

# Reading Paul with the Reformers

---

*Stephen J. Chester, professor of New Testament,  
North Park Theological Seminary, Chicago, Illinois*

**H**ow should we think about the Reformers as interpreters of Paul at the 500th anniversary of their transformation of church and society?<sup>1</sup> Should our interest be antiquarian only, their interpretation of the Pauline letters of value for how we understand the sixteenth century and its conflicts but of little direct interest for our own task of interpreting the New Testament in and for the twenty-first century? Or, at the opposite extreme, do the Reformers provide for us exegetical and theological touchstones, departures from which must be resisted as a falling away from the truth of the gospel?

In the aftermath of rise of the New Perspective on Paul (hereafter NPP) in the late 1970s and early 1980s, New Testament scholars largely adopted the first of these approaches. The NPP offered a reevaluation of Second Temple Judaism, emphasizing that it cannot legitimately be interpreted as a religion of works-righteousness.<sup>2</sup> The responsibility for previous portrayals of Judaism as unhealthily legalistic was traced back to Luther's identification of the works-righteousness of his own opponents in the sixteenth century with that of Paul's opponents in the first century. Historically credible interpretation of the Pauline letters for the contemporary world therefore required rejection of trajectories of interpretation stemming from the Reformation. In contrast, some in the

1. This article draws extensively upon Stephen J. Chester, *Reading Paul with the Reformers: Reconciling Old and New Perspectives* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017).

2. The label NPP continues to be used, even as it has become ever clearer that, outside of this central NPP commitment to reevaluating Judaism in less prejudicial terms, what has resulted is not a monolithic single viewpoint but rather a variety of newer perspectives. Nevertheless, these various newer perspectives do share some characteristics, one of which is the view that older trajectories of interpretation that derived ultimately from the Protestant Reformers are significantly in error.

church and a minority in the academy simply sought to refute the NPP and reassert traditional perspectives.

In my view, neither of these responses is helpful. Whether acknowledged or not, the history of reception exercises influence over contemporary interpreters. The progenitors of the NPP were all Protestant exegetes of various kinds (e.g., E.P. Sanders, James Dunn, N.T. Wright), and, although most contemporary Pauline interpreters are genuinely in disagreement with Reformation exegesis at significant points, on other exegetical issues, positions first developed in the sixteenth century remain influential. As John Riches comments, there are problems with buying into “the school of thought which imagines that truly historical readings of the biblical books can be achieved only if we divest ourselves of traditional church understandings. Where those of strong Christian beliefs are concerned such an act of self-mutilation usually results in their readings being unconsciously guided by their (only partially discarded after all) theological prejudices (Gadamer).”<sup>3</sup> At the other extreme, however, simply to reassert Reformation perspectives without qualification brings its own problems. The simple fact that the Reformers are the founders of traditions to which many of us belong does not make them right on all exegetical issues. Further, the Reformers were interpreting for and from within very different contexts from our own, and simply to reconstitute their exegesis represents an unhelpful nostalgia that evades present challenges rather than meets them. Effective use of the resources offered by the Reformers requires us instead to sift their exegetical conclusions critically and to bring them into conversation with our own questions and concerns, sharpening our own focus as we stage a dialogue with them about interpretative issues.

### **The Reformers as Exegetical Innovators**

If we are to stage such a dialogue, it is necessary first to comprehend in its own context the nature of the Reformers’ achievement as Pauline interpreters. For if we are to understand which elements of their Pauline interpretation persist in contemporary scholarship, which are most appropriately left in the sixteenth century, and which might profitably be recovered, we must establish what the Reformers proposed and what they reacted against. At the heart of their achievement lies the formation of a new paradigm for Pauline interpretation. Early Lutheran and early

3. John K. Riches, “Book of the Month: Commenting on Romans in Its Original Context,” *Expository Times* 119, no. 1 (2007): 29.

Reformed interpreters together founded a new tradition of reading Paul that transformed the legacy of Pauline interpretation they inherited from the patristic and medieval eras.<sup>4</sup> One way in which to picture this new tradition is through the analogy of language and grammar. The Reformers' language of Pauline theology is a new language, radically different from the language of Pauline theology spoken by their predecessors, and sometimes unfathomable to those for whom that earlier language was native. The Reformers can speak this new language because, in their shared exegetical conclusions, they have developed a new exegetical "grammar" of Pauline theology. Just as grammatical principles structure and enable the use of a language, so these exegetical conclusions about fundamental aspects of Paul's meaning provide structure for and enable the Reformers' new interpretations of Pauline texts.<sup>5</sup> There may be disagreements, but these disagreements take place within this new exegetical grammar, which is different from the one within which their Catholic opponents interpreted Paul.

