

Feeling God's Pleasure: The Final Judgment According to the Gospel
(Rom. 2:1-29)

Sermon follow-up, 2-26-12

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Sorry the first part of the sermon did not get recorded. Let me recap that here and then provide a little bibliography for those interested in reading further. I believe Romans 2 is a vital, but overlooked and often misunderstood, chapter. It contains the seeds of most everything else Paul goes on to develop in the letter as a whole.

Let me begin by asking you a couple of questions. What if I told you that there is a judgment day coming and you will be judged, either justified or condemned, according to your works? Would that sound like good news or bad news to you?

Let me ask you another question: Have you ever done anything that God was happy with? That pleased God? That brought a smile to God's face? Is it even possible for us to please God?

There are two main purposes in this section of Romans. The first I'm only going to mention very briefly. Paul exposes religious hypocrisy among the non-Christian Jews of his day. The Jews thought because they were God's chosen people, because they were descendants of Abraham, because they had the covenant badge of circumcision, because they possessed the law of Moses, they would be immune to God's judgment. In Romans 1:18ff, Paul says God's wrath is being revealed from heaven against the ungodliness and unrighteousness of humanity, and then he begins cataloging typical Gentile sins, common among the pagan nations, especially idolatry and immorality. But then in Romans 2, Paul shows that really Jews, by and large, are hypocritical because they commit the same sins they condemn in others; in other words, the diatribe of Romans 1:18-32 circles back around and applies to Jews as well! Thus, Paul says to his non-Christian, Jewish dialogue partner, "You are inexcusable, O man, whoever you are who judge, for in whatever you judge another you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things." Later on, in 2:17-24, he says those who are called Jews, who rest in the

law and boast in God, who think they can teach others, are hypocrites. They do not practice what they preach. The OT prophets even said the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of their hypocrisy.

You see this same hypocrisy in the gospels, especially among the Jewish leadership. Jesus is constantly exposing the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. They aren't the lawkeepers they claim to be. They say they are righteous, but they oppress people, they steal, they commit adultery, they have demons in their synagogues. They don't practice what they preach, and they excuse themselves while being harsh towards others.

Now, the truth is that hypocrisy is always a temptation in religious communities because there is always pressure to be something you're not. It was a problem in ancient Israel, but it's also a problem in the church today. You always have posers, religious pretenders, people who are one way in public but another way in private. Paul shows us here it is especially easy for us to most notice and most eagerly condemn in others the very sins we commit ourselves. It's easy to be judgmental about the judgmental, self-righteous about the self-righteous, pharisaical about the pharisaical, intolerant of the intolerant, angry at those who have an anger problem. Jesus warned against this kind of judging in the sermon on the mount, Matt. 7:1-6. You will be judged the same way you judge others. Don't go after the speck in your brother's eye when you have a plank in your own eye. Self-righteous judgment is like a boomerang – the judgment you render on others comes right back at you. When those first century, unfaithful Jews judged Gentile pagans, they thought they were separating themselves from the condemned, putting themselves outside the circle of condemnation. Actually, they were putting themselves inside the circle to the degree they do the same things! And that's Paul's point in Rom. 2:3.

Some more follow-up:

The real theme that emerges from this chapter is not just religious hypocrisy or the final judgment, but Gentile participation in Jewish blessings. Often, the passage is read strictly in terms of condemnation – Romans 1 condemns the irreligious Gentiles, Romans 2 condemns

religious Jews, and then chapter 3 lumps both together. There is a good bit of truth in that reading of Romans, but it also sweeps away far too many of the details of the text in Romans 2. Actually, Paul shows that Jews will be condemned by Gentiles who have embraced their messiah, their law, and their mission – albeit in new and unexpected ways. Gentiles can participate in Jewish blessings by faith and Jews can forfeit their blessings by unbelief (cf. Rom. 11).

Note that the law-abiding, heart-circumcised, Spirit-indwelt Gentiles Paul mentions are not a hypothetical category. In fact, Romans 2 anticipates themes that will be given a fuller treatment later in the letter. If we were to interrupt Paul at 2:13 and ask who these doers of the law are, I think he'd take us straight to Romans 8:1-4, 6:1-14, 10:4,13:8-14, etc. The fact that the Jewish hope is being realized among the Gentiles further exposes their failure and might even provoke them to jealousy (cf. Rom. 11).

The gospel creates a new category of humanity, beyond the Jew/Gentile divide. This new humanity fulfills in an eschatological way the law, and thus is the new and true Israel of God.

Paul is not saying that if our last works are tallied up at the last day and we've done enough good deeds, we'll be acquitted. It's not acquittal for those who hit the 51% mark. It doesn't work that way.

Rather, Paul is remind us that what we do flows out of who we are. Our works are the outflow of our faith. Deeds follow faith; your deeds can always be traced back to the core of who you are, to the posture of your heart. You become like what you trust and worship. So a judgment according to works is really, at a deeper level, a judgment about faith.

Note that Romans speaks elsewhere of pleasing God. Those who are the flesh cannot please God (Rom. 8:8). But the implication is that those who are in the Spirit and who walk by the Spirit can and do please God. Romans 8:8 makes no sense if Christians who have the Spirit cannot please God either!

The God-pleasing life is described in Rom. 12:1-2. God accepts the offering of his people. See also Romans 13:8 describes this new obedience in eschatological terms, using the language of "fulfilling." Paul speaks in number of places of Christians doing what is pleasing or acceptable to God, e.g., Eph. 5:10, Phil. 2:13, Col. 3:20, 1 Thess. 2:4, 1 Thess. 4:1, Heb. 11:5-6, Heb. 13:16, Heb. 13:21, 1 Jn. 3:22, etc. To be sure, God's ultimate pleasure is found in his Son (Lk. 3:22), but those who are united to him can please God as well.

Phillip Melancthon on Romans 2:13:

Accordingly, James is right in denying that we are justified by such a faith as is without works. But when he says that we are justified by faith and works, he certainly does not say that we are born again by works. Neither does he say this, that partly Christ is our Propitiator, and partly our works are our propitiation. Nor does he describe the mode of justification, but only of what nature the just are, after they have been already justified and regenerated...

...And here to be justified does not mean that a righteous man is made from a wicked man, but to be pronounced righteous in a forensic sense, as also in the passage Rom. 2:13: "The doers of the Law shall be justified." As, therefore, these words: "The doers of the Law shall be justified," contain nothing contrary to our doctrine, so, too, we believe concerning the words of James: "By works a man is justified, and not by faith alone," because men having faith and good works are certainly pronounced righteous. For, as we have said, the good works of saints are righteous, and please on account of faith. For James commends only such works as faith produces, as he testifies when he says of Abraham, 2:22: "Faith wrought with his works." In this sense it is said: "The doers of the Law are justified," i.e., they are pronounced righteous who from the heart believe God, and afterwards have good fruits, which please Him on account of faith, and, accordingly, are the fulfilment of the Law.

From Archbishop Ussher's *Body of Divinity*:

Shall there be no difference in the examination of the Elect and the Reprobate?

Yes. For, 1. The Elect shall not have their sins, for which Christ satisfied, but only their good works, remembered. Ezek. 18.22. Rev. 14.17.

2. Being in Christ, they and their works shall not undergo the strict trial of the Law simply in it self; but as the obedience thereof does prove them to be true partakers of the grace of the Gospel.

Rick Phillips' hopelessly confused article

(<http://www.reformation21.org/articles/five-arguments-against-future-justification-according-to-works-part-ii.php>) is representative of the kind of view I was challenging in the sermon:

With what disgust, contempt, and hatred Christ must look upon every second of our lives, the reviewing of which must be a long torture for us, were such a judgment in our future! I, for one, must consider the return of Christ and such a judgment a dread and horror to be feared and loathed, rather than "our blessed hope," as Paul puts it in [Titus 2:13](#).

Stephen Coxhead has several helpful blogposts on Romans 2.

Coxhead rightfully sees the importance of the Gentile inclusion theme in Romans 2, anticipating and foreshadowing threads that will be more fully developed later on in the letter (<http://berithroad.blogspot.com/2010/03/pauls-diatribes-in-romans-2.html>):

In Rom 2 Paul is not primarily concerned to establish the equality of Jews and Gentiles as sinners, but to challenge the covenantal exclusivism of the Judaizers by opening up the door of Jewish privilege to Gentiles. Paul engages his Jewish opponents in a virtual way through the use of diatribe, which involves him taking on the persona of a debater conducting an argument against an opponent. It is clear from Rom 2:17–20 that Paul was conducting this diatribe with a Jew of orthodox views regarding the chosen status of Israel under the Mosaic covenant. Paul's diatribal opponent calls himself a Jew, builds his life on the law of Moses, and boasts in God (v. 17). He reckons that he knows God's will and what is morally right, because he possesses the law of Moses (v. 18). He considers

himself to be “a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth” (vv. 19-20).

Verses 19-20 are significant in suggesting that Paul’s Jewish opponents viewed the law of Moses as having an educational purpose, bringing the knowledge of God’s truth to the blind and those living in darkness, i.e., to the Gentiles. Of course, in the historical context of Paul’s day, this attitude resulted in a significant number of Christian Jews denying the saved status of Gentile Christians unless the latter came under the framework of the Mosaic covenant by undergoing circumcision (if male) and by living in accordance with the teaching of the law of Moses. This issue is clearly portrayed in Acts 15:1-5, and this issue (which led to the calling of the Jerusalem Council) was being replayed among the Christian churches in Rome after the Jews were allowed back into the imperial capital following Nero’s ascension to the throne in A.D. 54.

The rhetorical form of diatribe in Rom 2 means that to understand clearly Paul’s argument in Rom 2 we need to approach it via an orthodox Jewish mindset. This can be done by studying first century Judaism, but in my opinion a familiarity with Old Testament theology is just as sufficient to illuminate the situation. Such a familiarity will help us to see the key allusions to the Old Testament that Paul makes in this chapter.

For example, one of the key eschatological prophecies of the Old Testament is the promise concerning the new covenant in Jer 31:31-34. This passage of Scripture prophesies that God would eventually write his law in the hearts of the people of Israel in a comprehensive way. So when Paul writes in Rom 2:14-15 that “when Gentiles, who by nature do not have the law, do what the law requires, they are the law to themselves, even though they do not have the law, in that they show that the work of the law is written on their hearts,” a Jewish mindset would see a clear allusion to Jer 31:33: “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” They would also understand the import of Paul’s argument: Are you saying, Paul, that Gentiles

can participate in the blessing of Jer 31:33? Are you saying that Gentiles can keep the law, without having the law? “Then what advantage has the Jew?” (Rom 3:1). You are giving to the Gentiles the privileges that have exclusively been given to us. You are going against the teaching of Moses.

Another key example is the eschatological prophecy of Deut 30:1-14, and Deut 30:6 in particular. Moses prophesied that after Israel’s covenantal failure, symbolized by exile (Deut 30:1, 3-4), God would circumcise the hearts of the people of Israel, so that they might be able to “love the Lord [their] God with all [their] heart and with all [their] soul, that [they] might live” (Deut 30:6). So when Paul writes in Rom 2:26 of a law-keeping Gentile’s uncircumcision being regarded as circumcision, and in Rom 2:29 that true circumcision “is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter,” a Jewish mindset would understand Paul as clearly alluding to Deut 30:6. They would also understand the import of Paul’s argument: Are you saying, Paul, that Gentiles can participate in the blessing of the circumcision of the heart promised in Deut 30:6, without undergoing physical circumcision? “What [then] is the value of circumcision?” (Rom 3:1).

To explain Rom 2 as simply condemning Jews of sin by comparing them to hypothetical law-keeping Gentiles, or the noble pagan, is to fail to understand what Paul is doing in this chapter. Such interpretations go against the Jewish nature of Paul’s diatribe in Rom 2. They fail to see the clear allusions to Jer 31:33 and Deut 30:6 in the chapter, and they do not make sense of the riposte of Paul’s diatribal opponent in Rom 3:1, which only makes sense if Paul’s Jewish opponent has understood him as calling into question the natural Jewish covenantal advantage and the value of physical circumcision. Paul’s diatribal opponent has assumed that this must be case on the basis of Paul’s argument in Rom 1:18–2:29 that (through the gospel) the possibility of keeping the law has been opened up to the Gentiles, and that Gentiles can participate in the blessing of the Spiritual circumcision of the heart.

