"E. P. SANDERS, HONDURAN CHURCHES, AND HOW WE WRITE THEOLOGY"

Mark D. Baker

INTRODUCTION

The small tin roofed churches on the dirt streets of a Honduran slum apparently have little connection with E. P. Sanders' meticulous study of texts of Judaism. This essay, however, will bring the two together in part to challenge one of Sander's basic conclusions, but more significantly as a word of warning to those of us who teach and write theology.

E. P. Sanders has argued convincingly that in the time of Paul, Judaism did not teach that salvation was based on one's works. Sanders asserts that common Jewish teaching, rather than understanding that salvation was earned through human merit, stated that salvation was always by God's grace. Jews of Paul's time understood that God gave the law in the context of the covenant. The law did not provide a means to achieve fellowship with God. God had already taken the initiative and done that. The law showed Israel how to live in covenant with God, and made it possible to do so by providing a system of atonement. They did not teach that obeying the law was a means to earn salvation; obedience kept one within the covenant. The issue in regards to the law was not getting in, but staying in.[1]

If Judaism did not teach that salvation was earned through merit-accumulating works, then it is incorrect to say that in Galatians Paul attacks a teaching that explicitly stated that salvation is earned through human effort—works. How could Paul attack a teaching that did not exist?

I accept Sanders' argument that the texts of Judaism did not teach merit-based salvation, and therefore I also accept that Paul, in Galatians and other places, was not attacking an explicit teaching of salvation by works. But to say that Paul did not confront a *teaching* of salvation by works, does not necessarily mean that Paul did not confront a lived out works righteousness. This last point, and the rest of this essay's discussion of Sanders' work will become much clearer if you come with me to visit the previously mentioned Honduran neighborhood.

PART I

In the middle of a workshop on how to study the Bible a Honduran woman raised her hand and asked me: "My friend told me that I have lost my salvation since I cut my hair. Is that true?" That question led us as a group to a study of Galatians,[2] and it led me to do an ethnographic investigation of the evangelical churches in Flor del Campo, this Tegucigalpa neighborhood.[3] For the purposes of this article I will focus on a small portion of the results of

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[1] E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), pp. 180, 419-428.

[2] My book, *Religious No More: Building Communities of Grace and Freedom* (Downers Grove, ILL: InterVarsity, 1999), includes a number of chapters on Galatians that are a product of the studies in Flor del Campo.

[3] I did the ethnographic research in July and August of 1994. I interviewed 24 people

this investigation.

Flor del Campo, with a population of over 15,000, is one of the numerous poor neighborhoods that have sprung up on the hills surrounding Tegucigalpa in the last twenty years. There are ten evangelical churches in Flor del Campo. Seven of the ten churches are pentecostal.

Evangelicals are best known in Flor del Campo for their strict observance of rules such as no drinking, no dancing, no drugs, and no smoking. Members are required to tithe their earnings and attend all church services—six or seven nights a week in most churches. Churches will not baptize anyone in a common-law marriage (the status of 38% of the households in Flor del Campo). Some churches prohibit men from wearing blue jeans or shorts. Most churches do not allow women to wear pants, shorts, or short skirts. They also prohibit women from wearing jewelry, using makeup, or cutting their hair. A number of the churches require women to wear head coverings in church.[4]

> What does one need to do to be an evangelical believer? According to a woman who goes to church occasionally, but who had gone faithfully for a year, *One must have a clean slate with God: be faithful, behave well and obey the rules.*

When asked to finish the phrase: "A Christian is someone who . . .", all the church members I interviewed included the idea of putting into practice what the Bible says or following the example of Jesus. Many said nothing else.[5] Their concept of Christianity focuses especially on the person's behavior. Only three church members mentioned belief in Christ or forgiveness of sins in their answer.

Although they all focused on behavior in defining who a Christian is, they gave a different answer when asked what one had to do to become a Christian. They gave answers that included the traditional evangelical emphasis on grace and forgiveness of sin. One must admit that one is a sinner and believe that through Jesus Christ there is forgiveness.

