

**BOMBING THE THEOLOGIANS' PLAYGROUND:  
AN EXTENDED REVIEW OF  
N. T. WRIGHT'S ROMANS COMMENTARY**

**BY RICH LUSK**

**Romans in Church History**

The book of Romans has played a critical role throughout the church's history. In its first century setting, Paul's letter acted to galvanize the church in the empire's capital and raise funds for his hoped for mission to Spain. Like the rest of Paul's correspondence, Romans is an *ad hoc*, situational letter. But because Paul had not met the Romans (in fact, this is perhaps the only church he wrote a canonical letter to that he did not plant), this epistle gives us a broader introduction to the apostle's overall theological worldview than any of his other letters. Its breadth makes it unique in the Pauline corpus.

Time and time again, Romans has been used uniquely in the providence of God as a catalyst for dramatic and dynamic change in the church and world. In the fourth century, a desperate Augustine responded to the mysterious voice of a child, saying, "Pick up and read, pick up and read." He randomly opened the book to Romans 13:13-14. God answered his mother Monica's prayers and transformed his heart as he read Paul's words:

I interpreted it [the child's chant] solely as a divine command to me to open the book and read the first chapter I might find . . . So I hurried back to the place where Alypius was sitting. There I had put down the book of the apostle when I got up. I seized it, opened it and in silence read the first passage on which my eyes lit: 'Not in riots and drunken parties, not in eroticism and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord

Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in its lusts' (Rom. 13:13-14).

I neither wished nor needed to read further. At once, with the last words of this sentence, it was as if a light of relief from all anxiety flooded into my heart. All the shadows of doubt were dispelled.<sup>1</sup>

Spurred by Paul's instruction to the Romans, this sex-crazed young man went on to become the greatest saint and theologian of his era.

In the sixteenth century, Romans was the eye of the Reformation storm.

Virtually every magisterial Reformer used Romans as a major plank in his doctrinal platform. At the beginning of the Protestant movement, it was Martin Luther's exposition of Romans that led to a rediscovery of the gospel. He describes it in his own words:

I greatly longed to understand Paul's epistle to the Romans and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, "the justice of God," because I took it to mean that justice whereby God is just and deals justly in punishing the unjust. My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage Him. Therefore I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against Him. Yet I clung to the dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant. Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that "the just shall live by faith." Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the "justice of God" had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate of heaven.<sup>2</sup>

Luther praised Romans as the pinnacle of God's revelation:

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. by Henry Chadwick (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 153.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 49-50.

The epistle to the Romans is really the chief part of the New Testament and the very purest Gospel, and is worthy not only that every Christian should know it word for word, by heart, but occupy himself with it everyday, as the daily bread of the soul. It can never be read or pondered too much, and the more it is dealt with the more precious it becomes, and the better it tastes.<sup>3</sup>

Other sixteenth century Reformers concurred. For example, William Tyndale said,

No man can verily read the epistle to the Romans too often, or study it too well; for the more it is studied, the easier it is, the more it is chewed the pleasanter it is, and the more thoroughly it is searched, the more precious the things which are found in it – so great a treasure of spiritual things lies his therein.

John Calvin's first published biblical commentary was on Romans. We may assume that Romans was chosen because of its strategic importance in the controversies of the day. He suggested that "when any one gains a knowledge of this epistle, he has an entrance opened to him to all the most hidden treasures of the Scriptures."<sup>4</sup>

In the eighteenth century, John Wesley's famous Aldersgate experience was mediated through the book of Romans. In his journal, he describes how God worked in his heart, as someone was reading from Luther's preface to Romans:

About a quarter before nine, while he was reading was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. by J. Theodore Mueller (Grand Rapids: Kregel 1974), xiii.

<sup>4</sup> William Tyndale, *Select Works* (Sussex: Focus Christian Ministries reprint, 1986), 312.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted from *John Wesley's Journal*, entry for May 24, 1738 in John Stott, *Romans: God's Good News for the World* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 22.

