

Pauline Paradoxes Decoded

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Michael Wood

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Section I
A Problem of Law

Chapter One

The Enigma of Paul

The apostle Paul wrote more New Testament books than any other author. Many modern denominations base their theology on his writings.¹ Meanwhile, biblical scholars such as Pamela Eisenbaum view Paul's teachings as a still unsolved mystery. Ms. Eisenbaum teaches Biblical studies and Christian origins at Denver's Ilif School of Theology. She speaks frankly when awakening her students to the enigma of Paul:

Some Pauline scholars have become so frustrated with Paul that they have concluded the apostle's letters are riddled with such stark theological inconsistencies that to try to reconcile them would amount to little more than theological nonsense.²—Pamela Eisenbaum

Naturally, many students are initially thrown by this statement. Eisenbaum expects the resistance, and she's fully prepared for it. The moment she senses resistance, she immediately plays her ace card—Romans 2.13:

When teaching introductory courses on Paul, I sometimes poll students with regard to their view of Paul's view of Jewish law—does Paul's theology affirm or negate the law? Without fail, **the majority of students say Paul negates or devalues Jewish law. When I offer students a third option—namely, does Paul think Jewish law had some, perhaps temporary, positive value but has been superseded by Christ?—the vast majority will select that option.**

When I ask them to justify this response, they usually offer some version of the following explanation: One is justified (or saved) by faith, rather than law,

1 Martin Luther, the Father of the Protestant Reformation, promoted the idea that Paul's epistles "far surpass" the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Many modern denominations have been established on this view.

"[T]he epistles of St. Paul... far surpass the other three gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke."—Martin Luther (*Selected Writings of Martin Luther, Volume 1*, by Martin Luther, edited by Theodore Gerhardt Tappert, p. 398, Fortress Press, Aug 1, 2007)

2 Eisenbaum, Pamela (2009-11-19). *Paul Was Not a Christian: The Original Message of a Misunderstood Apostle* (p. 30). Harper Collins, Inc.. Kindle Edition.

therefore Paul obviously devalues law. At that point I usually highlight a text where Paul says something unambiguously positive about law. **My favorite is Romans 2:13, “For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified.” Not the hearers but the doers of the law will be justified. Students are typically dumbfounded by this statement.**³—Pamela Eisenbaum

Most pupils are deeply familiar with Paul’s *negative* statements about law—Romans 3:28 in particular:

by the works of the law no one will be justified

However, beginning students rarely have given serious consideration to Paul’s *positive* statements about law—statements such as Romans 2:13:

only the doers of the law will be justified

Paul wrote *many* negative statements about law, and he also wrote *many* positive statements about law. These seemingly negative/positive flip-flops are “the basic problem in interpreting Paul’s Christian view of the Jewish law”:

The basic problem in interpreting Paul’s Christian view of the Jewish law is that he seems to say both positive and negative things about it. For example, apparently negative statements include the following... ‘Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law’ (Gal 3:13). But on the other hand, consider the positive statements:... ‘through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself”’ (Gal 5:13-14).⁴—*An Introduction to the Study of Paul*

Because of these negative/positive statements, “few would want to argue that Paul was rigorously consistent or systematic in all that he wrote”:

How then are we to make sense of these contrasting, even contradictory statements? Some scholars, notably Heikki Räisänen, have argued that Paul’s various statements about the law cannot be harmonized into a coherent or systematic scheme: Paul is simply inconsistent. Others suggest that Paul’s thought developed between his different letters, notably between Galatians

3 Eisenbaum, Pamela (2009-11-19). *Paul Was Not a Christian: The Original Message of a Misunderstood Apostle* (pp. 28-29). Harper Collins, Inc.. Kindle Edition.

4 *An Introduction to the Study of Paul* by David G. Horrell, p. 91, Continuum International Publishing Group, Aug 30, 2006

and Romans; but since both positive and negative statements occur within the same letters (e.g. Galatians; see above) such an answer seems less than complete. **As for Paul's consistency, few would want to argue that Paul was rigorously consistent or systematic in all that he wrote⁵**

Awakening students to Paul's *positive* statements about law is often difficult. Many students have been taught to mentally ignore them:

Although most experienced readers of Paul's letters acknowledge the challenge posed by such divergent statements, more facile interpreters too often read Paul with simplistic Reformation filters, by which I mean that **they take note only of Paul's negative remarks on Jewish law, virtually ignoring the positive ones. As a result, some readers of Paul's letters do not experience any cognitive dissonance in their encounters with Paul.**⁶—Pamela Eisenbaum

Romans 2.13 is Eisenbaum's favorite verse to awaken students for good reason. Why? Paul pulls a decisive one-two punch. First, he declares that *only the doers of the law will be vindicated before God*. Then Paul gives an example of people who are vindicated by doing the law:

For it is not the hearers of the law who will be vindicated before God. **Rather the doers of the law will be vindicated. For example, when Gentiles who don't have the law do naturally what the law requires, those gentiles without the law are the law unto themselves.** They are demonstrating the performance of the law written in their hearts⁷

According to Paul, some Gentiles not only keep the law but they are vindicated before God for doing so. The law appears to be the source of their vindication.

