he owes him.<sup>1</sup>

One cannot help but notice that Luther’s view regarding justification is fully concentrated on the individual’s status before God. God’s righteousness is given to the believer because of his faith in Christ, counting him as righteous or justified before God. For this reason, it is not wrong to affirm that the reformed view interprets the Pauline doctrine of justification mainly through a soteriological lens. In other words, it deals with one’s salvation, when the sinner is justified or counted as righteous through faith in Christ Jesus and his atoning work. As J. I Packer puts it, “Justification is a *gospel ministry*.”<sup>2</sup>

Since the Reformation period, this view became the conventional interpretation in most evangelical circles. However, a younger pursuit for a new and reshaped understanding of Pauline literature, including his doctrine of justification, arose in 1963 with Krister Stendahl publishing his famous article, *The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West*. In his article, Stendahl points out that Luther’s interpretation concerning justification was, in some sense, corrupted by his own context and circumstances. Because of his inner struggles concerning the individual’s salvation in the context of late medieval piety, he wrongly assumed that The Law, ceremonial and moral, became in Paul’s time a general principle of “legalism” in religious matters.<sup>3</sup> Stendahl states, “Where Paul was concerned about the possibility for Gentiles to be included in the Messianic Community, his statements are now read as answers to the quest for assurance about man’s salvation out of a common human predicament.”<sup>4</sup> In addition, in 1977, E. P. Sanders published an entire

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<sup>1</sup> Luther, Martin. *Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans 1546* (1522), 371.

<sup>2</sup> J.I. Packer, *a Quest for Godliness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990) 149.

<sup>3</sup> Krister Stendahl, “The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West,” *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol 56 (1963): 205-206.

<sup>4</sup> Krister Stendahl, “The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West,” 206.

book, *Paul and the Palestinian Judaism*, attempting to elucidate the relationship between Paul’s theology and the Jewish beliefs of his time. In his book, Sanders coined the term “covenantal nomism.” Sanders used this term to demonstrate that Second Temple Jews believed that an individual is a member of God’s people on the basis of the covenant, which is unmerited since God graciously chose the Israelites to be his covenant people through Abraham. In addition, the proper response to God’s covenant is obedience to his commandments.<sup>5</sup> The main point of Sanders’ term is to demonstrate that Jews didn’t seek obedience to the law in order to obtain salvation, whereas submitting to God’s commandments served only as evidence that one is truly a member of God’s covenant people. Thus, when the Apostle Paul says that no one is justified by “works of the law” (Gal.3 Rom.3:28), he is not inferring that some were attempting to achieve salvation through the obedience of the law (legalism) since they were graciously chosen to be part of the covenant in the first place. In conclusion, Sanders’ main contribution consisted in proving that Jews living during Second Temple Judaism did not struggle with legalism since they were aware of being graciously chosen by God to be his people, and obedience to his commandments was true evidence of salvation. “New Perspective on Paul” (NPP), a term coined by J.D.G. Dunn,<sup>6</sup> sprang up from these two foundational works. Those who adhere to the New Perspective claim that their major concern is to understand the apostle’s Jewish roots and context in order to fully comprehend his theology.<sup>7</sup> The two main proponents of the NPP are J.D.G. Dunn and N. T. Wright who were majorly responsible for “reformulating Pauline theology within the framework of a ‘New Perspective.’”<sup>8</sup> As it will be presented in this paper, one of the areas of Paul’s theology most affected by this new interpretation is the apostle’s view on the doctrine of justification. Generally, NPP scholars differ from the traditional interpretation in claiming that Pauline justification has to do with ecclesiological purposes. This indicates the new status of the believer regarding his relationship to God’s covenant after coming to faith. In other words, the act of being justified is not referring to the individual’s salvation or a moral transformation but only to the declaration of his or hers change of membership status.<sup>9</sup> As Wright puts it, “Justification is not how someone becomes a Christian. It is the declaration that they have become a Christian.”<sup>10</sup> In light of Wright’s view, the purpose of the paper is to demonstrate that, although there are ecclesiological dimensions in Paul’s theology of justification (the reformed view), emphasizing the apostle’s usage of the term in order to indicate how someone becomes a Christian is still valid and coherent

<sup>5</sup> E. P. Sanders, *Paul and the Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 75.

<sup>6</sup> Bert Jan Lietaert Peerbolte, “A New Perspective of Justification: Recent Developments in the Study of Paul,” *Zeitschrift für Dialektische Theologie* 6 (2014):132.

<sup>7</sup> N.T. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 3-20; in the first chapter, Wright argues that one must understand Paul’s three worlds in order to fully comprehend his theology. The worlds are Second Temple Judaism, Hellenistic culture, and Roman Empire. He points out the danger to influence by modern interpretations neglecting what truly was said by the Apostle.

<sup>8</sup> S Brian Pounds, “Romans 4:1-8 as a Test Case for the New Perspective,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 41 (2011): 213.

<sup>9</sup> N. T. Wright, *Justification: God’s Plan and Paul vision*, 91.

<sup>10</sup> N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Pub, 1997), 125.

with the Scriptures. The paper is divided into two main sections. The first section provides a brief summary of some of the essential NPP definitions, particularly Wright's and Dunn's, concerning key terms (points of dispute) such as "works of the law," "the righteousness of God," and "justification." This summary will be followed by important counter-arguments against the NPP definitions. The second section provides three main arguments for Paul's use of justification, keeping in mind primarily soteriological purposes. This demonstrates that a deeper understanding of the doctrine of justification requires a "both-and" approach instead of an "either-or" approach, which is sadly defended by those who perceive the Pauline doctrine only through the scope of ecclesiology.

## Points of Dispute

### Works of the Law

Much debate revolves around the meaning of the term "works of the law" used by Paul when dealing with justification in his epistles. According to the majority of the NPP scholars, Luther was terribly wrong in interpreting such works as good, moral deeds intended to lead to salvation.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, they believe that "works of the law" is referring solely to Jewish regulations functioning as boundary markers responsible to make the Israelites distinct from the other nations<sup>12</sup>. Therefore, this section will provide N.T. Wright's and Dunn's definition of this crucial term and will be followed by an analysis of their arguments.

