

**A Reformed Perspective on the New Perspective:
A Review Essay of Guy Prentiss Waters, *Justification and the New Perspective: A
Review and Response* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2004).**

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A story is told of an American tourist, who just having returned from his first trip to Europe, gathers his friends together to tell them of his travels. “Upon my word,” the man began excitedly, “sometimes it was difficult to deal with the Europeans. When I sat down for soup in Paris, they called for *une cuiller*. When I did the same in Berlin, they gave me *ein Loeffel*. And the whole time all I wanted was a spoon, which is of course what it is.” In some ways, entering into the conversation of contemporary New Testament studies, and within this field the sub-specialty of Pauline studies, is like going abroad. One cannot get very far without soon finding that the vast array of theological judgments and ways of speaking about Paul are rooted in and informed by an equally broad and diverse spectrum of assumptions, faith-commitments and worldviews.

This reality poses two sorts of challenges for the critically-responsible exegete of Paul. In the first place, the Pauline student must be willing to learn how different scholars use different terms in different ways. The student must, in other words, get at least as far as the tourist who in recounting his travels remembered the French and German equivalents for the English word “spoon.” But there is a second requirement in faithfully interacting with the primary sources and the relevant secondary literature, one that is just as important as the first: the ability to understand others on their own terms. The annoyed American tourist wants to correct the German and French waiters, because they failed to use familiar language. He strikes us as naive not only because he in effect collapses the distinction between the sign (“a spoon”) and that which the sign signifies (an implement used in eating soup), but also because he believes that his linguistic system is the one to which all other systems are relative.

In reading Guy Prentiss Waters’s *Justification and the New Perspective: A Review and Response*, I find an analogy that the author has both succeeded where our tourist has succeeded and failed where he has failed. He has in general terms accurately represented many of the essential points of the New Perspective on Paul (hereafter NPP), just as the tourist correctly rehearsed the individual French and German words, but the work is ultimately unsatisfying in that the author fails to assess the NPP according to its own objectives and context, before addressing how certain of its implications impinge on his own concerns. Put otherwise again, insofar the objectives of *Justification and the New Perspective* are to offer a “Review and Response” (as the subtitle implies), Waters fulfills his obligation on the former, but neglects to do justice to the latter. The remainder of the essay will correspondingly deal with these two objectives.

Review

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Seeking in Chapters 1 and 2 to set the stage of contemporary Pauline scholarship, Waters begins—as is traditionally done—with the Reformation. Maintaining that the Reformers (Luther and Calvin) had “bequeathed to their heirs a carefully articulated and balanced understanding of the relationship between the doctrines of justification and sanctification” (3), Waters sees trouble taking root in the eighteenth century, a time when “[N]o longer would exegesis be governed by the teaching of Scripture as a systematic and theological whole” (3–4). By the time of F. C. Baur, the ground had shifted again:

The Lutheran tradition had historically maintained Paul’s theological center to be justification by faith alone. The question before critical scholarship now was which theological category—the forensic or the transformative—would be regarded as generative of Paul’s theology. (6)

Waters then introduces his reader to some early twentieth-century trends, including liberalism, the *Religionsgeschichteschule*, and the thought of Albert Schweitzer. The common denominator of these approaches was their shared focus on the “in Christ” language, for they “agreed in principle that participation language was at the heart of Paul” (13). (Apparently, in Waters’s mind, an emphasis on the participationist category compromises the Reformation legacy—a point to which I will return.) While in continuity with the Lutheran tradition, Bultmann saw Jesus and Paul as rejecting Judaism as a legalistic religion, built on a system of meritorious works, W. D. Davies responded to the professor from Marburg by focusing on ways in which Paul’s thinking was not a reaction to, but actually a development out of Pharisaic Judaism. Part and parcel of Davies’s contribution is his critique of the typically Lutheran reading of Paul. Waters’s disapprovingly quotes Davies who writes that “‘it is a simplification and even a falsification of the complexity of Paul’s thought to pin down Justification by Faith as its quintessence.’” (19). Ernst Käsemann in his turn (happily for Waters) re-emphasized the centrality of justification in Paul’s thought (as opposed to a framework of salvation history), but (lamentably) redefined the righteousness of God in such a way that he had “for all intents and purposes forfeited forensic language” (22).

