



Justification by N.T. Wright

Reviewed by Dr. Michael Horton

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Introduction

For nearly three decades now, N. T. Wright has been stirring things up in New Testament studies. Despite the persona of the champion of the New Perspective on Paul, Wright is often as critical of (and criticized by) colleagues in this loosely affiliated circle as by advocates of the “old perspective.” His wide-ranging scholarship has been put to remarkable use in his New Testament studies for Fortress Press (Christian Origins and the Question of God, three volumes published from 1992 to 2003). I recall his lectures at Yale Divinity School’s homecoming: the basic stuff of his forthcoming resurrection book. Going about the task in his characteristically business-like yet occasionally humorous manner, Wright’s case for the bodily resurrection of Christ aroused two standing ovations. Did I mention it was Yale?

As a covenant theologian, I have been following Tom Wright’s explorations in a covenantal approach to justification (and much else) with great interest since my time in Oxford when I had the privilege of interacting with him as I was reading his first salvo, *Climax of the Covenant* (1993). There were concerns raised among evangelicals, especially as Tom regularly lectured on the relationship between justification and covenant in Paul. On one hand, I had growing concerns about the New Perspective in general and Wright’s version of it in particular. On the other hand, I often cringed at the Oxford Intercollegiate Christian Union (OICU) events—especially the missions (a week of evangelistic talks)—when the gospel was sometimes reduced to “inviting-Jesus-into-your-heart-so-you-can-go-to-heaven-when-you-die.”

So along came Tom Wright, saying that the gospel is the Jesus Christ is Lord, proved and in fact achieved by his resurrection from the dead, as the first-fruits of the age to come right in the middle of our history. While the Greeks (and many other religions) treat salvation as the escape of the soul from its prison-house of flesh, the world, and history, biblical faith anticipates the resurrection of the body and life everlasting in a new heavens and earth. Much of this has been put together for a wider audience in his book, *Surprised by Hope* (2007). Although the Apostles’ Creed fixes our hope on “the resurrection of the dead and the life everlasting,” the secular media (following Wright’s own way of speaking) picked up on this emphases as if it were a new perspective on life after death.

Part of this reaction is no doubt due a shallow form of popular Christianity that is insufficiently grounded in its own biblical story. Part of it can be explained also by the enthusiasm with which Bishop Wright presents his views, sometimes conveying the impression that he is introducing a completely new understanding of the Christian faith.

Justification is no different. After writing several scholarly monographs on the subject (as well as a couple of brief popular treatments), the latest was provoked by the critique, *The Future of Justification: A Response to N. T. Wright* (2007), written by John Piper, pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis. I won’t be interacting with the specific charges and counter-charges between these esteemed pastors, but will focus on Wright’s book. In many respects, this is the best of Wright’s treatments of this subject. Besides its accessibility to a wide audience, its polemic is sharp and to-the-point, clustering his arguments into a narrative of Paul’s gospel as the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham in Genesis 15 with sweeping exegetical vistas.

Since this book is a rejoinder, Wright's polemics are at times rather sharp, comparing critics like Piper to flat-earthers (19), even Pharisees (20). Though critical of the reformers for having cast themselves as "Paul" and the medieval church as "Pharisees," Wright has no trouble playing Paul's part against his "old perspective" agitators: "Someone in my position, in fact, is bound to have a certain fellow-feeling with Paul in Galatia. He is, after all, under attack from his own right wing" (112). But let's focus on substance. Over the coming sections, I'll summarize his argument under my own subheadings and at the end of each will offer an evaluation.

Justification and God's Single Plan: The Covenant and History

According to Wright, "Paul's doctrine of justification is the place where four themes meet, which Piper, and others like him, have managed to ignore or sideline." "First, Paul's doctrine of justification is about the work of Jesus the Messiah of Israel." The story of Israel too often functions "merely as a backdrop, a source of prooftexts and types, rather than as itself the story of God's saving purposes" (11).

Second, Paul's doctrine of justification is therefore about what we may call the covenant—the covenant God made with Abraham, the covenant whose purpose was from the beginning the saving call of a worldwide family through whom God's saving purposes for the world were to be realized...For Piper, and many like him, the very idea of a covenant of this kind remains strangely foreign and alien...Despite the strong covenantal theology of John Calvin himself, and his positive reading of the story of Israel as fulfilled in Jesus Christ, many who claim Calvinist or Reformed heritage today resist applying it in the way that, as I argue in this book, Paul himself does, in line with the solid biblical foundation for the 'continuing exile' theme. Third, Paul's doctrine of justification is focused on the divine law-court...For John Piper and others who share his perspective, the lawcourt imagery is read differently, with attention shifting rather to the supposed moral achievement of Jesus to gaining, through his perfect obedience, a righteousness which can then be passed on to his faithful people...Fourth, Paul's doctrine of justification is bound up with eschatology, that is, his vision of God's future for the whole world and for his people.

This eschatological perspective not only brings into view the wider purposes of God for creation but also highlights "...two moments, the final justification when God puts the whole world right and raises his people from the dead, and the present justification in which that moment is anticipated" (12).

Wright argues that the "old perspective" obsesses over personal salvation to the exclusion of that wider horizon of history and eschatological redemption: "the theological equivalent" of a heliocentric universe. "But we are not the center of the universe. God is not circling around us. We are circling around him" (23). "If the Reformation had treated the Gospels as equally important as the Epistles, this mistake might never have happened," he suggests (24). Aside from the apparent concession (viz., that the Epistles are concerned with the question, "How can I be saved?"), it is difficult to square his interpretation of Reformation theology as human-centered rather than God-centered. After all, there is a wide consensus among historians as well as theologians that the Reformation was obsessed with shifting the focus from us back to God. "The chief end of man is

to glorify God and to enjoy him forever,” according to the first answer of the Westminster Shorter Catechism.

Furthermore, all of the major Reformers wrote volumes on the Gospels (as well as the Old Testament) and it is clear from these commentaries and sermons that they read Scripture as an unfolding plot with Christ as the fulfillment of the promises made to Israel. They wrote at great length on the kingdom of God, the reversals in the plot as it thickens around Jesus, his signs, and his teachings. I will refrain from repeating myself throughout this review and leave the point at this: Wright has clearly not read widely in the sources that he criticizes and this creates a straw opponent against which his views may be easily contrasted.

As Wright scanned the biblical and theological dictionaries on justification, he said, “Again and again, even where the authors appeared to be paying close attention to the biblical texts, several of the key elements in Paul’s doctrine were simply missing: Abraham and the promises God made to him, incorporation into Christ, resurrection and new creation, the coming together of Jews and Gentiles, eschatology in the sense of God’s purpose-driven plan through history, and, not least, the Holy Spirit and the formation of Christian character” (32). This may well be the case especially among those New Testament scholars who regard the covenant as a Reformed concept. It is no wonder, then, that he singles out Reformed theologian J. I. Packer as an exception in his entry on justification for the *New Bible Dictionary* (32).

Surprising to anyone who has read the Reformers and especially the covenant theologians in the Reformed tradition who followed in their wake, Wright seems to paint the “old perspective” as if it were a dispensationalist scheme. “It is central to Paul,” he says, “but almost entirely ignored in perspectives old, new and otherwise, that God had a single plan all along through which he intended to rescue the world and the human race, and that this single plan was centered upon the call of Israel, a call which Paul saw coming to fruition in Israel’s representative, the Messiah” (35). After all, the Westminster Larger Catechism (#191) encourages us to pray (with the Lord’s Prayer), “that the kingdom of sin and Satan may be destroyed, the gospel propagated throughout the world, the Jews called, the fullness of the Gentiles brought in...that Christ would rule in our hearts here, and hasten the time of his second coming, and our reigning with him forever: and that he would be pleased so to exercise the kingdom of his power in all the world, as may best conduce to these ends.”

Next, we’ll look at how Wright pairs soteriology with ecclesiology.

Justification and God’s Single Plan: Justification and God’s People

Wright properly emphasizes the integral relationship between justification (soteriology) and the uniting of Jew and Gentile into one family in Christ (ecclesiology):

In Galatians 3:29, after heaping up almost all his great theological themes into a single pile—law, faith, children of God, ‘in Christ,’ baptism, ‘putting on Christ,’ ‘neither Jew nor Greek,’ ‘all one in Christ’—the conclusion is not ‘You are therefore children of God’ or ‘You are therefore saved by

grace through faith,' but 'You are Abraham's offspring.' Why does that matter to Paul, and at that point?

Good question. But it verges on bizarre that Wright could include Reformed theology in his sweeping indictment: "Most new perspective writers have no answer for that. Virtually no old perspective ones even see that there is a question to be asked" (36). Although he properly recognizes, "There is no such thing as a pure return to the Reformers," Wright seems to think that he has attained a pure return to Paul, as if he did not bring his own questions and presuppositions to the text. In fact, he advises, "For too long we have read Scripture with nineteenth-century eyes and sixteenth-century questions. It's time to get back to reading with first-century eyes and twenty-first-century questions" (37).

Like many biblical theologians of late (even in Reformed circles), the question of how one is saved (the *ordo salutis*) is regarded as quite secondary to the main theme: the history of redemption (*historia salutis*). Keeping these two aspects together was the genius of biblical theologians like Geerhardus Vos, but Wright's penchant for downplaying the former over the latter has become standard fare. For Wright especially, the proper concern for the history of redemption includes a strong sociological and political component: "Thus, for instance, the attempt to read a text like 1 Corinthians 1:30 ([God] is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption) in terms of an *ordo salutis*," says Wright, "...is not only unlikely to make much sense in itself, but is highly likely to miss the point that Paul is making, which is the way in which the status of the believer in Christ overturns all the social pride and convention of the surrounding culture" (42). The real problem with Paul's opponents was not that they were trusting in their own obedience to the works of the law, he repeatedly insists, but that Jews and Gentiles alike were elitist.