Some suppose that the Gentiles in Paul's passage were Christian converts, which explains why they kept the law, and that's why they were vindicated before God. However, the passage excludes the possibility that these Gentiles were Christian converts. As New Testament scholar Heikki Räisänen points out:

5 *An Introduction to the Study of Paul* by David G. Horrell, p. 91, Continuum International Publishing Group, Aug 30, 2006

6 Eisenbaum, Pamela (2009-11-19). *Paul Was Not a Christian: The Original Message of a Misunderstood Apostle* (p. 28). Harper Collins, Inc.. Kindle Edition.

7 Romans 2:13-14

- During Paul's day, Christianity was a branch of Judaism. First century converts were familiar with Jewish law, at least the basics of it. Yet the Gentiles in Paul's passage "do not have the law."⁸ The law is unknown to them. Thus, they are *not* Christian converts.⁹
- Paul considered Christians as "enslaved to Jesus."¹⁰ They are required to fulfill *his* law.¹¹ Yet the Gentiles in Paul's passage are "a law *unto themselves*."¹² Paul wouldn't describe converts as being their own law. Thus, they are *not* Christian converts.¹³
- Moreover, Paul's converts learned to obey Jesus' teachings by religious instruction (via the Gospel). The Gentiles in Paul's passage were keeping the law instinctively by nature, *not by religious instruction*. Thus, they are *not* Christian converts.¹⁴

Räisänen's last point deserves great attention. The backdrop of the larger passage is a contrast between:

- Gentiles who know God's ethical code *by nature*.¹⁵
- Jews who know God's ethical code *by religious instruction*.¹⁶

8 Romans 2.14

9 *Paul and the Law* by Heikki Räisänen, p. 104, Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2010

10 Cf. Romans 1.1

11 Galatians 6.2

12 Romans 2.14

13 *Paul and the Law* by Heikki Räisänen, pp. 104-105, Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2010

14 *Paul and the Law* by Heikki Räisänen, p. 104, Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2010

15 Paul establishes that the Gentiles in Romans 1.16-3.31 know God's requirements *by nature*. "that which is known about God is plainly seen by them because God made it plainly seen to them... *being understood by [God's] creation*... they know God's ethical code..." (Romans 1.19-20, 32)

16 Paul establishes that the Jews in Romans 1.16-3.31 know God's requirements *by religious instruction*. "you bear the name 'Jew'... *being instructed* out of the law and are convinced that you are *a guide* for the blind, *a light* to those in darkness, *an instructor* of the ignorant, *a teacher* of children, *having the embodiment of knowledge and truth* in the law..." (Romans 2.18-20). This religious training is

The Gentiles' lack of religious instruction is the very basis of the contrast. Paul painstakingly depicts these Gentiles as devoid of *all* religious training—including the Gospel. The “Christian-convert” presumption, therefore, doesn't qualify as a solution.¹⁷ (A solution is an explanation which accounts for every detail without adding any tensions in the process. The “Christian-covert” hypothesis introduces tensions, and therefore isn't a *solution*.)

A solution must account for all the details: Paul wrote about Gentiles who were vindicated before God *without any knowledge of Jesus*.

Protestant Reformer John Calvin fully acknowledged that the Gentiles in Paul's passage were saved *without any knowledge of Jesus*. However, Calvin concluded that the passage must be referring to *fictitious* Gentiles. Calvin believed that no one can keep the law. Therefore he concluded that Paul must be referring to a hypothetical, non-real-world group.¹⁸

Calvin's explanation is disqualified as well. The passage chastises a group of Jews.¹⁹ And Paul wrote that the law-abiding Gentiles are going to condemn these Jews:

And **he who is physically uncircumcised and fulfills the law, won't he condemn you** who violates the law though you have its letter and your circumcision?²⁰

How can hypothetical, fictitious Gentiles “condemn” real-world Jews? They can't.

contrasted against Gentiles who learn God's attributes *entirely by nature*.

17 N.T. Wright hypothesizes that the Gentiles in Romans 2 are Christian converts. Yet, he freely admits that Romans 2 is the Achilles heel of all explanations of Paul and the law—including his own. Wright fully acknowledges that the “Christian-convert” hypothesis doesn't fully account for all the details of Romans 2 and therefore isn't a *solution*. In fact, Wright also wrote that he anticipates an actual “solution” to Romans 2 to be forthcoming.

