

**AN OVERVIEW AND CRITIQUE OF THE NEW PERSPECTIVE
ON PAUL’S DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION:
Part Three—The New Perspective Critiqued (2)**

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In the last article we considered some of the historical and hermeneutical problems with the New Perspective (NP). Of course ultimately the question of whether the NP provides a valid interpretation of Paul must be determined on the basis of exegesis. Are the viewpoints of the NP supported by what Paul actually says in his epistles? In a limited amount of space there is no way to give a detailed exposition of every relevant passage of Scripture. But we can take up some of the major categories of NP reinterpretation of Paul and point to some of the exegetical problems with these reinterpretations. The first problem will be discussed in this article.

Problem One: “The Works of the Law”

It is good to remind ourselves that one of the major tenets of the NP is its peculiar understanding of Paul’s references to the “works of the law” in connection with justification. What did Paul mean, for example, when he says that we are “justified by faith and not by the works of the law”? The phrase “the works [or deeds] of the law” (ἔργων νόμου) is found in Romans and Galatians eight or nine times. It is found at Rom. 3:20 and 3:28. Some manuscripts have it at Rom. 9:32 (while others simply have the more general term “works”). And it is found three times at Gal. 2:15 and once each at Gal. 3:2, 3:5, and 3:10.

In the traditional Reformed understanding, when Paul speaks of being justified by faith and not by the works of the law, he refers to the impossibility of being justified on the basis of one’s efforts to do what the law commands. Since no sinner, whether Jew or Gentile, has obeyed, or is able to obey, the law of God perfectly, or genuinely, no one can be justified before God by their works. The Reformed view has, therefore, also understood Paul’s polemic against justification by works to be

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directed toward Jewish or Jewish-Christian legalists who taught that we are justified either in whole or in part on the basis of our own good works or efforts to obey the law.

But, as we have seen in previous articles, the NP argues that this understanding is wrong. According to E.P. Sanders, the Jews were not trying to be justified on the basis of keeping of the law. And according to James Dunn and N.T. Wright, when Paul speaks about the “works of the law,” he has in mind the social function of the law as a boundary marker, or a charter of national privilege, separating the Jews from the Gentiles. This particularly brings into focus things such as the rite of circumcision, the food laws, the Sabbath laws, and the feast days by which the Jews were set apart from the Gentiles. Likewise the problem that Paul is addressing, according to the NP, is not the basis on which a sinner can find acceptance with God, but the question of how Gentiles can be included together with the Jews in the covenant community.¹

This article will try to show that the NP understanding of Paul’s polemic with reference to the “works of the law” is off the mark and that the Reformed understanding, on the whole, is in line with the Scriptures. The path we will follow is outlined below:²

¹ This attempt to restrict Paul’s references to law (in the matter of justification) to ceremonial requirements is not new. A similar view was taught by Pelagius and has been held by others in church history. Calvin responded to it in his day. For example, he said, “Let them now babble if they dare, that these statements apply to ceremonies, not to morals. Even schoolboys would hoot at such impudence. Therefore, let us hold as certain that when the ability to justify is denied to the law, these words refer to the whole law.” Philip Eveson, *The Great Exchange: Justification by faith alone—in light of recent thought* (Surry, UK: Day One Publications, 1996), 133, quoting from Calvin’s *Institutes* 3.11.19. Eveson notes (endnote 29) that though Calvin actually refers to Origin, according to Battles’s (note 36) the reference is to Pelagius. Jonathan Edwards also addresses this view. Jonathan Edwards, “Justification by Faith Alone,” *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (reprint ed., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 1:630-635.

² Cornelius Venema takes a similar approach. I found his articles on this subject very helpful and suggestive. See Cornelius Venema, “Evaluating the New Perspective on Paul” (4): “What Does Paul Mean by the ‘Works of the Law?’,” Sept. 2003 and Oct. 2003. Also “Evaluating the New Perspective on Paul” (5): “‘Works of the Law’, Human Inability and Boasting,” parts one and two, Dec. 2003 and Jan. 2004. These articles may be found at <http://www.wrfnet.org/articles>. Also helpful is an article by Douglas Moo, “Law, Works of the Law, and Legalism in Paul,” in *Westminster Theological Journal* 45:1 (Spring 1983). Also Moo’s, “Excursus: Paul, ‘Works of the Law,’ and First-Century Judaism,” in *The Epistle To The Romans*, in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 211-217. Edwards, “Justification,” 1:630-635 addresses the attempt to restrict works of the law to ceremonial ordinances in a way that at some points is very helpful.

I. The “works of the law” in Romans

A. *The overall context in which the phrase is introduced in Rom. 3:20*

1. After two and a half chapters of proving that all men, Jews as well as Gentiles, are sinners, under the wrath of God, and under the condemnation of the law
2. After the divine standard by which all are in this condition has been spelled out in terms of the ethical claims of God upon men

B. *The close connection of the phrase “the works of the law” with the more general term “works” in Rom. 4:1-6*

II. The “works of the law” in Galatians

A. *Gal. 2:16*

B. *Gal. 3:10-14*

C. *Gal. 5:3-4*

D. *Gal. 6:13*

III. The reasons Paul gives for why “the works of the law” cannot justify

A. *Gal. 3:10*

B. *Rom. 3:10-20*

C. *Rom. 7*

IV. The statements Paul makes about “works” in his other epistles

I. The “works of the law” in Romans

In Romans, the expression “works of the law” refers to deeds performed in obedience to God’s commandments as a whole with respect to his moral claims on men. Contrary to the NP, it does not refer just to adherence to the law in terms of a socially excluding function given primary expression in Jewish boundary markers. In other words, “works of the law” does not point simply to ethnic distinctives, but also and, indeed, primarily, to ethical ones.³

³ Peter O’Brien, “Was Paul a Covenantal Nomist,” *Justification And Variegated Nomism Volume 2-The Paradoxes Of Paul*, eds. D.A. Carson, Peter T. O’Brien, Mark A. Seifrid (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Press, 2004), 279.

A. *The overall context in which the phrase is introduced in Rom. 3:20*

After two and a half chapters of proving that all men, Jews as well as Gentiles, are sinners, under the wrath of God, and under the condemnation of the law, Paul writes, “Therefore by the deeds of the law [or by the works of the law] no flesh will be justified in his sight” (3:20). This is the first use of the phrase “works (or deeds) of the law” in Romans. Dunn interprets Paul as speaking of “those acts prescribed by the law by which a member of the covenant people identified himself as a Jew and maintained his status within the covenant.”⁴ He argues that between the phrases “works of the law” and “shall be justified” there is a hidden middle term that Reformation exegesis largely missed.⁵ “The hidden middle term,” he says, “is the function of the law as an identity factor, the social function of the law marking out the people of the law in their distinctiveness (circumcision, food laws, etc.).”⁶ Wright tells us that the reference is to “possession of Torah as the badge of being God’s special people.”⁷ Is the reference, however, to the social function of the law—the law merely as a boundary marker separating the Jews from the Gentiles? Or does it refer to the ethical function of the law—to those deeds performed in obedience to the commands of the law as a whole?

