

**Marcin Walczak**

Katolicki Uniwersytet Lubelski Jana Pawła II

marwal8@wp.pl

ORCID: 0000-0002-8189-6392

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## Theological Implications of the New Perspective on Paul\*

### Teologiczne implikacje nurtu *New Perspective on Paul*

**Abstract.** The release of E.P. Sanders' groundbreaking *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* in 1977 inaugurated a new perspective on Paul. This current interpretation of Paul's thought has had a great impact on modern understanding of the Bible, even in the presence of zealous polemicists and opponents of this interpretation. This new perspective differs from the old one as it tries to look at Paul not through the prism of later theological disputes, especially those related to the beginning of the Reformation, but in the real-life context and ideological background of the apostle. Therefore, researchers emphasize, above all, the Jewish nature of his thought, showing that Paul did not oppose Judaism as such, but rather reinterpreted it in the key of the events of Jesus as the Messiah. At the same time, Paul is considered to be the father of Christian theology. Then what are the implications for systematic theology from the new perspective on Paul? This article attempts to answer this question based on the theses of key representatives of the current thought, such as E.P. Sanders, J.D.G. Dunn, and N.T. Wright.

**Streszczenie.** Ukazanie się pracy E.P. Sandersa *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* w 1977 roku rozpoczęło nową perspektywę w spojrzeniu na Pawła Apostoła. Ten współczesny nurt interpretacji myśli Pawła odegrał dużą rolę we współczesnej egzegezie Nowego Testamentu, nawet jeśli faktem jest, że Nowa Perspektywa ma swoich gorliwych przeciwników i oponentów. Nowa Perspektywa różni się od starej tym, że próbuje patrzeć na Pawła nie przez pryzmat późniejszych dysput teologicznych, zwłaszcza tych związanych z początkami reformacji, ale w realnym kontekście ideowym życia i misji Apostoła. Tym samym badacze pokazują przede wszystkim żydowski charakter myśli Pawła, wskazując, że Apostoł nie opozycjonował się wobec judaizmu jako takiego, ale raczej reinterpretował go w kluczu wydarzenia Chrystusa. Jednocześnie Pawła uważa się za ojca teologii chrześcijańskiej. Jakie są implikacje teologiczne wpływające z nurtu zwa-

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nego *New Perspective on Paul*? Niniejszy artykuł próbuje odpowiedzieć na to pytanie w oparciu o tezy kluczowych przedstawicieli omawianego nurtu, takich jak E.P. Sanders, J.D.G. Dunn i N.T. Wright.

**Keywords:** New Perspective on Paul, Paul the Apostle, theology and exegesis, E.P. Sanders, N.T. Wright, J.D.G. Dunn.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Nowa Perspektywa Pawła, Paweł Apostoła, teologia i egzegeza, E.P. Sanders, N.T. Wright, J.D.G. Dunn.

There is no doubt that the apostle Paul himself and his thought built the foundations of Christian theology for centuries to come. It was on his ideas, concepts and convictions that Christian thought of all subsequent epochs, especially those of the Reformers of the sixteenth century, led by Martin Luther, were largely based. Paul's thought, however, remains largely unfathomable, complex, intricate, and controversial in interpretation. In recent decades, many new trends have emerged in the interpretation of Paul's thought. Some of them call into question the basic theses of the centuries-old tradition of interpreting the apostle's writings. A trend that has left a particularly strong mark on the modern exegesis of Paul's letters is the so-called New Perspective on Paul.<sup>1</sup> Its influence on the modern understanding of Paul's thought cannot be denied, even if there are many opponents of this approach (Westerholm 2013; Cara 2017; Waters 2004; Das 2010).<sup>2</sup> As Westerholm concludes: "That there is little consensus on the 'new perspective' is apparent enough" (Westerholm 2017, 231). Nevertheless, if systematic theology really wants to be based on biblical tradition, it must not lose touch with the discoveries of exegetes. This does not mean that every exegetical thesis must be considered by the systematic theologian. In the case of the New Perspective on Paul, however, we are dealing with a very serious theory, even if not recognized

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<sup>1</sup> The new perspective contains a number of studies, articles, monographs, polemics and discussions. It would be impossible to provide a complete bibliography of the entire current of research at this point. An extensive bibliography was collected by B.J. Oropeza on his profile on the Academia portal (Oropeza 2020). This paper will focus on the work of the three main representatives of the new perspective on Paul, namely, E.P. Sanders, J.D.G. Dunn and N.T. Wright.

<sup>2</sup> The most important contribution to the polemics of with the new perspective is a two-volume multi-author work: Carson – O'Brien – Seifrid (eds.), *Justification and Variegated Nomism. Volume I; Volume II* (2001; 2004).

by all researchers. This is undoubtedly a theory worth considering in systematic theology. Although Catholic theology – and this is the trend that present reflections fall under – is not subject to the principle of *sola Scriptura* and is not limited to the study of Sacred Scripture, it cannot fail to take into account the important discoveries of exegesis. This is also the case here – the new perspective on Paul demands assimilation within systematic theology. Cornelis P. Venema even wrote: “One of the greatest challenges facing the contemporary Church, then, is the emergence of a new perspective on Paul” (Venema 2006a, 2). In any case, Paul’s thought constitutes a permanent point of reference for Christian theology, and therefore theologians cannot be indifferent to how this thought is interpreted by exegetes today. The works of the New Perspective on Paul are undoubtedly a valuable counterbalance to the old perspective, even if sometimes they seem to propose solutions that are too radical and exaggerated. An exaggerated focus on the New Perspective can make Paul appear to be almost the same Jew he was before his encounter with Christ. It is worth remembering and avoiding this threat, emphasizing both a certain continuity in Paul’s views and the radical novelty in his thought brought about by the Damascus event. Regardless, the fact is that the work of scholars such as Sanders, Dunn, and Wright left a significant mark on how biblical scholars understand Paul’s ideas today.

It is reasonable, however, to ask whether they have also left their mark on systematic theology. Since it wants to be based on the biblical message, and since it refers strongly to the ideas of Paul, one cannot help but ask whether it understands these ideas correctly, i.e., whether it assimilates what the apostle actually meant when he wrote his letters. Building bridges between exegesis and systematic theology is a frequently raised postulate today, especially in the matter of Jesus Quest and its influence on Christology (see: Skierkowski 2013, 182–194). It is hard to disagree that the search for the truth of the historical Jesus is important for systematic theology. The same must be true of the search for the truth of historical Paul, his real beliefs and ideas, and the actual context of his life and activities.<sup>3</sup>

The purpose of this study is to show the theological implications of the New Perspective on Paul. This problem has already been discussed in the academic

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<sup>3</sup> Even if someone will mainly see danger in that historical approach. See: Cara 2017, 205, where the author warns evangelical churches against New Perspective as a trend that holds a “low view” of the historical accuracy of the Bible. An example of this approach has to be denying Paul’s authorship of the Pastoral Letters.

literature, but most often in a limited perspective, for example in the key of a given issue or in the context of a specific Christian denomination (Tleane 2018; Kok 2010; Golea 2011). This article is an attempt to show in general theological meaning of the New Perspective on Paul. That kind of research is important to systematic theology because it builds bridges between it and modern exegesis. The article is written from the perspective of Catholic theology. The preliminary thesis that will have to be verified is that New Perspective does not bring great novelty to Catholic theology, but rather is a great challenge to Protestant thought. The postulates that flow from this current of exegetical research largely coincide with the convictions present strongly in Catholic thought. They can additionally strengthen them, but they are not a great revolution for her. The New Perspective is ultimately a challenge primarily for Lutheran theology, which has sometimes fallen into overemphasis on the opposition between the Old and New Testaments or between faith and works.

