

Justified by faith apart from... what exactly?
Works of the law in the early church

Oxford Graduate Christian Forum, 31 Oct 2016

Matthew J. Thomas, Christ Church

“It is a matter of doubt, even among the learned, what the works of the law mean.”

- John Calvin

“According to some New Perspective scholars, ‘works of the law’ refer to Sabbath observance, food laws, and circumcision—those things that identified Jews. According to the Old Perspective, ‘works of the law’ represents the Judaizers’ attempt to secure salvation through moral effort.”

- J. V. Fesko

Old and new perspectives on works of the law

Old perspective

- ❖ *Meaning:* Works in general: any sort of good works or achievements
- ❖ *Significance:* To earn one's own salvation

New perspective

- ❖ *Meaning:* The prescriptions of the *law*, the Torah: principally circumcision, Sabbath (and related days), and food laws
- ❖ *Significance:* To be part of the Jewish people

Old and new perspectives on works of the law

Old perspective

❖ *Opposition:*

- ❖ Luther (Bultmann, etc.): No one can do them; they do not justify; most fundamentally, the attempt to do them is self-idolatry
- ❖ Calvin (Moo, etc.): Humanity's sinful condition means no one can perform them perfectly as God requires

New perspective

❖ *Opposition:*

- ❖ Sanders: experiential emphasis
- ❖ Dunn: Social emphasis
- ❖ Wright: Covenantal emphasis

Early perspectives on works
of the law

Sources

- ❖ *Didache*
- ❖ *Epistle of Barnabas*
- ❖ The epistles of Ignatius of Antioch
- ❖ Fragments of *Preaching of Peter*, *Dialogue of Jason and Papiscus*, and *Acts of Paul*
- ❖ *Epistle to Diognetus*
- ❖ *Apology of Aristides*
- ❖ Fragments from the Ebionites, Marcion and Ptolemy
- ❖ Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho*
- ❖ Melito of Sardis' *On Pascha*
- ❖ Irenaeus' *Against Heresies* and *Demonstration on the Apostolic Preaching*

Epistle of Barnabas (c. A.D. 70-135)

- ❖ *Barn.* 2:4-6: For [God] has made it clear to us through all the prophets that he needs neither sacrifices nor whole burnt offerings nor general offerings, saying on one occasion: “What is the multitude of your sacrifices to me?” says the Lord. ‘I am full of whole burnt offerings, and I do not want the fat of lambs and the blood of bulls and goats, not even if you come to appear before me. For who demanded these things from your hands? Do not continue to trample my court. If you bring fine flour, it is in vain; incense is detestable to me; your new moons and sabbaths I cannot stand.’” Therefore he has abolished these things, in order that the new law of our Lord Jesus Christ, which is free from the yoke of compulsion, might have its offering, one not made by humans.
- ❖ *Barn.* 13.7: What, then, does he say to Abraham, when he alone believed and was established in righteousness? “Behold, I have established you, Abraham, as the father of the nations who believe in God without being circumcised.”

Ignatius, *Philadelphians* (c. A.D. 110)

- ❖ *Phila.* 6.1: But if anyone expounds Judaism to you, do not listen to him. For it is better to hear about Christianity from a man who is circumcised than about Judaism from one who is not. But if either of them fails to speak about Jesus Christ, I look on them as tombstones and graves of the dead, upon which only the names of people are inscribed.
- ❖ *Phila.* 8.2: Moreover, I urge you to do nothing in a spirit of contentiousness, but in accordance with the teaching of Christ. For I heard some people say, “If I do not find it in the archives, I do not believe it in the gospel.” And when I said to them, “It is written,” they answered me, “That is precisely the question.” But for me, the “archives” are Jesus Christ, the unalterable archives are his cross and death and his resurrection and the faith that comes through him; by these things I want, through your prayers, to be justified.

Epistle to Diognetus (c. A.D. 125)

- ❖ *Diog.* 4.1-6: But with regard to [the Jews'] qualms about meats, and superstition concerning the sabbath, and pride in circumcision, and hypocrisy about fasting and new moons, I doubt that you need to learn from me that they are ridiculous and not worth discussing. For is it not unlawful to accept some of the things created by God for human use as created good but to refuse others as useless and superfluous? And is it not impious to slander God by alleging that he forbids us to do any good thing on the sabbath day? And is it not also ridiculous to take pride in the mutilation of the flesh as a sign of election, as though they were especially beloved by God because of this? And as for the way they watch the stars and the moon so as to observe months and days, and to make distinctions between the changing seasons ordained by God, making some into feasts and others into times of mourning according to their own inclinations, who would regard this as an example of godliness and not much more of a lack of understanding? So then, I think you have been sufficiently instructed to realize that the Christians are right to keep their distance from the common silliness and deception and fussiness and pride of the Jews. But as for the mystery of the Christian's own religion, do not expect to be able to learn this from a human being.
- ❖ *Diog.* 5.1-2: For Christians are not distinguished from the rest of humanity by country, language, or custom. For nowhere do they live in cities of their own, nor do they speak some unusual dialect, nor do they practice an eccentric way of life...