One of the keys to understanding Paul’s use of the phrase “the deeds of the law” is careful consideration of the preceding context. Obviously, a detailed exposition of the entirety of Romans to this point would take too much space; but we can draw out some of the main lines of thought leading up to 3:19-20.

First, Paul has just spent two and half chapters proving that all men are sinners under the wrath of God and under condemnation. He has given an extended, sweeping indictment comprehending both Gentile and Jew.⁸ He charges both for their failure to live up to the divine standard. That this is what he is doing is confirmed by his own words: “For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin” (3:9).

⁴ Dunn, *Romans*, 1:158.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Wright, *Romans*, 461.

⁸ Waters, *New Perspectives*, 160.

Second, the standard before which all are condemned is spelled out in these chapters, not in terms of the boundary marker function of the law, but in terms of the moral claims of God upon men. This can be easily demonstrated. After saying, “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men” (1:18), Paul follows with a long list of sins by which men have exposed themselves to God’s wrath and which themselves are an indication that God’s wrath rests upon the human race. For example, we read,

being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; they are whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful; who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them (Rom. 1:29-32).

Paul’s argument is that all men have sinned, are accountable to God for their actions, are under his wrath, and are without excuse. The passage focuses on the Gentiles who do not have written revelation. They have sinned against the revelation of God in creation and conscience. They have suppressed “in unrighteousness” the truth that God has revealed to them. Though they have not known God savingly, nonetheless they have suppressed what they have known. “What may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse” (1:19-20). All men are condemned, not in terms of the boundary marker function of the law, not even in terms of the law of God as inscripturated by Moses, but in terms of the moral claims of God upon all men as creatures created in his image and as possessing his revelation in creation and conscience.

In chapter 2 Paul anticipates the presumption of the moralist. “Therefore you are inexcusable, O man, whoever you are who judge, for in whatever you judge another you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things” (Rom. 2:1). In other words, he condemns the moralist who judges others while failing to see that in doing so he is condemning himself, for he is guilty of the same sins.

Paul goes on to point out that God’s judgment is impartial (vv. 2-6). Verse 6 concludes this line of thought with the words: “who will render

to each one according to *his deeds*.” Notice that the works or deeds that Paul has in mind are works in general; any kind of works. These works can be described as good: “eternal life to those who by patient continuance in *doing good* seek for glory”(v. 7; cf., v. 10), or as evil: “tribulation and anguish on every soul of man *who does evil*” (v. 9).

Paul shows explicitly that the Jews who have the law and the Gentiles who do not are in the same boat. This applies to the Jew first and also to the Greek (v. 10). God shows no partiality (v. 11). Paul says, “for as many who have sinned [that is, who have done evil works] without law will also perish without law” (v. 12a). He is speaking of the Gentiles, who do not have inscripturated special revelation. Paul goes on, “and as many as have sinned [or have done evil works] in the law will be judged by the law” (v. 12b). These are the Jews, and may include Gentile proselytes, who have inscripturated special revelation. Then he says, “for not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified” (v. 13). Possessing the law and hearing the law will not justify. The law must be obeyed. The emphasis is on doing what the law requires. Paul’s point, going back to v. 6, is that God will give to each one according to his works, *i.e.*, according to his good deeds or his evil deeds, regardless of whether he is a Jew who has the law, or a Gentile who does not have the law in its written form.

Paul goes on to explain that though the Gentiles do not have the law in written form, they still have the work of the law written in their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness (vv.14-16). Therefore God will judge them for what they do know and for what their consciences bear witness to of His moral law (by virtue of natural revelation). This is an important text because it demonstrates that the law of God as inscripturated by Moses does apply to Gentiles with respect to its ethical and moral demands. God’s law is not considered here only in terms of its social function of maintaining a distinctly Jewish social and ethnic separation from the nations. Its ethical demands correspond with the work of the law written on the hearts of all men by nature, and all men are accountable to those ethical demands.

Beginning in v.17, Paul addresses the Jew who has the written law, who characteristically relies on the law, who makes his boast in God, who knows his will, and who approves the things that are excellent, being instructed out of the law. He addresses the Jew who is confident that he himself is a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, and so on, having the form of knowledge and truth in the law (vv.17-20). By a series of rhetorical

questions, Paul implies that even Jews who teach the law to others are guilty of violating its prohibitions against lying, adultery, idolatry, etc. (vv. 21-23). The result is that the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of them (v. 24).

Paul then points out that the Jew's circumcision will avail him nothing if he does not obey the ethical demands of the law as a whole (vv. 25-29). Notice that he contrasts here the moral claims of the law with the Jewish boundary marker of circumcision: "You who preach that man should not steal, do you steal? You who say, 'Do not commit adultery?' do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?" etc. (vv. 21ff) and "For circumcision is indeed profitable *if you keep the law*; but if you are a breaker of the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision" (v. 25). Paul contrasts keeping or not keeping the law (including such commands as "do not steal and do not commit adultery") with circumcision. It is at least conceivable (for the sake of argument) that one may be uncircumcised and yet keep the law in the way that Paul speaks of keeping it in this context (v. 26), and that one who is circumcised may not keep the law in the sense in which Paul is speaking (v. 27).

Clearly, the issue is the law in terms of its ethical demands, not merely its function as a social boundary marker. The problem that Paul identifies and underscores is not that the Jew failed to keep the boundary marker regulations of the law such as circumcision. And he is not insisting that Gentiles become Jews and keep the boundary marker regulations of the law. Rather, he speaks of the Jew's failure to obey the law as a whole in terms of its ethical demands.

Paul then continues his argument that all (both Jew and Gentile) are under condemnation, that all are accountable to God as lawbreakers and sinners. This leads to v. 9, where he says, "What then? Are we [Jews] better than they [Gentiles]? Not at all, for we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin." And how does Paul then describe this universal condition of all mankind, this all men being under sin? In terms of Jewish boundary markers? No, in terms of the ethical claims of God upon his creatures.

As it is written: There is none righteous, no, not one; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside; they have together become unprofitable; there is none who does good, no, not one. Their throat is an open tomb; with their tongues they have practiced deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips; whose

mouth is full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; destruction and misery are in their ways; and the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes (3:10-18).

Verses 19-20, where we first find the phrase “the deeds of the law,” serve as the conclusion or climax to the argumentation of 1:18-3:18. Paul writes:

Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin.

Clearly, in light of the context that we have just surveyed, “the deeds of the law” here cannot be limited to so-called Jewish boundary markers! The emphasis of the last two and half chapters has been that both Jews and Gentiles are guilty of failing to do what the law as a whole requires in terms of God’s ethical claims upon mankind. Consider the main lines of thought in these verses.