Chapter 3 focuses on Krister Stendahl. Here the reader is alerted to the impact of Stendahl’s essay, “The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West.” Stendahl was among the first to suggest that Protestant exegesis, enthralled to reading the experience of Paul through the experience of Luther, had been unduly myopic in its focus on individual salvation. For Stendahl, the center of Paul’s thought lay neither in justification (Romans 3:23—5), nor in mystical union (Romans 6—8), but in the question of Jew-Gentile relations (Romans 9—11). As Waters rightly points out, Stendahl places such emphasis on the corporate nature that the individual experience is all but eclipsed. In fact, conversion is recast as call and personal forgiveness falls by the wayside.

In Chapters 4—5, Waters gives detailed attention to E. P. Sanders’s watershed monograph: “[I]n a blistering overview of prior scholarship in *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, Sanders dismantles the pantheon of works on ancient Judaism as distorted and inaccurate” (36). Following twelve summary points (52–53), Waters commends Sanders for affording a “more balanced picture than prevailed in earlier German scholarship”

(55), but remains largely unconvinced by Sanders's thesis. Waters claims that Sanders at turns dismisses that evidence which does not support his theory and, moreover, has failed to prove that Judaism was a "religion of grace" (55). The former is a standard criticism of Sanders's work; the latter point relates to another weakness of Sanders (sometimes exploited by his critics), namely, the lack of definitional clarity as to what constitutes legalistic religion as opposed to gracious religion. What Waters finds "chiefly objectionable here ... is the view that the ground of the believer's acceptance rested in his own deeds (whether conceived as acts of obedience or acts of atonement) and that the believer was not bound to keep the whole law" (57).

Chapter 5 gives an accurate and fair-minded representation of Sanders's famous "solution to plight" account of Paul. For Sanders's Paul, if the Messiah is the answer, then there must be a problem and that problem is the law. So, the law brings curse. But in other places Paul suggests that the law is not all bad either. This tension may be averted, since Sanders's Paul (along with the rabbis of his time) would not be bothered by internal inconsistencies. In the remainder of the chapter (77–85), Waters recapitulates Sanders's reading of a number of relevant Pauline passages (Gal 3:10–13, 5:3, 6:13; Rom 1—3, 3:27—4:25, 9:30—10:13, Php 3:9). As Waters shows, the Paul of Sanders "never believed that Judaism was inherently faulty in its capacity to provide salvation to its participants" (87), nor did he believe "in any person's inherent inability to keep the law" (88). Finally Sanders's Paul saw that Christ's death was "not fundamentally expiatory" but "entailed the believer's deliverance from the power of sin by participation in his death" (89).

Oddly, in coming to considerations of Heikki Räisänen, J. D. G. Dunn and N. T. Wright in chapters 6—7, the author makes a perceptible shift from rehearsing the views in question to more forthright criticism. While the author's discussion from the Reformation up to Sanders has been more or less a *Stand der Forschung*, the thrust of the prose in these chapters has swung into a more polemical direction. We have apparently left off with the Review and are now in the midst of the Response. Before turning to this, it should be said that up to this point Waters is to be commended for providing a kind of lay-level précis of the recent, monumental changes in Pauline scholarship. Despite certain editorial remarks with which I would take exception (see below), he has accurately described the various movements in Pauline scholarship up to the 1950s and has faithfully recapitulated the essential arguments of Stendahl and Sanders.

Response

Whatever the merits of *Justification and the New Perspective* as a primer on twentieth-century Pauline scholarship, the author has been less than successful in his interaction with the NPP. Indeed, assuming that Waters's primary goal is to construct a convincing argument against the NPP (and N. T. Wright in particular), the book must be judged to have failed at a fundamental level. Before attending to several larger reasons as to why I believe this is the case, it is necessary to register a handful of serious reservations.

First, it goes without saying that a book must be assessed not only for what it says, but for how it says what it says. On this score, even those who are most sympathetic with Waters's conclusions would have to concede the book provides an unhelpful model as to how one engages in theological discussion. Inflammatory assertions like "[I]ronically, it is the *ignorance* of historical theology on the part of Wright and other scholars that prompts them to make such affirmations..." (186, emphasis original) is simply disrespectful, and as such, sub-Christian (1 Pe 3:15–16). Equally troubling is Waters's tendency toward caricature, evident in his sometimes drawing infelicitous inferences from his opponents' arguments, where no such inferences are necessary, or in some cases even conceivable. For example, the author observes

that Dunn ... leaves certain questions unanswered regarding Christ's death. What does it mean, for instance, that God dealt with his people's sin in accord with the covenant (although not in terms of "some abstract ideal of justice")? Undoubtedly this vagueness stems from Dunn's unwillingness to view divine righteousness in traditional categories. (102)

This strikes me as *non sequitur*. Other scholars have no trouble whatsoever combining a (partially or entirely) Käsemannian understanding of the "righteousness of God" with God's dispensing his covenantal justice on the cross.¹ Is it really beyond doubt that Dunn's failure to address Christ's death to Waters's satisfaction is to be traced to his allegedly perverse understanding of righteousness?

