

**N. T. WRIGHT AND REFORMED THEOLOGY:
FRIENDS OR FOES?**

By Rich Lusk

This short essay is not an attempt to provide a comprehensive analysis and defense of N. T. Wright. Indeed, Wright's theological project is still incomplete so full evaluation is not yet possible.¹ Rather, my much more modest goal is to offer a plea for Reformed theologians and pastors to give Wright a sustained and sympathetic reading. Several Reformed theologians have recently gone on record critiquing Wright particularly on the issue of justification.² My hope is to

¹ Wright's New Testament theology projects to be six volumes, only two of which have been published. More relevant to this paper, his major work on Paul is still forthcoming.

² Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., "Paul the Theologian," *Westminster Theological Journal*, Vol. 62, No. 1 (121-141). Gaffin critiques Wright and J. G. Dunn in the same article. Dunn's orthodoxy is far more questionable than Wright's, so Gaffin has made some measure of guilt by association unavoidable. Charles Hill has a critique of Wright's doctrine of justification available online at http://thirdmill.org/files/english/new_testament/11926~5_28_01_10-55-11_AM~NT.Hill.Wright.pdf. Bob Cara has critiqued Wright in unpublished

clear the ground, and show why I think these critics have, in several key ways, misread and mischaracterized Wright's theology. In fact, if we ignore Wright or fail to do the careful study needed to understand his work, we will be missing out on tremendous blessing.

Because of the controversy surrounding Wright, a few preliminary remarks are in order. First, Wright is occasionally (and understandably) prone to exaggerate the newness of his own proposals. In a way, he is like Chesterton at the beginning of *Orthodoxy*. Chesterton tells an autobiographical allegory about an English yachtsman who sets out on a voyage, and by a wonderful miscalculation believes he has discovered a new island in the South Seas, when in reality he has ended up back in merry old England. Our sailor gets the joy of rediscovering his homeland! As Chesterton asks, "What could be more delightful than to have in the same few minutes all the fascinating terrors of going abroad combined with all the humane security of coming home again?"³ This is what it is like for a Reformed Christian to read Wright: foreign yet familiar, exciting but safe.

Wright's theology is very traditional when all his cards are on the table. It really

notes from various seminary and seminar classes. See also Don Garlington, *Exegetical Essays* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001), 281-295.

Garlington is very favorable to Wright, but still offers significant criticism.

³ G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 10.

is, in its own way, “an elegant fundamentalism,” as John Dominic Crossan calls it. In a sense, his project is to help us rediscover what we already knew, though now with nuances, depth, and color that were not noticed before.

Second, and closely related, we note that when Wright contrasts his own interpretation of Paul with traditional Protestant readings, well-read Reformed believers may feel their positions have been caricatured (e.g., “legal fiction” and “timeless system of salvation” language). Wright would probably communicate better with traditional believers if these caricatures were avoided (though sadly, they probably do have some truth behind them) and he strived to critique other positions with greater precision.

Third, to call Wright a “New Perspective” theologian is not quite true, or at least not the whole truth. The New Perspective, a mixed bag of New Testament scholars with varying degrees of orthodoxy, argues that the Judaism of Paul’s day was not a merit-based religion in which individuals tried to earn God’s favor by doing good works. Rather, Judaism’s “pattern of religion” was a form of “covenant nomism,” meaning that obedience to Torah was the way Jews expressed their fidelity and gratitude to the God who had graciously elected

them and entered into covenant with them.⁴ By keeping Torah, one was sure to participate in the blessings of the age to come since the practices Torah called for served as boundary markers between the people of God and the condemned pagan world. The New Perspective certainly drives us to rethink theological positions and exegetical conclusions we have generally taken for granted. In particular, it forces us to reckon with the redemptive-historical nature of Paul's critique of the Torah and unbelieving Israel. In terms of the New Perspective, Paul's problem with his kinsmen was not their attempt to earn favor from God (though that would ultimately be included), but their failure to enter into the new age inaugurated by the crucified and risen Messiah. The Judaizers who stirred up so much trouble in Paul's nascent congregations denied the good *news* (cf. Gal. 1:8-9) precisely because they denied the *newness* of the new age brought in by Christ. The good news Paul announced was that now that the promised Messiah had come, the covenant blessing God promised to Abraham was to flow out to all the families of the earth, irrespective of their possession of Torah (Galatians 3:8; cf. Galatians 3:28). But the Judaizers denied this good news because they tried to confine the covenant blessing to those marked out by