Coxhead on "nature" in Romans 2:14
(<http://berithroad.blogspot.com/search/label/Romans%202%3A14>)
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It has been traditional for our English versions of Rom 2:14 to translate this verse something like what occurs in the ESV: "For when the Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law." Significantly the phrase translated as *by nature* is taken as qualifying the verb that follows it. Following this translation, the idea is that Gentiles can naturally do some of the things that the law of God requires. From this has developed the idea that Paul is talking here about moral pagans.

But the phrase *by nature* can also be taken as qualifying the verb that precedes. In this case it should be translated as: "For when the Gentiles, who by nature do not have the law, do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law." The idea in this case is not the idea that Gentiles can naturally do morally good things, but rather that Gentiles naturally do not have the law, i.e., the Gentiles, because they are Gentiles and not Jews, do not possess the law of Moses.

Which translation is better?

There are three reasons why the second option is the one to choose. Firstly, the phrase *by nature* immediately follows the verb that precedes it, whereas it is separated from the verb that follows it by another phrase. The proximity of the phrase *by nature* to the first verb means that these two syntactical elements have a higher probability of going together.

Secondly, Paul's usage of the phrase *by nature* in connection with human beings elsewhere in his letters is consistently used to indicate the nature that a person has by virtue of birth. In Rom 2:27, Paul speaks of Gentiles as "the uncircumcision *by nature*." In Gal 2:15: "we are *by nature* Jews and not sinners of the Gentiles." And in Eph 2:3: "we were *by nature* children of wrath."

Thirdly, in Old Testament and Pauline thinking it is not possible for the natural person to keep the law. In Old Testament thinking, the law must be written on the heart in order for a person to be able to keep it. But the writing of the law on the heart is not a natural phenomenon; it is a work of the Spirit of God. It is inconceivable from an Old Testament perspective for Gentiles naturally to be able to keep torah. And likewise, I suggest, from Paul's perspective. Gentiles, are clearly born as children of wrath (Eph 2:3) and of the flesh. But "the mindset of the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot" (Rom 8:7). Gentiles cannot by their natural selves keep the law. Neither can Jews for that matter. Only a work of the Spirit of God writing the law on the heart can bring about such a result (Ezek 36:26-27).

All of this confirms, therefore, that the second translation for Rom 2:14 is the way to go. Gentiles are born outside of the Mosaic covenant. By nature they do not have the law.

But as Paul will argue in Rom 8:1-17, thanks be to God for the new covenant in Christ (Rom 7:25)! With the Spirit poured out upon all flesh, and the law written on the heart, God's people (including Gentiles) are now able to fulfill the requirement of the law (Rom 8:4). It is true to say, therefore, that Christ has come to bring about the obedience of Israel and the nations to torah. What was once unnatural for Gentiles has become natural in Christ.

Coxhead on covenant reversal in Romans 1:28-2:29

(<http://berithroad.blogspot.com/search/label/Romans%201%E2%80%932>):

There is a popular understanding of Rom 1–2 which says that in Rom 1:18–32 Paul convicts Gentiles of sin, and in Rom 2 he convicts Jews of sin. But this view is too simplistic.

Romans 1:18–32 should actually be viewed as forming a section with 2:1–29. This is evident from the fact that the language of Rom 2:1–3 refers back to the content of Rom 1:18–32. The word *therefore* in 2:1 links the beginning of the chapter in very closely with what has gone before. The phrases *the very same things* (2:1) and *such things* (2:2–3) do likewise.

So, Rom 1:18–2:29 should be treated as a common section, in which Paul is concerned to develop his first line of argument against his diatribal opponent. Paul's line of argument is developed over two stages, which then corresponds to the two main sub-sections of this section: 1:18–32 and 2:1–29.

In 1:18–32, Paul paints a picture of God's wrath revealed from heaven against all instances of sin. This wrath is a pre-eschatological expression of God's wrath that is pan-ethnic in nature. Even though the content of this sub-section is often thought of as being a description of God's wrath directed against Gentiles, this is to misunderstand the nature of Paul's argument. Even though some of the major sins enumerated here (such as idolatry and homosexual sin) were particularly associated in the Jewish mind with Gentiles rather than Jews, it should be noted that Paul does not use ethnic labels in 1:18–32. Instead, he employs the universal language of *humanity* (1:18). Then in 2:1 he applies this divine wrath to the unbelieving Jew of his day. The argument in 1:18–32 is, therefore, preparatory to that found in 2:1–29.

It is almost as if Paul has set his Jewish opponents a trap. In 1:18–32 he draws them in. "Yes, what else would you expect from Gentile sinners!" you can almost hear his Jewish opponents saying. But then in 2:1–5, 17–24 he turns the tables on his Jewish opponents, accusing them of the very same sins for which they had despised the Gentiles. "Got you!" says Paul. So, Rom 1:18–32 is actually preparatory to the main part of the first-line of his argument, which is given in 2:1–29.

In the second sub-section (2:1–29), Paul applies God's wrath particularly to his non-Christian Jewish opponents, and in doing so he asserts the principle of a universal judgment according to works (2:6). The main function of the argument in this sub-section is to apply the principle of a universal judgment according to works to both Jew and Gentile in an attempt to destroy the fence of covenant righteousness that the Jewish covenantal exclusivists had built around themselves. On the one hand, he assumes that his Jewish opponents are sinners in need of repentance (2:4–5); and on the other hand, he asserts the possibility of Gentiles keeping the law (2:14–15, 26–27).

Paul engages his Jewish opponents in a virtual way through the use of diatribe. The rhetorical device of diatribe involves a writer or speaker taking on the persona of a debater conducting an argument against an opponent. It is characterized by direct address of one's opponent and the use of second person pronouns (e.g., 2:1–5, 17–19, 21–25), and by the extensive use of questions that embody the argument of one's opponents, which the rhetorician then bounces off to argue his case further (e.g., 3:1, 5, 9, 27, 31).

It is clear from 2:17–20 that Paul was conducting this diatribe with an orthodox Jew who is an advocate of traditional Jewish covenant theology. Paul applies the pre-eschatological revelation of God's wrath mentioned in 1:18–32 to his Jewish opponents, and extends it by speaking of the wrath of God in its eschatological form, which unrepentant Jews will also have to face (2:1–5). In fact, on the day of judgment, the law-keeping Gentile will judge the law-breaking Jew (2:26–27).

In Rom 2 Paul is concerned to destroy the fence of Jewish covenantal particularism by asserting the principle of a universal judgment according to works (2:6–11) and by opening up the possibility of law-keeping and covenant righteousness on the part of the Gentiles (2:14–16, 26–27). Through the work of God's Spirit writing the law and circumcising Gentile hearts (2:14–15, 29), Gentiles can now (i.e., in the new covenant age) participate on an equal footing with Jews in covenant righteousness (2:14, 26) and receive eternal life (2:7), glory and honor and peace (2:10), and even praise from God (2:29), as a result. Paul is not talking about the noble pagan in chapter 2. He is talking about Gentile Christians.

Paul's Jewish opponents believed that righteousness and salvation could only be attained by means of physical circumcision and a commitment to doing the law of Moses. But Paul had come to understand that the new covenant truths of Deut 30:6, 11–14; Jer 31:33; and Ezek 36:26–27 also applied to Gentiles through faith in Christ. That is to say, Paul had come to see how justification by faith in Christ had effectively opened up justification by the works of the law to Gentiles (as per the logic of 2:13) through the grace of the spiritual circumcision of

the heart that Christ had come to achieve as a key element of the new covenant!

Joel Garver on Romans 2
(<http://www.joelgarver.com/writ/bibl/doers.htm>):

Romans 2:13 sometimes arises as a significant text with regard to the relationships among faith, the works that flow from faith, justification, and the final judgment. The Scriptures, of course, repeatedly speak of a final judgment that is "according to works" or "according to the deeds done in the body" (Eccl 12:14; Mt 12:36-37; Rom 2:5-6, 16; 14:10-12; 2 Cor 5:10; etc.; cf *WCF* 23.1). This judgment is one that results in either eternal life or condemnation. As *Westminster Larger Catechism* 90 states, in the final judgment believers will be "openly acknowledged and acquitted" by God.

One question is whether this open acquittal is to be thought of in terms of justification. As Mark Seifrid, Richard Gaffin, and others have noted, in Scripture resurrection unto eternal life is the very form that justification ultimately takes: first with regard to Christ's vindication by the Father in his resurrection and then by imputation to those who are united to Christ through faith--those who are said to be "raised with him" and thus share in the verdict of right-standing before the divine court that Christ himself enjoys. The final resurrection of believers unto eternal life is the ultimate outworking of that justification and, thereby, functions as their open acquittal and vindication.

A further question, then, is how this aspect of justification is related to a judgment which is "according to works" and then, in turn, how that relates to the affirmation in Romans 2:13 that "the doers of the law shall be justified" in the final judgment. The 68th General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church appended this verse to *WLC* 90 as a prooftext for the open acquittal of believers, bringing these different aspects of biblical eschatology together.

But, if the final judgment is part and parcel of the justification of believers--as the ultimate outworking and public manifestation of what is already reckoned true of us now in

Christ--and this judgment is according to works, then how does that intersect with our Reformed affirmation that justification is only by faith, and not by works of the law? And, in that context, what is the meaning of Romans 2:13?

One possibility is that Romans 2:13 is hypothetical, stating what *would* have be true of us if we, in ourselves, wished to obtain final justification: we would have to be doers of the law. The point on such an interpretation is that we all fall miserably short of that goal and thus stand condemned, were it not for the faithful obedience of Christ in whom the law is fulfilled for our salvation.

All of that, naturally, is true, but some have questioned whether that is Paul's actual intent in Romans 2. The immediate context, it is suggested, is not so much the equal condemnation of Jews and Gentiles as lawbreakers, but the more puzzling suggestion that some Gentiles are, in fact, doers of the law even though they do not have the law (Ro 2:14-15). These are the law-fulfilling "uncircumcision" whom, Paul later suggests, will judge lawbreaking Jews (Ro 2:27). As such, these Gentile "doers of the law shall be justified," having the law on their hearts (a new covenant promise).

One way to take this, I suppose, would be to say that there are those Gentiles who, though not keeping the letter of the law, maintain its spirit, and somehow their spiritualized lawkeeping avails before God for their justification. But, taken in a straightforward sense--that these doers of the law have somehow worked hard enough to deserve salvation in God's sight--such an interpretation is simply impausible in light of Paul's wider teaching in Romans: that it is *faith* in Christ that justifies and, moreover, that justification is only by grace, whereas, for the one who does works, the reward is not reckoned by grace (Ro 4:4).

But there's at least one other possibility regarding Romans 2:13 that doesn't take it as merely hypothetical and yet attempts to not let go of the sole sufficiency of faith for justification.

The suggestion is that when Paul says it is the "doers of the law" who will be justified on the last day, he may be somewhat

cryptically and provocatively anticipating what he says later in Romans: that it is those who look to Christ in faith who are reckoned as righteous, as the true keepers of the law, having their hearts circumcised, and so on. Thus Paul can talk later on of "the law of faith" (3:27; and the "law of the Spirit of Christ", 8:2) and claim that faith doesn't void the law, but establishes it (3:31).

Here's how that picture could be filled out further:

This approach would operate in the context of Paul's whole argument that the law comes to fulfillment in Christian faith in Christ as the "*telos*" of the law (Ro 10:4). Christ is the law's *telos* both, positively, by fulfilling the law as its goal (its prophetic and typological anticipation, Ro 3:21, as well as Christ's own perfectly obedient faithfulness, Ro 3:21-26; 8:3-4) and, negatively, by bringing the law's condemnation to an end through his atoning and propitiatory work (which was part of the law's "planned obsolescence" in exacerbating and then dealing with sin, Ro 4:15; 5:13-21).

Thus from the standpoint of faith in what God has accomplished in and through Christ for us, it is clear that the law cannot provide salvation whether as a badge of identity, meritorious works, or what have you.