This new exegetical grammar was not intended to produce mere novelty. The Reformers "strove for a *reformation* in the sense of the restoration of the original form of the true congregation of Jesus Christ—and in this respect a renewal of the contemporary Church: *renovatio* not *innovatio!*"<sup>6</sup> They regarded themselves as the true Catholics, prophetically offering the opportunity for repentance and restoration to a stiff-necked people who would not listen. Yet, while this sense of continuity should help us avoid facile, sweeping characterizations of the Reformation as the sudden springing into being of the modern world and alert us to the possibility

4. The term "the Reformers" can legitimately be used in various ways, sometimes to cover all advocates of reform in the sixteenth century whose religion can ultimately be traced to Luther's rebellion against the Roman Catholic Church and who can retrospectively be designated using the term "Protestant," sometimes even more broadly to include even those advocates of reform who remained within the Roman Catholic Church. In terms of the development of a new Pauline exegetical grammar, I here apply it more narrowly to early Lutheran and early Reformed exegetes only.

5. I am here adopting and adapting a concept of Luther's own. He speaks of "a new and theological grammar" (*Luther's Works* [LW] 26:267) that replaces a previous "moral grammar" (LW 26:268) and that he applies to interpreting texts that might seem to speak of righteousness by works. In Luther's new grammar, these texts speak of deeds of love as the fruit of faith that grows from justification rather than as in any way the basis on which justification is granted. All references to Luther's texts are to the American edition, 55 vols. original series; 11 vols. to date in new series (St Louis: Concordia, 1955–1986, 2010–).

6. Berndt Hamm, "How Innovative was the Reformation?" in *The Reformation of Faith in the Context of Late Medieval Theology and Piety*, ed. Robert J. Bast (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 254.

of some striking continuities in aspects of theology,<sup>7</sup> it should not blind us to the scale of change represented by the Reformers' conclusions about Pauline interpretation. Although worked out in dialogue with patristic and medieval predecessors, the Reformers' new Pauline exegetical grammar differentiates them sharply from such predecessors and overturned widespread assumptions stretching back centuries about the meaning of key terms and concepts. Their undeniably frequent dependence on predecessors for particular exegetical points should not be allowed to obscure the fact that these continuities exist within a radically altered framework. In relation to key issues in Paul's description of the human plight apart from Christ (e.g., the nature of sin, the law, and the conscience) and in relation to his description of salvation in Christ (e.g., the works of the law, grace, and faith), the Reformers developed a powerful new consensus that set limits within their communities of interpretation as to what could plausibly be proposed.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Content of the Reformers' New Pauline Exegetical Grammar**

The medieval Pauline exegetical grammar that the Reformers rejected was shaped profoundly by the influence of Augustine. Ever since Augustine's dispute with Pelagius in the early fifth century, it had been widely recognized that Paul teaches that salvation begins with divine initiative. The impact of sin means that fallen human beings can act justly only as a result of the gift of God's grace granted in initial justification. The law can reveal to human beings what God requires and demonstrate their sinfulness, but it is unable to give the power to obey. No one can make themselves righteous apart from the gift of grace, which is available only because of the person and work of Christ. Yet once the initial gift of infused grace is received in baptism, it is the Christian's responsibility to

7. In recent historiography, the trend has been to stress the continuity between the Reformation and the medieval world. See Susan Schreiner, *Are You Alone Wise? The Search for Certainty in the Early Modern Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3–11; Gerhard Müller, "Luther's Transformation of Medieval Thought: Discontinuity and Continuity," and Volker Leppin, "Luther's Transformation of Medieval Thought: Continuity and Discontinuity," in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*, ed. Robert Kolb, Irene Dingel, and L'ubomír Bakta (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 105–14, 115–24. In many respects the emphasis on continuity is extremely helpful, but in the Reformers' Pauline exegesis it finds perhaps its greatest challenge.

8. On all these issues, the Reformers adopt the same positions as each other over and against their Catholic opponents. Something of a partial exception to this pattern, and therefore a distinctive voice within early Protestant exegesis, is Martin Bucer. See Brian Lugoio, *Martin Bucer's Doctrine of Justification: Reformation Theology and Early Modern Irrenicisim* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 37–102.

cooperate with the gift by performing meritorious good works in love of God and neighbor. Grace is something infused within those who believe, and there is not only initial justification but also justification as a lifetime process in which individuals gradually became more Christ-like.

Paul's statements that justification is not by works of the law are typically understood to apply only to initial justification.<sup>9</sup> Paul intends to say that good works do not contribute to initial justification, not to deny that works of charity play a crucial part in the ongoing process of justification. Within this process, the sins of believers result in a loss of grace, but the merits of their good works and their accessing of the grace made available through the sacraments of the church result in its increase. There are mortal sins (e.g., murder) that might endanger the whole process but also a whole host of less serious venial sins in relation to which works such as fasting, almsgiving, and prayer are efficacious. When Paul speaks of the flesh that wars against the spirit (Galatians 5:17), he is referring primarily to the desires of the body that threaten to overwhelm the higher rational parts of a person. When the baptized person still experiences desire for things contrary to God's will, this is not in itself sin and does not in itself lead to a loss of grace and justice unless these desires are assented to and acted upon.