First, there is a common knowledge assumed. “*Now we know* that whatever the law says, it says to those under the law.” What does Paul mean? “We know” introduces a truth that Paul assumes his readers also know. What is known is that whatever the law says, it says to those under or in the law (ἐν τῷ νόμῳ). In the preceding verses (vv. 10-18), Paul has given a series of quotations from the Psalms and Isaiah. Therefore, the first use of the term “law” in this sentence (“whatever the law says”) does not designate what it usually does with Paul, *i.e.*, the law of Moses, but refers to the OT canon as a whole. However we must keep in mind that these indictments are based on the ethical requirements of the Mosaic Law. The second use of *nomos* (“it says to those under or in the law”) may continue to refer to the OT as a whole, or Paul may revert to the usual, narrower meaning.

Ultimately it doesn’t matter. The point is that the law, the OT, including the quotes that he has just given (to the effect that there are none righteous), speaks to those who are under or in the law. This is probably a reference to the Jews. John Murray tries to give a broader reference, pointing to the reference to Gentiles who do not have the law in written form being a law to themselves, showing the work of the law

written in their hearts (2:14-15).⁹ In this way he expands the reference to all people, Jew and Gentile, as those being described in the words “whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law.” That is possible and takes into account the universal language in these verses: “every mouth may be stopped,” “all the world may become guilty,” “by the deeds of the law *no flesh* will be justified.” Attractive as this interpretation is, however, it is too strained. Paul’s phrase is literally those who are “in the law,” which is parallel to his referring to the Jews by the words “as many as *in the law*” (ἐν νόμῳ), in contrast with the Gentiles (2:12). Also, the quotations in vv. 10-18 are taken from the OT and are thus found in the Scriptures by those who had them (*i.e.*, the Jews). The assumption from early on in Romans has been that, though all Gentiles are exposed to the claims of God’s law and are accountable to its ethical demands, not all are exposed to the law inscripturated as given to Moses. Thus, the most natural understanding is that when Paul says, “whatever the law says, it says to those who are in the law,” he is primarily thinking of Jews. However this does not in anyway remove the universal focus of what Paul is saying.

Second, a universal purpose is asserted. Notice the language. “Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are in the law.” This is followed by the purpose statement, “in order that (ἵνα) every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God.” Paul is not just referring to Jews but to all men; *every mouth, all the world*. The law says what it says to those who are under the law with the purpose that every mouth may be stopped and the whole world become guilty before God

The question may be raised, “What does every mouth being stopped and the whole world being guilty have to do with a law given to the Jews?” Paul has answered this question in the remarks leading up to this point in his argument. The Jews who had the privilege of possessing the law in written form did not and could not keep the demands of the law. Thus Paul has shown that they are as much sinners as the Gentiles who do not have the Scriptures and who live in disobedience to what they do know about God’s law by natural revelation. It follows then that every mouth is stopped and the whole world is guilty before God. If the Jews who had the written law did not keep it and ultimately are condemned,

⁹ John Murray, *The Epistle To The Romans*, in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1959), 1:105-106.

then it follows that no one, including the Gentiles, have or can keep the law. All stand condemned before God.

The mouth being stopped describes the case of a defendant who has nothing to say in answer to the charges brought against him. The word translated “guilty” is only used once in the NT. But it is used in extra-biblical literature to carry the idea of being “answerable to” or “liable to prosecution” or “accountable.”¹⁰ “The image, then, is of all humanity standing before God, accountable to him for willful and inexcusable violations of his will, awaiting the sentence of condemnation that their actions deserve.”¹¹ The point is that there is no plea for justification that anyone can make on the basis of one’s devotion to or obedience to God’s law. All are under sin’s tyranny, all are under the law’s condemnation. The whole world, Jews and Gentiles alike, is condemned before God and without a plea.

Third, Paul gives a confirming reason. This brings us to our key phrase. Romans 3:20 begins with the word “therefore” in the AV. The Greek word is διότι, which may be translated “for” or “because.” The verse either serves to confirm the preceding assertion of the guilt of all men (“for”) or it gives a reason for the guilt of all men (“because”). In a sense it does both. Either way, Paul now makes the point that “by the deeds of the law *no flesh* (person, man, woman, boy or girl, Jew or Gentile) will be justified in His sight.”

Unlike in the preceding verse, there is no article before “law.” Literally the text says, “By the deeds of law.” Though we should not push this too far, the absence of the article here may be a way of underscoring that there is no justification by obedience to any law given to man, whether the law inscripturated (the Jew) or the work of the law written in the heart (the Gentile).¹² If Paul has in mind again *the Mosaic Law*, the point still is the same. Obedience to the law cannot justify.

Clearly “the deeds of law” does not refer merely to boundary marker regulations. That would be completely inconsistent with the whole train of argument leading up to this point. Remember that the emphasis of the last two and half chapters has been that both Jews and Gentiles are guilty of failing to live up to the divine standard in terms of God’s ethical

¹⁰ Douglas Moo, *Romans*, in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1996), 205.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² For this interpretation see Robert Haldane, *Commentary on Romans* (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1996), 131.

claims upon mankind. All are guilty. All are under sin. Every mouth is without any plea to offer before God. With respect to circumcision etc., it could not be said that the Jews had failed to keep those regulations. Nor could it be said with reference merely to boundary marker regulations or to the social function of the law that its result was to stop every mouth and render the whole world guilty before God. The Jews are guilty, the whole world is guilty, and every mouth of every man is stopped, because we have failed to live up to what God requires in terms of the law's ethical claims upon us. Every mouth is stopped because, by trying to obey the law of God, by works of law, no flesh will be justified in God's sight. There can be no justification on the basis of law keeping because it is at this very point that the whole world stands condemned. This is what the apostle has been laboring to demonstrate.

The fault that the law finds with the Jews is not that they have failed to adhere to the boundary markers of the law or failed to possess and accept the law as a charter of national privilege and distinction separating them from the Gentiles and marking them out as God's covenant people. No. Paul acknowledges that they have not failed to do that when he speaks of their circumcision. Nor is the fault that the Jews are trying to impose boundary markers on the Gentiles. That's not it at all. The fault that the law finds with both the Jew and the Gentile is that all men have failed to live up to what the law requires, whether in terms of natural revelation or in terms of inscripturated special revelation. All have failed to live up to the divine standard of proper God glorifying behavior. All have failed to live up to what God requires, particularly in terms of his ethical claims upon men. And because of this, "By the *deeds of the law* no flesh will be justified in God's sight." So, "the deeds of the law" here refers to *those deeds performed in the effort to obey the law of God*.

It is important to point out that Paul is not condemning obedience to the law as a bad thing. His point is that there can be no justification before God on that basis. The universal sinfulness of mankind is the problem that makes this so.

Fourth, there is a further confirmation added. We'll come back to this later, but in v. 20 Paul gives another reason why no flesh will be justified by the works of the law. "Because by the law is the knowledge of sin." This again tells us that what he has in mind is not merely the law conceived of in terms of its boundary marker function, but the law in terms of its ethical function by which it defines and exposes and confers the knowledge of human sinfulness.