And yet, in that same faith, everything for which the law had been given by God comes to completion. And so Paul can paradoxically and ironically speak of faith in Christ, apart from the law, as the "doing of the law."

Now, of course, for Paul this has the additional dimension that through faith and the forgiveness of sins, a right relationship between God and humanity is established so that, in the Spirit, the kind of life for which people were originally created begins to come alive (Ro 7:6; 8:4ff; 13:8-14). This plays itself out in the fruit of faith, which is the love that fulfills the law, not in the judaizing sense of "law-keeping" (in whatever manner one understands that), but in the free obedience of the Christian, which the law had anticipated, though was unable to provide since it was a ministration of death.

In this additional sense then, faith again counts as doing the law since, through faith, as its outworking, the law is freely fulfilled in love, apart from "law-keeping" (which includes Jewish boundary markers, particularly insofar as they become badges of ethnic pride, and thus encompassing all analogous manifestations of law-keeping, including meritorious works-righteousness; the fruit of faith is nothing like that since faith doesn't look to itself and its own outworking, but to Christ).

Thus, going back to Romans 2, when Paul says that it is "the doers of the law" who will be justified on the last day, it is possible that what he has in mind is, first and foremost, those (Gentile believers) who count as "doers of the law" by putting their faith in Christ. Inasmuch as *that* sort of faith is extraspective and looks away from itself and rests upon and receives Christ as the one in whom God's promises are fulfilled and to his faithfulness (and thus as the *telos* of the law), "doing the law" cannot be in any way interpreted in terms of obedience that avails before God for (even our final) justification.

And yet, on the other hand, such a faith produces fruit (as Rom 6 and 13, among other places, make clear). Justification, after all, involves a deliverance from the power of sin unto newness of life (Rom 6:7, where the term "justified" bleeds off in this direction), as the embodied and conjoined effect of God's judicial verdict over us in Christ (which is made based upon what Christ has already done apart from us, for us, imputed to us for the forgiveness of sins).

Thus it is also the "doers of the law" in this sense who are justified, not because they've somehow attained to a certain level of performance, but because the kind of life the law anticipated (but was unable to give) has begun to appear in God's people and this has happened as a fruit and effect of faith, by the power of the Spirit.

That is to say, the "doers of the law" are justified on the last day. This is the case insofar as: [a] truly "doing the law" is ultimately, for Paul, a matter of putting all your faith in Christ alone (and thereby receiving justification in him and his faithfulness) and [b] those who put their faith in Christ end up, moreover, fulfilling the law in love as a fruit of faith (and, thus,

with no room for boasting).

In neither case are we talking about the *grounds* for final justification (which always remains Christ alone and his righteousness), but the means or instrument of final justification. And that means is only faith, yet the faith that is the only means, is not a lone faith, but a faith that also works in love. In both senses, then, it can be said that it is those who count as "doers of the law" who, on the last day, "will be justified."

That at least is one exegetical proposal for dealing with Romans 2:13.

Alastair Roberts (<http://alastair.adversaria.co.uk/?p=716>):

Questions of Interpretation

Few verses in Romans are perplexing as 2:14-15. Patience and care are demanded of the exegete, lest, in pulling too vigorously on one of the threads bound up in the complex weave of Paul's argument, while neglecting others, the passage is rendered knottier than it already is, or Paul's argument begins to unravel in our hands.

Perhaps the key questions facing the exegete of Romans 2:14-15 concern the identity of the persons spoken of in these verses. Are these doers of the Law real or hypothetical?[1] Are they Christian (as Ambrosiaster,[2] the later Augustine,[3] Barth, Cranfield[4] and Wright maintain[5]), non-Christian (the historically dominant reading, held by most of the Reformers[6] among others) or even pre-Christian believing Gentiles? Is the portrayal of them intended to be positive or negative?[7]

The role of the word φουσει in this context is also a matter of debate. Does it modify the verb ποιωσιν, describing the manner in which these Gentiles do the things of the Law, or does it belong with the earlier part of the clause, in which case it refers to the fact that Gentiles do not possess the Law by birthright, in the manner of the Jews? Is Paul making a reference to some form of natural Law in this context?

A number of further questions must also be addressed. What sort of 'doing' of the Law is here envisioned? How are we to understand the work of the Law written on the hearts of these

Gentiles? Is this an allusion to OT passages concerning the New Covenant, or is a reference to an inner moral sense possessed by every person?

Within this post I will present an argument for favouring a Gentile Christian reading of these verses. I will engage with some of the principal objections that have been raised against this reading and will explore the manner in which the reading that I propose functions in the context of Paul's larger argument.

In Favour of the Gentile Christian Reading

Perhaps one of the first things that we can observe about the Gentiles referred to in these verses is their exceptional character. Paul has already spoken in verse 12 of those who are within the Law and will be judged by the Law and those who are without Law and will be judged without Law. Here he seems to describe a *tertium quid*, a set of persons who do not fit tidily into either category. While they do not possess the Law by birthright as the Jews do, they nonetheless 'do the things of the Law,' 'are a Law to themselves,' and 'show the work of the Law written in their hearts.'

It could be argued that Paul is here focusing on a hypothetical case of an upright Gentile, in order to cover all possible bases and prove the impartiality of God beyond all dispute.[8]

However, this would still leave us with the problem of Paul's apparent equivocation, whereby Gentiles are described as being without Law in verse 12 and as having a significant relationship with the Law in verses 13-15. Far better, I believe, to interpret this as a reference to Gentile Christians who are, to use N.T. Wright's expression, 'neither fish nor fowl.' [9]

The paradoxical doing of the Law by those naturally without the Law could be understood in terms of a theology of natural law, a natural law somehow related to the Mosaic Torah.[10]

How Paul would account for Gentiles doing the Torah by means of obeying natural law is by no means clear. Where Paul elsewhere speaks of a non-Jewish mode of Law-fulfilment, it is always articulated in terms of, or in the clear context of, new covenant faith. Were we to adopt a natural law reading of this text, we would have to account for an alternative manner in which one can do the Torah as a non-Jew. We might also end up playing down the extent to which Paul conceives of the Torah as positive legislation (cf. Romans 5:13, 20; 7:7-12). We should further recognize that, when Paul does speak in terms of

a natural knowledge of God and his will in Romans 1:19-21, it is an external voice suppressed by man that is spoken of.

If we determine that the people in view in verses 14-15 are not a hypothetical class, the question of how exactly Gentile Christians could be said to do the Law in a manner that will result in justification is raised. Is the obedience in view here 'partial', 'vague' or 'perfect'? Gathercole rather suggests that 'the reference is to the fundamental knowledge of God and orientation to his will that is lacking in the Jewish contemporaries of these Gentiles', [11] something which is intrinsic to Spirit-given Christian faith. It is our opinion that this non-Jewish doing of the Law is a reference to the Christian fulfilment of the Torah by faith, a position that Paul expresses more explicitly in various other parts of his corpus.

Further supporting our reading is the apparent allusion to the new covenant within these verses. Paul's claim that the work of the Law is written on the heart of these Gentiles is regarded by a number of scholars as an allusion to LXX Jeremiah 38:33. A comparison of the two texts reveals a number of strong similarities:

[νομους μου] ... επι καρδιας αυτων γραψω αυτους – LXX Jeremiah 38:33b

το εργον του νομου γραπτον εν ταις καρδιας αυτων – Romans 2:15a

As Gathercole observes, these verses have 'four key lexemes in common.' [12] The writing of the work of the Law on the heart would also stand in sharp contrast with the way that Paul earlier described the darkening of the foolish hearts of the Gentiles in 1:21.

Our reading is further buttressed by the close relationship between these verses and verses 25-29, which speak of the uncircumcised man who 'keeps the righteous requirements of the Law'. In verses 28-29 we see an accumulation of distinctions that Paul habitually employs with reference to the difference between the old and new covenants: inward/outward (cf. 2 Corinthians 4:6; Galatians 6:12-13), flesh/Spirit (cf. Philippians 3:3), letter/Spirit (cf. Romans 7:6; 2 Corinthians 3:6). In speaking of the circumcision of the heart, Paul also alludes to the new covenant promise of Deuteronomy 30:6 and to Ezekiel 36:27. While Wright takes verses 28-29 to be speaking of the distinction between two types of 'Jewish' people, transferring validity from one group to another, [13] in our estimation these

verses are better understood as a clarification of the puzzling status of the new covenant Gentile Christian in particular. While our reading doesn't necessarily commit us to one side or another in the debate concerning the term φουσει (see Ito[14]), a number of considerations lead us to favour reading φουσει as belonging with the earlier half of the clause.[15] Not least among these reasons is the fact that, as Achtemeier has observed, every time Paul uses φουσει it is used 'to characterise further some group' rather than 'to describe an action'.[16] Wisdom 13:1a is one counterexample to the claim that φουσει would have to occur in the middle of the phrase in order to function in such a manner in this clause.[17] The fact that an adverb generally follows the verb that it qualifies is also worth noting here.

The parallel with verse 27 (η εκ φουσεως ακροβυστια) is significant for this case. Gathercole remarks:

[O]f course the contrast is the same: in 2.14, 'those without Torah *by birthright*, actually nevertheless obey it'; in 2.27, 'those uncircumcised by birthright, actually nevertheless fulfil Torah'.[18]

That Paul uses φουσει to explain the exact sense in which these Gentiles do not possess the Law might be further supported by comparison with Romans 11:21-24, where 'by nature' is the precise manner in which Gentile Christians are not members of the olive tree. Finally, speaking of Gentile Christians fulfilling the Law 'by nature' would jar with other statements elsewhere in Paul.[19]

Objections

A number of objections have been raised to this reading of Romans 2:14-15.

The Contrast in Context

One of the first objections is that a contrast between Jews and Gentile Christians is inappropriate in the context. Achtemeier claims that Paul makes 'no reference at all to the new situation in Christ until 3:20'. [20] This claim, however, does not seem to take sufficient account of the language of verses 25-29: Paul seems to be anticipating later movements in his argument. Also, *contra* Bornkamm, antitheses between Jews and Gentile Christians are found elsewhere in Paul (Romans 9:30; 11:11-14).[21]

The Impartiality of God

Bassler argues against the Gentile Christian reading, insisting that the context of Romans 2:12-29 demands 'a discussion in terms of Jews and Gentiles *per se*'[22] if Paul is truly to address the question of the impartiality of God in light of the 'selective dispensation of the Law'. We suggest that that particular point has already been established and that Paul is here moving on to explore the paradoxical obedience to the Law of the new covenant Gentile, demonstrating the manner in which the Law can remain a 'boundary marker' for the true people of God, without undermining divine impartiality.

A Law unto Themselves

Räsänen and Schreiner ask what exactly is meant 'that Gentile Christians *are* a (the) law for themselves', presenting 1 Corinthians 9:21 as a problem text for such a reading.[23] Gathercole helpfully observes that speaking of Gentile Christians 'being' the Law unto themselves, refers to the manner in which they 'embody' or 'incarnate' the Law and do not merely 'possess' it.[24] Paul is not here absolving Gentile Christians of any relationship with the Law, but is clarifying the sense in which such a relationship exists.

The Work of the Law

Moo alerts us to the fact that, although Jeremiah speaks of the Law being written on the heart, here, with a *hapax legomenon*, we read of the '*work* of the Law' being written on the heart.[25] Perhaps it is best to understand Paul's choice of this expression as resulting from his tendency to present the fulfilment of the Law as something that occurs through the enactment of a simple principle of action (so Cranfield[26]), such as faith or love (e.g. Romans 13:8-10), in contrast to the observance of piecemeal regulations.

Gentiles 'Doing' the Law

A further objection levelled against our reading proceeds from the recognition that, when Paul speaks of Christian's relationship with the Law elsewhere, he always uses verbs other than ποιέω.[27] We suggest that Paul's deviation from his preferred verbs in this instance is determined in large measure by the hearing/doing contrast of the immediate context in verse 13.