The two key passages containing the terminology "works of the law" or "deeds of the Law" are found in Galatians 2:16 and Romans 3:28. They say, "we know that a person is not justified by *works of the law* but through faith in Jesus (Gal.2:16, Emphasis added) and "we hold that one is justified by faith apart from the *works of the law* (Rom. 3:28, Emphasis added). In Wright's interpretation of Gal. 2:16, he claims that the context surrounding the verse is ethnical boundary laws, which once separated Jews and Gentiles. Now, these boundaries no longer have the power to do so.<sup>13</sup> Wright states, concerning the "works of the law", "they are the 'living like a Jew' of Galatians 2:14, the separation from 'Gentile sinners' of Galatians 2:15. They are not, in other words, the moral 'good works' which the Reformation tradition loves to hate. They are the things that divide Jew from Gentile."<sup>14</sup> In short, Wright affirms that the term "works of the Law" is only referring to Jewish ceremonial laws, such as circumcision and dietary laws.

In a more moderate fashion, Dunn argues that Paul is talking about the Torah as a whole, the Jewish Law. He defines "works of the Law" as "what the law required of Israel as God's

<sup>11</sup> N.T. Wright, *Justification: God's Plan & Paul's Vision*, 112; Wright claims that Luther's commentary on Galatians was "wonderful and deeply flawed." Since the reformer imagined that the apostle was attacking the exactly same enemies as himself. In other words, Luther interprets "works of the law" as moral deeds that led to righteousness because the Roman Catholic Church of his time was promoting such notion. Thus, Wright accuses Luther of bringing his own context to the text, instead of identifying Paul's content and the author's original intent when dealing with justification.

<sup>12</sup> S. Brian Pounds, "Romans 4:1-8 as a Text Case for the New Perspective on Paul," 221-222.

<sup>13</sup> N. T. Wright, *justification*, 116.

<sup>14</sup> N. T. Wright, *justification*, 117.

people.”<sup>15</sup> However, he quickly transitions to an argument very similar to Wright’s when arguing that the corollary purpose of the law was to distinguish the Jews from the Gentiles. In his words, the law “came to reinforce the sense of Israel’s privilege, the law as marking out this people in its set-apartness to God.”<sup>16</sup>

In order to prove their argument, both Wright and Dunn draw heavily upon the written document *Miqsat Ma’ase Ha-Torah* – 4QMMT<sup>17</sup> found in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Although the senders and recipients are not identified in the letter, the 4QMMT appears to be written by the leaders of the Qumran community to the priestly authorities in Jerusalem in hope that the latter would correct their ways.<sup>18</sup> The body of the message contains a set of over twenty legal issues concerning “matters of sacrifice, priestly gifts, purity, forbidden marriages, and persons prohibited from entering the sanctuary,” in which the writer disagrees with the recipient.<sup>19</sup> The most relevant part of the letter is the ending, lines 26 through 32, where the author claims that “some of the works of the Law” were mentioned in the letter so that the recipients would abide to them and that such obedience “will be reckoned as righteousness to them”.<sup>20</sup>

James Dunn argues that the 4QMMT should be highly considered since it contains the nearest parallel of Paul’s phrase. He affirms that the Qumran understanding of “deeds of the law” was “simply a sectarian and more particularist expression of the widespread Jewish conviction that ‘works of the law’ were what marked off Jews from ‘Gentile sinners’ (Gal. 2:15)”<sup>21</sup> In conclusion, the New Perspective theologian states that Paul’s use of the term is the same of the 4QMMT, in which the apostle indicates that justification is not given to those who practice distinct Jewish works but all who place their faith in Christ, including Gentiles. Similarly, Wright points out that the context of the Qumran letter is “explicitly covenantal and eschatological.”<sup>22</sup> The language of “works” is not referring to the entry of the community or the sect, but its practice serves as evidence that one is truly a member of the community and will be absolved in the future eschatological judgment.<sup>23</sup> Wright, then, affirms that this Second Temple Judaism understanding is also Paul’s who warns the recip-

<sup>15</sup> J. D. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Pub, 1998), 355.

<sup>16</sup> J. D. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 355-57; Here, Dunn provides the argument informing that a crucial role of the law that is often ignored is its power set apart God’s people from other people groups. Dunn cites three main examples of such laws, circumcision, the Sabbath, and dietary laws.

<sup>17</sup> E. Qimron and J. Strugnell, *Miqsat Ma’ase Ha-Torah* (DJD 10.5; Oxford: Clarendon, 1994).

<sup>18</sup> James Vanderkam & Peter Flint, *The Meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls: Their Significance for Understanding the Bible, Judaism, Jesus, and Christianity*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (San Francisco, Calif: Harper San Francisco, 2002), 211-212.

<sup>19</sup> James Vanderkam & Peter Flint, *The Meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls: Their Significance for Understanding the Bible, Judaism, Jesus, and Christianity*, 212

<sup>20</sup> James Vanderkam & Peter Flint, *The Meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 213.

<sup>21</sup> James. G. Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*, 204.

<sup>22</sup> N.T. Wright, “4QMMT and Paul: Justification, Works, and Eschatology,” In *History and Exegesis: New Testament Essays in Honor of Dr. E. Earle Ellis for his 80<sup>th</sup> Birthday*, eds. Aang-Won (Aaron) Son (New York and London: T&T Clark, 2006), 111.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

ients of his letters that they are justified. They are true members of God's covenant, not by practicing "works of the law," distinct Jewish practices, but by having faith in Christ.<sup>24</sup>

One cannot deny that there is certain correlation between the 4QMMT and Paul's writings in Romans and Galatians. After all, Paul lived during the Second Temple Judaism period and its context is the same as Paul's epistles. For this reason, evidence such as the 4QMMT must not be overlooked since it plays a fundamental role in interpreting Pauline literature. Furthermore, different Jewish regulations are mentioned throughout the letters such as Titus not being forced to circumcision although he was a Greek (Gal.2:3), Peter separating himself from the Gentiles after eating with them fearing the circumcision party (Gal. 2:11-14), and the mention of the value of circumcision (Rom. 3:1). In addition, particularly in the book of Galatians, Paul seems to be dealing with Gentile believers that were being influenced by Judaizers to submit under Jewish regulations after having placed their trust in the true gospel of Jesus Christ (Gal. 1:6-10). For these reasons, Wright and Dunn are not wrong in emphasizing the one aspect of "the works of the law" as boundary markers separating Jews and Gentiles, which were indiscriminately an important issue in the first century. However, they are mistaken in concluding that social norms must be the only meaning regarding the deeds of the law.

