



Paul Today

When we are talking about Paul “for today” and of “his mission” and “message” which we do rather glibly, assuming this is known, I wonder how aware most people are about the “New Perspective” on Paul, as it is called. The whole point of the “New Perspective” is that Paul *today* is not the Paul we knew. This drastically affects how we understand his *mission* and his *message* rather than living in fantasy land about them, as the New Perspective suggests we have been. Hearing this, I can imagine someone asking how, after 2000 years, we haven’t got Paul’s message and mission straight? And asking isn’t it just typical modernist hubris to imagine that only now, in our time, are we getting Paul right? These are usually questions I ask and exclamations I make, given my distaste for “brave new worldism” with which progressivism is always laced, which to my mind is always mere intellectual grad-wrap; but in this case I don’t think it is. The answer to those questions I just raised can be given in one word: Holocaust. Christian thought has been historically determined by an anti-Judaic hype. It’s even in the New Testament – “the Jews” in John are the baddies. But a more historic example, to give but one, is the Emperor Constantine who changed the date of Easter, which the Church had previously celebrated to coincide with Jewish Passover. Constantine ordered the Church perennially to celebrate Easter in such a way as *never* to be on Passover, because, he ordained, Christians must have nothing to do with “the Christ-killers”, who anyway are deserving of death (and this was the tolerant period toward Jews). This kind of thinking is normal in Christian tradition - and some reflection of it was only removed from Catholic prayer-books after Vatican II. But why I mention it is that Paul has been the great hero of anti-Judaism, and even more for Protestants than for Catholics, for it is Paul, who in Romans, traditionally the key book of the Bible for Protestants, is reputed to have opposed the legalism and “death” of the Old Covenant, with the grace and salvation of the New. My point is this: *the ideology of Christian anti-Judaism was always basically Pauline*. But after the Holocaust in Europe, scholars, with a new sensibility toward Jews and Judaism (given the cultural Christian collusion in the whole debacle) realised that actually Paul was more Jewish than we’d thought and actually it is the *better reading* of Scripture to see that Paul was *not* opposing the Old to the New in the way Lutherans and others had so strongly emphasised. This is one big plank in the platform of the New Perspective on Paul and it impacts on Paul for today, and what we ascertain to be his mission and his message.

The New Perspective on Paul is therefore a complete reversal, such that, a comment by the scholar Alister McGrath, on the back cover of a new work by one of the New Perspective’s major scholars, N. T. Wright, says, “If Wright is correct, Luther was wrong.” Now the person making this comment, Alistair McGrath, is not some middle brow book reviewer, but the most famous Protestant professor writing in English today and among the most erudite. McGrath’s one-liner has been ripped out of context and it may well be that he would side with Luther, I don’t know. But the fact is that The New Perspective is nothing

short of revolutionary within Protestant Evangelicalism, which is the core movement within different forms of Protestantism; and it will surely impact on the Catholic Church sooner or later precisely because *the basis of it is Scripture*. The leading proponents of the New Perspective are not only Protestants but Scripture scholars. N. T. Wright has an amazing CV. He had been a Lecturer in New Testament Studies at Oxford University and at Cambridge University. He was Canon of Westminster (a 'Lector Theologiae') before becoming Bishop of Durham in 2003. Durham Cathedral is where Venerable Bede a Doctor of the Catholic Church, and author of *Ecclesiastical History* (731) is buried. Wright has been adamant against those who say "Wright is Wrong" as one (scholarly) Sydney Anglican Bishop recently had the nerve to do. To him Wright said, "my authority is Scripture, not traditions *about* Scripture." This is as one Protestant to another! So Wright is playing a trump card by saying this. And Wright adds, "...especially traditions based on Protestant disagreements with Catholics." In other words, traditions which are not themselves biblically based. Let's argue about the Bible, Wright says to his critics. Of course that puts them on Wright's home-turf, given that he knows the Bible mostly by heart but knows the historical lexicography of every word in the New Testament. I remember when Wright was here in Sydney and at question time someone stood up and read some verses of Paul which directly contradicted what Wright had just been saying – or seemed to. But from the podium Wright interjected, having immediately recognised the translation she was reading from. Given the enormous number of available translations of the New Testament into English and their similarity this was impressive I thought. Then he said the Greek underlying the words you have just read are (saying the Greek), then he went on to explain that the translation was improperly based on the Greek meaning of Paul, and so couldn't be relied on in a discussion such as this. He basically said her Bible was deceiving her. All this in the shake of a duck's tail. It was daunting. Even the person who had hoped to disprove Wright from the Bible looked like someone who had accidentally waded out of their depth. And Protestants are not used to feeling like this about the Bible – of course as the only Catholic present I was able to smile a little smugly to myself.

So briefly, in a paragraph, what is the New Perspective about? Well there is a whole literature of it already. New Perspective people talk about Paul in the Judaic context of this time, and particularly of the Judaic thought-world, which as I said, is held in new respect, and quite rightly so. Wright explains that Paul doesn't mean by "justification by faith alone" what it has customarily been taken to mean in Protestant circles; that is why, if he is right, Luther is wrong. Wright argues across thousands of pages that Paul retains the shape of Jewish theology of his time, but fills it with new content. So the argument is basically about "justified" "justification" and "faith" and "righteousness" and juxtapositions like "the righteousness of God" or "justification by faith", but ultimately the best of the literature (and that is why I've limited myself to mentioning Wright, because he is the tip of the best of it) is about how the Gospel is about Jesus and how the Christian reading of the Jewish Scriptures is totally in terms of Jesus, and how, therefore, Paul is teaching nothing but Christ, and him risen.

For more information check out <http://www.thepaulpage.com/>
Or <http://www.ntwrightpage.com>

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