18 *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul to the Romans* by John Calvin, p. 96, Kessinger Publishing, 2006

19 For a discussion on Romans' target audience, see Appendix B, “Romans' Primary Target.”

20 Romans 2:27

Another suggestion is that Paul is speaking only hypothetically of a case which cannot occur in reality at all. It is hard to see, however, what point there would have been in taking up such a fictitious matter at all. Above all, **such an imaginary Gentile would be of no use for Paul's polemic against the Jew. How could a non-existent Gentile 'condemn' him?**²¹—Heikki Räisänen

This isn't Calvin's only problem. In the passage, Paul *chastises* the Jews *for breaking the law*:

You're preaching not to steal, and you're stealing!... You boast of law, but you bring dishonor on God by breaking the law!²²

The passage disallows Calvin's notion that Paul considered the law to be unkeepable. (Do the Jews *dishonor* God by breaking an unkeepable law?)

The passage isn't even referring to parts of the law that are difficult to keep. Rather, it is speaking about stealing and the like. Is "do not steal" a supposedly unkeepable part of the law? Paul isn't excusing the Jews' stealing because the law is unkeepable. On the contrary! He's telling them they must stop stealing *because of the law*. The situation is the opposite of Calvin's premise.

Calvin's explanation even adds tension beyond the passage itself. His premise literally opposes the entire chapter. **Romans 2 was written to promote salvation by good deeds:**

God will "render to every man according to his deeds": **to those who are seeking glory and honor and immortality by persevering in good deeds, he will give immortality**; but to those who through selfish ambition have not followed the truth, but instead have followed injustice—there will be wrath and anger²³

Calvin's theological motivation was to preach faith *apart from law*. Yet, *Romans 2 portrays law as the sole determinant of salvation, independent of belief in Jesus*:

The question throughout chapter 2 is whether or not one does the Jewish law, **not as a result of being in Christ, but as the sole determinant of salvation.**²⁴—EP Sanders

21 *Paul and the Law* by Heikki Räisänen, p. 103-104, Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2010

22 Romans 2.21, 23

23 Romans 2.6-8

24 *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* by E. P. Sanders, p. 129, Fortress Press, 1985

Calvin's proposal fails on a number of levels:

- It has non-existent Gentiles condemning real-world Jews.
- It has Paul condemning the Jews for breaking a law that is supposedly unkeepable anyway.
- The theological motivation behind it is literally the opposite of the chapter's message from beginning to end.

Calvin's proposal doesn't qualify as a *solution*.

Any solution must account for the following details: Paul wrote about *real-world* Gentiles, who were vindicated before God, without any knowledge of Jesus, *because they kept the law*. Every detail must be accounted for without adding any tensions in the process. The leading Protestant Reformer, John Calvin, failed to do this.

So does that mean the Catholic Church has the answer? Catholicism teaches that salvation cannot be found outside the Catholic Church.²⁵ Yet Paul wrote about real-world Gentiles who were vindicated without any knowledge of Jesus. In other words, Paul wrote about real-world people who are saved outside the Church.

Neither the Protestant nor Catholic explanation resolves Romans 2. Neither offers a solution to what Paul actually wrote.

N.T. Wright refers to Romans 2 as the "Achilles heel of schemes on Paul and the law."²⁶ Wright characterizes Romans 2 in this manner because it's a historically accurate description—not hyperbole. Romans 2 has, quite literally, been the Achilles heel of *all* explanations—both Protestant and Catholic.

Dr. Wright is one of the most recognized Biblical scholars today. In addition to his doctorate from Oxford University, he also has been awarded honorary doctoral degrees from eight prestigious institutions. Wright acknowledges that Romans 2 has been the Achilles heel of all explanations of Paul... including his own. That's the type of scholarly

25 Catholicism teaches *extra ecclesia nulla salus* ("Outside the Church there is no salvation"). [*What Is Catholicism?: Hard Questions-Straight Answers* by Rev. John Redford and Avery Dulles, p. 41, Our Sunday Visitor Publishing, Sep 1, 1999.]

26 "The Law in Romans 2" by N.T. Wright as reprinted in *Paul and the Mosaic Law: The Third Durham-Tübingen Research Symposium on Earliest Christianity and Judaism* (Durham, September, 1994), p. 132, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, Jan 1, 2001

honesty that has earned Wright the praise of his peers.

It should be noted that Wright uses the word “scheme” in the European sense of the word. In Europe, this word refers to “systematic explanations.” The European use of the word doesn’t convey any inherently negative connotations as it does here in the States. Wright is simply saying that all systematic explanations of Paul and the law have met their ruination in Romans 2—the Achilles heel of Pauline Studies. After all, Romans 2 praises law from beginning to end, in sharp contrast to the *many* times Paul denigrated the law.

Most biblical scholars openly acknowledge the difficulties posed by Paul’s negative/positive statements about law. In fact, a majority of scholars have concluded that these statements *cannot* be systematically reconciled. However, evangelicals firmly believe in the perfect inerrancy (and therefore consistency) of Paul. They take great offense at the notion of *unsolved* Pauline issues.

