Reformed, Lutheran, and “New Perspective”:
A Dialogue Between Traditions Regarding the Interpretation of “Works of the Law” in Galatians

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Abstract

Theologians and biblical scholars have debated over the proper interpretation of the Pauline phrase “works of the law” for centuries. In recent decades, scholars in the “New Perspective” tradition have taken great strides to dismantle the interpretation of the Reformers, arguing that Paul’s use of the phrase was primarily concerned with Jewish ethnocentrism and not “good works” *per se*. In this paper, I will offer an overview and an evaluation of how three different traditions (Lutheran, Reformed, and New Perspective) perceive Paul’s use of the phrase in Galatians, and I will argue that although the New Perspective rightly keeps a keen eye on historical and sociological factors concurrent in Paul’s time, it wrongly attributes a misreading of Paul to Luther and to Calvin. Both Luther and Calvin interpreted Paul with more finesse than some New Perspective proponents like to suggest, and ultimately, their reading of Paul with regard to this issue is both exegetically sound and pastorally instructive.

“Yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified” (Gal 2:16 ESV). With these words, the Apostle Paul provided the basis for what would later become the theological lodestar of the Protestant Reformation: the doctrine of justification by faith alone apart from works. However, what does Paul have in mind when he uses the phrase ἔργα νόμου (works of the law)? Paul uses the phrase four times in his letter to the Galatians. Along with the assertion put forward in the passage quoted above, Paul insists that the Spirit
was not received by ἔργα νόμου (Gal 3:2, 5) and that those who are of/from ἔργα νόμου are under a curse (Gal 3:10). In this essay, I will briefly outline the different interpretations of the phrase ἔργα νόμου in Galatians offered by three different camps: Lutheran, Reformed, and the “New Perspective on Paul” (herein referred to as the NPP). After doing so, I will discuss areas of criticism in an effort to settle on an interpretation that incorporates the best of what each tradition has to offer.

Martin Luther is unequivocally clear in his interpretation of what Paul means by ἔργα νόμου in Galatians: “For Paul, ‘works of the law’ means the works of the entire Law. Therefore one should not make a distinction between the Decalog and ceremonial laws.” Luther makes it clear that he is aware that others insist that Paul is referring only to the ceremonial law when he uses the phrase. Moreover, he knows that the context surrounding the epistle is that Gentiles are being compelled to be circumcised—to submit to only a portion of the law. However, since Luther understood νόμος to refer to anything commanded by God, it logically followed for him that ἔργα νόμου refers to any and all acts of obedience to divinely given commands.

For Luther, to limit ἔργα νόμου to indicate only the ceremonial practices of Judaism was tantamount to blasphemy, since what is then implied is that it is only by ceremonial works that justification (δικαιοσύνη) cannot be attained. Paul, however, makes it clear that any and all works are insufficient for justification when he writes, “if righteousness [also δικαιοσύνη] were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose” (Gal 2:21). How, then, can ἔργα νόμου refer to anything less than the entire law as though by any portion of the law righteousness can be attained? Or, as Luther puts it, “What is the use of a grace that liberates us only from ceremonial works, which are the easiest of all?” Additionally, in light of Luther’s view that all that God commands is law, it makes little sense to downplay the moral freight that ἔργα νόμου carries. In other words, circumcision is very much a moral issue due to the very fact that God commands it.

“There are only two ways to justification: either the Word of the Gospel or the Law.” With these words, Luther summarizes a central tenet of his theology—namely, the fundamental opposition of law (works) and gospel (faith). For Luther,

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1 Martin Luther, Lectures on Galatians (ed. Jaroslav Pelikan; vol. 26 of Luther’s Works; Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), 122.
2 Luther, Galatians, 26:123.
3 Luther, Galatians, 26:138.
4 Luther, Galatians, 26:181; see also Stephen Westerholm, Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The “Lutheran” Paul and His Critics (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 34.
6 Contra N.T. Wright, What Saint Paul Really Said (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 120.
7 Luther, Galatians, 26:203.
the only truly good and obedient works are those that flow from faith, and since faith by its very nature has nothing to do with law (it is receptive as opposed to active), any attempt to keep the law as though it had any bearing on justification is entirely sinful. This line of thinking is picked up in the work of the Lutheran theologian Rudolf Bultmann: “Man’s effort to achieve his salvation by keeping the Law only leads him into sin, indeed this effort itself is already sin.” Why does Bultmann insist that even the effort to be justified by means of the law is sinful in itself? Precisely because it is in the attempt itself—regardless of the outcome—that man betrays his belief in the arrogant lie that he is able in himself “to exhibit the works of the Law” in their entirety. Understandably, Bultmann based his thinking on this matter on Paul’s words: “For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them’” (Gal 3:10). It is evident here that the reason why a curse falls on all who are εξ ἔργων νόμου is because they have failed to do all that the law requires. It is evident, then, that in Bultmann’s view, ἔργα νόμου refers to all that the law requires its adherents to do.