Apology of Aristides (c. A.D. 125)

- ❖ *Arist.* 14.1-4: Let us come now, O King, to the history of the Jews also, and see what opinion they have as to God. The Jews then say that God is one, the Creator of all, and omnipotent; and that it is not right that any other should be worshipped except this God alone. And herein they appear to approach the truth more than all the nations, especially in that they worship God and not His works. And they imitate God by the philanthropy which prevails among them; for they have compassion on the poor, and they release the captives, and bury the dead, and do such things as these, which are acceptable before God and well-pleasing also to men — which customs they have received from their forefathers.
- ❖ Nevertheless they too erred from true knowledge. And in their imagination they conceive that it is God they serve; whereas by their mode of observance it is to the angels and not to God that their service is rendered: as when they celebrate sabbaths and the beginning of the months, and feasts of unleavened bread, and a great fast; and fasting and circumcision and the purification of meats, which things, however, they do not observe perfectly.

Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* (c. A.D. 135-60)

- ❖ *Dial.* 10: Justin: “My friends, is there any accusation you have against us other than this, that we do not observe the Law, nor circumcise the flesh as your forefathers did, nor observe the Sabbath as you do? Or do you also condemn our customs and morals?...”
- ❖ Trypho: “Those other charges which the rabble lodge against you are not worthy of belief, for they are too repulsive to human nature. But the precepts in your so-called Gospel are so marvelous and great that I don’t think that anyone could possibly keep them. For I took the trouble to consult them.
- ❖ But this is what we are most puzzled about, that you who claim to be pious and believe yourselves to be different from the others do not segregate yourselves from them, nor do you observe a manner of life different from that of the Gentiles, for you do not keep the feasts or Sabbaths, nor do you practice the rite of circumcision. You place your hope in a crucified man, and still expect to receive favors from God when you disregard his commandments. Have you not read that the male who is not circumcised on the eighth day shall be eliminated from his people? This precept was for stranger and purchased slave alike. But you, forthwith, scorn this covenant, spurn the commands that come afterwards, and then you try to convince us that you know God, when you fail to do those things that every God-fearing person would do. If, then, you can give a satisfactory reply to these charges and can show us on what you place your hopes, even though you refuse to observe the Law, we will listen to you most willingly, and then we can go on and examine in the same manner our other differences.”

Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* (c. A.D. 135-60)

- ❖ *Dial.* 11: Justin: “And I answered him, ‘Trypho, there never will be, nor has there ever been from eternity, any other God except him who formed this universe. Furthermore, we do not claim that our God is different from yours, for he is the God who, with a strong hand and outstretched arm, led your forefathers out of Egypt. Nor have we placed our trust in any other (for, indeed, there is no other), but only in him whom you also trusted, the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob. But, our hope is not through Moses or through the Law, otherwise our customs would be the same as yours.
- ❖ Now indeed, for I have read, Trypho, that there should be a definitive law and a covenant more binding than all others, which now must be respected by all those who aspire to the heritage of God. The law promulgated at Horeb is already obsolete, and was intended for you Jews only, whereas the law of which I speak is simply for all men. Now a later law in opposition to an older law abrogates the older; so, too, does a later covenant void an earlier one. An everlasting and final law, Christ himself, and a trustworthy covenant has been given to us, after which there shall be no law, or commandment, or precept.

Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* (c. A.D. 135-60)

- ❖ *Dial.* 11: Justin: “Have you not read these words of Isaiah: ‘Hear me, listen to me, my people; and give ear to me, you kings: for a law shall go forth from me, and my judgment shall be a light to the nations. My justice approaches swiftly, and my salvation shall go forth, and nations shall have hope in my arm?’ (Isa 51:4-5). And concerning this new covenant, God spoke through Jeremiah thus: ‘Behold the days shall come, said the Lord, and I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: it will not be like the covenant which I made with their fathers, in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt’ (Jer 31:31-32).
- ❖ If, therefore, God predicted that he would make a new covenant, and this for a light to the nations, and we see and are convinced that, through the name of the crucified Jesus Christ, men have turned to God, leaving behind them idolatry and other sinful practices, and have kept the faith and have practiced piety even unto death, then everyone can clearly see from these deeds and the accompanying powerful miracles that he is indeed the New Law, the new covenant, and the expectation of those who, from every nation, have awaited the blessings of God.
- ❖ We have been led to God through this crucified Christ, and we are the true spiritual Israel, and the descendants of Judah, Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham, who, though uncircumcised, was approved and blessed by God because of his faith and was called the father of many nations. All this shall be proved as we proceed with our discussion.”

Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* (c. A.D. 135-60)

- ❖ *Dial.* 12.2-3: Justin: “The Lawgiver has come, and you do not see him; the poor have the gospel preached to them, the blind see, yet you do not understand.

What you really need is another circumcision, though you prize that of the flesh. The New Law demands that you observe a perpetual Sabbath, whereas you consider yourselves religious when you refrain from work on one day out of the week, and in doing so you don't understand the real meaning of that precept. You also claim to have done the will of God when you eat unleavened bread, but such practices afford no pleasure to the Lord our God. If there be a perjurer or thief among you, let him mend his ways; if there be an adulterer, let him repent; in this way he will have kept a true and peaceful Sabbath of God.”

Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* (c. A.D. 135-60)

- ❖ *Dial.* 23.3-4: Justin: “For if circumcision was not required before the time of Abraham, and if there was no need of Sabbaths, festivals, and sacrifices before Moses, they are not needed now [following Christ’s advent]...

Indeed, while Abraham himself was still uncircumcised, he was justified and blessed by God because of his faith in him, as the Scriptures tell us. Furthermore, the Scriptures and the facts of the case force us to admit that Abraham received circumcision for a sign, not for justification itself.”

Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* (c. A.D. 180)

- ❖ *Haer.* 4.13: “And that the Lord did not abrogate the natural precepts of the law, by which man is justified, which also those who were justified by faith, and who pleased God, did observe previous to the giving of the law, but that He extended and fulfilled them, is shown from His words. “For,” He remarks, “it has been said to them of old time, Do not commit adultery. But I say unto you, That every one who hath looked upon a woman to lust after her, hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.” And again: “It has been said, Thou shalt not kill. But I say unto you, Every one who is angry with his brother without a cause, shall be in danger of the judgment.” And, “It hath been said, Thou shalt not forswear thyself. But I say unto you, Swear not at all; but let your conversation be, Yea, yea, and Nay, nay.” And other statements of a like nature. For all these do not contain or imply an opposition to and an overturning of the precepts of the past, as Marcion’s followers do strenuously maintain; but they exhibit a fulfilling and an extension of them, as He does Himself declare: “Unless your righteousness shall exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.” For what meant the excess referred to? In the first place, we must believe not only in the Father, but also in His Son now revealed; for He it is who leads man into fellowship and unity with God. In the next place, we must not only say, but we must do; for they said, but did not. And we must not only abstain from evil deeds, but even from the desires after them. Now He did not teach us these things as being opposed to the law, but as fulfilling the law, and implanting in us the varied righteousness of the law. That would have been contrary to the law, if He had commanded His disciples to do anything which the law had prohibited. But this which He did command—namely, not only to abstain from things forbidden by the law, but even from longing after them—is not contrary to the law, as I have remarked, neither is it the utterance of one destroying the law, but of one fulfilling, extending, and affording greater scope to it.

Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* (c. A.D. 180)

- ❖ *Haer.* 4.16: Moreover, we learn from the Scripture itself, that God gave circumcision, not as the completer of righteousness, but as a sign, that the race of Abraham might continue recognizable... This same does Ezekiel the prophet say with regard to the Sabbaths... These things, then, were given for a sign; but the signs were not unsymbolical, that is, neither unmeaning nor to no purpose, inasmuch as they were given by a wise Artist; but the circumcision after the flesh typified that after the Spirit. For “we,” says the Apostle, “have been circumcised with the circumcision made without hands...”
- ❖ And that man was not justified by these things, but that they were given as a sign to the people, this fact shows—that Abraham himself, without circumcision and without observance of Sabbaths, “believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness; and he was called the friend of God.” Then, again, Lot, without circumcision, was brought out from Sodom, receiving salvation from God. So also did Noah, pleasing God, although he was uncircumcised, receive the dimensions of the ark... Enoch, too, pleasing God, without circumcision, discharged the office of God’s legate to the angels... Moreover, all the rest of the multitude of those righteous men who lived before Abraham, and of those patriarchs who preceded Moses, were justified independently of the things above mentioned, and without the law of Moses. As also Moses himself says to the people in Deuteronomy: “The LORD thy God formed a covenant in Horeb. The LORD formed not this covenant with your fathers, but for you.”

Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* (c. A.D. 180)

- ❖ *Haer.* 4.16: Why, then, did the Lord not form the covenant for the fathers? Because “the law was not established for righteous men” (1 Tim 1:9). But the righteous fathers had the meaning of the Decalogue written in their hearts and souls, that is, they loved the God who made them, and did no injury to their neighbour. There was therefore no occasion that they should be cautioned by prohibitory mandates, because they had the righteousness of the law in themselves. But when this righteousness and love to God had passed into oblivion, and became extinct in Egypt, God did necessarily, because of His great goodwill to men, reveal Himself by a voice, and led the people with power out of Egypt, in order that man might again become the disciple and follower of God...
- ❖ Preparing man for this life, the Lord Himself did speak in His own person to all alike the words of the Decalogue; and therefore, in like manner, do they remain permanently with us, receiving by means of His advent in the flesh, extension and increase, but not abrogation...

Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* (c. A.D. 180)

- ❖ *Haer.* 4.16: The laws of bondage, however, were one by one promulgated to the people by Moses, suited for their instruction or for their punishment, as Moses himself declared: “And the LORD commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and judgments.” These things, therefore, which were given for bondage, and for a sign to them, He cancelled by the new covenant of liberty. But He has increased and widened those laws which are natural, and noble, and common to all, granting to men largely and without grudging, by means of adoption, to know God the Father, and to love Him with the whole heart, and to follow His word unswervingly, while they abstain not only from evil deeds, but even from the desire after them. But He has also increased the feeling of reverence; for sons should have more veneration than slaves, and greater love for their father. And therefore the Lord says, “As to every idle word that men have spoken, they shall render an account for it in the day of judgment.” And, “he who has looked upon a woman to lust after her, hath committed adultery with her already in his heart”; and, “he that is angry with his brother without a cause, shall be in danger of the judgment.” All this is declared, that we may know that we shall give account to God not of deeds only, as slaves, but even of words and thoughts, as those who have truly received the power of liberty, in which condition a man is more severely tested, whether he will reverence, and fear, and love the Lord. And for this reason Peter says “that we have not liberty as a cloak of maliciousness,” but as the means of testing and evidencing faith.

Early perspectives on works of the law

- ❖ *Meaning*: The prescriptions of the Mosaic law given at Sinai: principally circumcision, Sabbath (and related days), sacrifices, and food laws
- ❖ *Significance*: Identification with the Jewish people, the Jewish covenant, and “Judaism,” the manner of life and worship prescribed in the Mosaic law

Early perspectives on works of the law

❖ *Opposition:* Five primary arguments

1. The arrival of the new law and covenant in Christ, the Messiah, whose teachings and ordinances replace those of the Mosaic law
2. The witness of the Hebrew Scriptures, in which the prophets testify regarding the Messiah and this new covenant, and the cessation of these previous works
3. The universal nature of this new covenant, which is promised to be for all nations, and which has its arrival confirmed by the Gentiles receiving grace and turning to God apart from becoming Jews
4. The transformation in humanity wrought by Christ, understood as the new birth or the circumcision of the heart, which renders the laws given to hard-hearted Israel unnecessary, and which allows the types and mysteries of Scripture to be rightly understood
5. The examples of Abraham and the righteous patriarchs, who were similarly accepted by God apart from these practices, and whose righteousness confirms that the Mosaic law and circumcision were not given for humanity's justification

Relation to “old” and “new” perspectives

- ❖ On the meaning and significance of works of the law, the “new” perspective appears to be, in reality, the old perspective
- ❖ However, on the opposition to these works, only Wright’s perspective carries considerable correspondence with the early witnesses, and it is significant that among “new perspective” interpreters, Wright does the most to incorporate “old perspective” concerns

Early perspectives and Paul

❖ Four suggestions regarding Paul's own meaning

1. Paul's disputes would appear to be over the concrete issue of the Torah's place in the Christian's life, not obedience to a moral law or works in general
2. Paul's rejection of works of the law not original to him (*pace* the "new perspective")
3. The law of Christ as a primary reason for not following the law of Moses
 - "Precisely because the phrase serves as the new covenant counterpart to the 'law of Moses,' we should expect the reference to include all those teachings and commandments set forth by Christ and by his inspired apostles—including Paul" (Doug Moo)
4. Conflicts not, at heart, about the Mosaic law or works at all, but rather about Jesus' identity as the Messiah

Justified by faith apart from... what exactly?
Works of the law in the early church

Oxford Graduate Christian Forum, 31 Oct 2016

Matthew J. Thomas, Christ Church

“It is a matter of doubt, even among the learned, what the works of the law mean.”

- John Calvin