

## The Missionary Perspective of the Pauline Doctrine of Justification. A Response to the “New Perspective”

It was more than 40 years ago when Krister Stendahl published a paper in the Harvard Theological Review with the title: “The Apostle Paul and the ‘Introspective’ Conscience of the West”.<sup>1</sup> In this article he challenged the common protestant interpretation of the Pauline doctrine of justification since Luther and even more the whole exegesis of Paul since Augustine. According to Stendahl Paul’s concern was not the afflicted conscience of the individual believer who was asking for “a gracious God” but the question of the inclusion of the Gentiles into the people of God. And this question had been solved already in the first century. The reaction of the supporters of the traditional interpretation was rather harsh. Ernst Käsemann responded with an essay “Rechtfertigung und Heilsgeschichte im Römerbrief”, which conceded that Stendahl rightly protested against a far too individualistic interpretation of the doctrine of justification in classical Protestantism but strongly emphasized all the dangers of a ‘heilsgeschichtliche’ interpretation of Paul.<sup>2</sup>

But the discussion had just begun. In 1977 E.P. Sanders published his seminal work “Paul and Palestinian Judaism”.<sup>3</sup> He tried to prove that the whole picture of Judaism as “work religion” which provided the base for the classical interpretation of Paul’s doctrine of justification was totally wrong, and that the question which was answered by Paul’s doctrine was not how to pass the last judgment but the question of “getting in” into the people of God. Although details of his work were disputed many New Testament scholars joined the main line of his arguments and a few years later James D.G. Dunn coined the slogan of the “New Perspective on Paul” which since then dominated the discussion.<sup>4</sup> Of course, in the last twenty-five years not only a lot of books were published which supported this new perspective but also many articles and books which challenged it. So, the question is still open.<sup>5</sup>

As a Methodist I am especially intrigued and may be sometimes irritated by the fact that the alternative of the “New Perspective” often is called the “Lutheran Perspective”.<sup>6</sup> It gives the impression that there are only two options for the interpretation of the Pauline doctrine of justification: the classical interpretation which remained almost the same since the times of the reformation and the “New Perspective”, which finally at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century found the real meaning of Paul’s message of justification. A lot of things could be said to such a simple view of the history of the interpretation. The “Lutheran” interpretation has many facets, and although e.g. Rudolf Bultmann’s theology of Paul may still be seen as typical Lutheran, at least his student Ernst Käsemann – following Adolf Schlatter – emphasized new dimensions of Paul’s teaching which are neither just “Lutheran” nor a mere anticipation of the “New

---

<sup>1</sup> Krister Stendahl, The Apostle Paul and the ‘Introspective’ Conscience of the West. HThR 56,1963,199-215; now in: *Paul among Jews and Gentiles, and Other Essays*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976, 78-96.

<sup>2</sup> Ernst Käsemann: *Rechtfertigung und Heilsgeschichte im Römerbrief*. Paulinische Perspektiven, Tübingen 1969, 3. Aufl. 1993, 108-139; ET: *Perspectives on Paul*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971.

<sup>3</sup> E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion*. London: SCM, 1972. Cf. – , *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983.

<sup>4</sup> J.D.G. Dunn, The New Perspective on Paul, repr. in: *ibid.*, *The New Perspective on Paul*. Collected Essays (WUNT 185), Tübingen 2005, 89–110.

<sup>5</sup> I mention only a few contributions to the Debate: J.D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998; D. S. Carson, Peter T. O’Brien, Mark A. Seifrid, *Justification and Variegated Nomism. Vol. I: The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism; Vol. II: The Paradoxes of Paul*. WUNT II, 1980 and 81, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2001; S. Westerholm, *The Perspectives Old and New on Paul. »Lutheran« Paul and His Critics*, Grand Rapids 2004; N.T. Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective*, Minneapolis 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Westerholm, *Perspectives*; M. Bachmann unter Mitarb. v. J. Woyke(ed.), *Lutherische und Neue Paulusperspektive*. Beiträge zu einem Schlüsselproblem der gegenwärtigen exegetischen Diskussion (WUNT 182), Tübingen 2005.

