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Justification by Faith is the Answer: What is the Question?¹

Stephen Westerholm

Let me begin with an outrageous claim, a bright idea spawned and supported solely by my own spotty reading—though, such is my perversity, that I would have voiced it with less rather than more confidence had it been the result of a hundred polls. No article published in the twentieth century on a New Testament topic garnered more attention, provoked more debate, or exercised greater influence than Krister Stendahl's "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West."² Stendahl himself meant his article to do for Paul what Henry Cadbury had done for the Gospels when he wrote *The Peril of Modernizing Jesus*.³ To lift Paul out of his first-century context is to distort him. And the ancients, among whom we must include the apostle Paul, were apparently not given to introspection. According to Stendahl, Augustine—not Paul—"express[ed] the dilemma of the introspective conscience," and he "may well have been one of the first" to do so.⁴ Nor should we attribute Luther's inner struggles to Paul; they mark the reformer rather as "a truly Augustinian monk" and an example of "late medieval piety and theology."⁵ In Luther's day, "penetrating self-examination reached a hitherto unknown intensity," bringing great "pressure" to bear on its practitioners. "It is in response to *their* question, 'How can I find a gracious God?' that Paul's words about a justification in Christ by faith, and without the works of the law, appears as the liberating and saving answer."⁶

¹ This paper was prepared for oral presentation at the 2006 Symposium on Exegetical Theology at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana. I have retained the oral style of the presentation and added only a few footnotes by way of documentation and clarification.

² Krister Stendahl, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," *Harvard Theological Review* 56 (1963): 199–215; reproduced in Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 78–96.

³ Henry J. Cadbury, *The Peril of Modernizing Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1937).

⁴ Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*, 83.

⁵ Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*, 82–83.

⁶ Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*, 83.

But their question was not Paul's question, which concerned rather "the place of the Gentiles in the Church and in the plan of God."⁷ Hence "the West for centuries has wrongly surmised that the biblical writers were grappling with problems which no doubt are ours, but which never entered their consciousness."⁸ "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."⁹ Stendahl later summarized his differences from Ernst Käsemann, his most noted and sharpest critic,¹⁰ along similar lines: "The first issue at hand is whether Paul intended *his* argument about justification to answer the question: 'How am I, Paul, to understand the place in the plan of God of my mission to the Gentiles, and how am I to defend the rights of the Gentiles to participate in God's promises?' *or*, if he intended it to answer the question, which I consider later and western: 'How am I to find a gracious God?'"¹¹

How one construes Paul's claim that we are "justified by faith, not by the works of the law" thus depends on the question one believes it addresses. Stendahl's posing of the issue—not "How can a sinner find a gracious God?" but "On what terms can Gentiles gain entrance to the people of God?"—has become something of a mantra for proponents of what we now call "the New Perspective on Paul." So E. P. Sanders writes of Galatians 2–4 and Romans 3–4, the primary chapters in which Paul discusses justification: "The subject matter is not 'how can the individual be righteous in God's sight?', but rather, 'on what grounds can Gentiles participate in the people of God in the last days?'"¹² And again: "The discussion of 'being righteoused by faith' is substantially the same [in Romans as in Galatians]. The problem is, again, that of Gentile inclusion in the people of God."¹³ And again: "The question is not about how many good deeds an individual must present before God to be declared righteous at the judgment, but, to repeat, whether or not Paul's Gentile

⁷ Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*, 84.

⁸ Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*, 95.

⁹ Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*, 86.

¹⁰ Ernst Käsemann, "Justification and Salvation History in the Epistle to the Romans," in *Perspectives on Paul* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 60–78.

¹¹ Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*, 131.

¹² E. P. Sanders, *Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 50.

¹³ Sanders, *Paul*, 66.

converts must accept the Jewish law in order to enter the people of God or to be counted truly members."¹⁴

James Dunn, too, has read his Stendahl. He writes: "The leading edge of Paul's theological thinking was the conviction that God's purpose embraced Gentile as well as Jew, not the question of how a guilty man might find a gracious God."¹⁵ And again:

When Paul said in effect, "All are justified by faith and not by works," he meant *not* "Every individual must cease from his own efforts and simply trust in God's acceptance," however legitimate and important an interpretation of his words that is. What he meant was, "Justification is not confined to Jews as marked out by their distinctive works; it is open to all, to Gentile as well as Jew, through faith."¹⁶

We have got the point, but we will give Dunn one more shot at its formulation: "Justification by faith was Paul's answer to the question: How is it that Gentiles can be equally acceptable to God as Jews?"¹⁷

Both the view of justification espoused by the New Perspectivists and the one they reject emerge clearly from their comments on "the works of the law" that Paul repudiates in favor of faith. Traditionally, these "works of the law" have been understood as human good deeds that Pelagian heretics, of one century or another, imagine lead to salvation. Paul's point, then, is that only by grace through faith can we be saved, not by any good works that we do. Not so, say the New Perspectivists. On their view, when the first-century Paul spoke of the "works of the law," he had in mind things like circumcision, food, and festival laws; and his point was that these distinctively Jewish practices need not be observed by Gentiles in order to belong to the people of God. Let Tom Wright speak for their position: "[Israel] was determined to have her covenant membership demarcated by works of Torah, that is, by the things that kept that

¹⁴ E.P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 20.