⁴ For a readable summary of the New Perspective's development and basic approach, see John Stott, *Romans: God's Good News For the World* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 24-31. See also N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1997), chapter 1.

fleshly, Torah-prescribed badges of identity. Paul countered with the claim that the Torah had served its good, but temporary, purpose in God's redemptive plan, but was now obsolete and could no longer function as the defining mark of God's people.⁵ By no means have the New Perspective scholars made an airtight case for every aspect of their project, and even if they had done so, many traditional insights into Paul would not be washed away.⁶ Wright agrees with

⁵ For more on Paul's eschatological critique of Torah and Israel (including the Judaizers), consult Don Garlington, *Exegetical Essays*, and Frank Thielman *Paul and the Law: A Contextual Approach* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994). Wright occasionally compares the Torah to a booster rocket that gets a spaceship up into the air and then, having served its good but limited purpose, falls away.

⁶ Again, the New Perspective teaches the basic problem with Judaism in Paul's day, after the coming of Christ, was not that it was "self-righteous" or "legalistic," but that it had an unrealized eschatology (that is, it clung to the old Torah-based ways of expressing fidelity to God which are now obsolete since the promised Messiah has come, opening covenant membership to the Gentiles). In other words, Paul's critique of Israel is not, on the surface, what the Reformers took it to be – prideful, legalistic attempts at achieving self-salvation through meritorious "works of the law." Paul, therefore, was not battling a form of proto-Pelagianism. Rather his opponents' problem was that they wanted to turn

the New Perspective that even as a Christian, Paul adhered to the basic Jewish form of religion, albeit with new, transforming content poured into its categories. And he agrees with the best scholars in this movement that Paul's critique of

back the clock of redemptive history; they were attempting to live "B.C." in an "A.D." world. However, what many New Perspective theologians fail to realize is that to continue to insist on circumcision, dietary laws, etc. as a means of relating to God *after* he has said these things are no longer pleasing to him and *after* they have filled their temporary redemptive-historical purpose *is* prideful and legalistic, considered from another angle. It *is* a form of self-salvation, since it demands the covenant blessing on one's own terms, rather than submitting to God's. So the old criticisms of Judaism are still there, but in nuanced form.

Many New Perspective theologians have been too quick to draw an antithesis between their view of Paul's argument and the Reformers'. Perhaps this is because they have failed to understand the basic nature of sin. Stott quips, "As I have read and pondered [Sanders'] books I have kept asking myself whether perhaps he knows more about Palestinian Judaism than he does about the human heart" (*Romans*, 29). See also Dan G. MacCartney, "No Grace Without Weakness," *Westminster Theological Journal* Vol. 61, No. 1 (1-13). Nationalistic pride and exclusivism, as seen in first century Judaism, are just variant forms of the same basic self-righteous, legalistic stance that fallen human nature always assumes.

Torah and “works of Torah” must be understood along eschatological, not just Pelagian, lines. But Wright expresses grave concern over many of the views put forth by the leading pioneers of the New Perspective, especially the more radical conclusions of E. P. Sanders and James D. G. Dunn. He tells us he had already arrived at his basic approach to Pauline theology before Sanders published his groundbreaking book *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, and finds Sanders’ reading of Paul “very unconvincing.”⁷ Thus, those who want to deal with Wright will have to do so on Wright’s own terms, and not simply lump him in with Sanders, Dunn, and other New Perspective theologians.