Perspective”.<sup>7</sup> And is there anything like a “Methodist” interpretation which is something else than John Wesley’s understanding of justification but a fresh approach to the Pauline teaching through the eyes of Methodist readers of his writings?

I can offer no simple answer to this question, but I want to invite you to test the case by making some exegetical “spot checks”.

### 1. Paul’s argument in his Letter to the Galatians<sup>8</sup>

If we want to understand why Paul speaks about justification we have first to turn to his Letter to the Galatians. Even those who don’t accept the idea of an evolution in Pauline theology will admit that this letter offered Paul an important opportunity to more systematically formulate and develop his message of justification. What was it that led to this?

Paul had heard that people had come to Galatia who confronted the local Gentile Christians with the demand that they allow themselves to be circumcised in order to belong fully to the community of the people of God (5:2ff.; 6:12ff.). Faith in Jesus Christ, they said, was only the beginning of the way to God. It is only obedience to the law that will bring you to the goal (cf. 3:2, 3). In so doing they presumably didn’t argue, as was earlier often assumed, that it was necessary to attain salvation through fulfilling the law. They wanted to answer the question: “Who belongs to the covenant people and what demands are to be fulfilled in regard to this membership?”<sup>9</sup> Their response was: “Whoever takes on circumcision as a sign of the covenant with Abraham and keeps the food laws and holy day rules belongs to the people of the promise” (cf. 4:9ff.; 5:2ff.). For them it was not a matter of fulfilling the whole law; Paul was the one who first pointed to this consequence (5:3). It was a matter of “identity markers” that had become important to Judaism of New Testament times.<sup>10</sup>

This analysis of the opposing position finds significant consensus with the research. It also meshes well with the recognition represented emphatically by a series of exegetes that there is no evidence from New Testament Judaism that one could or should, so to speak, earn salvation through fulfilling the law. God’s covenant with his people was the gracious context that formed the foundation for Israel’s salvation and life. Obedience in response to the commandments was the consequence and form in which the covenant was lived out.<sup>11</sup>

Paul was extremely alarmed by this development. To him, what was at stake in this was the freedom from the law of the whole mission to the Gentiles and the “truth of the gospel” (Gal 2:5, 14). The fact that his authority as an apostle was disputed and that he was reproached for preaching a “diluted” gospel in order to please people (1:10) made the situation more poignant for him. It is for this reason that in his letter he first of all points to the origins of his authorization of his gospel in a call from God (1:11-24). At the same time he also names the agreement made with him in Jerusalem about the Gentile mission freed from the constraints of the law (2:1-10). It may be seen as the first declaration of communion (*koinonia*) between different branches of the Christian Church on the base of “reconciled diversity”.

---

<sup>7</sup> I refer to my article: Gottes Gerechtigkeit und Gottes Herrschaft. Ernst Käsemann als Ausleger des Neuen Testaments. In: J. Adam/H.J. Eckstein/H. Lichtenberger (ed.), *Ernst Käsemann zum 100. Geburtstag*. Tübinger Vorträge, Theologie interdisziplinär 3, Neukirchen-Vluyn 2007 (forthcoming), 59-82.

<sup>8</sup> For the following paragraph I have used material of my book: *Justified Before God. A Contemporary Theology*, Nashville Abingdon Press 2006, 64ff.

<sup>9</sup> Wolfgang Kraus, *Das Volk Gottes: Zur Grundlegung der Ekklesiologie bei Paulus*. WUNT 85. Tübingen: Mohr, 1996, 216; Walter Klaiber, *Rechtfertigung und Gemeinde: Eine Untersuchung zum paulinischen Kirchenverständnis*. FRLANT 127. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982, 149ff.

<sup>10</sup> On this see J.D.G. Dunn, “Works of the Law and the Curse of the Law (Galatians 3:10-14).” *Jesus, Paul, and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians*. London: SPCK, 1990, 215-41; *ibid.* “Yet once more—‘The Works of the Law’: A Response,” *JSiNT* 46, 1992, 99-117; *ibid.* “The Justice of God,” *JThSt NS* 43, 1992, 1-22, who in this context also speaks of “boundary markers” or “badges” and points to interesting parallels in the contemporary confessional landscape.

<sup>11</sup> E. P. Sanders speaks of “covenantal nomism” (*Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 422ff.).