¹⁵ James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul, and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990), 232.

¹⁶ James D. G. Dunn, "The Justice of God: A Renewed Perspective on Justification by Faith," *Journal of Theological Studies* 43 (1992): 14.

¹⁷ James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 340.

membership confined to Jews and Jews only."¹⁸ Or, again, we may cite Dunn: "'Works of the law' are what distinguish Jew from Gentile. To affirm justification by works of the law is to affirm that justification is for Jews only, is to require that Gentile believers take on the persona and practices of the Jewish people."¹⁹

My purpose in this paper is not to review further the contemporary debate,²⁰ but to ask quite simply whether Stendahl and others who followed in his footsteps have correctly identified the question Paul addressed in saying that justification is by faith. Did he mean that faith alone, not the observance of distinctively Jewish works of the law, is required for Gentiles to be included in the people of God? Or was his point that sinners are declared righteous by faith alone, apart from the righteous deeds that the law requires? Justification by faith is the answer, but what is the question?

Our main focus will naturally be on Paul's letters to the Galatians and Romans; but I mean to begin, not with letters central to our topic, nor even with letters indisputably Pauline, but with several epistles whose Pauline authorship is contested by many scholars and with one letter definitely not by Paul, whose stance, indeed, is widely thought to be *anti*-Pauline. Let us look first, albeit briefly, at Ephesians and the Pastoral Epistles, then at the Epistle of James.

In Ephesians 2:8-9, we read familiar words: "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."²¹ The "you" addressed in these verses were once "dead" in "trespasses and sins" and destined for God's judgment as "children of wrath" (Eph 2:1-3). But now, we are told, they have been saved by grace as a sheer gift from God, apart from any works of their own. The whole scenario is recreated in Titus 3:3-7:

¹⁸ N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 130.

¹⁹ Dunn, *Theology*, 363-364.

²⁰ I cannot, however, be accused in good faith of shying away from the task in other contexts; see my *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The "Lutheran" Paul and His Critics* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 99-258; and "The 'New Perspective' at Twenty-Five," in *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, Vol. 2, ed. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 1-38.

²¹ Biblical quotations are taken from the *English Standard Version*.

For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, 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, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Similarly, 2 Timothy 1:9 stresses that God “saved us . . . not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace.”²²

Whatever their authorship, each of these passages echoes and reformulates the justification texts in Paul’s undisputed letters, particularly Romans 3–4: here, as there, one reads of a God who justifies (Titus 3:7; Rom 3:26, 30; 4:5) by his grace (Eph 2:8; 2 Tim 1:9; Titus 3:7; Rom 3:24) through faith (Eph 2:8; Rom 3:22, 28; 4:5) and not through works (Eph 2:9; 2 Tim 1:9; Titus 3:5; Rom 3:20, 28; 4:2, 6), thus eliminating any grounds for boasting (Eph 2:9; Rom 3:27; 4:2). In Ephesians and the Pastorals, the works repeatedly rejected as playing a role in salvation are good works in general, deeds done in righteousness, as Titus 3 puts it. And those saved or justified by divine grace are sinners, plain and simple, slaves of their sins and otherwise destined for divine judgment; they are not Gentiles inquiring about entrance requirements to a desired community.²³ In broad terms at least, the interpretation of these texts is not controversial.

Now nothing in these texts allows us to decide what question Paul addressed in Galatians and Romans when he spoke of justification by faith, apart from the works of the law. The suggestion is often made—and a plausible suggestion it is—that a Pauline formula originally designed to address a particular mid-century crisis (so Galatians and Romans) was later reformulated and generalized when the original crisis had passed (so

²² On these texts, see Andrew T. Lincoln, “Ephesians 2:8–10: A Summary of Paul’s Gospel?” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 45 (1983): 617–630; and I. Howard Marshall, “Salvation, Grace and Works in the Later Writings in the Pauline Corpus,” *New Testament Studies* 42 (1996): 339–358.

²³ Ephesians (but not the Pastoral Epistles) does emphasize Paul’s role in proclaiming the divine mystery by which Gentiles participate together with Jews in the people of God (2:11–3:6; cf. Col 1:25–27). But the language of *faith*, *works*, and *justification* is not used in that context.

Ephesians and the Pastorals). Something along these lines is, from the perspective of the New Perspectivists, what must have happened. What can be said with certainty, however, is that already in the first century the Pauline justification texts were invoked to address the predicament of sinners facing God's wrath; and already in the first century they were used to insist that God offers such sinners salvation in Jesus Christ by grace through faith apart from a demand for righteous deeds that they are in no position to meet. The claim that such a reading modernizes Paul can only be maintained if we date the onset of modernity prior to the composition of Ephesians.