No one can know with certainty where they have reached in their own journey of justification or whether and how much time in purgatory might be necessary to complete the process and fit them for heaven. So while hope can be strong, complete assurance is possible only in relation to God's desire to forgive and not in relation to whether a person has attained salvation. Faith plays an important but carefully defined role in this process. It is from faith that good works flow, and yet faith by itself is not capable of such works. Faced by the need to coordinate Pauline texts that assert that faith is the instrument through which God justifies (e.g., Galatians 2:16) with James's denial that justification is by faith alone (James 2:24), medieval theologians took Galatians 5:6, where Paul asserts that in Christ what counts is faith working through love, to indicate that faith works only when it is formed by love. Apart from love, faith (typically translated using the Latin word *fides*) is intellectual assent to the truth of the gospel that depends on love to vivify it

9. A minority of medieval commentators follow Ambrosiaster in believing that Paul's phrase "the works of the law" refers to Jewish ceremonies only and not to the moral law. However, this is not taken to contradict the view that good works play no part in initial justification but merely to indicate that it was not Paul's purpose to comment directly on the issue.

from something that is primarily cognitive to something that is living and active. It is when Christians have this faith formed by love that they progress in righteousness and begin to fulfill God's law. The goal of this process is a righteousness that is inherent to the Christian and will finally be measured against the righteousness of God. There is an objective judgment based on what the human being has become: "life is to be conceived of as a via for our transformation.... 'In the end' the human should be able to stand before God on account of his merits. That merit is gained through working with God's grace, in which the human remains rooted."<sup>10</sup>

All of this the Reformers sweep away as representing a travesty of Paul's teaching. Instead they insist that cooperation with infused grace to produce works of righteousness is an illusion. Sin is an active inclination of the will against God, and Paul's term "the flesh" denotes the whole of a human being in rebellion against God. It is not simply that sin has captured the body so that sin is to be identified primarily with the desires of the body. Sin does not only disrupt healthy hierarchies between mind and body and between reason or the will and other parts of the soul, so that the lower will not obey the higher. Instead sin also captures the higher faculties. The whole person is captive unless set free by God, and for people even to recognize their captivity and their need of Christ is a matter of divine revelation. The instrument of this revelation is the law. It demonstrates to people their sin and drives them to seek Christ. Yet this revelation accomplishes little if it stops simply with the recognition of sin and with despair. People need to be assured not just that they are sinners but that it is God's purpose in Christ to save them. God's grace is not something that God infuses into those who believe, but rather refers primarily to the favor with which God regards those who believe in Jesus. Grace is a divine disposition not a quality infused into the believer.

What matters in salvation is therefore to cast oneself upon Christ and his saving work alone. The believer is judged on the basis not of his or her own deeds but those of Christ. When Paul says that justification is not by works of the law, he intends to exclude from justification the whole law. The works of charity are not in any sense an efficient cause of justification. Paul is opposing the works-righteousness of his first-century opponents, just as the Reformers oppose the works-righteousness of their sixteenth-century opponents. The righteousness of Christ granted to the believer

10. Daphne Hampson, *Christian Contradictions: The Structures of Lutheran and Catholic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 83–84.

in justification is perfect and cannot be supplemented or completed. It is also alien: it remains wholly and entirely that of Christ. This righteousness is received by faith through the preaching of the biblical word, with those who believe drawn out of themselves and into total reliance on the promises of God. People do not encounter God by looking inward, but rather they encounter God as the convicting power of the word turns them outward toward Christ. They do not need to wonder if they have salvation but can instead have full assurance, for this depends not on them but on the already perfectly accomplished saving work of Christ on their behalf. This saving faith is thus not just intellectual assent to the facts of the gospel but trust (typically translated using the Latin word *fiducia*) that what God has accomplished in Christ is indeed effective for those who believe. As such, this faith is not something incomplete that needs love to form it and make it alive but is rather the power that makes it possible for love to be put into action. Faith is active, or it is not truly faith. Thus, believers will experience ethical transformation—and indeed the absence of such transformation could only indicate that faith is not genuine and justification not received—but nevertheless such transformation does not form part of the basis of justification before God. Deeds matter profoundly, but they do not justify; and it is this error that Paul is concerned to deny when he insists repeatedly that justification is not by the “works of the law” (e.g., Romans 3:20, 28; Galatians 3:16). Justification is instead by faith alone.