In the early nineteenth century, the famous Haldane revival was sparked by an exposition of Paul's letter to the Romans. Martyn Lloyd-Jones tells the story:

In 1816, Robert Haldane, being about fifty years of age, went to Switzerland and to Geneva. There, to all outward appearances as if by accident, he came into contact with a number of students who were studying for the ministry. They were blind to spiritual truth but felt much attracted to Haldane and to what he said. He arranged, therefore, that they should come regularly twice a week to the rooms where he was staying and there he took them through and expounded to them Paul's epistle to the Romans. One by one they were converted, and their conversion led to a true revival of religion, not only in Switzerland, but also in France. They included such men as Merle D'Aubigne, the writer of the classic *History of the Reformation*, Frederic Monod who became the chief founder of the Free Churches in France, Bonifas who became a theologian of great ability; Louis Gaussen, the author of *Theopneustia*, a book on the inspiration of the Scriptures; and Cesar Milan. There were others who were greatly used of God in the revival. It was at the request of such men that Robert Haldane decided to put into print what he had been telling them.<sup>6</sup>

Interest in Romans has never waned. It continues to be the most heavily researched and written about book in the Pauline corpus, if not the entire biblical canon. The twentieth century saw the production of monumental commentaries on Romans by the likes of John Murray,<sup>7</sup> Charles Cranfield,<sup>8</sup> Martin Lloyd Jones,<sup>9</sup> F. F. Bruce,<sup>10</sup> and John Stott.<sup>11</sup> But the most famous twentieth century commentator on Romans was no doubt Karl Barth.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> "Forward" in Robert Haldane, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1988), 7.

<sup>7</sup> John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Eerdmans, 1959-65; two-volumes-in-one edition, 1968).

<sup>8</sup> Charles E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, in *The International Critical Commentaries* (T. and T. Clark; vol. 1, 1975; vol. 2, 1979).

<sup>9</sup> Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust), 11 vols., 1995-1998. Lloyd-Jones' contribution is really a collection of highly theological sermons.

<sup>10</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Letter of Paul to the Romans*, in *The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1963).

Barth's commentary (first published in 1918, with several subsequent revisions) postured itself as something of a break with the insipid theological liberalism of the day. Yet it was not a call back to the old paths of Luther and Calvin. In light of the horrors of the First World War, Barth called for a theological revolution; indeed some called it "a new Reformation." Proclaiming the "Godness of God" against our ungodliness, Barth argued that we are utterly dependent on sovereign grace. And yet he was not out to recover the Protestant orthodoxy of the past; his dialectical method, in fact, required a radical rethinking of Calvinism, edging towards universalism. His staunchly Christocentric view of God demanded a reworking of traditional theological categories and sparked a renaissance of Trinitarian study. His views of revelation and history did not seem to fit easily into either conservative or liberal boxes; scholars still debate precisely what Barth meant decades later. But there was one thing everyone agreed upon: After Barth, commenting on Romans would never be the same. As one reviewer put it, using a fit metaphor for the postwar situation, Barth's commentary was a "bombshell dropped on the playground of the theologians."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Stott, *Romans: God's Good News for the World*.

<sup>12</sup> Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (London: Oxford University, 1918). Obviously, this was not Barth's only important and influential work, so it is almost impossible to separate out the impact of this commentary from his other published writings.

<sup>13</sup> This comment about Barth's work on Romans is attributed to Karl Adam. In his essay, "Does the Gospel Have a Future? Barth's *Romans* Revisited," Gerhard O. Forde writes,

*Romans* is still the theological classic of the twentieth century, the hallmark over against which all have to define themselves, even that later Barth himself. I soon get suspicious of theologians who worry overmuch about whether Barth might have gone too far in his relentless attacks on every sacred oak in sight. *Romans* is still the great thunderhead that

While the twenty-first century is barely underway, it's already witnessed the publication of a landmark new commentary on Romans by one of the world's leading New Testament scholars. Another bomb has been dropped, creating another theological earthquake. N. T. Wright's *The Letter to the Romans: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections* is pages 393-770 in volume 10 of *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, edited by Leander Keck. The 2002 Abingdon Press book retails for \$70.00. As with Barth's commentary, so Wright's work unleashes the apostle's *magnum opus* from the theological straightjackets of the day, and is sure to cause many a theologian who thinks he has Romans all figured out to delve into the text afresh.

