

The NPP and 2 former Presbyterian Moderators: there is no new thing under the sun

In recent years, there has been much talk and discussion about what has come to be known as the **NPP**. This I hasten to add is not referring to the ideology of some 'supremacist' political party but rather the **NPP** refers to a new 'take' being put forward by an array of theologians on the inspired teachings of the Apostle Paul, in particular in relation to the glorious truth of 'justification'. The initials stand for the '**New Perspective on Paul**' but the reality is that it is just another attack upon the truth of God's inspired word and so it is '**no new thing under the sun**'. When analysed in 'the cold light of scripture' this '**new perspective**' is being used to undermine the very heart of the true Gospel and is being used to further the aims and ambitions of today's liberals and ecumenists.

Faithful servants of God have written some very helpful articles and I want to draw extracts from one particular article that will hopefully give you an understanding of what sadly is being advanced in many colleges and seminaries around the world and also close to home. The article is found on the website of The Trinity Foundation and this is this relevant link should you wish to read the whole article

<http://www.trinityfoundation.org/journal.php?id=237>

The article is entitled '**The New Perspective on Paul**' and was written by **Louis DeBoer** [Editor of American Presbyterian Press]. Herewith are the extracts *[with an occasional added comment by myself]* –

'Let us first recall what we are being asked to discard, the "old perspective on Paul." The old perspective declared that Paul was concerned about God's law, sin, and individual salvation, and taught the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith alone...Justification is an act of God's free grace wherein he pardons all our sins and accepts us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us and received by faith alone" (*Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Question 33).

The Gospel, the good news, presupposes the bad news, the fall into sin and man's hopeless condition before a just and holy God, as recounted in *Genesis*. Man violated the covenant of works, which is the covenant God made with Adam in the Garden before the fall...

The good news, the Gospel, is that Christ kept this covenant on behalf of His people, His elect. He hung on the cross in our place and suffered the death that we deserved. He paid the penalties that this covenant required of those who transgress it. And more than that, He kept its terms for us. He led the perfectly sinless life of faithful and personal obedience that God requires of us, thereby earning everlasting life for us. Christ's perfect obedience to the law of God, His sinless perfection, His spotless righteousness, is imputed to us at the moment we believe the Gospel. We are justified, declared not guilty, because of the imputation of our sins to Christ, and the imputation of His perfect righteousness to us...

The imputation of Christ's righteousness to us when we believe the Gospel fits us for Heaven and fellowship with a holy God. Both the obedience to God's law and the satisfaction of God's justice are absolutely necessary, and both are provided by Jesus Christ. We are saved by His passive and active obedience, not our own...

This is the Gospel that has been preached and proclaimed, believed and trusted, for the past 2000 years, especially during the 490 years since the Reformation...And this is the Gospel

that we are now being told is all wrong because it is based on a misunderstanding of first-century Judaism and what Paul was actually trying to teach...

The New Perspective on Paul (NPP) says that the Western churches for the past 2000 years, and especially Protestants for the past 500 years, have all misunderstood Paul...They claim that justification has nothing to do with our legal standing before God...but to ecclesiology, the doctrine of the church. Justification is horizontal [*Cecil - the man to man relationship*], not vertical [*Cecil - the man to God relationship*];... Paul was not concerned about how we are delivered from our sins as much as he was concerned about church membership...

According to the NPP, Second-Temple Judaism was really a religion that believed in "salvation by grace," and it has been improperly condemned as being a religion of salvation by works, human merit, and one's own righteousness...According to the NPP the problem was not that the Judaisers in the early church were corrupting the Gospel and teaching a false way of salvation so much as they were confusing badges of church membership....They refused to admit Gentiles into the church unless they wore the Jewish badges of covenant membership: circumcision, adherence to the ceremonial law, etc. [*Cecil – this NNP assertion is totally refuted by Acts 15:1 “And certain men who came down from Judea taught the brethren and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses ye cannot BE SAVED”*]

To the NPP, the entire question is, what is the badge of covenant membership in the New Testament - circumcision or faith? According to the NPP, "justification" has to do with how we recognize who is in the covenant family. "Justification by faith" simply means that faith, as opposed to circumcision, observing the dietary laws of Moses, etc., is the badge that enables us to recognize who is a Christian, that is, who is in the covenant community.