Fourth, while one will not find Wright frequently employing categories such as “inspiration” and “inerrancy” to describe Scripture, he does treat the canonical text with the utmost seriousness. For example, in debate with Paul Barnett, he says,

If we are to keep the rally going, I hope it will be centrally focussed on the exegetical details, since as I have said more than once it is the text of scripture itself, rather than later traditions about what it is supposed to mean, that matters

⁷ N. T. Wright, “The Shape of Justification.” Available online at

<http://www.angelfire.com/mi2/paulpage/Shape.html>.

to me. By all means let's look at the theological, evangelistic and pastoral questions, but let's be clear where our authority lies.⁸

In defending his reworking of traditional definitions for terms such as “justification” and the “righteousness of God,” he says,

What I am doing, often enough, is exactly parallel, in terms of method, to what Martin Luther did when he took the gospel word *metanoete* and insisted that it didn't mean 'do penance', as the Vulgate indicated, but 'repent' in a much more personal and heartfelt way. The only way to make that sort of point is to show that *that's what the word would have meant at the time*. That's the kind of serious biblical scholarship the Protestant Reformation was built on, and I for one am proud to carry on that tradition -- if need be, against those who have turned the Reformation itself into a tradition to be set up over scripture itself.⁹

⁸ “Shape.”

⁹ “Shape.” As Wright says elsewhere, “*Ecclesia catholica semper reformanda* is a noble ideal, but it is a painful one to live up to.” In Carey Newman, editor, *Jesus and the Restoration of Israel: A Critical Assessment of N. T. Wright's Jesus and the Victory of God* (Downers Grove Illinois: Inter-Varsity, 1999), 248.

The irony is that Wright's loyalty to Scripture may make him more Reformed than his Reformed critics, who often do very little exegesis, but instead throw Reformational slogans at him!¹⁰

I first stumbled across Wright in the mid-1990s when I was doing research on New Testament eschatology and the historical Jesus. But it was not long before I discovered Wright had a profound grasp of Pauline theology as well. Because Reformed theology has been dominated by Paul, it is not surprising that Wright's fresh reading of the apostle has attracted a great deal of attention from Reformed

¹⁰ Wright is not the only conservative scholar who believes a reworking of the church's doctrine of justification, based on fresh exegesis of the Pauline text, is in order. Wright quotes Alister McGrath in *Saint Paul*:

The doctrine of justification has come to develop a meaning quite independent of its biblical origins, and concerns the means by which man's relationship to God is established. The church has chosen to subsume its discussion of the reconciliation of man to God under the aegis of justification, thereby giving the concept an emphasis quite absent from the New Testament. The 'doctrine of justification' has come to bear a meaning within dogmatic theology which is quite independent of its Pauline origins (115).

thinkers. Thus far, no one from within the Reformed world has stepped forward to provide an overarching defense of Wright, and certainly this paper is far too brief to fill that void. But in the meantime, I feel the need to say something to the Reformed community on Wright's behalf. I will not take the time to summarize the now-standard criticisms of Wright, which are available elsewhere. Rather, I will focus primarily on the overall shape of his doctrine of justification, showing it basically harmonizes with, complements, and even enhances, more traditional Reformed formulations. Wright's teaching on justification has seven basic features that need examining.

First, Wright uses the standard Reformed law court metaphor for justification. Clearly Wright believes, with the Reformers and against Rome, that justification has a forensic dimension and is not a matter of moral transformation. There is no mixing of forensic and participationist categories in Wright, though we will see he still manages to tie them together in a coherent, covenantal whole. Wright explicitly rejects the Roman Catholic view of justification and insists justification is the eschatological verdict of God brought into the present time.¹¹ He finds the

¹¹ See, e.g., his article on justification in Sinclair Ferguson and David F. Wright, editors, *The New Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity, 1988), 360: "The verdict issued in the present on the basis of faith (Rom. 3:21-26)

basis of this verdict in the representative and substitutionary death and resurrection of Christ.¹² Christ took the curse of the law upon himself in order to

correctly anticipates the verdict to be issued in the final judgment.” Also, from Saint Paul:

Within this context, ‘justification,’ as seen in [Rom.] 3:24-26, means that those who believe in Jesus Christ are declared to be members of the true covenant family; which of course means that their sins are forgiven, since that was the purpose of the covenant. They are given the status of being ‘righteous’ in the metaphorical law court. When this is cashed out in terms of the underlying covenantal theme, it means that they are *declared in the present, to be what they will be seen to be in the future*, namely the true people of God . . . *The verdict of the last day is therefore now also anticipated in the present, whenever someone believes in the gospel message about Jesus* (129, 131, emphasis mine).