B. The close connection of the phrase “the works of the law” with the more general term “works” in Rom. 4:1-6

The next text in which we find the phrase “the works of the law” is Rom. 3:28. “Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from *the deeds of the law.*” At first glance, this text may seem to support the idea that Paul has in mind the “boundary marker” requirements of the law, such as circumcision. He immediately follows by saying, “Or is He the God of the Jews only? Is He not also the God of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also, since there is one God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith” (vv. 29-30). So, it may be argued, it is clear that “the deeds of the law” refer to circumcision and the point is that God is the God of Gentiles and Jews alike because circumcision does not matter; justification is apart from “the deeds of the law;” that is, apart from adherence to Jewish boundary markers such as circumcision.

Indeed, Paul teaches that reliance on circumcision or Jewishness does not justify and that justification is open to both Jew and Gentile. That is one of the points he is making in his overall argument. But it is impossible to restrict the works of the law in this text to circumcision only, or to circumcision *only conceived of as a boundary marker or as a social separator*. The emphasis is on obedience to the commands of the law as a whole, which would include circumcision. This is confirmed, first, by the preceding context, which we have already considered above. But most conclusively this passage is immediately followed in chapter 4 by a discussion in which Paul excludes all works of any kind from being the basis of justification.

What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness, just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works (4:1-6).

The fact that “the deeds (or works) of the law” in Romans refers to deeds performed in obedience to the commands of the law as a whole

can be demonstrated also by considering the close connection of this phrase with the more general term “works” in Rom. 4:1-6. Paul not only says that we are not justified by “the works of the law” but also that we are not justified by “works,” using the more general term. And he uses the more general term in a context that points to its “essential synonymity”¹³ with the phrase “works of the law.”

Consider several preliminary observations from this passage. First, Paul is speaking of justification. Second, he is underscoring that justification is not by works but by faith. He says that to ascribe Abraham’s justification to works would be to contradict the truth that he was justified by faith and would leave him with something to boast in. Third, he describes works in terms of human activity—deeds that one performs—and not in terms of certain boundary markers. NP advocates may challenge the last point, so let’s consider several things that make it clear.

First, consider the way the general term “works” is used elsewhere in Romans. Here are two examples. The first we saw already in 2:5-6.

But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who will render to each one according to his deeds.

Remember from the context that the works or deeds that Paul has in mind here are works in general, any kind of works, works that can be described as doing good (v. 7) or doing evil (v. 9). Another text in which the general term “works” is used is 9:10-11. Here Paul speaks of God’s election of Jacob:

And not only this, but when Rebecca also had conceived by one man, even by our father Isaac (for the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls)

When God chose Jacob, neither Jacob nor Esau had done any good or evil. This doing of good or evil is described in terms of “works.” In this context, “not of works” clearly means not with reference to human deeds, whether good or evil. Thus Paul’s use of the term “works”

¹³ Moo, “Law, Works of the Law, and Legalism in Paul,” 94.

elsewhere in the epistle supports the meaning in chapter 4 of any human actions or deeds in general.

Second, consider the contrast in Rom. 4:4 between someone who works and earns a wage and someone who believes and receives a free gift of grace. “Now to him who works the wages are not counted as grace but debt.” Paul uses a bookkeeping metaphor. The picture is of one who works and then receives the wages that are due to him for his labor. This is contrasted with grace.

Third, over against this receiving what is due for what one does, Paul sets the doctrine of justification by faith. “But to him who does not work,” that is, does not work in the sense of performing deeds by which justification is received as a wage for the deeds performed, “but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness” (4:5). Therefore, “works” in this context refers to human actions by which one earns what is due to those actions as a debt. If Abraham was justified by works, he would have been counted righteous as the reward due to him for the deeds that he performed. But he was not justified by works; he was justified by faith. “The apostle speaks quite broadly of the principle of ‘works’ in opposition to ‘faith’; whereas faith receives freely what God’s grace grants, works obtain their reward on the basis of merit or wages due.”¹⁴

Fourth, consider that by “works” Paul included any deeds or virtue of our own of any kind and not merely works in a social boundary marker sense. This is further seen in the parallel between “working not” and being ungodly.¹⁵ He who does not work and the ungodly that God justifies by faith are one and the same (v. 5). These are synonymous expressions. According to v. 4, the blessing of justification is given on the principle of grace, not works. According to v. 5, this gospel grace consists in justifying the ungodly. So by “him who works not” is meant him who is “ungodly.” The emphasis is to show that in justification God has absolutely no regard to any good or godliness of our own whatsoever.

Paul then cites David, who speaks of a man being counted righteous apart from works (v. 6). But is the idea here that a man is counted righteous apart from his adherence to Jewish boundary markers? Is that all that is meant by God imputing righteousness without works? It is true, as Paul points out in vv. 9-11, that this blessing of justification did not

¹⁴ Venema, “Evaluating the New Perspective (4 continued),” 6.

¹⁵ Edwards, 1:622.

come to Abraham simply because he was circumcised. He does, indeed, underscore that this is a blessing that is not exclusive to Jews who possess the Law of Moses. Nevertheless the works referred to here by which a man is not justified are not merely ceremonial works. Paul includes all works, including the law in terms of its ethical claims. This can be seen by the fact that this imputing of righteousness to a man apart from works is further described in vv. 7-8 in terms of his lawless deeds being forgiven, his sins being covered, and his sins not being imputed to him. These are not merely works that mark off the Jews from the Gentiles. These are moral, ethical works. His sins were not imputed to him. In spite of his evil deeds, God imputed righteousness to him.

In conclusion, in Romans Paul is emphasizing that both Jews and Gentiles are equally in need of justification by faith, that if ever justified before God, both must be justified in the same way; by faith apart from the works of the law. Clearly, he is concerned to emphasize the essential unity of believing Jew and believing Gentile in the New Covenant community, the church. However it is wrong to limit “works of the law” to referring only to boundary marker regulations or merely to the social function of the law. On the contrary, the phrase is used in Romans to refer to all that the law requires in terms of its moral claims upon men. It is used in connection with the exclusion of any works whatsoever of any kind from being the ground upon which God justifies sinners.

II. The “works of the law” in Galatians

Paul’s use of the language “works of the law” in Galatians is especially important to our subject because the occasion of this letter, its historical context, may seem to be very agreeable to the NP understanding. The occasion is that certain pseudo-Christian Jews, or Judaizers (as they’ve come to be known), were insisting that Gentile Christians be circumcised. They were apparently also insisting that they observe other boundary marker requirements of the law. This comes out, for example, in chapter two. In an implied contrast with what was happening to the Galatians, Paul says that when in Jerusalem not even Titus had been compelled to be circumcised by the Jerusalem church (v. 3). He refers also to an event that occurred at Antioch in which members of this same circumcision party, or at least of a similar theological viewpoint with those who were troubling the Galatians, refused to have table fellowship with Gentile Christians and were requiring them to be circumcised and to live like Jews (vv. 3, 12-14). Paul speaks of those who “compel you to be

circumcised” and warns against submitting to those who do so (5:1-6; 6:12-13). He also speaks of the observing of days and months and seasons and years (4:10). It is true that the occasion of the letter was the insistence by the Judaizers that the Gentiles submit to the Law of Moses and the focus seems primarily to have been on what advocates of the NP call boundary marker requirements of the law. More specifically it was the insistence that they must do this in order to be justified.