We move on to the Epistle of James. When the Epistle of James declares that "a person is justified by works and *not* by faith alone" (Jas 2:24), the formulation, though inverted, must ultimately be based on the justification texts of the apostle Paul: it was Paul who introduced the language of justification by faith, not by works.²⁴ Whomever James may intend to refute, the *position* he dismisses holds that God approves sinners because of their faith regardless of whether or not that faith leads to righteous behavior. Paul himself (one suspects) would not have vouched for justification in the terms James rejects. Even in Galatians he insists that we reap what we sow (Gal 6:7), that those who practice the "works of the flesh . . . will not inherit the kingdom of God" (Gal 5:19–21), and that faith finds expression in love (Gal 5:6). Nonetheless, from James as well as from responses to Paul reflected in his own letters it is clear that some of his listeners and readers interpreted Paul's message along antinomian lines already in the first century – as, indeed, some have done ever since.²⁵ For our purposes, we should note that the terms of Gentile inclusion in the people of God are not an issue for the Epistle of James; very much an issue, however, is whether people can be justified by faith apart from any accompanying works. And the works in question are not circumcision or the observance of food and festival laws, but such good deeds as clothing the naked and feeding the hungry (Jas 2:14–17). Does James, too, represent a modernized and westernized reading of Paul?

We turn now to Paul's undisputed writings, though not yet to texts that have figured centrally in the debate. In 1 Thessalonians we find no trace of

²⁴ Cf. Friedrich Avemarie, "Die Werke des Gesetzes im Spiegel des Jakobusbriefs: A Very Old Perspective on Paul," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 98 (2001): 282–309.

²⁵ Rom 3:8; 1 Cor 6:12; 10:23; cf. Rom 6:1; Gal 5:13.

justification language or any discussion of circumcision or Jewish festival and dietary laws. The dual omission may suggest to some readers a link between the items omitted: justification language is only adopted when Gentile observance of Jewish practices is an issue. The linkage will concern us when we come to the letter to the Galatians. Evidence in the negative for our question, however, is not all that 1 Thessalonians has to offer. The content of the letter leaves no doubt about the substance of Paul's missionary proclamation to the Thessalonians. The latter (like all human beings) are the creatures of a God whom they have not worshiped (1 Thess 1:9), whose expectations for moral behavior they have not met (1 Thess 4:5), and whose outpouring of wrath is imminent (1 Thess 1:10; 5:2-3). Had Paul posed the dilemma facing the Thessalonians in terms of a question, it would necessarily have been something like: How can I, a sinner facing divine judgment, find a gracious God?

And that is the question that Paul's message to the Thessalonians was designed to answer. In turning from idols to the "living and true God," they were placing their faith in his son Jesus, "who delivers us from the wrath to come" (1 Thess 1:9-10). "The day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night. While people are saying, 'There is peace and security,' then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape" (1 Thess 5:2-3). Believers in Jesus, however, belong to the day, not the night, and they should live accordingly. "For God has not determined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him" (1 Thess 5:9-10). If, for Dunn, "the leading edge of Paul's theological thinking was the conviction that God's purposes embraced Gentiles as well as Jews, not the question of how a guilty man might find a gracious God"²⁶; and if, for Stendahl, the latter question marks the concerns of the later West,²⁷ then it must be said that Paul's message to the Thessalonians left them in the dark about the core of his thinking while pointlessly answering a question that they were born in quite the wrong time and place even to dream of raising. Permit me an alternative proposal: to my mind, 1 Thessalonians suggests that the

²⁶ Dunn, *Jesus, Paul, and the Law*, 232.

²⁷ Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*, 131.

danger of modernizing Paul lies in displacing the centrality of sin, judgment, faith, and salvation from his message.²⁸

On to Corinth, where Paul's message has not changed. His goal, in Corinth as elsewhere, is to do whatever it takes to save those who hear his message.

To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not myself being under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, *that by all means I might save some.* (1 Cor 9:20-23; cf. 10:33; emphasis added)

Salvation in Thessalonians meant deliverance from God's wrath and judgment; it means the same in Corinthians. The world, according to 1 Corinthians 11:32, faces condemnation; its people, according to several texts, are the perishing (1 Cor 1:18; 2 Cor 2:15; 4:3). And they are perishing because their deeds merit perdition: the "unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Cor 6:9; cf. 2 Cor 6:14). To those otherwise perishing, Paul brings a gospel of salvation from sin and its condemnation for all who believe the gospel message.

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. . . . It pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. (1 Cor 1:18, 21)²⁹

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. (1 Cor 15:1-2)

We are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to the one a fragrance from death to

²⁸ Cf. R. Barry Matlock, "Almost Cultural Studies? Reflections on the 'New Perspective' on Paul," in *Biblical Studies/Cultural Studies: The Third Sheffield Colloquium*, ed. J. Cheryl Exum and Stephen D. Moore (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 439.

²⁹ Note that the context stresses that the same message brings salvation to "both Jews and Greeks" (1 Cor 1:22-25).

death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? (2 Cor 2:15–16; cf. 6:1–2)

There is no question, then, about the heart of Paul's message when he arrived in Corinth.

Significantly for our purposes, the language of *righteousness* and *justification*, absent from Thessalonians, is used in 1 and 2 Corinthians, though not prominently. The Greek verb we render *justify* (δικαίω) comes from the same stem as the words for *righteous* (δίκαιος) and *righteousness* (δικαιοσύνη); it means to "find (or declare) righteous," "to acquit." Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 4:4 that he himself is not aware of sin in his life; but since God, not he, is the judge, his own sense of innocence does not mean he is justified.³⁰ That is, God alone can pronounce on whether or not people are righteous. And to be righteous, in this (quite ordinary) sense of the word, is to have met one's moral obligations.³¹ Conversely, the unrighteous are those who do not live as they ought, and Paul has lists at hand of the kind of sinful deeds they practice (1 Cor 6:9–10). One way, then, of putting the dilemma addressed by Paul's gospel is to say that the world is peopled by the unrighteous who, as such, cannot hope to survive divine judgment. The gospel responds to that dilemma by offering the unrighteous a means by which they may extraordinarily be declared righteous or justified.