Like Barth's work, Wright's volume on Romans is both traditional and cutting edge at the same time. But unlike Barth's opaque and draining style, Wright's commentary is quite well-written and is organized in a reader-friendly fashion. With so many Romans commentaries already on the market, one might wonder what could justify one more, even by the famed Bishop of Durham. But it does not take a reader long to discover why Wright's commentary is so needed. It is chock full of provocative insights, clear-headed exegesis, and

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looms over us all, threatening ever and again to blast our fine and flimsy theological constructions with divine lightning and awesome thunder . . . Paul's Romans has always been the explosive that fires reformation in the history of the church and will, God willing, be so again. Barth's *Romans* gives Paul voice once again in the twentieth century, after he had been buried by the searchers for the historical Jesus and the history of religions savants who put him in the trash heap of Hellenism. The conversations back and forth in the prefaces to the several editions are a telltale indication of how these professional practitioners attempted to reduce Paul to a domesticated house pet . . . [Barth's *Romans* was] the bombshell that rocked the theological world so that it has never been the same.

Available at [http://www.luthersem.edu/word&world/Archives/14-1\\_Baptism/14-1\\_Forde.pdf](http://www.luthersem.edu/word&world/Archives/14-1_Baptism/14-1_Forde.pdf).

challenging practical applications to the church. It is a path-breaking work, carving a way through old impasses and quagmires. It's not perfect, to be sure, but it's a fine and needed contribution to Romans studies and Pauline theology in general.

Of course, it would not be fair to expect Wright's work on Romans to have the quite the same seismic effect that Barth's commentary had a couple generations ago. Barth's commentary catapulted him to instant theological stardom; it would be impossible for Wright's commentary to do the same. For one thing, Wright has already laid most of his theological cards on the table in the decade before publishing his commentary. For those who have tracked closely the writing<sup>14</sup> and speaking<sup>15</sup> ministry of Wright, there will be few surprises in his commentary, though having all his thoughts on Romans in one place will be quite convenient. Wright has been working on Pauline studies for years and had made at least cursory comments on large swaths of Romans along the way.<sup>16</sup> So this work must ultimately be viewed as part of a larger theological project that will likely overshadow twenty-first century biblical scholarship in much the same way Barth's work dominated the last century.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1997).

<sup>15</sup> E.g., Wright's "Romans in a Week" tape series, available from Regent Bookstore at <https://shop.gospelcom.net/cgi-bin/RegentCollegeBookstore.storefront>.

<sup>16</sup> Wright's (unfortunately unpublished) dissertation is a marvelous study in its own right. N. T. Wright, *The Messiah and the People of God: A Study in Pauline Theology with Particular Reference to the Argument of the Epistle to the Romans*.

<sup>17</sup> Of course, I have in mind here not only his *NIB* contribution on Romans, but also his still-in-progress *Christian Origins and the Question of God* series. Thus far, three of the planned seven volumes have been published. The one on Paul is still to come.

In addition, Wright's commentary cannot have the full earthshaking impact of Barth's because Wright is far more classical than Barth. While Barth was seeking to cut a new road through the morass of liberalism gone bad, Wright is thoroughly at home in traditional, Reformational Christianity, including the *solas*.<sup>18</sup> His insights emerge from *within* the Reformed tradition, rather than seeking to break out of it. That's not to say that he has nothing genuinely new to add to Romans scholarship; it is to suggest, rather, that his fresh insights are snugly situated within a time-tested, classically Protestant framework. His commentary, then, is blending of treasures both old and new, but recombined into an attractive, compelling package. He offers a reading of Paul that is familiar and still provocative, recognizable and yet challenging. He will not introduce Calvinists to a Paul they never knew; he will instead point out features of the old Paul that have been missed or misread in the past. He manages to avoid the temptation that has haunted Reformed scholarship on Romans for centuries – namely, disguising systematic theology in the form of a commentary.

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<sup>18</sup> In his Rutherford lecture, he described himself, "as a good Calvinist" and said, "I still think of myself as a Reformed theologian." See his "New Perspectives on Paul," available at [http://home.hiwaay.net/~kbush/Wright\\_New\\_Perspectives.pdf](http://home.hiwaay.net/~kbush/Wright_New_Perspectives.pdf). In his commentary on Romans, he affirms all five *solas* of the Reformation. His commitment to exegesis and his submission to scriptural authority demonstrate his belief in *sola scriptura*. He asserts *solus Christus* on page 525: "The solution [to sin] is the same for all: grace, working through God's covenant faithfulness, resulting in the life of the age to come, though Jesus, Israel's Messiah." On page 548, he affirms *sola gratia* and *sola fide*: "Justification is by grace alone, through faith alone." Finally, *solus Deo gloria* is found on page 696: "Now, in hope, through the gospel of the Messiah, Jesus, the glory is restored (5:2; 8:30); but the glory remains God's, God's to give, God's to be reflected back to God, God's own forever."