The Accusations of Conscience

Perhaps the weightiest of the objections against our reading

concerns Paul's description of the work of the heart, conscience and thoughts in accusing and excusing.[28] Why, the objection goes, would Paul present the situation of the Gentile Christian in a manner that gave such an accusatory voice to these three witnesses? The fact that the witnesses sometimes accuse and sometimes excuse points to the occasional and non-saving nature of the obedience in question.[29]

Gathercole observes there is no reason why we could not have many accusing thoughts and still not be condemned by God (1 Corinthians 4:4-5; cf. 1 John 3:20).[30] He counsels us to attend to the contrasts between the description of the Gentiles in 1:18-32 and in 2:14-15: Gentiles, formerly without excuse (1:20) and knowing themselves to be worthy of death (1:32), now find themselves occasionally excused by their conscience, heart and thoughts. Gathercole remarks, 'the surprise for the Jewish interlocutor would have been that the thoughts *could actually provide a defence at all.*'[31]

Wright surmises that the self-accusations may result in part from the 'inner conflict' that the Gentile Christian faces as he approaches the Day of Judgment, aware of his ambiguous status.[32] The Gentile Christian would, in many respects, be more susceptible to a weak and self-accusing conscience than his Jewish counterpart would.

Nils Dahl has suggested an alternative reading: that the role of the heart, conscience and thoughts as advocates for the Gentiles is designed to counter Jewish claims that the Torah and its commandments would serve as special advocates for them. Jouette Bassler argues that God's impartiality demands that God judge Jews and Gentiles in 'different but equivalent ways'; this impartiality is maintained as Christian Gentiles have the advocates of conscience and thoughts, which correspond to the Jewish advocates of Torah and Miswot.[33]

Conclusion

In conclusion, on the basis of the allusions to the new covenant promise of Jeremiah, the parallels with verses 25-29, and the contrast with the way that Gentiles are described in Romans 1, the Gentile Christian reading of Romans 2:14-15 appears to be the most satisfying of the exegetical options open to us. We do not believe that any of the objections that have been raised against this reading are sufficiently convincing to undermine it.

Footnotes

[1] E.g. Westerholm, Stephen. 2004. *Perspectives Old and New on*

- Paul: The "Lutheran" Paul and His Critics*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 271n23. See also Sanders, E.P. 1983. *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 126-127.
- [2] Bray, Gerald (ed.). 1998. *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament VI – Romans*. Chicago, IL: Fitzroy Dearborn, 67
- [3] Cf. Patte, Daniel and Eugene TeSelle (eds.). 2002. *Engaging Augustine on Romans: Self, Context, and Theology in Interpretation*. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 147-170
- [4] Cranfield, C.E.B. 1975. *The Epistle to the Romans: Volume 1*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 155ff
- [5] See Gathercole, S.J. 2002. *Where is Boasting? Early Jewish Soteriology and Paul's Response in Romans 1-5*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 126n50 for a list of modern exegetes.
- [6] Parker, T.H.L. 1986. *Commentaries on the Epistle to the Romans 1532-1542*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 138-141
- [7] Gathercole, S.J. 2002. 'A Law unto Themselves: The Gentiles in Romans 2.14-15 Revisited.' *JSNT*, 85:27-49, 29
- [8] *Perspectives Old and New on Paul*, 271n23
- [9] Dunn, James D.G. (ed.). 1996. *Paul and the Mosaic Law*. Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 146
- [10] Stuhlmacher, Peter. 1994. *Paul's Letter to the Romans*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 42-43. See Bockmuehl, Markus. 2000. *Jewish Law in Gentile Churches: Halakhah and the Beginning of Christian Public Ethics*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 131 for a challenge to the natural law reading.
- [11] 'A Law unto Themselves', 35
- [12] *Ibid*, 41
- [13] Wright, N.T. 2002. *The Letter to the Romans in The New Interpreter's Bible: Volume X*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 448-449
- [14] Ito, Akio. 1996. 'Romans 2: A Deuteronomistic Reading.' *JSNT*, 59:21-37, 33
- [15] See Stowers, Stanley K. 1994. *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews, & Gentiles*. London: Yale University Press, 116-117, 138-139 for a helpful discussion of this.
- [16] 'A Law unto Themselves', 36
- [17] *Ibid*.
- [18] *Ibid*, 36-37
- [19] Cf. Dunn, James D.G. 1988. *Romans 1-8 (Word Biblical Commentary: Volume 38a)*. Dallas, TX: Word Books, 98

- [20] Achtemeier, Paul. 1985. *Romans*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 51. See also Ziesler, John. 1989. *Paul's Letter to the Romans*. London: SCM Press, 86-87.
- [21] 'A Law unto Themselves', 31
- [22] Bassler, Jouette. 1982. *Divine Impartiality: Paul and a Theological Axiom*. Chico, CA: Scholar's Press, 144
- [23] Räisänen, Heikki. 1983. *Paul and the Law*. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 104; Pate, C. Marvin. 2000. *The Reverse of the Curse: Paul, Wisdom, and the Law*. Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 262. See also Käsemann, Ernst. 1980. *Commentary on Romans*. London: SCM Press, 65.
- [24] 'A Law unto Themselves', 37
- [25] Moo, Douglas J. 1996. *The Epistle to the Romans*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 151-152. Cf. Schreiner, Thomas. 1993. 'Did Paul Believe in Justification By Works? Another Look at Romans 2.' *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 3:131-158, 146.
- [26] Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans: Volume 1*, 158
- [27] 'Romans 2: A Deuteronomistic Reading', 36
- [28] 'A Law unto Themselves', 40ff; Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, 65-66
- [29] 'Did Paul Believe in Justification By Works?' 147
- [30] 'A Law unto Themselves', 45
- [31] *Ibid*, 46
- [32] *Paul and the Mosaic Law*, 146
- [33] Bassler, Jouette. 1984. 'Divine Impartiality in Paul's Letter to the Romans.' *Novum Testamentum* 26:43-58, 51, 52n26

Tim Gallant on Romans 2

(<http://www.rabbisaul.com/articles/doersoflaw.php>):

It is often suggested by Protestant exegetes that the above passage is in a sense hypothetical. If anyone could truly be a "doer of the law," he could stand in God's court and be justified. Indeed, even Gentiles, if they could perfectly work out and live out the law of God which is imprinted upon their conscience, could likewise be justified at the final judgment on that basis. Since, however, Paul is in the midst of an argument demonstrating that all fail before the law's judgment seat, it follows that none can be justified on the basis of law. While it is doubtless true that none can be justified on the basis of keeping of the law (see esp. 3:19-20), I do not believe that this

is what Paul is specifically arguing here. I believe that Paul is referring to Christian believers. (This is also a position taken by N. T. Wright in his commentary on Romans, as well as in his article, "The Law in Romans 2," in *Paul and the Mosaic Law*, James D. G. Dunn, ed; see esp. pp. 143-148. I will attempt to provide further defense for this position than Wright has argued for.)

Passage not hypothetical

I disagree with the hypothetical view of Romans 2:12-16 for the following reasons:

1. Although many Protestant interpreters (including John Calvin and John Murray) divide up Paul's argument, so that 2:1-11 is not hypothetical, while 2:12-16 following is so taken, this does not appear to be exegetically tenable. Here's why not:

- a. Verse 12 opens with *for* (Greek *gar*); the foregoing is supported by what Paul will say here.
- b. There is strong parallelism between the two sections. "Those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness" and who thus inherit wrath, both of Jews and Greeks, described in verses 9-10, stand parallel to those who have sinned being judged, both those "in the law" and those "without law," in verse 12. Likewise, verse 5 speaks of "the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God," while verse 16 speaks of "the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ."

Thus it is clear that if verses 1-11 are not merely hypothetical, it is highly unlikely that 12-16 are hypothetical either.

Nor will it do to push the problem back, and make both sections hypothetical, as some have attempted to do. This will not work, because Paul in verse 4, addressing the unrighteous judges, says, "the goodness of God leads you to repentance." But divine invitation to repentance presupposes God's providing means for forgiveness of sins (see esp. Murray, *ad. loc. cit.*). If that is the case, the passage clearly cannot be about a hypothetical perfection.

2. The language of "the work of the law written in their hearts" in verse 15 is too reminiscent of the promise of the new covenant in Jeremiah 31:31-34 to be merely coincidental. In the LXX, Jer. 31:33 (actually, 38:33 in the LXX; 31:33 is the place of the passage in Hebrew and English) says, "I will give my laws

unto their understanding, and upon their hearts I will write them." The Hebrew can be rendered, "I will give my law in their midst, and upon their hearts I will write it." (This raises the difficulty of the usual understanding that Romans 2:14 indicates that the Gentiles in view "by nature do the things in the law"; we will take up this problem below.)

Moreover, this "work of the law written in their hearts" in verse 15 is not stated by Paul to be universal. The clause begins with the indefinite pronoun whoever (Greek: *`oitines*, from *`ostis*). Although this word can function as a simple relative pronoun (*who, which*), that is not the most common meaning, and certainly not the necessary one. No commentator argues that the "work of the law" here is perhaps non-existent due to the indefinite article, and that is clearly not my point. Rather, I am saying that Paul (1) assumes this work of the law to be a reality; and (2) thinks of it in non-universal terms: only some Gentiles have this work of the law written in their hearts.

Furthermore, the indefiniteness of verse 15 (whoever) matches the indefiniteness of verse 14: "For whenever (Greek *`otan*) Gentiles who do not have the law...do the things in the law...." Verse 14 must be indefinite, because otherwise we would have to conclude that Gentiles universally "do the things in the law," at least some of the time.

3. The parallelism between 1-11 and 12-16 is also echoed in the passages following, in particular 2:25-29, as Wright has so ably shown in his article, "The Law in Romans 2." This is made most evident in comparing the law-keeping Gentile of verse 14 with verse 27: "And will not the one, by nature uncircumcised, who keeps the law, judge you who through the letter and circumcision transgress the law?"

Yet standard Protestant exegesis acknowledges the non-hypothetical character of 2:25-29. This is inescapable. Verse 29 says, "he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God." The "by the Spirit" language indicates that Paul is thinking of real people who have received the promised new covenant Spirit; he is certainly not positing a hypothetical works-righteousness attained by native human strength.

4. Paul's concluding phrase here in verse 16, according to my gospel, also appears in 16:25; 1 Timothy 1:11; and 2 Timothy 2:8 (cf. Gal. 1:11). In no other case can it reasonably be argued that

the situation in view is in any fashion hypothetical. Even further, and this is crucially important, Paul is describing here the character of the judgment of which he is speaking. It will be "according to my gospel, through Christ Jesus" (v. 16b).

5. The relationship of verse 16 to the preceding indicates that the accusing / defending exercise of the conscience occurs at the day of judgment. If we were to limit the "doing of the law" in this passage to occasional times in which a general proper behaviour was carried out, it is rather inconceivable that Paul would speak of a positive defense of the conscience. If Paul's point is the absolute character of God's law and His judgment, it seems unlikely that he would admit that unbelievers could stand before that judgment seat and have "law-informed" consciences (i.e. shaped by some "work of the law" functioning analogous to the written law) that would in part excuse themselves.

If, however, verses 12-16 are envisioning "doers of the law" who are Christian believers and who will be justified in the day of judgment, we are left with a few questions.

Legalistic Judgment?

First, does it not contradict Paul's entire gospel program if he posits that the doers of the law will in actuality be justified? Does this indeed not contradict 3:20-21?

In fact, no. For first, *this passage does not actually say that the doers of the law will be justified on the basis of their law-keeping.* (The earlier section, 2:1-11, which is only rarely seen as hypothetical, is in fact more difficult on this issue, because, as in other passages, Paul states that God will render to each according to his deeds, v. 6.)

Second, we need to examine what Paul means by the "doing of the law" here. It must be understood that especially in chapters 1-2, Paul often anticipates his argument well in advance, and only by careful consideration of the whole letter can we fully grasp his early cryptic statements. In this regard, we are helped out by the link between verses 14 and 27, on the one hand, and the link between 27 and 10:4, on the other. In 2:27, Paul speaks of the one who "keeps" the law; the word is *telousa* (from *teleo*). Paul uses the noun cognate to this verb in 10:4: "For Christ is the goal (*telos*) of the law unto righteousness to all who believe." In the context of 10:4, Paul has explained that Israel had stumbled, because although they "pursued a law of righteousness, they did not arrive at the law" (9:31). We would

have expected Paul to say: they did not arrive at *righteousness* - but Paul's point is that *the law itself was aimed at Christ*. Thus, any approach to the law that does not aim at Christ will in fact fall short of the law itself.