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from ten evangelical churches, I did participant observation in three of the churches, and I interviewed four community leaders. The research was not focused solely on legalism. The complete results of the study are published in: Mark D. Baker, *Evangelical Churches in a Tegucigalpa Barrio, Do They Fit the Escapist and Legalistic Stereotype?: An Ethnographic Investigation*, Duke-University of North Carolina Program in Latin American Studies Working Paper Series, no. 16 (Feb. 1995). A report and analysis of the legalism aspect of the investigation has been published in: Mark D. Baker, “Is This the Gospel? An Evaluation of the Legalism Present in Churches in a Tegucigalpa Barrio,” *Missiology*, 25, no. 4 (Oct. 1997): 405-418.

[4] Although people would occasionally mention the importance of honesty, love, good relationships with neighbors, or avoiding envy, the above, more easily measured list of things is what both evangelicals and non-evangelicals would talk about when asked about the norms of conduct in evangelical churches.

[5] Two examples: "A Christian is someone who does the will of God and obeys and practices what is in the Bible." "A Christian is someone who not only walks around with a Bible, but someone who by his actions gives testimony to the fact that he is a Christian."

The evangelicals in Flor del Campo would argue strongly for the doctrine that a person is saved, not by his or her deeds, but by the grace of God. This moment of grace, however, is fleeting. When it comes to staying in the church, a person's works become the priority. As one church member stated, "The way it is here, a person accepts Christ one day and the next day the church leaders arrive with the machete to tell the person what to do and what not to do."

This emphasis on behavior defining who is and who is not a believer affects the way non-evangelicals think about evangelical Christianity. When I asked Catholics and people on the fringes of evangelicalism what one needed to do to become an evangelical, all except one spoke of behavior and obeying rules.[6] The evangelical emphasis on rules has apparently overwhelmed the doctrine of grace. Clearly, outside the church, and, we will later see, inside the church as well, people think that evangelicals teach that one must be good in order to be a Christian and go to heaven.[7] Non-evangelicals tend to think they must straighten out their lives in order to become an evangelical Christian. A woman, who liked to visit evangelical churches, said, "I almost accepted Jesus Christ last night." When I asked why she had not, she explained she could not accept Jesus because she was a sinner. For her, accepting Jesus and complying with the rules of the church were the same thing. For various reasons she could not marry her common-law husband, and therefore, from her perspective, she could not become an evangelical Christian.[8]

If asked specifically, the members of the church she visited, like the ones I interviewed, would probably say that putting your life in order comes *after* accepting Jesus Christ as your savior. Yet they have communicated something quite different to this woman and others like her. Or, at least, they have not done enough to correct her mistaken view.

> *There were a couple years when I was pretty tense about all these rules. There were times when I wondered if I was saved. If I missed a few days of church I'd be afraid of God* (a man in his 40's).

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[6] The one exception said: "One needs to know and understand the things of God." If I had worded the question differently, such as: "What does one need to do to accept Jesus as your savior?" they may have given different answers. I purposefully did not do that because I wanted to see what was foremost in their minds in regards to the issue of becoming an evangelical.

[7] I am currently giving a basic theology class in Amor Fe y Vida Church in Flor del Campo. I had the participants interview neighbors in order to better understand other people's concept of God. The last question they asked people was: "What do you think God will say to you when you die?" The participants had interviewed about thirty people equally divided between evangelicals and non-evangelicals. All of the responses communicated the idea that God would only allow them into heaven if they had been good people.

[8] This woman's understanding is not unique. In Santiago Chile, David Dixon observed that, "evangelicals reported changing their lives of sin to lives of righteousness before they started going to church" (In David Stoll, "Introduction: Rethinking Protestantism in Latin America," in *Rethinking Protestantism in Latin America*, eds. Virginia Garrard-Burnett and David Stoll [Philadelphia: Temple Univ., 1993], p. 4).

Many evangelicals use the threat of Hell to bring people into the church and then to keep them in line. One man, now a pastor, recalls that he stopped drinking mostly because he heard preachers say that drunks went to Hell.[9]

People's fear leads them to respond to these rules in different ways. One man who goes to Catholic services every week explained that he did not feel capable of being an evangelical. He said, "I am afraid that if I become an evangelical, and later find I cannot do all that is demanded and go astray, I will feel bad with myself, with God, and with others."