Evangelicals believe that Paul consistently taught one thing: Man is vindicated by faith *apart from law*. Their doctrine is based on Paul’s negative statements about law. So what do they do with Paul’s positive statements? Galatians 6.2 is a perfect example:

Bear one another’s burdens and in this manner **fulfill the Law of Christ**.

Evangelical Christianity is based on the presumption that Christians are freed from all law. Meanwhile, Paul commanded his converts to *fulfill a law*—the Law of Christ. How do evangelical commentators respond to this? Todd A. Wilson surveyed the various responses to this phrase:

Nearly three centuries ago J. A. Bengel referred to the Law of Christ as a *rara appellatio*. **Recent interpreters, however, have been less discreet. They now refer to the Law of Christ as ‘most remarkable,’ ‘arresting,’ ‘strange,’ ‘muy curiosa,’ ‘striking,’ ‘extremely baffling,’ ‘doubly astonishing,’ a ‘brehtaking paradox,’ a ‘much-puzzled-over-term,’ and ‘oxymoron étonnant,’ indeed ‘a phrase more likely to mislead than instruct.’**²⁷

Evangelical scholars generally respond with bewilderment regarding the Law of Christ. It bears great emphasis that leading scholars refer to this phrase as:

27 *The Curse of the Law and the Crisis in Galatia: Reassessing the Purpose of Galatians* by Todd A. Wilson, pp. 100-101, Mohr Siebeck, Jun 30, 2007

-
- Most remarkable
 - Arresting
 - Strange
 - *Muy curiosa* (very puzzling)
 - Striking
 - Extremely baffling
 - Doubly astonishing
 - A breathtaking paradox
 - A much-puzzled-over-term
 - Oxymoron étonnant
 - A phrase more likely to mislead than instruct

Evangelicals take Paul's negative statements at face value. But Paul's positive statements are *muy curiosa!* Naturally, this is *not* a solution.

Romans 2.13 exemplifies the evangelical quandary. As a reminder, this verse says that *only the doers of the law* will be vindicated before God—*directly* opposing evangelical doctrine. How do modern evangelicals deal with this? Many teach that this verse was written from “Pre-Saved” Paul's perspective. (It was a description of what Paul believed before he embraced the teachings of Jesus.)²⁸

This explanation adds insurmountable tension to Romans 2. Romans 2 warns certain Jews that *they* will be judged according to *their* deeds. In other words, *the Jews admonished by ‘Post-Saved’ Paul* will be judged according to *their* deeds. The “Pre-Saved Paul” notion stands in tension with this.

Paul warned the Jews that they will be judged in the same way *as the rest of humanity*—according to their deeds. Most readers gloss over the role that Romans 2.13 plays in all of this:

- Everyone will be judged according to their deeds
- *Because* only the doers of the law will be vindicated before God.

²⁸ This popular explanation was offered by one of the evangelical scholars interviewed for this work.

Romans 2.13 was Paul's explanation on *why* everyone will be judged according to their deeds. Everyone will be judged according to their deeds *because only the doers of the law will be vindicated before God*. This is "Post-Saved" Paul's explanation of salvation and judgment. At least the "Post-Saved" Paul of Romans 2.

When it comes to Romans 2, there's no way around it: **Post-Saved Paul considered real-world Gentiles to be vindicated before God without any knowledge of Jesus simply because they kept the law.** Solving Romans 2 requires a full accounting of all these details.

Most biblical scholars now acknowledge there's no wiggle room around this. However, their acknowledgement has fostered a troubling new development in biblical scholarship. Scholars are now beginning to distance Romans 2 from Paul himself. EP Sanders is the thought leader behind this.

Sanders is one of the most highly influential Pauline scholars. (His research is referenced in more than 88,000 published works.)²⁹ Sanders believes that Romans 2 was originally a Jewish synagogue sermon. Paul incorporated this sermon into Romans without making any edits. Therefore, Romans 2 shouldn't be considered a legitimate part of Paul's argument.

I think that the best way to read 1.18-2.29 is as a synagogue sermon...

I find, in short, no distinctively Pauline imprint in 1.18-2.29, apart from the tag in 2.16. Christians are not in mind, the Christian viewpoint plays no role, and the entire chapter is written from a Jewish perspective. The question throughout chapter 2 is whether or not one does the Jewish law, not as a result of being in Christ, but as the sole determinant of salvation.³⁰—EP Sanders

Sanders hit the nail on the head: In Romans 2, Paul presents the law *as the sole determinant of salvation*. This (supposedly) presents a problem. Therefore, Sanders proposes that Romans 2 be completely ignored when we seek to understand the historical Paul.