Consequently, the chief "doing of the law" that Paul has built up to in this epistle revolves around owning Christ as Lord. Romans 10:6, which is citing a passage originally speaking of the commandments of the law, identifies that passage (Deut. 30:11-14) as referring to "the righteousness based on faith" - which Paul equally clearly refers to Christ (as we noted in 10:4). It is this righteousness that arises out of the gospel, and which confesses Jesus as Lord, confessing and believing unto salvation (10:9-10).

This is built upon everything that has gone before in the epistle, but we can note especially 8:1ff. The law was weak through the flesh, but in the hands of the Spirit of life, it has become the instrument of freeing us from itself as the law of sin and death (8:2). How so? God employed the law to put His Son to death as a sin offering, and thereby condemned sin in the flesh and satisfied the just judgment (*dikaioma*) of the law with reference to us (8:3). Already here we can see that the one who believes upon Jesus as Lord is "doing the law," because its purpose and its judgment are fulfilled in Him. The "fulfilling of the law" in the believer is also understood by Paul at the level of sanctification; the one who is in Jesus is led by the Spirit, and is thus no longer antagonistic toward the law; see the whole argument of 8:5-14. Such sanctification is of course not meritorious, but it does serve to identify those who are in Christ, who is the law's goal.

Third, and in line with the above, this final judgment which vindicates these "doers of the law" will be "according to [Paul's] gospel, through Jesus Christ" (2.16b). It is most certainly not a "legalistic judgment." It is a judgment in accordance with the gospel Paul preaches.

What is "by nature"?

A large issue remains unresolved. The common translation of 2:14 runs something like this: "For when Gentiles who do not have the law do instinctively [lit. *by nature*; Greek *phusei*] the things of the law, these, not having the law, are a law to themselves" (NASB).

There are two issues here that need to be addressed: identifying what *by nature* means; and identifying what it is supposed to modify.

1. First, contrary to what is widely assumed, Paul's usage of *nature* does not usually refer to what is innate or simply creational. In fact, in the related passage in 2:27, Paul can speak of the Gentile as one who is uncircumcised "by / from nature" - in implicit, but clear, contrast to the Jew who is circumcised "by nature." Now clearly, by nature as we use the term, all are uncircumcised: every normal male is born with a foreskin! Paul, however, is employing the term more generally with the idea of natural heritage. The Jew has received circumcision and Torah as part of his God-given heritage; the Gentile has not.

Likewise, in 11:27 Paul speaks of the Jews as the "natural" (*phusin*) branches of the olive tree into which the Gentiles have been engrafted. He is not saying that Jews are not partakers of original sin or anything of that sort! He is simply saying that they have received the grace of the covenant as part of their natural and customary heritage. (Cf. Gal. 2:15, which contrasts "Jews by nature" with "sinners of the Gentiles," a contrast which surely stretches beyond the natural idea of race; also 1 Cor. 11:14: it seems at least questionable that Paul is claiming that abhorrence of long hair for males is "innate.")

2. The phrase itself has probably been misplaced in our translations. In the Greek text (which of course, originally had little or no punctuation), the word order runs this way: "Whenever for Gentiles the ones not the law having by nature the things of the law do...." As can be seen, *by nature* stands squarely between two clauses: the first refers to the fact that Gentiles do *not have* the law; the second refer to these Gentiles *doing* the law. On the basis of the analogy with verse 27, there is a much better argument for understanding *by nature* as modifying *not having*, rather than modifying "do the things of the law."

Thus a smooth translation of the verse would run: "For whenever the Gentiles, who do not have the law by nature, do the things of the law, these though not having the law are a law for themselves." This then flows into verse 15: "...whoever demonstrates the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and between their thoughts, accusing or defending."

The Gentiles do not have the law as their heritage. Here again is a parallel to 9:30ff. As those who were not in possession of the law, the Gentiles did not even pursue righteousness, but it has come to them in Christ.

The relationship between 14-15 is thus evident: these are the ones who do the law and become a law for themselves: whoever demonstrates the work of the law written in their hearts. Those who have been granted the new covenant Spirit: these alone can truly fulfill the law.

It may be objected, however, that the present tense in verse 14 (not having the law) undercuts the notion that Christian believers are in view: for do they not *now* have the law? But this objection misses the fact that Paul does not see the new covenant as under the law's charter in the way the Jews were under the old covenant. The new covenant believer has the "work of the law written on his heart," but he is not under the law itself (see e.g. 6:14 and numerous other passages in Paul's epistles). In a very real and strong sense, new covenant Gentiles do not "have the law." (Remember that the contrast here is between Jews who possess the law and Gentiles who do not; the issue is not whether there is any sense in which the Gentiles in view "have the law." Paul's ostensible Jewish dialogue partner would have denied that an uncircumcised Gentile ever possessed the law, even if the latter viewed it as holy Scripture.)

Accused and justified

What about the *accusing of the conscience* in verse 16? Why would a Christian believer suffer such self-accusation at the final judgment? As I noted above, the conscience of the unbeliever would not likely defend him before the throne of absolute justice. But the converse is not the case. Even the most faithful Christian believer will not stand before God's judgment seat on the ground of a clean conscience; he will still recognize his own sins, although he will know them as washed away through the sin offering of Christ.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we may say that Romans 2:12-16 is a passage that we ought to take straightforwardly rather than hypothetically. The *doers of the law* are those who have found the law's goal to be Christ Himself, and who thus confess Him as Lord. They are also those who are, in becoming united to Christ, granted His Holy Spirit. They walk by that Spirit, and thus fulfill the true intention of the law (cf. 8:1-14; 13:10; Gal. 5:14-26). The doers of

the law will stand uncondemned at the final judgment, because they are in Christ, who has encountered and fulfilled the sentence of judgment when He became their sin offering (8:3-4).

Postscript

Some interpreters who hold to a literal, straightforward (as opposed to hypothetical) reading of this passage have suggested that the Gentiles in view are God-fearers, rather than new covenant believers. In other words, they take the passage as looking retrospectively back to the period antedating the proclamation of the new covenant gospel.

I do not find this persuasive, for several reasons:

- a. As we saw, Paul's argument is anticipatory, and this passage is built on throughout Romans.
- b. Paul's allusion to Jeremiah 31 indicates that he specifically has the new covenant in view. (Cf. also the "circumcision of the heart" theme in the related passage at 2:29; this theme has an eschatological outlook in its OT source, Deut. 30:6.)
- c. The present tense is more naturally taken to refer to the present period, particularly in view of the fact that when Romans was written, the gospel had been going forth for some 30 years.

This, of course, does not deny that believers under the old covenant period, whether faithful Israelite or uncircumcised God-fearer, would be able to stand in the judgment. Paul, after all, sees Abraham as the father of faith (see Rom. 4; Gal. 3:6-9). But that is simply not within his purview here, in my judgment. His overall intent here is to show that mere possession of the law does not grant Israel immunity from judgment, and conversely, that salvation from judgment can occur without the law. The focal point of salvation is not the law, but rather Christ who is its goal, over whom Israel has stumbled (9:30ff.). This is the contemporary setting; Paul has little reason here to address the historical issue of the salvation of Gentile God-fearers.

In a sense, it is true that Paul does establish Abraham within the God-fearer paradigm in 4:9ff. Yet even there, his point has nothing directly to do with historical Gentile God-fearers; it is rather to establish the precedent for the present full inclusion of uncircumcised Gentiles in the new covenant. In context, Paul is working with the promise that God would make Abraham the father of many nations (4:17). It is clear from Galatians 3:8 that

Paul took this class of Abrahamic promises to be eschatological, a proleptic preaching of his gospel which looked forward to the present age.

Consequently, Romans 2:12-16 should be understood as referring to new covenant believers.

Peter Leithart has a number of helpful blogposts that deal with issues in Romans 2 (<http://www.leithart.com/2009/12/12/baptismal-efficacy/>):

This raises, fourth, the issue of internal/external...If external events and realities cannot penetrate to the inner man, then we have no grounds for sacramental theology at all, since sacraments are outward bodily acts.

At the same time, I acknowledge that the Bible regularly teaches that human beings have an internal and an external dimension. The tabernacle is, among other things, an architectural human being, and it has an "inner" and "outer" sanctuary. Paul uses an "inner man/outer man" distinction in various places (Romans 7:22; 2 Corinthians 4:16; Ephesians 3:16). So, the issue is not whether this distinction is a biblical one; it is. The question is what the Bible means by this distinction and how it functions. It's very easy for us to read the Biblical inner/outer distinction through our own cultural lenses, where the Cartesian subject/object, mind/body dualism is still instinctive.

Let me briefly analyze one important use of this sort of distinction, Romans 2:27-29. In the context (I believe) of a discussion of Jews and Gentiles, Paul introduces a distinction between different sorts of circumcision. There is the manifest circumcision in the flesh, and the "secret" (*kruptos*) circumcision of the Spirit. Jews who don't keep the law are not Jews, and their circumcision is uncircumcision (v. 25). Only those who keep the law by the power of the Spirit are Jews and the true circumcision. Within Israel, then, there are some who are circumcised only in the manifest, fleshly sense, and others who are circumcised also in the secret, Spiritual sense.

For Paul, however, this does not mean that fleshly circumcision is meaningless or useless, or that those who received fleshly circumcision received nothing. As Paul's argument continues

into chapter 3, he asks “What advantage has the Jew? Or what is the benefit of circumcision?” (v. 1). Clearly, he is speaking of what he has just described as Jews and circumcision according to flesh; the advantage of those who are circumcised by the Spirit is obvious. Given Paul’s distinction between fleshly and Spiritual circumcision, we might expect him to answer his question with “Fleshly circumcision gives no advantage.” That is not what Paul says, however. “Great in every respect” (v. 2). Here, he lists only one of the great advantages of fleshly Israel – “they were entrusted with the oracles of God” (v. 2).

When Paul picks up the argument later in Romans, however, he expands on the advantage of fleshly Israel: “For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.” (9:3-5).

Fleshly Israel – the “visible church” of the Old Testament – received great blessings. They were the son(s) of Yahweh, had the glory of Yahweh dwelling in their midst, received the covenants and promises, had a law that was the envy of the nations, was privileged with the temple service and the great heritage of the patriarchs. Above all, they were the people of Jesus, the Christ, the king of all things. When God blessed forever became flesh, He became Jewish flesh. These are blessings enjoyed by the “manifest” or “external” Jew, and they are considerable.

I don’t think I am imagining things to conclude that Paul’s is not the view of many in the PCA. Do we tell baptized children, “Yours is the adoption; yours the glory and the covenants and promises and commandments; you have a great heritage, and are privileged to have a place in the temple of the living God”? If Reformed theologians and pastors had so robust an understanding of the gifts conferred in baptism, I would not have devoted so much time to the subject of baptismal efficacy.

Possible connection with 70AD in the text
(<http://www.leithart.com/archives/000246.php>):

What about taking “day of wrath” in Romans 2 as AD 70? Some arguments:

1) Dunn lists the verses that use similar phrases for “wrath and indignation” and “tribulation and distress,” and most of them are about historical judgments on Israel. There’s a cluster of uses in Deut 28:55ff, which have specific reference to the distress that Israel would experience before the exile. Other OT passages that use similar language are talking about historical judgments; Dunn (strangely) lists Is 13:9 as an exception.

2) Do we really want to say that the final judgment operates “to the Jew first and also to the Greek”? Does Paul’s argument about those “with law” and those “without law” really work after AD 70?

3) 2:4 refers to the riches of God’s kindness to Israel in particular, but I think there’s an exodus subtext to this: It was the kindness of God that was leading Pharaoh to repentance and Pharaoh is a great example of hardened heart; plus, “riches” and “patience” are picked up in 9:23 (chiastically related to ch 2??), where in the context Israel has been compared to Egypt/Pharaoh. If this works, then the stubbornness that is treasuring up wrath is like the stubbornness of Pharaoh, and the judgment is going to be a series of plagues on the new Egypt – Israel (cf. Revelation).

