Reformation Redivivus: Synergism and the New Perspective

Kent L. Yinger
George Fox Evangelical Seminary

Abstract — Debates over the New Perspective on Paul show a great deal of similarity to Reformation-era debates over synergism. In fact, synergism has become one of the more common charges made against the New Perspective by its critics. After documenting the charge in these modern debates, this article explores the details of synergistic controversy surrounding the Reformation. Among other things, various wings of the Reformation appear to have understood, and reacted to, synergism in quite-different ways. The article then highlights some aspects of New Perspective debates that are reminiscent of earlier theological debates over synergism and suggests ways in which greater attention to some aspects of theological interpretation might help move this part of the New Perspective debate forward.

Key Words — New Perspective, Paul, synergism, monergism

Although debate over the merits of the New Perspective's various readings of Pauline soteriology seems to have died down somewhat, this probably has less to do with common agreement than with its running out of steam. All one has to do is poke this sleeping dog to discover that many of the earlier specific disagreements are still slumbering only very gently and can still bark loudly. Nowhere is this more evident than when Pauline scholars discuss the role of obedience or works in the apostle's concept of justification by faith.

In spite of a host of careful studies on nearly all exegetical aspects of this issue—works of the law, righteousness of God, Second Temple Jewish

literature, perfection, etc.—a number of more theologically oriented concerns continue to surface. In particular, synergism is mentioned most often as the real problem with New Perspective soteriology. Part two of this article will clarify the theological meaning of synergism, but for now the following working definition should suffice: in salvation, God and the human recipient work together (ςυνεργεω, "work with”).

This article proposes that important aspects of the current debate among Pauline specialists comprise a continuation of never-completed Reformation debates over synergism, an observation that suggests that this biblical studies debate will never be resolved on a purely exegetical basis. The article suggests further that scholars should step back and review their preunderstandings of soteriology, in particular as it may relate to Reformation debates over synergism, as part of their approach to Pauline texts. After a review of Reformation debates over synergism, the article will point out how current Pauline studies debates mirror these Reformation positions and will suggest a number of potentially fruitful ways forward in light of this kind of theological interpretation.

CURRENT DEBATES OVER THE NEW PERSPECTIVE ON PAUL, LEGALISM, AND SYNERGISM

At least since the publication of his Paul and Palestinian Judaism (1977), NT scholars have been debating Sanders’s revised understanding of Second Temple Judaism and the relationship between Paul and Judaism or the Law. According to Sanders, first-century Judaism did not espouse a legalistic soteriology (meritorious works earn salvation) but began with God’s election of and covenant with Israel, that is, with grace. Works of obedience to the law were, indeed, required to experience life, but these works were the response to prior grace and were not human actions that earned divine favor. Sanders termed this pattern of religion “covenantal nomism” and viewed Paul’s pattern as quite different. These conclusions about Judaism form the basis of most studies aligned with the New Perspective on Paul; however, most of these studies also depart from Sanders regarding

2. Dunn has wondered along similar lines in “The New Perspective on Paul: Whence, What and Whither?” 77–80. See also Stephen Westerholm, “The ‘New Perspective’ at Twenty-Five,” in Justification and Variegated Nomism, vol. 2: The Paradoxes of Paul (ed. D. A. Carson et al.; WUNT 2/140; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck / Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 37. This in no way minimizes the importance of continued work on exegetical details, but it does suggest that further debate on the exegetical level is unlikely to yield significant progress without increased attention to the theological context of this interpretation. The flip side is equally true; theological analysis will require continued pursuit of exegetical detail.

Paul. They see the apostle’s soteriology largely in continuity with covenantal nomism. Those attracted to this perspective, while differing on a great many exegetical details, typically hold at least the following in common when interpreting Paul's letters: (i) Since Judaism was not legalistic, it is unlikely that Paul was opposing legalism when speaking of justification by faith and not by works of the law. (2) Rather than some form of works-righteousness, works of the law refer to Jewish identity as it was marked out by Torah-oriented behavior. (3) Paul’s language of justification by faith and not by works (or works of the law) primarily addressed who belongs to the people of God. Rather than participation in Israel (Jewishness), the gospel of Christ announces that anyone who is in Christ by faith—whether Jewish or Gentile, male or female, slave or free—is now part of the elect and eschatological people of the God of Israel.4

Although numerous NT scholars have come to be identified with this New Perspective on Paul, there is, in fact, no monolithic New Perspective.5 Instead, there is a shared starting point that Sanders was largely correct about Paul's non-legalistic Jewish milieu and that one of Paul's primary concerns was to defend the status of his uncircumcised Gentile converts in the face of pressures that they become Jewish in order to be counted among God's people, rather than to counter a message of salvation by works.