Flor del Campo's evangelicals say that salvation is by grace, but they live as if they earned their salvation by their works. Human actions are foremost on the minds of the evangelicals of Flor del Campo. They focus on behavior when defining who is a Christian. Naturally, by implication, they think that God's foremost concern is also individual morality, and although they make statements of God's love and grace, most live as if God's attitude and actions towards humans are dependent on how the humans behave. Stanley Slade, a missionary in El Salvador, concludes that a main reason Central American evangelicals go to church is to attempt to satisfy a strict and distant God who demands their worship. "God may be good, but He's definitely going to punish any lack of loyalty to the activities of the church."[10]

PART II

Evangelical churches in Flor del Campo state a doctrine of salvation by grace, but live out a theology of works righteousness. The fact that today in Flor del Campo what is taught does not match what is lived does not prove that the same dynamic occurred in the first century. This reality, however, is common enough that Sanders is wrong to overlook the possibility that Paul may have addressed a legalism and works righteousness that did not occur in Jewish writings, but was nevertheless lived out by Jewish people.[11] Sanders too easily assumes that if Judaism

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[9] This individual is very glad he stopped drinking. He sees that as a good thing, but he will not preach that sermon himself. He wishes they would have preached more about the negativeness of drinking itself. I encountered another example of this threat in relation to makeup and earrings. Two teenage sisters were told they were going to Hell because they started using makeup and earrings.

[10] Stanley Slade, "Popular Spirituality as an Oppressive Reality," in *New Face of the Church in Latin America*, ed. Guillermo Cook (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), p. 137.

[11] Elsa Tamez offers a similar critique of Sanders. She states that, "Sanders' word of caution is important, but it cannot mask the fact that Paul's affirmation in Galatians that one is justified by faith and not by works of the law points toward an important truth about human existence: To live in Christ is to live in freedom, while to submit oneself to the law is to return to a condition of slavery" (Elsa Tamez, *The Amnesty of Grace: Justification by Faith from a Latin American Perspective* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1993], pp. 76-77). Tamez, writing in Latin America, is less haunted by the issue of Israel and anti-Semitism that marks the work of so many

included teaching that salvation is by God's grace, then people would not have a problem with self-righteousness or a works orientation. Rather than assuming that people will understand teaching in the most positive, or grace oriented way, we must remember that humans are inclined to think they must do things to earn God's acceptance and approval. The human religious drive leads people to distort a message of grace and continue to live as if they must earn the acceptance of God and the acceptance of others in their religious community.[12]

When I compare or juxtapose what was taught and lived out I do not mean to communicate that teaching itself was not central. In Galatians Paul was upset at the false teachers. His concern undoubtedly included what they were actually teaching. What I mean to communicate by this statement is that the problem is not *just* that the teachers explicitly stated "a person is saved by works." Nor is the possibility that people lived out a works-righteousness ruled out simply because the teachers in some way included words of God's saving grace in their teaching.

I began this article by agreeing with Sanders and stating that the traditional approach has been wrong to portray Paul as being upset because the agitators in Galatia explicitly taught that salvation was based on human merit. I then, however, made a distinction between what is taught and lived, and disagreed with Sanders's conclusion that Paul does not attack the practice of

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European and North American post-war Pauline scholars. She obviously considers other issues more pressing for Latin America. Although some may critique her work, or mine as potentially fostering anti-Semitism, that comment would reflect a superficial reading. We point to deeper problems than Judaism itself. I critique the same tendency in my own tradition--evangelicalism.

R. H. Gundry offers a critique of Sanders that, although significantly different from mine, shares some similarities because it emphasizes that, in relation to "staying in," the way Paul discusses ethical issues differs significantly from Judaism. It is not just that Paul offers a different set of rules, but that the whole discussion is in a different key. "Though obedience is integral and important to Paul's theology, alongside Palestinian Jewish absorption in legal questions his comments on obedience look proportionately slight. Furthermore they usually take the form of exhortations, not of legal interpretation, extension, and application" (p. 7). This demonstrates that Gundry has more sensitivity than Sanders does to the issue of not just what is said, but how it is said and how much it is said. Although I agree with Gundry's critique of Sanders on this point, Gundry may be wrong to limit Paul's concern in Galatia to the issue of "staying in." In real life the distinction between getting in and staying in may not be so clear. If the false teachers could lead the people to think they must be circumcised to stay in, it is easy to imagine that some Gentile Christians, or especially new converts, could come to see it as a requirement for getting in. Therefore, Paul might very well have been concerned about the implications their teaching had for people's understanding of "getting in" as well. (R. H. Gundry, "Grace, Works, and Staying Saved in Paul," *Biblica* 66 [1985]: 1-38).