They are careful to point out that they mean faith in Christ as Lord, not faith in a substitutionary atonement. [*Cecil - An atonement that ALONE propitiated God's wrath and that ALONE expiated the guilt of God's elect*] They believe that the whole plan of salvation that the Reformers taught as the Gospel is a fabrication based on a misunderstanding of Paul and Judaism. The following quotations from NPP theologians give a sense of how they express these views:

James D. G. Dunn

The doctrine of justification by faith came to expression in these key letters of Paul (*Galatians* and *Romans*) as his attempt to prove that God's covenant blessings were for Gentiles as well as Jews...Justification by faith is Paul's fundamental objection to the idea that God has limited his saving goodness to a particular people. ⁽¹⁾

[Bishop] N. T. Wright

"Justification" in the first century was not about how someone might establish a relationship with God. It was about God's eschatological definition, both future and present, of who was, in fact, a member of his people...Despite a long tradition to the contrary, the problem Paul addresses in *Galatians* is not the question of how precisely someone becomes a Christian or attains to a relationship with God...**The problem he addresses is: Should ex-pagan converts be circumcised or not?**... it has to do, quite obviously, with the question of how you define the people of God. Are they to be defined by the badges of the Jewish race, or in some other way? ⁽²⁾

By "the gospel" Paul does not mean "justification by faith." He means the announcement that the crucified and risen Jesus is Lord...To believe it is both to have assurance...and to know that one belongs in the single family of God, called to share table

fellowship with all other believers without distinction (*Galatians* 2:11-21).⁽³⁾... **It is not how you become a Christian, so much as how you can tell who is a member of the covenant family**...the doctrine which insists that all who share faith in Christ belong at the same table...the central tenet of the NPP 'Justification' is not about salvation from sin, but about "who belongs at the same dinner table." It is about social fellowship and food, not sin and righteousness.

The Agenda of the New Perspective

What motivated the originators of the NPP to craft this revisionist view of Paul's theology? Since they have been rather explicit in promoting the alleged benefits of their "perspective," we can gain a direct insight into their agenda. I will cover it under the following heads –

1. Anti-Semitism. Proponents of the NPP say they want to vindicate Paul from the charge of anti-Semitism. They think Paul's harsh words against the Judaizers and his low estimation of first-century Judaism lays him open to a charge of anti-Semitism...Now, Paul was himself a Jew, with a passion for the salvation of his fellow Israelites...Paul even said, "For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren" [*Romans* 9:3]... These are not the words of an anti-Semite, but of a man desperately labouring to bring salvation to his fellow Jews who are trapped in the coils of a false religion,

2. Ecumenism. The proponents of the NPP decry the results of the Christian Reformation...They believe that both sides in the Reformation misunderstood Paul, and that the entire Reformation was a gigantic mistake...and they hope that their teachings will reunite Catholics and Protestants...They see their novel doctrine as particularly useful in reuniting all branches of the "Christian" church and accomplishing the goal of one church in one world.

3. Socialism. Third, they see their doctrine as of great use in advancing the church in its primary goal of promoting "social justice." [*Cecil – Rome will absolutely love this*]... to show how justification is a doctrine that ought to be drawing us together instead of dividing us and separating us.⁽⁸⁾

4. The Gospel. Finally...The Gospel of the Christian church, which was restored in the Christian Reformation, must be eliminated and replaced with something else, something more relevant, more mundane, more tangible. The NPP is radically opposed to the Biblical doctrines of sin and salvation...and it asserts that Christians have misunderstood the Bible on this very basic point for the past 2,000 years..