Thus, the relationship between grace and works in Paul or in Judaism has occupied a great deal of the post-Sanders discussion. Critics not infrequently accuse New Perspective positions of some sort of grace-works synergism. For example, Robert Gundry: "[I]n Paul's presentation of Pal[estinian] Jud[aism] good works constitute a righteousness necessary at least to activate God's grace for the forgiveness of sins. Paul will have none of this synergism."6 Thomas Schreiner: "Paul detected legalism in Judaism because its soteriology was synergistic."7 Donald Hagner: "Paul abandoned the synergism of Jewish soteriology for the monergism of total dependence upon the grace of God in Christ."8 Douglas Moo: "[S]cholars are increasingly recognizing that first-century Judaism, on any reading of the evidence, was

4. For details, see Thompson, *The New Perspective on Paul*.
5. Thus, a particular scholar's association with the New Perspective does not mean that every position taken by that person represents this New Perspective. Examples include Dunn's work on incarnational Christology, Wright's understanding of Israel's exilic condition, Räisänen's inconsistent Paul, or Stendahl's two-covenant theory.
synergistic...Jews were saved through both grace and works. And it is just this synergism that Paul seems to be attacking in a number of passages.9

The charge of synergism carries considerable weight with these opponents, needing but little elaboration. As will become clear in the next section, Reformation debates explain the importance and self-evident nature of this charge.

**Synergism: A Reformation Debate**

**Pelagius and Augustine**

In the late 4th and early 5th centuries, a British ascetic, Pelagius, arguing against Manichaean fatalism and for the necessity of choosing the good, asserted that human beings are capable of taking the initial and decisive first step toward their salvation apart from a special grace of God. “When we really do a good thing or speak a good word or think a good thought, it proceeds from ourselves.”10 Pelagius’s position was a reaction to perceived determinism; that is, if all human choice is predetermined, humans will cease striving for the good. For Augustine, this position diminished the divine glory in salvation (since it makes salvation due to human action). Thus, he opposed Pelagius and asserted that without divine grace there can be no choosing of the good, no movement toward salvation. “Our free will can do nothing better than to commit itself to him to be led, who cannot act wrongly, and, when it has done this, not to doubt that it was assisted to do it by him.”11

Because the freedom of the will became so central in the synergism debates of the Reformation, it is important to note that Augustine was not hereby opposing freedom of the will in an unqualified sense.12 That, of

---


10. *Tractatus de libero arbitrio*, CSEL xlii, 139.


course, would have played directly into the hands of the determinists. Instead, for Augustine, the human (even fallen) will was incapacitated, wounded by sin, to such an extent that, although still possessing theoretical freedom to choose good, in practice it would always choose evil unless healed by grace.

Within this larger debate over the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility, the question as to how, or how much, humans cooperate in becoming and staying saved became an issue. Debate over whether the fallen human will was wholly in bondage or was wounded and in need of healing would characterize different sides in synergism debates yet to come. Although Pelagius's views were almost universally condemned, his concern for human responsibility, including the conviction that the fallen human being must cooperate with grace in salvation, became the standard view of most medieval theologians. Nevertheless, Augustine's insistence that any such human cooperation required a prior act of divine grace (a healing of the wounded will) would arise again in the Reformation.13

Synergism Not a Particularly Burning Issue in Roman Catholic or Orthodox Soteriology

As should be clear from the foregoing, reflection on the relationship between divine and human action in salvation has characterized Christian theology from its early period. However, the more focused charges of synergism reflected in the quoted allegations above appear to be almost wholly a Reformation-related issue and are generally not present in other traditions. Orthodox soteriology, for instance, "sees salvation in terms of synergeia or 'cooperation' between divine grace and human freedom."14 Likewise, Roman Catholic theology following the Pelagian crisis, and as enshrined in the Tridentine canons, has stressed the necessity of prevenient divine grace for human faith and action alongside the voluntary exercise of human free will (assisted by grace, of course).15 In these traditions,


14. Bishop Kallistos (Timothy Ware), How Are We Saved? The Understanding of Salvation in the Orthodox Tradition (Minneapolis: Light & Life, 1996), 34.

15. "If any one saith, that without the prevenient inspiration of the Holy Ghost, and without his help, man can believe, hope, love, or be penitent as he ought...; let him be anathema" (Council of Trent, Session VI, "On Justification," Canon III). "If any one saith, that man's free will moved and excited by God... no-wise cooperates towards disposing and preparing itself for obtaining the grace of Justification... as [if it were] something inanimate... and is merely passive; let him be anathema" (ibid., Canon IV). Similarly, the Catechism: "In faith, the human intellect and will cooperate with divine grace" (Catechism of the Catholic Church [Liguori, MO: Liguori, 1994], §155).
synergism was not particularly problematic. Debate over synergism is mainly a Protestant issue.