4) This might actually do better justice to the specific language here. 1:16 and 2:9-10 do not say “first Jew, then Gentile,” but “first Jew, then GREEK.” And I’m inclined to think that Greek and Gentile are not interchangeable terms. (After 2:12, Paul begins talking about ETHNE, instead of Hellenes, so there the point appears to be broader, applying to “barbarians” as well as to Jews and Greeks.) If they are not interchangeable, then the judgment described in 2:9-10 is pretty specific: It’s a judgment on Jews and Hellenes. I’m neither, so the judgment doesn’t cover me at all, and can’t be talking about a universal final judgment.

And:

“Day of wrath” in Romans 2:5: This is universally (so far as I know) taken as a reference to the final day of judgment. But a) is there any other passage in Scripture that uses this phrase to refer to the final judgment? and b) is the final day of judgment

accurately described as a "day of wrath"? I am not denying a final judgment; that is taught in Revelation 20:11-15, a description of a post-millennial judgment. But this is not described as a "day of wrath."

On "justified" in Romans 2:13:

"Justified" in Rom 2:13 (the first use in Romans) is clearly contrasted with "perish" and "judged by Law." The structure of vv 12-13 is poetic parallelism:
whoever without law sins without law also perishes
whoever in law sins through law will be judged
not the hearers of law are just before God
but the doers of law shall be justified
Obviously, "justified" is synonymous with "just before God."
But the structure also suggests that being "justified" is the opposite of "perishing" or "being judged by law." To be justified is to be rescued from wrath, from the tribulation and distress that Paul predicts earlier in the passage. If that tribulation is understood as the historical judgment on Israel and the oikoumene in AD 70, then "justified" means surviving that ordeal and escaping to the other side, passing through the tribulation and receiving "eternal life" as an inheritance.

Further (<http://www.leithart.com/archives/000310.php>):

1) As Dunn points out, Paul is clearly lining out a series of oppositions in the latter part of this chapter, much as he does in Galatians:

manifest \emptyset Not Jew \emptyset Manifest circumcision \emptyset Flesh
 \emptyset *E*gramma / letter \emptyset Praise from man hidden \emptyset Jew
 \emptyset Circumcision \emptyset Heart -- Spirit \emptyset Praise from God

This indicates that the whole contrast here is between OC and NC realities, between "flesh" and "spirit." The Jews are those who are in the new covenant, who enjoy the realities of the fulfilled covenant \emptyset Circumcision of the heart, through the Spirit, praise from God. Because those within the NC "keep the law" and "fulfill the law" they honor God's name among the Gentiles, in contrast to those who do not keep the law and bring blasphemy upon the name of Yahweh. And God responds to their honoring of His name by praising them.

2) Verse 27 makes a neat reversal of the initial verses of the chapter. There, Paul addresses an interlocutor (probably to be understood as Jewish) who is eager to judge others and hopes to escape the judgment of God by passing judgment on others. But those who judge others, even if they judge other rightly, but fail to keep Torah themselves will be "judged" (v 27) by the Gentiles who keep Torah through the Spirit. The tables are turned, and the "righteous" who participate in the judgment of angels, who eat from the tree of knowledge, are not the "naturally" circumcised, but those who though "naturally" uncircumcised do the things written in Torah.

3) In verse 27, "keep" translates TELOEIN, "complete," "accomplish," "bring to its proper end." It seems naturally to point ahead to 10:4, that Christ is the "telos" of the law for those who believe.

4) Verse 26 introduces the notion of "reckoning." The word has been used before (2:3), but this is the first time that it is (implicitly but undoubtedly) God who is doing the reckoning. Here uncircumcision is "reckoned" circumcision if the uncircumcised one keeps the law. God reckons those who are "by nature" outside the covenant as being "inside" the covenant if they keep (PHULASSO here) the law. How does this affect our reading of the later "reckoning" passages in chapter 4? There is surely a connection, since Paul's discussion of God's reckoning of Abram as righteous is followed immediately by a discussion of circumcision (4:1-12). But I don't see the connection at the moment.

5) There is a subtext of resurrection running through the latter part of Romans 2. Verse 29 is the first mention of the Holy Spirit since 1:4, where the "Spirit of holiness" is the agent of Jesus' resurrection. Further, the Spirit-letter contrast is picked up in 7:6, where release from Torah comes about through "death to that by which we were bound," and leads to service "in the newness of the Spirit." Thus, the Jew whose circumcision is of the heart by the Spirit is the one who is participating in the resurrection power of Jesus.

6) The phrase "DIA GRAMMATOS KAI PERITOMES" in verse 27 seems very odd. Paul asserts that the one who is "naturally" (EK PHUSEOS) uncircumcised but who keeps Torah will judge (woodenly translated) "you the through letter and circumcision transgressor of Torah." This has been rendered as "though having the letter of the Law and circumcision are a

transgressor" (NASB), but the DIA is more naturally instrumental rather than concessive. It is not that the circumcised becomes a transgressor IN SPITE OF his possession of Torah and circumcision; rather, it is THROUGH the possession of Torah and circumcision that he becomes a transgressor. If this is right, this is the first introduction in Romans to what is in my mind a key theme, namely, the fact that the Torah, far from solving the problem of sin, exacerbates it. This is unpacked in Romans 5 and 7, and comes to a great climax in 8:1-4. Is it possible that this instrumental force for DIA has already been argued for in the preceding verses? Is it perhaps precisely the possession of Torah (and its transgression) that produces the situation of verse 24, that the name of Yahweh is blasphemed among the nations because of them?

On Jewish boasting

(<http://www.leithart.com/archives/000338.php>):

Simon Gathercole's *Where Is Boasting* has some stimulating insights into the argument of Romans 2, and some important objections to the NPP. The following notes are based on Gathercole:

1) It is clear that in Romans 2, Paul considers this Jew to be unrepentant and an apostate from Judaism. It has been common in recent NT scholarship to emphasize that the Jews had means for forgiveness and redemption. They weren't condemned to death simply because they had broken the law, but had the system of sacrifices that would address the wrongs they did. But the law requires that the Israelites confess and repent of their sins. Otherwise, the sacrifices would not be effective for them. There are two sorts of sins in the sacrificial system: high-handed sins and sins of inadvertency or ignorance. The latter are the only kind that can be atoned by sacrifice. But you can be redeemed when you commit a high-handed sin if you confess it and abandon it. That brings the sin down to the level of inadvertency, so that it can be dealt with by sacrifice. But Paul is treating this Jew as unrepentant (v 4), and working hard to convince the Jew that he is a sinner (vv 17ff). That means that, under the law, this Jew does not have recourse to the sacrificial system, or at least that it is not going to be effective for him. Since this Jew represents the nation,

Paul is treating the nation not only as corrupted by sin, but as unrepentant, as unconvinced that they ARE sinners.

2) This helps to specify Paul's precise problem with Judaism, which has been a big issue with the NPP. The general consensus among NPP scholars is that Paul is not attacking works-righteousness in a traditional sense, but rather is attacking national pride of Israel, their boasting in and depending on their own election, their misuse of the law to exclude Gentiles, or their misunderstanding of the proper use of the law. But Paul here makes it clear that his problem with the Jews is that they have transgressed the law, and therefore have failed to accomplish their mission among the nations (2:24). By transgressing the law, they have become the opposite of what they claim to be: they are not circumcision, but uncircumcision. One of the ways they have transgressed the law may be a pride and dependence on election, in a presumptive way. One great sin was their exclusion of Gentiles from salvation. But that's not what Paul says: he simply says they have transgressed the law.

3) There is an additional problem that has been suppressed in NPP. According to Paul, the Jews who have transgressed the law do not acknowledge that they have transgressed the law. This leads us back toward the more traditional Protestant reading of Romans: The Jews do have hope in their obedience, a hope that at the judgment they will be able to stand not just because they POSSESS the law but because they believe they have KEPT the law. It is true that possession of the law and election as Israel does not guarantee they will stand in judgment, and Paul makes that point here (vv 12-16). But in addition to that Jews have a confidence in their own works, in their having done the things of the law, and believe that they will be judged righteous because of their works.

4) Thus, the flow of Paul's argument in the center of chapter 2 is, in essence: "OK, Jews, I agree with you that all men will be judged by what they have done. I agree with you that the doers of the law will be justified and vindicated and will inherit glory and life. But (v 17) you haven't done that, and I'll show you how you have failed (vv 21-23). Scripture backs me up, saying that God's name is blasphemed because of you (v 24). Insofar as your circumcision is a marker of your inclusion in Israel, the people of God, it is annulled by your sin and your impenitence, and Gentiles who are keeping the law are able to pass judgment

on you (v 27). You have no basis for confidence at the judgment because you have transgressed the law. Don't trust in, or boast in, your performance of the law."

On Romans 2:24 (<http://www.leithart.com/archives/000309.php>):

In Romans 2:24, Paul cites Isaiah 52:5 and/or Ezekiel 36:20-23 to describe Israel's effect on the nations. Israel was called to be a light to the world, to be a priest to the nations, and to cause Yahweh's name to be honored among the Gentiles. Torah, and all the privileges associated with Torah, were given to Israel for precisely this reason. But they failed to keep Torah, they were not doers of Torah, and therefore the name of Yahweh is blasphemed among the nations.

In the passages that Paul cites, the blasphemy does not arise directly from Israel's behavior. Rather, the pattern is this (particularly clear in Ezek 36; Isaiah 52:4-6 is pretty compressed): Israel defiled the land by her disobedience; Yahweh therefore sent Israel into exile; but once Israel was in exile, the Gentiles started taunting Israel and mocking Yahweh, asking questions like "If Yahweh is so great, why is His people in exile?"; it's the very presence of Israel in exile, the fact that they are not safely in the land promised to them, that leads to blasphemy. In both passages, Yahweh says He is determined to intervene and save Israel so that the blasphemy will stop, and so that Israel will know that He is Lord. That is, what Israel failed to do (ie, bring honor to Yahweh among the nations), Yahweh is now doing on His own.

In Romans 2, Paul's focus seems to be more on the sins of Israel as the cause of blasphemy, rather than on their exilic condition. But the latter cannot be excluded. Israel's state in the world in Paul's day, which was indeed the result of Israel's sins, caused the nations to profane and blaspheme the name of Israel's God. And Paul's gospel is that God decided to do what Israel had failed to do. And we know the rest of the story: Yahweh BECOMES Israel in order to accomplish Israel's calling for her. Since Israel failed to offer herself for the world, Yahweh offers Himself for the world.

On Romans 2:12-29

(<http://www.leithart.com/archives/000229.php>):

Jouette Bassler's article on "Divine Impartiality in Romans" (NovT, 1984) also includes a neat discussion of the structure of Romans 2:12-29. She points out the sequence of terms as Paul introduces the issues of law (NOMOS) and circumcision (PERITOME). "Law" first becomes an issue in v 12, in the negative form "without law" (ANOMOS), then Paul discusses the condition of Jew and Gentile with respect to the NOMOS. In verse 25, the binary of NOMOS/ ANOMOS is overtaken by another binary of circumcision/uncircumcision (PERITOME/ AKROBUSTIA). Bassler argues that the "word-chain" of lawless-law-circumcision-uncircumcision unites the section.

She goes on to demonstrate the chiasmic structure of this section of the chapter:

General statement (in form of not (OU)...but (ALLA)), vv 12-13
Conditional case A: Gentiles, vv 14-16 (the ANOMOS)
Conditional case B: Jews, vv 17-24 (those with NOMOS)
Conditional case B': Jews, v 25 (introducing "circumcision")
Conditional case A': Gentiles, v 26 ("uncircumcision")
General statement (in form of OU...ALLA), vv 28-29

Bill DeJong on Romans 2:28-29:

Reformed folk typically resort to Romans 2:28-29 to defend an external/internal distinction in relation to the covenant. In these verses a proof-text is located for alleging that whereas all the baptized are externally in the covenant, only the elect are internally in the covenant. But is this what Paul is saying in Romans 2?

It is my thesis that Paul is talking about Jews and Gentiles in terms of the newly constituted Israel and that the distinction he introduces here is not timeless, but redemptive-historical.