[12] Although the Jewish writings may make mention of God's grace, their overwhelming focus on presenting and discussing rules for human behavior allows them to become rich soil for living a works orientation. Sanders himself acknowledges that God's saving action through the covenant is "more presupposed than directly discussed" (*Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, p. 236).

works-righteousness in Galatians.[13] Therefore, we can conclude that it can be necessary to attack the practice of works-righteousness even in situations where there has been teaching about God's grace.

The common concept of Judaism and the Judaizers would not lead one to this conclusion. It portrays Judaism as explicitly teaching that one's salvation is gained through human effort. This understanding leads those who today preach that salvation is by grace to view themselves as "right," and to see Galatians as a corrective for others who actually teach that salvation is by works. Sanders forces us all to take a new look, not just at Judaism, but at ourselves. It is probable that the teaching of the Judaizers in Galatia included statements that salvation was only by God's grace. Yet Paul accuses them of not preaching the gospel. Sanders' work should lead evangelicals, and others who preach that salvation is by grace, to re-evaluate how much we have in common with the false teachers in Galatia. Ironically then, I am using Sanders' work to warn us against doing what I have accused him of doing--of placing too much emphasis on "official" teaching and ignoring the human tendency to turn a gospel of freedom into a works oriented religion.

PART III

The works-righteousness lived out in the evangelical churches of Flor del Campo calls us to reflect on our preaching and teaching. We can easily react by saying their situation is very different, and the churches we go to are not caught up in such legalism. We must, however, take very seriously the fact that our missionary efforts have produced these Honduran evangelical churches. What does it say about the theology we teach and the gospel we preach that it can turn into something that is so clearly not the gospel?

That is an important question, but it may imply a greater difference between us and Flor del Campo than actually exists. Certainly most of our churches no longer enforce the list of rules common in the Flor del Campo churches. On the surface things have changed considerably from earlier in this century. But, as Philip Yancey writes, "Although the manifestations have changed, the spirit of legalism has not. Now I am more likely to encounter legalism of thought. Author friends of mine who dare to question the received doctrine of abortion or homosexuality, for example, face the same judgment today that a 'social drinking' Christian faced in the fundamentalist subculture."[14]

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[13] Sanders states that Paul's "criticism of his native religion has nothing to do with whether or not some are inclined towards self-righteousness. . . When he criticizes Judaism, he does so in a sweeping manner, and the criticism has two focuses: the lack of faith in Christ and the lack of equality for the Gentiles." Sanders argues that the dispute in Galatians is not about "doing" as such. It is not a conflict between "doing" and "faith." He maintains that both sides had requirements, and to have requirements is not to deny the importance of faith (E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983]. pp. 157, 155, 159).

[14] Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), p.

Yancey's book, *What's So Amazing About Grace*, demonstrates what I have argued in this article. He observes that North American evangelicals believe a theology of grace, but don't live it. They still struggle to earn God's approval. And interestingly, he states that non-evangelicals in the United States, like non-evangelicals in Flor del Campo, "think of the church as a place to go after you have cleaned up your act, not before."[15]

The Judaizers, most evangelicals in Flor del Campo, and many North American evangelicals display a common problem. They affirm a theology of grace, but live a theology of works. The following arrows capture the difference. Humans, in religions throughout the world, live as if their actions are the key factor in their relationship to God or the gods. Humans' actions either earn rewards from God or provoke God's wrath.

Humans ----------> God

In contrast the second arrow represents something radically different; God's action, not human action, is primary. Christians believe that the God revealed in Jesus Christ took the initiative and provides humans the opportunity of relationship and freedom. Human actions are produced by, and are a response to, God's love.

God ----------> Humans

The contrast between the two diagrams is clear, but our visit to a Honduran neighborhood, and E. P. Sanders' work (read in light of that visit), forces us to recognize that people, even after affirming the truth of the second diagram often relate to God as if the first were true. And unfortunately the propensity to think that the God's love is conditional is strong enough that people do not even need to hear an explicit teaching of works righteousness in order live according to the first diagram rather than the second.

We must intentionally counter this tendency. In other publications I have reflected on the importance of doing this in the church community where people live out their faith,[16] but those of us who teach and write theology must also evaluate if we are contributing to the problem or the solution. We must think critically about how we structure our sentences, paragraphs and chapters so that we do not inadvertently facilitate someone's living out a counterfeit Christianity rooted in human action, and we must evaluate ways we can teach and write that will help people not only affirm the truth of the second diagram but also live according to it--live a life of response to God's gracious action.