It Was Primarily Martin Luther Who Introduced Concerns about Synergism into Christian Soteriological Debate

Luther revised the Augustinian position as to the depravity of the human will. Whereas Augustine thought that salvation by grace could be preserved without denying free will (the will was free though captive, liberum arbitrium captivatum), Luther was adamant regarding the bondage of the human will (servum arbitrium). His more pessimistic anthropology rejected all human cooperation in the achieving and obtaining of salvation. In De servo arbitrio (Bondage of the Will), he sets forth a soteriological monergism in which human salvation is traced to divine grace alone and the human agent is passive. Although the term "synergism" is not used, Luther is clearly opposing the more synergistic position of Erasmus.

[T]his is the hinge on which our discussion turns... to investigate what ability 'free will' has... We need... to have in mind a clear-cut distinction between God's power and ours, and God's work and ours [in matters pertaining to salvation].... God's mercy alone works everything, and our will works nothing, but is rather the object of Divine working, else all will not be ascribed to God.

If human conditionality were allowed entrance to the doctrine of justification, a twofold disaster would result. First, the glory and all-sufficiency of God's work in Christ for sinners would be sullied; and, second, believers could no longer enjoy assurance in Christ by faith alone (since they would need also to glance at their own performance as in the uncertainty of medieval Catholic piety per Luther).

Luther's monergism was, however, somewhat ambiguous for his followers. While he was deeply concerned to maintain this fundamental distinction between divine action (justification by grace through faith) and human response (sanctification, good works), he was equally concerned to deny any division; they belong and work together, they cooperate. Thus, Luther could speak with vigor of the necessity of human cooperation in obedient works (sanctification), while denying it any necessary place in justification, which was by divine grace alone. "Opera sunt necessaria ad

16. "The free will taken captive [liberum arbitrium captivatum] does not avail, except for sin; but for righteousness, unless divinely set free and aided, it does not avail," Contra duas epistolam Pelagianorum III, viii, 24 (NPNF1 5:414; emphasis added).

17. For human passivity in Luther's teaching on justification, see especially his treatment of proposition 36 in the "Bondage of the Will"; see also Article 2 of the "Formula of Concord," in The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church (ed. R. Kolb and T. J. Wengert; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 494.
salutem, sed non causant salutem, quia fides sola dat vitam” (“Works are necessary to salvation, but they do not cause salvation, because faith alone gives life”).

Luther's Ambiguities Led to Controversy over Synergism

As increasing moral laxity became evident among confessing Lutherans and antinomian voices grew louder (Agricola), Luther's monergism was perceived to be problematic since it was heard by many as diminishing the necessity of Christian obedience. In response, Philipp Melanchthon began to stress the importance of obedient cooperation with justifying grace. Although the first edition of his *Loci communes* (1521) largely replicated Luther's position on the bondage of the will, subsequent editions gave more attention to the “necessity” of good works, not as causing or meriting justification, but as the necessary consequence of justification. The second edition included the new phrasing “good works are necessary for salvation” and they “are the *sine qua non* for salvation.” After discussion with Luther, however, the third edition dropped “for salvation” so that good works were now simply “necessary.”

Unfortunately, during the Reformation controversy as well as in modern disputes over Paul and synergism, two closely related but distinct debates have often been merged and confused. The Synergist Controversy, strictly speaking, dealt with the role of human free will in the initiation of salvation or coming to faith in Christ. The Majorist Controversy focused more on the role and value of obedience in those already converted. Although they are historically and conceptually intertwined, I will outline the Synergist Controversy first and then the other.

Beginning with the second edition of his *Loci* (1535), Melanchthon posited three causes in conversion: the Word of God, the Holy Spirit, and the human will. Thus, he allowed some role for the human will in the beginnings of conversion. The action of the will in no way merited salvation, but it must not resist or reject the offer. Melanchthon's opponents saw here the introduction of human works; Melanchthon himself seems to have viewed his stance as, in fact, an avoidance of human work, that is, simply the refusal to reject the offer (rather than the active acceptance of the offer). In any case, Melanchthon's stress on the human will was aimed against determinism or Manichaeanism; God draws the one who is willing, rather than coercing the unwilling. (Note the echo of earlier Pelagian concerns.)


This stress on the necessity of good works alarmed his Gnesio-Lutheran opponents. It had been precisely the Reformers’ denial that good works were necessary for salvation that had brought bitter Catholic denunciations of Reformation leaders. Now one of their own was sounding just like their Catholic opponents!