In the wider context Paul is addressing a Jewish interlocutor (see vv.1-3,17) who is eager to judge others and hopes to escape God's judgment by passing judgment on others. In verse 25 he writes (ESV is used throughout this post),

For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. The Jewish interlocutor would have agreed with the first statement but would have been shocked and possibly offended by the second, especially if he were familiar with the practice of epispasm, by which hellenizing Jews somehow disguised the mark of circumcision (cf. 1 Macc.1:15). Then in verse 26, Paul writes,

So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? The question is rhetorical. God will reckon (*logizesthai*) uncircumcision as circumcision if the uncircumcised keep the Torah. The non-Jew who keeps the law can be reckoned as a member of God's covenant community.

Verse 27: Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision, but break the law.

"Physically uncircumcised" is better translated "uncircumcised by nature (*phuseos*)," an expression which recalls 2:14, "the nations who have not the law by nature (*phusei*)." These phrases denote those who are "naturally" Gentiles, Gentiles by birth. So, God will reckon those who are "by nature" outside the covenant as being "inside" the covenant if they keep (*telousa*) the Torah.

Sidenote: I agree with Andrew Das who argues, against a number of scholars, "It would hardly carry any persuasive value to say that only a hypothetical Gentile judges the Jew. Why bother? On the other hand, actual Gentile obedience and actual Gentile judges would shame the Jew." ([Paul, the Law and the Covenant](#) [Peabody: Hendrickson, 2001] 185, n. 48).

The "naturally" Gentiles who keep the law will condemn "you who have the written code and circumcision"—literally, "you the-through-letter-and-circumcision (*dia grammatos kai peritomes*)-transgressor of Torah." This has been rendered as "though having the letter of the Law and circumcision are a transgressor" (NASB) but the Greek preposition (*dia*) is more naturally instrumental than concessive. It is through the possession of Torah and circumcision that he becomes a transgressor. Torah, far from solving the problem of sin, exacerbates it (cf. Rom.3:20, 5:20 and 7).

Those who judge others, but fail to keep Torah themselves will be “judged” (v.27) by the Gentiles who keep Torah through the Spirit. Paul turns the tables on the Jews! The “righteous” who judge are not the “naturally” circumcised, but those who, though “naturally” uncircumcised, do the things written in Torah.

This passage envisions the reconstitution of God’s people in the new covenant. As in Galatians 2 Paul is concerned with the question, who is a Jew? With his disagreement with Peter in mind, he says to the Galatians (2:14), “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how you can force the Gentiles to live like Jews?” Peter had assumed that uncircumcised believers, in order to belong to God’s people, would have to assume the identity of ethnic Jews by getting physically circumcised. But “the Israel of God” (Gal.6:16) is now redefined as the people of the Messiah. Those who believe in Messiah Jesus, and are baptized into him, form the new family, redefined around and by the Messiah in fulfillment of the promises to Abraham (Gal.3:29).

It is in this context that we must understand Romans 2:28-29: For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God. The Hebrew word for ‘praise’ is *jehuda* (Judah), so that the very name ‘Jew’ (*Ioudaios* in Greek), ought to mean ‘praise.’ But this word *Ioudaios* is to be predicated of a group no longer defined ethnically or by possession of Torah and no longer marked by things which are “in the open” (*en to phanero*). Rather, “the-in-secret-Jew” (*ho en to krypto Ioudaios*) is circumcised in the heart and gains ‘praise’ not from humans, but from God.

Herman Ridderbos ([*Paul: An Outline of His Theology*](#) [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975]) writes (334-335), The last pronouncement in Romans 2 is also of importance for the reason that without directly mentioning the name of Christ it signifies a radicalizing of the concept Jew, and thereby of the definition of the essence of the people of God . . . For Paul, even when speaks of being a Jew in the heart and the Spirit, faith in Christ and his gift of grace are all-important, and therefore

natural descent from Abraham is no longer a determinative factor for belonging to the people of God.
See also Thomas Schreiner, [*Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ*](#) (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity, 2001) 81.

Jews who don't keep the law are not (true) Jews and their circumcision is uncircumcision (v.25). On the other hand God can reckon "uncircumcision" as "circumcision"; he can reckon those "naturally" outside the covenant as being inside the covenant if they, by the power of the Spirit, keep the law (v.26). The Messiah and the Spirit reconstitute the people of God, transforming the heart to enable it to keep the commandments of God (cf. Rom.7:4-6; 8:4-8; 2 Cor.3).

Conclusion: Paul's manifest/secret distinction in Romans 2 is not timeless, but has specific import at this juncture in redemptive history when the people of Israel had only recently been reconstituted by the arrival of the Messiah and the outpouring of His Spirit on Pentecost. It was a time period when "manifest" circumcision, for example, still had a lot of spiritual capital in the minds of people and therefore Paul has to explain that, because it is no longer the marker of God's people, "manifest" circumcision has been relativised. The new marker of God's people is "secret" faith (see the contrast between circumcision and faith in Romans 4).

Paul would never claim, in other words, that those who were circumcised but not believers were not truly in the covenant. Precisely because they were in the covenant, they had to be "broken off" (Romans 11) that the Gentiles might be grafted in. It is therefore going beyond Paul to say that only the elect are members of the covenant community. Even once one has been grafted in, the possibility of falling away remains (Rom.11). Paul's language about election largely needs to be understood in the context of covenant and not vice versa. This does mean that Paul's use of "elect" often unsettles those of us who grew up with the pleasant aroma of TULIP. We must remember, however, that Paul's teaching does not explicitly contradict TULIP; it simply operates more in the historical sphere than in the eternal.

Other theologians to consult include Don Garlington, Mike Bird, N. T. Wright (who has cleared up some confusing language on the role of works in the final judgment:

<http://bibliatheologica.blogspot.com/2010/11/wright-sets-right-wrong.html>;

<http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/2010/11/26/what-n-t-wright-really-said/>;

<http://ugleyvicar.blogspot.com/2010/11/clarification-from-tom-wright.html>), Alan Stanley, and Paul Rainbow. I especially

recommend Wright's Romans commentary and his essay on Romans 2 in the book *Paul and the Law*. Finally, for more theological synthesis and historical background, consult my essays "Future Justification: Some Theological and Exegetical Proposals" and "The Reformed Doctrine of Justification By Works."

The structure of the early chapters of Romans follows the contours of the OT:

1:18-32 – fall of Adam, focus on worship/garden/Father

2:1-16 – fall of Cain, focus on work/land/Son

2:17-29 – fall of world (Sethites), focus on witness/world/Spirit

3:1-20 – fall of cosmos (Noah/Babel), God "floods" the whole creation with judgment, all humanity is united but in rebellion

3:21-5:11 – new creation, beginning with Abraham; Abraham reverses Adam's fall by trusting and glorying God, reverses Cain's fall by receiving and offering back his son, and reverses flood/Babel by becoming the father of a new global family

Those familiar with Jim Jordan's "threefold fall pattern" in the book of Genesis will see why this structure is important.

Perhaps the cycle begins again in 5:12, though I haven't done the work on that yet.

The recent trend in Reformed circles to "totalize" the doctrine of justification needs to be challenged. While justification is of vital importance, we cannot reduce the gospel to God's legal declaration. While I am no fan of the Trinity Review, it did contain a recent critique of the so-called "grace" movement in the Reformed world

(<http://trinityfoundation.org/latest.php>). The section on Tim Keller is particularly interesting:

Keller strikes the same tone as Tchividjian, essentially equating the functional implications of legalism and leniency:

Legalism and leniency are not just equally bad and wrong but they are basically the same thing. They are just different strategies of “self-salvation.” ... The only way into a ministry that sees people’s lives change, that brings a joy and power and electricity without authoritarianism—is a preaching of the gospel that deconstructs both legalism and leniency equally. [29]

And how does this play out in his preaching? Keller continues by explaining how to preach to different worldviews. When trying to reach Sadducees, you must “deconstruct Phariseeism”; when trying to reach antinomians, you must “distinguish the gospel from legalism”; when trying to non-Christians, you must use the good news of grace against legalism”; when pressed to teach against “license and antinomianism,” he disagrees and says instead we must “critique moralism.” [30] If legalism and leniency are the same, then by preaching against legalism, he has covered them both.

This is myopic, and the effect is profound as it manifests in his teaching. Keller has written and taught extensively on many topics, most notably and recently on the Parable of the Prodigal Son in his book, *The Prodigal God*. Keller’s myopia is revealed when he expounds on the Parable, which he is unable to do without first adopting the same position as Brown and Tchividjian—essentially equating Bible-believing obedience with Pharisaical legalism: “Jesus’ teaching consistently attracted the irreligious, while offending the Bible-believing, religious people of his day.” [31] Of the Pharisees, Keller also writes that “[t]hey studied and obeyed the Scripture.” [32]

This is a misrepresentation that Jesus will not allow, for He testified that the Pharisees were not Bible believers at all, and certainly were not obedient to the Scriptures:

For had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me: for he wrote of me. But if ye believe not his writings, how shall ye believe my words? (*John* 5:46-47)

And he said unto them, "Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition.... Making the word of God of none effect through your tradition, which ye have delivered: and many such like things do ye." (*Mark* 7:9, 13)

Clearly, Jesus did not consider the Pharisees to be the obedient Bible-believers of His day, but it suits Keller's purposes to cast them as such as he interprets the Scripture through his myopic lens.

As he continues, we note that he takes the same tack as Brown and Tchividjian, denigrating intentional obedience in the life of the believer. He does this in his exposition of *Luke* 15, where he briefly turns to the Parable of the Sower and writes, "The only group of people who produce changed lives are not those who have worked harder and been more obedient, but those who 'hear the word of God and *understand* it' (*Matthew* 13:23)." [\[33\]](#) That this is a rather un-careful and peculiar interpretation becomes obvious upon inspection. Keller introduces a false dichotomy to the text, awkwardly distinguishing between "bearing fruit" and intentional obedience. According to Scripture, obedience and hard work is the fruit of the Word in the life of a believer (*John* 15:7-10; *Luke* 19:8-9; *Hebrews* 12:4). Keller's false dichotomy is made clear when we re-read his observation in that light, and reduce his statement to this absurd contradiction: "The only people who bear fruit are not those who bear fruit but those who hear the word of God and understand it." That is nonsense, but it is the necessary implication of Keller's reading of the text. *Contra* Keller, the truth is that hearing the Word of God and understanding it, is the seed being well planted. Hard work and obedience is the fruit itself. Keller would have done very well to say, "Those who hear the Word of God and understand it are they who respond to the Word with hard work and obedience," for that is the plain meaning of the Parable based on Jesus' teachings—the very fruit that is produced by the indwelling Word. We note, for example, that following the parable of the Sower in *Luke* 8,

Jesus provided a live illustration of what the parable signified, saying, "My mother and my brethren are these which hear the word of God and do it" (*Luke 8:21*). Thus it appears to this writer to be a rather unhelpful hermeneutic that could read Christ's words in the Parable of the Sower and attempt to separate *intentional obedience* to the Word of God from the fruit of the implanted Word. This should not be taken, of course, to suggest that Keller does not believe the fruit of the Word is to love God and love our neighbor, or that one should never try at all. Rather it highlights the propensity of the Grace Movement for diminishing intentional obedience to the Law as the fruit of sanctification, regularly equating hard work and obedience as hindrances to, rather than the fruit of, sanctification.

Yet this is the ultimate end of Keller's own acknowledged practice, which is to preach "grace, grace, grace" in every sermon. [\[34\]](#) The danger of interpreting the Scripture in this manner is that it downplays God's many other attributes, and opens the door to making the Scripture say whatever one thinks it ought to have said. Keller succumbs to this temptation when he expounds on the Prodigal's speech preparations in *Luke 15:18-19*. The Prodigal says, "I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants."