Wright complains that the reformers simply did not read Paul with his own concerns in mind, such as God's plan "to sum up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph 1:10), with the two peoples (Jew and Gentile) becoming one family in Christ in fulfillment of the promise to Abraham (43). If they had, then there would have been "no split between Romans 3:28 and Romans 3:29. No marginalization of Romans 9-11" (44). Again, at this point one suspects that Wright has constructed a straw opponent. A cursory reading of Calvin's Ephesians commentary tells a different story. Nevertheless, Wright states confidently, "And, as I have argued before and hope to show here once more, many of the supposedly ordinary readings within the Western Protestant traditions have simply not paid attention to what Paul actually wrote" (50). The Reformation tradition simply doesn't see any "organic connection between justification by faith on the one hand and the inclusion of the Gentiles within God's people on the other..." (53).

Wright insists that the Jews of Jesus' day were waiting for God's activity within history, for Israel and the world. "They were not, in other words, understanding themselves as living in a narrative which said, 'All humans are sinful and will go to hell; maybe God will be gracious and let us go to heaven instead and dwell with him; how will that come about? Let's look at our scriptures for advance clues'" (49). As typical throughout this volume, Wright both caricatures the opposing view and transforms an important insight into the main point. It is in the Gospels that we first encounter questions like, "What must I do to be saved?" and "Who then may be saved?" and "What is the work that I must do to be saved?" Indeed, the severity of the sanctions for violating the Sinai covenant provoked this concern, particularly in the wake of the prophets' judgments that were fulfilled in Israel's exile. But just as there is a greater exodus to come for all who believe,

there is a greater exile. Wright assumes that we've never talked about the first-century expectations being that of a political messiah who would end the exile and drive out the Romans. Once again, his target is "a non-historical soteriology" (61). The same criticisms can be found in Vos, Ridderbos, Murray, Kline, and host of other Reformed exegetes. However, their target was not the Reformation but an individualistic and non-historical soteriology that is basically pietistic in origins.

Next, we'll look at Wright's complaints about the importance we give to imputation.

Justification and God's Righteousness: Imputation and the Future Hope

Whatever the merits of John Piper's critique, it is disappointing that Wright fails to engage with "old perspective" writers who emphasize the importance of covenant and eschatology as he does but without surrendering the imputation of Christ's righteousness. "Biblicism," the assumption that a concept must be stated in so many words in the Bible in order for it to attain the status of a biblical doctrine, is apparent in Wright's rhetorical question: "if 'imputed' righteousness is so utterly central, so nerve-janglingly vital, so standing-and-falling-church important as John Piper makes out, isn't it strange that Paul never actually came straight out and said it?" (46). How would Wright defend the doctrine of the Trinity? Or the hypostatic union in the incarnation? Systematic and historical theology appeal to a host of concepts and terms that are not found expressly in Scripture that are nevertheless crucial for stating precisely the intention of the whole teaching of Scripture on a given topic. Indeed, Wright employs many constructions that articulate a biblical view that cannot be found in exactly the same words in the Bible.

There may be legitimate exegetical debates over what exactly Paul means by *logizomai* and its cognates (particularly what is imputed and why), but it is generally agreed to mean "impute" or "credit." In fact, Wright has no trouble holding that the believer's sins are imputed to Christ, so why the difficulty with the imputation of his righteousness? Jesus says that the sinner rather than the Pharisee "went to his house justified" through faith in God's mercy (Luke 18:14). Like other terms, such as "redemption," "salvation," "atonement," "the new birth," the importance of justification cannot be determined by a word-count. The biblicistic tendency emerges again when Wright says that "all the discussion of 'formal cause' of justification as against the 'material cause' represents an intrusion of questions alien to Paul and the first century (50). Yet in the next chapter, he even quotes Daniel 9:4-19, including the penultimate sentence: "We do not present our supplications before you on the ground of our righteousness (*epi tais dikaiosynais hēmōn*, translating *al tsidqothenu*), but on the ground of your great mercies" (62, emphasis added). The formal cause of our salvation is God's grace, the material cause (or ground) is Christ, and the instrument through which we receive it is faith: salvation by grace, in Christ, through faith. What is so anachronistic about this? I think it is pretty obvious in Paul—and in passages like Daniel 9.

Over and over again, Wright insists that when the Bible talks about righteousness, whether God's or ours, it's not talking about "virtuous acts," but keeping covenant promises (63). Aside from whether keeping your word is a virtuous act, who is he targeting? [Wright correctly rejects Piper's definition of "righteousness" as "God's concern for God's own glory" (64)]. Wright follows Ernst

Käsemann in arguing that God's righteousness is chiefly "his faithfulness to, and his powerful commitment to rescue, creation itself." For Wright, it is even more specific: "...in Paul's reading of Scripture, God's way of putting the world right is precisely through his covenant with Israel" (65). Righteousness is relational, but not in the sense of "getting to know someone personally," but rather in terms of "how they stand in relation to one another"—i.e., "the status of their relationship" (66). In my view, this is another case of overstatement—an over-correction of pietistic individualism. "God's righteousness"—especially in the Psalms and prophets—clearly includes an important aspect of divine faithfulness to the covenant. In this sense, justification clearly includes not only God's "righting" of sinners apart from their works, but of righting the world. The resurrection of the righteous, which most Jews longed for, is clearly tied especially in Paul to the justification of the ungodly who have already received this verdict in the present. Christ not only bore our sins, so that we can withstand his judgment, but secured the righteousness and peace that will dominate all of creation at his return. However, none of this future hope is conceivable apart from the repeated emphasis of Paul on the present justification of the ungodly by imputed Christ's righteousness to all who trust in Christ. Not only is all of this consistent with a Reformed understanding of justification; it is part and parcel of a great deal of exegesis even before Käsemann, much less Wright.

Now we'll turn to Wright's misunderstanding of the nature and purpose of the covenants God made with Abraham and Israel.

Justification and God's Righteousness: Covenant and Eschatology

Wright sees Genesis 15 as the background for everything that Paul says in Romans 4 (66). So too did the Reformers (especially Calvin) and the federal theologians who followed. Wright is even willing to speak of Abraham's righteousness as "his right standing within that covenant, and God's righteousness" as "his unswerving commitment to be faithful to that covenant—including the promise (Romans 4:13) that Abraham would inherit the world. Here we have it: God's single plan, through Abraham and his family, to bless the whole world. That is what I have meant by the word covenant when I have used it as shorthand in writing about Paul" (67).

Wright does a great job of showing how Romans 4 is rooted in Genesis 15, Deuteronomy 27-30, and Daniel 9 (67). However, since he is only working with "one covenant" and his "single-plan" emphasis eschews any nuance between different types of covenants (a temporal-typological and an eschatological homeland) even within this one plan, he mistakenly assumes that Deuteronomy (the Sinaitic covenant) is just another form of the Abrahamic promise except for its ethnic exclusivism (esp. 67). Wright is most persuasive in his insistence that justification be interpreted in the light of God's covenantal promise. This is something I never heard in mainstream evangelicalism, but have heard repeatedly from Reformed theologians. "As in Daniel 9, it is because of God's faithfulness to the covenant that he must punish his faithless covenant people, and as a result their covenant failure ('unrighteousness') thus shows up his covenant faithfulness all the more" (68).

It's not an abstract point that Paul is making, Wright correctly insists, but one that is bound up with the covenant history of Israel. "The point of Romans 3:1-8 is not a general discussion about God's attributes and human failure," he properly contends. Nevertheless, again we meet an example of a good point swallowing other important things whole: "Likewise, the unfaithfulness of the Israelites is not their lack of belief...The point is that God has promised to bless the world through Israel, and Israel has been faithless to that commission" (67). Paul expressly says in Romans that his countrymen according to the flesh were condemned for refusing to place their faith in Christ rather than in their own works (Rom 9:32). The writer to the Hebrews says that the wilderness generation was barred from entering the promised land because they did not respond in faith to the preaching of the gospel (Heb 3:16-19). As covenant theology has emphasized, the covenants with Adam and Israel are indeed a commission to bring God's righteous kingdom to the ends of the earth. However, it is not only a commission to global mission, but a specific kind of commission to fulfill all righteousness. Adam and Israel were entrusted with God's law, on trial in God's garden, and both probations ended in the failure of the covenant partner. This is the bleak backdrop of Jesus' identity as the Last Adam and True Israel. However, for Wright there is no distinction between covenants: judgment on the basis of Sinai (Dt 27-30), with deliverance on the basis of the Abrahamic promise (Gen 15).

Remarkably, Wright accuses the old perspective (or at least Piper) of down-playing the law-court metaphor (68). This is highly ironic, given the fact that the grounding of justification in the law-court (imputation rather than infusion) has been the heart of the debate between Reformation and Roman Catholic interpretations. As in his other books, Wright mistakenly assumes that the Reformation view argues that God's essential righteousness—in other words, his own attribute of righteousness—is somehow given to believers. But this overlooks the crucial role of Jesus Christ as mediator in the traditional view: It is not God's attribute of righteousness, but the right-standing that results from a complete fulfillment of God's law, that is imputed to believers. It is Christ's obedience, not his essence, that becomes ours. Further, Wright appears to argue against the "old perspective" as if it were the very opposite (viz., the Roman view). In this context, Wright insists, "righteous" doesn't mean "virtuous," but in right standing (68). "That 'finding in favor,' that declaration, is 'justification'; the result is that Bildad is now 'righteous,' that is, 'in the right.' This does not mean, primarily, that Bildad is virtuous, certainly not that he has a special concern for the glory of the judge" (69). Why does Wright keep criticizing justification as "making virtuous" as if it is the Reformation view, when it is precisely the view that the reformers rejected?

Unlike his other works, in this book Wright does recognize that Calvin did not completely miss these crucial aspects: the Genevan reformer emphasized that we are saved by grace, but also affirmed that God saved us for obedience. (Surely Wright is not unaware of Luther's similar point, often observed under such maxims as "justified by faith alone, but not by a faith that is alone"?) This, Wright suggests, is nothing more or less than "what Ed Sanders was arguing about Torah-keeping within Judaism. That is 'covenantal nomism': now that you're in the covenant, here is the law to keep" (72). However, this is a very grace-friendly interpretation of Sanders. Of course, his thesis is that Judaism is a religion of grace rather than of moralistic self-salvation. However, Sanders can only say this because his own synergistic theology assumes that grace is a necessary but not sufficient cause of salvation. Sanders himself points out in that seminal work the extent to which early Judaism taught a view of "salvation" that was clearly dependent on our works (the "merit of the fathers" and the good works of the righteous outweighing their sins, etc.). Sanders' formula was actually "get in by grace, stay in by obedience."