Against this background, the Synergist Controversy itself was occasioned by Johann Pfeffinger’s *Propositiones de libero arbitrio* (1555), which argued that some human cooperation was necessary for the initial reception of the gospel. Pfeffinger’s synergist position was challenged by the monergists, von Amsdorf and Flacius, who felt that Luther’s twofold concern mentioned above (for the glory of God and for believers’ assurance) was not being sufficiently safeguarded. Instead of human cooperation, they stressed human passivity, as had Luther himself. To many observers, the monergist side seemed to tend toward an almost Manichaean stance in which absolute predestination made fallen humanity appear as unfree puppets. Note, the Synergist Controversy dealt with whether the fallen human being could contribute in the initial reception of salvation and is thus somewhat distinct from current disputes over the saving role of believers’ post-conversion obedience (for which the Majorist Controversy below is more relevant).

The issue was debated at the Weimar Colloquy (1560), and the synergism of Melanchthon and Pfeffinger was definitively rejected by Lutheranism in the Formula of Concord, Articles 1 and 2 (1577). Whereas Melanchthon had stated there were three causes leading some to accept and others to reject the gospel (“the Word of God, the Holy Spirit, and the Will”), the Formula of Concord held that there were only two (“the Holy Spirit and God’s Word as the instrument of the Holy Spirit”) and thus rejected Melanchthon’s synergistic free will. His position was seen as weakening total depravity and detracting from the sole sufficiency of divine grace in salvation.

20. Those adhering to Melanchthon’s line were called “Philippists” and their opponents “Gnesio-Lutherans” (pure or authentic Lutherans).


Running alongside this Synergist Controversy over the initial reception of salvation was another that was concerned with the role of the works of the justified in their obtaining of final salvation. Though not intended by Luther himself, his strong stance on justification by faith *apart from works* could be taken to imply that good works following conversion were unnecessary or optional.

During the early 1550s a dispute erupted between Wittenberg theologian, Georg Major—a student of Melanchthon and Luther and a proponent of the Leipzig Interim—and members of the Magdeburg Consistory, which thought the Leipzig Interim had abandoned too much of the essence of Lutheranism. The debate focused on Major's use of the sentence "good works are necessary for salvation." For Major, this sentence was directed against antinomian laxity, and in this context he felt it was shared by all proponents of the Reformation. In the same writings, when addressing the perceived legalistic error of Rome ("good works are necessary *to earn* salvation"), he made unmistakably clear that humanity is saved "by faith alone through Christ alone *without any help from us.*"

The stringent monergists, like von Amsdorf, saw this nevertheless as an attack on justification *sola fide.*

We know well... that a Christian should and must do good works. Nobody disputes and speaks concerning that. . . . On the contrary, we speak and dispute concerning this, whether a Christian earns salvation by the good works that he should and must do... [W]hoever teaches and preaches these words as they stand, "Good works are necessary to salvation," is the same as a Pelagian, a mameluke, a denier of Christ, and a duplicitous papist.

As a safeguard to this monergistic view, von Amsdorf moved even beyond Luther to argue that good works are not only unnecessary but positively detrimental to salvation.

24. "[D]as gute werck zur seligkeit nötig sind/ vnd . . . das auch niemands durch böse werck selig werde/ vnd das auch niemands one gute werck selig werde" ("that good works are necessary for salvation/and . . . that no one is saved through evil works/and that no one is saved without good works"); "Answer to Amsdorff" [1552]; quoted in Timothy J. Wengert, "Georg Major [1502–1574], Defender of Wittenberg's Faith and Melanchthonian Exegete," in *Melanchthon in seinen Schülern* [ed. H. Scheible; Wolfenbütteler Forschungen 73; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1997], 139.

25. German: *on alle zuthun,* "without any additional work" (ibid., 136, emphasis added).


27. So the title of Amsdorf's 1559 publication: *Das die proposition (Gute werck sind sur Seligkeit schedlich) eine rechte ware christliche propositio sey* ("On the truly Christian thesis that good works are detrimental to salvation").
In the last analysis, the two sides appear to have been talking past one another to a large extent. The Majorists, like Melanchthon before them, were concerned with the problem of antinomianism; the “necessity” of good works in the lives of believers was aimed at quashing the false hopes of those who might claim to be saved by faith alone while living in sin. Amsdorf and the Gnesio-Lutherans were concerned with the earnest seeker after peace with God whose conscience was troubled by lack of perfectly righteous behavior (the opposite attitude from an antinomian’s). In this context, the “necessity” of good works would make all hope of assurance and peace with God an impossibility and would turn seekers to their own works rather than to Christ.28

Again, it was the Formula of Concord (Art. 4) that established the Lutheran position.29 “We reject... that good works are necessary for salvation; or that no one has ever been saved without good works; or that it is impossible to be saved without good works.”30 However, the immediately following Negative Thesis acknowledges a proper urging of the “necessity” of human cooperation in the face of antinomianism.

