The “New” Perspectives on Paul
at the 2012 Luther Congress in Helsinki
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[Editor’s note: In 2010 Lutheran Quarterly published Erik M. Heen’s essay “A Lutheran Response to the New Perspective on Paul”; LQ 24 (2010): 263-291. Heen began by citing a standard description of this so-called “New Perspective,” here reproduced in order to provide some context for Timothy Wengert’s Comment.

What is this new perspective? At its core is the recognition that Judaism is not a religion of self-righteousness whereby humankind seeks to merit salvation before God. Paul’s argument with the Judaizers was not about Christian grace versus Jewish legalism. His argument was rather about the status of Gentiles in the church. Paul’s doctrine of justification, therefore, had far more to do with Jewish-Gentile issues than with questions of the individual’s status before God.

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The plenary session of the Luther Congress in Helsinki on 9 August 2012 focused on “Luther in the New Perspective on Paul.” A panel of theologians, consisting of Jens Schröter and Notger Slenczka of the Humboldt University in Berlin along with Bo Kristian Holm of the University of Aarhus, made presentations. After a break for coffee, a lively discussion ensued. Timothy J. Wengert of The Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia made remarks along the following lines.]

First, it is somewhat disingenuous to call this perspective “new,” since the church father, Jerome, had already argued that when Paul used the term “law” in Romans and Galatians he only meant the ceremonial law. In the sixteenth century, Erasmus of Rotterdam revived this position, against which both Martin Luther and Philip Melanchthon objected. Thus, the notion that this was a “new” perspective or that the reformers were ignorant of it is not only misleading but also obscures the fact that in their exegetical works they argued directly against it.
Second, singling out Martin Luther as representing the contrary position to the “New Perspective” ignores the actual history of biblical interpretation in the sixteenth century. Wittenberg’s leading scholar on Romans was not Luther, whose lectures on Romans were not published until the twentieth century and whose only contribution to Romans interpretation was the preface in his translation of the New Testament, but rather Philip Melanchthon, who published five commentaries on Romans aimed in part at refuting Erasmus’s incorrect interpretations. (With Galatians, of course, the roles were reversed.) Moreover, Luther and Melanchthon’s interpretation of Pauline theology did not arise simply out of efforts to defend their views of justification by faith alone. They represented ongoing efforts among all of Wittenberg’s theologians and their students to understand the biblical text. For this they all employed the very latest Renaissance methods for their exegesis and were not simply practicing “eisegesis.”

Third, in the current debate one must recognize the origins and character of the “New Perspectives” as arising out of certain strains of Reformed theology, which had long since rejected the unconditional nature of God’s gracious forgiveness of sins and emphasized instead the centrality of the covenant and sanctification and, hence, the development of righteousness in the believer and not necessarily the declaration of forgiveness to the believer.

Fourth, as interesting a thesis as Krister Stendal’s proposal in his brief article on the “introspective conscience of the West” is, it is unfortunate that New Testament exegetes are willing to believe his unproven argument about fifteen hundred years of church history rather than employ the careful work of historians. And yet they would never allow a historian of biblical interpretation to write the definitive work on Paul in an equivalent fifteen-page essay—nor should they. That is, New Testament scholars simply need to stop using a meditative piece by Stendal as the lens through which to judge all interpretations of Paul from Augustine through Luther to the present.

Fifth, a final flaw of the “New Perspectives” arises out of their brand of historical positivism, which assumes that a twenty-first century biblical interpreter can shed his or her biases and finally
discover what Paul (or any other first-century author) really meant, limiting that meaning to a single meaning intended by the author and first audience and ignoring the history of biblical interpretation or rejecting it out of hand. By uncritically accepting Stendal, recapitulating (without attribution) the views of Jerome and Erasmus, and remaining ignorant of the actual methods and approaches of the Reformers whom they treat as straw men, they are more likely simply to reflect twenty-first century views and remain ignorant of their own (albeit important) role in the continuing development of Reformed interpretations of the Bible.