Neither Sanders nor Wright recognizes any difference between this Sinai covenant and the Abrahamic covenant of grace. Sanders' formula does indeed capture the substance of the Sinai covenant, which pertained to the national status of ethnic Israel in the typological land. Israel was given the land by promise, not because of merits (Dt 8). Nevertheless, Israel could remain in God's land only by doing everything contained in the law. The conditions and sanctions are "do or die." This is not how Israelites were "saved" (i.e., justified before God), but it is the basis of their title to the land as a nation prefiguring the messianic kingdom.

Wright also observes, "Many a good old perspective Calvinist has declared that the best way to understand justification is within the context of 'being in Christ': the two need not be played off against one another, and indeed they hardly can be without tearing apart some of Paul's most tightly argued passages (e.g., Galatians 3:22-29 or Philippians 3:7-11)" (72). Even more: "In Calvin and his followers...the great emphasis is on the single plan of God, the fact that God has not changed his mind" (73). Then why did he assert repeatedly until now that being in Christ, and the single-plan based on God's promise to Abraham, are themes virtually ignored by the whole Protestant tradition?

Paul's point in Romans 3 is that "since the whole human race is in the dock, guilty before God, 'justification' will always then mean 'acquittal,' the granting of the status of 'righteous' to those who had been on trial—and which will then also mean, since they were in fact guilty, 'forgiveness'" (90). So it can't mean Augustine's "to make righteous," i.e., "transforming the character of the person" (91). It "does not denote an action which transforms someone so much as a declaration which grants them a status" (91). At this point, one might have expected Wright to announce that he embraces the Reformation interpretation of justification over against the Roman Catholic view. However, he sweeps them together. Unlike "the post-Augustinian tradition," Paul didn't understand justification "to cover the whole range of 'becoming a Christian' from first to last..." (81). Surely Wright must be aware of the reformers' reluctant but firm criticism of Augustine and the medieval view at just this point (confusing justification and sanctification).

Romans 3 is not concerned with "a 'moral righteousness,'" but "the status of the person whom the court has vindicated," Wright insists, criticizing not only Piper but Stephen Westerholm and Mark Seifrid for dismissing the importance of the covenant-motif (92-93). I concur with Wright entirely when he writes, "The contrast between promise and law is not merely that they function differently as abstract systems. The contrast is that 'the covenant' is what God made with Abraham, the agreement that through him God would bless the whole world, giving him a single worldwide family, while 'the law' is what God gave to Moses, for reasons that will become (more or less) apparent, but which cannot include abolishing or tampering with 'the covenant' God had already made with Abraham..." (98). Paul points out that "the promises to Abraham and his family were that they should inherit (not 'the land,' merely, but) 'the world' (Romans 4:13). This is exactly the point" (99). He adds, "It is also forensic, understanding the covenantal history within the lawcourt framework, not as an arbitrary metaphor chosen at random but precisely because the covenant was there as God's chosen means of putting things right. And it is also, of course, eschatological" (100).

Paul believed, in short, that what Israel had longed for God to do for it and for the world, God had done for Jesus, bringing him through death and into the life of the age to come. Eschatology: the new world had been inaugurated! Covenant: God's promises to Abraham had been fulfilled! Lawcourt: Jesus had been vindicated—and so also all those who belonged to Jesus will be vindicated as well! And these, for Paul, were not three, but one. Welcome to Paul's doctrine of justification,

rooted in the single scriptural narrative as he read it, reaching out to the waiting world. The eschatology, though, was as I said only partially realized (101).

The problem, as I see it, is that Wright can explain Paul's contrast between law and promise, Sinai/Moses and Abraham, only on the basis of the former's exclusivity rather than on the conditional character of the national covenant distinct from the gospel that God also promised to Abraham and foreshadowed in the typological rites of Israel's worship. He is right to criticize an abstract opposition of law and promise, but doesn't recognize the deeper reasons why Paul indeed argues for a strict opposition when it comes to the question of how one is right with God.

Once more we are told, "This is the trouble with the great tradition, from Augustine onward: not that it has not said many true and useful things, but that by using the word 'justification' as though it described the entire process from grace to glory it has given conscientious Pauline interpreters many sleepless nights trying to work out how what he actually says about justification can be made to cover this whole range without collapsing into nonsense or heresy or both" (102). But he nowhere observes that this "great tradition from Augustine onward" does not include the Reformation but was in fact the target of the reformers' objections. These sweeping indictments are made all the more confusing when Wright adds comments such as the following: "As John Calvin rightly saw—and as Paul himself said, in the first paragraph he ever wrote on the subject—we are 'justified in Christ' (Galatians 2:17)" (102). Again, I ask, what then of the sweeping charge that nobody in the old perspective really understood this point?

Wright helpfully observes that "this faithful obedience of the Messiah, culminating in his death 'for our sins in accordance with the scriptures' as in one of Paul's summaries of the gospel (1 Corinthians 15:3), is regularly understood in terms of the Messiah, precisely because he represents his people, now appropriately standing in for them, taking upon himself the death which they deserved, so that they might not suffer it themselves. This is most clearly expressed, to my mind, in two passages: Romans 8:3, where Paul declares that God 'condemned sin in the flesh' (note, he does not say that God 'condemned Jesus,' but that 'he condemned sin in the flesh' of Jesus); and 2 Corinthians 5:21a, where he says that God 'made him to be sin [for us] who knew no sin'" (105). "Notice how the sterile old antithesis between 'representation' and 'substitution' is completely overcome. The Messiah is able to be the substitute because he is the representative" (106). With these assumptions, it is puzzling to me at least why Wright would have trouble with "this faithful obedience of the Messiah" and his representation or "standing in for" as a righteousness that is credited or imputed to his people.

"Fifth, the resurrection of the Messiah is, for Paul, the beginning of the entire new creation" (106). "Sixth—it may feel like a different subject, but for Paul it belongs right here—the 'Spirit of his Son' (Galatians 4:6), the 'Spirit of [the Messiah]' (Romans 8:9), is poured out upon the Messiah's people, so that they become in reality what they already are by God's declaration: God's people indeed, his 'children' (Romans 8:12-17; Galatians 4:4-7) within a context replete with overtones of Israel as 'God's son' at the exodus" (106-107). "Seventh, and finally, the point which has just been hinted at: for Paul, Jesus' messiahship constitutes him as the judge on the last day" (107). "And at that judgment seat the verdict will be in accordance with one's 'works'" (108). The old perspective has not had any trouble affirming the abundant exegetical warrant for a final judgment of works. Not only are believers judged worthy in Christ already (justification), but they will be publicly revealed as "the righteous" in glory (as sanctification is immediately perfected in the glorification/resurrection of the dead). The danger, however, is in making faith the condition of

present justification and works the condition of an eschatological justification in the future. In my view, it is more consonant with Paul's eschatology to speak not of present and future justification, but justification as the already fully-realized verdict that ensures our eschatological glorification.

In the next section, we'll spend some time looking at Wright's formulation of faith and faithfulness in relation to Christ and his work of passive and active obedience.

Justification, Faith, and Faithfulness: The Works of the Law

So far, Wright has approximated a traditional Reformation definition of justification several times: representation and substitution, a courtroom verdict—not that people are morally virtuous, but that they are right before God simply by virtue of his verdict, on the basis of Christ. So then it seems odd that he should say so emphatically, referring to Romans 2:11-16a, that “to be justified” cannot mean for Paul “to be granted free forgiveness of your sins,’ ‘to come into a right relation with God’ or some other near-synonym of ‘to be reckoned “in the right” before God,’ but rather, and very specifically, ‘to be reckoned by God to be a true member of his family, and hence with the right to share table fellowship.’” However, Wright exaggerates the Reformation position in order to define justification as “God’s declaration of membership” (116). Though forgiveness/imputation and covenant membership are obviously connected in Paul’s thinking, to declare someone righteous is different from declaring someone to be a member of a group.

As is well-known, Wright affirms the “faithfulness of Christ” (*pistis Iēsou Christou*) interpretation of Richard Hays (117). “The faithfulness of the Messiah,’ in the sense described in the previous chapter—his faithfulness to the long, single purpose of God for Israel—is the instrument, the ultimate agency, by which ‘justification’ takes place...And the way in which people appropriate that justification, that redefinition of God’s people, is now ‘by faith,’ by coming to believe in Jesus as Messiah” (117).

First, in the light of this last statement, wouldn’t “faith in Christ” make more sense? Second, does it make any sense for individuals to “appropriate” a “redefinition of God’s people”? One may appropriate (or better, receive) God’s verdict of right-standing, but how can one’s believing affect the redefinition of God’s people one way or the other? Even on Wright’s own terms, there is no way to escape the fact that Paul is speaking about a transfer of someone from a state of condemnation to a state of right-standing and forgiveness in justification. “‘Works of the law’ cannot justify, because God has re-defined his people through the faithfulness of the Messiah” (118). “Nor, of course, is the idea of faith in Jesus Christ hereby rendered unnecessary: that is the very next thing Paul says in [Rom] 3:22, exactly as in Galatians 2:16. God’s righteousness is unveiled through the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah on the one hand, and for the benefit of all who believe on the other” (203).

Regardless of how one comes down on the genitive construction, the traditional Reformed view certainly includes Christ’s active obedience—his representative, federal (covenantal) fulfillment of the law—as the basis for both soteriology and ecclesiology. So once again I wonder why Wright is averse to Christ’s active obedience and the concept of imputation? He adds, “But in Romans 3:20

Paul does explain the meaning of the quotation [“By the works of the law no flesh shall be justified”], by adding, ‘For through the law comes the knowledge of sin’” (118).