Elsewhere, having done well to offer a cogent and clear description of Wright's approach to theology as story, the author goes on to a completely unanticipated conclusion:

We have, then, in Wright's thought, an inherent bias against doctrinal formulation and linear, logical reasoning, a predisposition against conceiving of the relationship of God and man in *vertical* terms. Rather, Wright is inclined to understand that relationship in essentially *horizontal* categories. (121, emphasis original)

It is difficult to see how the attempt to understand the narrative worlds embedded in scripture entails "an inherent bias against doctrinal formulation." Nor is it all clear how Wright's critical realism falls short of "linear, logical reasoning." While it is true that modern systematic treatments have tended to operate by a certain kind of discursive logic, stories—assuming they have a beginning, middle and ending—also have their own linearity and logic. The dichotomy between narrative coherency and logical reasoning is, at any rate, a false one. In regards to the second statement ("Wright is inclined to understand that [God-man] relationship in essentially *horizontal* categories"), I confess I am at a loss as to what the author means by this or how this statement follows from Wright's program of critical realism.

¹ In passing it may be observed that several well-respected evangelical, Reformed Pauline scholars also admit some force to Käsemann's case for seeing the "righteousness of God" as God's saving power. Douglas Moo (*Romans 1—8* [Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary; Chicago: Moody, 1991] 86) grants "some similarities between our own interpretation [of the righteousness of God] and that of Käsemann"; Thomas R. Schreiner (*Romans* [BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003] 69) states that the "righteousness of God is both gift *and* power..." (emphasis added).

Consider yet another case:

Wright, to be sure, uses the language of “atonement” and “propitiation” to speak of Christ’s death. Since Wright rejects imputation as a Pauline category, however, he cannot mean by “atonement” and “propitiation” what these terms have traditionally been understood to mean. Atonement and propitiation cannot, therefore, play a central role in Wright’s real understanding of the significance of Christ’s death to Paul. (142)

The author’s train of thought may seem to be paraphrased as follows: (1) Wright uses the language of atonement/propitiation; (2) Wright does not use the language of atonement/propitiation as it has traditionally been understood. (3) Therefore, atonement and propitiation are not central in Wright’s understanding. There is simply no other way to say this: the argument is nonsensical. When a writer arrives at certain conclusions by flawed reasoning, it is unconvincing; when a writer forces certain conclusions on his opponents by the same kind of logical leaps, it is uncharitable.

My second point equally bears on the author’s rhetorical strategy, but also touches on a lingering problem of methodology. The astute reader of this review may notice that the words “traditional” and “traditionally” occur in two of the above citations. The adjective and the adverb are indeed sprinkled throughout the book. But just what does Waters mean when he uses the term “traditional”? Or when the author employs concepts like the “traditional understanding of atonement,” what tradition or whose tradition does he have in mind? Is he thinking of Augustine (whose understanding relies on neo-Platonic categories) or Anselm (who depends on feudal terms) or someone else? If here he intends a theory of atonement that falls strictly in line with the Calvinist tradition, he should simply say so.

The author is equally fast and loose in applying the concept of “tradition” or “orthodoxy” to certain ways of reading the Bible. For example, Waters states that “Dunn dissents from the critical orthodoxy that, since W. G. Kümmel’s 1929 monograph, had argued that Romans 7:7–25 describes ... “the ‘convert’s past.’” (113). I must confess it comes as a surprise to this reviewer to learn that the guild of Pauline scholars has come to anything approaching a consensus on this much-debated text, much less a “critical orthodoxy.” The tossing around of blanket-terms is a bad habit. Repeatedly, Waters implies that there are certain “traditional” (or “orthodox”) understandings of certain doctrines or texts, when in reality no such monolithic tradition exists, except perhaps in an ecclesiological fold here, or a seminary there, or in the mind of certain uninitiated readers.

There are several unfortunate results that follow from this propensity. First, this construct of pitting “tradition” against the NPP has the untoward rhetorical effect of making out the latter to be ne’er-do-goods merely seeking to upset the applecart. Those who know better know that at so many points along the way, the champions of the NPP are not so much creating problems, but seeking to address unresolved ones in new ways. (One problem, for instance, the NPP has forced to the table is precisely the same one flagged up by Lesslie Newbigin two decades ago in his Henry Martyn Lectures delivered in Cambridge: “We have to find a view [of salvation-history] which does justice to both aspects of the

problem—individual and social—and which resolves the apparent contradictions between them.”²) In any event, Waters owes it both to his readers and his opponents to specify names instead of carelessly falling back on “tradition,” a vague and virtually meaningless descriptor.