Membership rules are only one aspect of the Law; nevertheless, it is clear that Paul has the entire Law, the Torah, in mind when using the term "works of the law." When utilizing such wording, he is referring to the Pentateuch as a whole, where the concept of the Law was first introduced in the Scriptures. Although the 4QMMT is an important document that helps us understand the context of Second Temple Judaism, in this case, it should not be the deciding interpretive factor since it only speaks about "some of the works of the law" and the term, "works of the law," in itself, is an OT concept<sup>25</sup>. Therefore, one must understand the role of the law and faith throughout the Pentateuch in order to comprehend Paul's usage of the term. The Old Testament scholar John Sailhamer writes concerning this topic in his book *The Pentateuch as Narrative*. According to Sailhamer, "faith versus the works of the law" is central to the theological purposes of the Pentateuch.<sup>26</sup> The lives of Abraham and Moses are contrasted, portraying the former as the righteous one, the one who kept the Law, even though he lived before the given of the Law. The latter is portrayed as the one who lived under the Law, the one who died in the wilderness because of his unbelief. Sailhamer, then, concludes that one of the purposes of the Pentateuch is to show the way of faith and the weakness of the Law (Gen 15:6; 26:5; Num 20:12).<sup>27</sup> As Westerholm puts it, "the law can only condemn and curse transgressors, and hand them over as captive to sin (2Cor. 3:9; Gal. 3:10, 21-22) – to make possible clear recognition of human sinfulness (Rom.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 104-132; The entire article wishes to explain the context of justification by elaborating on the topics of covenant and eschatology in MMT and Paul. Wright's main conclusion is that the dualistic context, covenant and eschatology, are found both in the 4QMMT and in Paul's writings. Therefore, it seems reasonable to affirm that the usage of the term "works of the Law" were the same in both writings.

<sup>25</sup> John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: a Biblical Theological Commentary*, Library of Biblical Interpretation (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 61.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 59-79.

3:20; 7:7-13).”<sup>28</sup> According to Paul, those who do not submit to the law cannot be righteous in his own term, which is the case of all human beings (Rom 3; 8:7-8). However, he does say that, if there is such case, it is “the doers of the law who will be justified (Rom.2:13)”. Thus, it is not wrong to affirm that the doer of the law, the one who persists in doing good, will receive eternal life. “To deny, then, that one can be justified by ‘works of the law’ is, essentially, to deny that one can be justified by doing good. Hence, ‘works of the law’ here is not only referring to boundary markers but it is excluding the role of ‘good works’ in providing salvation.”<sup>29</sup> Another similar example is found in Titus 3:5, where the parallel term “works done in righteousness” is used to indicate that one cannot be saved by them. The addition of the phrase, “in righteousness”, points away from the boundary marker interpretation since it focuses on the nature of works – whether they are righteous or not.<sup>30</sup>

## Justification and God’s Righteousness

Both terminologies, “the righteousness of God,” *dikaiousune theou*, and “justification,” *dikaioo*, are essential concepts for the development and understanding regarding the Pauline doctrine justification. Much controversy revolves around these two terms. Depending on how one defines them, important conclusions can be made regarding the nature of justification. For this reason, understanding the NPP interpretation of both terms is crucial in order to comprehend their main conclusion that justification has to do with “a post-conversion declaration that one is a member of the people of God rather describing the process of how one becomes part of the people of God.”<sup>31</sup> The following section will provide a brief exposition of Dunn’s and Wright’s views regarding the “righteousness of God” and “justification.”

Dunn initiates his argument by claiming that both terms ought to be interpreted in light of their underlying Hebrew roots instead of a Hellenistic background. The latter perceives “righteousness” as an idea or ideal that can be measured against the individual or his actions. The former emphasizes the relational concept of “righteousness” highlighting the individual’s responsibility to meet his or hers obligations within the covenant relationship.<sup>32</sup> In light of this thought, Dunn defines God’s righteousness as his faithfulness to his people. In other words, the “fulfillment of his covenant obligation as Israel’s God in delivering, saving, and vindicating Israel, despite Israel’s own failure.”<sup>33</sup> In addition, he defines “justification” as the act of God accepting “persons without reference to whether they have been born into a particular race, or not (Rom. 9:6-8); without reference to whether they have maintained the traditional and distinguishing customs of that race, or not (Rom 9:9-

<sup>28</sup> Stephen Westerholm, *Justification Reconsidered: Rethinking a Pauline Theme* (Grand Rapids: MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2013), 82-83.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, “Justification: the Saving Righteousness of God in Christ,” *JETS* 54 (2011): 27.

<sup>31</sup> Michael F. Bird, “What is there Between Minneapolis and Saint Andrews? A Third Way in the Piper-Wright Debate,” *JETS* 54.2 (June 2011): 303.

<sup>32</sup> Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 341.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 342.



11;11:6).”<sup>34</sup> Notice that, in his definition, he elaborates primarily on the role of faith in making justification a possibility for everyone, but he never addresses the meaning of the act of justification itself. Is it a post-conversion declaration that one is now a member of God’s covenant family? Or is it the saving work of God welcoming the sinner into his family through the means of faith and forgiveness? It is difficult to know since Dunn emphasizes only the relational aspect of justification, where every human can be accepted into God’s family by faith.

