

**A MAN MORE SINNED AGAINST THAN SINNING? THE PORTRAIT OF  
MARTIN LUTHER IN CONTEMPORARY NEW TESTAMENT  
SCHOLARSHIP:  
Some Casual Observations of a Mere Historian**

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**Introduction: The Importance of the Topic**

I have chosen to speak on the above topic for a variety of reasons which I hope to explicate in the course of this lecture. My lecture is, however, ultimately to have a very narrow focus, as I shall make clear, a fact due in no small part to the narrowness of my own sphere of competence, which is historical theology and emphatically not New Testament studies. Nevertheless, lest what I have to say be regarded by some outside of the immediate circle of evangelical theology as of little more than antiquarian interest, I wish to start with a brief comment on the broader implications of the debate upon which I shall be making the "casual observations" of the title.

To put it bluntly, it seems to me that the current revision of the doctrine of justification as formulated by the advocates of the so-called New Perspective on Paul is nothing less than a fundamental repudiation not just of that Protestantism which seeks to stand within the creedal and doctrinal trajectories of the Reformation but also of virtually the entire Western tradition on justification from at least as far back as Augustine. I do not say this in order to shock or to create bad feeling against its exponents but simply to clarify how serious the issue is. Indeed, the advocates of the New Perspective would, I am sure, find my statement of the significance of their position to be in accordance with how they understand their position. We are not talking here of the old debate between imputation and impartation which has historically separated Protestants and Catholics; we are talking rather of a debate which pits the New Perspective against both Protestants and Catholics on the grounds that the traditional Reformation discussion actually takes place within a tradition which has a fundamentally defective view of what God's righteousness, and thus the believer's justification, are all about.

For Protestants, the issue is particularly acute. Given the role of the doctrine of justification by grace through faith both in the theology of the Reformation, and as perhaps the defining feature of Protestantism over against post-Tridentine Catholicism, the kind of revision being proposed by the New Perspective involves a fundamental re-definition of what Protestantism, at least in its conservative, confessional form, is.

That the New Perspective is being advocated not simply by mainstream liberal scholars such as E P Sanders and James D G Dunn but also by evangelicals such as N T Wright is

particularly significant. Wright's magisterial work in debunking the Jesus Seminar has made him a significant evangelical presence; that he combines this historical scholarship with a basic revision of the doctrine of justification more or less guarantees that the New Perspective will not just be something which impacts upon the liberal theological world but also upon the evangelical world as well. All this is not to say that the Protestant notion of justification is an evangelical 'central dogma' from which all other doctrines can be deduced; but it is to point to the singular theological importance of the doctrine in church history and in historic evangelical identity.

That the New Perspective has such radical implications for the history of the doctrine in general and the theology of Protestantism in particular does not, of course, mean that it is wrong. After all, in terms of church tradition, John Eck had many of the trump cards at Leipzig; yet many of us still consider Martin Luther to have had the more scriptural arguments. The Protestant commitment to the scripture principle means that tradition, while very important, never has decisive and unlimited authority. It does, however, mean that we should be aware of the seriousness of the issues at stake. We should, after all, not lightly throw out at least 500, if not 1500, years of church teaching. We need to be acutely sensitive to the magnitude of the moves we make in this area and thus proceed with modesty, caution, and careful scholarship.

### **The Scope of My Argument**

Having outlined the importance of the debate as a whole, I now wish to clarify how I wish to contribute in this paper. As the title states, my observations will be 'casual.' I am a relative newcomer to the issues involved and thus do not feel able to make more than a number of fleeting observations on what is being said. Second, as a 'mere historian,' and one acutely sensitive to the problems of commenting outside of my sphere of specialisation, I do not wish what I have to say to be mistaken for comment on the New Testament scholarship underlying the New Perspective: I do not belong to the guild and would not dare venture such criticism. Rather, as a historian, I wish to comment only on those areas where the scholars of the New Perspective have audaciously wandered from their own spheres of competence and dared to comment on the field of Reformation history. Only as they cross from their own sector into my own do I feel confident to aim a few critical volleys at their work. I do confess to being puzzled at the amount of work that is done by these scholars in extra-canonical literature, since I wonder what the theological implications of the kind of moves that are made between canonical and non-canonical literature are, but I leave this particular question mark over current procedures for the biblical theologians.