But this agreement had not settled all open questions. This was demonstrated through an episode in Antioch that led to a conflict with Peter, who had given up the table fellowship that he, along with other Jewish Christians in Antioch, had had with the Gentile Christians. James's people and subsequently Peter and Barnabas had good grounds for their behavior. What was important to them was not to endanger their ties with Judaism through table fellowship with Gentiles. For them, the community of Jesus could only keep its identity by also maintaining its continuity with Israel. But Paul doesn't allow this line of argumentation to prevail. The essence of the congregation is its inclusivity, the social counterpart to the universality of the Gospel, and this is expressed precisely by eating with one another.

So Paul tried to make clear to Peter that his change of behavior put the Gentile Christians into a difficult position (2:14). For now the question arises as to what will in future be decisive for their identity as Christians: Taking on the Jewish religious culture or faith in Jesus Christ? The form of life together in the congregation and the question about the salvation that God gives through Christ are intimately connected. Paul makes this quite clear in the continuation of his report on the conflict with Peter.<sup>12</sup> Next Paul makes a concession to Peter: "We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners" (2:15). Even Paul must not annihilate the difference between those who have God's law and live according to it and other people. And yet one deciding realization links both Jewish and Gentile Christian: "We know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law"(2:16).

This carefully worded phrase, which has become the central phrase of Pauline teaching on justification (cf. Rom 3:20, 28), is at first rather strange in its context. Why does Paul suddenly speak of "being justified"? Why does he place justification "through faith in Christ Jesus" in opposition to a(n impossible) justification "by the works of the law" when, according to the testimony of many present-day exegetes, neither the Jewish Christian agitators in Galatia nor anyone in the time of New Testament Judaism had so much as thought of basing salvation before God on the fulfillment of the law?

The answer at first seems simple. After 1 Cor 6:11, "being justified" characterizes becoming a Christian, being accepted into the congregation by baptism.<sup>13</sup> What seems to fit well with this idea is that according to the representatives of the "New Perspective", what is meant by the "works of the law" is not the effort to do everything possible to fulfill all the commands of the law but rather the "prescriptions of the law" with which Jews traditionally distanced themselves from the Gentiles, in particular circumcision, Sabbath observance, and purity and food laws.<sup>14</sup> If this were correct, then in the debate about justification, the question of how one enters into the salvific fellowship of the people of God and how one demonstrates one's loyalty to God would be the key questions.<sup>15</sup> And indeed more recent research points to the fact that Gal 2:16 was a kind of "canon of mission theology" of the Antiochian congregation to which Paul points. He says, "We must not insist on circumcision as the *condition sine qua non* of Gentile converts' acceptance into the fellowship of the holy; their confession of Christ suffices."<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> It is unclear whether he still has in mind the situation in Antioch or to what extent the problems in Galatia are already determining how he expresses things.

<sup>13</sup> Thus J. Becker, *Paul: Apostle to the Gentiles*. Translated by O. C. Dean Jr. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993., 96, who therefore paraphrases Gal 2:16: "God accepts people through baptism because of their belief in Jesus Christ, not because of legalistic lifestyle, that is, on the basis on circumcision and observance of the law."

<sup>14</sup> On this, see the works of Dunn (above, note 10) who sees an important support for his theory in the Qumran texts and especially in 4QMMT, a text that has recently been made public (Dunn, "4QMMT and Galatians", *NTS* 43, 1997, 147-53).

<sup>15</sup> E. P. Sanders, *Paul and the Law*, 10, 159ff., is a particular proponent of this view.

<sup>16</sup> M. Theobald, "Der Kanon von der Rechtfertigung (Gal 2,16; Röm 3,28) – Eigentum des Paulus oder Gemeingut der Kirche?" in *Worum geht es in der Rechtfertigungslehre?* Edited by T. Söding. QD 180, 1999, 131-92.

But Paul does not stop at the declaration of Gal 2:15ff. The phrase is important to him because he bases being a Christian in “faith in Jesus Christ” and contrasts this faith with “works of the law.” The prepositions “out of” (= because of) or “through” qualify this contrast as a criterion for the question of out of what or through what a person is justified, i.e., on what he bases his existence before God.<sup>17</sup> It is not only a matter of the “identity markers” or “badges,” it’s a matter of the question of from what a person lives.