The research method will be the analysis of the writings of authors from the New Perspective trend, as well as, for balance, polemical writings against this trend. Then, synthetic postulates for theology will be derived from the New Perspective on Paul.

In the first part, a short history of the discussed current of exegesis of the writings of the apostle Paul will be presented. In the second part, the most important claims of the creators of the New Perspective on Paul will be shown. Finally, in the third part, the postulates resulting from the New Perspective for systematic theology will be derived. It will be particularly important to look at whether the New Perspective brings any new postulate to Catholic theology, or whether it is mainly a challenge to traditional Lutheran thought.

## 1. Origins and Development of the New Perspective on Paul

This new perspective on Paul, by its very name, suggests that there was an old perspective that was in some opposition to the new one. This old perspective was essentially determined by Lutheran thought, which strongly emphasized the contrast between the attitudes and ideas of Paul and that of Judaism, and put Paul's thesis on justification by grace through faith in the center.<sup>4</sup> In contrast,

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<sup>4</sup> However, it is worth noting that critique of Reformers' approach made by modern Pauline scholarship may be often oversimplified and caricatured. For example, as Chester

the new perspective points to the full extent of the Jewish character of Paul's thought, its immersion and persistence in the biblical tradition, and holds that the theory of justification by grace through faith is not some absolute center of Paul's theology and, secondly, it doesn't have to be understood in terms of the key to the salvation of the individual (see: Westerholm 2004).

A precursor of the new perspective was Albert Schweitzer, who, just as he played a great role in the search for a historical Jesus, also significantly contributed to new research on the person and thought of Paul the apostle. Schweitzer's book *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle* (Schweitzer 1931) was a clear breakthrough in the existing exegetical tradition, in which Paul's mind was clearly seen through Lutheran glasses. The theme of justification by grace through faith (and not by works) was the obvious center of Paul's theology for most exegetes. According to Schweitzer, a Lutheran pastor himself, such an approach does not correspond to the truth of Paul's writings and ideas. The thesis of justification by grace through faith was only of a secondary nature, Schweitzer argued (Schweitzer 1931, 205–226). Meanwhile, the essence of Paul's message is simply Christ, the union of the believer with him and the unity of the community of believers in him (Schweitzer 1931, 378). The category of "being in Christ" is the real key to correctly interpreting the thought of the Apostle of Nations. According to Schweitzer, Paul was first and foremost an eschatological mystic, because the perspective of "being in Christ" is precisely mystical. "This 'being-in-Christ' is the prime enigma of the Pauline teaching: once grasped it gives the clue to the whole" (Schweitzer 1931, 3). And while the description of Paul's theology as mystical did not enjoy a great career in exegesis, Schweitzer's book was the first clear sign of the upcoming changes and a new look at Paul's mindset.

A man who later played an important role in opening a new way of interpreting Paul's letters was Krister Stendahl, who, in his essay *The Apostle Paul and the Introspective: The Conscience of the West* (Stendahl 1978, 78–96) first published in 1963, pointed to erroneous paths in the traditional exegesis of the writings of Paul thus far. In Stendahl's opinion, Augustine was the initiator of the tradition of interpreting Paul in existential and introspective terms, treating the apostle's theories as relating primarily to the spiritual life and internal struggles of the individual (Stendahl 1978, 79). This tradition was further strengthened by the Reformation, in which the key question was how to find God's salvation in the

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points out, Reformers also emphasized believer's personal union with Christ in their understanding of justification (Chester 2017, 421). See also: Carson – O'Brien 2004, 437–463.

drama of personal sinfulness. However, this was not the starting point for Paul, and that was not the meaning of his theology. For the apostle, the focus was on the relationship between gentiles and Jews, and how gentiles can become members of God's people.<sup>5</sup> According to Stendahl, this was the question Paul asked himself, and by taking this question in parentheses, the thought of the Apostle of Nations was misunderstood for centuries (Stendahl 1978, 87).

Ed Parish Sanders, author of the groundbreaking work *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, is considered to be the real father of the new perspective on Paul (Sanders 2017). In his book, first published in 1977, Sanders set out to make a comparison between the religious matrix of Judaism in Paul's day and that emerging from his own writings (Sanders 2017, 18–19). In other words, Sanders wanted to compare two religions – the religion of the Palestinian Jews in Jesus' and Paul's times and the religion of Paul of Tarsus. Today, it is most often recognized that Sanders' greatest contribution was to show that at the time of the birth of Christianity Palestinian Judaism was not a legalistic religion of self-salvation (Gieniusz 2001, 120). The belief that Paul was fighting his old religion because he understood that it was seeking salvation not in God's grace but in human merit is an entirely ahistorical projection. Judaism did not proclaim that salvation or justification came from man's moral efforts, as the exegete showed from Jewish writings of that period. As Sanders writes:

The frequent Christian charge against Judaism, it must be recalled, is not that some individual Jews misunderstood, misapplied and abused their religion, but that Judaism necessarily tends towards petty legalism, self-serving and self-deceiving casuistry, and a mixture of arrogance and lack of confidence in God. But the surviving Jewish literature is as free of these characteristics as any I have ever read (Sanders 2017, 427).

With his in-depth analysis of Jewish texts from the time of the breakthroughs, Sanders showed that the theory of justification by grace through faith is not in itself directed against Judaism. When it comes to the very thought of Paul, according to Sanders, its interpretation should take into account both participatory categories (that is, what Schweitzer called mysticism) and the legal categories in which justification belongs. Primacy belongs to participation, but that does not mean that the question of justification is entirely secondary and insignificant (Sanders 2017, 508). Why does Paul

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<sup>5</sup> For the critique of this view see: Buch-Hansen 2017, 23–24.

persist in some dispute with his parent tradition while reinterpreting it? Sanders only says that in preaching Christ with zeal and the novelty brought by him, he is arguing with those who do not want to accept this news. Paul does not criticize Judaism for being an autosoteric legalism – because it is not—it is a covenantal nomism (Sanders 2017, 422) – but simply because it rejected Christ. In his famous conclusion, Sanders states: “In short, this is what Paul finds wrong in Judaism: it is not Christianity” (Sanders 2017, 552).