Although the meaning of the act of justification is not touched by Dunn, it is safe to say that his position would be similar to Wright’s considering that both are NPP scholars. Wright defines “the righteousness of God” as “that aspect of his character because of which, despite Israel’s infidelity and consequent banishment, God will remain true to the covenant with Abraham and rescue her none the less.”<sup>35</sup> In short, God’s righteousness is in his faithfulness to keep his covenant with Israel. Furthermore, Wright claims that one is able to clearly visualize and understand his definition by considering the context of the Jewish law-court, which serves as background for Paul’s discussion concerning the *dikaiosisune* theme.<sup>36</sup> He states this in the context of the law-court, where one is declared righteous apart from his moral character, but only indicates that he found favor with the court by receiving a status of “non-guilty.” Therefore, Wright continues, “the whole concept of God’s or Christ’s righteousness being imputed into the believer is nonsense. While God does reckon righteousness for those who believe, that righteousness is not his or Christ’s; it is the act of God in forgiving the sinner and accepting him or her into his family.”<sup>37</sup>

In terms of “justification,” Wright affirms that Paul, when using the word “*dikaioo*,” is not addressing conversion itself but a declarative act that logically happens after it.<sup>38</sup> The reasoning behind his definition is found in Paul’s use of “vindication” language that is common in the Jewish law-court context. Wright claims that, within the context of law-court, those who are pronounced “not guilty”, or, in a sense, “righteous”, receive a verdict functioning solely as a status that has no power to bring moral transformation in the life of the individual. This only absolves the defendant. According to Wright’s view, the concept of a covenant is also crucial for the understanding of “justification.” This is because the declarative act demonstrates that “a person is in the right, that is, that their sins have been forgiven,

<sup>34</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 205.

<sup>35</sup> N.T. Wright, “New Perspectives on Paul,” 10<sup>th</sup> Edinburgh Dogmatics Conference (2003): 5.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 7; Here Wright defends his position by stating that the only biblical passages, I Cor. 1:30 and 2 Cor. 5:21, that seem to argue for “imputed righteousness” can be easily refuted and does not contain enough evidence to propel someone to hold a theological position based on them. According to Wright, the main point of I Corinthians 1:30 is “wisdom” and the other following three nouns are only a way of implying, “everything else as well.” If the imputation of righteousness is to be taken literally in the passage, then the imputation of “wisdom, sanctification, and redemption” should be valid as well. Moreover, in 2 Cor. 5:2, Wright claims that Paul is not making a statement concerning soteriology but of apostolic ministry. “To become God’s righteousness in him means that in Christ those who are called to be apostolic preachers actually embody God’s own covenant faithfulness.”

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

and that they are part of the single covenant family promised to Abraham."<sup>39</sup> The main idea, here, is that a sinner is now considered a member of God's people after having placed his or hers faith in Christ. Wright also argues that this vindication occurs twice, in the present which was just described and also in the future based on the entire life of a person led by the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>40</sup> This is where the idea of eschatology plays a vital role, considering that believers will also receive a future justification on the basis of their faithfulness towards the Lord demonstrated by works. Wright states, concerning "justification by faith", "it is the anticipation in the present of the verdict which will be reaffirmed in the future. Justification is not 'how someone becomes a Christian'. It is God's declaration about a person who has just become a Christian."<sup>41</sup> It is important to notice that Wright is not saying future justification is based solely on works, as if by only living a faithful life in terms of morality will deliver someone from the future punishment coming in the Lord's second descending. On the contrary, Wright says true saving faith will lead the believer to newness of life marked by obedience and holiness in this life time, which will play a pivotal role in the second justification with the Lord's second coming.

Now, some observations concerning Dunn's and Wright's definitions of God's righteousness and the concept of justification are necessary. As it was pointed out, both scholars argue that "the righteousness of God" is mainly a relational concept which refers solely to God's covenantal faithfulness to his people. When addressing the justification of the individual, they also claim that it is simply "the status someone has when the court has found in their favor, which does not denote an action which transforms someone so much as a declaration which grants them a status."<sup>42</sup> Therefore, the reckoning of righteousness (Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:9, 22; Gal. 3:6) has nothing to do with God's or Christ's righteousness being transferred or imputed to the believer but rather the fresh status of a "covenant member" and/or a justified sinner.<sup>43</sup>

Although there are certain cases in the Scriptures where God's righteousness is equivalent to covenantal faithfulness (Gen. 24:27; I Sam. 12:7; Isa. 38:19; Rom. 3:5, 25), there are other references where righteousness is depicted as a gift from God to believers (Rom. 1:17; Phil. 3:9) or even used apart from the context of covenant membership (Heb. 11:4; I John 3:12; 2 Pt. 2:7-8.) Old Testament Scholar, Gerhard von Rad, demonstrates this in his study regarding God's righteousness in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, obedience to the commandments is essential for one to be declared righteous before God, but such righteousness is also a gift that can only be attributed by Yahweh and always indicates salvation. Von Rad states, "Man's faithfulness to the relationship had to prove itself in recognizing the commandments and keeping them."<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, the people of Israel worshipped Yahweh

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 12-13.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Wright, *Justification*, 90-91.

<sup>43</sup> N.T. Wright, "New Perspectives on Paul," 7.