This makes the continuation of the argumentation clear. Although the Jews, in seeking justification through faith alone, show themselves in the deepest sense to be “sinners,” this does not make Christ the “servant of sin” as Paul was accused of making him. It’s more like the opposite: Anyone who, like Peter, rebuilds the wall that he has already torn down, necessarily makes himself a transgressor of the law (v. 18).

Yet it is the personal consequence that Paul names in vv. 19-21 that is decisive. He does this using the first-person form, which on the one hand is meant to be typical for the “I” of every Christian, yet at the same time appears “as an existential presentation of his understanding of the Gospel.”<sup>18</sup> “Through the law [Paul] died to the law” because he has “been crucified with Christ,” that is, through baptism he has been included in Christ’s death, Christ who bore the curse of the law and so brought to an end its judgmental power (cf. 3:13). Yet this happened so that he “might live to God.” The law that to Jews is the God-given way to life has become an obstacle to Paul to really live for God. It became clear to him through his encounter with the risen Christ that his fight for the law was a fight against God. Yet it is Christ, and no longer the “I” imprisoned and led astray by the law, that is now the center of his life. “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (2:20), says Paul—which might have been quite an enthusiastic declaration if Paul had not immediately qualified it by saying, “The life I now live in the flesh [i.e., under the condition of my earthly existence] I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (v. 20). Extinguishing the “I” is not the goal, rather anchoring it in the sacrificial love of Christ who from now on determines my life. Faith in Jesus Christ is not one form of identification alongside others but rather the way of life that links one’s own life with God’s love in Jesus Christ. To use the terminology of the “New Perspective” faith in Christ is indeed a kind of identity marker, but not only in the sense that the profession of faith counts as the new proof of membership (instead of circumcision) but in a much deeper sense that the faith defines anew the identity of the believers: those who believe in Jesus Christ find their identity in Christ and his love. That means not only to facilitate an easier access to the people of God for the Gentiles, but has revolutionary consequences for all human beings. Paul speaks as a Judaeo-Christian when he says: “I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing” (v. 21). And to draw such a conclusion would mean to disempower God’s grace!

Paul achieves this final sense of certainty about the path to salvation not through a critical analysis of the theory and praxis of the fulfillment of the law in contemporary Judaism but rather through his encounter with Christ. In other words, he argues from the perspective of a Christian. In what follows, he, for that reason in the first instance addresses the Galatian Christians with respect to their experience. He reminds them of their encounter with the crucified one in Paul’s proclamation and of the gift of the Holy Spirit, God’s gift to the end-time people of God, which they have received not because of “works of the law” but “by believing what [they] heard” (3:1-5).

But then Paul also goes on to argue on the basis of the witness of the Scripture by showing that the promise to Abraham of his faith being reckoned to him as righteousness (Gen

---

<sup>17</sup> F. Vouga, *An die Galater*. Handbuch zum Neuen Testament 10. Tübingen: Mohr (Siebeck), 1998, 58, sees in this “meaning-making function of the prepositions” the decisive indication that 4QMMT= 4Q398 14 II, 3, presents “no factual parallels to the Pauline formulations.”

<sup>18</sup> Vouga, Gal 39.

15:6) at the same time holds within it the promise that in him “all peoples will be blessed.”<sup>19</sup> For this presages what now occurs in the law-free mission to the Gentiles: like Abraham, God justifies the Gentiles on the basis of their faith and thus includes them in the blessing of Abraham. By the same token, the opposite is also true: that all who live according to the works of the law, i.e., those who rely on the works of the Law, are under the curse. Paul proves this by a quotation from Deut 27:26 that places under the curse all who do not keep all that is written in the book of the law (3:6-12).