Before moving on to Wright’s analysis, it is worth asking whether Paul’s justification for his claim that no one will be justified by works of the law makes sense in Wright’s view. How could a Gentile become aware of his sin by kosher laws? Wright believes that the “Gentiles” who “by nature” do some of the things prescribed in the law written on their conscience are actually Christians rather than the noble pagan. But Paul says that Jews and Gentiles come to know their sin by the law, whether written on tablets or on the conscience. Thus, every mouth is stopped (Rom 3:19). How could Gentiles come to know their sin if “the works of the law” are merely the particular commandments given to Israel to distinguish Jews from the nations? And why does Paul later mention even his own case of coveting in 7:7 rather than, say, keeping Sabbath? It was because Paul did keep Sabbath, but nevertheless violated the moral law (Phil 3:9).

Wright tries to explain Romans 3:20 in less reductionistic (“covenant membership”) terms than he does, by my reckoning at least, in earlier works: “There are, then, two interlocking reasons why ‘works of the law cannot justify.’ First, God has redefined his people through the faithfulness of the Messiah, and ‘works of the law’ would divide Jew from Gentile in a way that is now irrelevant. Second, ‘works of the law’ will never justify, because what the law does is to reveal sin. Nobody can keep it perfectly” (118). Now he’s sounding like the reformers again! However, if “works of the law” refer only to boundary markers between Jew and Gentile, it’s obvious that Jews could—and did—keep the law in that sense. Paul does not indict Jews for being uncircumcised or eating with Gentiles, but for failing to keep the moral commands while glorying in their ritual cleanness.

Expanding “works of the law” beyond mere boundary markers of covenant membership is further in evidence when he writes,

‘Transgression,’ we should note, is the actual breaking of the law, whereas ‘sin’ is any missing-of-the-mark, any failure to live as a genuine human being, whether or not the law is there to point it out. Paul is still, in other words, continuing to explore the theological dimensions of the situation Peter had put himself in. Either you stay in the Jew-plus-Gentile family of the Messiah, or you erect again the wall of Torah between them—but there will be a notice on your side of that wall, saying, ‘By the way, you have broken me’—both in general, because nobody keeps it perfectly, and in particular, because you have recently been living ‘like a Gentile, not like a Jew’ (Galatians 2:14).

Again he does not seem to understand the Reformation view, allowing only for two interpretations: justification = either (a) a moral quality / God’s own non-transferable attribute of righteousness or (b) membership in God’s family. Justification “denotes a status, not a moral quality. It means ‘membership in God’s true family’” (121). He says, “The lawcourt metaphor behind the language of justification, and of the status ‘righteous’ which someone has when the court has found in their favor, has given way to the clear sense of ‘membership in God’s people’” (121). By why not read it the other way: the former as the rationale for the latter? Even in Wright’s own construction here, “someone” is declared righteous when the court has found in his or her favor. Actual persons are “declared righteous.” That is semantically distinct from “membership in God’s family,” even if it is the basis for it. Once more, in the form of “not just this, but also that” ends up excluding “this”:

But the problem is not simply that the law condemns (though it does), shows up sin (though it does) or indeed encourages people into self-righteous ‘legalism’ (which Paul does not mention at all, in

this chapter at least). The problem is that the law gets in the way of the promise to Abraham, the single-plan-through-Israel-to-the-world, first by apparently choking the promise within the failure of Israel (Galatians 3:10-14), then by threatening to divide the promised single family into two (Galatians 3:15-18), then finally by locking everything up in the prison house of sin (Galatians 3:21-22) (123).

Wright reads Romans 2 as saying that Israel failed in its missionary enterprise, not in its faithfulness to the law. Israel is under the curse because it has “proved unfaithful to the commission (despite the boast of Romans 2:17-20)” (124). “‘Unfaithful’ here [2:17-20] does not mean ‘unbelieving’ in the sense of simply ‘refusing to have faith in God.’ It means ‘unfaithful to God’s commission’” (198). But then why does Paul contrast the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenant, especially in Galatians? In Galatians 3:16, 21-22, Wright interprets, “Yes, he says: there was nothing wrong with the law in itself, and had it been possible for a law to have been given which could have given life, then righteousness would have been on the basis of the law—the very thing which Galatians 2:21 had denied” (126). But why would Paul have said this if the only issue was extending the Abrahamic promise to the world? Paul’s point is that the law cannot give life, because it cannot give righteousness (justification) because of sin.

Where Wright is correct is in his insistence, “In fact, what appear to Western eyes as two separate issues—salvation from sin on the one hand, a united people of God on the other—seem to have appeared to Paul as part and parcel of the same thing” (127). “Paul is not saying, as traditional readings have had it, that ‘the law was a hard taskmaster, driving us to despair of ever accomplishing its demands, so that we would be forced to flee to Christ to find an easier way, namely faith’” (129). But Wright can only dismiss this interpretation of Paul because he has reduced the law-promise contrast to the question of covenant membership. For Paul, faith is opposed to works (and not just some, but all) not only because it keeps the gospel from going out to everyone, but also because (more basically), the gospel itself is distinct from the conditional terms of Sinai! Where Paul sees the gospel as necessarily implying the reconciliation of human beings to each other, Wright sees the gospel as practically reduced to this social dimension: “The promises God made to Abraham were a covenant. Genesis 15 says so, Paul says so (Galatians 3:15, 17); that is the assumed starting point for the whole passage. The covenant always had in view the liberation of the entire human race from the plight of Genesis 3-11, in other words, God’s dealing with the problem of human sin and the consequent fracturing of human community...” (133).

Boxing at shadows again, Wright opposes the Roman Catholic view as if it were the “old perspective” of the Reformation:

But the verdict of the court, declaring, ‘This person is in the right’ and thus making her ‘righteous’ not in the sense of ‘making her virtuous,’ infusing her with a moral quality called ‘righteousness,’ but in the sense of creating for her the status of ‘having-been-declared-in-the-right,’ is the implicit metaphor behind Paul’s primary subject in this passage [Gal 3], which is God’s action in declaring, ‘You are my children, members of the single Abrahamic family’ (135).

Does he really think the old perspective advanced rather than rejected justification as infused righteousness?

Wright does indeed see Christ’s obedient life and death as the basis for eschatological salvation:

The basis for all this, in theology and eschatology, is the faithful, loving, self-giving death of the Messiah. This is the theological point of reading *pistis Christou* and its cognates in terms of the Messiah's own faithfulness; and this brings us as close as Galatians will let us come to what the Reformed tradition always wanted to say through the language of 'imputed righteousness' ...But this does not mean that he has 'fulfilled the law' in the sense of obeying it perfectly and thus building up a 'treasury of merit' which can then be 'reckoned' to his people. That scheme, for all its venerable antecedents in my own tradition as well as John Piper's, always was an attempt to say something which Paul was saying, but in language and concepts which had still not shaken off the old idea that the law was, after all, given as a ladder of good works up which one might climb to impress God with one's own moral accomplishments (135).

"God's promises to Abraham were stuck in the Deuteronomic curse, and could not go forward in history to their fulfillment," flowing out to the world" (136). But his choice of the term "curse" is crucial here. It's not just that Sinai stood in the way of Zion by virtue of the former's exclusive claim upon Israel. Rather, it is that Israel too—like the Gentile world—is under the condemnation of the law.

Next, we'll move on to chapter 6 and begin reviewing Wright's treatment of other Pauline texts.

Justification and the Testimony of Paul

In chapter six, Wright interprets other Pauline epistles (Philippians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Ephesians) in the light of his over-arching framework. In his famous contrast in Philippians 3 between "the righteousness of the law" and the righteousness that he now has "in Christ," Paul designated himself, "...as to righteousness within Torah, blameless." "Ah, there's the rub," says Wright. "What on earth did he mean by that?" (143). "Does that not indicate Paul's pride in his own achievement, and thus an 'attitudinal' failing, the sort of 'self-righteousness' which the old perspective made its chief target? Well, yes and no." Like his fellow Jews, Paul believed (as Sanders suggests), that one gets in by grace by stays in by obedience. "It is vital to distinguish two things: the status of God's people, prior to anything they do, and the life they are called to lead which points forward to the eventual judgment...there is, on the one hand, the verdict that is already announced, and there is on the other hand, as in Galatians 5:5, the verdict that is still eagerly awaited" (144).

At this point, Wright fails to mention a typical Reformed interpretation: Paul was blameless in terms of "righteousness within Torah"—and here, in this context of Paul's specific appeal to his Pharisaical pedigree, we can say he is specifically referring to the boundary markers. In this sense, he was blameless, but all of this is to be considered a debit compared to being in Christ. Wright seems to approximate this view on page 147: "He performed the 'works of Torah,' attaining a standard that he had regarded as 'blameless.'...; 'blameless under the law' is not the same as 'sinless'...." "The keeping of the law was not a way of earning anything, of gaining a status before God; the status was already given in birth, ethnic roots, circumcision and the ancestral possession of Torah. All that Torah-obedience then does—it's a big 'all,' but it is all—is to consolidate, to express what is already given, to inhabit appropriately a suit of clothes ('righteousness') that one has already inherited" (145).

However, is this really what Paul says here? Not exactly. First, Paul does not say that his circumcision and strict adherence to the ceremonies merely pointed to a righteous status that he already possessed by grace as a Jew. Rather, he refers to this blameless observance as “a righteousness of my own, which comes from the law.” Second, given Wright’s rejection of imputation in favor exclusively of God’s own faithfulness to his covenant, how does “righteousness” now come to mean “a suite of clothes” that one wears? Third, according to Wright, “The question is not, ‘What must I do to get to heaven?’ but How can you tell in the present who will be vindicated in the future?” (146). However, there is no indication here that Paul presupposes any division between the question of personal salvation and belonging to the right group. Even in the way Wright states the question, I fail to see the antithesis: If “going to heaven” means the resurrection of the dead and life everlasting, as Christians confess, how is that different from being vindicated in the future?