The scholar who took up the challenge started by Sanders was James Dunn. In his research, he paid special attention to the issue of justification by grace through faith, as opposed to impossible justification by works (Westerholm 2004, 252–258; Aletti 2015, 62). Dunn brought the issue back to the center, but his approach was radically different from the old and traditional. If Judaism did not propose to seek justification in doing good works, what is Paul actually arguing for on this point? “It had to be answered: What was it that Paul was reacting against?” (Dunn 2008, 5). This was the question Dunn asked himself, finding Sanders unsatisfactory to answer. He writes about Sanders: “Unfortunately, however, his treatment of Paul failed to answer my own key question. In fact, in setting the record straight so far as the Judaism confronted by Paul was concerned, Sanders only increased the puzzle. If the Judaism of Paul’s day also gave such a place to divine election, atonement and forgiveness, then what was Paul objecting to?” (Dunn 2008, 7).

Dunn’s exegetical research led him to conclude that Paul’s theory of justification was indeed polemical, but not directed against Judaism as such. Rather, Paul’s writings, including the theory in question, are the fruit of intra-Christian polemics. Paul argues with the Judaizing approach, i.e., with the movement of Jewish Christians, who argued that pagans who join the Church must undergo circumcision and be subject to the regulations of the Torah. According to Dunn, it is indicated in particular by the context in which the thesis of justification by faith and not by works appears in the Letter to the Galatians. It is the dispute with Peter about sitting at the table with the gentiles that provides the proper background for Paul’s discourse (Dunn 2008, 27). The deeds of the law that are said to be unjustified are therefore not good deeds in a moral sense, but rather acts related to Jewish customs, including circumcision and the kosher diet (Dunn 2008, 125–132). The entire Letter to the Galatians is indeed a polemic to Christians against the proposition of pagan circumcision. Therefore, justification by grace through faith and not by works means making faith the only condition for belonging to God’s people.

Thus, Paul's thought, as interpreted by Dunn, is highly inclusive and is directed against divisions in the primitive Church. Distinguishing oneself from others through circumcision or dietary principles ultimately destroys the community, as the Antiochian dispute has shown. Thus, Paul was primarily concerned that matters of national or religious affiliation were not more important than simple affiliation based on faith in God and Christ. Only faith is a sign of belonging to God's people, not the outward signs of circumcision and food regulations. "The primary question was whether these works were obligatory (also) for Gentile believers. Paul's response had been clear: only faith was necessary; to require works of the law in addition to faith was to subvert the gospel of justification by faith alone [...]" (Dunn 2008, 56; see: Meeks 2003, 92). Dunn's approach has been criticized as being too sociological by showing national pride as a main problem of some Jewish Christians in their controversy with Paul (Gieniusz 2001, 127). Nevertheless, it is beyond question that the British exegete contributed a great deal to the new perspective on Paul.

Another major representative of the new perspective is Nicholas Thomas Wright. Although in his texts he criticizes some of the assumptions of the new perspective and indicates the need to go beyond the dichotomy of the old and new perspective (Wright 2013, 40; see: Watson 2007, xii–xiii; Zetterholm 2009, 127–164), he can be included in the discussed school of thought. First of all, Wright places Paul's theology in the context of Second Temple Judaism, and thus fits in with the New Perspective trend. One wonders, by the way, whether Wright's balanced theses, overcoming the opposition between the new and the old perspective, do not result from his confessional and theological context. As an Anglican, Wright stands somewhat closer to Catholic thought than Lutherans and is directed to look for the so-called *via media*. He also finds it easier than other authors of the New Perspective to see the connections between the Old and New Covenants. Anyway Wright devoted one of his books to the history of the contemporary interpretation of Paul's thought (Wright 2015) as well as many minor books, but his most important work on Paul remains the monumental monograph *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Wright 2013). This work remains an important point of reference for contemporary research on Paul's thought, even if there is no shortage of criticism of it (Heilig, Hewitt, Bird 2017).

In his presentation of Paul's theology, Wright does not propose any spectacular, revolutionary thesis similar to that put forward by Sanders or Dunn, but it fits in with a new view of Paul in opposition to the old perception of him as opposed to the Jewish faith. In his most important book on this topic he writes:

“part of the overall argument of the book is that Paul remains a decidedly and determinedly Jewish thinker” (Wright 2013, xvi). Wright places a very strong emphasis on the Jewish character of the thought of Paul, who did not break with Judaism but reinterpreted it in the key of the events of Christ. According to Wright, Paul was convinced that Jesus was and is the Jewish messiah, and thus the fulfillment of all the hopes and prophecies of biblical Israel (Wright 2013, 518).

Paul’s theology, then, is ultimately Jewish theology, but worked in the light of the coming of the Messiah and the descent of the Holy Spirit. Wright captures Paul’s thought in the three most important categories of Judaism, in his opinion: monotheism, election and eschatology. He writes: “We see the three major points of what might be called ‘Jewish theology’ [...] substantially reinterpreted, reworked, around the Messiah and the spirit. The three categories are monotheism, election and eschatology: one God, one people of God, one future for God’s world” (Wright 2013, 75). In this way, Wright shows that in Paul’s theology the most important theme of all earlier Jewish thought come to the fore.

The breakthrough that Paul is witnessing means fulfilling Old Testament theology, not breaking with it. Although to interpret the theology of the apostle’s letters it is important to take into account the context of the pagan world, especially the political conditions of the Roman Empire, and also Greek philosophy and pagan religiosity, the Jewish context remains the most important. Within the New Perspective, therefore, there is also a trend that directly aims to show Paul as a figure functioning within Judaism. The most famous representative of the Paul within Judaism school is Gabriele Boccaccini (2020). The famous work *Paul the Jew* was published under his editorship, in which the authors argue that Paul should be read and understood in its entirety as a Jewish author. In the introduction, Boccaccini writes: “Paul was a Jewish thinker and all his ideas (even the most nonconformist) were Jewish” (Boccaccini, Segovia 2016, 4).

The new perspective on Paul also includes other authors, commentators and polemicists. Within this current, various detailed theories and disputes arise, often concerning very detailed issues, such as the exegesis of the phrase *pistis Christou*. Although it is difficult to call the new perspective a completed project, and to indicate any rigid views of all the representatives of this trend, it cannot be denied that it strongly influenced the contemporary exegesis of Paul’s letters and understanding the beginnings of Christianity.