¹² Contrary to the criticisms of Gaffin (“Paul the Theologian,” 140) and Cara, Wright believes in substitution, not just representation. In the tape series, “Paul, Jesus, and the Faith of Israel,” available from Regent College Bookstore (1-800-663-8664), he says substitution presupposes representation. Christ is our substitute *because* he is our representative. He did what he in the place of his

bring the promised covenant blessing to us. While Wright shies away from the term “imputation,” virtually synonymous terms such as “reckon” or “confer” are used. For example, in his article, “The Shape of Justification,” he writes,

‘Justification’ has a specific, and narrower, reference [than Paul’s doctrine of calling]: it is God’s *declaration* that the person is now in the right, which confers on them the *status* ‘righteous’. (We may note that, since ‘righteous’ here, within the lawcourt metaphor, refers to ‘status’, not ‘character’, we correctly say that God’s declaration *makes* the person ‘righteous’, i.e. in good standing.) . . .

‘Justification’ is thus the *declaration* of God, the just judge, that someone is (a) in the right, that their sins are forgiven, and (b) a true member of the covenant family, the people belonging to Abraham. That is how the word works in Paul’s writings. It doesn’t describe *how* people *get in* to God’s forgiven family; it *declares that they are in*.¹³

people. It is indisputable that Wright clearly affirms the vicarious nature of Christ’s work.

¹³ See also N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1993). Wright speaks of the Torah’s function of “drawing sin” onto Israel, and therefore onto Israel’s representative, the Messiah, so it can be dealt with at the cross (39). This seems isomorphic with the Reformed doctrine of

Note that Wright's definition of justification is twofold: forgiveness and covenant membership are twin, inseparable realities, since rescue from sin was the whole point of the covenant with Abraham from the beginning.¹⁴ Moreover, in his

imputation, albeit in different language. If sin was "drawn onto the Messiah," it seems it was "imputed" to him as well. Or, to take another example, on 202, he says the Messiah "represents his people so that what is true of him is reckoned as true of them." But how is this reckoning different from imputation? I have not seen Wright discuss his misgivings with the term "imputation." One interpretive problem Reformed readers of Wright face is that he insists passages that speak of "God's righteousness" (e.g., Rom. 3:21) do not refer to "imputed righteousness." But this should not be confused with a rejection of imputation altogether. Wright points out that it is a category mistake to say that *God's* righteousness is imputed to us. Rather, we need a perfect *human* righteousness that pleases God. "God's righteousness", as we will see below, primarily refers to God's attribute of covenant faithfulness and/or acts of covenant faithfulness. The primary way God has shown forth his righteousness is in providing the obedient and faithful man, Jesus Christ, to make his people right with him by dying and rising on their behalf.

¹⁴ See *Saint Paul*, 129. This, it seems, is enough to deal with Hill's basic criticism, which forces a dichotomy between forgiveness of sin and covenant membership

lecture comments¹⁵ on Romans 3:25 he makes it very plain he believes the cross did indeed propitiate God's wrath. He clearly distinguishes propitiation from expiation, and follows the best evangelical scholarship in taking *hilasterion* in the classic, Reformed, propitiatory sense. Wright cannot be accused of soft-pedaling God's wrath or the cross's quenching of that wrath.¹⁶ In other words, for Wright, Calvary is God's loving answer to the wrath revealed from heaven against sin.

Second, Wright says, in unison with Protestants everywhere, that we are justified *by faith*. In "Shape," he writes "God vindicates in the present, in advance of the last day, all those who believe in Jesus as Messiah and Lord (Romans 3.21-31; 4.13-25; 10.9-13) . . . The faith in question is faith in 'The God who raised Jesus from the dead.'" Faith is not just assent, or an intellectual commitment; it is trust in the living God and his crucified and risen Son. Just as justification can be considered from two perspectives, forgiveness and covenant membership, so

onto Wright, as though we had to choose one or the other. Covenant membership and forgiveness are two angles on the same reality, and are not to be played off against each other.

¹⁵ From the tape series "Paul, Jesus, and the Faith of Israel."