<sup>44</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology: The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions*, 1 vols. (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1962), 1:381.

as the one “who bestowed on his people the all-embracing gift of his righteousness.”<sup>45</sup> Von Rad correctly argues, based on Genesis 15:6, Deuteronomy 6:25, and Ezekiel 18, that the nature of righteousness and the individual’s vindication as righteous were determined by God alone. Thus, the psalmist can pray for his vindication to “come forth” (Pss. 17:2; 37:6), and the Servant is able to know that his vindication will take place because righteousness belongs to Yahweh (Is. 49:4, 8).<sup>46</sup>

For this reason, it appears that the NPP’s definition highlights one example of righteousness, but it is not broad enough to address the entirety of the concept.<sup>47</sup> <sup>48</sup>To say that “righteousness” equals or only means “covenantal faithfulness” is to commit an incident of “totally transfer”, that is, to affirm that the meaning arising from one or more passages must be the same in all references.<sup>49</sup> In his study of Old Testament “righteousness”, Westerholm reached the conclusion that, in the Hebrew Bible, the foundation for Paul’s doctrine of justification and vocabulary in the epistles, “righteousness is what one ought to do (however that is defined), and the one who does it is ‘righteous.’” <sup>50</sup> Noah was declared “righteous” before any covenant is mentioned in Scripture (Gen. 6:9) and before others in his generation failed to meet the expectation of “righteousness” and were judged (though part of no covenant). Job was blameless and upright in God’s eyes even though the covenant is not mentioned and even though he most-likely lived before Moses. Moreover, Abel and Lot were considered “righteous” (Heb. 11:4; 2 Pet. 2:7-8) before the covenant. According to Westerholm, the concept of “righteousness” is connected to what is deemed morally appropriate. This transcends the reality of the covenant since it reflects the morally appropriate behavior rooted in the character of God and in the principle of creation before the formulation of the covenant.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 377.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 379-80.

<sup>47</sup> Westerholm, *Justification Reconsidered*, 71.

<sup>48</sup> John Piper, *The Future of Justification: A Response to N.T. Wright* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), 62-63. In this section, Piper makes the statement that Wright’s definition of God’s righteousness does not go deep enough. Although God’s faithfulness in keeping his promises and honoring his covenant with the Israelites is part of his “righteousness,” attributes such as love, goodness, and faithfulness could also impel God to be faithful to the covenant promises. According to Piper, one must ask, “What is it about God’s righteousness that inclines him to act in these ways? In order to find a definition for the “righteousness of God.” In the following pages, he affirms that “the righteousness of God consists most basically in God’s unswerving commitment to preserve the honor of his name and display his glory (p. 66).”

<sup>49</sup> S. Brian Pounds, “Romans 4:1-4 as a Test Case for the New Perspective on Paul,” 220.

<sup>50</sup> Westerholm, *Justification Reconsidered*, 59.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 58-64. Westerholm states that “righteousness does not mean, and by its very nature cannot mean, membership in a covenant or a status conveyed by the decision of a court.” According to the author, the meaning of “righteousness” is rooted in the uprightness of someone’s moral character that transcends the concepts of the covenant and the law. In other words, “righteousness” was a reality before the covenant was present, because it is rooted in the character of God since the beginning of times. Another example that the author uses is found in the book of proverbs, where the framework used throughout the book is not that of “the covenant,” but of creation’s order, which is observed even by the ants (prov. 6:6-8). He claims that “scales, paths, and commandments be what they ought, or purport, to be. Covenant membership is not, for scales, paths, or commandments, a live option; but they ought to be ‘righteous.’ (pg. 63).

Additionally, Wright's and Dunn's view seems to neglect or, at least, soften the strong forensic and moral connotations that the *dikaio*- terms present. "Righteousness" is often contrasted with sin and evil (Deut. 9:4-6; Rom. 5:19, 6:13, 18-19; Heb. 1:9; 2 Pet. 2:5), demonstrated by good works (Matt. 5:20; Rom. 2:13; I John 2:29). It also merits reward or recompense from God (Kgs 8:32; Job 33:26; Prov. 11:8; Matt 6:1).<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, Romans 1-3 demonstrates this strong language, emphasizing the forensic and moral connotation of the terms. The apostle Paul speaks on God's judgment upon sinners (Rom. 2:1-5, 12, 16, 27; 3:6) while noticing that it is the "righteous who will be justified," or vindicated, at the final judgment (2:13).<sup>53</sup> It is also important to notice that Paul uses the term "justify" in order to indicate that one is made "innocent" (Rom. 2:13; I Cor. 44). Therefore, Paul's introduction of the concept "justification by faith" as a gracious gift in Rom. 3:23-36 stands in contrast with the universal human culpability before God because of the "unrighteousness" presented throughout Romans 1-3. As a result, it is appropriate to say that there are evidences against the NPP position, which states that the conception of being "justified" or made "righteous" before God in a forensic and moral sense is valid and should not be discarded. If this is the case, then the traditional reformed position, which affirms the idea of one "being made right with God" in a moral and transformative way through "justification", is closer to the truth than the NPP interpretation.

In terms of Christ's righteousness being imputed to the believer, Wright defends the position that one is declared righteous through the forgiveness of sins and the status of acceptance into God's family by faith in Christ. He intentionally argues against the notion of Christ's righteousness being imputed to the believer. In other words, he never denies the "reckoning of righteousness" to the Christian; he only believes that such is done differently than it is proposed by the reformed tradition of "double-imputation." In response to his view, there are two important comments to make regarding the logic behind the analogy he uses to prove his argument and the importance of Romans 3:21-26 in conjuncture with 4:3-8 in making a case for the imputation of Christ's righteousness. As addressed previously in the paper, Wright uses the analogy of the Jewish law-court to express that the righteousness of the judge is not transferred or passed to the defendant when the latter is counted righteous. Thus, the same happens to the believer who, by faith, is justified. The problem with Wright's position is that, even though the analogy sets up the right context for the nature of justification, it does not take into consideration the distinction between the human judge in the analogy and Yahweh, the only Righteous Judge (2 Tim. 4:8). Once the All-knowing, All-powerful, All-benevolent God is the judge of the matter, perfection is the standard required to declare someone righteous. God is different than a flawed or corrupted human judge who, for different reasons, is able to absolve the guilty and give him a righteous status. Yahweh must exercise justice and cannot leave the guilty unpunished (Ps.9:8). The Scriptures explicitly state that all humanity remains guilty before the Lord because of sin (Rom.3:23; Eph. 2:1-3). For this reason, in order to justify the ungodly (Rom. 4:5) differently from the judge at the Jewish law-court, God must grant something to the defendant who is inherently guilty of rebelling against the judge himself. This is where the

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<sup>52</sup> Pounds, "Romans 4:1-4 as a Test Case for the New Perspective on Paul," 221.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

analogy breaks down and Pauline's justification proves to be different than any other human legal system. However, this only demonstrates that the law-court analogy cannot be taken to the extent that Wright takes it. It does *not* establish the necessity of Christ's external or passive righteousness to be imputed into the believer. This leads us to the second observation.