Secondly, and more significantly, the recurring turn to “tradition” signals a rather profound weakness in the book, that is, its circularity. From its inception Biblical Theology has had to concern itself with two related questions, the historical question (“What *did* the scripture mean?”) and the theological question (“What *does* the scripture mean?”). Today scholars of all theological stripes can easily enough agree that we cannot very well begin to apply the Bible in our own time without having first understood what the Biblical authors intended in the original setting. In contemporary theological discourse, the historical question has typically been understood as preceding the theological question. Once theological concerns are smuggled in to bolster historical judgments, once the question of “What St Paul really *says*” (or “What St Paul *should* have said”) drives the question of “What St Paul really *said*,” we are no longer dealing with Biblical Theology; we are instead merely dealing with the pre-critical dogma of the Confessional Age. Given the author’s lamenting that fact that we live in a day when exegesis is “no longer governed by the teaching of Scripture as a systematic and theological whole” (3), and given the overall nature of the book’s argument, it appears that the steady appeal to “tradition” reveals a basic methodological indecision.

In the dance of Biblical Theology, in the study of Paul, it must be clear from the outset who is going to lead. Will it be History (i.e. historical investigation) or Theology (i.e. dogmatic concerns)? At points, it appears that Waters wants to have History lead (for example, in his review of Sanders); at other points, he would rather have Theology lead (for example, in his historically-indefensible insistence that Paul drew from no literature outside our OT books [157]). But you can’t have it both ways. Once both partners try to lead, the result is an awkward chaos. The dance becomes an exercise in question begging.

But setting aside all this, let us weigh the merit of Waters’s basic thesis: that the NPP, with particular attention to the Bishop of Durham, stands at odds with the conservative Reformed tradition. As Waters sees it, the question continues to be stand: “which theological category—the forensic or the transformative—would be regarded as generative of Paul’s theology” (6). To choose the latter, the author suggests, is to place oneself beyond the pale of the Reformed tradition. But this is simply untrue.

John Murray both in his commentary on Romans and in his *Collected Writings* gives pride of place the transformation wrought by our mystical union with Christ:

In later Reformed theology the term *regeneration* has been chosen to designate the initial act, that act in which God alone is active, while *conversion* is frequently used to designate the logically subsequent phase in which the person is active as a result of the grace which in regeneration has been imparted to him....

² Lesslie Newbigin, *Signs amid the Rubble: The Purposes of God in Human History* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) 26.

Regeneration in this restricted sense is logically antecedent to any saving response in the consciousness or understanding of the subject. Regeneration is a change wrought by the Spirit in order that the person may savingly respond to the summons, or demand of the call, embodied in the gospel call.³

For Murray, as for a good number of Reformed theologians, the transformative category, whereby “man’s subjective disposition and *habitus* be renewed,”⁴ is logically prior to the juridical. Citing Dr. Warfield to the effect that the “recreative activity of the Spirit of God is made the crowning Messianic blessing ...,” Murray goes on to affirm that from the point of view of OT prophecy, regeneration is “the crowning blessing” of the Messianic age.⁵ Surely, as one of the pillars of twentieth-century Reformed theology sees it, justification is to be subsumed under union with Christ.⁶

In his masterful and still-quoted summary of Paul (which Waters quotes approvingly in his chapter 1), Herman Ridderbos is duly suspicious of constructions which allow the juridical element of Paul’s thought to obscure the eschatological/participationist.

What is typical of Paul’s preaching is not that he comes to interpret and translate the original eschatological message contained in such concepts as justification and reconciliation, but rather, conversely, that these concepts—which in themselves were not new—now receive their background and their new content out of the realization of the divine plan of redemption embracing man and the world, the revelation of the mystery.... One can ask himself, therefore, whether the traditional order of treatment which begins with the doctrine of justification is not one-sided and does not involve even the danger of a certain narrowing of the viewpoint.⁷

Ridderbos objects that to make justification the center of Paul’s thought is “arbitrary” and risks doing violence to the “multiplicity of viewpoints and motifs” that constitute the gospel.⁸ In response to the traditional Lutheran reading of Paul, Ridderbos is emphatic: “we do not set out in the footprints of those who hold the view that Pauline eschatology bears a basically anthropological character and is oriented to the individual relationship of God to man.”⁹ Ridderbos here has Bultmann in mind, but certainly his disavowal would equally apply to Waters, who follows Bultmann (16-18). In my view, Ridderbos and Wright have it right. The gospel is not co-identical with the doctrine of justification; justification is an aspect of the gospel. Paul’s gospel, according to the apostle’s own

³ *The Collected Writings of John Murray: Volume Two: Select Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth, 1977) 172.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 173-74, emphasis original.