Such language, to repeat, is not prominent in Corinthians; but it is there, and it deals neither with whether Gentiles need to be circumcised and keep Jewish food laws (those questions are not an issue in Corinthians), nor with how Gentiles can be made equally acceptable before God as Jews (in fact, Jews no less than Gentiles need to be "saved" [1 Cor 9:20–23; cf. 1:18–25]). Paul invokes the language of *righteousness* and *justification* when he indicates how sinners can find the righteousness they need if they are to stand in the face of God's judgment.³² That Christ is "our righteousness," as 1 Corinthians 1:30 declares, addresses the issue in the most succinct way possible: Christ is the means by which people, themselves unrighteous, can be found righteous by God. The same basic point is made in 2 Corinthians

³⁰ ESV here reads "acquitted."

³¹ See Westerholm, *Perspectives*, 263–273.

³² Both, too, are "called" (1 Cor 1:24; cf. Rom 9:24); see also the remarks of Stephen J. Chester, *Conversion at Corinth: Perspectives on Conversion in Paul's Theology and the Corinthian Church* (London: T & T Clark, 2003), 155.

5:21: "For our sake," Paul writes, "[God] made [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." The verb "to justify" is used in 1 Corinthians 6:11 in a context where those said to be "justified" (or "declared righteous") are explicitly the "unrighteous." Paul has just reminded the Corinthians that "the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Cor 6:9). After listing various categories of the "unrighteous," he continues: "And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor 6:11). Justification, then, has to do with the removal of sins that would otherwise condemn the unrighteous.

One other text from the Corinthian correspondence should be mentioned here. In 2 Corinthians 3, the covenant under which Paul serves is said to be one of righteousness (in the sense of "acquittal") in contrast with the Mosaic covenant, which, though divine and glorious, brings condemnation and death to its subjects (2 Cor 3:7-10). Here Paul does not pause to explain why the Mosaic covenant condemns and does not acquit; but, in light of what he writes elsewhere, his thinking on the matter is not in doubt. The Mosaic covenant promises blessing to those who obey its commandments (Rom 10:5; Gal 3:12) but curses all who transgress them (Gal 3:10). It thus becomes a covenant solely of condemnation and death (as in 2 Cor 3:7, 9) only on the assumption that all its subjects are sinners who transgress its prescriptions; and that, of course, was Paul's conviction (cf. Rom 8:7-8). "In Adam *all die*" (1 Cor 15:22)—and the law of Moses, far from remedying that situation, only pronounces their condemnation (cf. 1 Cor 15:56).

Conversely, Paul's service under the new covenant involves bringing a message of righteousness (or justification) and life to those condemned by the law. In short, the Corinthian Epistles link the language of *righteousness* and *justification* to the message that the Corinthian and Thessalonian Epistles alike identify as the central concern of Paul's mission: How sinners can be saved from merited judgment. Justification through the gospel of Jesus Christ represents Paul's answer to the question inevitably provoked by a message of pending eschatological doom: How can I find a gracious God? Perhaps we should add, however, that an eschatological framework such as Paul's is hardly the only ancient, non-Western setting in which such a concern could arise. In Job, too, we read: "Can mortal man be in the right before God? Can a man be pure before his Maker?" (Job 4:17). Such, it seems, is a perennial concern of the religiously alert.

Before we look at Galatians, perhaps we should tally up the scorecard to this point. On the one side we have the "Stendahl Revisionists." Stendahl, explaining Luther's concern to find a gracious God, labeled him an Augustinian monk. That label will do for our purposes: the "Stendahl Revisionists" are taking on the "Augustinian Monks." To this point we have looked at Ephesians, the Pastoral Epistles, James, 1 Thessalonians, and the letters to the Corinthians. The terms by which Gentiles are to be admitted to the people of God are not discussed in any of these writings, leaving the "Stendahl Revisionists" scoreless at this point in the game. For their part, the "Augustinian Monks" can claim in their favor that Ephesians, the Pastoral Epistles, and James read Paul's justification texts much the same way they do; that 1 Thessalonians and the Corinthian Epistles show that the central question provoked by Paul's missionary message (How can sinners find a gracious God?) is precisely the question that Paul's justification language, on their understanding, is designed to satisfy; and that in Corinthians Paul clearly uses justification language for precisely that purpose. If the "Monks" have a decent middle reliever and a closer in their bullpen, this game is over. We should not forget, however, that right from the outset the "Revisionists" have banked their hopes on Galatians.

It is in Paul's letter to the Galatians that we find for the first time the formula "A person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ" (Gal 2:16). Here we also encounter, for the first time in Paul's letters, a debate about whether Gentile believers in Christ should be circumcised.³³ Clearly the formula is linked to the debate; but what, more specifically, is the linkage?