### **The Reformers’ Pauline Exegetical Grammar in Present Perspective**

To sketch briefly these contrasting Pauline exegetical grammars leaves many questions unexplored, for any such grammar is the consequence of multiple exegetical decisions. It does, however, demonstrate how such decisions sometimes cohere together in the history of reception to provide radically alternative frameworks. It is not that there is no continuity in detail between the two frameworks. In the descriptions above, for example, the function of the law in revealing human sin is similar in both exegetical grammars, yet it is located very differently in relation to concepts of justification. The medieval exegetical grammar locates it in relation to the incapacity of human works to contribute to initial justification; the Reformers in relation to the exclusion of all human works from the causes of justification. The overall framework is very different.

If we turn from the relationship between the Reformers’ Pauline inter-

pretation and that of their medieval predecessors to the relationship between the Reformers' Pauline interpretation and contemporary Pauline scholarship, what do we find? Are the overall frameworks just as different, or is the relationship more complicated? In fact, the consensus forged within contemporary Pauline scholarship by the NPP runs across a much narrower front than that found within the Reformers' Pauline exegetical grammar. In the crucial question of the nature of Second Temple Judaism and Paul's relationship to it, the impact of the NPP does, however, run very deep. It is no longer possible to credibly portray Judaism as a legalistic religion devoid of grace, oriented toward the earning of salvation. This impact can be seen clearly in current discussion of the phrase "works of the law." The interpretation of the phrase still provokes vigorous debate, and there are good reasons to think that Dunn and other interpreters are wrong to insist that for Paul it always refers primarily to the boundary makers of circumcision, food laws, and Sabbath observance that serve to separate Jews from Gentiles in social practice. The phrase in fact denotes the whole Jewish way of life, swathed in nomistic observance. The boundary markers are centrally important to that way of life, but to speak of them alone is to miss other aspects and functions of the "works of the law."

Nevertheless, the NPP represents a significant and salutary advance in turning Pauline scholarship away from sweeping negative characterizations of Judaism and toward engagement with the realities of Jewish practice. Here we should remember that the Reformers were not historical-critical scholars, nor did they have access to the range of sources that allow contemporary scholarship to present more nuanced accounts of Second Temple Judaism. Yet if our question is how the exegetical legacy of the Reformers relates to our own contemporary task of interpretation, it is indisputable that the Reformers do not pay sufficient attention to these realities of Jewish practice. Dunn's complaint that "Luther's fundamental distinction between gospel and law was too completely focused on the danger of self-achieved works righteousness"<sup>11</sup> can be illustrated by Luther's treatment of the incident at Antioch (Galatians 2:11–14) in his famous 1535 *Commentary on Galatians*. Luther leaps directly into the relationship between the law and the gospel without any attention to Jew-Gentile relationships within the church. For an interpreter to adopt the same procedure today would be to fail to recognize the centrality of

11. J.D.G. Dunn, "The New Perspective: Whence, What and Whither," in *The New Perspective on Paul*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 20.



practice to Jewish identity, which means that soteriological principles cannot easily be detached from the practices that embody them.

Thus there are very good reasons not to revive the polemic of the Reformers against works-righteousness. However, other aspects of the Reformers' exegetical grammar are in fact still current in contemporary exegesis, even if their contribution is rarely recognized. Pauline anthropology is one such area. As we have seen, the Reformers insisted that "the flesh" does not represent the lower component of anthropological hierarchies, either within the soul or between the soul and the body. For, as Melancthon sharply formulated it, "*flesh* should be understood of whatever is in man without the Holy Spirit."<sup>12</sup> It is the whole person in rebellion against God. Similar positions can be found in contemporary scholarship. John Barclay states of Galatians 5:17 that "Paul is not concerned here with a 'fleshly' part of each individual (his physical being or his 'lower nature') but with the influence of an 'era' and its human traditions and assumptions."<sup>13</sup> This can be compared to Luther's assertion that "by flesh the whole man is meant...the inward and the outward man, or the new man and the old, are not distinguished according to the difference between soul and body but according to their dispositions."<sup>14</sup> There are some important differences in what these two statements affirm the nature of "the flesh" to be, notably between Luther's emphasis on the flesh as the total disposition of the unredeemed person and Barclay's broader focus on an era and its traditions (although a contrast between Paul's gospel and human traditions and assumptions is scarcely antithetical to Luther). However, the two are identical in what they deny. Contemporary scholars may locate their understandings of "the flesh" within overall interpretations of Paul that are significantly different from the Reformers' Pauline exegetical grammar. Yet on this issue itself, a commonplace conclusion in contemporary scholarship is an expression of the same exegetical conclusion as that reached by the Reformers.