Now there is a common thread to all these concerns. There is a uniformity to this agenda. These are all Liberal concerns. Christians are concerned about truth. Christians are concerned about sin and the salvation of their fellow men, about their eternal standing before a just and a holy God. Liberals have other concerns. They do not believe in the Gospel. They see no need for it because they do not believe in man's desperate condition before God. Their concerns, like the Sadducees of old, are all related to this present world. The New Perspective is the latest form of theological Liberalism.

1. James D. G. Dunn and Alan M. Suggate, *The Justice of God: A Fresh Look at the Old Doctrine of Justification by Faith*, 25, 28.

2. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 119-120.

3. N.T. Wright, "The Shape of Justification." See also chapter 7 of *What Saint Paul Really Said*.

8. J. Ligon Duncan, "The Attractions of the New Perspective(s) on Paul."

This article by **Louis DeBoer** continues on to consider 'The Attractions of the New Perspective' and 'Theological History Fabricated by the NPP' before drawing some 'Conclusions' in which **Mr DeBoer** writes – "Today's "Evangelicals" [*Cecil – those promoting the NPP*] extend the right hand of fellowship to wolves in sheep's clothing [*Cecil – likeminded liberal ecumenists*] and count heretics [*Cecil - The Pope, his priests, so-called "Evangelical Catholics" etc*] as "esteemed brethren."

In the light of this very helpful article by **Mr DeBoer** I want now to relate this **NPP** to 2 former Irish Presbyterian Moderators namely **Trevor Morrow** and **Russell Birney**. Back in the late 1990's I had identified how unitedly they were twisting and misrepresenting the inspired teachings in Paul's letter to the Galatians. Their 'heresy', for that's what it is, didn't go under the banner of the **NPP** but in the light of the more recent controversy addressed by **Mr DeBoer** I can now see that this is precisely what both **Mr Morrow** and **Mr Birney** were advocating.

Mr DeBoer identified 'ecumenism' as being on the agenda of those promoting the **NPP** and it was in precisely this context that both **Mr Morrow** and **Mr Birney** set forth their 'twisted teachings'. What follows now are extracts from what I wrote about the teachings of **Trevor Morrow** and **Russell Birney**. On **Trevor Morrow** I wrote -

'I mentioned the 1998 Belfast launch of the 16-page booklet entitled '*Evangelicals & Catholics Together in Ireland*'...Coinciding with the launch of this booklet was another publication called "*Adventures in reconciliation: 29 Catholic Testimonies*"... In addition to the 29 Catholic 'Testimonies' in the 1998 book... there were also 4 'Commendations', one of which was by **Trevor Morrow**. This 'Commendation' contained one of the most devious scripture-twisting segments I have ever read – twisted in order to malign true evangelicals who in obedience to God's Word separate from those who are trusting in the false 'gospel' of Roman Catholicism... **Trevor Morrow** wrote in his 'Commendation' [pages 26-27]...

'For Presbyterians like myself, who still hold to the principle of the Reformation – of justification by faith alone, the implications are straightforward. If these [29 Catholic] testimonies are evidence of real faith in Christ, then whatever our theological differences, these Roman Catholic believers are justified by faith alone, and so are our brothers and sisters in Christ'. In Paul's letter to the Galatians, he saw this doctrine [justification by faith alone] as vital for Christian fellowship and freedom. The Jewish Christians from Jerusalem had come down to Galatia and were fearful that Paul's message of justification apart from the work of the law would undermine the traditions and identity of their Jewish inheritance. They were insisting that it was not enough for a Gentile to believe in Jesus Christ. They also had to keep the laws of Judaism; to be circumcised, to keep the dietary requirements, to observe the Jewish Sabbaths and festivals, in order for them to be accepted as Christians. It became for them a criteria for fellowship. Paul rails against this. If someone insists that something else is required, apart from faith, in order to accept a person as a fellow Christian, or as a basis for fellowship, then they, says Paul, are preaching a false gospel'.