## 2. Paul's Doctrine in the New Perspective

The first and fundamental postulate of the new perspective regarding the views of Paul is to place them in the context of the richness and diversity of Second Temple Judaism. Traditionally, Paul was supposed to be the one to break with the faith of his ancestors and propose something completely new, which is on the one hand was immersed in the biblical tradition, but on the other completely replaces it. The old perspective is used to seeing Paul as someone who actually fights Judaism and argues with it, as such, proposing a new religion—Christianity. The new perspective has shown how false this interpretation of Paul's teaching is. In fact, the apostle is completely immersed in the biblical tradition, and his convictions are a kind of recapitulation and new interpretation of the faith of Israel, not a polemic and break with its essence (Wright 2013, 616). Paul was convinced that through Christ he had discovered the proper sense of the Jewish faith, which was now also becoming the faith of the gentiles. The church that Paul was building was not some new reality to replace God's biblical people but a continuation of it. Being open to the gentiles was not a conceptualized revolution but a fulfillment of biblical prophecy. Yes, Paul believed that in Christ the renewal of the covenant of people with God was accomplished, but this does not mean that he was thus outside broadly understood Judaism. Also, the members of the community of Qumran were convinced that their group was the only true Israel, and at the same time we do not consider them to be non-Jews (Sanders 1983, 175). Another analogy is from Rabbi Akiba, quoted by N.T. Wright, who considered Bar Kochba to be the Messiah. "Was Akiba 'supersessionist' when he hailed bar-Kochba as Messiah and summoned Israel to rally to the flag?" Wright asks (Wright 2013, 985). The belief in the messianic breakthrough does not make us recognize Akiba as someone who no longer belongs to Judaism. Likewise, Paul, seeing Jesus as the Jewish messiah, does not cease to profess the Jewish faith. On the contrary, he proclaimed its fulfillment and that it had reached its apex. Paul, therefore, cannot be considered as someone who leaves one religion and enters another, or is assuming another. This cannot be done if only because the very category of a separate religion distinct from other religions is an expression of modern thinking – it wasn't the way the ancients thought. As notes Wright: "the idea that there might then be different 'religions' was an innovation of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries" (Wright 2013, 249).

In conclusion, no matter how immersed Paul was in the Greco-Roman world, how much he used the categories and ideas of pagan philosophy, especially Stoicism, there is no doubt that he was primarily a Jewish thinker. According to Paul, the novelty that Christ brought was not a break with the tradition of Israel but its complement (Fredriksen 2017, 30). As Richard Hays put it: “The gospel is the fulfillment, not the negation, of God’s word to Israel” (Hays 1993, 34).

The second important theme of the new perspective on Paul is the discovery of the key meaning of the idea of being “in Christ” (*en Christo* in Greek). Centuries of Catholic-Protestant polemics made Paul’s first and fundamental doctrine almost unanimously considered justification by grace through faith. The new perspective exegetes do not deny the role of this doctrine, which is indeed very important for Paul, but they value, following Schweitzer, participatory categories (Thate, Vanhoozer, Campbell 2014; Campbell 2015). At every step, more than justification, Paul wrote about being in Christ, that the Christian is in him and that believers are together one body of Christ (Schweitzer 1931, 3–4). Sanders emphasized very strongly that in the letters of Paul participatory optics dominated legal optics (Sanders 2017, 456). Being in Christ, dying and rising with him is at least as important to Paul, if not more important than that Jesus died in sacrifice for us or that we are justified. One does not exclude the other and both views complement each other, but the new perspective rehabilitates the former and gives it a due place in Paul’s theology. Dunn is aiming for balance between both perspectives: “for Paul participation in Christ was a fundamental expression of his new understanding of salvation. It was what Christ had done and Christ himself as the medium of his acceptance by and relationship with God which made all the difference. His righteousness from God and his being in Christ were two sides of the same coin, fully integrated in his own understanding of God’s saving righteousness” (Dunn 2008, 490). The interdependence of the two is also indicated by N.T. Wright (Wright 2013, 901). Remembering about an importance of “in Christ” category means, among other things, showing the particularly important role of baptism (Morales 2014, 159) like also enhancing the ecclesiology in the mind of the apostle. That the Church is the body of Christ in which believers share is not merely a loose metaphor but a fundamental conviction for Paul. According to this view the Church is kind of continuation of the presence of the Messiah on Earth. Valuing the category of “being in Christ” allows us to see this as well as to better place other important points in Paul’s theology (Schweitzer 1931, 387).

This does not change the fact that the doctrine of justification is also crucial to the apostle. Proof of the importance of that doctrine is its presence in

post-Pauline Letter to Ephesians 2:5 (see: Meeks 2003, 186). Its reinterpretation is also a great merit of researchers from the new perspective on Paul's trend. The contribution of James Dunn is particularly significant here, as he devoted much of his attention and research to explaining what, in the real context and intention of Paul, justification by grace through faith could mean, as opposed to impossible justification by works (Dunn 2008, 193–211). The traditional view had no problem with this because it was generally agreed that Paul was simply struggling with Judaism, which had fallen into the trap of religiosity seeking to justify man by good deeds (Dunn 1998, 336). By scrupulously following the regulations of the Torah, both ritual and ethical, man was supposed to gain points with God, which would ultimately ensure his salvation. At the time this view of Judaism, as Sanders showed, had no support in historical sources. The Jews endeavored to do good and keep to the Law, not to earn their own salvation, but to remain faithful to the covenant that gracious God had made with them. In Judaism, salvation itself was also understood to come from grace.

Then what does Paul mean and from what view does he argue when he denies the possibility of being justified by works, arguing that only through faith one can receive justification by grace? According to Dunn, the answer directs us to tension within the early Church and thus to polemics within Judaism (Dunn 2008, 228). Paul criticizes the approach that obliged gentiles to join the community to obey the rules of Jewish customs. As Stendahl puts it: "His ministry is based on the specific conviction that the Gentiles will become part of the people of God without having to pass through the law. This is Paul's secret revelation and knowledge" (Stendahl 1978, 4). Thus, justification by faith means a polemic with Jewish particularism.<sup>6</sup> Paul opposes the notion that in order to be justified man must enter into Jewish customs and rituals (Sanders 1983, 143). Faith is enough to enter God's people; one doesn't have to submit to the law (Sanders 2015, 9). Dunn writes: "Whatever precisely Paul was warning against, the thrust of his positive advocacy is clear. The means by which individuals respond to the gospel and experience its offered blessings is 'faith, trust' (pistis)" (Dunn 1998, 371). It is circumcision and the dietary regulations that, according to Dunn, are laws that cannot be excused from being obeyed.<sup>7</sup> Paul's doctrine would therefore

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<sup>6</sup> For polemic with that approach see: Gieniusz 2018, 187–226.

<sup>7</sup> For a polemics with Dunn's perspective, see: Kim 2022, 57–60; Venema 2006b, 200–201.

be a call to overcome particularism and to be genuinely open to diversity in the Church. Faith alone is to be the hallmark of God's people.<sup>8</sup>

Another particularly important topic raised by the authors of the new perspective on Paul is the question of translating and understanding the term *pistis Christou*. This phrase appears several times in Paul's letters and is most often translated as "faith in Christ." However, it is possible to translate it as "faith of Christ." An additional problem is the ambiguity of the term *pistis*. It can mean both faith and faithfulness. Therefore, *pistis Christou* could mean "faithfulness of Christ". N. T. Wright is particularly convinced of this translation (Wright 2013, 836–851). It should be noted that the case is not about some insignificant passages from Paul's letters, but about absolutely key passages such as Gal 2:16. "And, though I do think that *pistis Christou* really does mean 'the Messiah's own faithfulness' here in 2.16 and elsewhere (in 3.22, for instance), the point of *pistis* for much of Galatians is that this is the badge worn by the Messiah's community," writes Wright (Wright 2013, 967–968).