Wright next introduces his distinction between present and future justification. On one hand, Wright says that the final justification will be based on works, a total life lived. Yet on the other hand, it is a verdict “here and now” that “will be repeated ‘on the last day.’ The works in question will not earn their performers their membership within God’s true, eschatological, covenant people, they will demonstrate that membership” (146). No argument here. This is standard “old perspective” fare, but is it a movement from Wright’s earlier work, where “future justification” is based on “a total life lived” rather than simply demonstrating the reality of justification?

Wright properly warns of treating justification as a “personal relationship.”

It is of course popular to say that, since the language of ‘righteousness’ is essentially ‘relational,’ ‘justification’ actually means ‘the establishment of a personal relationship,’ a mutual knowing, between the believer and God, or the believer and Jesus. But this is extremely misleading (and made more so by all the loose talk in some Christian circles about ‘my relationship with God’ as the center of everything, which then of course becomes problematic when one encounters depression, or enters a ‘dark night of the soul’) (149).

Here, Wright will find only approval in Reformed circles. In fact, we can identify with Luther’s reaction to Melancthon’s introspective anxiety: “The gospel is entirely outside of you!” The gospel is an objective announcement about something that has happened in history, not a subjective feeling that we are close to God. The gospel provokes assurance and conversion, but cannot be confused with our inner states. The gospel creates a new relationship, but it is not itself to be identified as a personal relationship. Wright stresses, “relational” is different from “lawcourt” (226); this, despite his polemics, is in complete harmony with the “old perspective.” It is clear enough that Wright is once again reacting against a pietistic emphasis that he mistakes for a Reformation perspective.

One of Wright’s best summaries of justification appears on pages 150-151:

Paul unpacks the meaning of the status in the four ways we have seen. It is a status of (a) having the court find in my favor despite my unworthiness, (b) ‘covenant membership,’ (c) advanced eschatological judgment (hearing, ahead of time, the verdict which will be announced at the end), and above all (d) God’s verdict on Jesus himself when he raised him from the dead and thereby demonstrated that he really was his Son, the Messiah (Romans 1:4; cf. 1 Timothy 3:16).

Therefore, “the ‘faith’ of the beneficiaries, looking away from themselves and to his achievement, is the badge which shows that they are indeed ‘in him.’”

Wright points to Paul’s repeated references to Christ working in us, God’s grace at work in us, and so forth—passages that are hardly passed over in Reformation preaching. Nevertheless, he writes, “If we, particularly those of us who have been strongly influenced by the Reformation, perceive such language as casting a shadow of doubt over ‘justification by faith,’ the problem is not with this way of putting it—it is after all Paul himself who puts it like this!—but with our traditions” (153). Here the author himself seems to assume that justification includes everything from grace to glory, but “old perspective” exegetes have ordinarily interpreted such passages as referring to sanctification as distinct from justification.

That Wright doesn’t appreciate this careful distinction is evident from his treatment of 1 Corinthians 1:30: Paul says that “‘righteousness’ is something that believers have because they are ‘in Christ’—though it is quite illegitimate to seize on that and say that therefore they have something called ‘the righteousness of Christ’ imputed to them, in the full sixteenth- and seventeenth-century sense so emphasized by John Piper.” Although there is “a great truth underneath that Reformation claim,” Wright says “we cannot press this verse into service as a primary vehicle of it, not least because, were we to do so, we should also have to speak, presumably, of ‘imputed wisdom,’ ‘imputed sanctification’ and ‘imputed redemption’” (157). This strikes me as another uncharitable reading of the tradition, as if it were saying that all of the gifts that we have in Christ must be given to us by imputation. Paul teaches that all of our blessings are in Christ, but justification is in Christ by imputation.

Wright’s interpretation of 2 Corinthians 5:19 appears to be an example of allowing one’s systematic-theological framework to run roughshod over exegesis: “In other words, that, in the Messiah, we might embody God’s faithfulness, God’s covenant faithfulness, God’s action in reconciling the world to himself” (163). A passage that conveys a transfer from “sinner” to “righteous” simply on the basis of Christ’s completed work is now read as our own activity in reconciliation. “The little word *genōmetha* in 2 Corinthians 5:21b—that we might become God’s righteousness in him—does not sit comfortably with the normal interpretation, according to which ‘God’s righteousness’ is ‘imputed’ or ‘reckoned’ to believers... Surely that leans far too much toward a Roman Catholic notion of infused righteousness?” (165). This is an odd conclusion, given Wright’s own debunking of the idea of an infused moral virtue. “Become” (*genōmetha*) is not the difficulty that he supposes; a change has indeed occurred, but it is a change in status, as Wright himself suggests repeatedly elsewhere.

Now, we’ll move on to Wright’s treatment of the Epistle to the Romans in chapter seven of his book, *Justification*.

Justification and Romans

Wright’s seventh chapter focuses on justification in Romans. Among other things, “part of its aim is to challenge, at several levels, the ideological foundations of Caesar’s empire” (177). If we had not made “‘justification’ cover the entire sweep of soteriology from grace to glory...,” we would

have recognized Paul's central point: "God's own 'righteousness,' unveiled, as in a great apocalypse, before the watching world" (178).

According to the author, the old perspective misreads Romans in several ways:

1. 3:27-31 "comes unglued at its crucial joint, the \bar{e} at the start of Romans 3:29."
2. Abraham in chapter 4 is treated as an 'example' or 'illustration,' and the point of the chapter is thereby completely missed, resulting in the oddity of placing within parentheses phrases in Romans 4:16-17, which are actually the main point of the whole discussion.
3. With Romans 9-11 itself, even when Paul structures his argument by questions about the word of God having failed, about God being unjust, about God's rights as judge, about his revelation of wrath and power, and then about his mercy (Romans 9:6, 14, 19, 22, 23)—all of which, to the eye trained in Scripture and Jewish tradition, should say, 'This is all about God's own righteousness'—the point is simply not seen, let alone grasped. Such is the effect of the late-medieval blinkers still worn within the post-Reformation traditions.
4. Then, of course, Romans 10:6-13 falls as well. If one is not thinking about God's faithfulness to the covenant, one might well miss—and the vast majority of exegetes have missed!—the central significance of Deuteronomy 30 within its own biblical context and within the re-readings of Scripture in Paul's day, and the way in which that passage, and the various second-temple re-readings of it, including Paul's, all point to the foundational belief that God is faithful to the covenant and will therefore bring about its renewal at last.
5. Finally, the climactic statements about God in Romans 11 (see Romans 11:22, 32, and of course 33-36) still fail to alert those whose minds are steeped in the theology of a different age to the fact, which even the verbal statistics will tell you, that the primary thing it is saying about God is that he is the God of faithful, just, covenantal love, that this has been unveiled in the gospel message about Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified and risen Messiah, and that through this gospel message, and the radical unveiling of God's covenant justice and faithfulness, God's saving power is going out into the world, and will not rest until creation itself is set free from its slavery to corruption and decay and shares in the liberty of the glory of God's children" (179-180).

The link between Romans 2:27 and chapter 9-11 is key for Wright. All roads lead back to Romans 2: "The journey from Romans 5:1-5 to Romans 8:31-39 is also the journey from Romans 3:21-31 back to Romans 2:1-16" (225). He does not think that Paul is talking about noble pagans when he speaks of Gentiles "without the law" nevertheless following its precepts written on the conscience. Rather, Wright believes that Gentile Christians are intended. Those who actually fulfill the law will be justified. The future judgment according to works (182-193). "Possession of Torah...will not be enough; it will be doing it that counts (whatever 'doing it' is going to mean)" (184).

This "doing" is to be taken seriously, and at this point Wright takes a swipe again at the "old perspective," as if the "let go and let God" teaching of Wesleyan groups (especially Keswick) were one with Luther and Calvin: "And if, as a late-flowering but spurious post-Reformation romanticism and existentialism has conditioned people to think, we simply 'wait for the Spirit to do it within us,' so that we only think it right to do that which 'feels natural,' we have missed the point entirely and are heading for serious trouble" (193).

“The point of future justification is then explained like this. The verdict of the last day will truly reflect what people have actually done” (191). He says that boast of “the Jew” in Romans 2 is not that they have and follow Torah, but, “Well, but I am the solution to this problem” (195). [What problem? They didn’t see the salvation of the Gentiles as a problem in the first place!] “He is not here demonstrating that all Jews are sinful. He is demonstrating that the boast of Israel, to be the answer to the world’s problem, cannot be made good” (195). However, there are several questions that might be raised against this interpretation. First, how does it fit with the conclusion to this argument in 3:19, namely, that every mouth is shut, the whole world is guilty before God, and there will therefore be no justification by works? Second, why are the Gentiles whom Paul has in mind described as idolaters and engaged openly in perverse immorality? All along, the examples Paul cites concern transgression of the moral law, not the ceremonies. Third, how could Paul mean that Gentile Christians do not have the written law, but only the moral law written on the conscience? Fourth, “doing the works” prescribed in the law cannot be limited to the ceremonies (boundary markers), since Paul’s polemic is against those who have kept these—and gloried in them! Finally, Wright says that Romans 2:27 is speaking of “Christian Gentiles, even though Paul has not yet developed that category” (190), but why would he begin an argument by employing a category he had not yet developed?

Wright also appeals to 1 Corinthians 3:12-15. The context is the Corinthian penchant for schism based on personalities. Paul seems to be saying that we are to await the last day, when the quality of the materials used (viz., the message and methods used in gospel ministry) will be tested and true churches will be revealed as such. However, Wright understands this passage as a more general reference to a final judgment based on works (185). The amount of material on future judgment can’t be swept aside, he says (186), as if this were a legitimate criticism of the “old perspective.”