Trevor Morrow is teaching that Paul's argument with the Judaizers was centred upon what the basis for 'fellowship' should be. This is **Mr Morrow's** 'devious scripture-twisting' that I referred to earlier. Paul's argument was not dealing with the basis of 'Christian fellowship' but with the basis for 'salvation'. "The gospel of Christ [alone] is the power of God unto salvation" [Romans 1:16] and the Judaizers were preaching a 'gospel' of 'Christ + works' [just like Rome] that can never "save" anyone and so these preachers and their 'gospel' were placed under God's curse [Galatians 1:8-9]. Paul positively encourages the discernment of and separation from such false teachers whereas **Trevor Morrow** teaches that those who rightly exercise Biblical discernment and separation are the ones who are in error. **Trevor Morrow**, by what

he wrote in his 'Commendation' is...guilty of mimicking the role played by the Apostle Peter in the 'Galatian error'

The full article on **Trevor Morrow** from which these extracts have been taken can be accessed on - <http://www.takeheed.info/trevor-morrow-reformed-but-living-in-the-21st-century/>

On **Russell Birney** I wrote –

'On 7 November 1999, **Russell Birney**, the minister of a large and popular [especially with young people from neighbouring congregations] Presbyterian Church in Ballymena preached a sermon based on Paul's epistle to the Galatians. The first 90-95% of the sermon could not be faulted but the final section betrayed **Mr Birney's** ecumenical zeal as he totally twisted his accurate biblical exposition of events with an application designed to serve the cause of **false ecumenism...**

The 'Galatian error' was that of the Judaisers '*requiring people to enter into a system of faith + works for salvation*' - a system that Paul condemned with "anathema". The 'Galatian error' was not [*as Mr Birney stated*] believers today '*requesting people to leave a system of faith + works for salvation*' as represented by the modern-day equivalent of the Judaisers namely Roman Catholicism...

Such action [by believers] is in obedience to the Word of God and is certainly not to be viewed as **Mr Birney** taught as the equivalent of the 'Galatian error'. Rather **Mr Birney** is the one who stands guilty of such 'error' as he is himself disobeying the clear command of God's Word by willingly fellowshiping with those who still claim to be Roman Catholics.

The full article on **Russell Birney** from which these extracts have been taken can be accessed on - <http://www.takeheed.info/news-from-the-front-march-2000/>

This **NPP**, as I wrote earlier, 'is just another attack upon the truth of God's inspired word' but it is a very serious one because it undermines the very heart of the glorious gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. What is particularly worrying, from a local standpoint, is the fact that 2 men elected in the last decade to the role of Moderator in the largest Protestant church grouping in Ireland have been in the forefront of promoting this gospel-destroying heresy. It is to be hoped that their influence will not adversely influence or affect what is being taught as 'The Gospel' in the theological college in Belfast where ministers are trained for their denomination.

In conclusion, the daily Devotional '**Footprints of Faith**' had these thoughts today [18 July] on the phrase "**To teach them war**" [Judges 3:2] – "**It was necessary for God's ancient people to learn the discipline of war...We must know the enemy. How vital is good intelligence in a military campaign. Child of God, do not underestimate the strength of the enemy. It is not for nothing that he is compared to a lion and a dragon. How subtle is our adversary. He can disguise himself as an angel of light...We must develop a holy skill in the use of the weaponry placed at our disposal. There is 'the sword of the Spirit', which is the Word of God, How wonderfully our Saviour wielded that sword...He met every subtle satanic onslaught with 'It is written'...We can wage a good warfare only as we are 'strong in the Lord and in the power of his might' [Ephesians 6:10].**

Stand fast against this **NPP** and hold fast to "**the old paths**" [Jeremiah 6:16].