[I]t is no less necessary to admonish the people to Christian discipline and good works and to remind them how necessary it is that they practice good works as a demonstration of their faith and their gratitude to God. ... For people can be damned by an Epicurean delusion about faith just as much as by the papistic, Pharisaic trust in their own works and merit.31

Heirs of Melanchthon and Evangelical Synergism

The Pietist wing of Lutheranism generally saw Luther interpreters as deficient in their understanding of the importance of good works in the Christian life. Thus, for instance, Spener says,

When Luther speaks at various times of faith and works, he appears to raise up the one only and entirely reject the other. Nevertheless, where all his writings are considered together at one time, it is clear that what he is really opposing is the delusion of their working together with faith for salvation. ... The dear man, however, also in

29. It is unlikely that Melanchthon changed his position on the “necessity of good works for salvation.” However, because the phrase was so easily misunderstood in the direction of legalism, he later urged followers to refrain from using it further; see ibid., 459 n. 13, and 463 n. 30.
31. Ibid., emphasis added. This is directed especially against Amsdorf’s denigration of good works as “harmful.”
many places... earnestly stressed godly living as much as one can do: but not from the law and only as a duty to which we must be driven, but much more in the sense that it is a never-absent fruit of true faith.\textsuperscript{32}

In opposition to Gomarus and forms of monergistic Calvinism prevalent in Holland at the time, Jacob Arminius held that God's prevenient grace in the proclamation of the gospel freed sinners from their necessary resistance to God and permitted their cooperation in the form of nonresistance. That is, the human contribution is not so much anything they do but what they do not do—they no longer resist the grace offered in the gospel. This type of evangelical synergism is not Pelagian, or even semi-Pelagian, but does attribute to human cooperation in salvation a place generally not expressed by monergists (at least not in these terms).

John Wesley and, thus, most of the Methodist and Wesleyan traditions are likewise synergistic in this sense. For this reason, some modern monergist theologians suspect Arminian synergists of not holding to justification by grace through faith alone, but this is an ongoing tension within evangelical theology.\textsuperscript{33}

\textbf{Reformation Redivivus: Echoes of This Reformation Debate in New Perspective Debates}

Although New Perspective debates take place largely within the field of biblical studies, the importance of church history and theology to the same should occasion no surprise. A great deal of the debate is carried out over the issue of whether a “Lutheran” or “non-Lutheran” reading of Paul is correct. This is wholly understandable, since Sanders framed the debate in terms of a Lutheran reading of Paul.\textsuperscript{34} The problem is not that biblical studies are being somehow “tainted” by foreign concerns (church history, systematic theology, etc.). The theological interpretation of Scripture is, in fact, a desideratum of many. Rather, New Perspective debates have

\textsuperscript{32} “Theologische Bedencken” (Halle, 1707); appears in \textit{Documents from the History of Lutheranism 1517–1750} (ed. Eric Lund; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 283.

\textsuperscript{33} See the defense of Wesley's synergism in Robert V. Rakestraw, “John Wesley as a Theologian of Grace,” \textit{JETS} 27 (1984): 193–203. For a defense of Arminian or evangelical synergism as authentically Protestant, see Roger E. Olson, \textit{The Mosaic of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries of Unity and Diversity} (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 277–86; idem, \textit{Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities} (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 18: “When conservative theologians declare that synergism is a heresy, they are usually referring to those two Pelagian forms of synergism [Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism]... Contrary to confused critics, classical Arminianism is neither Pelagian nor semi-Pelagian! But it is synergistic. Arminianism is \textit{evangelical synergism} as opposed to heretical, humanistic synergism” (original emphasis).

\textsuperscript{34} On the whole, see Stephen Westerholm, \textit{Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The “Lutheran” Paul and His Critics} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).
suffered from insufficient theological and historical reflection. This reflection might aid these discussions in moving beyond the current impasse.

The problem arises from unarticulated theological presuppositions. Jewish and Pauline texts are probed, sometimes resulting in the conclusion that the former are synergistic while the latter are not; yet the understanding of synergism stems from Reformation debates and represents, without acknowledgement or reflection, only one side of that debate, viz., the Gnesio-Lutheran or Formula of Concord. If a Melanchthonian or Majoristic understanding were applied, Paul and Judaism can be seen in much greater continuity (as do most New Perspective proponents).