But, having acknowledged that insistence on the observance of such regulations was the occasion of the letter, an examination of Paul’s use of the phrase “the works of the law” demonstrates that he saw in this insistence a much deeper problem that goes far beyond the mere issue of boundary markers or the social function of the law. Paul argues that to insist that justification is dependent on obedience to *any aspect* of the law means that we must be obedient to *all* that the law as a whole demands in order to be justified. He underscores that this is exactly what both the Jews and the Gentiles had failed to do and were unable to do. Therefore, justification is not based upon obedience to the demands of the law in any way, either in part or in whole.

A. *Galatians 2:16*

This is probably Paul’s most straightforward statement of the doctrine of justification by faith and not by the works of the law. He writes:

knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified.

The occasion is the insistence of the circumcision party that Gentiles be circumcised and live like Jews. This insistence had caused Peter to cave in for fear of certain men who had come to Antioch. Before they came he ate freely with the Gentiles, but after they came he withdrew from them. Therefore, Paul rebuked him to his face. This incident is described in vv. 11-13 and Paul’s words in Gal. 2:16 recount what he said to Peter on that occasion.

One thing is clear on the surface of the text. Paul distinctly contrasts the works of the law and faith in Jesus Christ: “knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law *but by faith in Jesus Christ*, even we

have *believed in Christ Jesus*, that we might be justified *by faith in Christ* and not by the works of the law” (2:16).

Some want to interpret the genitive construction translated “by faith in Jesus Christ” as a subjective genitive. Thus, they argue, it should be translated “by the faithfulness of Jesus Christ.” The text would then read “a man is not justified by the works of the law but by the faithfulness of Jesus Christ” (as opposed to “by faith in Christ,” taking it as an objective genitive). The problems with this interpretation have been demonstrated so often and convincingly that we should be surprised that anyone still tries to hold to it.¹⁶ Even if one tries to interpret the genitive in that way, still the text clearly refers to the Christian’s act of believing in contrast with the works of the law. Paul says, “even we have believed in Christ.” The contrast is between faith in Christ, *i.e.*, believing in Christ, and the works of the law. And this contrast continues to be made throughout the epistle. Thus, whatever “works of the law” refers to, Paul contrasts it with the Christian’s response of faith in Christ and the gospel.

The Judaizers were insisting that Gentiles be circumcised and keep various regulations of the Mosaic Law in order to be justified. While arguing against this, Paul mentions the incident in Antioch and the words that he spoke to Peter. Thus clearly Paul is opposing the Judaizers’

¹⁶ The attempt to interpret the genitive subjectively to refer to the faithfulness of Christ here and elsewhere simply does not stand up to scrutiny. It has been refuted more than once. See John Murray’s appendix in his *Epistle to the Romans*, 1:363-374. See also Douglas Moo, *Romans*, 224-225 and Moises Silva, “Faith Versus Works of Law in Galatians,” in *Justification And Variegated Nomism Volume 2*, 227-234. The major arguments against this translation and interpretation can be summarized as follows: 1. The witness of the Greek Fathers. The unanimous witness is to the objective genitive “faith in Christ” referring to our faith in Christ. 2. The prominence in the NT of the act of believing. The verb *pisteuo* is used more than 240 times in the NT, the vast majority with the meaning “believe in, trust.” This prominence of the human act of believing is such that the NT authors would surely expect their readers to understand the noun *pistis* in this sense unless there were contextual factors that clearly excluded that meaning. There are none. 3. There are unambiguous references to *pistis* referring to the Christian’s faith (for example, see Rom. 4:5, 9), while there is not one unambiguous reference to *pistis* referring to a faith that belongs to Christ. 4. Various uses of *pistis* with the genitive “of God” or “of Christ” do not support this meaning (Gal. 2:20; Rom. 3:26; Phil. 3:9; Eph. 3:12; Mk. 11:22; Acts 3:16; Col. 2:12; Rev. 2:13 and 14:12) 5. *Pistis* rarely carries the idea of faithfulness. That meaning is especially rare in the Greek NT. 6. The immediate context of Galatians supports the objective genitive. Paul makes no unambiguous reference to Christ’s believing or being faithful in this epistle, while he speaks constantly of the Christian’s faith or believing.

insistence in his affirmation of justification by faith. However, in underscoring that justification is by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, Paul is not merely excluding works of the law in terms of boundary markers. There is more involved than that. This becomes clear when we consider what he says elsewhere in Galatians.

B. Galatians 3:10-14

Several observations are in order. First, notice how Paul states the principle that we are not justified by the works of the law. He does so in a way that enlarges the reference beyond the mere question of boundary markers. He says that as many as are “of the works of the law” are under the curse. Why? “For it is written Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.” Paul is drawing attention to the fact that the law demands obedience to all things that are written in it. Consider Venema’s comments on this text:

Those who would be justified by the works of the law are reminded that the law pronounces a curse upon everyone who fails to keep ‘all things’ that are written in it. Any failure in respect to the law’s requirement will inevitably bring about the curse pronounced in Deuteronomy 27:26. Though the particular “works of the law” that his opponents were emphasizing were no doubt what Dunn and others call ‘boundary markers’, Paul generalizes on the basis of the threatened curse of Deuteronomy that God’s judgment rests upon anyone who falls short of ANYTHING that is written in the law.¹⁷

Venema goes on to point out that in the context of Deuteronomy 27, from which Paul takes this quote:

the requirements of the law... include more than such things as circumcision, dietary laws, and feast day provisions. They also include prohibitions against idolatry, dishonorable behavior toward one’s father or mother, incest and murder. It is not enough, therefore, to keep the former requirements in order to be justified. One must live in conformity to all that the law enjoins.¹⁸

¹⁷ Venema, “Evaluating the New Perspective (4 continued),” 6.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

The entirety of the law must be kept if one chooses to pursue justification either in whole or in part by the works of the law.

Second, notice the way that Paul draws a sharp contrast again between the works of the law and faith. He says, “But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for the just shall live by faith.” Paul’s point is that God’s word teaches that justification is by faith; therefore it cannot be by the works of the law. But why is this so? This is the key question. Is the problem that Jewish boundary markers exclude Gentiles? No. The contrast is between faith and *doing* what the law requires. “Yet the law is not of faith, but the man who does them shall live by them” (3:12). The principle on which the Mosaic Law (or Mosaic covenant, see the rest of ch. 3) operates *when divorced from Christ and the gospel of justification by faith alone* (which is included in the Mosaic covenant properly understood) is that of doing what the law requires as contrasted with believing what God has promised. The point in the context is that seeking to be justified by doing what the law requires, rather than trusting in Christ for justification, brings one under the curse of the law.