Other aspects of Reformation interpretation are simply badly misunderstood in recent Pauline scholarship. Krister Stendahl's famous article "Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West" used texts like Philippians 3:6 to draw attention to the robust conscience of Paul

12. Fred Kramer, trans., *Philip Melancthon's Commentary on Romans* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1992), 170, emphasis original.

13. John M.G. Barclay, *Obeying the Truth: Paul's Ethics in Galatians* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 213.

14. Luther, LW 27:367.

the Pharisee. Stendahl disputed any notion that a struggle with inability to obey the law formed the backdrop to Paul's Damascus Road experience.<sup>15</sup> The false assumption that it did form this backdrop Stendahl attributed to a projection back onto Paul of Luther's *Anfechtungen*, his struggles with spiritual despair.<sup>16</sup> The problem here is that there is little in the Reformers' exegesis to suggest they believed that all will struggle with a guilty conscience prior to faith, nor that they include Paul in this or take the experience of such struggle to be typical of Jewish engagement with the law. Luther and others read Philippians 3:6 as indicating that Paul's experience as a Pharisee is to be explained in terms of confident but misplaced zeal, a conclusion very similar to Stendahl's own. The Reformers' characterization of Judaism in terms of justification by works and their broader understanding of justification by faith in no way depend on Paul's having as a Pharisee struggled with a guilty conscience. Whatever the merits of Stendahl's alternative construal of justification in terms of the inclusion of the Gentiles in God's people, the notion that Reformation formulations of justification depend on Paul's having an introspective conscience cannot legitimately be used to bolster the credibility of Stendahl's own proposal.

At other points, the relationship between the Reformers' exegetical grammar and contemporary interpretation is less straightforward than either unacknowledged dependence or simple misunderstanding. Contemporary scholars sometimes intensify one element of the Reformers' exegetical grammar so strongly as to marginalize others. Thus, for example, N.T. Wright interprets Paul as a covenantal theologian, who understood himself as an actor within a single continuous story stretching from the creation of the world and the call of Abraham forward.<sup>17</sup> God entered into a covenant with Abraham's family to bless the world through that family. The people of Israel departed from their covenant obligations and ended up in exile, with even those Jews resident in the

15. Krister Stendahl, "Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," in *Paul among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 78–96. Cf. Stephen J. Chester, "Paul and the Introspective Conscience of Martin Luther," in *Biblical Interpretation* 14, no. 5 (2006): 508–36.

16. Krister Stendahl, "Call Not Conversion," in *Paul among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 12: "We all, in the West, especially in the tradition of the Reformation, cannot help reading Paul through the experience of persons like Luther and Calvin. And this is the chief reason for most of our misunderstandings of Paul."

17. See, for example, N.T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 2 vols. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 114–39.

land of Israel reminded by Roman occupation that the exile continued in the sense that disobedience still estranged Israel from God and provided a barrier to blessing. On this view, Jesus the Messiah gives a surprising and definitive new twist to Israel's story, fulfilling the covenant, breaking the curse of continuing exile, and radically redefining the family of Abraham so as to include Gentiles. Justification is therefore understood not primarily in terms of dealing with sin but as a covenantal issue, with those justified declared to be members of God's people. Justification is forensic and does involve union with Christ, but its point of impact is different from that found in Reformation accounts. For this reason, Wright's account of justification has been much criticized from within the Reformed tradition, and he typically contrasts his exegetical conclusions with those belonging within trajectories of interpretation derived from the Reformers. Yet this is only part of the story, for the category of covenant is an important one within Reformed theology in general and for Calvin in particular. Wright's interpretation of Paul thus conflicts with much in the Reformed tradition, but it does so by intensifying one of its own most important themes to such a degree as to displace others.

Similarly, divine initiative in salvation is very strongly emphasized in what is increasingly labeled the "apocalyptic" interpretation of Paul in contrast to "covenantal" interpretations, such as that of Wright.<sup>18</sup> For an interpreter like J.L. Martyn, all talk of continuity in salvation history such that the Gentiles are called into the existing people of God obscures the invasive grace of God that in Christ works a new creation and cuts across all human traditions and institutions. Similarly, Martyn takes Paul's disputed genitive phrase *pistis Iēsou Christou* (which can be translated either as an objective genitive, "faith in Christ," or as a subjective genitive, "faithfulness of Christ") to refer to Christ's faithful obedience, thereby removing any possibility of misconstruing justifying faith as a human possibility: "God has set things right without laying down a prior condition of any sort. God's rectifying act, that is to say, is no more God's response to human faith in Christ than it is God's response to human observance of the law. God's rectification is not God's response at all. It is the *first* move; it is God's initiative, carried out by him in Christ's

18. The terminology is potentially confusing since it is perfectly possible to regard apocalyptic as an important motif in Paul's theology but to position it within an overall interpretation more appropriately labeled "covenantal." See, for example, Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 40.

faithful death.”<sup>19</sup> In his work, Douglas Campbell offers strong contrasts between conditional and unconditional salvation, between prospective epistemology (prior human awareness of sin prompts repentance and faith) and retrospective epistemology (the divine gift of faith reveals the depth of human bondage to sin), and between individualist and corporate emphases. Here it is the first member of each pair that represents a catastrophic misinterpretation of Paul, while the second member of each pair represents a healthy pathway in interpretation, consistent with a strong emphasis on divine initiative in salvation.