### **Luther in the New Perspective: A Brief Historical Overview**

It was Krister Stendahl who first drew attention to the way in which Luther's conversion experience, shaped by his own position within a theological tradition stemming from Augustine, allegedly shaped his reading of the writings of Paul, turning Paul's letter to the Romans into personal, introspective and to an extent gloom-laden autobiography. Stendahl's argument, developed in a justly famous article, was not in itself part of the

shift in perspective on Pauline studies. This was to be pioneered some years later by the work of E P Sanders, but it did lay the groundwork for focussing attention on Luther as central to the misreading of Paul which later scholars were to argue ran throughout Western, and particularly Protestant understanding of Pauline theology.

The work of Sanders was not particularly concerned with critiquing Luther and concentrated rather on setting the Pauline corpus specifically within the context of the Jewish thought which provided the background to the cultural, social, and intellectual worlds out of which Christianity was to emerge. Nevertheless, in the years after Sanders started to rewrite the intellectual history of Christianity and redefine its relationship to Judaism, others were to make central the connection between the new trajectory of Pauline studies and the theology of the West, particularly that on justification. Thus, in the mid-eighties, the first real brickbats were hurled Luther's way, this time from the pen of Francis Watson whose first book, *Paul, Judaism, and the Gentiles: A Sociological Approach* (1986), dealt with the problem of Luther in some detail.

After Watson's work, Luther became fixed in the imagination of the New Perspective as the bad guy of the history of justification. James D G Dunn, in an important article in 1992 for the *Journal of Theological Studies*, turned his guns firmly against the great German Reformers. His article is, in many ways, a manifesto of the anti-Lutheran direction of the New Perspective and remains perhaps the single most important scholarly salvo in the battle. In addition, Dunn followed this article in 1993 with a popular book, *The Justice of God*, which he co-authored with Dr Alan Suggate, which sought to place the New Perspective, along with its concomitant critique of Luther, into the popular arena. With this work, it is arguable that the New Perspective ceased to be an ivory-tower debate and became something of concern to all intelligent and thoughtful Christians everywhere.

James Dunn is not the only articulate contemporary advocate of the New Perspective who has given a significant amount of time to critiquing Luther. As mentioned above, N T Wright has also done so and is, arguably, more influential in evangelical circles than Dunn himself. Nevertheless, Dunn remains the one who has hit Luther the hardest and thus it is primarily with his work that I shall be concerned in this paper.

Given the comprehensive implications of the New Perspective for the historical tradition, it should be clear that I do not have the space to deal with all of the avenues of criticism which have been opened up against Luther and the Reformation. To do this would require a piece of much greater length than I have the authority to produce here. What I want to highlight, though, is the weakness of much of the historical analysis in terms of the traditional teaching. Now, as I have already said, I in no way wish to imply that the soundness or otherwise of the New Perspective depends upon its treatment of Luther or the tradition; but it is important to note that the criticism of the tradition fulfils an important, though not decisive, function in the argument. As I noted in my earlier lecture, we live at a time when innovation is of the order of the day and tradition is at a discount. Whereas in the sixteenth century the very novelty of Luther's ideas was what made them so suspect and, one might add, so likely to be wrong, nowadays, it is the traditional which

is likely to be considered wrong and the novel which likely to be regarded as more likely true. We should not therefore underestimate the importance of the New Perspective being precisely that -- a new perspective -- within the social and intellectual context modern academic discourse. Given this, the break with tradition which the New Perspective advocates trumpet from the rooftops is a not insignificant part of the overall polemic.

### **Luther: The Case for the Prosecution**

The problem, or rather problems, with Luther's theology with which I wish to deal in this paper can be summarised as follows: he is introspective in his reading of Paul and thus in his understanding of salvation; and he is individualistic in his formulation of justification. The New Perspective also makes other criticisms of Luther, with which I hope to deal elsewhere. Time and space, however, require me to concentrate my attention on these two related points, points which, I should add, are basic to the central anti-Luther case these scholars wish to make.

### **Introspection and Luther's Reading of Romans 7**

Dunn, building on the work of Stendahl, points out that Luther took Romans 7 as being the description of Paul's own struggle with his sin prior to his conversion to Christianity. Dunn, however, counters by saying that none of Paul's unequivocal statements about his pre-Christian state give any indication of such agonies of conscience as a prerequisite to his conversion. In other words, what Luther has done is to project his own spiritual struggles back into the writings of St Paul -- a classic and radical example of eisegesis with disastrous consequences for the future of the church.