Wright's exegesis could certainly be used to feed into a systematic theology, but his overriding concern is with the text of Romans itself.<sup>19</sup>

But if Wright's commentary is as old as it is new, what's the big deal? What makes Wright's commentary so special? There are at least two reasons for singling out Wright's commentary amidst the flood of studies on Romans. The first is its relationship to biblical theology; the second is its connection with the so-called "New Perspective on Paul." Let's look at each of these in turn; afterwards, we can look more fully at the commentary itself.

### **N. T. Wright and Biblical Theology**

The biblical theology movement is now a few centuries old.<sup>20</sup> Of course, there is still widespread debate over just what the task of biblical theology should be, how it relates to systematic and confessional theology, what methods it should employ, and so forth.<sup>21</sup> But at its best, biblical theology is, as

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<sup>19</sup> Obviously, systematic theology is inescapable. Every commentator on the text of Roman has certain presuppositions about systematic theology that will inevitably shape the way he reads the text. Wright is no exception. But Wright's concerns are clearly exegetical, not systematic.

<sup>20</sup> Of course, biblical theology is not *really* a "movement" at all, as Scott Hafemann has pointed out: "[A]s James Smart observed, to call biblical theology a 'movement' in the first place was the 'kiss of death.' Movements are temporary answers to abiding problems. Thus, by definition, movements come and go. In stark contrast, biblical theology is an abiding response demanded by the subject matter of the biblical text itself." "Biblical Theology: Retrospect and Prospect," in *Biblical Theology: Retrospect and Prospect*, edited by Scott Hafemann (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 15.

<sup>21</sup> See, e.g., Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology: A Proposal* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002). Reformed tensions between dogmatic/systematic theology and biblical/covenantal theology go at least back to the debates between Voetius and Cocceius in the seventeenth century. See Phillip Benedict, *Christ's Churches Purely Reformed: A Social History of Calvinism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 339ff.

Geerhardus Vos noted, simply an outgrowth of Reformed covenant theology.<sup>22</sup> Or, even more broadly, it's simply an enhancement of the church's traditional typological pattern of interpretation.<sup>23</sup> Biblical theology does not reject an *ordo salutis* for individuals, but it contextualizes it within the broader framework of *historia salutis*, that is, God's redemptive purposes for creation and history.

At root, biblical theology is simply *story theology*. To read the Bible on its own terms, from beginning to end, is to read it as a story. And if Wright understands anything about Scripture, he understands its narrational shape: "As Paul's own writings make abundantly clear, what we find in Scripture is above all a *narrative*: the great story of God and the world, and of God's people as the people of God *for* that world."<sup>24</sup>

In fact, Wright takes "story" to be a fundamental, irreducible worldview category.<sup>25</sup> His model for interpreting and applying Scripture is essentially

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<sup>22</sup> "[Reformed theology] has from the beginning shown itself possessed of a true historic sense in the apprehension of the progressive character of the deliverance of truth. Its doctrine of the covenants on its historical side represents the first attempt at constructing a history of revelation and may justly be considered the precursor of what is at present called biblical theology."

*Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, edited R. B. Gaffin, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2001), 232.

<sup>23</sup> R. B. Gaffin writes, "Virtually from its beginning on and more or less consistently, the church has been incipiently biblical-theological." "Biblical Theology and the Westminster Standards," *Westminster Theological Journal* 65 (2003), 166. See also Jean Danielou, *From Shadow to Reality: Studies in the Biblical Typology of the Fathers*, trans. by Wulstan Hubbard (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1960); Henri DeLubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, vol. 1, trans by Mark Sebanc (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998); and Christopher Hall, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1998).

<sup>24</sup> *Romans*, 586-7. See also, e.g., his "New Perspectives on Paul" essay: "What I miss entirely in the Old Perspective, but find so powerfully in some modern Pauline scholarship, is Paul's sense of an underlying narrative, the story of God and Israel, God and Abraham, God and the covenant people, and the way in which that story came to its climax, as he says, 'when the time had fully come' with the coming of Jesus the Messiah."

<sup>25</sup> See *The New Testament and the People of God*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), ch. 8.

narrative based.<sup>26</sup> He refuses to fall into the Enlightenment trap of treating Paul as a philosopher, spinning out timeless, abstract truths. Wright's approach to Paul is firmly grounded in the God-given particularities of redemptive history.