Justification by grace through faith, then, may in fact mean that justification is accomplished through Christ's faithfulness. It is this faithfulness that realizes and embodies God's own faithfulness—his fidelity to the covenant. So perhaps Paul wrote not so much that faith is the medium through which we receive our justification, but that we are saved because of God's faithfulness incarnates in Christ. Disputes over the term *pistis Christou* persists, both on the philological-exegetical and more theological levels (see: Easter 2010; Kugler 2016; Oropeza 2021; Bates 2020). However, the undoubted merit of the new perspective on Paul is drawing attention to the possibility of a different interpretation of *pistis Christou*. Aletti even asks if "Paul has not utilized the genitive in order to connote both relationships: that of faith *in* Christ and that of the faithfulness *of* Christ" (Aletti 2015, 54). Wright's version fits well with covenant theology and thus with all of Paul's Jewish thought. It is also ultimately more theocentric and Christocentric and less anthropological. Justification by grace through faith is sometimes understood almost as if it were a reward for the faith possessed or practiced, which is probably completely different from Paul's beliefs. Meanwhile, the indication of the fidelity of the Messiah shows that God justifies people because of His faithful love and not any of their activity—spiritual or ritual. At

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<sup>8</sup> Fredriksen writes that Paul's starting problem was how a pagan is to become *de facto* a Jew (Fredriksen 2017, 65).

the end of this thread, it is worth noting that not all of the discussed exegetes are supporters of such an interpretation.<sup>9</sup>

The last thread that seems worth emphasizing here is the question of ecclesiology. Initially, this was mentioned in the context of the category of being in Christ and the body of Christ. The new perspective appreciates the importance of the Church in Paul's thought (Sanders 2017, 456–457). Of course this is not a revolution but rather the restoration of some original touches. In the post-Reformation tradition, the main emphasis in interpreting Paul's theology was on the individual dimension. As Wright puts it: "The theological equivalent of supposing that the sun goes round the earth is the belief that the whole of Christian truth *is about me and my salvation*" (Wright 2009, 7). Paul's letters were treated as a source of answers to the question of how an individual can save himself and how an individual can find a gracious God. The problem is that, as with the topic of justification, here too, the *de facto* questions of Luther and the Reformation were imposed on Paul. In fact, Paul's optics were much less individualistic and more social and ecclesiastical. Also in the matter of justification Paul was not so individualistic in his thought. As Stuhlmacher puts it: "the Gospel of God's righteousness that Paul proclaimed is not exhausted by the message of the forgiveness of sins for individual Jews and Gentiles. Rather, it involves the saving message, which must be passed on to all the peoples of the world, concerning the end-time rule of God that the one God will establish through his Christ" (Stuhlmacher 2001, 30).

A pinnacle of the old perspective was the exegesis of Rudolf Bultmann, who made Paul almost existentialist, interpreting him in the key of Heidegger's thought. Meanwhile, New Perspective thinkers, especially N. T. Wright, shows that Paul emphasized the subject of God's people—the Church—very strongly (Wright 2013, 774–1042). The Church is the people of the new covenant, she is the body of Christ; through her the work of salvation continues. In that context Wright writes about an "‘incorporative’ idea of Messiahship" (Wright 1991, 258). Also, the question of justification is not only a matter of the individual standing before God, as it is used to interpret it, but of belonging to God's people (Wright 2013, 926; Wright 1997, 139; Bird 2007, 152–153).<sup>10</sup> Pauline Christianity is ecclesial Christianity from beginning to end.

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<sup>9</sup> It is opposed by James Dunn (Dunn 2008, 43, 344, 373, 415).

<sup>10</sup> As a polemic with Wright's view, see: Aletti 2015, 24–27.

### 3. Postulates for Systematic Theology

In reference to the selected theses of the representatives of the New Perspective, discussed above, five postulates that result from this trend of exegesis of Paul's letters for systematic theology can be made. This does not mean that theology is to be derived solely from biblical research or to be fully dependent on the latest discoveries of exegetes. However, it must take into account what is already part of the latest achievements of biblical scholarship in a given area. Christianity is not a religion of the book, and theology is not a mere product of exegesis. The Bible is read in theology as a testimony to God's revelation, not as a certain historical source. This does not change the fact that theology must take into account the literal meaning of biblical texts, taking into account the historical context of their creation. Despite the fact that New Perspective's specific theses are still criticized and debated, it brought some new, or rather regained the original, image of Paul's thought, and so it cannot be ignored as a source of inspiration for systematic theology. As we shall see, the postulates of New Perspective on Paul do not constitute any theological novelty, but only reinforce certain trends in Christian thought. They are particularly convergent with Catholic theology, while they are more challenging for Protestant theology. Thus, New Perspective appears as a challenge primarily for Protestant thought, which often exaggerated in the interpretation of the writings of Paul the Apostle the differences between the Old and New Covenant, Christianity and Judaism, or grace and good works. It can be said that the New Perspective on Paul, itself born in a Protestant environment, is a stimulus to restore the proper theological balance, which is otherwise present in Catholic thought.

First, New Perspective brings new light to Christianity's relationship with Judaism. In light of what we know and understand about Paul's writings today, it cannot be argued that the apostle was founding some new religion or proclaimed Judaism to be a false or terminated religion. On the contrary, Paul was part of the Jewish faith and believed that he had discovered its proper meaning and fulfillment in Jesus as the Messiah. Paul's God is the God of Israel (Dunn 1998, 43). The question of the Jewish roots of Christianity is obvious today, just as it is clear that Jesus must be understood first as a Jew. New Perspective adds that Paul was also fully a Jew, and his doctrines were not some kind of deliberate break with the Jewish tradition. Dunn states, for example, that the Letter to the Galatians is an expression of intra-Jewish polemics (Dunn, 2008, 244–245).

Even Sanders, who strongly emphasizes the differences between Paul's views and those in other strands of Palestinian Judaism, states that "Paul's thought was largely Jewish, and his work as apostle to the Gentiles is to be understood within the framework of Jewish eschatological speculation" (Sanders 1983, 207). Paul's theses, even though original and outrageous to many Jews of his day, were immersed in the faith of biblical Israel and supported by Old Testament arguments. The New Perspective is the next step for theology to break with the Marcionite tendency, still present here and there (Wright 2013, 754; Yinger 2011, 88–89). Christianity did not appear on Earth as something that had fallen from Heaven, and the Jewish faith was not just a random background on which this novelty appeared. Christian theology is, in a sense, Jewish theology – from the very beginning and until today. The New Perspective on Paul encourages us to always take into account the Jewish context of Christianity when practicing systematic theology, given its rightful place to the Old Testament and the culture of ancient Israel. One of the categories that should regain its deserved place in theological reflection is the covenant – a concept that requires reflection and re-interpretation in contemporary theology (Wright 2013, 40–41; Wright 2005, 25). The New Perspective also helps us to understand how attitude towards Judaism affects biblical exegesis and vice versa (Novenson 2022, 180–196).