As noted in part one of this paper, charges that the New Perspective on Paul is synergistic have become fairly commonplace. Occasionally, these authors will give some minimal definition to this charge. More often, the terms are used without any explanation, as though their meaning will be self-evident. This is partially understandable in light of the Lutheran framing of the New Perspective debate. Apparently, many of these authors assume a Reformation understanding of synergism and monergism. However, as seen in the first part of this paper, ascertaining this “Reformation understanding” remains a bit of unfinished business among theologians and church historians. As far as I can tell, most critics of the New Perspective on Paul have generally adopted an understanding of synergism in line with that of the Formula of Concord. Pauline texts are viewed within the framework of Augustinian or Lutheran monergism, and interpretations tending toward any form of synergism are, correspondingly, departures from genuinely Pauline thought. Since Sanders’s covenantal nomism moves in a synergistic direction, it obviously must differ from Paul’s perspective.

Some proponents of the New Perspective, on the other hand, would appear to be more comfortable viewing Paul (and Judaism) in synergistic

35. Often overlooked in charges such as these of “Jewish synergism” is the fact that some streams of Second Temple Judaism were at least as monergistic as Augustine, Luther, or Calvin later on. See, for example, Gabriele Boccaccini, “Inner-Jewish Debate on the Tension between Divine and Human Agency in Second Temple Judaism,” and Phillip S. Alexander, “Predestination and Free Will in the Theology of the Dead Sea,” in Divine and Human Agency in Paul and His Cultural Environment (ed. John M. G. Barclay and Simon J. Gathercole; Early Christianity in Context; London: T. & T. Clark, 2006), 9–26 and 27–49, respectively.

36. Thus, one reviewer noted that my position might be charged (incorrectly, in his view) with “synergism” (Friedrich Aemaric, “Paul, Judaism, and Judgment According to Deed,” JTS 51 [2000]: 272).

37. “By synergism we mean simply that the actions of men are believed to affect their eschatological salvation” (Timo Eskola, “Paul, Predestination and ‘Covenantal Nomism’: Re-Assessing Paul and Palestinian Judaism,” JSF 28 [1997]: 404, emphasis added). Another author explains that one “must and can through his own works cooperate in the process of salvation” (Timo Laato, Paul and Judaism: An Anthropological Approach [South Florida Studies in the History of Judaism 115; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995], 167).

38. This is rarely explicit; but see Guy Prentiss Waters, Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul: A Review and Response (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004), 151–90.
ways. Many of the views they suggest in Paul's letters remind readers of the Majoristic, Melanchthonian, or Wesleyan variations of synergism. From ongoing discussions of synergism in theological and church historical circles, it should be clear that any claim to "the Reformation understanding" may be jumping the gun. Thus, when one New Perspective critic cries "synergism," rather than crying "ouch," some proponents may say "precisely." Thus, their disagreement ends up being less about the Pauline evidence and more about whether one understanding of soteriological synergism is preferable to another. Attempts at genuine theological interpretation have been rare.

The remainder of this article will suggest some areas of Pauline study in which greater attention to this theological interpretation might move the New Perspective debate forward. One important area of dispute centers on Pauline and Jewish anthropology. Timo Laato has argued that Paul's pessimistic anthropology contrasts with Judaism's optimistic version. Human beings can, purportedly, obey God without the Spirit's aid in Judaism. For Paul, on the other hand, humans are in bondage to the power of sin, and even Christians' works are not so much human effort but "fruit of the Spirit." Jewish anthropology leads to synergism (human ability to cooperate with God and even to contribute to salvation), whereas the Pauline view demands monergism. A number of other scholars agree that these are central differences between Paul and Judaism and are a weakness of New Perspective presentations. Sanders could be said to have invited debate on this point. "The lack of a doctrine of original sin in the Augustinian sense is an important point to be grasped if one is to understand Rabbinic 'soteriology' or the nature and quality of Jewish religious life."

39. When Eskola refers to the "common theory of synergistic religion," he apparently means common among certain groups of Protestant theologians ("Paul, Predestination and 'Covenantal Nomism,'" 396). I am aware of no "common theory" outside of those circles, and he refers only to other New Perspective critics for this idea.

40. Paul Rainbow has recently argued for what he calls "Augustinian synergism," but interacts only tangentially with New Perspective debates (The Way of Salvation: The Role of Christian Obedience in Justification [Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2005]). Waters is explicit that the New Perspective on Paul is a rehash of Reformation debates over Catholic semi-Pelagianism. However, his book is primarily an apologetic for a Reformed critique of the New Perspective debate and fails to move the debate forward (Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul).