N.T. Wright suspects that *a lot* of scholars *privately* concur with Sanders:

29 Based on Google books search: "EP Sanders" OR "Ed Parish Sanders" OR "Ed P Sanders"

30 *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* by E. P. Sanders, p. 129, Fortress Press, 1985

Notoriously, Sanders in *Paul, the Law and the Jewish People* declared that Romans 2 was not a legitimate part of Paul's argument; it was an old synagogue sermon, with minimal Christian updating. **I suspect that Sanders here said out loud what a lot of exegetes have thought privately**, but it still comes as something of a shock to be told that the second chapter in a major theological letter must be put in brackets.³¹—N.T. Wright

Wright travels in the innermost circles of the scholarly community. And his interaction with top scholars leads him to conclude: “a lot of exegetes have thought privately” that Romans 2 “was not a legitimate part of Paul's argument.”

Romans is Paul's quintessential theological masterpiece. Yet, **a lot of exegetes think that *an entire chapter of Romans is not a legitimate part of Paul's message!***

This statement should make the headlines in every Christian periodical. Yet, how many laymen are aware of this? Certainly Eisenbaum's beginning students are rarely (if ever) aware of it. There is a great disconnect between the scholarly community and the laity.

Modern scholarship fully concedes that Romans 2 promotes salvation by keeping the law. Therefore the current scholarly inclination is to throw the whole chapter out.

Scholarship isn't seeking to toss out a sentence here and there. It's not even seeking to throw out an odd paragraph or two. Rather, the current trend in scholarship is to discard the entirety of Romans 2. Why? The *entire* chapter teaches judgment by good deeds and salvation by keeping the law:

- The chapter begins by stating that all humanity, Christian and non-Christian alike, will be judged solely based on their good deeds.³²
- Then, only the doers of the law will be vindicated before God.³³
- Then, Paul gives an example of Gentiles who are a law unto themselves.³⁴

31 “The Law in Romans 2” by N.T. Wright, as printed in *Paul and the Mosaic Law* by James D. G. Dunn, p. 131, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, Jan 1, 2001

32 Romans 2.1-12

33 Romans 2.13

34 Romans 2.14-16

- Then, Roman Jews are chastised *for breaking the law*.³⁵
- Then, Paul says that the Gentiles *who keep the law* will condemn the Jews *who break the law*.³⁶
- Then, Paul says that Gentiles *who keep the law* are true members of the Faith.³⁷

Gentiles who keep the law are vindicated before God. Jews who break the law are condemned. The entire chapter promotes the necessity of keeping the law in order to survive God's impartial judgment—a judgment based solely on good deeds.³⁸

From start to finish, the chapter explains how non-converts can be vindicated before God. The chapter is *anathema* to Protestants and Catholics alike.

And the problem goes even deeper. The entirety of Romans 2 appears to contradict the entirety of Romans 3, *the very next chapter!* (At least according to the way scholarship views these two chapters.) Scholarship has tended to view these chapters as follows:

- Romans 2 teaches that only the doers of the law will be vindicated and that all humanity will be judged solely by their deeds.
- Romans 3 teaches that vindication is by faith apart from the law and humanity will be judged by its trust in Jesus.

Romans 2 seems to applaud the law. Romans 3 seems to denigrate the law. On the surface, discarding Romans 2 seems to solve the problem (hence Sanders' proposal).

But, is discarding the entirety of Romans 2 a solution? If Romans 2 was Paul's only positive reference to law, then perhaps those who seek to discard it would have a stronger case. The problem is that Paul wrote positively about law *many* times. Paul also wrote negatively about law *many* times. While Romans 2 and 3 form a particularly stark contrast given their length and proximity to one another, the positive/negative flip-flops are found throughout Paul's letters:

35 Romans 2.17-24

36 Romans 2.25-27

37 Romans 2.28-29

38 Romans 2.1-12

As Brice L. Martin's recent study highlights, the most striking feature about the data concerning the role of the Law in Paul's writings is that the apostle speaks about it in both negative and positive ways.

From a negative perspective, the Law brings a curse (Gal. 3:13), wrath (Rom. 4:15), sin (Rom. 7:7-13), and death (Rom. 7:9-11; 2 Cor. 3:6-9); produces transgressions (Rom. 4:15; Gal. 3:19); enslaves (Rom. 6:14; 7:4-6, 23-25; Gal. 3:23; 4:5, 21-31); and is fatal (Rom. 3:20; 6:14; Gal 3:11; 5:4).

From a positive point of view, the Law is of divine origin (Rom. 7:22, 25; 8:7, 9:4); contains the will of God (Rom. 2:17-18); is holy (Rom. 7:12, 14, 16) and loving (Rom. 13:8-10; Gal. 5:14); is established by faith (Rom. 3:31; 9:30-10:4); and is obeyed by the power of the Spirit (Rom. 8:4).