Paul is a valuable ally in this task. A self-correction in his letter to the Galatians demonstrates that he took this issue quite seriously. He writes: "Now, that you know God." But then it is as if he catches himself, thinking "no I don't want to say that. I do not want to offer them any grounds for giving importance to human actions in coming to know God." Therefore to instead place the emphasis on God's action he adds, "or rather are known by God" (Gal. 4:9; NIV).

Too often, however, theologians do not approach their teaching and writing with the same awareness and care that Paul did. The following interchange, which took place at a

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262.

[15] Yancey, 15, 33, 203, 263, 14.

[16] Baker, *Religious No More;* Baker, "Is This the Gospel."

conference on hermeneutics, demonstrates this lack of awareness. In his paper, Richard Hays had argued that translating *pistis I'sou Christou* as an objective genitive ("faith in Jesus Christ") in Galatians can facilitate people viewing faith itself as a kind of work.[17] Instead Hays suggests using the subjective genitive ("faith of Jesus" or "faithfulness of Jesus") which places more emphasis on God's action emphasizing God's action. He offers this translation of Galatians 2:16: "Knowing that a person is not justified on the basis of works of the law but through Jesus Christ's faithfulness, we also placed our faith in Christ Jesus in order that we might be justified on the basis of Christ's faithfulness and not on the basis of works of the law."[18]

Moisés Silva's response to the paper included this statement:

> [Hays'] characterization of "justifying faith" as a "work" fails to appreciate the Reformation's understanding of faith as precisely the *relinquishment* of the effort to seek one's own justification through any means whatever.[19]

Hays replied,

> Insofar as Silva's account of the Reformation understanding of faith is accurate, my polemic against the tendency to turn faith into a work is directed not against the Reformers themselves but against their historical successors, particularly twentieth-century evangelicals, among whom this tendency is epidemic.[20]

Silva focuses on the words themselves isolated from how people are interpreting and living them out today. If the Reformers did not understand faith as a work, then according to him faith is not a work. In an academic sense he is correct. Written texts from the period back him up. Hays, however, observes not just what is written, but what is lived out. Due to influences besides the writings of the Reformers many people today do treat faith as if it were a work. In contrast to Silva, Hays' approach produces a theological observation that is much more valuable to the present mission of the church, and more in line with the concern Paul displays in his self-correction in Galatians 4:9.

Paul took care not only in the way he crafts individual sentences, but also in the overall structure of his letters. As Robert Hill said, "Paul...was ever answering the question of what we

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[17] Richard B. Hays, "Jesus' Faith and Ours" in *Conflict and Context:Hermeneutics in the Americas*, eds. Mark Lau Branson and C. René Padilla, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), p. 260. The paper was given at the "Context and Hermeneutics in the Americas Conference" which took place in Tlayacapan, Mexico, Nov. 24-29, 1983.

[18] Ibid., 263. Note that this translation of the verse still includes the element of human faith, or human response.

[19] In Richard B. Hays, "Postscript: Further Reflections on Galatians 3," in *Conflict and Context* p. 278.

[20] Hays, "Postscript," 278. Hays offers more in response to Silva's comment than just this observation (see 278).

should do by saying something first about what God has done."[21] In Romans Paul spends 11 chapters writing about God's gracious action, before discussing ethical issues. In Galatians Paul writes more than four chapters telling the Galatians they are justified by Jesus Christ's action not through the law or by their own actions. The context of grace and freedom will affect the way the Galatians hear the imperatives that come at the end of the letter. Whereas their natural tendency will lead them to think that fulfilling certain requirements will make them "true Christians," members of the covenant people of God, Paul's emphasis on their justification through Christ's faithfulness would make it difficult for them to hear Paul's imperatives as a condition for inclusion.

If, however, a theologian does not practice the same sensitivity that Paul did to believers' propensity to subvert a gospel of freedom with their natural works orientation, the theologian can end up writing something that may be orthodox, but also potentially quite destructive.