This present-and-future justification motif highlights the single plan of a worldwide family promised to Abraham. Thus, Romans 9-11 picks up where Romans 2:27 left off, according to Wright. God has remained faithful to his covenant, despite all appearances to the contrary, precisely by making faith in Christ rather than circumcision that basis of covenant membership. Though ingenious (and, I would argue, containing important points present in chapters 9-11), the connection to 2:27 seems hermeneutically odd to me. Whatever its relative place in the same epistle, Romans 2:27 is part of an argument that leads naturally from the “thesis statement” (the gospel as the only power of God unto salvation for everyone, Jew or Gentile, 1:16), to the indictment of Gentiles (2:12-29) and Jews alike (3:1-20), with the conclusion that no one can be justified in the present or in the future on the basis of works, but only on the basis of Christ’s righteousness imputed to the ungodly (3:21-8:39). Has God revoked his plan? Not at all, Paul answers in chapters 9-11. Justification has always been by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone—however the revelation of this gospel has been more fully unveiled in the new covenant. Nevertheless, Israel’s national status in the land was conditioned on strict obedience to Torah. It is this confusion of covenants that Paul is always working to untangle (especially in Galatians) and the failure to distinguish them that the new perspective continues to overlook. This in no way invites Wright’s sweeping claim, “Of course, as the literature shows abundantly, summaries of the ‘doctrine of justification’ down the years have regularly answered the question [of God’s revoking his plan] with ‘yes.’ God will revoke his plan! Torah will be set aside as a failed first attempt to rescue humans!” (199)

Romans 3, then, introduces the need for a faithful Israel, since the nation had been exiled for its sins. “It was not so much that ‘God needed a sinless victim,’ though in sacrificial terms that is no

doubt true as well, as that ‘God needed a faithful Israelite,’ to take upon himself the burden of rescuing the world from its sin and death” (204). Once more, one wonders why Wright has trouble with the doctrine of Christ’s active obedience, since its intent is to make this point. “[Ernst] Käsemann was desperately anxious to prevent Paul from having anything to do with the ‘covenant,’ lest his theology collapse back into Jewish particularism. He nevertheless conceded that 3:25-26 certainly looked like a Christian version of Jewish covenantal theology.” He recalls an angry Lutheran complaining to Fortress Press for publishing such an obvious piece of Reformed theology: viz., covenant (205).

He repeats that “‘righteous’ here does not mean ‘morally virtuous.’ It means, quite simply, that the court has found in your favor.

That is why the declarative verb *dikaioō*, ‘to justify,’ can be said to indicate the creation of something, the making of something. But, as we noted earlier, the thing that is made is not a moral character, not an infused virtue, but a status...Notice what has not happened, within this lawcourt scene. The judge has not clothed the defendant with his own ‘righteousness.’ That doesn’t come into it. Nor has he given the defendant something called ‘the righteousness of the Messiah’—or, if he has, Paul has not even hinted at it. What the judge has done is to pass judicial sentence on sin, in the faithful death of the Messiah, so that those who belong to the Messiah, though in themselves ‘ungodly’ and without virtue or merit, now find themselves hearing the lawcourt verdict, ‘in the right.’ And the point, putting covenant and lawcourt together, is that this is what the single-plan-through-Israel-for-the-world was designed to do!...Here again is the truth to which, at its best, the doctrine of ‘imputed righteousness’ can function as a kind of signpost. God has ‘put forth’ Jesus so that, through his faithful death, all those who belong to him can be regarded as having died. God raised him up so that, through his vindication, all those who belong to him can be regarded as being themselves vindicated (206).

Why does Wright object to the language of believers being “clothed” with Christ’s righteousness? He has already spoken of Philippians 3 referring to Paul’s experience as a Jew, being “clothed with righteousness,” demonstrated by Torah-righteousness, so why not the obverse? And if Jesus had done what Israel (and the world “in Adam”) failed to do, namely to fulfill the commission entailed by the law, even to the point of bearing their curse, why can’t this be called “the imputation of Christ’s righteousness,” especially since “impute/credit” and its cognates are actually used, along with images of “clothing”?

Perplexity concerning Wright’s critique mounts as he comes close to stating the classic covenantal perspective: “‘The faithfulness of the Messiah’ is, actually, a way of stressing—as one might have thought any good Reformed theologian would welcome!—the sovereignty of God and the unshakeable, rock-bottom reality, within the events of justification and salvation, not of the faith of those being justified, but of the representative and therefore substitutionary death of Israel’s Messiah, Jesus” (207). Faith isn’t the basis, but the badge (207-209). “What becomes of boasting? It is excluded” (Rom 3:27). “The ‘boast’ in question is the ‘boast’ of Romans 2:17-20: the ‘boast’ that Israel would take its place within the single-plan-through-Israel-for-the-world, the boast not merely of superiority (and perhaps salvation) because of Torah-possession (and the attempt at Torah-keeping) but of a superior calling within God’s purposes.” “‘Boasting excluded—by what Torah? A Torah of works? No—but by the Torah of faith’ (Romans 3:27). Who are God’s people? They are those who keep the Torah—but whose Torah-keeping consists of faith” (211). “Nomos” here as limited to “Torah” is questionable. Plus, what does this do to the earlier argument that Torah-keeping consists of Torah-keeping and the final justification is according to works?

Again he repeats: “‘make righteous’ here does not mean ‘make them morally upright or virtuous’ but rather ‘make them ‘people-in-whose-favor-the-verdict-has-been-given.’”

The idea that what sinners need is for someone else’s ‘righteousness’ to be credited to their account simply muddles up the categories, importing with huge irony into the equation the idea that the same tradition worked so hard to eliminate, namely the suggestion that, after all, ‘righteousness’ here means ‘moral virtue,’ ‘the merit acquired from lawkeeping’ or something like that. We don’t have any of that, said the Reformers, so we have to have someone else’s credited to us, and ‘justification’ can’t mean ‘being made righteous,’ as though God first pumps a little bit of moral virtue into us and then generously regards the part as standing for the whole. No, replies Paul, you’ve missed the point; you haven’t gone far enough in eliminating the last traces of medieval understanding. ‘Righteousness’ remains the status that you possess as a result of the judge’s verdict... ‘Imputed righteousness’ is a Reformation answer to a medieval question, in the medieval terms which were themselves part of the problem (213).

At this point, Wright returns to the category of future justification. The point of Romans 2:1-16 is this: “...justified in the future on the basis of the entire life!” “The judge has declared the verdict before the evidence has been produced!” (emphasis added). But then, one might ask, what becomes of a judgment based on works, on the basis of an entire life? Justification can be rendered in the present on the basis of “the extraordinary, unprecedented and unimagined fact of the resurrection itself coming forward into the present” (215). It seems that Wright plays with two conflicting ideas: present justification (according to faith) hopes for a corresponding future justification (according to works) vs. the future justification is brought forward into the present: the very same verdict, already announced and guaranteed. God’s purpose for Israel was fulfilled finally in the Messiah, his Son in whom he is well-pleased. “And what God said about Jesus in that moment, he said and says about all those who belong to Jesus the Messiah” (215).

Romans 4 is the lodestar for Wright on justification, as it is for Paul. “The point of Romans 4 is, in any case, not simply about ‘how people get justified,’” but (as in Gal 3) the question, “who are the family of Abraham?” (217). But look at the construction of Paul’s argument in Romans 4: “Therefore, it is by faith, so that it might be in accordance with grace, so that the promise might be confirmed for all the seed, not only that which is from the law but also that which is from the faith of Abraham...” Doesn’t Paul’s own construction of the argument suggest that the “single family of Abraham” is the benefit of justification rather than justification itself? Wright adds, “Literally, more or less word by word, the sentence [4:1] reads, ‘What then shall we say to have found Abraham our forefather according to the flesh?’” But Wright suggests that “What shall we say that Abraham found [in this matter]” “is an odd way of saying even what the normal theory wants Paul to have said” (218). Wright translates, “What then shall we say? Have we found Abraham to be our forefather according to the flesh?” (219). But this makes no sense with the next sentence: “For if Abraham was justified by works, he has a boast—but not in the presence of God.”

Wright adds, “What follows in Romans 4:4-8 makes it crystal clear that ‘reckoned it as righteousness’ means that although Abraham was ‘ungodly,’ a ‘sinner,’ God did not count this against him” (220). And the promise “was not, as the old perspective might have imagined, ‘the promise that his sins would be forgiven and that he would go to heaven when he died.’ It was rather, that he would have a family as numerous as the stars in the heavens (Genesis 15:5)” (220).

However, we may ask why David and the forgiveness of sins in the next breath? Wright simply explains away 4:4-5 in another sweeping polemic:

The brief discussion in Romans 4:4-5 about people 'earning a reward' (or not as the case may be) does not mean that Paul is after all talking about proto-Pelagianism, self-help moralism or whatever, except to this extent: that he is ruling out any suggestion that Abraham might have been 'just the sort of person God was looking for,' so that there might be some merit prior to the promise, in other words, some kind of 'boast' (220).

He does affirm "the non-reckoning of sin" (220). So there's imputation, at least non-imputation! In fact, "Forgiveness—the non-reckoning of sin—is thus right at the heart of the larger picture which Paul is sketching, but we must not for that reason ignore that larger picture" (221).

At several points, I have pointed out where Wright verges on the doctrine of Christ's active obedience, only to pull back. At this point, he speaks to it directly: "We note in particular that the 'obedience' of Christ is not designed to amass a treasury of merit which can then be 'reckoned' to the believer, as in some Reformed schemes of thought, but is rather a way of saying what Paul says more fully in Philippians 2:8, that the Messiah was obedient all the way to death, even the death on the cross." He is the faithful Israelite who fulfills the single plan for one family (228). It's not just that people can go to heaven when they die now, but that the age to come has in some sense already dawned, which encompasses all of creation (228).

On one hand, he seems to assume that he invented "union with Christ" and was the first to observe and it "fully dovetails" with "the doctrine of justification." "It is not the case, in other words, that one has to choose between 'justification by faith' and 'being in Christ' as the 'center' of Paul's thought. As many Reformed theologians in particular have seen—though one would not know it from reading John Piper, Stephen Westerholm and many others—the two must not be played off against one another, and indeed they can only be understood in relation to one another" (228-229). Paul "...established in Romans 6:1-11 that what is true of the Messiah (dying to sin, rising to new life) is now to be 'reckoned' as true of all who are baptized into him..." (229).