⁶ Elsewhere, Murray (*Redemption—Accomplished and Applied* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955] 201, 205) writes: “Union with Christ is ... the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation.... It is not simply a phase of the application of redemption; it underlies every aspect of redemption.”

⁷ *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 160.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 159-60.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 159.

words, is nothing short of bringing “all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ” (Eph 1:10).

In attending to the details of the historical arguments, the work does not fare much better. One might cite, by way of example, the author’s treatment of Wright’s view of exile. As Waters rightly points out, the on-going exile of Israel into the second-Temple period is for Wright a “hinge proposition.” In response to this foundational plank of his opponent, Waters flatly states: “there was no such model [of exile] for Paul to inherit from Judaism” (153)—a remarkable statement given the evidence to the contrary (Daniel 9, Sirach 36, 1 Enoch 89—90, Baruch 1—3, etc.). Furthermore, if there was absolutely no notion of exile, how did the Christians arrive at their self-identity as exiles, as Waters admits they did (154)? If against the non-canonical textual evidence, Waters wishes to maintain that the Christian community invented the notion of being in exile *ex nihilo* (rather than inheriting it), he might offer some explanation as to how the people, who saw themselves as redeemed by the messiah, now suddenly came to see themselves in exile. Scholars across the board are willing to allow that at least certain strands of Judaism conceived themselves as being in exile. To assert point-blank that there was “no such model” demands much more explanation.

All this is not to say that the book makes absolutely no contribution as an interaction with the NPP. The author does, I think, identify some of the exegetical sticking points of the NPP and raises some good points along the way (109-13, 128-35, 158-68). But given the stern warnings in his final chapter, “What’s at Stake for Reformed Christianity?” (presumably one and the same as the PCA?!), Waters seems to be of the mind that he has slayed the dragon of the NPP with the sharp sword of his argumentation. This is hardly the case. It is not beyond the realm of possibility that the soteriological views of one or more scholars within the NPP movement stand in material contradiction to the propositions contained in the Westminster Confession, but this remains to be shown.

What remains to be done is a fair appreciation of the NPP from the Westminster-confessionalist perspective: one which takes the time to recognize what these scholars are setting out to do, again, in their own terms. Criticism, in order to be fair, must first and foremost judge another by what he or she is trying to do, not by what the person in question is not trying to do. It should be said, in all fairness to the scholars under scrutiny, that it was never their intention to conform their reading of Paul to the details of the Westminster Confession. Of course, one would expect the point to be so obvious that it would hardly need stating. Nevertheless, we have in *Justification and the New Perspective* an author who seems to be demanding a methodology from his opponents they would never be interested in using, demanding answers to questions they are not interested in asking, and demanding language they simply don’t speak.

Such a posture betrays, I think, an insensitivity to the disparate contexts involved. It should be remembered that the same particular historical context that gave rise to the Westminster Assembly also gave shape to the Confession’s final organization, scope, and goals. The Confession in turn has provided the framework and set the agenda and emphases for other theological trajectories, including the one to which Mr. Waters and

this reviewer belong. In engaging thinkers outside one's tradition, there must be some (self-)consciousness of such trajectories along with some awareness that, for historical reasons, our theological battles are not necessarily everybody else's theological battles. Such self-location is prerequisite to entering into the thought-world of another. Unless this movement is made, those who attempt woodenly to translate the immediate concerns and emphases of NPP directly into the thought-world of conservative North American Presbyterianism will likely be no different from our American tourist indignant over the fact that those silly Europeans just don't understand that we eat soup with *a spoon!*

Once this movement is made, however, and only when this movement is made, is it possible to begin addressing, in a dispassionate and charitable manner, how implications from NPP research may build upon, modify, challenge or subvert the confessional stance forged by the Westminster divines. Here attention to nuance and cogent logic must be the order of the day. Unfortunately, Mr. Waters has produced a book that is neither dispassionate nor charitable, neither attentive to nuance nor cogent in its logic. Perhaps one day—we can hope—a book with these qualities will be written. Perhaps Mr. Waters himself will write it. I hope he does.