This sense of ambivalence about the role of the Law extends to Christians themselves, who on the one hand are **no longer obligated to keep the Law** (Rom. 6:14; 7:4, 6; Gal. 2:19; 3:13), but on the other hand are **expected to fulfill its ideals** (Rom. 2:12-16; 5:14; 6:2; 8:4; 13:8-10).³⁹

Paul's positive statements about law are interspersed with his negative statements. He seems to flip-flop back and forth without any warning or hesitation. And he flip-flops back and forth *many times*. Therefore, discarding Romans 2 doesn't even begin to solve the problem. In fact, it only introduces more problems. If an entire chapter can be discarded, what other parts can we disregard as well? What does this say about the integrity of every other part of the New Testament? Discarding an entire chapter is *radical*.⁴⁰ (It's a radical step that doesn't even begin to address the other *numerous* negative/positive statements. Thus, it *solves nothing*.)

The scholarly community is now facing a daunting reality: Few of the basic problems have actually been solved.

Few of the basic problems that have arisen in the course of history of interpretation have really been solved⁴¹ —Heikki Räisänen

Räisänen reached this conclusion after conducting an exhaustive research initiative.

39 *The End of the Age has Come: The Theology of Paul* by C. Marvin Pate, pp. 125-126, Zondervan, Feb 15, 1995

40 Wright considers Sanders' proposal "notorious" and "somewhat of a shock" ("The Law in Romans 2" by NT Wright, as printed in *Paul and the Mosaic Law* by James D. G. Dunn, p. 131, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, Jan 1, 2001)

41 *Challenges to Biblical Interpretation: Collected Essays, 1991-2000* by Heikki Räisänen, p. 96, BRILL, 2001

Räisänen pored through published Pauline scholarship looking for *solutions*. He catalogued all of the Pauline flip-flops and assessed the published explanations of them. He found that virtually none of the proposals developed over two millennia met the criteria necessary to be regarded as a solution. (Each proposal introduced a new tension, rather than simply resolving the one at hand.)

Calvin's proposal (discussed above) is a perfect example. He sought to resolve the tension of Gentiles who are a law unto themselves. He proposed that Paul was referring to fictitious, non-existent Gentiles. Yet his proposal that they were hypothetical simply introduced *a new tension*. How could hypothetical Gentiles condemn the real-world target of Paul's admonition? **Calvin merely exchanged one tension for another.** And this is precisely what Räisänen discovered for virtually all the Pauline contradictions. Scholarship wasn't filled with solutions. On the contrary! Scholars have been merely swapping tensions that bother them for tensions they could live with. By consistently applying this tension-swapping strategy, even the most basic issues have never actually been *solved*.

Räisänen eventually published the full catalogue of Pauline flip-flops along with the tensions introduced by all the published explanations. He exposed the emperor's lack of clothes in his classic *Paul and the Law*; a 300-page compendium of unsolved Pauline paradoxes.

Scholarship at large acknowledges the problem of the Pauline paradoxes. James A. Sanders is a seminary professor, one of the editors of the Dead Sea Scrolls, and founder of the Ancient Biblical Manuscript Center. This scholarly heavyweight characterizes Paul's view of law as "one of the most seemingly insolvable in biblical study":

Paul's attitude toward the law has been one of the most puzzling and seemingly insolvable in biblical study.⁴²—James A. Sanders

Scholarship's largest open issue has been its inability to *systematically* reconcile Paul's positive and negative statements about law. Räisänen's publication of *Paul and the Law* heightened this crisis:

42 "Torah and Paul" by James A. Sanders as printed in *God's Christ and His People: Studies in Honor of Nils Alstrup Dahl*, p. 132, edited by Jacob Jerrell and Wayne A. Meeks, Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1977.

Räsänen's *Paul and the Law* heightened the crisis by postulating a Paul whose several treatments of the law in his writing, **including passages within the same letter, cannot adequately be reconciled** and must be left in uncomfortable juxtaposition.⁴³—James Dunn

Dunn is another scholarly heavyweight. He wasn't using hyperbole when he described the situation as "a crisis." While the laity sits comfortably in the pew, the scholarly community has become increasingly uncomfortable over its lack of genuine solutions to Paul's positive/negative statements about law.

Dunn wrote the above when discussing the motivations for a recent symposium on "Paul and the Law." Räsänen's scholarship had heightened the crisis, and holding the symposium was, it was thought, a way to address that crisis. But, at the end of the symposium, nothing had changed. After the conference was over, the same major questions remained:

Major questions therefore remain. For example, does the phrase 'works of the law' express Jewish self-understanding (and if so what?), or simply Paul's own (possibly idiosyncratic) experience of the law? What is the focus of Paul's critique of the law? **How to correlate the seemingly positive assertions he also makes (about believers fulfilling the law) with his more negative comments? Can all his statements about the law be synthesized into a single coherent view?**⁴⁴—James Dunn, commenting on the outcome of the international, multi-denominational symposium on "Paul and the Law"

At the conclusion of this recent symposium, scholarship's two largest issues remained unresolved:

- How can we correlate Paul's many positive statements about the law with his many negative statements about it?
- Will we ever be able to synthesize all of Paul's statements about the law into a single coherent view?