A number of comments are in order at this point. First, Dunn's basic contention -- that Luther projected his own conversion agonies back into Romans 7 -- is simply not supported by the evidence. Dunn cites the famous autobiographical fragment from the 1545 Latin edition of Luther as outlining Luther's conversion, but there are a number of problems with using this as the hook upon which to hang ones case about Romans 7 and introspection. First, on a general level, the difficulties in using this as evidence for Luther's conversion is far from unproblematic as the chronology of the events recounted is far from clear, with the result that decent arguments can be made for placing the events as early as 1515, or even 1514, and as late as 1518. Given the discovery this century of Luther's 1515-1516 lectures on Romans, we now know that Luther's own passage to his understanding of justification by grace through faith alone is not as easy or as straightforward as the dramatic account of the autobiographical fragment might suggest.

Second, and far more important, is the complete lack of Romans 7 in the passage. Romans does occur, but it is Chapter 1 verse 17 which is the focus, not Chapter 7; and there is little if any introspection in Luther's `new understanding of this verse which he outlines in the fragment; and it is certain that Augustine, the origin of this introspective conscience, is conspicuous only by his absence. There is nothing here, then, to justify claims of the eisegetical reading of Romans 7 which Dunn alleges.

Now, while it is never cited as evidence by Dunn (direct primary source citations being conspicuous only by their general absence from the New Perspective criticisms of Luther), we might now spend just a few moments in the one place where such eisegesis might well be found: Luther's commentary on Romans 7. There is some debate, of course, about whether Luther has already made his Reformation breakthrough before (or perhaps during) his delivery of these lectures. For myself, I find the basic elements of Luther's mature theology of justification to be more-or-less in place in these lectures, if not expressed with the same consistency, clarity, and precision we find later, though I combine this with a tendency to lean towards a 1518 date for the events described in the fragment. Whatever the dating of the Tower Experience, the Romans lectures represent a significant move away from the theology of the *via moderna* in which Luther was schooled. Thus, if Dunn is correct about Luther on Romans 7, I would argue that we should find significant evidence of this in these lectures.

Now, there are two things which are most striking about Luther's treatment of Romans 7: his understanding of the status of the persona of Paul in the chapter; and his use of Augustine. Both, as we shall see, flatly contradict Dunn's thesis. As to the persona of Paul, whether Luther regards him as describing his experience as unbeliever or believer, Luther is emphatic: Paul is describing his experience as a spiritual person, i.e., a believer. Unlike Dunn, I quote the man himself in this context:

"For I should not have known what it is to covet". From this passage to the end of the chapter the apostle is speaking in his own person and as a spiritual man and by no means in the person of a carnal man.

Indeed, this is not simply a bald assertion: Luther proceeds to cite evidence for this reading: the passage indicates a hatred of the flesh and a love for the Law, something which is impossible for the carnal; Paul speaks of being unable to understand his sinful actions, again a sign of a true believer; he does not wish to sin but still does, and a carnal person cannot wish not to sin; he knows that nothing good dwells in his flesh, again a sign of true spirituality; he wills to do what is right, which can only come from possession of the Spirit; he feels a battle between contrary laws in his own members; he delights in the law of God; he sees himself as fighting between two contrary laws; he cries out to God for help; and, finally, he declares that in his mind he serves the law of God. In other words, far from reading back pre-conversion struggles into Paul's statements in Romans 7, Luther gives no less than ten reasons why Romans 7 cannot be dealing with the pre-conversion agonies of the apostle but must be dealing with his experience as a Christian. Little did he know it at the time, but in doing this Luther was also providing us with ten compelling reasons for rejecting Dunn's portrait of the Reformer. Given this fact, it is perhaps not entirely surprising that Dunn chooses not to cite any relevant primary evidence for his arguments at this point; indeed, we can, I think, legitimately ask whether Professor Dunn has ever read Luther on Romans 7.