Turning now to the Reformed tradition, we see very little difference between Martin Luther and John Calvin regarding the basic definition of ἔργα νόμου. Like Luther, Calvin sees the term to be necessarily all encompassing, since the means by which justification is attained cannot be shared. Calvin readily affirms that the initial conflict in Galatia was indeed over the ceremonial matter of circumcision; however, he notes that Paul, the ever-savvy pastor, passed “from a particular department [circumcision] to the whole subject [being justified apart from works of the law]” upon recognizing that there was a larger underlying issue at work. Calvin argues, “It would not have given so much uneasiness to Paul that ceremonies should be observed, as that the confident hope and the glory of salvation should be made to rest on works . . . we do not look so much to the importance of the prohibition itself, as to the snare which is laid for the consciences of men.”

In other words, since Gentiles were willing to undergo the pains of circumcision,
they clearly believed it to somehow be of significant value. Yet as soon as worth of any kind is ascribed to anything other than faith in Christ in matters of justification, the death of Christ is made void.\textsuperscript{14} Therefore, for Calvin as well as for Luther, there is no reason whatsoever to conclude that \textgreek{érga nóμου} refers to anything less than the deeds of the entire law, since it is clearly Paul's aim to show that faith alone is the free gift of God by which humans may be declared righteous.

A key area of dissonance between the Reformed and the Lutheran traditions in this matter is found in their respective understandings of the nature and purpose of the law. Bultmann saw the purpose of the law to be “to lead man into sin . . . by offering him the uttermost possibility of living as a sinner by perverting his resistance . . . into a striving after ‘a righteousness of his own.”\textsuperscript{15} The law, then, is a baited hook—even if one were to attain it, it would only serve to reveal one’s evil intent. Calvin, however, directly denies this view by answering a rhetorical question: “Is it not the next thing to mockery, to hold out the hope of happiness, to invite and exhort us to it . . . all the while the entrance to it is precluded and quite shut up?”\textsuperscript{16} Calvin answers his query by concluding that the law has not been given in vain.\textsuperscript{17} Rather than tricking us into exposing our own self-righteous attitude, the law functions as a standard—a mirror by which “we discover any stains upon our face.”\textsuperscript{18} The Lutheran and the Reformed traditions are in agreement that the law holds out an unattainable standard, yet they differ regarding the question of whether or not seeking to “do” the law is in itself a wrongheaded endeavor.

Several scholars in the Reformed tradition have taken the effort to answer this question by arguing that Bultmann’s polarization of law and of gospel is overstated.\textsuperscript{19} Their general conclusion is that Paul did not see the law as evil in itself (Rom 7:12) and that the law, by its very nature, is based on the principle of doing works.\textsuperscript{20} Therefore, “doing” in itself cannot possibly be the root problem. Thomas Schreiner captures the essential matter of disagreement: “Paul’s fundamental objection . . . is not with doing \textit{per se}, but with the inability to ‘do’ perfectly.”\textsuperscript{21} This is an important distinction in relation to Paul’s use of \textgreek{érga nóμου}, for it addresses the question, “What is Paul actually criticizing in the pertinent passages in Galatians?”

Due to their interpretation of \textgreek{érga nóμου}, the NPP has its own answer to that very question. Championed by scholars like James D. G. Dunn and N. T. Wright,
the NPP is a broad movement that seeks to reevaluate common conceptions of Paul that have been handed down by the broader Reformation traditions. Both Dunn and Wright separate themselves from the Lutheran and the Reformed understandings of ἔργα νόμου, taking the phrase to refer to “boundary markers” or to “the things that divide Jew from Gentile.” It should be noted that Dunn makes it clear that ἔργα νόμου does not directly and necessarily denote boundary markers; yet in the context in which Paul uses the term in Galatians, the phrase is used metonymically to refer to “certain crucial issues and disputes”—namely, the practices of the law that give self-definition to the Jewish people (food laws, circumcision, Sabbath). Such an interpretation is required if one is to do justice to the historical context surrounding Paul’s use of the term. As Dunn notes, “Anthropologists and sociologists have made us aware of the fact that any social grouping will inevitably have various features and characteristics which provide the group’s self-definition.” Given the social nature of the scenario in Galatia, Dunn does well to pay attention to this.

Wright is in essential agreement with Dunn on allowing the social context of the situation in Galatia to inform our understanding of ἔργα νόμου. Wright, however, makes an even greater effort to allow the literary context of Gal 2:16 to speak for itself: “What, then, are the ‘works of the law,’ by which one cannot be ‘justified’ in this sense? Again, the context is pretty clear. They are the ‘living like a Jew’. . . the separation from ‘Gentile sinners’. . . They are not, in other words, the moral ‘good works’ which the Reformation tradition loves to hate.” In contrast to Luther—who we earlier witnessed argue that if works of the law do not justify, much less will any sort of works—Wright refuses to allow ἔργα νόμου to connote the idea of works-righteousness: “[ἔργα νόμου] were not a legalist’s ladder up which one climbed to earn the divine favour, but were the badges that one wore as the marks of identity.”