This line of argumentation seems to lead to two possible conclusions: (1) If Paul’s opponents indeed understand “works of the law” to mean the most important distinguishing features particularly of Jewish identity, then Paul shows the Galatian Christians that these features, in fact, lead them right past the real intentions of the law; and (2) the problem to which justification by faith responds is, for Paul, the lack of fulfillment of the law and not the misled effort in trying to be justified by the doing of the law.<sup>20</sup> But Paul’s further reasoning demonstrates that Paul is arguing at a more fundamental level. For in Hab 2:4 it says: “The righteous live by their faith.” But law “does not rest on faith,” i.e., it does not point to faith as the final and decisive basis of life before God. The law is oriented to doing: “Whoever does the works of the law will live by them” (Lev 18:5). Given this argument, a person almost unavoidably finds him- or herself under the curse of the law: on the one hand, because he or she never totally fulfills the law, and on the other, because this fulfillment is not at all the path to fellowship with God. By taking it upon himself, Christ has freed humanity from this curse. This opens the way for those Gentiles to benefit from the blessing promised to Abraham, who through faith receive the promised Spirit of God and thus also his living presence (3:13ff.).<sup>21</sup> Chapter 3:26-29 shows how this occurs and also thereby illuminates a new ecclesiological perspective. All who belong to Christ have become “sons of God” through faith, i.e., his legally responsible children. For all who are baptized “into Christ” “have clothed [themselves] with Christ” (v. 27). No doubt the background to these statements is the idea of the body of Christ into which the faithful are incorporated through baptism and at the same become partakers in being children of God. The consequence of this is that all dividing differences are erased: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (v. 28).

The fact that Paul changes the symbolization at this point is not arbitrary. Christ is more than a mediator of restitution for the people of God. In some way he remains determinative of what happens in his community, something Paul can describe only with spatial categories. By showing Christians their place “in Christ,” he makes clear what part of the eschatological fellowship with God is valid now. The common status of Jews and Gentiles before God shown soteriologically in the justification of the sinner (Gal 2:16) finds its counterpart in the equality of all in Christ, in which all societal differences of rank and worth are eliminated.

---

<sup>19</sup> Contemporary exegesis of this matter in Judaism points in totally the opposite direction and is determined by 1Macc 2:52 (cf. also 4QMMT); on this see Dunn, “4QMMT,” 151ff.

<sup>20</sup> Interpretive camps are evenly divided on the question of whether, according to Paul, justification through the law fails because the goal is “quantitatively” unsuccessful (i.e., because the entire law is never fulfilled) or “qualitatively” unsuccessful (because the law is wrongly considered the way of salvation). Here, Paul seems to vacillate between the two. The debate between J. Blank (Catholic) in his “Warum sagt Paulus: ‘Aus Werken des Gesetzes wird niemand gerecht?’” in: *Paulus: Von Jesus zum Christentum: Aspekte der paulinischen Lehre und Praxis*. Munich: Kösel, 1982, 42-68., who represents the traditionally “Protestant” solution and U. Wilckens (Lutheran) in his “Was heisst bei Paulus: ‘Aus Werken des Gesetzes wird kein Mensch gerecht?’” in: *Rechtfertigung als Freiheit. Paulusstudien*. Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1974, 77-109, who represents the traditionally “Catholic” position, is classic.

<sup>21</sup> Paul seeks to firm up this idea in what follows through further salvation historical considerations of the role of the law in the history of the people of God. He explains that the law took on a kind of vigilante role and had to keep the people in a kind of protective custody until faith came (3:24ff.), which leads to righteousness and thus into fellowship with God.

In Gal 4:1-7 Paul describes the liberation effect of the Christ event in a further image. By God's Son being placed as a human under the rule of the law, he freed those who had lived as slaves under the guardianship of the law to real life as children of God, made them mature heirs of the promise, and placed them in a personal father-child relationship through the working of the Spirit.

Two things are worth noting at this point: By perceiving the law together with the *stoicheia tou kosmou* (the "elemental spirits of the world") as enslaving powers in 4:3, which Paul later identifies with the heathen gods in 4:8ff., he places the law into the world of religion and hints at a phenomenological parallel between law and religion.<sup>22</sup> Each person finds himself or herself faced with demands that are based in the cosmic order or in the will of God transmitted through salvation history (by the angels) but which "can give neither life nor identity nor meaning"<sup>23</sup> because they cannot really communicate fellowship with God. But God's spirit does communicate such fellowship. It is received by faith and becomes a life-determining force in this new existence before God. It inspires love that helps to fulfill what the law prescribes as God's will. And so there is no ethical vacuum when people are set free from the enslaving power of the law (5:13ff.).