¹⁶ Thus, Wright is at one with the Reformed tradition on *sola gratia, sola Christus*, and, as we are about to see, *sola fide*. This seems to refute, or at least temper, Gaffin's criticisms in "Paul the Theologian," 139-140.

faith has two roles to play: it is the instrumental means of claiming forgiveness as one's own in Christ and it functions as the badge of covenant membership in the new, messianic age. True, sometimes, Wright focuses more on faith as boundary marker than as means of salvation, but both are present and complementary aspects of our trust in God. Just as justification is objectively based on God's gracious setting forth of Christ as our sacrifice for sin on the cross, so our subjective reception of Christ by faith is rooted in God's gracious work in us by the Spirit. Wright is no Pelagian, or even Semi-Pelagian. He insists, very Calvinistically, that faith is a gift, created by God through the preaching of the gospel and sealed in baptism.¹⁷

¹⁷ In *Saint Paul*, he says,

When [Paul] describes how persons, finding themselves confronted with the act of God in Christ, come to appropriate that act for themselves, he has a clear train of thought, repeated at various points. The message about Jesus and his cross and resurrection – the 'gospel' . . . -- is announced to them; through this means God works by his Spirit upon their hearts; as a result, they come to believe the message; they join the Christian community through baptism, and begin to share in its common life and its common way of life. That is how people come into

Third, Wright's doctrine of justification is inseparable from his corporate Christology.¹⁸ This is where many of his Reformed detractors have failed to deal with the real Wright. Instead of looking at justification in its proper place in his system, they decontextualize it, abstracting it from his corporate Christology.¹⁹ Essentially, however, there is nothing unreformed about the structure of Wright's theology here. He simply uses union with Christ to do in his theology what imputation does for traditional Reformed systematics. Of course, the net result is the same: sinners are right with God because of what Christ did in their stead. Wright focuses more on a shared status we have with Christ, than a record imputed from Christ to us. But making union with Christ more foundational than reckoning, as he does, is nothing new in Reformed theology.

relationship with the living God . . . [Faith] is the God-given badge of membership, neither more nor less" (116-117, 160).

This is an essentially Reformed *ordo salutis*.

¹⁸ Wright emphasizes "Christ" is an official title, not a proper name. Jesus, as Christ, is the royal representative of his people, the one who sums them up in himself. The meaning of his "corporate Christology" is essentially what Reformed theologians have meant by "union with Christ."

¹⁹ See in particular his book *The Climax of the Covenant* to get a sense of his corporate Christology.

Indeed, this move was already anticipated in Calvin and has been reiterated even more strongly by Gaffin. Consider Calvin:

Therefore, that joining together of Head and members, that indwelling of Christ in our hearts — in short, that mystical union are accorded by us the highest degree of importance, so that Christ, having been made ours, makes us sharers with him in the gifts with which he has been endowed. We do not, therefore, contemplate him outside ourselves from afar in order that his righteousness may be imputed to us but because we put on Christ and are engrafted into his body — in short, because he deigns to make us one with him. For this reason, we glory that we have fellowship of righteousness with him (*Institutes* 3.11.10).

And from Gaffin's *Resurrection and Redemption*:

This means, then, that despite a surface appearance to the contrary, Paul does not view the justification, adoption, sanctification, and glorification of the believer as separate distinct acts, but as different facets or aspects of the *one act* of incorporation with the resurrected Christ . . . Paul does not view the justification of the sinner (the imputation of Christ's righteousness) as an act having a discrete

structure of its own. Rather, . . . [in justification] the act of being joined to Christ is conceived of imputatively (130-1, 132).²⁰

In Wright's words:

[F]or those who *belong to the Messiah*, there is 'no condemnation' (Rom. 8.1, 8.31-9) . . . '*Justification*' is the declaration which God at once makes, that all who share this faith belong to Christ, to his sin-forgiven family, the one family of believing Jews and believing Gentiles together, and are assured of final glorification."²¹

In other words, for Calvin and Gaffin, as well as for Wright, it is not quite proper to speak of an *alien* righteousness in justification. Rather, in terms of union with Christ, his righteousness belongs to us in the same way a man's name and possessions now belong to his new wife. Because we are *in Christ*, all that Christ has is now ours -- including his righteous standing before the Father as the New Adam. The forensic, imputational aspect of salvation is included as one

²⁰ Richard B. Gaffin, *Resurrection and Redemption* (Baker, 1978. Reprint. Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987).