Third, notice where Dunn’s interpretation of “the works of the law” lands him when he comes to v. 13, which says, “Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree).” This verse (in connection with the verses above) has long been understood as teaching that the law demands obedience to all that it commands and it curses those who fail to do so, but that Christ has taken the law’s curse upon himself in our place, thus freeing those who believe in him from that curse. Because Dunn insists on maintaining that the “works of the law” speak merely of the social function of the law in terms of its boundary marking regulations, he argues that the curse from which Christ delivers us is the curse of restricting the grace and promise of God on nationalistic terms.¹⁹ The curse removed by Christ’s death was the curse of a wrong

¹⁹ Dunn, *Jesus, Paul and the Law*, 228-299: “The curse of the law is not simply the condemnation which falls on any transgression and on all who fall short of the law’s requirements. Paul has in mind the specific short-fall of his typical Jewish contemporary, the curse which falls on all who restrict the grace and promise of God in nationalistic terms, who treat the law as a boundary to mark the people of God off from the Gentiles, who give a false priority to ritual markers. The curse of the law here has to do primarily with that attitude which confines the covenant promise to Jews as Jews: it falls on those who live within the law in such a way as to exclude the Gentile as Gentile from the promise.”

understanding of the law.²⁰ Jesus died as one who was considered an outsider to the covenant. He, in other words, put himself in the place of the Gentiles. God then vindicated him, thereby demonstrating that God is for the Gentiles.²¹

What should we think of this? Stephen Westerholm comments, “We may be grateful to Dunn for following the logic of his new perspective to its extraordinary conclusions.”²² Westerholm goes on to show how the conclusion Dunn is forced to on this text shows the folly of his position and, indeed, refutes his position concerning the works of the law.²³ For

²⁰ In Dunn, *Jesus, Paul and the Law*, 229-230, Dunn says, “The curse which was removed by Christ’s death therefore was the curse which had previously prevented that blessing from reaching the Gentiles, the curse of a wrong understanding of the law... As soon as we recall that ‘those under the law’ are under the curse of the law (v. 10), the purpose of Christ’s redemptive work can be specified quite properly as the removal of that curse, as the deliverance of the heirs of the covenant promise from the ill effects of the too narrow understanding of covenant and law held by most of Paul’s Jewish contemporaries.” In his *Theology of Paul*, 375, Dunn says, “The curse of the law, however, has been absorbed by Christ (3:13). So the curse has been removed. And with it both the misunderstanding of the law’s role and its effect in excluding Gentiles from the promise, which had brought the curse into effect, have been declared null and void.” In James Dunn, *The Epistle To The Galatians*, in *Black’s New Testament Commentary* (London: A & C Black, 1993), 177, he adds, “For the ‘from the works of the law’ attitude was typically Jewish (3:10) and had been Paul’s before he came to share in Christ’s redemption (i. 13-14). And the curse functioned to reinforce the ‘outsideness’ of the other nations: it was the same ‘works of the law’ attitude which underlined the Jew/Gentile antithesis, and prevented both from participating in the blessing of Abraham. It was precisely this ‘us’ and ‘them’ dichotomy of grace which Paul sought to combat: Christ died to benefit all whose misunderstanding or ignorance of the grace of God through faith put them effectively outside its full sweep” And finally, Dunn, *Jesus, Paul, and the Law*, 230, says, “Christ in his death put himself under the curse and outside the covenant blessing (cf. Deut. 11:26; 30:19-20)...”

²¹ Dunn, *Jesus, Paul, and the Law*, 230, “Christ in his death put himself under the curse and outside the covenant blessing (cf. Deut. 11:26; 30:19-20)---that is, put himself in the place of the Gentile! Yet God vindicated him! Therefore, God is *for* the Gentiles, and consequently the law could no longer serve as a boundary dividing Jew from Gentile....Christ’s death was effective, in Paul’s view, precisely because it broke through the restrictiveness of the typical Jewish understanding of God’s righteousness.” James Dunn, *The Theology Of Paul’s Letter To The Galatians*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 86, “It (the curse of the law, parenthesis mine) falls on those who so live out of (the works of) the law as to keep Gentiles as such at a distance from the covenant people... Paul understood the significance of the cross and its curse primarily in terms of its significance for the Gentile question.”

²² Westerholm, *Perspective Old and New*, 318.

²³ *Ibid.*, 317-319.

example, if this is the meaning of Christ being made a curse for us, then the Jews themselves had no need of the cross. The cross was only for the Gentiles, to show them that God is for them. The only need, then, that Jews had of the cross was with reference to their unwillingness to receive Gentiles. Thus the cross was only for those Jews who were racist and only for those Gentiles who were unhappy with the idea of having to become Jews. But what about Gentiles who didn't mind being circumcised? Apparently the Gentiles in the Galatian churches were attracted to this idea, so that if the cross meant the removal of the curse of an attitude that said they had to adopt Jewish practices, apparently some of these Gentiles saw no curse in that at all. They were perfectly happy with the idea that membership in the people of God required adopting Jewish boundary markers. Surely this amounts to a grievous trivializing of the death of Christ.

Dunn's whole approach in the end is really foolish and ridiculous, not to mention heretical. Luther long ago exposed the folly of those who wished to interpret the works of the law here merely in terms of Jewish ceremonies.

[Some] are in the habit of trying to get around Paul here, by making out that what he calls works of the law are the ceremonial works, which since the death of Christ are deadly... Even if there had never been any other error in the Church, this one was pestilent and potent enough to make havoc of the gospel... For someone could say: Granted we are not justified by ceremonial works, yet a person might be justified by the moral works of the Decalogue... Besides, what is the use of a grace that liberates us only from ceremonial works, which are the easiest of all.²⁴

²⁴ Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 189-190. Westerholm, *Perspective Old and New*, 318 also quotes Luther from a work I've not seen myself entitled *Theses Concerning Faith and Law* found in *Luther's Works*, vol.34, ed. Lewis Spitz, (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1960), 115: "Christ died for the sins of the whole world from the beginning of the world before there was any ceremonial law. Consequently Paul must be understood as speaking about the law and sins of the whole world from the beginning on. Those who really continue to understand him only with reference to the ceremonial law must necessarily concede that he must be speaking only of sin against the ceremonial law, when he refers to law and sin in turns...It follows, therefore, that Christ achieved nothing by his death except that he redeemed the Jews

C. Galatians 5:3-4

And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law. You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace.

Again, notice Paul's emphasis. The Judaizers were insisting that Gentiles be circumcised. Paul argues that insistence on the necessity of circumcision in order to be justified brings one under a debt to obey the whole law in order to be justified. The law and its obligations cannot be treated piece-meal. If one insists on adherence to any aspect of the law as the means or ground of justification, then one is under obligation to obey the whole law as the means of justification. Venema comments:

The implication here, though unstated, is clear enough: Because his opponents have not met and cannot meet this burden, they have embraced an obligation that is beyond their reach. Moreover, to seek justification in the way of obedience to... requirements of the law is inimical to the grace of Christ. Either one is justified freely through faith in Christ or through obedience to the law.²⁵

D. Galatians 6:13

“For not even those who are circumcised keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh.” Here Paul charges his opponents with hypocrisy. When they require Gentile believers to be circumcised in order to be justified, they do so in order that they might boast in their flesh, *i.e.*, in order that they might have cause for boasting in the success of their proselytizing mission.²⁶ But the problem is, Paul says, that the very ones who compel them to be circumcised do not keep the law. They fail to recognize that justification on the basis of the law requires much more than merely being circumcised.