There are different passages in Pauline literature that address the idea of Christ's righteousness being given to the believer (2 Cor. 5:21; Phil. 3:9; I Cor. 1:30), but the most convincing one is found in Romans 4:3-8, in light of the context of Romans 3:21-26. The New Testament scholar, D. A. Carson, argues that Paul's discussion of "justification" in Romans 3:21-26 indicates that God justifies the ungodly by setting Christ as the propitiation for their sins. He affirms,

"In short, the flow of the argument is not affirming that God credits something intrinsic to us or properly earned by us or reflective of us to be our righteousness, but it is arguing that God counts us righteous, even though we are ungodly, by crediting faith as such righteousness—that is, faith in the justifying God who justifies the ungodly by setting forth Christ as the propitiation for our sins. Thus God credits us with a righteousness we do not have."<sup>54</sup>

Carson continues by saying that, in the same way that God credits faith to Abraham as righteousness (4:3, 9), he also credits righteousness apart from works to the ungodly (4:6).<sup>55</sup> In addition, Simon J. Gathercole makes an interesting observation in his exegesis of Romans 4:6-8. He explains that God's justification of David "apart from works" has two components that can be seen metaphorically as two sides of a ledger that records both sins and righteousness.<sup>56</sup> Both Paul and David understood that true blessing consists of having one's sin forgiven, covered, and "nonreckoned." (4:7-8). However, this happens simultaneously with "God's positive reckoning of righteousness on the other side of the ledger." Where there was no righteousness, David was without works, God "creatively counts righteousness (4:6)."<sup>57</sup> This is Paul's explanation and theology concerning God's justification of the ungodly.

## A "Both-And" Approach

Undoubtedly, the NPP has contributed immensely for the advance of biblical scholarship. To deny the importance of the works produced by Wright, Dunn, Sanders, and many others regarding Pauline studies is essentially a tragedy, since they are crucial for a right understanding of the Apostle and his theology. For this reason, there are generally three principles derived from the NPP scholarship that certainly guide the believer to a better

<sup>54</sup> D.A. Carson, "The Vindication of Imputation: on Fields of Discourse and Semantic Fields," in *Justification: What's at Stake in the Current Debates*, eds. Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Treier (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 61. {expound here}

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>56</sup> Simon J. Gathercole, *Where is Boasting? Early Jewish Soteriology and Paul's Response in Romans 1-5* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 247. {expound here}

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 248.

knowledge of the Scriptures, and they ought to be emphasized here. First, the NPP method of study helps us realize the "big picture" of the Bible and the overarching storyline of redemption rooted in the Messiah. N.T. Wright often warns the biblical reader about the danger of placing himself in the center of God's plan or of posing one's story onto the biblical text, as if the individual salvation is all that the gospel entails.<sup>58</sup> Second, NPP scholars rightly demonstrate the crucial role of works and the importance of recognizing the lordship of Christ in Paul's gospel message. Although I do not agree with Wright's definition that the gospel for Paul is "Jesus Christ is Lord,"<sup>59</sup> the recognition of Christ's lordship is essential for the Christian walk and should not be neglected in one's pursuit of holiness and maturity (Jam. 2:1; Phil. 2:11; I Cor. 1:9, 2:12; Rom. 6:23, 7:25, 16:18; I Pet. 3:15). Moreover, I fully agree with Wright's statement, "The 'works' (from Phil. 1:6) in accordance with which the Christian will be vindicated are not the unaided works of self-help moralism. Nor are they the performance of the ethnically distinctive Jewish boundary markers (Sabbath, food-laws, and circumcision). They are the things which show, rather, that one is in Christ; the things which are produced in one's life as a result of the Spirit's indwelling and operation."<sup>60</sup> In other words, genuine, saving faith will always lead to works of righteousness and a fruitful life before God. This cannot be taken lightly since God will judge the believer according to his works (Rom. 14:10-12; 2 Cor. 5:10; I Cor. 3, John 15). Lastly, the NPP correctly emphasizes the significance of Jew-Gentile relationships, the issue of boundary markers in Paul's 1<sup>st</sup> century theology of justification, and how the doctrine should impact the social life of the church. Paul often states that there is no distinction between those who are in Christ. Believers, despite their race or background, are called to be one in the Lord (Gal. 3:26-28; Phil. 2:1; Eph. 1:10; Rom. 6:5). As a result, one cannot deny the existence of ecclesiological dimensions in Paul's theology of "justification" since the preoccupation concerning the role and responsibility of gentile believers in the church was a vital issue for Paul. Surely, the Apostle desired to communicate in his epistles that there is no division between Jews and Gentiles once they are justified in Christ, and that the gentile believer should not abide under a different gospel by submitting to Jewish regulations and practices (Gal. 2: 1-21; 3:1-25; 5:1-15). Hence, shall we conclude alongside the NPP that "justification" was solely an issue of covenant membership which logically happens post-conversion? I would argue against it. One cannot deny the fact that one who is justified receives a "righteous" status that allows him to be part of God's covenant and share in his promises. However, I do not think that was all the Apostle Paul had in mind when elaborating on the doctrine of "justification." Therefore, in this section, I will argue for a "both-and" approach when dealing with Pauline "justification". The Apostle Paul, though addressing the issue of covenant membership to some extent, had primarily in mind soteriological purposes.

Thomas R. Schreiner successfully points out in his article, *The Saving Righteousness of God in Christ*, three helpful observations with the intent to prove that "justification" for Paul conceives the idea of being made right with God. First, he claims that the soteriological nature of justification is supported by the constant statements that "we are not justified by

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<sup>58</sup> Wright, *Justification*, 35.