²¹ "Shape," first emphasis mine.

dimension of our union with the risen and vindicated Christ. Justification has no freestanding structure of its own; it is a function of our oneness with Christ.²²

²² All this is to say, for Wright, God accepts us as members of his sin-forgiven family because we are *in Christ*; justification is the (logically consequent) declaration that we are in Christ/in the covenant family. Justification presupposes and stems from union with Christ. This (I think) is what Wright is getting at when he says things like, "Justification is not how one becomes a Christian; it is the announcement he already is." Don Garlington's criticism that Wright's law court metaphor takes insufficient account of the sinner's union with Christ is largely correct because Wright does not always make union with Christ explicit enough in his explanation. However, it is still the case that union with Christ is a governing motif for Wright, even in his doctrine of justification.

Follow his train of thought as he surveys Romans 3:20-30 in *Saint Paul*:

All humankind is thus in the dock in God's metaphorical law court [according to Rom. 3:20]. In terms of the law court diagram, it is no longer just a case of Israel coming before God as the plaintiff, bringing a charge against the pagans. Gentile and Jew alike are now guilty defendants . . . What is God to do? Paul's answer is that the Messiah, King Jesus, has been the true faithful Israelite . . . 'The faithfulness of Jesus' (which later in, Romans 5, Paul can refer to as 'the

But, fourth, Wright's view of justification is further misunderstood because his corporate Christology feeds into a narrative reading of Scripture that many Reformed theologians, steeped in systematics but unfamiliar with typology, struggle to comprehend. On this point, a careful study of several of Wright's works is needed.²³ Wright situates justification within the broader framework of the biblical story, or metanarrative. In other words, he reads the Pauline doctrine

obedience of Jesus') is thus *the means whereby the righteousness of God is revealed.*

God is himself righteous, as the covenant God who has made promises and kept them. In terms of the law court metaphor, he has been true to his word, he has been impartial (note the way in which Paul goes on at once to speak of God's even-handed dealing with Jew and Gentile alike [in 3:29-30]), and he has dealt with sin...Once again we must insist that there is of course a 'righteous' standing, a status, which human beings have *as a result of God's gracious verdict in Christ.* Paul is perfectly happy with that" (106-7; last emphasis added).

For Wright, the righteous verdict God passes over us is founded upon our "in Christness."

²³ Especially helpful is his treatment of narrative in relation to worldview in *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1992). His Adam/Israel/Christ typology pervades most everything he has written.

of justification in terms of redemptive history. Thus, Christ is understood to be the New Adam and New Israel, living out the life of faithfulness which they failed to offer to God. Justification and the forgiveness of sins, therefore, are coordinated with the removal of the curse and the return from exile, which are clearly redemptive-historical events. While Wright's exile/exodus theology should be nuanced a bit more (to take into account the fact that Israel did, in some sense, return from exile in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah), there is no question he is on the right track. The prophets themselves repeatedly link the return from exile with forgiveness (e.g., Isaiah 40:1-2), and the New Testament clearly interprets Christ's death and resurrection in exile/exodus categories (e.g., Luke 9:31). In other words, justification has at least as much to do with the history of salvation as it does with some sort of individualistic *ordo salutis*. As Wright is fond of saying, what Israel had expected God to do for her at the end of history, he has done for one man, Jesus, in the middle of history.²⁴ For Wright, Jesus' resurrection is his great vindication; it is the justification, in representative form, that all Israel had hoped for (cf. Romans 4:25; 1 Tim. 3:16). Now, those who enter God's new Israel by faith share in Jesus' story of suffering and vindication; his story becomes their own. However, this is not to say Wright plays off individual salvation and redemptive history against each other. In fact,

²⁴ See *Saint Paul* 127.

given Wright's corporate Christology, if you have the *historia salutis*, the *ordo salutis* is thrown in as well.²⁵