Statements like these show how Wright is intent on rescuing first-century Judaism from the caricatures commonly given to it—caricatures, Wright would add, that derive from a careless identification of Paul’s opponents in Galatia with Luther’s opponents in Rome. For the NPP, then, to interpret ἔργα νόμου in Galatians to mean more than “badges” or “boundary markers” is to ignore the immediate context of Paul’s use of the term and is to impetuously identify first-century

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Judaism with a sort of proto-Pelagianism. The core of the disagreement, then, is this: whereas the Lutheran and the Reformed traditions see Paul rebuking the notion of works-righteousness in Galatia, the NPP sees Paul confronting ethnocentrism—the failure of Jewish Christians to recognize that justification is now available to Gentiles apart from Jewish distinctions.

I have thus far attempted to present a sympathetic (albeit very basic) outline of three different traditions’ interpretations of the phrase ἔργα νόμου as it is used in Galatians. It is my conviction that each of these camps offers wisdom that ought to be heeded. It also my conviction, however, that each tradition’s interpretation incorporates elements that need correction. I will now briefly summarize my main points of appreciation and of critique of the previously discussed interpretations.

Much of the disagreement between the NPP and the Lutheran/Reformed understanding of ἔργα νόμου is rooted in the NPP’s refusal to allow for the entirely plausible possibility that Paul, to use Calvin’s language, “moved from a particular department to the whole subject.” That is to say, there is no substantial reason not to believe that Paul used the occasion of a debate over circumcision to explicate the wider implications of justification by faith. Wright, then, gives a specious argument when he claims that the historical context of Gal 2 leaves him no choice but to interpret ἔργα νόμου as “the things that divide Jew from Gentile.” Certainly Paul is able to apply a weighty theological term to a particular historical situation without diminishing the potency of the term itself! If one were to apply Wright’s logic to Gal 2:14, one would be forced to conclude that “being in step with the truth of the gospel” means nothing more than freely eating with Gentiles. The NPP, then, needs to find a legitimate weakness in Calvin’s “particular to whole” argument if their interpretation of ἔργα νόμου is to be seriously considered.

Bultmann, for his part, likely goes too far in his argument for the negative role of the law. The argument that obeying the law was always a perverse pursuit by its very nature is tenuous. As Douglas Moo observes, whenever Paul polemicizes against works of the law, it is always in the context of discussions of justification; never does Paul simply “criticize them as such.” Moreover, Bultmann draws a conclusion that the NPP rightly rejects—namely, that the Christians in Galatia were attempting to achieve their salvation via works of the law. Indeed, Paul reminds the Galatians of the implications of being justified by faith alone. Works of the law are neither here nor there; therefore, one must not see them to be of any consequence in matters of justification! Paul does not, however, give any indication that the Galatians are convinced that they are as yet unsaved and that they need to earn their salvation via works. Calvin himself commits this same error when he

29 Wright, *People*, 189.
31 Moo, “Law,” 97n77.
assumes that Paul is concerned that the Galatians are attributing salvation as a whole to their performance of works. The NPP’s criticism of this oft-repeated caricature is justified.

In conclusion, I find it to be evident that the Lutheran and the Reformed traditions—although perhaps not as careful as the NPP to discern the social nuances of the scenario in Galatia—offer an interpretation of ἔργα νόμου that is substantially more satisfying than the NPP’s. It is an interpretation that rightly exalts both the sufficiency of the cross-event and of the efficacy of faith in Christ. This is not to say that the NPP does not value these key elements; however, its proponents are often guilty of speaking of these things in ways that are unhelpfully limiting. To its credit, the NPP wisely cautions us against interpreting the problem in Galatia as an exact parallel to the problem Luther faced in sixteenth-century Christendom. However, this fear of anachronism leads the NPP to the unnecessary conclusion that Luther and Calvin have seriously misinterpreted Paul. There is no evidence for this. Luther and Calvin, as we have seen, adeptly recognized the historical context of the problem Paul addressed in Galatia. They did not commit an exegetical fallacy; they interpreted. Yes, a one-for-one equating of Paul’s context with Luther’s is misguided; however, this does not mean that Galatians does not give solutions to the problems faced by the latter’s context.

When Luther concludes, “If works of the law do not justify, much less will any human works,” he is arriving at an interpretation that is both exegetically sound and pastorally instructive. Is it not the job of biblical interpretation to discern how God’s revealed truth applies to changing historical situations? Luther and Calvin can hardly be faulted for finding in Galatians answers to questions that were being posed in their own time. We would be wise to do the same.

32 Calvin, Commentaries, 68.
33 Remarking on Dunn’s perspective on the atonement, for example, Westerholm quips, “So limited a view of the atonement would have astonished even the most dogmatic TULIP theologian.” Westerholm, Perspectives, 317–318.
34 So Westerholm, Perspectives, 384.