The case against Dunn, however, does not end here. We still have the Augustine connection with which to deal. Now Dunn is correct on one point: Luther is indeed influenced by Augustine in his reading of Romans 7. In fact, he quotes him at length, and

with approval, on the issue of whether Paul is describing himself as believer or unbeliever here. The problem for Dunn, however, is that Luther had an extensive knowledge of Augustine's writings, and chose to use a passage from the *Retractions*, not the earlier anti-Pelagian material, to support his reading. This passage is quoted by Luther as follows in his comments on Romans 7:7 and following:

When the apostle says: `We know that the Law is spiritual; but I am carnal (v.14), I was absolutely unwilling to understand this passage as referring to the person of the apostle who was already spiritual, but I wanted to refer it to him as a man placed under the Law and not yet under grace. This is the way I first understood these words, but later, after I had read certain interpretations of the divine words by men whose authority impressed me, I considered the matter more carefully and saw that the passage could also be understood of the apostle himself.

In other words, Luther is influenced by Augustine at this point, but by the later Augustine, and that into reading Romans 7 as the struggle of a believer not the pre-conversion agonies of an unbeliever under conviction of sin. The reading of Luther on Romans 7 offered by Dunn is therefore simply risible in its theological claims and its statements about its relationship to Augustine because in every significant way it is demonstrably incorrect. Given this, it is perhaps no surprise that even Dunn's citation of the autobiographical fragment is not taken from an original Luther source (Latin or translation), but is adapted from R H Bainton's popular biography, *Here I Stand*. The question of Dunn's first-hand acquaintance with the Lutheran sources looms large.

In mitigation we should perhaps note that in his magnum opus on Pauline theology -- a book which, on the whole gives a somewhat more sympathetic view of Luther but still without recourse to any primary sources -- Dunn does include a footnote which implicitly conceded that his earlier statements concerning Luther on Romans 7 were incorrect when he acknowledges that Luther is one of those who `find it impossible to exclude the believer from the I of Romans 7:7-25. This is hardly, however, a full and accurate statement of the issue: Luther not only finds it impossible to exclude the believer from the `I, but, in his Lectures on Romans, he appears to find it impossible to include anyone else. It is perhaps not surprising that this surreptitious and somewhat inaccurate retraction is not accompanied with any reference at all to Luther's Lectures on Romans.

Now, having said all this, it is no doubt true that many in the Protestant tradition have chosen to interpret Romans 7 in terms of the struggles of the unbeliever prior to, or in the throws of, conversion. Were this all Dunn claimed, we would have no quarrel with him; but his determination to vitiate the whole Protestant tradition by locating this error in the psychological eisegesis of its original source, that of Luther's theology, is historically inaccurate and theologically unfair. If later generations used Luther in such a way, that is hardly Luther's fault -- the original author was well and truly dead by such points! And even among his contemporaries, there is evidence that Dunn's sweeping connection between a certain reading of Romans 7 and introspection is untenable. Calvin, for example, reads Romans 7 in precisely the kind of way in which Dunn wrongly accuses Luther of doing, but, if we use Dunn's own approach to Paul and apply it to Calvin, we

come up with some interesting results: Dunn refers to passages in Galatians and Philippians which speak unequivocally of Paul's pre-Christian days and argues that they exhibit no evidence of any morbid introspection; and, in the same way if we look at the story of Calvin's life prior to his conversion to the Reformation cause, and at the occasional allusions to his personal experiences, we find no evidence for the kind of introspection which Dunn appears to regard his reading of Romans 7 as requiring. All we really know of his conversion is that it was *subito*, sudden or unexpected; whether it involved long or deep periods of introspection and despair is extremely doubtful. It is thus misleading to imply that the Lutheran notion of justification was necessarily borne out of extended introspection prior to conversion. There is plenty of evidence in the Reformation that such introspection was not a prerequisite to faith, and thus the absolutely necessary connection between the two is impossible to maintain.

### **The Problem of Individualism**

The second major charge against Luther is that he set Protestant theology on a track which was radically individualistic in its understanding of what Christianity was all about. It is in some ways more difficult to respond to this charge than to the first, not because it is any more just but because it is inevitably more abstract in its claims.

There is, of course, a serious problem with the word 'individualism' and its cognates. Like other contemporary theological buzz-words, such as 'rationalism', 'dualism', and 'scholasticism', it is a term which has become part of the rhetorical arsenal with which traditional theology is today frequently assaulted. The problem is that such terms are used as if their meaning and moral connotations were givens, self-evident to any intelligent human being, whereas, in fact, neither of these things are obvious. Given the current emphasis in intellectual culture on the social construction of reality, on communitarianism, on the importance of the public nature of language and discourse, we all know that individualism is, to quote *1066 and All That*, 'a very bad thing,' but we are perhaps not always quite so certain of precisely what the term means. Thus, to tar a particular position with the brush of 'individualism', as with that of 'rationalism', is to score an immediate rhetorical point against it; whether the scoring of such a point is at all meaningful in terms of real substance must surely depend not on the lobbing of pejorative cliches but upon demonstrable errors or weaknesses.