Presumably Paul's initial message to the Galatians differed little from his initial message to the Thessalonians and the Corinthians. In that case he presented Christ as God's answer to the dilemma faced by sinners otherwise condemned to divine wrath. When the "Lord Jesus Christ . . . gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age" (Gal 1:4), the deliverance at least includes, if it is not to be equated with, deliverance from the judgment that hangs over the "evil age" and its denizens. In neither Thessalonica nor in Corinth had the question arisen whether Gentiles needed to be circumcised or keep other distinctively Jewish laws. Presumably, Paul did not raise the issue in Galatia either. Had he done so,

³³ 1 Cor 7:17-19 hardly amounts to a debate.

it could only have been to deny such requirements; and the Galatians, so prepared, would presumably not have been swept off their feet when later confronted by such demands.

How, we may well wonder, was a demand for circumcision made convincing to Galatian believers in Christ? In itself circumcision would hardly have seemed a desirable operation to undergo; it could only have been urged upon the Galatians as part of a bigger picture. God had chosen the seed of Abraham as his people. At Sinai he had entered into a covenant with them. By the laws of that covenant God's people were to live. Those laws included circumcision. If males wanted to belong to God's people, they must start by getting circumcised. So, plausibly enough, the teachers who followed Paul into Galatia would have argued.

They saw no conflict between the requirement for circumcision and a recognition of Jesus as Messiah. They, too, proclaimed the gospel (cf. Gal 1:6) that the God who chose the Jewish people had now sent them their Messiah; for these teachers, too, it was incumbent upon all to believe in Jesus and be baptized in his name. But the advent of Messiah was a Jewish hope, and its fulfillment was no reason for abandoning a Jewish way of life. If Judaism meant life lived under the Mosaic covenant and its laws,³⁴ then these teachers came to Galatia to promote a sect that had recently begun to take shape within Judaism, distinguished from other Jews precisely (but only) by its faith in Jesus as Messiah. In the view of these teachers, the framework within which all God's people were to live remained that of the Mosaic law and covenant.

Paul's formula of justification—"A person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ"—sums up his opposition to this position. The question we need to answer is what part (or parts) of the position it opposes. A minimalist interpretation would see him denying only the demand that Gentiles be circumcised and submit to the

³⁴ This corresponds nicely with E. P. Sanders's well-known understanding of Judaism as "covenantal nomism," though stressing (as "covenantal nomism" does not) that adherence to the Mosaic laws represents the ancestral way of life of the Jewish people. Cf. John M. G. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora: From Alexander to Trajan [323 BCE–117 CE]* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 410; Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 7–8, 92–93, 182; Martin S. Jaffee, *Early Judaism* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1997), 9–10.

distinctively Jewish laws of the Mosaic covenant. Such a denial is itself quite intelligible within the boundaries of first-century Judaism. After all, Jews of the period were by no means united in their understanding of how Gentiles could gain God's favor.³⁵ Some (like those Christ-believing Jews who followed Paul into Galatia) thought Gentiles had to become Jews; but others thought it necessary only that Gentiles maintain basic standards of morality. On this reading, Paul—no less than the Galatians' new teachers—came to Galatia to propagate a Christ-believing sect within a Judaism defined by its adherence to the Mosaic law, though in his case without requiring such adherence of Gentiles. On this reading, moreover, justification by faith represents, as the New Perspectivists claim it represents, Paul's answer to a question whether Gentile believers in Christ should be circumcised and adopt a Jewish way of life.

This minimalist interpretation, however, must ignore or explain away the whole argument of Galatians. The Galatians' new teachers may have assumed that the Sinaitic covenant remains in place as the framework within which God's people are to live; but that is the very point at which Paul attacks them. Circumcision (he argues, in effect) is not to be required of Gentiles, not because this part of a still valid Mosaic economy is inapplicable in their case, or even because the whole of a still valid Mosaic economy is not meant for Gentiles, but because the Mosaic economy itself has lost its validity. Its day has past. At the best of times, righteousness was simply not achievable by means of the Mosaic economy. Lacking the means to justify sinners, it could only curse and enslave them. In the plan of God the covenant and laws of Mount Sinai played an important but temporary role as guardian of God's people until Messiah should come and deliver them. For Gentile believers in Christ to be circumcised now would be a disaster, not because they would be unnecessarily taking on requirements binding only on Jews, but because they would be abandoning Christ, whose death is the sole means by which Jews and Gentiles alike can find righteousness; and they would be embracing life under a covenant that can only condemn them. Such is the thrust of Galatians.

³⁵ See Terence L. Donaldson, *Paul and the Gentiles: Remapping the Apostle's Convictional World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 51-74; E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 206-212.

Let me briefly develop critical parts of these claims.³⁶ First, when Paul talks about justification, in Galatians as in his other Epistles, he is talking about how sinners can be found righteous. That Gentiles were sinners was self-evident to Jews (Gal 2:15); but if Jews like Peter and Paul sought justification in Christ, then they, too, proved to be sinners (Gal 2:16-17). If justification had been achievable by other means, Christ need not have died; clearly, then, his death represented the only way that sinners could be justified (Gal 2:21). According to Galatians 3:22-24, all were "imprisoned . . . under sin" until "Christ came in order that we might be justified by faith." Paul's message of justification thus does not address a need peculiar to Gentiles, but the need of all human beings—Jews like Peter and Paul no less than Gentiles like the Galatians—inasmuch as all are sinners.