How does the Letter to the Galatians speak of justification? We will try to achieve an even-handed portrayal.

1. In the controversy described by the Letter to the Galatians, justification, first of all, means acceptance into the people of God and the community of salvation. The ecclesiological aspect is important even for Paul. Acceptance into the people of God is a continuing foundation for a way of living together that does not discriminate against others and thus befits acceptance by God. God's justifying action that makes all who believe into his beloved children at the same time creates the fond community "in Christ" that overcomes all human differences.
2. Justification is a person's acceptance by God; *dikaioσύνη* (righteousness) signifies what gives life form and content and thus salvation and life. The forensic aspect of this, meaning the implied judgment situation in which God vindicates and accepts, is in the background but is not described in any great detail.
3. Paul sees a mutually exclusive contrast between being justified by the law (*en nomō*) and being justified by Christ (*en Christō*), and likewise being justified "by the works of the law" and being justified "by faith in Jesus Christ." What this makes clear is that Paul's repudiation of the law as the way to salvation is not simply about distinguishing between the Jewish privilege and the Gentile misuse of the law and its prescriptions. It's about a decision between two ways of living before God: a life determined by Christ or by the law. It's a matter of whether a sense of identity and a foundation for life is derived from the "works of the law," from "doing," or out of a sense of trust about what God has done in Jesus Christ and how this places us in relationship to God.
4. Justification is liberation from the deathly domination from our own anxious ego (what Paul terms "the flesh"). But at the same time justification means finding oneself. Wherever the enthroned ego dies (2:19; 6:14), God's beloved "thou" comes to life and an "I" is created whose nature is determined by the relationship to God. The fact that in Galatians Paul writes in the first person in such a multilayered way "occurs as a result of the meaning of the revelation of God in Christ for the individual's self-understanding. The discovery of subjectivity is [...] the consequence of the christological-soteriological universalism." For justification of a person through faith "unconditionally assumes the differentiation between his unmistakable person and the characteristics that he can gain, have, and lose."<sup>24</sup> This constitutes not only new self-

---

<sup>22</sup> Compare Hübner, *Law in Paul's Thought*. Translated by C. G. Greig. Edited by John Riches. Studies of the New Testament and Its World. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1984, 33-36; by way of contrast see Sanders, *Paul, the Law*, 158.

<sup>23</sup> Vouga op.cit.

<sup>24</sup> Vouga, Gal 39.

understanding but also a new way of being with others in community: “Each person is recognized as an individual and subject with equal rights.”<sup>25</sup>

5. Justification is therefore liberation to love (5:1, 13), through which persons, freed from anxiety about themselves, can live out what God’s spirit effects for others through them (5:22ff.).

## 2. Paul’s Perspective in Romans

The situation of Paul’s letter to the Romans is different from that of his letter to the Galatians.<sup>26</sup> There seems to be no conflict about the conditions of admission for non-Jewish converts. The majority of the Roman Christians are obviously people from the Gentiles whom Paul wants to convince to support his mission to Spain and with whom he hopes to do also some missionary work in Rome – although such enterprise actually contradicts his missionary code of conduct.

But the way Paul writes this letter shows clearly that he had reason to suspect that the principal question of a mission among the Gentiles without the requirements of the Jewish law was still not settled. But Paul wants to change the perspective of this question. The question: “Whom may we admit under which conditions into the fellowship of the Christian church?” should be really the question: “To whom do we owe the Gospel at all costs?” Mentioning “Greeks and barbarians, wise and foolish” as addressees of the Gospel Paul indicates that looking to Rome he has not only the separation between Jews and Gentiles in mind but also other barriers which will be overcome by the Gospel.

Nevertheless the relation between Jews and Gentiles remains a kind of thematic *ostinato* of Paul’s letter to the Romans which reads partly like a dialogue with a Jew. But just the key passages of the letter indicate clearly that the issue which is at stake is not only the question of the conditions of admission to the Covenant for non-Jewish converts but that the Gospel speaks at first to the Jewish people.