So what does 'individualism' mean? When, for example, does it begin? With the arrival of knives and forks rather than a communal eating pot? Perhaps the man who invented knives and forks was the first individualist. Or was it with the advent of the Cartesian principle of doubt? With the development of the genre of autobiography? Or with the development of copyright legislation or the notion of personal property, intellectual or otherwise? I have not time to discuss these in more detail; but I do want to make the point that the complexity of issues which even this brief litany of questions brings to the surface underlines the fact that we must think beyond cliches if we are to do justice to the nuances of intellectual history in general and the church's theological tradition in particular.

Given that the term has no obviously given meaning, what exactly does Dunn mean by Luther thinking of justification in distinctly individualistic terms? It would appear that what he sees Luther as doing is emphasising the vertical dimension of salvation between God and believer as taking such prominence within his soteriological scheme that the corporate aspects of salvation and Christianity are weakened and eventually eliminated (this process reaching its terminus in the existentialist reading of Luther found in the work of Rudolf Bultmann). This development is seen as the logical outworking of Luther's theology and not necessarily something which was explicit in Luther's own work or even of which he was consciously aware.

The implications of Dunn's reading of Luther as individualist are worked out by Alan Suggate in his essay 'Germany: A Tale of Two Kingdoms' in the book he co-authored with Dunn, *The Justice of God*. In general, the portrait of Luther in this essay is bizarre. On the first page we are told that Luther wanted to purify Catholicism (true) and retained 'many of its beliefs and practices, much like the English King Henry VIII. Given the fact that Luther fundamentally restructured the sacramental theology of the church and that Henry VIII personally took him to task on precisely this issue, burning a good few Lutherans into the bargain, Suggate's description here is unlikely to be one that either of them would approve, recognise or find particularly flattering. In addition, we are told, portentously, that 'the temptation to launch attacks against Catholicism was very strong, and Luther cannot escape some of the blame for what happened after him. Then, just in case any of us have missed the point of Luther's pornographic anti-papal woodcuts or his obscene language in his anti-Roman polemic, we are reminded that 'Luther was not above intemperate attacks himself.'

We may well laugh at the oddity of these comments but it is important to realise the game that is being played by Suggate here: Luther is being portrayed as the man who let the genie out of the bottle; he was not necessarily a revolutionary or an extremist himself, but his thinking was fundamentally inconsistent in attempting to balance his new understanding of justification with a strong ecclesiology; and, in the generations after his death, the doctrine of justification won out, undermining and ultimately destroying the doctrine of the church. For Suggate, the road from Luther runs fairly directly to the totalitarianism of Nazi Germany where the individualist piety of Lutheranism was incapable of providing a rationale for any kind of concerted social resistance to tyranny.

The political question is, of course, a highly complex one and, given the horrors of the Holocaust, any connection made between Luther and the Third Reich raises the whole debate to a highly emotive level. Nevertheless, even if we allow the ideas of particular individuals a significant role in the formation of a nation's social, political, and cultural values (and that in itself is a philosophically contentious position with which I am profoundly unhappy in such a bald form), Luther's Christianity is by no means the sole candidate for criticism as far as Germany's recent history goes: the philosophy of Hegel and Bismarck's policy of *Realpolitik* are also significant intellectual sources of modern Teutonic totalitarianism.

If we move away from confusing the issue of Luther's theology with events in the mid-twentieth century, there are two basic points which can be made to counter accusations of individualism (in the anti-social, anti-ecclesiological sense of the word that Dunn appears to be using): Luther's high view of baptism and its relation to the Christian life; and the connection between justification and social ethics.