<sup>59</sup> Wright, "New Perspectives on Paul," 4.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

works or by works of law or via the law (Rom. 3:20; 21, 28; 4:6, 13; 9:31; 10:3-5; Gal. 2:16, 21; 3:11,21; 5:4; Phil. 3:6,9; Titus 3:5).<sup>61</sup> According to Schreiner, the focus here is not on how one defines “works of the Law” but on the knowledge that one does not stand in the right with God by the means of “works” or “works of the law.” Thus, the Apostle Paul is fundamentally addressing a soteriological issue, man and woman are not innocent before God by the means of their works.<sup>62</sup> In addition, Paul uses the terms “works” and “works of righteousness” as synonyms to “works of the Law (Rom. 3:21; 28; Gal. 2:16).” For example, in Ephesians 2:8, Paul says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” Furthermore, Paul says in Titus 3:5, “He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.” In both passages, you can see Paul is clearly speaking about the individual’s salvation by the means of “faith” and not “works.” Second, Schreiner argues that “justification regularly appears in soteriological contexts and therefore focuses on how one is saved.”<sup>63</sup> In Romans 1:17 and 2:12-13, we see that the “righteous shall live by faith (1:17).” In this verse, “live” refers to eschatological life, eternal salvation. Likewise, justification is pronounced in the context of future eschatological judgment before God (2:12-13), which will bring eternal life for those who are saved and condemnation for the unsaved (Matt. 13:39-43). Furthermore, justification is closely related to the concepts of redemption and forgiveness of sins, which are clearly soteriological (Rom. 3:24 & 4:6-8). Finally, in 1 Corinthians 1:30, “justification” is matched with “redemption” and “sanctification”. These terms are not matched to indicate that all three words have the same meaning but to bring to light God’s saving work on behalf of his people who have no place to boast since they never deserved such salvation. Similarly, 2 Corinthians 5:21 states that one can become the “righteousness of God through reconciliation with God by faith.” He is now a new creation in Christ, forgiven from his sins and iniquities (5:16-21).<sup>64</sup> Third, Schreiner refutes Wright’s argument by stating that, in the Second Temple period, “circumcision was required to enter the people of God.” So, the issue in Galatians was not only ecclesiological, where Gentile believers should be circumcised to be fully a member of the covenant, but also fundamentally soteriological since they should be circumcised in order to become members in the first place.<sup>65</sup> Therefore, according to the false teachers in Galatia (Gal. 2:3-5; 6:12-13), the practice of circumcision was required for salvation. This truth induces Paul to assure the Galatians that they are truly saved (justified) and; consequently, members of God’s covenant people (implications of justification) are saved through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, who they have received by faith (Gal. 3:1-5).

Another significant argument in favor of the reformed view is the NPP’s failure to interpret Romans 4:1-8. The passage reads as follows:

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<sup>61</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, “Justification: the Saving Righteousness of God in Christ,” 23.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? <sup>2</sup> For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. <sup>3</sup> For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness." <sup>4</sup> Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. <sup>5</sup> And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness,<sup>6</sup> just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works:

<sup>7</sup> "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven,  
and whose sins are covered;

<sup>8</sup> blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin." (Romans 4:1-8)

As it was already mentioned, the NPP has different definitions compared to the traditional view of crucial terms related to the studied topic. However, these new definitions fail to provide a sound interpretation of this passage. The first problem is found in their definition of the term "works of the law." Once Romans 4:1-8 serves as a kind of "commentary" on Romans 3:27-28, the mentioning of "works" in verse 2 echoes the previous passage, where Paul says that no one is justified by "works of the Law (3:20, 28)."<sup>66</sup> Thus, there is a strong evidence that, when Paul uses the term "works," he is referring to the Torah in general and not to a more restricted function of the Law serving as boundary markers. When addressing Abraham, the Apostle is specifically speaking on his merit before God instead of his inclusion or exclusion from a people group. Also, the covenant of circumcision (Gen. 17) happened after the event echoed in this passage (Gen. 15). This clearly implies that "works", here, is referring to general obedience and not simply boundary markers. Furthermore, the context of the passage and the previous chapter indicates that Paul was refuting the belief that Abraham was justified before God because of his general obedience, not because of his eagerness and strife to exclude himself from the Gentiles in order to obey the Law.<sup>67</sup> In addition, the idea of "faith" being "reckoned" as "righteousness" (4:3, 5) demonstrates that Abraham received this righteousness as a gift which does not inherently belongs to him.<sup>68</sup> This view suggests that righteousness is not simply a status or declaration but a gift with transformative power since Abraham was reckoned/imputed with a type of alien (not Abraham's) "righteousness" because of his faith. Thus, he establishes his relationship with God as an act of God's grace.<sup>69</sup> Finally, an important observation against the NPP view is found in Paul's use of David's testimony in verses six through eight. In the words of Gathercole, "It is crucial to recognize that the New Perspective interpretation of 4:1-8 falls to the ground on this point: that David although circumcised, Sabbatarian, and kosher, is described as without works because of his disobedience."<sup>70</sup> The main idea in these two verses

<sup>66</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistles to the Romans*, The New International Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 259.

<sup>67</sup> Pounds, "Romans 4:1-4," 215.

<sup>68</sup> Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 262.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.* {expound here}

<sup>70</sup> Gathercole, *Where is Boasting?* 247.



is that David, though he kept himself distinct from the Gentiles, is described by Paul as someone who was once ungodly justified by faith apart from works (4:5-6). Here, forgiveness of sin is seen as a vital component of his justification. Therefore, the presence of the Davidic psalm (32:1-2) demonstrates that the “one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works (4:6)” is equivalent to the one who is blessed for having his sins forgiven and covered (4:7-8). As a result, the one who receives righteousness by faith and apart from works is justified (4:3, 5; 3:20-31), simultaneously having his sins forgiven and “non-reckoned (4:6-8).” This is not merely describing the process of someone to whom was granted the benefit of becoming a member of the covenant but of someone who was made right with God (justified) by having his sins forgiven.

