

The Hermeneutics of the New Perspective on Paul

A Reaction

In one respect, Bultmann was right: everyone has presuppositions when he comes to a book. We assume certain things about what kind of book it is. We have ideas about its basic purpose and content. Whether or not we are correct in our assumptions depends on whether or not we are ultimately willing to be servants or masters of a text. Are we willing to *understand* it or will we insist on *overstanding* it? Are we eager to test our presuppositions to see if they conform to the text or will we impose our ideas upon what we are reading and find what we are looking for? I know there's no disagreement among us that the best interpreter is the one whose presuppositions are in harmony with the way the text presents itself to us.

We have before us today an important test case of good hermeneutics. You can forget about the existentialism you heard about in school, and you need not trouble yourself over much about gospel reductionism. These hermeneutical movements have each had their day and have passed unlamented into the ash heap of hermeneutical history. The true threat today comes from those who are seeking to reinterpret the apostle Paul in a way radically different from the way he was interpreted at the time of the Reformation. Our essayist's analysis of the New Perspective on Paul, therefore, could not be more timely or needed.

Consider what *Christianity Today* has written about one of its chief proponents, N.T. Wright:

Wright's goal in his teaching and writing is to massively revise the way Christianity has been articulated for generations. Christian faith, for Wright, is not about going to heaven when you die. It is not about the triumph of grace over the law of the Old Testament. He says its key doctrine is not justification by grace alone, the cornerstone for the Protestant Reformers. The church has misread Paul so severely, it seems, that no one fully understood the gospel from the time of the apostle to the time a certain British scholar started reading Paul in Greek in graduate school.¹

What's at stake, as our essayist points out, is the article on which the Church stands or falls, the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith. If the New Perspective is correct, then the entire Reformation was built upon a massive misunderstanding. Such a thesis has to be a matter of the profoundest concern for the Reformation's confessional sons and daughters. But if anyone doubted whether or not our essayist was up for the task, those doubts were dispelled by the end of the first two pages. Note how he skillfully teased out the four basic propositions upon which this interpretation is built. Here they are again:

1. First century Judaism was a religion of grace and so Paul could not have been trying to combat work righteousness.
2. Justification does not answer the question of how we find a gracious God, but rather how we become/are identified as people of God.
3. Justification language is covenant language.
4. Individual passages must be interpreted within the context of an overarching narrative that has been identified and reconstructed for us by NT Wright.

¹ Jason Byassee, "Surprised by N.T. Wright." *ChristianityToday.com*, April 8, 2014.

You've heard what our brother has had to say and so I have no intention of trying to rehearse his arguments. I would rather spend the time I have in pointing out what makes this such an excellent essay. Then I hope to close with a brief excursus about the limits of narrative theology especially as we have seen abused by proponents such as NT Wright.

First of all, what I admire about brother Dan's work is the clarity of his exposition. If you have spent any time at all toiling in the mire and the muck of the New Perspective, you can quickly become thoroughly confused. While in many major points they agree, each of the three chief proponents has his own particular angle in his exposition of the New Perspective. Pastor Waldschmidt's lucid prose cuts through the difficulties and helps us understand.

The second thing that I appreciate about his work is that he practices what he preaches. Just as a good Bible interpreter wants to be a servant of the text he interprets, so anyone who desires to discuss someone else's writing should seek to be a servant and try to understand the individual on his own terms. Even when one is dealing with an opponent, a careful interpreter follows the way of love outlined by the eighth commandment. Brother Dan excels in this. He does not thunder down anathemas from the top of Mount Sinai; he rather speaks in gentle, measured tones as he sets forth the movement's basic ideas. He does not refute with ridicule, but, by taking their arguments seriously, he shows where they are wrong. His critiques and responses to their ideas are all the more devastating because of this.

In the end, however, I'm sure that you will agree with me that Pastor Waldschmidt's best and greatest gift is his ability to keep us focused on what is important. Again and again he helps us see that the real issue here revolves around the *res* of Scripture (to use Martin Franzmann's memorable terminology). If we get this most basic hermeneutical presupposition wrong, everything that follows will be skewed. Again and again Pastor Waldschmidt points out how the New Perspective's flawed starting point inevitably leads to its flawed outcomes.