Biblical theology requires us to learn to read the biblical narrative *from within*. As the covenant people, we are *insiders* to the story of Scripture. It's *our* story.<sup>27</sup> As such, we must be ever mindful to allow the Word to absorb the world rather than allowing the world to absorb the Word. We must interpret our story and the world's story in light of Scripture's story. We have to take Scripture's outlook and framework as normative rather than imposing another, alien worldview on our reading of Scripture. We must learn to read the Bible organically, in terms of itself. Wright's masterful grasp of the New Testament's historical context and background allows him to do this. Wright reads the New

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<sup>26</sup> See, e.g., his "How Can the Bible be Authoritative?" essay, available at <http://home.hiwaay.net/~kbush/Wright Bible Authoritative.pdf>. There, Wright compares Scripture to an unfinished five act Shakespeare play. The first four acts determine the shape the fifth must take in post-canonical history:

The first four acts provide, let us suppose, such a wealth of characterization, such a crescendo of excitement within the plot, that it is generally agreed that the play ought to be staged. Nevertheless, it is felt inappropriate actually to write a fifth act once and for all; it would freeze the play into one form . . . Better, it might be felt, to give the key parts to highly trained, sensitive and experienced Shakespearian actors, who would immerse themselves in the first four acts, and in the language and culture of Shakespeare and his time, and *who would then be told to work out a fifth act for themselves*.

<sup>27</sup> This is Paul's point in passages such as Romans 11 and 1 Corinthians 10:1-11, to name a couple of explicit examples. Even Gentiles have been grafted into the story of Israel because they are united to Christ, the True Israelite. All Christians now trace their heritage back through Jesus and his apostles, to Israel. David, Moses, and Abraham are now our ancestors and their stories part of our background. We must learn to read the Bible accordingly. It is not only revelation *for* us, but *about* us. We must learn to read the Bible the way Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy would read *The Chronicles of Narnia*. We are insiders, not outsiders, to the biblical metanarrative. See George Lindbeck, *Postliberal Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 177ff, for an excellent account of this sort of typological interpretation in the history of the church.

Testament as God's completion of the unfinished story found in the Hebrew Scriptures.

As part of his historical project, Wright fearlessly situates Paul within his first century world. Paul stood at the nexus of several different cultures – his own Jewish culture which gave him his personal and communal background, the Roman culture in which he held his citizenship, the Greek culture in which he was so fluent, and the newly emerging Christian culture of the church, in which his identity and worldview underwent a profound Christological transformation. As a biblical theologian, Wright integrates all of these various layers into a coherent and compelling reading of Paul. At every turn, Wright seeks to take account of Paul's multi-faceted background and forward-looking mission.

Reading the Bible organically also means reading it intertextually and typologically. Intertextual reading listens for echoes of and allusions to other passages within the canon, using Scripture interpret Scripture. The Old Testament is the key that unlocks the New, and vice versa.<sup>28</sup> Typological reading looks for repeating patterns within the unfolding storyline of Scripture.<sup>29</sup> Biblical typology is focused on *totus Christus* – the whole Christ, head and body, Jesus and the church. Typology means reading the Bible in terms of promise and fulfillment structures. As we move from type to antitype, there is both

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<sup>28</sup> For an excellent example of Wright's intertextual exegesis, see *Romans*, 610-611: Wright demonstrates Paul has woven together three Old Testament allusions in Romans 8:31ff. Of course, the commentary, as well as Wright's other writings, are chock full on this sort of inner-biblical exegesis.

<sup>29</sup> In analyzing Paul's overview of redemptive history in Romans 5:12-21, Wright unpacks the dense Adam-Israel-Christ chain of typological links. See *Romans*, 525.

correspondence and escalation within history. Scripture is read as a revelation of the suffering and glory of Christ (Lk. 24); these things *had to happen* because they were prophesied long before.<sup>30</sup>

Wright's biblical-theological exposition of Romans is sensitive to types and narrative patterns, as we will see. Wright rejects the liberal form of biblical theology which dichotomized between God's acts in history and the human record of those events<sup>31</sup> or between the "historical" meaning of a text and its "typological" sense.<sup>32</sup> According to Wright, in Romans (and elsewhere), we are given both the record of what God has done in history, as well as a God's-eye interpretation of those events.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Wright rarely uses the term "typology" to describe his method, but it's obvious this is what he's doing. For an overview of his typological, promise/fulfillment reading of the New Testament, see *The New Testament and the People of God*, ch. 13. For Wright, christological typology is not so much a matter of isolated prooftexts or repeating patterns as it is the outflow of the overall biblical storyline. See, e.g., the various essays in his *Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

<sup>31</sup> See *The New Testament and the People of God*, ch. 1.

