As I have researched the New Perspective on Paul (NPP) I have really struggled with understanding its concepts and grasping what the founders of this new movement have presented to us. But through this strife it has opened my eyes to ways we might have interpreted scripture incorrectly and has required a deeper study of the texts and solidification what I believe as a follower of Christ. What will be written is my current understanding of the movement, as I have much more reading to do on this matter than time has allotted for this paper, and how I have seen it applied to our culture today. I will begin with a simple explanation of the NPP and what the main points that I have seen highlighted in various articles. Next I will show how it affects how we understand the theology of Paul.

The New Perspective on Paul

From what I have read, there are three main points that Garlington would classify as essential to the NPP. He begins with the concept of understanding Paul in his original context. As I read this title I thought to myself that this isn’t very revolutionary, isn’t this what we should be doing in all translation of scripture? But as I read deeper it

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1 Ideas Incorporated from Garlington, The New Perspective on Paul: An Appraisal.
goes into a descriptive breadth of covenant nomism that I had never seen. The more articles I read, the more it was defined with different terminology yet the basic idea remained the same, the idea being,

“the view that one’s place in God’s plan is established on the basis of the covenant and that the covenant requires as the proper response of man his obedience to its commandments, while providing means of atonement for transgression... Obedience maintains one’s position in the covenant, but it does not earn God’s grace as such... Righteousness in Judaism is a term which implies the maintenance of status among the group of the elect.”  

This basically states that in the context of Paul in the New Testament, salvation comes from belonging to the covenant people of God and that the proper response to the covenant is obedience. “That is, ‘the maintenance of status’ amend the chosen people of God by observing the law given by God as part of that covenant relationship.” In short, the NPP is trying to understand the New Testament in such a way that it balances the context and the text. The second main point was that the NPP is rooted in the basic architecture of Biblical eschatology. A good example of this was the already/not yet aspects of salvation. That Jesus has already saved us in his first coming, the already, and that he is still to fulfill more in his second coming, the not yet. “Believers have been ‘liberated (literally justified) from sin’, and yet they await the final deliverance from the bondage of the old creation, the present evil age.”

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3 Sanders. From Hawthorne, Dictionary of Paul and his Letters.
NPP seeks consistency in the character of the Biblical covenant. “The believer’s righteousness, therefore, is none other than his/her conformity to the covenant relationship and its standards. This is both the righteousness that comes ‘from God’ and a righteousness that forms the precondition of eschatological vindication.” 6 This expresses the grace aspect of any covenant with unilateral connection to God. These three main ideas are the central tenets of the NPP and lead to a drastic reconstruction of how we see God, the covenant, and Pauline scripture in our context and the context of his time.

*The Effect on the New Perspective on Paul*

When we analyze the scriptures through this new lens we can see that Second Temple Judaism is very different from our Lutheran Reformed views of the law. That the role of the law today emphasizes not the dietary rules or circumcision but the way we identify fellow believers. That Jews could identify who was going to most likely be justified in the end times because they could see them working to follow the law. The best description I found was presented by Dunn, the

“...works of the law are nowhere understood here, either by his Jewish interlocutors or by Paul himself, as works which earn God’s favor, as merit-amassing observances. They are rather seen as badges: they are simple what membership of the covenant people involves, what mark out the Jews as God’s

people;... in other words, Paul has in view precisely what Sanders calls ‘covenant nomism,’ that God’s grace extends only to those who wear the badge of the covenant.”

We can see this in a reference to Galatians that N.T. Wright talks about insisting that the justification in Galatians does not tell us how to be saved, rather, a way of staying inside the covenant community. Dunn wraps this subject up nicely by saying that “it was not the law itself which Paul criticized, but rather its misuse as a social barrier.”

This new view completely changes our current views on how we read Paul. With this new perspective we can see the emphasis on the old covenant and the new covenant. We can see through Paul’s works in Romans 10:4 and Galatians 3:23-25 that Jesus brought an end to the law, but also that certain aspects of the law must remain intact for Christians as seen in Romans 7:12 and Galatians 5:14. It notes the shift from Israel as the chosen people to Christ and his people as the chosen people. As N.T Wright puts it, “The NT writers as a whole take Israel’s history and redraw it around Jesus and his people. This has manifold implications for both eschatology and ecclesiology.”

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7 Dunn, Ibid., p. 194. From Mattison, A Summary of the New Perspective on Paul.
9 Dunn, From Mattison, A Summary of the New Perspective on Paul.
Conclusion

What milestones will this set on the timeline of Christianity? I believe that time will tell how much this movement will effect our beliefs and the “living out” of our faith. What is known for sure is that the NPP movement has challenged our understanding of the New Testament and the role of Second Temple Judaism. I think N.T. Wright says it the best when he states that, “Basically the NP is part of a wake-up call to people in the Church and outside it that there are more things going on in Paul than we have traditionally supposed and that it is time we got the bigger picture.”

Clearly God has brought this issue to the front of theological discussion and debate, I am not entirely convinced by it yet as I agree some aspects of the movement and disagree with others. As long as more connections are continually being made between the text and context, I don’t see this movement going away anytime soon.

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[11] R Alan Streett; An Interview with N.T. Wright
Bibliography