That is not only the case in 1:16 where Paul says that the Gospel “is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek”. In Romans 3, too, the negative diagnosis “There is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”(v.23) is followed by the positive statement: “God is one, and he will justify the circumcised on the ground of faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith”(v.30). Also in Romans 9-11 where Paul speaks about God’s way with Israel he underlines again: “For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and generous to all who call on him”(10:12). And even in the summary of the last part of the letter where Paul puts together his admonition to Christian people of different opinions and traditions to accept one another in Christ *and* the universal perspective of Christ’s ministry to all human beings he states: “For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm his promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy”(15:8f).

When Paul again and again emphasizes, that for Jews and Gentiles salvation depends on God’s mercy and faithfulness, he is concerned about human beings and the way they open their lives for God’s saving grace. But he is also concerned about God and his righteousness and wants to prove that the God who justifies Jews and Gentiles as well on the ground of faith is the *one* and true God for all. This can be seen nowhere as clearly as in Romans 9-11 where Paul in great sorrow and deep solidarity struggles for the salvation of his own people. But finally he ends not only with the conviction that “all Israel will be saved” but aims at the grateful confession to God: “For from him and through him and to him are all things”(11:36).

---

<sup>25</sup> Vouga, Gal 92, on 3:28.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. K.P. Donfried(ed.), *The Romans Debate*. Minneapolis 1977, <sup>2</sup>Peabody 1991; K.P. Donfried/P. Richardson, *Judaism and Christianity in First-Century Rome*, Grand Rapids/Cambridge 1998, E. Lohse, *Der Brief an die Römer*, KEK 4, Göttingen Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2003, 37-56.

A key position for this interpretation of Romans is constituted by the theme of the letter in 1:16f, the revelation of God's righteousness, and the relation of this theme to Psalm 98:2 and to similar references in the scrolls from Qumran.<sup>27</sup> The expectation of the revelation of the vindicating and saving righteousness of God for his people in the sight of all nations and of the victory of his right over his creation belongs to the basic beliefs of the apocalyptic tradition of Early Judaism. According to Paul this expectation is now fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ and God's righteousness reveals itself through the Gospel to all who open their hearts by faith for this message.

After the penetrating analysis of the desperate situation of all human beings, Gentiles and Jews, before God in Romans 1:18 – 3:20 Paul comes back to the theme of the revelation of God's righteousness in 3:21-31 and relates it to God's justifying and reconciling action through the death of Jesus. He obviously quotes in 3:25 words of a Jewish-Christian tradition which explains the meaning of the sacrificial death of Jesus. But Paul develops the scope of this statement further on: the evidence of God's righteousness and the effect of the atonement through the blood of Jesus lead beyond the renewal of the covenant with Israel; God's justifying grace includes everybody who believes in Jesus. Describing the intention of God's saving action in Jesus Christ as to prove "that he himself is righteous and justifies the one who has faith in Jesus Christ"(3:26) Paul shows again the indissoluble connection between the revelation of God's reality and nature and his saving action for human beings.

This becomes especially clear in the following verses which show the consequences of God's work. There is at first the anthropological and soteriological consequence for all human beings: "For we hold that a person is justified by faith alone apart from works prescribed by the law"(3:28). It seems to me clear that the confrontation of *faith vs. works prescribed by the law* does not only aim at the question of the appropriate *identity markers* in the sociological sense of the word ("Who belongs?"), but that *faith vs. works* denote the source of our identity before God. Consequently Paul justifies his statement through the reference to the nature of God: "Or is God the God of the Jews only? Is he not the God of the Gentiles also? Yes of Gentiles also, since God is one; and he will justify the circumcised on the ground of faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith"(v.29f).

In Romans 4 we find a similar connection between the anthropological and the theological perspective. Subject of this chapter is the faith of Abraham and Paul uses this paradigm to expound his understanding of faith in all its depth. In spite of the protest of the representatives of the *New Perspective* it seems to me clear that at least in Romans 4:4f Paul juxtaposes *faith* and *works* he sees them as epitome of human achievement. The way he confronts the ἐργαζόμενος with the πιστεῖων makes this interpretation evident.<sup>28</sup> But this does not make the faith a kind of Archimedian point through which we may lever ourselves out of our distance from God. Paul doesn't say that Abraham "trusted him who justifies those who believe" but that he "trusted him who justifies the *ungodly*". The "ungodly" is the one who has nothing to appeal to in order to be justified before God. He or she can only trust. That's what Paul want to say and this is made especially clear by the way he refers to the God in whom Abraham believed; he is the God "who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist" (4:17). And this kind of belief is a paradigm for those who "believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead ..." (4:24). The question how people can take part in God's salvation leads to the question: Who is God? He is the God who works where human beings are no longer able to do or to achieve anything. That puts to an end any appeal to own *works*.