There is much here that resonates with the Reformers’ critique of human religiosity and their emphasis on the soteriological priority of divine initiative. Yet this element has become so highly developed as to limit what can be said concerning the Reformers’ equally emphatic emphasis on the active nature of human faith and its crucial role in appropriating Christ and his saving benefits. It is one thing to insist with the Reformers on the gifted nature of human faith; it is quite another so to fear any compromise of divine initiative as to be left unable to say very much concerning the nature of the gift.<sup>20</sup> The very intensification of one motif or interpretative element has led to the diminution of another out of a sense of the paramount importance of preserving the former in its purest possible form.<sup>21</sup>

### **Resources for Contemporary Interpretation from the Reformers’ Exegesis: Human Faith**

The relationship between the Reformers’ Pauline exegetical grammar and contemporary Pauline scholarship is thus more complex than might be imagined. As well as genuine disagreement over the meaning of the phrase the “works of the law” and the nature of Judaism, there is also unacknowledged dependence, rejection based on simple misunderstand-

19. J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 271, commenting on Galatians 2:16, emphasis original. The debate concerning subjective versus objective genitive is sometimes characterized as a choice between a christocentric option (“faithfulness of Christ”) and an anthropological option (“faith in Christ”), but if, with Luther and Calvin, faith in Christ is understood to unite the believer with Christ (see below), then the objective genitive can also be characterized as christocentric.

20. Martyn, *Galatians*, 275–77, does not ignore human faith or deny its importance but is left with little to say about faith *exegetically* except to deny its human origin.

21. This phenomenon of intensifying or perfecting a concept is discussed by John M.G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 66–78.

ing, and intensification of some elements at the expense of others. Here it is significant that one of the clearest examples of intensification is an emphasis on divine initiative in salvation so strong that it prevents full exploration of the nature of human faith. For this is an aspect of the Reformers' exegesis with the potential to help stimulate fresh and productive thinking within contemporary scholarship. The Reformers offer a nuanced, multi-dimensional account of human faith that contrasts not only with its neglect in recent "apocalyptic" interpretations of Paul but also with the emphasis on faith as revised self-understanding characteristic of mid-twentieth century accounts.<sup>22</sup>

It is well-known that the Reformers argue that in many Pauline texts concerning justification the Greek noun "faith" (*pistis*) bears the sense of "trust" (*fiducia*) in response to God's promises. Here the example of Abraham (Romans 4, Galatians 3) in trusting God's promise of a son is particularly important. Sinners must accept that they come before God empty-handed and that their hope is based entirely upon the gifts of God that can only come to them from outside the self. In this sense, faith is primarily receptive. What is less often remembered is the Reformers' insistence that such faith is not, however, passively receptive. Faith is *active* and impacts every aspect of a person's existence. As Luther defined faith in the *Preface to Romans* (1522) of his German Bible, "It kills the old Adam and makes us altogether different men, in heart and spirit and mind and powers; and brings with it the Holy Spirit. O it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith."<sup>23</sup> Faith that justifies is not simply intellectual assent. Such faith also works, even if the works it performs are not a cause of justification. Further, justifying faith also offers true worship. In believing God's promises, Abraham considers and confesses God to be truthful and, in so doing, gives God the worship that is God's due. Faith justifies because in accepting God's promises it acknowledges and honors God as God. Faith lets God be God. Paul's statement in Romans 4:20, that Abraham "grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God," was one of the biblical bases upon which this emphasis found an enduring place in early Protestant exegesis. Calvin is typical of many when he makes this aspect of faith paradigmatic of true worship:

22. New discussions of human faith are beginning to appear. See, for example, Teresa Morgan, *Roman Faith and Christian Faith: Pistis and Fides in the Early Roman Empire and Early Churches* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

23. Luther, LW 35:370.

No greater honour can be given to God than by sealing His truth by our faith. On the other hand, no greater insult can be shown to Him than by rejecting the grace which He offers us, or by detracting from the authority of His Word. For this reason the main thing in the worship of God is to embrace His promises with obedience. True religion begins with faith.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, the Reformers' exegesis stresses that Abraham received what was not possible humanly speaking. He walked by faith and not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7):