Accusations of individualism as lodged by Dunn and Suggate fail to come to grips with the fact that Luther combined his understanding of justification by faith with a high view of baptism as means of union with Christ and thus entry into the church. Indeed, all of the magisterial Reformers argued for the fundamental importance of infant baptism as a counter to the radical ecclesiology of the Anabaptists and a self-conscious attempt to stand within the Catholic tradition of the church by avoiding Donatism. There were, of course, important differences between the way baptism was construed by the Lutherans and by the Reformed, but both sides ascribed the doctrine basic importance in their understanding of the Christian life. Now, we all know that Luther's analysis of the Christian life, as found, for example, in his Commentary on Galatians, came to exert a profound influence on the popular piety of later conversionist evangelicalism, partly through its impact and appropriation by John Bunyan and John Wesley, whose writings and life stories were to have such an effect upon shaping eighteenth and nineteenth century popular piety; but we must beware of blaming the earlier Reformers for problems that develop in later tradition. The Reformers felt no tension between their emphasis on infant baptism and that upon justification by faith; and it is illegitimate for us to import such tension back into their writings or to impute the problems of later Protestant theology to questions which they allegedly left unanswered. One can hardly leave a question unanswered which was never asked in the first place.

When we look at Luther's doctrine of baptism, the following points are of note. First, the development of Luther's theology of baptism goes hand-in-hand, and is indeed an integral part, of his theological development which culminates in his understanding of justification by faith. This is in large measure because of his increasingly radical and anti-Pelagian understanding of sin. Unlike the medieval tradition in which he had been schooled and against which he was to react, Luther came to regard innate human sin after baptism as far more than a mere fomes or piece of kindling-wood which could be defeated by the efforts of the baptised. No: sin was something which dominated and controlled the whole human being and therefore baptism needed to be something total and comprehensive in order to match up to the seriousness of sin. In his Lectures on Romans, he makes the following comment, after noting the need for the believer to die in a manner analogous to Christ:

But we must note that it is not necessary for all men to be found immediately in this state of perfection [of being dead to sin], as soon as they have been baptized into a death of this kind. For they are baptized `into death, that is, toward death, which is to say, they have begun to live in such a way that they are pursuing this kind of death and reach out toward this their goal. For although they are baptised unto eternal life and the kingdom of heaven, yet they do not all at once possess this goal fully, but they have begun to act in such a way that they may attain to it -- for Baptism was established to direct us toward

death and through this death to life -- therefore it is necessary that we come to it in the order which has been prescribed.

To anyone familiar first-hand with the theology of Luther, this passage will appear striking for its use of the Pauline language of life and death which is so characteristic of Luther's theology of justification. What is of central importance to note is that this was written during the very period when Luther's theology was moving towards its mature Reformation position on justification and that the two issues are thus inextricably linked. Later historiography and mythology may have isolated the doctrine of justification from Luther's broader theological biography but, again, that is an error of later tradition not something for which we can blame Luther. To excise Luther's doctrine of justification from its wider situation in the doctrinal matrix that is his anti-Pelagian soteriology is not a legitimate historical or, one might add, theological move. If further evidence of this is needed, I refer interested parties to Part Four of Luther's *Small Catechism* of 1529 and his classic 1520 manifesto of sacramental theology, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, where the language of promise and faith, so central to justification, is also central to his understanding of the sacrament.

The second point concerning baptism is that for Luther it was to be applied to infants. There are, broadly speaking, two dimensions to Luther's understanding of paedobaptism, one of which remains constant throughout his mature career, and one of which shifts in a subtle fashion. As to the first, the necessity of baptising infants, Luther never wavers, rooting the immediate reason for so doing in the command of God:

We bring the child with the purpose and hope that he may believe, and we pray God to grant him faith. But we do not baptize him on that account, but solely on the command of God. [Lohse, p. 304]

As to the second reason, what we might call the secondary rationale for paedobaptism, this does change somewhat, mainly as a result of the explosive controversies between magisterial Reformers and Anabaptists in the early 1520s. Early in his reforming career, Luther had tended towards the view that children were baptised on the basis of the vicarious faith of their parents. Then, round about 1522-23, he shifted to arguing on occasion that infants themselves possessed faith. Later still, he became more cautious, no doubt concerned about making the sacrament dependent upon the precondition of the presence of faith, and saw the sacrament as anticipating future faith. What is certain is that baptisms validity was rooted in the word and not in the individual faith of the baptised.

Given all this -- that Luther's doctrine of justification cannot be isolated from the theological development which also gives us his theology of baptism -- where does that leave Dunn's accusation that the former is ineradicably and unacceptably individualistic?

