Dunn, J D G 2007 - *The new perspective on Paul*

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Now and again biblical scholarship and theology undergo what can be called a paradigm shift in interpretation. The "New Perspective on Paul" (NPP) certainly is such a paradigm shift. The "new perspective" is a term Dunn originally used for E P Sanders' work on Early Judaism and Paul, but it has since developed to now being mainly associated with the work of Dunn himself. Ever since the now famous Mansion Memorial Lecture delivered by Dunn in 1982, Pauline studies - at least in some circles - have challenged the received Protestant/Reformed tradition's interpretation of what Paul meant by "works of the law". The point of the enterprise was to understand that Paul's argument also had a social and ethnic dimension to it when appreciated context, and therefore should not exclusively be seen through the lens of Martin Luther's basic theology as it developed in reaction against Roman Catholicism. Employing social studies, Dunn opened up new understanding Paul, serving to enlighten those who welcome it, and soliciting vigorous opposition from those who will destroy the very foundation of the Protestant/Reformed theological tradition.

Dunn's basic thesis is that "works of the law" do not refer to "legalistic works righteousness", or to the one's salvation through "works". What Paul opposed, rather, was the insistence of Israelite believers in a social boundary between Israelite and Gentile. The "works of the law" - mainly circumcision, dietary laws, Sabbath observance - which the Gentile believers had to adopt, were important "badges" of identity, or "test cases" of fidelity to Israel's covenant with God. As far as these Israelite believers were concerned, Gentiles had to become members and so adopt "Jewish" identity through circumcision and/or observing purity laws and the Sabbath day exercised their faith in Jesus by remaining Gentiles. It is the Gentile adoption of these "badges" of identity that Paul strongly opposed. He attacked the social function of the law, a certain attitude towards the law...
Dunn also insists, however, that "works of the law" refer to the entire law, yet it specifically focuses on covenant fidelity and matters for which "Jews" were persecuted during the Maccabean period. In this argument that the law still had a positive function for Paul, that is, when it is "denationalized" and no longer a possession and boundary marker of Israel, and so can still be a guide for everyday life, especially in its command. Paul had a narrow and a broad approach to the law: one will not be justified by doing the very social function of the law, yet one will still be judged by the law (where it still reveals God's command in Dunn's interpretation is an aspect which still needs to be resolved.

Related arguments are Paul's reproach of Israelite "boasting". This is not "boasting" about one's own but Paul's attack is on "Jews" and their self-perceived covenant "set-apartness", their sense of having eyes of God, and not being liable to condemnation as the Gentiles were. Paul moved away from his former "zeal", which, as in Phinehas, focused on protecting Israel's "set-apartness" to God.

The above argument formed part of the reason, so Dunn has maintained for nearly 30 years, why Paul theology of justification by faith. It was to help remove the social boundary between "Jew" and Gentile (boundary making) attitude to the law in view of the all embracing gospel.

This is the NPP of Dunn in a nutshell, which of course, contains many more nuances and aspects of interpretation discussed here. These can be discovered and digested from the book that contains Dunn's continuous work on the NPP. The majority of the articles (chaps. 2-21) were published between 1983 to 2004, comprising 20 articles that set out, develop, and answer objections to the NPP. There are also two "new" additions: chapter one sets out another defence of the doctrine of justification. It simply observes that a social theology of justification by faith. It was to help remove the social boundary between "Jew" and Gentile (boundary making) attitude to the law in view of the all embracing gospel.

So does the NPP undermine the Protestant/Reformed theological basis and tradition of justification by faith? This is not "boasting" about one's own but Paul's attack is on "Jews" and their self-perceived covenant "set-apartness", their sense of having eyes of God, and not being liable to condemnation as the Gentiles were. Paul moved away from his former "zeal", which, as in Phinehas, focused on protecting Israel's "set-apartness" to God.

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Another motif also evident in the NPP is Paul describing the process of salvation in vv 9-11. The righteous of God only secure at the resurrection from the dead - it is not something he already attained. This points to the process of personal transformation "in Christ", and therefore justification should not be understood "righteousness" imputed to the believer, or the cross as atonement. In contrast with his previous confidence, humility that there was still much to be done on his part, requiring intense personal exertion in order to reach the prize "of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (3:14). What we find here is Dunn's insistence on distinguishing between initial justification and final justification - salvation for Paul is a process!

Dunn and his work on the NPP have brought to light the importance of ethnic identity in the New Test Paul faced in his attempt to make one people out of the many. This book is a testimony to Paul's struggle as Dunn's identification of that struggle when appreciated in its social and historical context, dimensic ignored in the development of Paul's theology. If you are a supporter of the NPP, this book is a conven work on the topic and a necessary addition to your library. If not, it will be a principal dialogue partner a testimony to Dunn's contribution to New Testament theology, and, I believe, a testimony to how a socio understanding of Paul and his doctrine of justification by faith.