

The Reformation view of Justification

The Reformed view of how we are ‘justified’, or as sinners made right in the sight of God, arguably has three elements:

1. God justifies a sinner by declaring the sinner is righteous even if the sinner is still imperfect. This is a legal idea: the sinner is acquitted and ‘reckoned as righteous’ (Romans 4:3, quoting Genesis 15:6) because Christ has taken the punishment for sin on himself.
2. This results in a state of justification in which the sinner continues to exist even when we carry on sinning— it is ‘once and for all’ that Christ died as a final and complete action, and once accepted by faith, we don’t have to keep on accepting our new status as right with God. We have permanent assurance of salvation.
3. At the last judgment God will re-affirm this prior declaration of righteousness with another judicial declaration of righteousness and welcome the saved into eternal heaven.

Justification as ‘getting in’ and ‘staying in’

EP Sanders (Paul and Palestinian Judaism, 1977) has spearheaded a new approach to studies of St Paul and Paul’s view of salvation. Part of this is a re-examination of the meaning of key texts such as Galatians chapter 3 or Romans chapters 4-5, and part involves a new exploration of the context of the Jewish writings that formed part of what is called the Second Temple period of Jewish history.

In 353 BC, seventy years after the destruction of the First Temple, the Jews began building again—at first of their own initiative, but later approved by King Darius of Persia. The Second Temple was completed in 349 BC. Under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah, the community in Judea became prosperous and safe.

The view of justification Sanders rejects is the view that justification is a legal declaration of righteousness, point 1 of the Reformation view summarised above. He argues that by God’s grace we ‘get in’ to be covenant people, and by works we ‘stay in’ as covenant people.

Covenantal Nomism

Sanders describes the Jewish view of salvation in this period as “covenantal nomism” (nomos, Greek for ‘law’). Although membership of the covenant is by election, the choice of God, this still requires proper behaviour within the covenant relationship for salvation to be assured. The word usually used for this is ‘works’. Works have a part to play in the salvation scheme of things and a covenant relationship itself must be

maintained by good works and proper atonement. Works are also the basis for God's reward or punishment. In this system, "getting in" is not on the basis of works, (it is all God's grace) but "staying in" is at least partly on this basis (with the additional factor of the need for atonement by the blood sacrifice of animals).

Sanders sums up his covenantal nomism this way:

"The pattern or structure of covenantal nomism is this:

1. God has chosen Israel.
2. God has given the law.
3. The law implies both God's promise to maintain the election and
4. The requirement to obey.
5. God commands obedience and punishes transgression.
6. The law provides for the means of atonement.
7. Atonement results in the maintenance or re-establishment of the covenant relationship.
8. All those who are maintained in the covenant relationship by obedience, atonement and God's mercy belong to the group who will be saved"

(1977:422)

So, E. P. Sanders argues, the Judaism of Paul's day was not "legalistic" in a way often depicted by Reformers in the sixteenth century. Legalism is the view that God requires obedience to the law in order for us to be accepted into his kingdom. But rather, Sanders' covenantal nomism holds that righteousness is a matter of being part of God's covenant people, which is arrived at by grace -"getting in" to God's covenant is a matter of God's "electing" or choosing. It is after that act of grace by God that salvation (or strictly, the state of having been saved by grace) then becomes a matter of obedience.

So "staying in" God's covenant requires obeying the Torah, God's law, obeying the commands contained in the first five books of the Bible (especially parts of Leviticus and Exodus chapter 20).

Sanders concludes that if Paul was reacting against legalism, then he was wrong to take Judaism as his target. But Sanders recognises that we may have misread St Paul. Paul advocates works of righteousness and is only opposed to the legalism which says in effect – to be saved you need to enter into the works of Judaism such as circumcision. Paul argues, then, according to Sanders, for faith in God's mercy and works as a covenant sign – albeit of the new covenant achieved by Christ's atoning blood.

So Sanders argues that Judaism did not teach salvation completely by works, or what we might consider today to be Pelagian view of salvation. Judaism of the Second Temple period taught covenant election by grace which is then responded to by good works of obedience. It is this context which informs Paul as a Rabbi teaching three hundred years after the building of the Second Temple.



Christianity

Handout - EP Sanders and Justification



“Obedience is universally held to be behaviour appropriate to being in the covenant, not the means of earning God’s grace...ultimately salvation cannot be earned but depends on God’s grace, by God’s mercy not human achievement”

(1977:421)

What could sound more ‘Reformation’ than that?

Source: EP Sanders, Paul and Palestinian Judaism, 1977