It is this kind of analysis that helps us understand why good hermeneutics is so important. Brother Dan is an excellent exegete, no doubt about it. But ultimately the problem with the New Perspective—as indeed the problem of most wrongheaded Bible interpretation—does not lie on the level of exegesis alone. It rather lies on the level of hermeneutical approach, one's basic hermeneutical commitments. We believe that the Bible is God's inspired inerrant word. This makes a difference in our exegesis. We believe that the basic content of the Bible is the love that our God has for poor sinners, revealed in the face of Jesus Christ, and received by faith in the gift of forgiveness that he won for us. The doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith is no less than the key that opens the text of Scripture to us.

So many doctoral discussions are rendered futile because the parties involved do not agree in their basic hermeneutical commitments. And as long as they don't, they will simply talk past one another.

Now permit me then briefly to muse over one hermeneutical topic raised by the paper that I believe is worthy of more discussion. What I mean is the question of the overarching narratives that lay behind the scriptural text. As I see it there are really two problems with NT Wright's approach.

The first is indicated by that little word "overarching." It is an iffy business to construct metanarratives and overarching templates for interpretation that are not explicitly identified as such by the sacred Scriptures. Jesus is very clear in Luke 24 about what the basic message of the Old Testament is and what the basic proclamation of the New Testament apostles is to be. To make up templates and metanarratives that displace and vitiate these clear Scripture passages is perverse and wrongheaded (pp 23ff). Both Andrew Das and Mark Seifrid help us see this (p. 31f).

I would only add that this principle of not reading into the text in this way has wider application than just to see it as a possible flaw in a narrative approach to Scripture. Finally, the same problem occurs if we construct, on our own authority, any theological or doctrinal template and make it into a principle governing interpretation. It can happen if we pose questions that the text was not made to answer. It can happen even when we impose our own orthodox theological grids upon a text in such a way that we force the words under study to mean what we want them to mean.

I'd better give an example of the latter. Certainly a key to our understanding of the Bible is to draw the fundamental distinction between law and gospel. But at times we can be rigid in almost forcing every single statement in Scripture to be either one or the other. Finally, didn't the confessors help us see that even the crucifixion itself can be seen—at one and the same—as both the most damning law and the sweetest gospel? To insist that it must be either one or the other is to force a text to conform to our dogmatical ideas rather than simply to let it speak on its own terms.

So how do we know if we're reading into a text or drawing from it? Here the question of appropriate methodology comes to the fore. There really can be no question that at times Paul, in the line of his theological thought, assumes a background knowledge of biblical stories. Romans 4, for example, assumes a knowledge of the Abraham narrative—even to the extent of the readers' needing to be aware of the chronology of events. Similarly, Romans 5 assumes the knowledge of both the fall of Adam and the crucifixion of Jesus. An interpreter is not playing games with the text to recognize these things. Depending on his audience, a preacher may well need to make explicit what is only implicit in the text. But here's the point about methodology: in both those cases it is quite clear in the language itself that Paul uses that those two narratives are embedded within the doctrinal content of the text.

What people like N.T. Wright do is to construct such narratives without adequate textual warrant for doing so. That's not to say he lacks any evidence at all from the first century. He may well be able to show from various other texts that these ideas were current. But to impose them as a hermeneutical grid against which the text itself (according to him) simply *must* be understood is to give a mere human supposition pride of place over the authority of the sacred text.

For example, many commentators today would say that in Paul's first chapter of Romans, he uses many words that are reminiscent of the kind of propaganda that was circulating in the Roman world regarding the excellencies of the Emperor. Words like "lord," "good news," and "salvation" come to mind. Now it's one thing to allow extra biblical data like this to add greater color to our understanding of the text before us. But it's another thing to insist that a mere possibility *must be so* and that therefore what Paul is doing—and what everybody would've understood him to be doing—is really a countercultural and an almost a subversive act that contrasts the Lord Christ with the Emperor. To take what is possible and to insist upon it as necessary is a classic example of a person seeking to overstand a text rather than to understand it. Unfortunately, this is not the only place where NT Wright and others have practice this kind of hermeneutics.

No doubt most of this is pretty obvious and I apologize for belaboring the point. Our real focus here must be on the service that our brother, Dan Waldschmidt, has rendered to us. His clear exposition, his charitable tone, and his focus on what is important make this essay on the New Perspective one of the best that I have read and a worthy contribution to our symposium on hermeneutics. For all of us brother, I thank you!

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