When he says that they do not keep the law, he cannot be referring here to the social function of the law in separating Jews from Gentiles.

alone from the ceremonial law or only abrogated the ceremonies. And he died in vain also for the Jews, since he did not die for the sins against the moral law.”

²⁵ Venema, “Evaluating the New Perspective,” (4 continued), 3.

²⁶ Ronald Y. K. Fung, *The Epistle To The Galatians, The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 304-305.

He cannot be talking about the boundary marker requirements of the law. This is so simply because they keep those. They were circumcised and they were compelling Gentiles to be circumcised. But when Paul says that they do not keep the law he means that they do not obey the commands of the law as a whole. They fail to do all that the law requires.

To summarize our survey of Romans and Galatians; the phrase “the works of the law” cannot be restricted merely to Jewish boundary markers or to the social function of the law. Paul uses it to refer to obedience to what the law requires as a whole in terms of its ethical claims upon men. And when he says that we are not justified by the works of the law, he is not merely saying that Gentiles need not become Jews in order to be included in the people of God. He is teaching that justification for both Jew and Gentile is not based upon one’s obedience to the law’s requirements or upon any kind of human works whatsoever.

III. The reasons Paul gives for why “the works of the law” cannot justify

Why did Paul insist that by the works of the law no flesh will be justified in the sight of God? What is the problem with the works of the law? According to the NP the works of the law refer to Jewish boundary markers, the social function of the law in separating Jews from Gentiles. So, according to Wright and Dunn, when Paul argues that justification is not by the works of the law his problem with the law is *its misuse to promote a Jewish exclusivism*. But is that really the main problem that Paul finds with seeking to be justified by the works of the law?

The Reformers argued that the inadequacy of the law for justification was rooted in the fact of human failure and inability to keep it. They argued that rather than providing a means for justification, one of the purposes of the law is to condemn all men (both Jews and Gentiles) as sinners.²⁷ It exposes and aggravates sin and shows men their need of Christ and of justification by faith in him and in his work alone. Were the Reformers right or is the NP right? What reasons does Paul give as to why no flesh will be justified by the deeds of the law? We will look at a few of Paul’s statements in Galatians and Romans to get our answer.

²⁷ Reformed theology has generally recognized a three-fold use of the law. One is that it provides a rule for civil righteousness. The second is, as mentioned above, to serve as a means of convicting men of sin and leading them to Christ. The third is to serve as a rule of life for the believer, or the standard of Christian ethics and sanctification.

A. Galatians 3:10

“For cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them.” The law apart from justification by faith alone requires perfect, universal, perpetual obedience to all things that it commands. Those who fail to render that kind of obedience are under a curse. Therefore, all who rely on the works of the law for justification are under the curse. Why? The clear implication is the failure and inability of anyone to do all that the law requires.

Someone may say, “Oh, but the law never requires perfect, perpetual obedience. It only requires sincere or evangelical obedience—the sincere believing effort to obey is all that it requires.” But, that’s not what the text says. “Cursed is everyone who does not continue, [*perpetual obedience*], in all things, [*universal and perfect obedience*] which are written in the book of the law *to do* them [*actual obedience*].” Paul does not speak of merely intending to do them or to sincerely trying to do them, but of doing them. This is not just the teaching of this text. God has always required from his creatures perpetual obedience (*cf.*, *e.g.*, Ezek. 18:24;26); universal obedience (*cf.*, *e.g.*, Jam. 2:10); perfect obedience (the very fact that any violations of the law in thought word or deed are defined as sin which makes men subject to punishment demonstrates this) and actual obedience. For anyone to say that the law requires anything less than perfect, actual obedience to what it requires is the same as saying that the law does not require what it requires. When God says “you shall not murder,” he really means you shall sincerely endeavor not to murder. You shall not murder too often. When he says, “you shall not steal,” he really means it should not be your habit to steal. It should be your sincere desire and intention to not steal. And even though you may sometimes steal, that’s fine, if it is generally not your habit and if your desire and intent is to follow God. But in fact, when God says that you shall not do something he means you shall not do it at all, ever. And when he says that you must do something he means that you must never fail to do it when duty requires it. For example, when God says that you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, to ever fail to do that is sin. And it is never acceptable to sin. “The soul that sins shall die, the wages of sin is death.” Consider Edwards’s comments on this point:

Every rule whatsoever requires perfect conformity to itself; it is a contradiction to suppose otherwise. For to say, that there is a law that does not require perfect obedience to itself, is to say that there is a law that does not require all that it requires.²⁸

This is the very point Paul is making. Justification cannot be by the works of the law because the Mosaic law in terms of its commands, and separated from the gospel of justification by faith alone, requires perfect obedience and curses those who do not render it. Since no man has or is able to render a perfect obedience to the law, those who rely on the works of the law for justification are under the curse. So the problem lies in the failure and inability of anyone to do what the law requires. Clearly the reference is not merely to Jewish boundary markers such as circumcision.

B. Romans 3:10-20

Paul says in Rom. 3:20, “For by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in his sight.” Why is this so? Remember the preceding context. Romans 3:9 says, “For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin.” No flesh can be justified by the deeds of the law because all have sinned. We’ve already blown it. Then v. 10 says, “There is none righteous, no not one.” And then Paul goes on quoting from different passages of OT Scripture to prove his point that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

Notice again the imagery that he uses in 3:19. It is the imagery of the whole world standing in the courtroom of God. And who is the prosecutor? The prosecutor is the law. The ceremonial law? No. It is the law in terms of its ethical claims upon all mankind. And so compelling and unanswerable is the prosecutor’s case that every mouth is silenced and the whole world is seen to be guilty before God.²⁹ So Paul concludes that “by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in his sight” (3:20). Then he adds, “for by the law is the knowledge of sin.” One purpose of the law is to define sin and to show men that they are sinners. It cannot serve as a means of justification. It serves to condemn us and to cause us to see our guilt and lost condition. And then Paul goes on to explain in the verses following that the only way we can find forgiveness and

²⁸ Edwards, 1:637.

²⁹ Venema, “Evaluating the New Perspective on Paul (5): ‘Works of the law’, Human Inability and Boasting,” 4.

justification is through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and the work that he has done on behalf of sinners. If the reason we cannot be justified by the deeds of the law is our failure and inability to keep the law, if the law condemns us and shows us our sin, the deeds of law in these references cannot be reduced to the social function of the law in terms of Jewish boundary markers.