²⁵ Wright's biblical-theological approach leads him to an understanding of justification that may seem strange to Reformed Christians on a first reading. However, his biblical-theological method is not necessarily antithetical to the conclusions drawn by Reformed dogmatics. His reworked definition of justification is no different in principle from Gaffin's reworked definition of regeneration along biblical-theological lines in *Resurrection and Redemption*. Gaffin demonstrates the Reformed dogmatic conception of regeneration is not what Paul has in view when he uses the term "regeneration" or related metaphors. In fact, Gaffin demonstrates Paul's formula is that we are regenerated by faith (129)! Of course, this is not decisional regeneration, since Gaffin insists faith itself is a gift. The same patient reading the Reformed community has given to Gaffin's biblical-theological overhaul of Reformed theology's traditional understanding of regeneration should be extended to Wright's analogous project with justification. See Vern Poythress, *Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1987), especially 74-81, on the slippage between terms as used in Scripture and systematic theology. This bifurcation is unfortunate, but seemingly unavoidable.

This brings us to the fifth feature of Wright's doctrine, its corporate nature. Luther and Calvin were deeply concerned with matters of individual standing before God. Think of Luther's driving question, "How can *I*, a sinner, find favor with God?" No doubt, this question must be asked and answered, and on that score the Reformers were right.²⁶ But such concerns are not always at the forefront of Paul's mind and reading them into Paul can be disastrous for exegesis. It is now becoming clear (and here is another issue Reformed theologians must be very patient in working towards a proper understanding of Wright) that our interpretation of Paul has often been governed more by existential sixteenth century questions, than by the questions that led Paul to pen the epistles in the first place. For example, if Galatians gives us Paul's earliest discussion of justification, it is striking that it comes up not in the context of Luther's individual soteriological question, but rather a debate over proper table fellowship (2:11ff)!²⁷ For Paul, justification was not merely a soteriological doctrine, but a sociological and ecclesiological one as well.²⁸ Indeed, for Paul,

²⁶ See *Saint Paul*, 116.

²⁷ *Saint Paul*, 120ff.

²⁸ Wright thus provides a healthy challenge to the doctrinalism/intellectualism that sometimes prevails in Reformed circles. Wright argues we are justified by faith in Christ (however poor our understanding of doctrine may be), not by believing the doctrine of justification by faith alone (which, ironically, creates a

soteriology and ecclesiology were inseparable since the church is the body and bride of the resurrected and glorified Christ, the new creation and eschatological kingdom in seed form. Wright has recovered this basic Pauline insight, and for that we should thank him. But note this does not leave him unconcerned with questions of individual salvation and assurance; indeed, Wright, rightly, reminds us that if you have the corporate, you get the individual thrown in as well.

Sixth, Wright begins his discussion of justification in the same place Paul does in the epistle to the Romans: in the future. Wright, building off of Romans 2:1-16, stresses the “not yet” as well as the “already” of justification. Here both Rome and the Reformers must be found wanting. For the Reformers, justification was conceived almost entirely in terms of the “already.” What wounded consciences needed to hear was that God had *already* accepted them in Christ. Rome, of course, held the verdict of justification in suspense until the last day, making assurance impossible. For Wright justification is *both* present *and* future. Initial justification is received by faith alone. But “future justification, acquittal at the

new kind of theological legalism). However, Gaffin (“Paul the Theologian,” 128) is correct that Wright would need to provide a good deal more argumentation to fully establish the conclusion that evangelical Protestants and Roman Catholics should share eucharistic fellowship.

last great Assize, always takes place on the basis of the totality of the life lived.”²⁹ Indeed, this point seems obvious, even if it has been largely missed because of our polemic against Rome. Scripture repeatedly points ahead to a final judgment in which works will play a vital role in our acquittal (though not in abstraction from faith or union with Christ, of course).³⁰

²⁹ James D. G. Dunn, editor, *Paul and the Mosaic Law* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2001), 144. See also *Saint Paul*, 129: “Present justification declares on the basis of faith, what future justification will affirm publicly (according to [Rom.] 2:14-16 and 8:9-11) on the basis of the entire life.” The reference to Rom. 8:9-11 is critical since it guards against any kind of legalism. Those who will be justified on the last day will have Spirit-wrought proof of their faith in Christ.