If righteousness is only possible through the death of Christ, then righteousness is not possible by means of the Mosaic law. So Paul asserts (Gal 2:21; 3:21-22), but he also explains why. The law tells people what to do and promises God's blessing if they do it: its operative principle is thus "The one who does [what the law demands] shall live by [so doing]" (Gal 3:12, citing Lev 18:5). Paul sees no need to dispute the further claim, axiomatic among Jews, that the law prescribes means to atone for sins inevitably and regrettably committed by people otherwise oriented toward serving God; he knows no such people.³⁷ Conversely, other Jews would not have disputed Paul's claim that the law condemns the incorrigibly sinful. Paul differs from other Jews not so much in his understanding of the requirements of the law as in his assessment of human sinfulness.³⁸ His more pessimistic anthropology, by which all are hopelessly enslaved to sin, seems to have followed from his conviction that the Messiah died to redeem humankind from its sins: so drastic a remedy implies a drastic dilemma, and Paul revised his earlier, more optimistic, assessment of the

³⁶ For a more detailed treatment, see my *Perspectives*, 366-384.

³⁷ That "the law provides for means of atonement, and atonement results in . . . maintenance or reestablishment of the covenantal relationship" is, for E. P. Sanders, one of the items that makes up "the 'pattern' or 'structure' of covenantal nomism"; *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 422. He illustrates the point in his discussion of a variety of Jewish texts; *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, e.g., 157-180, 298-305, and 338-341.

³⁸ Cf. Mikael Winninge, *Sinners and the Righteous: A Comparative Student of the Psalms of Solomon and Paul's Letters* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1993), 264, 306-307. Also Timo Laato, *Paul and Judaism: Anthropological Approach* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1995).

human condition accordingly.³⁹ The desperation of a humanity whose sinfulness is illumined by the death of Christ cannot possibly meet the measure of obedience required—on any interpretation—by the Mosaic covenant.⁴⁰

When Paul declares, then, that “a person is not justified by works of the law” (Gal 2:16), he is, to be sure, denying that Gentiles should be circumcised; but the point of the formula, and the reason why Gentiles ought not to be circumcised, is that God’s favor cannot be enjoyed by sinners under a covenant that demands compliance with its laws as its condition for blessing.⁴¹ The justification “by works of the law” that Paul rules out in Galatians 2:16 is no different from the justification “through the law” that he deems inconceivable in Galatians 2:21, where no restriction to particular, boundary-defining commandments (like that of circumcision) is in view. Elsewhere, too, the alternative Paul rejects is not a justification linked with particular demands of the law, but justification by

³⁹ Cf. Phil 3:4–6. In fact, covenantal nomism only works on the assumption that the people of the covenant can adequately fulfill its demands; cf. Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society, 200 B.C.E. to 640 C.E.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 65.

⁴⁰Cf. Lev 18:5; Deut 10:12–13; 11:26–28.

⁴¹ Being circumcised means entering a covenant that requires obedience to all its laws: such would be the obligation of the Galatians, should they be circumcised (Gal 5:3)—as indeed, it had been the obligation of Jews (like Paul) as long as they lived “under the law.” The captivity under the law from which Jewish believers in Christ had been delivered (Rom 7:4–6; cf. 6:14–15; 1 Cor 9:20; Gal 4:5; 5:18, etc.) is not one that Gentiles should now enter (Gal 4:21–5:1). Indeed, for Paul, Jewish believers themselves must *not* comply with the law if it keeps them from walking “in step with the truth of the gospel” (Gal 2:14, in context). Romans 14 strikes a more conciliatory note; yet even here compliance with the law is only a matter of individual conscience (see Rom 14:5, 13–14, where Paul makes it clear that treating any day as different from another is optional, and where he sees himself free to eat any food whatever [cf. 1 Cor 10:25–27]; in 1 Cor 9:19–23, Paul explains his own occasional compliance with [distinctively Jewish] demands of the law as strategically motivated). However accommodating to Jewish sensibilities Paul’s position in Romans 14 may appear to be, John Barclay notes that the apostle appeared as an apostate to his fellow Jews (John M. G. Barclay, “Paul Among Diaspora Jews: Anomaly or Apostate?” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 60 [1995]: 118–119; *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, 384–385, 395), and that his treatment of Torah observance as optional for Jewish believers could only undermine such observance (“Do We Undermine the Law? A Study of Romans 14.1–15.6,” in *Paul and the Mosaic Law*, ed. James D. G. Dunn [Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001], 287–308).

the law itself, whose requirement of righteous works distinguishes it from the path of faith and grace:

Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for "The righteous shall live by faith." But the law is not of faith, rather "The one who does [its commands] shall live by them." (Gal 3:11-12, quoting Hab 2:4; Lev 18:5)

You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. (Gal 5:4)

Second, the problem posed by the law is indeed not simply its inability to give life to the dead or to justify the sinner (Gal 3:21-24). It curses all who transgress its commandments: "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them" (Gal 3:10, quoting Deut 27:26). If all are "imprisoned . . . under sin," then none can "abide by" the things written in the law. It follows that all are subject to "the curse of the law"; and the benefits of Christ's death must go beyond justification for sinners to include deliverance from that curse (Gal 3:10, 13; cf. 4:5).