This recognition and affirmation of the Jewish roots of Christianity is not an absolute novelty in theology. In the twentieth century, especially after the Holocaust and in the context of the developing dialogue between Christianity and Judaism, there appeared a strong trend in theology to show the Jewish roots of the Gospel. In the Catholic Church, this trend was also reflected in official documents, headed by the famous declaration *Nostra aetate*, in which we read:

the Church of Christ acknowledges that, according to God's saving design, the beginnings of her faith and her election are found already among the Patriarchs, Moses and the prophets. She professes that all who believe in Christ – Abraham's sons according to faith – are included in the same Patriarch's call, and likewise that the salvation of the Church is mysteriously foreshadowed by the chosen people's exodus from the land of bondage. The Church, therefore, cannot forget that she received the revelation of the Old Testament through the people with whom God in His inexpressible mercy concluded the Ancient Covenant (Second Vatican Council, *Nostra aetate*, no. 4).

In turn, in the document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission we find, among other things, a simple statement: "The New Testament recognizes the

divine authority of the Jewish Scriptures and supports itself on this authority. When the New Testament speaks of the «Scriptures» and refers to «that which is written», it is to the Jewish Scriptures that it refers” (Pontifical Biblical Commission 2001, 84). In contemporary dogmatic theology, especially that of Catholic provenance, pointing to the Jewish roots of Christianity is something obvious. Theologians such as Joseph Ratzinger and Gerhard Müller emphasize the integrity of the biblical image of God and the continuity between the Jewish community of faith and the Church (Ratzinger 2004, 274). Protestant theologians are also convinced that Christianity is deeply rooted in Judaism. Even if Harnack was still proposing *de facto* Marcionist optics<sup>11</sup>, Karl Barth already wrote: “he who rejects and persecutes the Jews rejects and persecutes Him who died for the sins of the Jews—and then, and only *thereby* for our sins as well. He who is a radical enemy of the Jews, were he in every other regard an angel of light, shows himself, as such, to be a radical enemy of Jesus Christ” (Barth 1939, 51). As Stephan Haynes put it: “Barth’s understanding of Israel has had the kind of influence on Protestant theology that ‘Nostra aetate’ has had on Catholic thinking about Israel” (Haynes 1991, 48). The New Perspective on Paul further strengthens the belief in the Jewish character of Christian theology and provides an additional stimulus to remember about Jewish roots.

The remembrance of these Jewish roots must also affect the self-understanding of Christianity. Its definition as a particular religion does not appear to be fully adequate, since Christianity in its beginnings was a movement within another religion. Understanding Christianity as something beyond religious, as a kind of renewal movement, can help to understand properly not only relationship between Christianity and Judaism, but also that of Christianity and other religious traditions.

Secondly, New Perspective shows the key role of the theology of participation in Paul’s thought. “Being in Christ” and relating to others “in him” are absolutely essential for an apostle. These are not merely expressions of Paul’s personal mysticism but essential theological categories on which the entire doctrine of the apostle rises. Taking into account the unity of the disciple and Christ, the answer to the question of what it means to “be in Christ” are the postulates that flow from this for systematic theology. The relationship between anthropology and Christology requires a rethink in order to actually, as Paul wrote, show Christ as

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<sup>11</sup> According to Harnack, Paul himself was someone “who delivered the Christian religion from Judaism” (Harnack 2006, 176).

“the firstborn among many brethren” (Rom. 8:29). Theology should show Christ not only as an external reality to man, but as an internal reality—the deepest truth about human being. As Schweitzer wrote, without the mysticism of Paul “we cannot form the right conception either of Christianity or of our individual state as a Christians” (Schweitzer 1931, 387). So, how does man live in Christ, how does Christ live in the believer? These are the questions that theology must try to answer if it is to be faithful to the inspiration found in Paul’s letters. The point is to always see Christology in a mystical and participatory key and not only as a reflection on some historical or supernatural phenomenon external to man. Thus, the entire tradition of Christian mysticism, to mention Meister Eckhart or the great saints of Carmel, seems worthy of appreciation. Mysticism is sometimes accused of being unbiblical, but the memory that Paul’s theology is also mystical refutes these arguments. Also in contemporary systematic theology, the emphasis on the unity of man and Christ, and thus the interpenetration of Christology and anthropology, is nothing exceptional. This is particularly evident in Catholic thinkers, such as Karl Rahner, who explored philosophically and theologically the issue of man’s relationship to Christ (Rahner 1992, 203–206). In conclusion, exploring Paul’s category of being in Christ is not entirely new. The New Perspective, however, gives an incentive to appreciate well-understood mystical threads in theology and the perception of anthropology in unity with Christology.

Putting the category of participation in the center of theology can be a valuable supplement to traditional soteriological concepts, explaining the salvation of man, sometimes as an act external to him, which takes place through the event of Christ’s death. For modern man it is hard to understand how the events of two thousand years ago would apply to his daily struggles and worries. Showing salvation in the perspective of participation indicates that the Easter events take place in a certain way here and now in the life of a Christian. Dying and rising with Christ is an existential reality, not just a loose metaphor. Christ’s Passover understood in the spirit of participation becomes better understood and at the same time closer to the mentality of the apostle Paul himself.

The third postulate for systematic theology that flows from the new perspective on Paul is related to the reinterpretation of justification by grace through faith in opposition to the impossibility of justification by works of law. The belief that Paul’s thesis is primarily opposed to the tendency to subject believing gentiles to circumcision and to the food regulations of the Torah has repercussions for theology. It shows that the opposition between justification by grace and the

pursuit of salvation through good works is not actually Paul's opposition. This does not diminish the importance of the Pelagian controversy and does not change the fact that Christianity must oppose moralizing and legalism. However, New Perspective shows that most likely this was not the problem that Paul was facing. Therefore we can say that New Perspective "can help our teaching preserve Christ's emphasis on the importance of love for our neighbor and avoid the danger of antinomianism" (Thompson 2002, 23).

Thus, theology can draw attention to an other than previously common understanding of the opposition between justification by grace through faith and seeking justice in the exercise of law. If the deeds of the law do relate primarily to circumcision, Sabbath observance and the kosher diet, they actually mean, as Dunn calls it, kind of "boundary markers".<sup>12</sup> Thus, Paul is against the tendency toward separation and the treatment of religious mores as distinctive features of true believers. Jewish particularism can be seen as a figure of any kind of particularism in which people believe that only their particular custom, rite, or way of life makes them members of God's people. Dunn himself states that this also applies to the relationship between Christians of different denominations.