Well, first, as I commented above, the way in which the term `individualism and its cognates are applied to Luther does not immediately disclose their meaning. If Dunn means simply that each individual must in some sense take personal responsibility for

their standing before God, believe in God for themselves, if you like, then that is a fair presentation of Luther's position. But given the fact that this seems to be little different to what is stated in the UCCF Doctrinal Basis, to which Dunn himself subscribes on an annual basis, I am inclined to believe that this is not the way in which he intends to apply the terminology to Luther. This would seem (and I stress 'seem' because, as I mentioned earlier, neither Dunn nor any of the other New Paul critics of Luther give a precise definition of what they mean by 'individualism') to be something along the lines of 'an approach to salvation which so stresses the vertical relationship between the individual and his or her God that this salvific bond is isolated from all horizontal social relations, whether church or secular, relations which are consequently completely and utterly irrelevant to, and unaffected by, the status of being a justified believer.' I hope this does not misrepresent the position of Dunn and the other advocates of the New Perspective; it is, as I say, a definition which I have had to infer from their writings for lack of explicit positive guidance.

If this definition is correct, then clearly all that I have said about baptism and Luther's ethics serves to undercut it. His understanding of baptism places great emphasis upon the ecclesiological dimensions of the sacrament and diverts attention away from introspective, individual considerations to the larger realities of union with Christ and God's own fidelity to his word. His understanding of justification as a vertical God-humanity relationship which profoundly affects horizontal relations between individuals and their neighbours, his theology of suffering on behalf of others, and his view of calling, all militate against the notion that Luther's theology of justification is inherently individualistic in the sense I have outlined above. Thus, on the second major charge against Luther, I confess that I find the evidence of his innocence compelling.

### **Luther and the New Perspective: A Preliminary Assessment**

In this final section, I wish to draw my reflections to a conclusion by giving a preliminary assessment of the implications what I have said so far. The field of Pauline studies is vast, and I have not had time to spend examining the views of all those involved, or even of all those who have made Luther a specific target of their attacks. Thus, I stress the adjective 'preliminary' in the section title.

First, it is worth noting briefly that the charge of projectionism which lies at the heart of New Perspective critiques of Luther is a dangerous one to make. To allege that Luther reads his own conversion back into Romans 7 is demonstrably false. To argue that Luther reads his experience back into Christian theology as a whole is somewhat more difficult to refute. But is there any point in refuting such a charge? On the grounds that what is good for the Reformation goose should also be considered good for the New Perspective gander, we might respond by arguing that the advocates of the New Perspective themselves read their own preoccupations back into the New Testament texts.

One could argue that the renewed interest in Christ's Jewishness is in no small part a function of corporate Christian guilt both for centuries of anti-Semitism which culminated in the Holocaust, and for the crass -- and now thankfully forgotten -- school

of scholarship which sought for ideological racial reasons to deny Christ's Jewishness. One could argue that the desire to read the doctrine of justification in a corporate rather than an individual way is the result of the impact of the change in philosophical paradigms in the wider culture, from the existentialist individualism of the mid-twentieth century, to the communitarian patterns of the post-Wittgensteinian world. One could -- but it would not get one very far. Thus, unless one wishes to go down the road which leads either to Feuerbach or to radical reader response theory, it will probably prove useful to move on from speculation about how much of Luther's theology was mere personal eisegesis. At least Luther's modern day supporters can claim some kind of historical perspective from which to judge what Luther was doing with the tradition; it will be some time before we can set the New Perspective in such historical context. For their own sakes, then, the leaders of the New Perspective would do well to show wise caution and steer clear of arguments based upon eisegetical projectionism.

Second, proponents of the New Perspective will probably respond to my paper by saying that their case depends upon exegesis not upon a particular reading of Luther. I could not agree more, and stated as much at the start. In reply, however, I would like it noted that I did not choose to bring Luther into the equation. It was leading figures of the New Perspective who chose to introduce Luther's theology to the argument, who proceeded to make him the historical figure over against whom they were to define themselves, and who gleefully delivered such sweeping and damaging judgments against his theology. I am merely responding to one aspect of an argument whose territory and rules of engagement were determined by New Testament scholars long before I entered the lists. I do not presume to comment on their exegesis; but they have presumed to comment on church history, not just at a popular level but also within the pages of scholarly journals and tomes. They can hardly now complain if their statements in this area are subjected to relevant scholarly scrutiny by those whose territory they felt confident enough to invade.