Wright nicely points up that Romans 6 isn't a shift from "doctrine" to "ethics," but continuing the same covenantal story of exodus through water. "Baptism recapitulates the story of Israel's escape from Egypt and, as in Romans 8, of the journey to the promised land—in this case, the entire new creation" (230). The Sinai covenant "began with grace..., and ended with the promise of blessing on obedience and the warning of curse on disobedience (Deuteronomy)" (230). It is here—in Romans 6—not in "the active obedience of Christ" that we find Paul's line of thought. The law was never given as a moral ladder of merit, but as the way for the redeemed to live (231-232). But does this entirely account for Jesus' "woes," or even with what Wright himself has just said: "warning of curse on disobedience"? Deuteronomy doesn't present the Torah as simply a "reasonable service" for those who are redeemed, as Paul assumes concerning the moral law in Romans 12:1-5.

In any case, "It is not the 'righteousness' of Jesus Christ which is 'reckoned' to the believer. It is his death and resurrection...All that the supposed doctrine of the 'imputed righteousness of Christ' has to offer is offered instead by Paul under this rubric, on these terms and within this covenantal framework" (232-233). "There are many things which are pastorally helpful in the short or medium term which are not in fact grounded on the deepest possible reading of Scripture" (233).

Wright next turns to Romans 8, launching out with another caricature: "What has been lacking in much of the tradition has been the interlocking Pauline features of (a) the renewal of creation and

(b) the indwelling of the Spirit” (236). We partake of salvation in advance. “At the same time he insists that the signs of the Spirit’s life must be present: if anyone doesn’t have the Spirit of Christ, that person doesn’t belong to him (Romans 8:9), and ‘if you live according to the flesh, you will die’ (Romans 8:13)”

You cannot, in short, have a Pauline doctrine of assurance (and the glory of the Reformation doctrine of justification is precisely assurance) without the Pauline doctrine of the Spirit. Try to do it, and you will put too much weight on human faith, which will then generate all kinds of further questions about types of faith, about faith and feelings, about what happens when faith wobbles. This, in turn, will generate worried reactions, as people look on and see a supposed Protestantism which appears to regard strong emotional certainty of being saved as the criterion for being saved in fact (237).

“The trouble with some would-be Reformation theology is that it is not only insufficiently biblical. It is also insufficiently trinitarian” (239). Since it is not clear what “would-be Reformation theology” he has in mind, it is difficult to know quite how to respond, except to say that the Reformed tradition has been thoroughly shaped in its covenant theology by a trinitarian perspective. Its emphasis on the Spirit’s person and work is especially pronounced, particularly in the light of other Protestant trajectories.

Do we then overthrow the Reformation tradition by this theology? On the contrary, we establish it. Everything Luther and Calvin wanted to achieve is within this glorious Pauline framework of thought. The difference is that, whereas for some of their followers it really did look as though the sun was going round the earth, we have now glimpsed the reality (252).

To employ his own analogy, there are indeed impressive pieces of Paul’s puzzle in Wright’s box to make sense of some of the arguments. However, the best pieces are drawn from biblical-theological box-tops that Reformed theologians have long recognized. “Israel recapitulates the primal sin of Adam and Eve” (241). “Embrace the God-given law, Paul says to his fellow Jews (to his own former self!) and you are embracing that which must declare you to be a transgressor, a lawbreaker, on all fours with the ‘sinners’ who are outside God’s covenant” (243). However, Wright is working with only one covenant and this inevitably constrains his interpretation throughout. In Romans 10 Paul “is thinking, in fact, of a covenant renewal which will be recognizably that of which Deuteronomy 30 was speaking when it spoke of ‘doing of the law’ which was not difficult, requiring someone to bring it down from heaven or out of the depths of the sea” (245). However, this misses the important and intentional switch of terms in Romans 10. Instead of saying that Torah–God’s law–is not far off, Paul speaks of the gospel. Wright puts his own conclusion in italics: “When people believe the gospel of Jesus and his resurrection, and confess him as Lord, they are in fact doing what Torah wanted all along, and are therefore displaying the necessary marks of covenant renewal” (245). However, this is to turn the law into the gospel.

Next, we’ll turn to Wright’s discussion of the church.

“Works of the Law”: Soteriology and Ecclesiology

Following D. G. Dunn, Wright insists that the “works of the law” are not “the moral ‘good works’ which the Reformation tradition loves to hate. They are the things that divide Jew from Gentile...” (117; cf. 172). Aside from the fact that the Reformation tradition—Lutheran as well as Reformed—has always affirmed the abiding role of the moral law for the Christian life, the deeper problem with this view is what it excludes. Of course, the Torah included the ceremonial and civil commands that governed the theocracy and marked Israel off from the nations. To be sure, these Israel-specific laws functioned as boundary markers. And surely their obsolescence (or rather, fulfillment) in the new covenant opens the door to the realization of the Abrahamic promise of the gospel to all peoples. However, is that it? Is there nothing more to the Good News than, “Jesus is Lord, so you don’t have to be circumcised and keep the dietary laws?” The new perspective misses the deeper problem of the “works of the law” as a means of justification in Paul. Paul’s teaching on justification surely involves an ecclesiological component (uniting two peoples into one in Christ), but only because it is the soteriological answer to a universal human problem: guilt before a holy God (Rom 3).

Wright insists that “justification is God’s declaration that someone is in the right, is a member of the sin-forgiven covenant family, while salvation is the actual rescue from death and sin” (170). “The Reformation legacy, eager to deny that ‘good works’ in the sense of morally virtuous deeds can play any part in commending us to God, was happy to cite this passage [Eph 2:10] by way of answer to the normal charge that ‘justification by faith alone’ would cut the nerve of all Christian morality.” We’re not saved by good works, but unto good works. “Well and good. This is not far, of course, from what the new perspective would say about Judaism: rescued by grace then given Torah as the way of life. But I do not actually think that that is what Paul is talking about here...[T]he point of this is not simply ‘because you now need to be virtuous’ but ‘because the church is the body of Christ in and for the world’” (171).

Wright wonders, “Is resistance to ecclesiology in Paul bound up with resistance to finding too much for the Spirit to do as well?” The coming together of Jews and Gentiles into one body is integral to the mystery in Ephesians (173). “If initial membership is by grace, but final judgment is according to works—and the New Testament, at first glance, including the Pauline corpus, does seem quite clear at this point—then what account of those ‘works’ can we give? Is this not, at last, the moment when Jewish ‘legalism’ is exposed?” Wright doesn’t deny that there are Second Temple texts that highlight the importance of works at the judgment (75). “First, the key question facing Judaism as a whole was not about individual salvation, but about God’s purposes for Israel and the world...The ‘present age’ would give way to the ‘age to come,’ but who would inherit that ‘age to come?’” (76). This seems right, in light of some of the questions that Jesus’ hearers ask. However, don’t these questions inescapably involve the personal question, “How can I be saved?” “What right do you Pharisees think you have to escape the wrath to come?”, Jesus demands of the religious leaders. “You assume that you are among the righteous to be raised on the last day, but are you really?” And his clear answer, especially during Holy Week on the Temple Mount is “No!”

So again Wright and the new perspective help us to embrace a wider context—and we are foolish if we ignore their seminal insights on these points, but they apparently fail to understand how the cosmic-eschatological concerns and the personal anxiety over salvation from sin's guilt and power are interdependent. Again he assumes he's the only one who has ever tied justification to the covenant in Gen 15 (82-3). What was Israel's expectation during Jesus' ministry?

The answer, from source after source in the second-temple period, confirming what we might have guessed from Scripture itself, was this: Israel will be vindicated, will inherit the age to come—but it will be the Israel that has kept Torah, or that, through penitence and amendment of life (as in Daniel 9, looking back to Deuteronomy 30), has shown the heartfelt desire to follow God's ways and be loyal to his covenant... 'All Israel will inherit the age to come,' said the Rabbis, with the following clauses indicating that some would not, opting out by their own rank refusal to follow Torah. Torah thus functioned, implicitly at least, within not only a covenantal framework but also a broadly eschatological one. The 'age to come' would see Israel vindicated at least. But the way to tell, in the present, who would thus be vindicated in the future was to see who was keeping Torah (in some sense at least) in the present... These questions could be addressed in terms of a theological account of how much of this law-keeping was up to one's own initiative, and how much would be owed to God's grace and help (76).

So much for their not being interested in questions of personal salvation, grace, and the extent to which one had to cooperate with God in justification! In fact, Wright refers to examples from early Jewish literature suggesting the importance of weighing works as the basis for final judgment and vindication. In fact, the Qumran community agreed with Paul in their expectation of the fulfillment of Deut 30. "Where they diverged was on the questions (a) What events have precipitated the advance covenant renewal with us in the present? (b) Who will be vindicated when God finally completes what he has thereby begun? (c) What are the signs in the present which mark out those who will be vindicated in the future? And perhaps also, as we shall see, (d) What theological account of how one passes from present grace-given membership to future salvation?" (77). From his own summary, it would seem that these questions are more integrally involved with the concern for personal salvation than Wright allows.

So again, the problem is not so much what is affirmed as what is denied. Wright is on target when he criticizes evangelicals for separating salvation (soteriology) from the church (ecclesiology) (132). He is also correct in seeing in Paul a thorough integration of those issues. The problem is that while the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile (and male and female and free and slave) is for Paul a critical implication and consequence of the gospel, for Wright it is exactly reverse. For him, the message of sin, forgiveness, and salvation is an "of course" (131). "The problem of human sin, and the divine answer in terms of the rescue provided by the Messiah, is the presupposition. It emerges gloriously at several points, notably Galatians 2:19-20 and Galatians 3:22. But it is not the main argument" (133). It's not just "at several points," however, but throughout his epistles that Paul makes central the themes of personal salvation in union with Christ. Because neither Jews nor Gentiles keep the law, they are all lumped together under a common curse, but because Jesus Christ has taken our place, Jews and Gentiles together can be children of Abraham—part of God's single, worldwide family. That is Romans 1-4 in nuce.

"How can 'ecclesiology' be a secondary topic, unworthy to be associated with the great doctrine of justification," Wright asks, "when Scripture itself gives it this high a place?"