Abraham is justified not because he believes this or that promise of God but because he stands ready to believe any promise of God, no matter how violently it may contradict the judgments of his own prudential reason and common sense. Abraham's faith is not so much an act (e.g., believing that Sarah will become pregnant in spite of her advanced years) as a disposition (e.g., believing that whatever God promises, however startling, he is able to perform).<sup>25</sup>

This emphasis on faith as believing in defiance of reason or common sense demonstrates that faith trusts, however discouraging its circumstances. As Calvin wrote, again in response to Romans 4:20, "Our circumstances are all in opposition to the promises of God.... What then are we to do? We must close our eyes, disregard ourselves and all things connected with us, so that nothing may hinder or prevent us from believing that God is true."<sup>26</sup> This commitment to trusting reception of divine promises in the face of apparently contradictory experiences is connected to the certainty of faith or assurance. For the Reformers, uncertainty about justification is inconsistent with Paul's assertions that the Spirit enables believers as children of God and heirs of a divine inheritance to cry "Abba! Father!" (Romans 8:15–17; Galatians 4:6–7).

Thus, faith trusts, faith works, faith worships, faith disregards discouraging circumstances, and faith grants assurance. These dimensions of faith identified by the Reformers may not be the only ones present in the

24. *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, vol. 8, *The Epistles of the Apostle Paul to the Romans and the Thessalonians*, trans. R. Mackenzie, ed. D.W. Torrance and T.F. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 99.

25. David C. Steinmetz, "Abraham and the Reformation," in *Luther in Context*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 41.

26. *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries* 8:99.

Pauline letters, but the richness of their reflections upon the theme serves to remind contemporary interpreters of faith's central importance and provide a caution against accounts of faith that explain it in one way only.

### **Resources for Contemporary Interpretation from the Reformers' Exegesis: Union with Christ**

The dimensions of faith discussed above are ubiquitous in the Reformers' Pauline exegesis. However, perhaps the most important aspect of faith is one at which differences emerge between leading exegetes. Melancthon typically describes justification by faith in relational terms. He will sometimes say that the righteousness received by the believer is the righteousness of Christ, but much more often that believers are justified "on account of [*propter*] Christ" (alternatively translated "because of Christ" or "for the sake of Christ"). He does not argue that Christ is present in faith, and, therefore, united with him by faith the believer receives Christ's righteousness. Nor does he characteristically argue that Christ's righteousness is in some sense transferred to the believer. Melancthon seems content to say that Christ is and remains the mediator whose death pleads the believer's case before the Father: "For we are righteous, that is, accepted by God, not on account of our perfection but through mercy on account of Christ, as long as we take hold of it and set it against the wrath of God."<sup>27</sup>

In contrast, both Luther and Calvin connect justification strongly to Paul's vocabulary of being "in Christ." Here it is faith that unites the believer with Christ, and the believer receives Christ's righteousness as a principal component of this union of persons. As Luther expresses it when commenting on Galatians 2:15–16, "Faith justifies because it takes hold of and possesses this treasure, the present Christ...the Christ who is grasped by faith and who lives in the heart is true Christian righteousness."<sup>28</sup> For Luther the presence of Christ in faith is, like the divine presence in the cloud on Mount Sinai or in the Holy of Holies in the temple, mysterious and ultimately inexplicable but also powerful and transforming.<sup>29</sup> There is a "joyous exchange" in which Christ "took upon Himself our sinful person and granted to us His innocent and

27. "Apology of the Augsburg Confession," par. 227 in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Covenant Church*, ed. R. Kolb and T.J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000).

28. Luther, LW 26:130.

29. *Ibid.*

victorious person.”<sup>30</sup> This means that, united with Christ by faith, the believer “can with confidence boast in Christ and say: Mine are Christ’s living, doing and speaking, his suffering and dying, mine as much as if I had lived, done, spoken, suffered and died as he did.”<sup>31</sup> Similarly, Calvin will explain that,

When, therefore, we are justified, the efficient cause is the mercy of God, Christ is the substance [*materia*] of our justification, and the Word, with faith, the instrument. Faith is therefore said to justify, because it is the instrument by which we receive Christ, in whom righteousness is communicated to us. When we are made partakers of Christ [*facti sumus Christi participes*], we are not only ourselves righteous, but our works also are counted righteous in the sight of God, because any imperfections in them are obliterated by the blood of Christ.<sup>32</sup>

Alongside these similarities, there are also important differences in the ways in which Luther and Calvin develop the significance of union with Christ for justification. Luther emphasizes that the believer lives not his or her own life but in fact that of Christ. Commenting on Galatians 2:19–20 he says,

I am not living as Paul now, for Paul is dead. Who then is living? “The Christian.” Paul, living in himself is utterly dead through the Law but living in Christ, or rather with Christ living in him, he lives an alien life. Christ is speaking, acting, and performing all actions in him; these belong not to the Paul-life, but to the Christ-life....[T]his death acquires an alien life for me, namely, the life of Christ, which is not inborn in me but is granted to me in faith through Christ.<sup>33</sup>

Since the believer is living the alien life of Christ, in this way the works that spring forth from faith are not in any conventional sense the believer’s own, and they are not meritorious. Luther therefore feels no need to distinguish sharply between justification and ethical renewal. It is as a believer that the justified person produces good works, and these works can be considered part of justification without threatening to become one

30. Ibid. 26:284.

31. Ibid. 31:297.

32. *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries* 8:73.