The following chapter shows very clearly that the theme of justification is not only related to the subject of "*getting in*", but is also used to describe the ongoing renewed relationship with God. This starts with 5:1: "Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with

<sup>27</sup> Cf. especially 1QS 10,25f; 11,12; 1QM 4,6 and 1QMyst (1Q27) 1,1,6.

<sup>28</sup> Contrary to *J.D.G. Dunn*, Romans 1-8 (WBC 38A), Dallas 1988, 204.

God through our Lord Jesus Christ”, continues with 5:12: “now that we have justified by his blood, we will be saved through him from the wrath of God” and finds its universal and eschatological expression in 5:18-21. In Romans 6-8 describes Paul the new life of the Christians through the theological concept of participation in Christ and the presence of the Spirit in them. But contrary to the assertion of Sanders this causes him not to leave the language of justification (cf. 6:19; 8:33). Especially Romans 8:31-39 testifies to the deep connection between God’s justifying and liberating verdict and the reception into the communion with him and his love, from which nothing can separate those who are in Jesus Christ.

### 3. Conclusions

I will stop and not continue with my exegetical “spot-checks”. I hope it is already clear what I am arguing for. I will try to summarize my argument:

a) The so called “New Perspective” on Paul has rightly shown that Paul’s first emphasis in developing his doctrine of justification was his missionary impetus: Non-Jewish converts should be admitted into the Christian community without the requirement to become first Jewish proselytes. Facing the question how the Gentiles are able to participate in God’s promises to Abraham and his descendants and become members of the people of God Paul fights for the answer: To believe in Jesus Christ is enough.

b) But most representatives of the New Perspective fail to realize that for Paul the issue of justification by faith alone is not only related to the question how to “get in”. As he has experienced himself to believe in Jesus Christ changes radically the way a person sees him- or herself before God. And this is not only true for former Gentiles but also for Jews who came to belief in Jesus Christ and to set their trust solely on God’s grace. It may be true that Paul does not accuse all Jewish people of self-righteousness as the traditional interpretation presupposes. But surely he deplors the fact that most of his fellow Jewish people fail to open their lives for the grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ which surpasses all their own efforts to achieve the righteousness which is the base of the real communion with God.

c) Therefore the significance of the Pauline doctrine of justification is not restricted to the problem of the relationship between Jewish and Gentile Christians in the first century. The message of justification proclaims God, who in his saving faithfulness turns to all persons and speaks the Yes of his love to them. The proclamation of justification by faith alone is not tied to a particular form of human questioning. We are bound to offer the gospel of God’s justifying and saving actions in Jesus Christ to all, regardless of whether or not they ask for it. The question about a “gracious God” also is not limited to the doubting of a fearful conscience in face of the threatening judgment of the Last Judgment. Correctly understood, it is the very question about God himself, about a God who enters into a healing relationship with us. It is the responsibility of the Christian churches, especially of those who have declared their common understanding of the doctrine of justification through the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, to share our belief in the Gospel of God’s justifying grace with the people of our time in a way that they realize: That is what we need to liberate our lives from its deadly struggle for survival to a life which is safe in the hands of a gracious God..

d) The message of justification calls people back to their real vocation of living in fellowship with God and relating responsibly to God. It places the justified in a life in which the anxiety about one’s own worth has been taken away and one is freed for lovingly caring for others. The commandment about love of neighbor becomes a possibility that is realized with gratitude, a chance to live out this newly created existence that has been given by God in fellowship with one another, a chance to experience the life-giving power with which God has permeated this new existence. Justification and sanctification belong inseparably together.

e) I have already deplored the fact that the present discussion focuses only in an alternative between the “Lutheran” and the “New” perspective. We as Methodists should insist

that there is a broader perspective on the doctrine of justification – already in the letters of Paul himself but also in its present interpretation and proclamation.