The current trend to discard Romans 2 is quite unfortunate. After all, *this chapter contains the key to resolving all of Paul's negative/positive statements.* This very notion was already intuited by Dr. Wright:

43 *Paul and the Mosaic Law* by James D. G. Dunn, p 2, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001

44 *Paul and the Mosaic Law* by James D. G. Dunn, pp. 2-3, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001

Romans 2, for so long the Achilles heel of schemes on Paul and the Law, **may make a vital contribution to some eventual solutions, both to the theological questions which surround Paul's writings and, of course, to the exegesis of Romans itself.**⁴⁵—Dr. N.T. Wright

Wright turned out to be right. Romans 2 is the key “both to the theological questions which surround Paul's writings and, of course, to the exegesis of Romans itself.”

There's a good reason why this is so: Romans 2 is Paul's lengthiest positive explanation of law. This comprehensive explanation ties judgment, vindication, and law all together. Therefore, it's a natural place to look to understand Paul's other positive statements about law scattered throughout his works. Romans 2 is the (elusively) obvious place to find an actual *solution*.

But how is a person to know when he has actually *solved* the issues? Thanks to Räsänen's work we already have a full catalogue of unresolved tensions. If a proposed solution resolves Räsänen's catalogue without introducing any new tensions, then it is indeed a genuine *solution*.

Räsänen's work remains a standing caution to all who seek for easy syntheses, and an unavoidable challenge to all who claim to have found such a synthesis, as to whether they have given enough weight to the awkward elements and passages in Paul's letters.⁴⁶—James Dunn

At the end of the multi-denominational symposium, Dunn wrote that Räsänen's catalogue was the standing measurement against which any systematic synthesis should be assessed.

Now we come to the purpose of this work: Finding a systematic reconciliation to Räsänen's catalogue is no longer an open issue. In fact, I'm going to make an admittedly audacious statement: Räsänen's contradictions in *Paul and the Law* can be resolved in a single sentence.

I'll repeat:

Räsänen's contradictions in Paul and the Law can be resolved in a single sentence.

45 “The Law in Romans 2” by N.T. Wright, as printed in *Paul and the Mosaic Law* by James D. G. Dunn, p. 131, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, Jan 1, 2001

46 *Paul and the Mosaic Law* by James D. G. Dunn, pp. 2-3, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001.

I do not make that statement lightly. The resolution of the contradictions in Räsänen's catalogue is the result of an intensive, ten-year, full-time effort (often 16 hours per day). Finally, in preparation for this current work, I conducted five three-hour interviews. Each interview was with a leading Biblical scholar. The purpose of each interview was to see if the respective scholar could identify any part of Räsänen's catalogue that isn't addressed by *one simple sentence*. The result: none of them could identify any of Räsänen's issues that are not resolved by *one simple sentence*.

That is not to say that these scholars read every Biblical passage in the same way as Räsänen. The interview didn't focus on their individual readings of the Bible, but centered on whether or not this one single sentence resolves the issues in Räsänen's classic. For example, Douglas Campbell naturally prefers his own reading of Paul's letters. Nevertheless, he kindly acknowledged that resolving Räsänen's catalogue in a single sentence is "quite an achievement in and of itself." He further stated, "I was impressed by the explanatory power of your thesis."

Again, the interview with Campbell focused on Räsänen's catalogue—not Campbell's model. Perhaps a specific example would be best. Campbell's model causes him to read 1 Corinthians 6 differently than Räsänen does. Therefore, the interview was not conducted from the standpoint of Campbell's approach to 1 Corinthians 6. Rather, the question was whether or not my single sentence addressed all of the issues regarding 1 Corinthians 6 detailed in Räsänen's catalogue. The same goes for all the scholars listed below:

- *Douglas Campbell*—Associate Professor of New Testament at Duke Divinity School.
- *Dale Martin*—Woolsey Professor of Religious Studies at Yale.
- *Bart Ehrman*—Gray Distinguished Professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. (Ehrman also authored four New York Times best sellers on early Christian history.)

- *Jason Staples*—PhD Candidate. (Ehrman describes Staples as one of his most exceptional grad students.)
- *Paul Miller*—Indiana University Professor and Founding Director of GRAMCORD Institute. (Co-creator of the GRAMCORD Greek New Testament Grammatical Concordance System, a linguistic and exegetical tool for Biblical research.)

I chose these scholars in search of diversity. Dale Martin is a seasoned scholar. Jason Staples is a PhD candidate. Paul Miller is a conservative Christian scholar. Bart Ehrman is a secular one. All of them, however, were familiar with Räisänen’s scholarship (as virtually every New Testament scholar is).