41. Laato, Paul and Judaism.

42. According to Robert Gundry, "boasting corrupts Spirit-less obedience to the law" in Judaism; whereas, for Paul, "[spiritual believers [Christians] naturally fulfill the righteous ordinance of the law" ("Grace, Works, and Staying Saved in Paul," 19). "Judaism believed human beings were endowed with free will so that they could cooperate with God. Paul believed human beings lacked the ability to choose what is good" (Schreiner, The Law and Its Fulfillment, 94; Schreiner makes reference to Laato for this point).

43. Sanders, Paul and Palestinian Judaism, 115.
Just as there were two distinct controversies over synergism during the Reformation (the Synergistic Controversy and the Majoristic Controversy), so there ought to be a distinction in Pauline debate as to what sort of synergism is being alleged.\textsuperscript{44} Strictly speaking, synergism (in the sense of the Synergistic Controversy) would refer only to unaided human initiative in coming to Christ and not to the role or necessity of post-conversion obedience. Sanders's insistence that in both Judaism and Paul one "gets in" by grace/election seems to suggest that this strict version ought not to be the type of synergism charged against the New Perspective. As a later critic agreed, "the initiation of 'salvation'... is by pure grace" in Sanders's Judaism and his Paul.\textsuperscript{45}

Thus, most commonly the charge of synergism against the New Perspective on Paul has to do with the necessity of postconversion human contribution to final salvation by obedience; viz., how one maintains ("stays in"), and then finally obtains, salvation. As Laato has argued, the New Perspective appears to adopt a sub-Pauline, Jewish anthropology in which Christians are capable of obedience by their own unaided nature or power. Paul, in contrast to the New Perspective and to Judaism, views Christians' obedience not as their own work but as "fruit of the Spirit."

In order to make progress in the discussion, several crucial questions demand deeper exploration, some of which are suggested by earlier synergism controversies. First, since all sides agree that there is, indeed, some human action involved in obedience (that is, human beings are not being manipulated like Manichaean puppets), further exploration of the psychology or theology of this divine-human interaction might suggest that the two sides are not as far apart as this charge seems to imply.\textsuperscript{46} This is, in many respects, a replay of Pelagian-Augustinian debates and of Calvinist-Arminian debates following the Reformation.

\textsuperscript{44} N. T. Wright seems to urge a similar distinction. Rather than continuing the Reformation's conflation of the terms justification and salvation, he suggests we limit justification to the "declarative act in which God as the judge pronounces someone 'in the right,'" and salvation to the "actual rescue from sin and its consequences," and use "call" for the initial "getting converted" (= Sanders' "getting in") (R. Alan Streett and N. T. Wright, "An Interview with N. T. Wright," \\textit{Criswell Theological Review} n.s. 2/2 [2005]: 5–6).


\textsuperscript{46} See, for instance, the essays in Barclay and Gathercole, eds., \textit{Divine and Human Agency}. Barclay suggests the New Perspective has "undercut the whole tradition of interpretation which found in Paul a programmatic distinction between divine and human agency" (Barclay, introduction to \textit{Divine and Human Agency}, 1–8), i.e., between divine monergism and divine-human synergism (p. 2); and the various essays demonstrate that the monergism-synergism debate is hardly an invention of Christian theology but is equally endemic to the OT and Second Temple Judaism.
Second, New Perspective proponents do not typically claim as charged that Christian obedience springs from unaided human nature. As I have written, “The role of the Spirit in enabling obedience ... is ... heightened significantly in Paul.”47 Similarly, Dunn: “Christian conduct is for Paul ... an outworking of the Spirit. ... not simply as walking in accordance with the Spirit, but as being led by the Spirit.”48 If, then, synergism typically refers to independent or unaided human cooperation with divine grace, what does it mean for the debate over synergism if New Perspective proponents envision believers’ co-work in salvation more in the sense of "fruit" than unaided human effort?

Third, and intimately related to the preceding, the charge that Jews thought obedience was to spring from unaided human nature rather than from divine empowerment needs exploration. Andrew Das is careful to nuance the use of the term synergism in relation to Judaism's understanding of Torah-obedience by the righteous: “To describe the Wisdom of Solomon's emphasis on the works of the righteous as crass synergism would be a mistake.”49 He notes how Second Temple texts speak consistently of divine empowerment, grace, forgiveness, and so on in connection with the equal stress on the necessity of obedience. Simon Gathercole, on the other hand, while acknowledging that Jewish texts (mainly the DSS) do speak of the Spirit's role in the righteous, contends that this is nearly always in terms of illumination and not empowerment and is thus not the equivalent of Paul's understanding of the “fruit of the Spirit.”50

The degree to which Jewish writers viewed their obedience as “fruit of the Spirit” (or similar) or rather as unaided human initiative has not been explored adequately. Too often, New Perspective debates assume that Jewish writers refer to unaided human effort (“works”) while Christian writers mean “fruit of the Spirit.” It is, however, quite possible that Paul's own language of the “fruit of the Spirit” is drawn from a very similar Jewish tradition that can be traced from the OT prophets through the DSS.51 Both the prophets and the Qumran sectarians expected the Spirit of God to cause barren Israel to bear the fruit of righteousness, joy, and so

on in the latter days. Until further work is done, the charge of Jewish "work" versus Christian "fruit" runs the risk of being little more than an unsubstantiated Christian bias.