In general terms the point is that within a larger set of beliefs or convictions (regarding conduct, worship and so forth) it often happens that circumstances force into prominence certain items within that set. Such items may not be fundamental in the sense of providing a foundation for the rest of the beliefs and convictions. But circumstances force them to become fundamental in the sense of epitomising or crystalizing the distinctiveness of the group that espouses them. Examples are easy to cite: the infallibility of the pope for Roman Catholics; the maleness of the priesthood for many Anglo-Catholics; believers' baptism for Baptists; speaking in tongues as 'the initial evidence' of Spirit baptism for classic Pentecostals; 'inerrancy' for Protestant fundamentalists. Such beliefs/convictions become crucial for these denominations/groups because they mark out these denominations'/groups' distinctive identity; they are boundary markers, distinguishing these denominations/groups from others; they are the shibboleths which tell at once where the speakers come from; they are the vital test-cases, the make or break issues which are sufficient of themselves to demonstrate either loyalty to or apostasy from the group (at least in the eyes of those members of the denomination/group who patrol the denomination's/group's boundaries with diligence and zeal to ensure that the boundary markers are retained in place and maintained in effect). My claim is simply that

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<sup>12</sup> For critique of Dunn's opinion, see: Visscher 2009, 244–245.

circumcision and food laws, in particular, functioned in the controversies reflected particularly in Gal. 2.1–14 (Dunn 2008, 214–215).

It is hard to say whether Dunn's statement quoted above is an accurate observation coming directly from Paul's thoughts, or whether it is a certain over-interpretation. One can get the impression that the exegete disregards the issue of inter-denominational differences, which often concern very serious matters. The fact is, however, that Paul's thought in the light of the New Perspective reminds us very much of the need for proper emphasis in presenting and living the Christian faith. First, salvation is accomplished only in and through Christ, not by any religious practice or moral merit. Second, participation in salvation comes as grace and is accomplished by faith, not through appropriate theological views or spiritual practices. This does not mean that the latter are devoid of any importance, but that they are not decisive. The point is not that Paul's theology allows us to disregard inter-denominational differences, but that it can help us not to overestimate them and seek unity by referring to the categories of the body of Christ and the people of God, close to the apostle's thought.

Therefore, the New Perspective on Paul shows that theology should rethink the question of belonging to the people of God – whether the criterion is faith in Christ or some specific rules prevailing in a given Christian denomination. Thus, Paul's thought may have the potential for a new perspective also in ecumenical relations (Yinger 2011, 81–82; Despotis 2017, 344; Gieniusz 2001, 125). It prompts the question of whether only Christ really saves people, or perhaps theology does not present this as if they were saved by religious affiliation and its external signs. As one of the interpreters of the New Perspective puts it: "In missional theology we should therefore not make the mistake to impose Western cultural paradigms or ethos as the means of converting people [...], but realize that Paul, in a time of radical ethnic and tribal sensitivities, was a revolutionary figure in his time who deconstructed such divisive ethnic particularities in favour of an inclusive universal missionary movement" (Kobus 2010, 16).

At the same time, the New Perspective makes us reflect on the fact that the performance of good deeds is closely related to the salvation of man. While man does not save himself by doing good works, it is not that salvation has nothing to do with human conduct. The distorted interpretations of Paul's thought, which showed him to be downright disregarding the question of human morality, must be rejected. Thus, the trend emphasizing the importance of good deeds in the Christian life and on the way to salvation must be appreciated. This trend begins

in the New Testament itself (Epistle of James), and in the last centuries it was present especially in Catholic theology.

The next issue is understanding the term *pistis Christou*, considered within New Perspective. At least in some cases, the indication that it may mean not so much faith in Christ as faithfulness of Christ himself must be taken into account. The thesis that justification comes through faith is central to Christian theology, especially Protestant. It cannot be ignored that for Paul this faith through which justification comes could mean not so much an act of Christian faith as God's faithfulness in Christ (Wright 2013, 852). This means a complete reversal of perspective: people are justified by God's faithful love, not by their own act of faith. Thus, reflection requires the question of how faith is understood as such and what its significance in the salvation of man is. Is the act of faith really crucial in the process of salvation, and is it somehow the cause of it? Disputes over the understanding of *pistis Christou* show that perhaps this should be rethought with more emphasis on Christ and his faithfulness to the covenant with men than on a personal act of faith. The latter was also undoubtedly of great importance to Paul, but this meaning is secondary to Christ himself and his saving action. Theology can learn a lesson from this to focus more on the event of Christ and on what God revealed in him, rather than on an individual's act of faith. Thus, the New Perspective encourages the appreciation of the objective dimension of salvation in theology at the expense of the subjective dimension. Overemphasizing the issue of personal faith, which has become central especially in Protestant theology, for example in Paul Tillich, can ultimately lead to emotionalism and subjectivism (see: Tillich 1958). In the light of the New Perspective, we see that Paul's thoughts are closer to putting the objective dimension of salvation above the subjective one. Thus, again, ideas close to Catholic theology seem to be worth appreciating and developing, as they avoid putting the individual's faith in the center of soteriology. This is particularly important in the perspective of the topic of the universality of salvation (O'Collins 2007, 218–237). The postulate resulting from the interpretation of *pistis Christou* proposed in the New Perspective is nothing new either, but it gives another stimulus for the development of theology faithful to the biblical message. Moreover, emphasizing the primacy of the objective dimension of salvation brings us closer to the center of Paul's theology and the center of New Testament thought – it is Christ, not human beliefs, feelings or religious experiences, that is the source of salvation.

The last postulate for systematic theology stemming from New Perspective is the appreciation of ecclesiology. Christianity has undoubtedly become largely

individualistic in recent centuries, at least in the Western world. The image and moral crisis of Church institutions increases the feeling that it is ultimately about the salvation of an individual soul, not about the Church. The thought of Paul, who saw Christianity always as communal, remains all the more challenging. As Dunn puts it: “We can hardly avoid speaking of the community, a community which understood itself not only from the gospel which had called it into existence, but also from the shared experience of Christ, which bonded them as one” (Dunn 1998, 401). For the apostle, the Church is the body of Christ and not just some loose association of believers for mutual support. The individualistic and existentialist categories that weighed down on theology under the influence of, for example, Heidegger’s thought certainly brought something positive to it, but their overemphasis causes the ecclesial horizon to be lost (Sanders 2017, 436). New Perspective reminds us that there is no Christian theology without reflection on the Church – and not only sociological or historical reflection, but also systematic and theological reflection. As Hays has shown, Paul, in his interpretation of Scripture, has always placed the category of the Church at the center as essential. “In short, Paul operates with an *ecclesiocentric* hermeneutic” (Hays 1993, 86). Although it is difficult for many people to see this, the Church must be presented by theology as a supernatural reality, as the Lord’s body. “It is impossible to avoid the conclusion that Paul’s understanding of the Church involves a deep and mystical identity between this community and the risen Jesus mediated by the Holy Spirit” (Johnson 2003, 207). At a time when Christians constantly repeat, like a mantra, phrases such as: “personal choice,” “my own experience,” and “my relationship with God,” it should be all the more remembered that Christianity also speaks of God’s community and its relationship to God himself. As Wright writes: “Paul’s rethinking of the meaning of the word ‘God’ dovetails us naturally with his rethinking of what it meant to be God’s people” (Wright 2005, 108).