Why should not the point of justification itself be precisely this, that, in constituting the church as the single family who are a sign to the powers that Jesus is Lord and that they are not, it serves directly the mission of the kingdom of God in the world? It cannot be, can it, that part of the old perspective's reaction to the new is the tacit sense that once we associate ecclesiology with the very center of the gospel we will have to go all the way and rethink the political role and task of the church? (174).

Before we criticize too quickly, it is important to allow Wright's concerns to sink in. Justification is not treated in the scriptures simply as an individual affair, but as a cosmic renewal, a divine re-writing of the tragic script that we have written for ourselves and the rest of creation. The church is integral to God's saving plan—not as the source of redemption, but as the minister of reconciliation. Further, this ministry leads simultaneously to a justified and renewed people who fulfill their callings in the world with an eschatological anticipation of Christ's fully-realized reign in a renewed creation.

However, this plan would be pie-in-the-sky if it were in our hands to accomplish or to complete—or if the justification of the ungodly were merely an “of course” rather than the reason why a united family of God is emerging in this passing age. Wright's real target seems to be not so much the Reformation tradition as pietism. As on other points, his solution is just as one-sided, however. He worries that the “old perspective” on justification will revive “Luther's ‘two kingdoms’ theology...” (174), although it is not clear exactly what ostensibly dangerous view he has in mind. Although he is anxious about an over-realized theology with respect to justification, he seems to advocate just such an eschatology with respect to the kingdom of God. In recent years, Wright has emphasized the political context of Jesus' ministry and apostolic preaching, over against the claims of Caesar, particularly in an effort to challenge U.S. militarism. Even here, there are important insights. However, is Romans really a political manifesto against Caesar, especially when Paul's call to obey emperors appears in chapter 13? The “two kingdoms” doctrine, which Calvin held as well, does not separate Christ's reign from the world's powers, but it also does not confuse them. In this time between Christ's two advents, the Spirit is at work uniting sinners to Christ and creating an end-time harvest of Israel and the nations. For now, the kingdoms of this world have not yet been made the kingdom of Christ in geo-political terms. Nevertheless, the church announces that imminent hope and lives in the present with patience, suffering for the sake of the gospel, until Christ returns in glory.

Lastly, we'll conclude this series with some final thoughts on the book as a whole.

Conclusion

Reared in a pietistic evangelical environment, I recall the revolution in my own faith when the eschatology of the prophets and apostles challenged the narrow concept of salvation that I had been taught. However, Wright had not yet written his first controversial tome. In fact, as a teenager, I had read with enthusiasm the little book that he wrote with two other Oxford undergraduates, *The Grace of God in the Gospel* (Banner of Truth, 1972). (On our first introduction, I told Tom that this was among the books instrumental in my “inviting Calvin into my heart” and he offered an equally tongue-in-cheek reply: “Now let me help you invite Paul into your heart.”)

It was the writings of Reformed theologians and biblical scholars like John Murray, Geerhardus Vos, Herman Ridderbos, and Anthony Hoekema who introduced me to the sweeping vistas of a redemptive-historical interpretation of Scripture. Of course, my own dispensationalist upbringing was dismantled in the process. Then, as a student of M. G. Kline, Dennis Johnson, Robert Strimple, and others at Westminster Seminary California, I came more fully to see how God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 15 generated an unfolding drama that led to God's single plan to bring salvation to the nations through Israel, concentrated on Jesus Christ.

Especially during my doctoral studies, I began reading some of the formative writers of post-Reformation Reformed orthodoxy more intently and discovered that they had pioneered this biblical-theological interpretation of Scripture. At its heart was a theology of the covenant, with the promise in Genesis 15 as a lodestar. So it was from the most "traditional" of Reformed theologians that I learned that justification was a forensic concept drawn from the lawcourt rather than a transfer or infusion of virtues; that the covenant of grace marches from the *protoeuangelion* in Genesis 3:15 to the covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15; that this promises gestates in the womb of Israel and is fulfilled in the birth of Jesus the Messiah; that this gospel is not simply going-to-heaven-when-I-die, but a renewed cosmos.

In one conversation in Oxford, Tom Wright concurred that although he had not read the older covenant theologians closely, he too was deeply influenced by Vos and Ridderbos. Hence, my surprise when there are no footnotes to these writers, even when he is making their points, and most of the time Wright presents his views over against the whole Reformation (including Reformed) tradition. In my view, Wright is at his best when he elaborates and extends arguments that, however controversial in the field of New Testament studies or in popular evangelicalism, are familiar territory for Reformed exegetes.

Where I think he is wrong is on his failure to see how the two promises made to Abraham in Genesis 15 (earthly land and the inheritance of the nations) lead to two distinct covenants: the conditional covenant of law at Sinai, where the people swear, "All this we will do," and the covenant of grace that is based on the fulfillment of the law by the True Israel, Jesus the Messiah. As a result, his sweeping biblical-theological vision misses crucial exegetical nuances, which Paul especially highlights in Galatians 4, with the contrast between law and promise, the earthly and heavenly Jerusalem, Hagar and Sarah, Sinai and Zion. The further implication of this confusion of law and gospel is the false dilemma he often posits (in spite of his criticism of false dilemmas) between God's righteousness as his own covenant faithfulness versus the imputation of Christ's righteousness.

First, he routinely misinterprets the Reformation doctrine as teaching that God's personal attribute of righteousness is transferred to believers. No reformer advocated such a thing. In fact, Calvin added a whole section to his final edition of the Institutes to rebut the teaching of Osiander that we are righteous because Christ's divine nature is imparted to us through mystical union. Rather, Melancthon, Calvin, and other reformers understood "Christ's righteousness" as Christ's fulfillment of the law as the representative head of his people. Wright believes that our sins are imputed to Jesus Christ, so why not his righteousness? Lacking engagement with any primary text from the Reformation for his assertions, he relies entirely it seems on Alister McGrath's impressive though controversial study of the history of the doctrine of justification. The choice is understandable. Assuming discontinuity more than refinement, McGrath argues (as approvingly cited by Wright), "The 'doctrine of justification' has come to bear a meaning within dogmatic

theology which is quite independent of its Pauline origins.” Wright repeatedly asserts, following McGrath, that justification “has regularly been made to do duty for the entire picture of God’s reconciling action toward the human race, covering everything from God’s free love and grace, through the sending of the son to die and rise again for sinners, through the preaching of the gospel, the work of the Spirit, the arousal of faith in human hearts and minds, the development of Christian character and conduct, the assurance of ultimate salvation, and the safe passage through final judgment to that destination” (86). This does not even fit Lutheranism, but less the Reformed tradition. If anything, these traditions carefully distinguish justification from sanctification. One of the reasons for the much-maligned *ordo salutis* is to speak about the many and varied gifts that come to us in Christ. Wright’s criticisms are often sweeping and dismissive and this leads inevitably to the second concern.

Second, alongside wonderful insights, Wright’s exegesis and theological conclusions are often reductionistic. He says that justification is a forensic term from the lawcourt that declares God’s people “in the right,” and Christ as the True Israel fulfills the Abrahamic pledge in a way that could never have happened through the law, so what is wrong with saying that we are justified by God’s crediting Christ’s lifelong obedience, satisfaction, and resurrection-vindication to believers as if they had fulfilled all obedience in their own person? As I have hinted at in various places along the way, Wright seems to have modified his views to some extent. Yet it would be helpful to have a summary of exactly where he thinks he had it wrong. He does write,

Of course—and my critics will no doubt have fun pointing this out—those of us, like Jimmy Dunn, Richard Hays, Douglas Campbell, Terry Donaldson and myself, who have tried to listen to the force of this point [a de-Judaizing of Paul], have not always followed either history or exegesis perfectly. We have been so eager to think through the implications of the alternative (and deeply Jewish) readings of Paul that we in our turn may well have ignored elements (not non-Jewish elements, of course, but elements of Paul’s inner dialectic) that the old perspective was right to highlight and which it has been right stubbornly to insist on, even if sometimes feeling like Canute with the waves of the sea washing around his throne. But if we are to listen to what Paul says, in a vital and overlooked passage like 2:17-20, we may yet achieve the proper balance...There was nothing wrong with the plan, or with the Torah on which it was based. The problem was in Israel itself. And as we shall see later, the problem was that Israel, too, was ‘in Adam’ (196).

However, Reformed exegetes have labored the point that the problem was never the Torah itself, but the fact that Israel too was “in Adam.”

In my view, Wright is not as radical in this book as he is in some of his earlier works. He seems to have softened his emphasis on a future justification by works that might be quite different from the present verdict. There seems to be a wider recognition of Christ’s representative work, not only in his death but in his life. More than in his earlier works, he seems in this volume to speak less one-sidedly of justification merely as a verdict concerning membership in God’s people and (although this is still emphasized), and he refers to justification also in several places as a verdict that declares sinners righteous in Christ through faith. In fact, his apparent moderation on this point makes for some confusion when he repeats his usual sharp contrasts between his own view and the Reformation perspective. Despite these modifications, his polemical tone and sweeping strikes against the Reformation remains as firmly entrenched as ever.

A concluding evaluation of this book would be incomplete if I did not register my genuine appreciation for some of his points. In spite of exaggerations and false dilemmas, Wright reminds

us that justification is inextricably tied to God's covenantal, historical, cosmic, and eschatological purposes for "summing up all things in Christ." Even if it is in some ways an over-correction, he does remind us that justification does not emerge simply out of need for personal or pastoral needs, but out of an unfolding plan that revolves around God's faithfulness to his own righteousness and results not only in saved individuals but in a church and a kingdom. Even if he tends sometimes to confuse this kingdom with his own political agenda, Wright properly reminds us that even in its seminal and liminal existence in this time between Christ's advents, it is already true that Jesus is Lord.

God promised the holy land and a worldwide family in Gen 15 (222). "And once again the point about the Torah is twofold: (a) to cling to it would be to embrace the wrath which results from having broken it; (b) to highlight it would be to restrict the covenantal promises to Jews only. Both perspectives matter, and the two fit snugly together within Paul's overall view of God's call and promise to Abraham" (222).

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