³⁰ See also Gal. 5:5-6. Wright speaks of the three tense of justification (past, present, future) in “Shape,” yet a forensic declaration is meant at every point, not a process. The Westminster divines implicitly acknowledge a future dimension to justification. Westminster Shorter Catechism 38 speaks of “acquittal” occurring at the final judgment and cites Matt. 25:23 as a proof-text. Gaffin, in *Resurrection and Redemption*, applies the already/not yet structure of New Testament eschatology to justification (133-4). Consider also Sinclair Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity, 1996):

Finally, we must consider Wright's Hebraic understanding "righteousness." For Wright, righteousness is not strictly legal but relational. It is not so much distributive justice as promise/covenant keeping.³¹ The Reformers, for the most part, ignored the Old Testament background to Paul's use of "righteousness" and assumed the Roman/Latin understanding then current. But Psalm 143:1, to cite one of many examples, parallels God's righteousness with his covenant faithfulness. The Psalmist can appeal to God's righteousness for salvation! On many Lutheran/Reformed grids, appealing to God's righteousness is suicidal, not salvific. But if righteousness is God's loyalty to the covenant, then the appeal of the psalmist makes sense. (It also explains why the psalmist could appeal to *his own* righteousness at times -- he wasn't claiming merit or moral perfection,

But there is an eschatological ('already/not yet') structure to each aspect of soteriology . . . And while it requires carefully guarded statement, it is also true that justification is an already accomplished and perfect reality, but awaits consummation...Similarly, while believers have already been justified with irreversible finality, they will appear before the judgment seat of Christ to receive what is due them (2 Cor. 5:10) (103).

³¹ See the discussion in Wright, *Saint Paul*, chapter 6, and Alister McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A Short History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification* (Second Edition. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1998), chapter 1.

only covenant faithfulness). In Romans 1, Paul says the gospel reveals the righteousness of God because, as the rest of the letter goes on to show, the gospel announces that God has kept all his covenant promises -- appearances to the contrary -- through the death and resurrection of Christ.

Wright's doctrine of justification has proven to be the most controversial element of his New Testament theology thus far. But a careful reading of Wright's work as a whole reveals that he does indeed deal with all the major, traditional Reformed concerns. Vicarious atonement, propitiation, salvation by grace through faith, the necessity of non-meritorious faith-based good works, the centrality of union with Christ – it is all there. The language and packaging are somewhat unique to Wright, but the heart of Wright's work is not antithetical to the Reformation. Granted, his definition of justification is not fully traditional. But what justification does in older Reformed systematics, Wright accomplishes with his corporate Christology and covenant-historical reading of Scripture. His work should be considered an expansion and development of Reformed theology, not its undoing. I consider his inclusion of corporate and eschatological dimensions in his doctrine of justification to be salutary developments. Granted, I have not dealt with many other less controversial

issues³² in Wright's theology, but hopefully I have demonstrated that if Wright is understood on his own terms, he falls within the boundaries of classic Reformed orthodoxy. As Wright is fond of saying, if you go his route, you do not lose the Reformation and you get a lot more thrown in!

No doubt, much more needs to be said, but hopefully this essay will at least temper some criticism of Wright and encourage many within the Reformed camp to take another look at his valuable work. It is all too easy to dismiss Wright without a hearing when a theologian of Gaffin's stature is critical of him. But we must not shy away from *semper Reformanda*, from continually reforming our theology and confessions according to the Scriptures. The sixteenth century reformers made great headway in understanding Paul. But we have several more centuries of preaching, exegesis, and scholarship behind us and should not be afraid to move forward, albeit with due caution. Plus, we should recognize the questions facing us are quite different today and cannot but force us to look at Paul from different angles. I am confident that in the long run, Wright's work on the New Testament will come be treasured by the Reformed tradition as the

³² Some other issues needing attention include his view of biblical authority, his "critical realism," his definition of "gospel," his exegesis of the Pauline phrase "faith of Jesus Christ," and his view of the role of women in the church.

“next step” in our growing understanding of God’s revelation in Christ.

Accepting Wright need not mean rejecting the Reformation.