I was both nervous and excited about running the sentence by them—excited at the privilege of interviewing them, nervous that ten years of research had finally reached its moment of truth. Now, after discussing the matter with all of them, I can finally announce: **Räisänen’s contradictions in *Paul and the Law* are resolved in a single sentence—including the minutest details of Romans 2.**

The most fascinating reaction came from Paul Miller. Miller is a conservative evangelical scholar. He quickly concurred that the sentence resolves the issues raised by Räisänen. He also said, “It resolves all the issues that have been swirling around in my head for the last ten years.” Over the next few days, I received many glowing emails, including one in which he told me he “stays awake at night thinking about new implications.” However, it wasn’t long before the full implications of the sentence hit him. He was now faced with making a choice:

- Accept the theological implications of the one sentence that fully resolves Räisänen’s catalogue, or
- Cling to the theology that created the 300 pages of contradictions in the first place (not to mention the numerous other issues swirling around in his head for the last decade).

He eventually chose the latter.

This work is going to be very challenging for millions of Christians. Yes, Räisänen's catalogue is *effortlessly* resolved in a single sentence. However, this single sentence reveals that Paul taught something very different from what millions of people currently believe. Traditional theology is the very reason that Paul's positive/negative statements remained unresolved for such a long time. *Paul's positive/negative statements cannot be resolved under the rubric of traditional Christian doctrine.* Hence, traditional Christian doctrine has been *wrong* about Paul—as the *solution* to Paul's statements documents.

This brings us to another question: Is it possible for any other sentence to resolve Räisänen's catalogue? The answer is No. There is only one possible way to systematically resolve Räisänen's issues in *Paul and the Law*. The rest of this work explains why this is so...

Summary

Räsänen's catalogue demonstrates that *every* published explanation of Romans 2 introduced tension. No *solution* had yet been found.

The law is impossible to keep and therefore no one can be vindicated by it.

Paul wrote that some Gentiles are vindicated before God by keeping the law. They are his example of the doers of the law mentioned in Romans 2.13. Thus, Paul wrote that the necessary part of the law can be kept and some folks are vindicated for doing so. Also, Paul told the Jews that they dishonor God by breaking the law. Did the Jews *dishonor* God by breaking a law that is unkeepable anyway? Furthermore, the passage isn't even discussing parts of the law that are difficult to keep. The passage discusses "do not steal" and the like. Paul wasn't excusing the Jews' stealing because of an "unkeepable law." On the contrary! Paul sought to get the Jews to stop stealing *because of the law*. The situation is the literal opposite of the "unkeepable law" notion.

Moreover, the chapter says that God will grant immortality to everyone who seeks immortality through good deeds. The necessity of keeping the law is Paul's explanation as to why this is so.

As Sanders succinctly states, "The question throughout chapter 2 is whether or not one does the Jewish law, not as a result of being in Christ, but as the sole determinant of salvation." The "unkeepable law" notion opposes the chapter's message from beginning to end.

The vindicated non-converts were hypothetical. Paul wasn't referring to a real-world group.

Paul wrote that these non-converts will condemn the real-world Jews chastised by the letter. Fictitious Gentiles can't condemn the real-world targets of Paul's letter.

Moreover, the "hypothetical Gentile" premise is predicated on the "impossible law" notion; a notion which adds many tensions in and of itself. (See above.)

The vindicated Gentiles in Romans 2 were Christians.

Paul wrote that the Gentiles were “a law unto themselves.” To call these Gentiles Christians is to introduce tensions in verses which consider converts under Jesus’ Law (Romans 13.8-9; Galatians 5.14, 6.2; 1 Corinthians 9.21).

Moreover, Paul wrote that these Gentiles were keeping the law instinctively by nature. He contrasted them to Jews who had religious instruction. The Gentiles in Romans 2 were keeping the law independent of any religious instruction—Christian or otherwise. The “Christian Gentile” theory adds tensions.

Paul wrote Romans 2 from the perspective of ‘Pre-Saved’ Paul. It represented Paul’s view before his conversion.

Paul wrote that *those admonished by the letter* will be judged according to *their* deeds. This was ‘Post-Saved’ Paul’s message to the currently unsaved group targeted in his letter. The “Pre-Saved Paul” notion stands in tension with the target audience of the entire chapter—Jewish contemporaries who Post-Saved Paul is trying to help.

Most importantly, Paul wrote *positive* things about law elsewhere in Romans and all throughout his other letters. Thus, *Post-Saved Paul* wrote positively about law *many times*. Romans 2 is fully consistent with all of his other positive statements about law. Thus, the “Pre-Saved” Paul notion stands in tension with all of Post-Saved Paul’s other positive statements about law.

Romans 2 can be discarded because it’s not a legitimate part of Paul’s argument.

As stated above, Romans 2 isn’t Paul’s only positive reference to law. Paul interspersed positive statements about law and judgment by deeds throughout his letters. Romans 2 is fully consistent with these numerous statements, and therefore is an integral part of Paul’s argument. The “illegitimate part of Paul’s argument” notion stands in tension with all of Paul’s other positive statements regarding law and judgment by deeds.