Having said this, it is of course inevitable that anyone proposing a major revision of the doctrine of justification must deal seriously at some point with Luther. He is, after all, second only to Augustine in his importance for understanding the soteriological traditions of the West, and of singular importance in the development of both Protestantism and Tridentine Catholicism. Love him or hate him, one has to deal with him. Thus, I do not criticise the New Perspective for placing Luther at the centre of the narrative whose final chapter makes them the most important figures since Paul in understanding the Christian gospel; but I said that the revisionists must deal seriously with Luther and what I question is whether they have dealt seriously with him at all.

Certainly, Dunn's major Luther source is the autobiographical fragment, and that cited from a popular 1950s biography. The rest of his argument proceeds on the strength of clichés such as 'individualism and sweeping generalisations, pronounced with the confidence of one who believes their truth value to be self-evident. Again, I have not had time to deal with the treatment Luther receives at the hands of N T Wright, but his sarcastic attacks on Luther and Lutheranism in *Jesus and the Victory of God* proceed with no reference to primary material at all and contain at least one demonstrable falsehood. What we have in Dunn and Wright is a critique of Luther which proceeds without

reference to primary sources or even to the best secondary material. At the hands of the New Perspective, Luther appears to be the victim not of devastating scholarly critique but of negative sound-bites and of tabloid headlines. He is a man who has lost the PR war through misleading publicity -- indeed, perhaps not so much sinned against as spinned against.

Some may be tempted to reply at this point that I protest too much. After all, am I myself not someone with a limited range of competence? Do I not use secondary sources and even unsubstantiated opinion when my work requires me to cross a disciplinary boundary. Again, this is true; but, then, the aim of my own scholarly work is somewhat more modest than that of the New Perspective, and the stakes for which I play are somewhat less high. Let us be quite clear about what is going on. These people define themselves not just by their careful exegesis of Pauline texts but also by their rejection of the Augustinian and Lutheran trajectories on justification. That is what they consider to be an essential part of what makes them so special, and what makes their contribution so important. What they are proposing in consequence is that the whole Western tradition has for most of the last two millennia been fundamentally wrong-headed about justification.

That is a claim which is staggering in its theological implications and awesome in its ecclesiological consequences. It requires that we be very cautious and careful before we embrace it with open arms. They could, of course, be correct; but surely these earth-shattering implications place them under obligation to deal seriously with the relevant primary texts of the tradition and to demonstrate in their analysis of them the same exegetical and historical sensitivity which they boast of as distinguishing their approach to the New Testament? To reject the entire tradition on the basis of an apparent bibliography that would look less than thin at the end of an undergraduate assignment is a move that can only be described as one of breath taking arrogance and awesome irresponsibility. Reject Luther and the tradition if you wish; but first make sure you know what it is that you are rejecting. And that requires studying primary texts in historical context.

This leads me to my final comment. The story is told of Bernard Shaw being taken to see the lights of Las Vegas late one night. 'It must be beautiful,' he commented, 'if you cant read.' I confess that the New Perspective approach to Luther strikes me a little that way. It too must be beautiful, but only if you don't know the primary texts. Its portrait of the Reformer certainly appears persuasive and impressive but that is because of the confidence with which it is presented to an audience whose culture generally considers novelty a good thing and tradition to be bad. A close examination of his theology in context reveals this portraits manifest deficiencies and palpable errors.

This leaves me with a big question: to coin a phrase drawing on my earlier lecture at the conference, Are the advocates of the New Perspective doing a Toynbee on me? Is there work only impressive at precisely those points where I am not competent to judge its validity? Certainly the vast knowledge of Judaism which underpins the argument is impressive, as is the tremendously subtle exegesis which provides the backbone of the

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revisionist case. But these are scholars who pride themselves on being historians, on reading primary sources in context, and on respecting the horizons of expectation of the various first century authors with which they deal. These are all basic aspects of sound historical method which apply equally to texts from the sixteenth century; they are also conspicuous only by their absence from the treatment of said texts in the works of the New Perspective.

It is on the basis of their consistent and careful application of these procedures that these scholars ask me to trust them when they tell me that the whole of Christian tradition is basically wrongheaded over salvation, that the Reformers were more guilty than most in the perversion of the gospel, and that I should trust them as the only people since Paul to have understood what the gospel is all about. Well, in those areas of their writings where I am competent to judge their application of historical procedure, I find them sadly deficient. They could still be right, but the sheer enormity of their claims requires me to be certain before I change my mind. Given the inaccuracy of their portrayal of Luther, they will, I hope, understand if I continue for the time being to back church tradition on this one.