Third, Paul underlines his point by introducing an allegorical interpretation of the mothers of Abraham's sons (Gal 4:21-5:1). Taking Hagar and Sarah to represent two covenants, Paul sees Hagar, whose child was born into slavery, as representing the covenant of Mount Sinai, which corresponds to "the present Jerusalem" (Gal 4:25); believers in Christ are then, like Isaac, the free offspring of Sarah. Why does Paul associate life under the Sinaitic covenant with slavery? No doubt because he sees its subjects as imprisoned under sin and subject to the law's curse.

Fourth, why, then, did God bother to give a law that can only curse its adherents? That Paul raises the issue, as he does in Galatians 3:19, shows again that the question whether Gentile believers should be circumcised cannot, for Paul, be answered without raising fundamental issues pertaining to the nature and purpose of the law itself. And a Paul who feels constrained to explain why God would even give the law can only be a Paul who has denied that the law serves the function that others attribute to it. The purpose Paul proposes is a limited one indeed: God gave the law to supervise the imprisonment of people who would later be set free; to serve as a guardian for those whose lot was then no better than slaves, though they were destined to inherit God's blessings as his children (Gal 3:21-4:7). For our purposes, the point to be emphasized is that the law's hegemony, for Paul, was temporary. It did not come into force until 430

years after God gave his promise to Abraham; and it remained in force only until Christ came, "the offspring . . . to whom the promise had been made" (Gal 3:17, 19). So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian (Gal 3:24–25; cf. 4:4–5; 5:18). Clearly, for Paul the Mosaic economy and its laws no longer provide the framework within which God's people are to live; and, inasmuch as they are sinners, it was never a means by which they could be justified.

Hence Paul can speak of Judaism itself as belonging to his past: "you have heard of my former life in Judaism" (Gal 1:13–14).⁴² In Paul's view, the community of those who believe in Jesus represents an alternative, even a rival, to "Judaism": he once showed his zeal for the latter by persecuting the former (Gal 1:13–14), then abandoned his life in Judaism when he began to preach "the faith he once tried to destroy" (Gal 1:23). For Paul, devotion to Judaism means devotion to the ancestral laws of the Jews (Gal 1:14; Phil 3:5–6) and the pursuit of the righteousness that is based on their observance (Phil 3:6, 9; Rom 9:31; 10:3–5). In short, Judaism is life within the framework of the Mosaic covenant (cf. Gal 4:24–25).⁴³ Paul by no means denies the divine origins of that covenant; but he sees it as a temporary stage in the history of God's dealing with his people. Judaism, as Paul employs the term, belongs to his past.

So how do things now stand as we approach the final innings of our contest? Consideration of Galatians gives the "Stendahl Revisionists" a run, maybe two, but it falls far short of the rally for which they hoped. Paul is indeed answering the question "Should Gentiles be circumcised?" when he insists that justification is by faith, not works of the law. But even in Galatians Paul's formula of justification relates, as the "Augustinian Monks" have always claimed it relates, to the extraordinary means by which God declares sinners righteous. If Paul uses the formula to deny that Gentiles should be circumcised, it is only because he believes

⁴² See Barclay, "Paul Among Diaspora Jews," 113; Chester, *Conversion at Corinth*, 154. Against Dunn, Chester rightly notes that Paul does not speak of abandoning a particular form of Judaism (i.e., Pharisaic Judaism, which is then taken to represent a distorted form of true Judaism!): "the way Paul speaks makes his former life appear not as the worst of Judaism, but rather as the best. His use of the term *genos* means that Paul is evaluating his progress against that of the nation as a whole" (*Conversion at Corinth*, 161).

⁴³ Or, indeed, "covenantal nomism," which Sanders, too, believes Paul came to reject.

circumcision belongs to a covenant that provides no answer to the still more basic question, "How can a sinner find a gracious God?" To that question, in Galatians as elsewhere, justification by faith is the answer. Give the "Augustinian Monks" a grand slam.

And so we come to Rome. To the Thessalonians Paul brought a message of salvation from impending doom for those who believe in Christ, though he (apparently) did not use the language of *justification*. To the Corinthians Paul brought the same message, now referring specifically to how God justifies the unrighteous, though the terminology is not yet prominent or formulaic. It is both in Galatians, prompted by the debate over circumcision. By the time we reach Romans, the terminology and formulas Paul invoked in response to the Galatian crisis have been fully assimilated into his evangelistic repertoire. Writing to a community he had not founded, Paul thinks it important to articulate the gospel that he proclaims without shame wherever he goes (Rom 1:14-16); and the substance of that gospel is now summed up in the language of righteousness (or justification): "The righteous shall live by faith" (Rom 1:17, quoting Hab 2:4). Such a gospel is necessary because human beings—Gentiles and Jews alike—are *not* righteous in the ordinary sense of the word: they have not lived as they ought, and as a result, "the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth" (Rom 1:18). "They knew God," but "they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him." The refusal to acknowledge the true God led to worship of the creature rather than the creator and to conduct practiced and praised despite an awareness that it merits death (Rom 1:18-32).