As noted above, most criticisms of New Perspective anthropology relate to post-conversion "maintenance" of justification rather than the initial "getting in." Nevertheless, a few critics do allege that Paul differs precisely on this question of human cooperation in the initial reception of God's saving work. As Laato concludes, "there is a fundamental difference between the Jewish and the Pauline pattern of religion. The 'getting in' in the first case is based on the human decision by the aid of free will, but in the latter case on the action of God through the Gospel."  

Laato's Paul sounds much like the monergists in the Synergist Controversy (grace alone apart from human cooperation), while the Jewish stance parallels the synergist view ("based on the human decision by the aid of free will"). However, this simple monergism-versus-synergism contrast is ultimately unhelpful, just as it was in the Reformation debates. The Formula of Concord did not simply endorse monergism over synergism (see Articles I and II on "Original Sin" and "Free Will," respectively). It did endorse Luther's concept of pure human passivity in the reception of justification. As repeated language in the Formula makes clear, this monergist point was made in order to avoid attributing any of the primary causation or glory of justification to anyone but God; apart from divine action, the human will is impotent. Yet it agreed with concerns (shared by the synergists) that such passive human acceptance not be pressed in the direction of determinism or coercion against one's will (thus its rejection of double predestination).

Another area that might be fruitfully explored relates to the conditional nature of works vis-à-vis salvation. As an early reviewer of Sanders noted, "Most surprising of all is the statement that for Paul, as for Palestinian Judaism, 'good deeds are the condition of remaining 'in.'" Here

---


55. See repeated phrases in Articles I and II such as "of their own powers," "of their own natural powers," etc.
surely the Lutherans are entitled to counterattack with a 'sola fide.'” To allow anything other than faith alone to occupy the instrumental or conditional role in justification appears to undercut the very heart of the Reformation's grasp of Pauline soteriology.

It should be clear from the review of synergistic debates during the Reformation that many of those same issues are being replayed here. Monergists hear any talk of works being “necessary for” or a “condition of” salvation as a direct attack on justification by faith alone apart from works. Synergists, on the other hand, understand the language as a bulwark against antinomianism, not as an addition to sola fide. They sometimes rely on a distinction between obedience as a causal or instrumental condition (“saved by”) and obedience as an evidential or congruent condition (“according to”). Luther himself could speak of the necessity of good works if one were to be saved (= condition), yet simultaneously reject any causative role for works (see above).

The Pauline corpus, of course, demonstrates no aversion to the use of conditional sentences in regard to salvation. For example:

- “If by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live” (Rom 8:13b)
- “if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him” (Rom 8:17b)
- “If you confess . . . and believe . . . you will be saved” (Rom 10:9)
- “Note . . . God's kindness toward you, provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off” (Rom 11:22)
- “If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person” (1 Cor 3:17a)
- “through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you” (1 Cor 15:2)
- “If you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you” (Gal 5:2)
- “to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him, provided that [εἰ γε] you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith” (Col 1:22b–23a)
- “If we endure, we will also reign with him” (2 Tim 2:12)

Since these texts explicitly consider the final salvation of Christians also to be “conditional” on actions other than faith, the debate is less over whether faith is the sole condition than in what sense it is the (sole) condition of salvation.

Likewise, during the Reformation, debate over the conditionality of salvation was more nuanced.

If Roger Olson is right that "the old debate between monergists and synergists" will be "the all-consuming [issue] in Christian theology in the twenty-first century," then perhaps Pauline studies will have something to contribute. Participants in the New Perspective debate continue to talk past one another in too many instances, just as did participants in Reformation debates over synergism. It would be helpful if contributors would explore their theological presuppositions on this score. To argue over whether Second Temple Jewish texts are synergistic or whether Paul was radically monergistic and opposed to synergism presupposes a particular understanding of synergism—one that is, in fact, not shared by all Reformation theologians.

I am not suggesting that the debate over the New Perspective on Paul divides neatly on systematic theological fault lines, with Lutheran monergists on one side and evangelical synergists on the other. It would, however, prove helpful if exegetes of Pauline or Second Temple texts would engage on this theological level as well.

58. Roger E. Olson, The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 612. Olson himself predicts that new thoughts will have to come from non-Western Christians.