33. Luther, LW 26:170.



of its causes. For his part, Calvin defines justification in forensic terms and distinguishes clearly between justification and renewal, terming the latter “sanctification” or “regeneration.” He insists that justification and sanctification are simultaneous but distinct aspects of union with Christ. They form a *duplex gratia* or double grace, twin principal saving benefits, both received in union with Christ by the agency of the Spirit:

For from where does it come that we are justified by faith? It is because by faith we grasp Christ’s righteousness which alone reconciles us to God. Now we cannot grasp this righteousness without also having sanctification. For when it is said that Christ is given to us for redemption, wisdom, and righteousness, it is likewise added that he is given to us for sanctification [1 Corinthians 1:30]. From that it follows that Christ does not justify anyone whom he does not at the same time sanctify. For these benefits are joined together by a perpetual tie; when He illumines us with His wisdom, He ransoms us; when He ransoms us, He justifies us; when He justifies us, He sanctifies us. But because it is now only a question of righteousness and sanctification, let us stop with these two. So although they must be distinguished, nevertheless Christ contains both inseparably. Do we want to receive righteousness in Christ? We must first possess Christ. Now we cannot possess Him without being participants in his sanctification, since He cannot be torn in pieces.<sup>34</sup>

Despite these important differences, the fact that Luther and Calvin both intimately connect justification by faith and union with Christ is of great significance. For in neither case are they retreating from the shared and relentless emphasis in early Protestant exegesis on the extrinsic nature of justification. This matters, for the insistence that those who believe receive justification only outside of themselves and that the righteousness of Christ remains an alien righteousness has often been identified as the source of difficulties in Protestant accounts of justification. Is it not when justification remains external that it becomes a legal fiction separated from the transformation that Paul so clearly expects in the lives of believers? Is it not when justification remains external that it becomes contractual, with faith filling the role of a human disposition that satisfies

34. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion: 1541 French Edition, The First English Version*, trans. E.A. McKee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 356.

a divine requirement? These are real dangers when the extrinsic nature of justification is emphasized in isolation. However, when it is held together with an emphasis on union with Christ, as in the exegesis of Luther and Calvin, these dangers are averted. Justification is then not a legal fiction. This is evident in Luther's conviction that, although righteousness remains alien to the believer, it is essential that the believer lives an alien life, and in Calvin's insistence that, alongside justification, sanctification is one of the simultaneous twin key aspects of union with Christ. Further, neither is justification contractual, for the focus of both Reformers is christological and not contractual. Far from holding that faith justifies because it is the right kind of religious disposition to fulfill the human side of a contract with God, both insist that faith justifies because it grasps hold of Christ and unites the believer with him. Looking back to Luther and Calvin in this way points us forward to more satisfactory exegesis of the Pauline texts. Modern scholarship has often treated the forensic and the participatory as separate tracks in Paul's thought, but here they are appropriately integrated.

## **Conclusions**

The relationship between the Reformers' exegesis and the contemporary task of Pauline interpretation cannot be conceived in any single or simple way but instead requires a critical sifting from which the following conclusions emerge:

(1) The Reformers' polemic against works-righteousness, while readily explicable in their own context, established trajectories of interpretation that unhelpfully distorted the perspective of scholarship on Second Temple Judaism. It therefore does not offer significant resources to contemporary interpreters.

(2) In some areas, contemporary scholars could better understand their own work and the historical influences on it by reflecting on the relationship between their own exegetical conclusions and those of the Reformers. Sometimes there is continued unacknowledged dependence (e.g., the nature of "the flesh"), sometimes intensification of one element of the Reformers' exegesis at the expense of others (e.g., the significance of covenant or the importance of emphasizing divine initiative in salvation), and sometimes simple misunderstanding (as in the treatment of the Reformers' supposed view of Paul's conscience).

(3) In other important respects, reflection on the Reformers' exegesis could help contemporary interpreters find fresh directions in their

research. The Reformers' multi-dimensional account of the nature of faith is of particular significance, as is the emphasis of Luther and Calvin in particular on faith's role in uniting the believer with Christ. The combining of this emphasis in their accounts of justification with an extrinsic focus addresses some of the principal deficiencies often identified in traditional Protestant discussions of the theme.