All this can be said without reference to the law of Moses, since God expects all human beings everywhere to do what is good and judges all according to their deeds (Rom 2:6-11). The law of Moses merely spells out—for the benefit of Jews, to whom it was given—the good that God requires of all (Rom 2:17-20). Its underlying principle—"the doers of the law . . . will be justified" (Rom 2:13)—represents the basic moral principle on which the world is run. But it is a principle by which sinful human beings cannot live. And since all—Jews and Gentiles alike—are sinful, and all the world is culpable before God (Rom 3:9-20, 23), the formula of Galatians 2:16 bears repetition here: "by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight" (Rom 3:20). Unrighteous people can be found righteous only by extraordinary means, and God has provided that means in the gospel. In Paul's terms, the gospel introduces a righteousness "apart

from the law" (Rom 3:21), by which he means not merely that Gentiles can experience this righteousness without being circumcised, but that Jewish and Gentile sinners alike can be found righteous even though they have not met the requirements of righteous behavior set forth in the law. That is why the act by which God declares them righteous is a gift, an act of divine grace (Rom 3:24). Such is "the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe" (Rom 3:22).

Later chapters in Romans repeat the language of righteousness (or justification) to the same effect. For those who trust the God who "justifies the ungodly," their "faith is counted as righteousness" (Rom 4:5). David speaks of the "blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from [righteous] works" when he speaks of those whose sins have been forgiven (Rom 4:6-8). That justification by faith is not in the first place an answer to whether Gentiles should be circumcised is clear when Paul discusses the justification of ungodly Abraham and sinful-but-forgiven David (Rom 4:1-8) before even asking whether the same path to righteousness is open to uncircumcised Gentiles (Rom 4:9-12). The answer, of course, is that it is, for the righteousness of faith has nothing to do with whether one is circumcised and everything to do with whether one shares the faith of father Abraham. Chapter 5 stresses again that those who God justifies are sinners, God's enemies, who, by being justified, are "saved from the wrath of God" (Rom 5:6-10). Justification as a free gift offsets the condemnation that became the lot of all human beings through Adam's sin (Rom 5:16-17).

Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. (Rom 5:18-19)

In Romans, then, as in Galatians and Corinthians, Paul uses justification language as the answer to the human dilemma apparent already in Thessalonians: How can sinners find a gracious God? God shows himself gracious by providing, in Christ, justification for all who believe.

One other passage in Romans requires our consideration. At the end of chapter 9 and in the opening verses of chapter 10, Paul contrasts "the righteousness that is based on the law" with the "righteousness that is by faith." The fundamental principle of the former path, here as in Galatians 3:12 and Romans 2:13, is that "the person who does the commandments shall live by them" (Rom 10:5, again citing Lev 18:5); and to this day, Paul

says, Israel continues this pursuit without attaining their goal (Rom 9:31). They still live by the terms of the Sinaitic covenant, not realizing that its path to righteousness, never attained by sinners, has now been set aside with the coming of Christ: "for Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (Rom 10:4). "For everyone who believes," because "there is no distinction between Jews and Gentiles" (Rom 10:11-12). Yet it is largely Gentiles—not known for their pursuit of righteousness—who have attained the "righteousness that comes from God;" that is, the "righteousness that is by faith" (Rom 9:30; cf. 10:20). For Jews and Gentiles alike this is the path to salvation, "for everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Rom 10:13).

Paul returns to the contrast between the righteousness of the law and the righteousness of faith in Philippians 3, here to say that he himself once pursued the former. He abandoned it, he says, so that he might "gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of [his] own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith" (Phil 3:8-9). For Paul himself, justification by faith was perceived as the answer to a question. That question, however, had nothing to do with circumcision and everything to do with how Paul was to stand before God. To be found righteous was the goal, and two paths to its attainment came into question: first, that based on his own compliance with the law; and second, that received as a gift from God through faith in Christ. He opted for the latter.

It feels strange indeed to argue in the journal of a Lutheran seminary that justification by faith is Paul's answer to how sinners can find a gracious God. However obvious to many of us that claim may appear, it is much in dispute among Pauline scholars today. There is plainly plausibility in the counterclaim: It is first in Paul's letter to the Galatians that justification by faith becomes thematic, and Galatians presents Paul's response to those who insisted that Gentiles must be circumcised if they are to belong to God's people. In fact, however, Paul uses justification language to speak of God's extraordinary offer in Christ Jesus of righteousness to the *unrighteous* who respond in faith. Galatians is no exception. No, Paul says, Gentiles must *not* be circumcised because circumcision marks entrance into a covenant that, however divine in its origin, was limited in its purpose and scope. It articulated God's demands for righteous behavior, his blessing for those who obey his commands, and

his curse on transgressors. With sinful human beings the curse alone is operative.

How, then, can sinners find a gracious God? The question is hardly peculiar to the modern West; it was provoked by Paul's message wherever he went. Paul was commissioned, not to illuminate a crisis, but to present to a world under judgment a divine offer of salvation. In substance though not terminology in Thessalonians, in terminology though not prominently in Corinthians, thematically in Galatians and regularly thereafter, Paul's answer was that sinners for whom Christ died are declared righteous by God when they place their faith in Christ.