Millard J. Erickson in his three volume systematic theology[22] places the chapter that discusses the subjective aspects of salvation before the chapter that describes the objective aspects. Why, in the midst of, what Hays calls, an epidemic of treating faith as a work, has Erickson placed the chapter that focuses on the human response first? Placing the chapter that focuses on God's action first would provide more helpful "medicine" in this epidemic.

At the end of the chapter that focuses on the human response aspect of salvation, Erickson states that "even repentance and faith are gifts from God"; and that new birth is not something "which can be accomplished by human effort."[23] Why does he wait until the *end* of his discussion of the subjective side to qualify it with these statements? Would he not more effectively communicate this point if he placed it at the beginning of the discussion (and perhaps again at the end)?

It is not only significant where one writes about something, but also how much is written. Quantity implies importance given to a specific subject. Robert P. Lightner offers an example of how quantity given to one subject can counter-act a statement made on another subject. Lightner has written a short systematic theology book. His discussion of justification falls within a three page exposition on "The means of Salvation."[24] He begins with the example of wrong directions being given to the driver of a fire engine. "Proper directions are always of great importance." Even worse than this driver having wrong directions "would be to give a sinner wrong directions to heaven." After this example, which focuses on the importance of human action, he spends one page expounding on the importance of an individual responding in faith to what God has done. He writes:

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[21] Robert A. Hill, "What a Friend We Have in Paul," Sermon at Asbury First United Methodist Church, Rochester NY, Oct. 12, 1997.

[22] Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998).

[23] Erickson, 954, 958.

[24] Robert P. Lightner, *Evangelical Theology: A Survey and Review* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 199-202.

> The great work of God must be appropriated by faith before it benefits the individual. . . What must a man do to be saved? The Bible knows only one condition whereby a sinner becomes a saint, and that is through personal faith in Jesus Christ alone as his Savior. . . It is personal faith in Christ the sin-bearer and turning from all idols that bring one into the family of God.

He then makes the following statement:

> While repentant faith is necessary for salvation, yet it is not man's faith that justifies him. Faith is not the cause of salvation. . . Never in Scripture are people said to be saved *on account of* their faith. . . It is not a person's faith that saves; Christ and Christ alone provides the just basis, and the Holy Spirit alone regenerates.

He then has two paragraphs on Christ's work on the cross, and concludes with two paragraphs on the relation of faith and works. We could make the same observations about the order of his presentation as we did with Erickson. In addition, however, we must call into question the fact that he writes more about the importance of the personal faith response than he writes about God's work in Christ.

Lightner offers a good paragraph that appears to be exactly the message needed to deal with our "epidemic." If, however, you are in the midst of an epidemic of people treating faith as a work necessary for salvation, why spend one page saying things that people could easily use to support that view before offering a one-paragraph word of caution? Would it not be wiser to give one paragraph to the importance of the individual decision, and a page of "medicine" to counter the epidemic? His first few lines about “directions” can very easily be read to mean that a person must *do* certain things in order to be justified. Would it not be better to begin by stressing the correct objective content of justification—the message to be proclaimed—rather than stressing the correct subjective response?

These writings, although containing statements of salvation by grace, do little to confront the problems observed in many churches where this gospel of grace is lived out as works-righteousness. In fact these presentations lend themselves to a distortion of the gospel.

CONCLUSION

E. P. Sanders’ work has forced us to re-evaluate the common caricature of Judaism in biblical times. Although I question some of Sanders’ conclusions, his research carries important implications, not only for how we read the New Testament, but also for the way we teach and write theology. If the teaching of the Christian Judaizers did not explicitly state that salvation was earned through human merit, but in fact contained statements of salvation depending on God’s grace, then we cannot be sure that simply because our teaching contains statements of grace our students will not end up distorting the gospel and living out a works-righteousness like the agitators in Galatia. My ethnographic study of some evangelical churches in Honduras demonstrated that this does in fact happen within evangelicalism.

Therefore rather than simply assuming we stand with Paul as teachers of the gospel because our writings contain statements that salvation is by faith not works, we must write as Paul wrote placing the indicative of God’s action prior to the imperative of human response--

prior both in the sense of order and quantity. Just as Paul self-corrected himself, and said “or rather are known by God” (Gal. 4:9), we must evaluate our work not simply by asking if it is correct, but also by asking if it helps people living out the gospel as a response to God’s loving initiative. We must honestly evaluate if the way we have written could actually facilitate people misinterpreting God’s love and acceptance as depending on the their human actions.

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