C. *Romans 7*

Paul tells us that though the law itself is holy and good, yet due to human depravity, it is completely powerless to produce what it commands. In fact, it only aggravates human sin and stimulates men to further sinfulness. Notice what Paul says, beginning:

What shall we say then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, "You shall not covet." But sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all manner of evil desire. For apart from the law sin *was* dead. I was alive once without the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died. And the commandment, which was to bring life, I found to *bring* death. For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it killed me. Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good. Has then what is good become death to me? Certainly not! But sin, that it might appear sin, was producing death in me through what is good, so that sin through the commandment might become exceedingly sinful. (Rom. 7:7-13)

Here Paul tells us that the law in and of itself is good and holy, but that due to the depravity of the human heart its demands only serve to expose sin and to stir up the passions of our hearts to even more sin. In this way the law of God kills us. It leaves us lost, dead, condemned, and helpless to deliver ourselves from its guilt and power. He specifically highlights the command, "You shall not covet" and thereby underscores that the demands of the law extend further and deeper than just outward actions. They extend to the desires of the heart.

So why will no flesh be justified by the works of the law? We've considered some of the reasons that Paul gives, all of which prove again that the NP's understanding of Paul's polemic against the works of the law is completely off the mark. His concern is not merely with the boundary markers of the law or its social function of excluding Gentiles

from the people of God. When he says that no flesh will be justified by the works of the law he is talking about obedience to the demands of the law as a whole, particularly with reference to its moral claims upon mankind. And the reason no man will be justified by the deeds of the law is that the law condemns us all as sinners in God's sight, both Jews and Gentiles. Furthermore, such is our lost condition that not only have we failed to obey the law, but also we are morally unable to do so; and even if we could do so from this point forward, our future obedience could never remove the guilt of our past transgressions.

Some argue that it's only a *legalistic obedience* to the law that Paul excludes from being the ground of justification. It is only obedience out of the sinful motive of seeking to bribe God. However, they argue that evangelical obedience, or believing obedience, is not excluded from being either the ground of our justification or from in some sense being the condition of our justification.³⁰ But it is not merely a legalistic

³⁰ For example Daniel P. Fuller, *Gospel & Law: Contrast Or Continuum?* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1980), 48: "The meaning of v. 11 [Gal. 3] then, is that no one is justified before God who boasts in his legalistic way of seemingly (to his way of thinking) living up to the law." In footnote 44 on p. 98, he says that Paul "uses the term 'works of the law' which for him always signified the legalistic misunderstanding of the law." See also Daniel P. Fuller, "Paul, and 'The Works of the Law,'" *Westminster Theological Journal* 38 (1975-1976):28-42. Fuller argues that "works of the law" refer to legalism, or a legalistic attempt to bribe God to show one favor, and not to the attempt to obey the law in and of itself. This is a position different from the NP, but also different from the traditional Reformed understanding. Paul opposes works of the law, not merely with respect to an attempt to bribe God from a legalistic mindset (though he would and does oppose that), but simply on the basis of the fact of the sinful failure and inability of men to do what the law requires. Fuller's idea, in effect, would allow for a justification at least partly based on works, so long as those works were believing works and not legalistically minded works. But not only are the works of the unregenerate excluded as being any part of the basis of our justification, the works of the regenerate are as well. See Eph. 2:8-10. See also Romans 4, where Abraham is spoken of with respect to God's declaration concerning him which was made in Genesis long after he was a regenerate, believing man. Yet respecting his justification he was declared righteous apart from works and as ungodly. In refutation of Fuller's interpretation of "the works of the law" see Douglas Moo, "'Law', 'Works of the Law', and Legalism," 85-90; Douglas Moo, review of *Gospel & Law: Contrast or Continuum?* In *Trinity Journal* 3, no. 1 (Spring, 1982); Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New*, 297-340. Westerholm addresses in some detail both the NP attempt to define "works of the law" in terms of Jewish boundary markers or in terms of social function and the attempt of men like Fuller and others to define "works of the law" as a reference merely to works done from a legalistic spirit. By recommending these, I'm not saying that I agree with everything the authors say, though I wholeheartedly agree with them that Fuller's interpretation is wrong. Also see Samuel E. Waldron, *Faith, Obedience And Justification*, in which he

obedience that Paul excludes. That, of course, is excluded. Paul excludes obedience to the demands of the law period, whatever the motive. This is not to say that Paul excludes Christians from the obligation to obey the ethical demands of God's law. Reformed theology has argued that the law in its ethical and moral demands is still the rule of life for the Christian. Likewise the Christian's obedience is to be an evangelical obedience flowing from faith. But obedience to the law of any kind for whatever reason or motive will never justify before God. It has no part as the basis by which God justifies sinners. Why? Because to be justified on that basis we must be sinless and have rendered a perfect obedience to all that the law requires. This, according to Paul and according to the Scriptures as a whole, is what no one has done or is able to do. In God's sight we are all sinners and under wrath and a sinner is someone who has not lived up to the ethical claims of God upon men which are given their most focused expression in his law. So the Reformers were right and the NP is wrong.

IV. The statements Paul makes about “works” in his other epistles

There are three passages that are especially relevant to our discussion of what Paul means when he excludes works with respect to justification.

gives a thorough overview and evaluation of Fuller's doctrine of justification. Also another helpful reference is John Owen's addressing of this very position in *The Doctrine Of Justification By Faith*, in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (reprint ed., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1998), 5:281-284. He addresses and refutes the following three related arguments in the context of addressing other attempts to get around Paul's exclusion of works: “3. Some of late among ourselves—and they want not them who have gone before them—affirm that the works of the law which the apostle excludes from justification are only *the outward works of the law, performed without an inward principle of faith, fear, or the love of God.*” He then proceeds to give four arguments of refutation. “5. Some say that it is works with *a conceit of merit*, that makes the reward to be a debt, and not of grace that are excluded by the apostle.” He then gives five arguments of refutation. “6. Some contend that the apostle excludes only *works wrought before believing*, in the strength of our own wills and natural abilities, without the aid of grace.” To this he gives 10 more arguments in refutation. Just a reminder that there is nothing new under the sun and that it might do some of our moderns much good to read the oft forgotten Puritan theologian par excellence, John Owen. There is no reference to Owen in either the bibliography or index of names in Fuller's book *Gospel & Law: Contrast or Continuum?* Perhaps in others of his works that I have not looked at he does interact with Owen. It is interesting that in defending his view of “the works of the law” in *Westminster Theological Journal* referenced above, Fuller expounds Gal. 3:10-12 with no mention of v. 13. The same is true of his book *Gospel & Law: Contrast or Continuum*.

All of them support the traditional view. One is Eph. 2:8-9, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works lest any man should boast.” The second is 2 Tim. 1:9, “Who has saved us and called us, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began.” And the third is Tit. 3:5-7, “Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy he saved us...that having been justified by his grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.” Without opening each of these texts, it is instructive to remember that Dunn argues that “works of the law” does not mean good works performed in order to have or achieve salvation or to achieve righteousness. But he is at least honest enough to concede that these texts support the traditional viewpoint.³¹ The way that he and some NP scholars get around that is by denying, or seriously questioning whether, the apostle Paul is the real author of Ephesians, 2 Timothy, and Titus. For those of us who have no such dispute, by Dunn’s own confession, these texts undermine his interpretation of Paul.

³¹ Dunn, *Theology of Paul*, 156.