There is no mystery here, no hidden meaning that has to be coaxed out of the text, no unspoken message that only a prophet can discern for us. The boy, at the end of his rope and empty of himself, *is hungry, and does not want to be hungry any more*. Note the progression:

[T]here arose a mighty famine in that land; *and he began to be in want*. (v. 14)

And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him. (v. 16)

And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, *and I perish with hunger!* (v. 17)

I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him...make me as one of thy hired servants. (vv. 18-19)

Clearly the son is aware of his sin—"I have sinned against heaven, and before thee"—but the desire to be made a hired servant is explained clearly in the text: he is hungry; his father's hired servants are not; given the option, he would rather be the latter than the former. That his sin has brought him here is now plain to him. But this explanation cannot satisfy Keller who must cast even the Prodigal, not as a repentant sinner completely emptied of himself, *but as a legalist attempting to establish his own works as a basis for justification*. Keller so expounds:

The son intends to say, "Father, I know I don't have a right to come back into the family. But if you apprentice me to one of your hired men so I can learn a trade and earn a wage, then at least I could begin to pay off my debt." That was his plan.[\[35\]](#)

Yet there is not a hint of such a plan in the text. It is un-careful and unhelpful to begin an exposition of the text by informing the reader that the Prodigal *intended* to say something that he did not. The text is sufficiently clear on its own. Yet in his preaching, as in his writing, Keller confirms this interpretation, explaining that only by reading carefully do we discover the Prodigal's true intent:

If you read carefully, you'll see the son knows that the only way that he can get back into a relationship with the father is if he deals with this dual debt.... First of all he says, "Make me like one of your hired men." He wants to pay back the financial debt. He doesn't want the father to assume the debt, he says "I'm going to pay it back." ... He's trying to pay it back.[\[36\]](#)

This is pure conjecture. The purpose of the three parables of *Luke 15* (the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and the Lost Son), was to show that Jesus preached to sinners because "joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth" (*Luke 15:7*), and "there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth" (*Luke 15:10*). It is His delight to run after them. This is why the Father in *Luke 15* ran out to greet his son and celebrated his return—rejoicing over a sinner who repented.

The younger brother in the Parable is a model of true repentance, signifying the authentic repentance of the harlots and tax collectors (*Matthew* 21:28-32) with whom Jesus associated. Jesus placed this illustration before the Scribes and Pharisees, perchance that they might emulate it. That an expositor could read works righteousness into the Prodigal's return is initially a surprise, but only until Keller's novel hermeneutic is understood. Given his myopia, it is no surprise at all to find that Keller sees the younger brother as just another legalist. When all you have is a hammer, everything starts to look like a nail. Under that constraint, even the repentant Prodigal is said to be a legalist.

Remarkably, Keller continues his exposition by explaining that Jesus intentionally left someone out of the Parable, and that Keller knows whom He left out, and why He left him out:

Jesus deliberately left someone out of the Parable. He did this so that we would look for him and, finding him, find our way home at last... [When] we hear about the plight of the lost son, we are fully prepared to expect that someone will set out to search for him. No one does. It is startling, and Jesus meant it to be so.[\[37\]](#)

Keller ultimately concludes that Jesus left Himself, our true Elder Brother, out of the Parable that we might seek Him.[\[38\]](#) This is troubling for two reasons. First, Jesus *did not leave Himself out at all*. He spoke the parables to the Pharisees when they questioned why He associated with the unwashed (*Luke* 15:2). The three parables show Jesus as three different characters in three different situations, *playing the same role*, seeking and saving that which was lost: the Shepherd seeking the lost sheep, the Woman seeking the lost coin, and the Father, running out to the lost son. In all three cases, there was rejoicing because what was lost was found, and it is Jesus in all three parables doing the finding and rejoicing.

Second, and more troubling, is that when expositors think to know what Jesus meant by what He left out—and then provide it for the hearer—they run the danger of simply reinforcing what they already believed by inserting their own thinking into the Scripture, and then preaching it as such. Roman Catholics

and Orthodox, by way of example, have been known to teach that Jesus may have left the mother out of the story that we might seek her—whether she be Mother Mary or Mother Church^[39] depends on the predisposition of the expositor. It certainly is not found in the text, yet how can we object to these, and not to Keller as well? Such are the dangers of his hermeneutic.

Just as Tchividjian did, Keller also presses Luther into service to advance the movement. Keller, like Tchividjian, believes that the means of sanctification is essentially by hearing about our justification:

I believe the classical Reformed view—that on the one hand, sanctification is not by “works” but by a continuous re-orienting ourselves to our justification.... When we feed on, remember, and live in accordance with our justification, it mortifies our idols and fills us with an inner joy and desire to please and resemble our Lord through obedience.^[40]

Now we are only too happy to affirm that sanctification is not by works, and further, not even by works done in faith. Rather, we affirm with Jesus that sanctification is by the truth (*John* 17:17), and that works are the fruit of the Word in the life of a believer by the power of the indwelling Spirit. We are even willing to acknowledge that *part* of our sanctification is by learning what the Word says about our justification, which informs us of our right standing with God, even as we struggle in sin. Where Keller goes wrong, however, is that he essentially teaches that *all* sanctification is by hearing about justification, and would have Luther support him in this. Consider, for example, “The Centrality of the Gospel,” Keller’s widely circulated paper on the meaning of *Galatians* 2:14 from 2000:

In *Galatians* 2:14, Paul lays down a powerful principle. He deals with Peter’s racial pride and cowardice by declaring that he was not living “in line with the truth of the gospel.” From this we see that the Christian life is a process of renewing every dimension of our life—spiritual, psychological, corporate, social—by thinking, hoping, and living out the “lines” or ramifications of the gospel. The gospel is to be applied to every

area of thinking, feeling, relating, working, and behaving. The implications and applications of Galatians 2:14 are vast.[\[41\]](#)

Indeed, the implications of *Galatians* 2:14 are vast—so vast that hearing about justification is said by Keller to be the implied means of sanctification. To bolster this position, he concludes his study of *Galatians* 2:14 by invoking Martin Luther’s exposition of *Galatians* 2:14 to make the point—namely that the main problem with our progress in sanctification is that we have not sufficiently heard about justification:

The main problem in the Christian life is that we have not thought out the deep implications of the gospel. We fail to grasp and believe it through and through. Luther said, “The truth of the Gospel is the principal article of all Christian doctrine.... Most necessary is it that we know this article well, teach it to others, and beat it into their heads continually” (Luther on Galatians 2:14f).... So the key to continual, deeper spiritual renewal is *continual rediscovery of the gospel*.[\[42\]](#)

Clearly, it appears, Luther supports Keller, and Keller uses the full weight of Luther’s exposition of *Galatians* 2:14 to conclude that “all deadness, divisiveness, fear, pride, [and] spiritual stagnation, in the church and in your life” is because justification has not been thoroughly beaten into the heads of believers.[\[43\]](#)

We agree, of course, that learning more about justification was *part* of Peter’s sanctification in *Galatians* 2:14. We cannot agree, however, that “*all* deadness, divisiveness, fear, pride, [and] spiritual stagnation” can be so diagnosed. But that is not the only problem with Keller’s use of Luther here. The larger problem is that *Luther did not say this about Galatians 2:14*. Keller does not appear to realize that he is quoting Luther’s exposition of *Galatians* 2:4-5 about the false brethren, and not Luther’s exposition of *Galatians* 2:14 about Peter. What we find when we visit Luther on *Galatians* 2:4 is that “beating it in” was not what Luther prescribed for sanctification at all, but what Luther prescribed as a defense against the false brethren who were harassing the church on every side *on the doctrine of justification*. In this section of his commentary, Luther rails against the pope, Papists, popish schoolmen, Anabaptists, heretics, false apostles,

and “our adversaries” who “say, that we must believe in Christ, and that faith is the foundation of our salvation: but it justifieth not, except it be furnished with charity.” [44] And then he concludes with this exhortation for the church to be equipped to “cry against” the error, for the doctrine of justification is so tender, and so easily wounded:

Wherefore, like as our adversaries will not leave this free unto us, that only faith in Christ justifieth; so on the other side, neither will we nor can we give place unto them, that faith furnished with charity justifieth. Here we will, and we ought also to be rebellious and obstinate against them, for else we should lose the truth of the gospel.... But because we cannot obtain this at their hands, we again for our part will not yield unto them one hair’s breadth...he suffered and died to deliver me from sin and death. The gospel willeth me to receive this, and to believe it. And this is the truth of the gospel. It is also the principal article of all Christian doctrine, wherein the knowledge of all godliness consisteth. *Most necessary is it, therefore, that we should know this article well, teach it unto others, and beat it into their heads continually. For as it is very tender, so it is soon hurt.* This Paul had well tried, and of this have all the godly also good experience... moreover, to add that life and salvation, or death and damnation, consisteth in the observation of [the pope’s traditions], is a devlish superstition, and full of blasphemy. *Whoso will not cry against this, accursed be he.* [45]

Here again, we have a prominent teacher invoking a giant of the faith on justification, extracting him from his original context, and then applying his words to a new view on sanctification. That this is no small issue is evidenced by how widely the misattribution has spread. It is a tribute to Keller’s great influence that studies on *Galatians*, sermons, church planting proposals, ministry resources, training materials and blogs cite and recite Keller on Luther on *Galatians* 2:14f, without checking to see if what he has said is correct. By way of example, we note that Tchividjian repeats Keller’s error uncorrected at the Gospel Coalition blog:

Keller writes: “Luther says, ‘The truth of the Gospel is the principle article of all Christian doctrine.... Most necessary is it

that we know this article well, teach it to others, and beat it into their heads continually.’ (on Gal.2:14f).”[\[46\]](#)

Then another blogger posts Tchividjian on Keller, uncorrected, a week later:

To emphasize the point, Tchividjian quotes some of Tim Keller's comments... “Luther says, ‘The truth of the Gospel is the principle article of all Christian doctrine.... Most necessary is it that we know this article well, teach it to others, and beat it into their heads continually’ (on Gal.2:14f).”[\[47\]](#)

We could argue, we believe correctly, that each man should be double-checking the references to see if they are true before passing them on, but above even this, we believe that Keller has truly missed Luther’s thoughts on sanctification in *Galatians* 2:14. Luther had a much more balanced view *as indicated by his actual comments on this verse*, where he reasons earnestly in a manner incompatible with Keller’s misattribution. Luther states not that justification needed to be beaten in, but rather, that a balanced and an appropriate distinction between Law and Gospel is what Christians must have, lest they conclude that all they need for sanctification is more Gospel:

Wherefore, if the question be concerning the matter of faith or conscience, let us utterly exclude the law, and leave it on earth; but, if we have to do with works, then let us lighten the lantern of works and of the righteousness of the law. So let the sun and the inestimable light of the Gospel and grace shine in the day, and the lantern of the law in the night.... This place, touching the difference between law and Gospel, is very necessary to be known, for it containeth the sum of all Christian doctrine. Wherefore let all that love and fear God, diligently learn to discern the one from the other.... Wherefore, when thy conscience is terrified with sin...[l]et the law now depart, and let the Gospel come...[b]ut...when external duties must be done, *there is no time to hearken to the Gospel*; then thou must follow thy vocation, and the works thereof.[\[48\]](#)

Note that Luther explicitly denies what Keller had him affirming. Keller had Luther affirming the need for more Gospel in this verse, but we find instead that Luther called for

better instruction in both Law and Gospel for sanctification. Indeed we share Luther's concern that some preachers, in their unbalanced hermeneutic, "do not explain the law and the promises of God to such an end, and in such a spirit, that men may learn whence repentance and grace are to come":

For not one word of God only, but both, should be preached; new and old things should be brought out of the treasury, as well the voice of the law as the word of grace. The voice of the law should be brought forward, that men may be terrified and brought to a knowledge of their sins, and thence be converted to penitence *and to a better manner of life*. But we must not stop here; that would be to wound only and not to bind up, to strike and not to heal, to kill and not to make alive, to bring down to hell and not to bring back, to humble and not to exalt. Therefore the word of grace and of the promised remission of sin must also be preached, in order to teach and set up faith, since without that word contrition, penitence, *and all other duties*, are performed and taught in vain. There still remain, it is true, preachers of repentance and grace, but they do not explain the law and the promises of God to such an end, and in such a spirit, that men may learn whence repentance and grace are to come. For repentance comes from the law of God, but faith or grace from the promises of God, as it is said, "Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. x. 17).[\[49\]](#)

To Luther, that "word of God" that sanctifies us must include both Law and Gospel—not Gospel only, and not "grace, grace, grace" only. Thus does Keller join Brown and Tchividjian in extracting a quote from its original context, pressing it into service for a new view on sanctification in a manner that the author explicitly rejected, and missing the original intent in the process.