Lastly, it is important to highlight that, although the Jewish religion is not founded upon a legalistic system, a work-based salvation religion, one must not exclude the possibility concerning the presence of an “ethnocentric legalism”<sup>71</sup> among Second Temple Jews. A foundational New Perspective principle which highly influences their interpretation regarding the fragment “works of the law” is the concept of “covenantal nomism.” E.P. Sanders defines it as “the view that one’s place in God’s plan is established on the basis of the covenant (election by grace) and that the covenant requires as the proper response of man his obedience to its commandments, while providing means of atonement for transgression (parenthesis added).”<sup>72</sup> According to Sanders, Second Temple Jews were not striving to pursue salvation through the obedience of the Law but were fully aware that obedience to God’s commandments was necessary and functioned as evidence that one is truly a member of the covenant. Therefore, it would not have made sense for Paul to have spoken against “works of the Law” as if 1<sup>st</sup> century Jews were concerned with attaining salvation by works. Instead, Paul uses the term in order to refute ethnocentric pride by expressing that one is not a member of the covenant by keeping the Sabbath, food laws, and circumcision, but by having faith in Christ Jesus. In this case, “works of the law” are Jewish regulations that served only as boundary markers, in which their goal was to preserve the distinctiveness of Israel’s nation in relation to others. The NPP reasoning seems to be valid, but a question is inevitably raised: Does the fact that Jewish religion is founded on the concept of unconditional election (Abrahamic covenant) rule out the existence of any type of legalism in terms of practice?<sup>73</sup> John Piper makes an interesting argument when he observes that “ethnocentrism and self-righteousness are morally inseparable.”<sup>74</sup> He claims that it is a futile differentiation once they both have the same root, which is self-righteousness. According to Piper, Jesus himself thought that ethnical exclusivism and self-righteousness were connected when telling the parable of the “the Pharisee and the Tax Collector” to a group of Jews who

<sup>71</sup> Andrew Hassler, “Ethnocentric Legalism and the Justification of the Individual: Rethinking Some New Perspective Assumptions,” *JETS* 54.2 (June 2011): 314. {expound here}

<sup>72</sup> Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 75.

<sup>73</sup> Alan P. Stanley, *Did Jesus Teach Salvation by Works?: The Role of Works in Salvation in the Synoptic Gospels* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2006), 89. In his book, Stanley affirms that Sanders representation of Judaism is regarded by many, including the renowned Jewish Scholar Jacob Neusner, as overly simplistic. In light of the fact that even if Judaism was not legalistic in principle, the presence of legalistic Jews in practice could have been still a reality.

<sup>74</sup> Piper, *The Future of Justification*, 156.

thought “they were righteous, and treated others with contempt (Lk. 18:9).” Piper suggests, based on the parable, that “the exclusivistic treatment of others is one manifestation of the self-righteousness that trusts in its own law-keeping”. In the parable, the Pharisee believed he was righteous based on the fact he was not an extortioner, adulterer, unjust like other men, or even like the tax-collector. This demonstrates that having pride in one’s ethnicity or even religion could lead to a self-righteous view of oneself. Therefore, even though the teachings of the 4QMMT “reveal nothing of the self-righteous and boastful ‘legalism’ which used to be thought characteristic of Jews in Paul’s day”,<sup>75</sup> it does not exclude the possibility that Jews at the time, because of the pride rooted in their cultural distinctiveness and religion, no longer recognized their unconditional election in Abraham and their need for daily grace in order to abide under God’s commandments. Amazingly, such can be true even within the Christian community. Christians can become self-righteous because they have high moral standards in comparison to society, were born in a Christian family, or avoid deep immoral sins by regularly committing themselves to church and religious activities. For this reason, one cannot deny the possibility that Paul could have had in mind a type of “ethnocentric legalism” when addressing the failure of justification by “works” and the necessity of “faith” in order to deliver the believer from any type of legalism, which deeply offends the heart of God.

## Conclusion

Throughout the paper, much was said concerning the Pauline doctrine of justification and how it should be interpreted. Currently, the concern for the correct understanding of the doctrine is a heated and considerably debated topic among scholars who either embrace the traditional view or believe the New Perspective interpretation to be more persuasive. In the midst of the discussion, there are also those who seek to find middle ground between the opposing positions, which is the case of both Michael F. Bird<sup>76</sup> and Kevin Vanhoozer.<sup>77</sup> I recommend both of their works; however, one should be very careful when reading them since the impossibility of compatibility regarding distinct views is real. Much can be compromised when attempting to find common ground while knowing that they successfully summarize both points and, then, formulate valid positions based on the strengths and weaknesses of both arguments. Similarly, in this paper, I defended that a deeper understanding of the doctrine of justification requires a “both-and” approach instead of an “either-or.” Although there are ecclesiological implications in Paul’s theology of justification, his primary focus was soteriological. In the first section of the paper, the terms “works of the law,” “the righteousness of God,” and “justification” were defined according to the NPP interpretation, which was followed by some observations responding to these definitions. Lastly, I argued for a “both-and-end” approach by providing three main arguments. The first one contained Thomas R. Schreiner’s three successful observations found in his article,

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<sup>75</sup> Wright, “4QMMT and Paul: Justification, Works, and Eschatology,” 106

<sup>76</sup>Bird, “What is there between Minneapolis and St. Andrews? A Third way in the Piper-Wright debate,” 299-309.

<sup>77</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer, *Wrighting the Wrongs of the Reformation*.

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*The Saving Righteousness of God in Christ*, with the intent to prove that “justification”, for Paul, conceives the idea of being made right with God. Secondly, the NPP’s failed to interpret Romans 4:1-8. Lastly, it was highlighted that, although the Jewish religion is not founded upon a legalistic system, a work-based salvation religion, one must not exclude the possibility concerning the presence of an “ethnocentric legalism”<sup>78</sup> among Second Temple Jews. As I conclude this work, my hope is not to solve the debate between both parties but to demonstrate that the traditional view concerning the doctrine of justification is not absurd, as some would say. Furthermore, it is possible to hold a soteriological position and still affirm ecclesiological implications to the Pauline doctrine.

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<sup>78</sup>Hassler, “Ethnocentric Legalism and the Justification of the Individual,” 314.

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