Of course, also the postulate of valuing ecclesiology is nothing new. Reflection on the Church and emphasizing its role in the work of human salvation have always been present in Christian theology. From the beginning, theologians have taught that the mystery of salvation is also the mystery of the Church. Clement of Alexandria wrote, for example: “Just as God’s will is creation and is called «the world», so his intention is the salvation of men, and it is called «the Church»” (PG 8, 281). The ecclesiological feature of Catholic theology is particularly important. One of the Catholic dogmatists who particularly strongly emphasized the role of the Church in the process of human salvation was Henri de Lubac. In

one of his books, he explicitly wrote that „revelation and redemption are bound up together, and the Church is their only Tabernacle” (de Lubac 1958, 113). Also in Protestant theology, starting from the second half of the twentieth century, a trend can be observed to emphasize the role of the Church more and to move away from soteriological individualism. It is worth mentioning that Karl Barth titled the greatest work of contemporary Protestant systematic theology as *Church Dogmatics*. Already in the first sentences of the work, Barth justifies his choice by stating that „theology is a function of the Church” (Barth 2009, 1). Giving the Church its rightful place in theological reflection is therefore nothing new, but the New Perspective further strengthens this trend and gives it a biblical foundation. At the same time, it is an encouragement to look at the Church not primarily as an institution or organization, but as the Body of Christ. The New Perspective encourages us to view the Church theologically, not merely sociologically or politically. If one forgets the supernatural dimension of the Church as portrayed in Paul’s letters, one can quickly see it as a power structure (Ratzinger 2004, 338–346).

As can be seen, the New Perspective on Paul poses a great challenge to the Lutheran tradition, because it verifies some of its elements as unsupported by Paul’s thought. Thus, it turns out that Catholic thought is closer to the New Perspective’s optics, for which the theories of Sanders, Dunn or Wright are ultimately not revolutionary, but rather strengthening and enriching. One can and should ask why Catholic theology seems to be closer to these theological postulates than Protestant theology. The answer seems to be the biblical hermeneutics adopted in Catholicism, according to which there is a clear continuity between the Old and New Testaments, and Holy Scripture should be read in the perspective of its whole. As we read in the exhortation *Verbum Domini*:

On the one hand, the Council emphasizes the study of literary genres and historical context as basic elements for understanding the meaning intended by the sacred author. On the other hand, since Scripture must be interpreted in the same Spirit in which it was written, the Dogmatic Constitution indicates three fundamental criteria for an appreciation of the divine dimension of the Bible: 1) the text must be interpreted with attention to *the unity of the whole of Scripture*; nowadays this is called canonical exegesis; 2) account is to be taken of the *living Tradition of the whole Church*; and, finally, 3) respect must be shown for *the analogy of faith*. “Only where both methodological levels, the historical-critical and the theological, are respected, can one speak of a theological exegesis, an exegesis worthy of this book” (Benedict XVI 2010, VD 34).

As one can see, Catholic hermeneutics assumes reading Scripture in its entirety, as well as in the perspective of the Tradition of the Church. The analogy of faith is also important. Perhaps it was precisely these principles, always present in Catholic theology, that prevented it from overemphasizing any dimension of the theology of Paul the Apostle. Considering Paul's thoughts in the perspective of the entire Bible, and not in isolation or in opposition to it, helped Catholic theology to protect itself from imposing on the apostle of nations an optic completely alien to him, for example, the optics of the 16th-century inter-denominational disputes. Thus, it turns out that Catholic principles of biblical hermeneutics not only do not conflict with critical-historical exegesis, but can lead to the same conclusions and help to interpret them correctly. In all this, the contribution of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI is important, who in his teaching emphasized the importance of the hermeneutics of faith for the proper understanding of the Holy Scripture and its theological interpretation. The most important seems to be the principle of canonical exegesis, according to which the texts of Sacred Scripture should be read in the context of their entirety. Paul himself read the event of Christ canonically, that is, in the perspective of the sacred Jewish writings. Therefore, in order to properly read the apostle's thought, it must also be read in this way, in the context of the Old Testament, and not in opposition to it. This is why Catholic theology turns out to be closer than it might seem to Paul's true intentions and ideas.

## Conclusions

New Perspective offers a chance to look at Paul in his own context and reread his message. This analysis made it possible to draw conclusions and postulates for systematic theology that flow from the new view of Paul's thought. Immersing theology in the Jewish tradition and the Hebrew Bible is the first anti-Marcionite postulate. The second is to appreciate the category of participation, the believer's unity with Christ and participation in His life. Christianity appears in the light of Paul's thought primarily as a mysticism, in the sense of personal union of people with Christ, but it is a mysticism for all Christians, not for the elect among them. Third, New Perspective encourages distancing oneself from issues related to religious or cultural affiliation or identity, and teaching oneself to maintain a distance from customs and external forms, especially when they may divide Christians. The fourth postulate is Christo-centrism in place

of anthropocentrism, in which the faith of the individual would be the most important. Finally, the last postulate is to increase the value of ecclesiology so that the Church is viewed as a fundamental theological reality and not just an institution to support the spiritual development of an individual. The Church is an organism, not just an organization.

The indication of these postulates does not mean that these are some completely new ideas that were previously absent in theology. On the contrary, all these themes are deeply rooted in the entire history of theology. The point is only to reinforce and validate these directions by arguing for them on the basis of the New Perspective on Paul. Interestingly, most of the indicated postulates refer to those aspects of Christian theology that are particularly clearly present in Catholic thought. Catholic theology is sometimes criticized for not being sufficiently biblical. Meanwhile, as one can see, such dimensions as emphasizing the importance of the Church in man's salvation or the mystical unity of the believer with Christ are firmly rooted in Paul's letters. Although the leading exegetes of the New Perspective on Paul movement were and are Protestants, the theological implications of this trend show the complementarity of Catholic and Protestant theology, and even make us aware that it is in the Catholic tradition that a particularly healthy, balanced understanding of Paul's thought has survived. Thus, the New Perspective on Paul has ecumenical potential and can contribute to mutual understanding and appreciation of Protestant and Catholic traditions.

As the conducted research has shown, the New Perspective on Paul is a challenge mainly for Protestant theology, strongly marked by the confessional controversy of the 16th century. For Catholic theology, this trend is rather a refreshment and strengthening than a revolutionary theological novelty. The New Perspective on Paul reveals the truth that denominational considerations are very important in the practice of exegesis and theology. The Lutheran context has weighed heavily on the theological interpretation of Paul's letters for centuries, while Catholic theology has maintained a healthy balance and balance between extremes in the interpretation of Scripture, including the apostle's letters. What kept Catholic theology from falling into the "old" perspective on Paul were the principles of biblical hermeneutics that had been shaped over the centuries. The New Perspective is literally new mainly for Protestant thought, and rather merely refreshing for Catholic.

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