<sup>32</sup> For example, in *Romans* (524-5), he argues that there was an original Adam, in accord with the Genesis accounts. Adam is treated as both an historical person and a typological/symbolic figure:

Paul clearly believed there had been a single first pair, whose male, Adam, had been given a commandment and had broken it. Paul was, we may be sure, aware of what we would call mythical or metaphorical dimensions to the story, but he would not have regarded these as throwing doubt on the existence, and primal sin, of the first historical pair . . . The general popular belief that the early stories of Genesis were straightforwardly disproved by Charles Darwin is of course non-sense, however many times it is reinforced in contemporary myth-making. Things are just not that simple, in biblical theology or science . . . Adam, he says, is a "type of the one who was coming" . . . The thought [of a "type"] is of a die or stamp that leaves its impression in wax: Paul's meaning seems to be that Adam prefigured the Messiah in certain respects . . . , notably that he founded a family that would bear his characteristics.

<sup>33</sup> See *Romans*, 416:

This letter is about the way in which, through the lens of the gospel, the covenant plan and purpose of the one true God have been unveiled before the world. Paul's view of God remained deeply Jewish; he believed that the one God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the creator of the world, had now brought world history to its climax in Jesus. Paul is urging the Roman Christians to understand this purpose, and their own place within it,

This canonical approach allows us to read Romans in light of the entire biblical story. If the major center of gravity in Romans is indeed “God’s righteousness,” if this is the central theme that pulls all other motifs in the letter into itself,<sup>34</sup> then the epistle can only be understood in terms of an Old Testament framework, blending covenantal, apocalyptic (or eschatological), and law court themes.<sup>35</sup> “God’s righteousness” is his divine commitment to fulfill the promises made to Israel through Abraham and the prophets. The righteousness of God has been revealed in and through the ministry of Jesus Christ.

The major narrative subtheme in Romans, feeding into the wider notion of “God’s righteousness,” is the exile/exodus cycle.<sup>36</sup> Adam was exiled from God’s presence in Genesis 3 (cf. Rom. 1:18-32); in Christ, humanity is “exodused” back into fellowship with God (cf. Rom. 5:12-21). Israel recapitulates Adam’s fall, undergoing exile by the Assyrians and Babylonians, losing her little piece of Eden (the temple and land). While that exile had come to an end in a geographic sense, including a rebuilt temple, the glorious restoration, depicted by the prophets in nothing less than Edenic and new exodus imagery, still awaited complete fulfillment. Daniel’s vision in chapter 9 elongated the exilic period from 70 years to 70 x 7 years. The days of desolation would continue on until

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so that they can then live and work appropriately and, indeed, support Paul’s apostolic task as well . . . The natural meaning of the phrase “God’s gospel concerning his son” [in 1:1-3], therefore, is “God’s announcement, in fulfillment of prophecy, of the royal enthronement of the Messiah, Israel’s anointed king, the lord of the world.”

<sup>34</sup> See *Romans* 397: “It is not difficult to discover the main theme of the letter. ‘God’s gospel unveils God’s righteousness.’ That, in effect, is Paul’s own summary of the letter in 1:16-17, and the letter does, indeed, unpack this dense statement.”

<sup>35</sup> *Romans*, 398ff.

<sup>36</sup> *Romans*, 398ff, 533ff.

God acted in a final and dramatic way to rescue and vindicate his people once and for all. Paul now proclaims that in Christ, that final promised exodus has and is coming to pass. God has kept the covenant with his people, and ultimately the entire creation will be delivered from the Pharaoh of sin and death (Rom. 8:17ff). Wright brilliantly traces out the exile/exodus motif through Paul's tightly woven, highly intertextual argument in chapters 6-8. In fact, he shows that these chapters play off the entire exodus/Red Sea crossing/wilderness wandering/promise land conquering story of Israel. As the new exodus community, we have been baptized into Christ and are under his Torah. The Spirit is now our pillar of cloud and fire, leading the adopted sons of God on their way to the promised inheritance. All the major themes of the exodus account resonate with the central section of Romans:

Baptism, death to sin's mastery, enslaved to righteousness(6:1ff) =  
Red Sea crossing, death to Pharaoh, enslaved to the Lord

Struggle with Torah (7:1ff) = Israel at Sinai

Following the lead of the Spirit as sons on the way to the promised new creation (Rom. 8:1ff) = Israel's wilderness wandering, as God's son, following the pillar of cloud and fire, on the way to Canaan

Of course, this biblical theological approach is not without controversy. Looking at Romans through the grid of Old Testament, Jewish categories forces us to rethink some things. Some of Wright's most controversial views have clustered around his attempts to redefine terms such as "justification" and "the

righteousness of God” in terms of biblical theology.<sup>37</sup> Confessional theologians feel threatened by a new terminology and react accordingly.

For example, Charles Hill argues that Wright’s incorporation of “covenant membership” into his doctrine of justification is illegitimate because justification is about salvation, not the church. Hill’s critique is odd because it is difficult to know exactly where he thinks his own view differs from Wright’s. But it’s clear that Hill reads Romans as systematic theology, more or less, and not as story theology.

Hill argues:

The claim to have discovered and restored this broad Jewish context is central to Wright’s attempt to redefine justification. He essentially argues that in the Judaism which nurtured Paul and which Paul addressed throughout his ministry, justification is all about covenant membership in God’s Israel. Here I think he is radically wrong. He has certainly not established this in his book [*What Saint Paul Really Said*]. The covenant relationship may be the context in which Jews discussed justification, but it was the context for their discussion of everything!<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> In “Biblical Theology and the Westminster Standards,” Gaffin shows that a biblical-theological approach, in principle, is not incompatible with the Westminster Standards or classic Reformed systematic theology. I agree. However, my frustration with Gaffin is his apparent unwillingness to concede that biblical-theology may in fact lead us to reformulate confessional standards. Biblical-theology is not to blame for “diminishing interest and confidence in the formulations of classic Reformed theology” (165). Rather, biblical-theology at times requires us to recast those same truths in slightly different form. Biblical-theology done right has the effect of purifying systematics and bringing it more closely in line with Scripture’s own language and categories. Surely our confessions are not un-reformable! If biblical-theology’s only role is to confirm what our dogmatics and confessions already teach us, why bother with it? What’s the payoff of biblical-theology? Gaffin has vastly underrated the theological impact of his own insights and methodology (though I daresay, sometimes Wright exaggerates the radicalness of his own insights!).

<sup>38</sup> <http://www.thirdmill.org/files/english/html/nt/NT.h.Hill.Wright.html>. This is not to say that Hill scores no points in his article’s debate with Wright. In fact, many statements Wright has made about justification call for clarification and amplification. Many of those clarifications and amplifications are made in the Romans commentary, written after Hill’s essay.



But this misses the point – and in fact, Hill goes on to do just what he says a good Jew would never have done: divorce a discussion of justification from the context of the covenant. Hill misreads Wright and misunderstands his methodology. Wright’s definition of justification is not lexical, but theological. He’s looking at how the doctrine of justification actually *functions* in Paul’s writings. In other words, he’s asking, “What does Paul use the doctrine of justification to do? What questions does he use the doctrine of justification to answer?” Wright is not suggesting that “covenant membership” can simply be inserted for every Pauline occurrence of “justification” as though they were synonymous.<sup>39</sup> The argument is more complex than that. Nor does Wright anywhere suggest that covenant membership is one thing, and the forgiveness of sins something else, altogether unrelated. And while Hill is correct that Paul does in fact contrast justification with condemnation (cf. Rom. 8:1; Wright would not deny this), it is *also* the case that Paul contrasts righteousness in Christ with his membership in the old covenant people (e.g., Phil. 3:1-12). In other words, Wright’s view embraces all

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<sup>39</sup> Wright’s argument for the inclusion of covenant membership under the rubric “justification” is not etymological, but functional. D. A. Carson makes the same mistake as Hill in his essay “The Vindication of Imputation: On Fields of Discourse and Semantic Fields,” 50ff, in *Justification: What’s at Stake in Current Debates*, edited by Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Treier (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 2004). Interestingly, the Reformed catechisms and confessions follow the same procedure as Wright. The Reformation defined justification, at least in part, as forgiveness. But the Greek terms for justification simply do not mean “to forgive,” but rather “to declare or demonstrate as righteous.” The Reformers were right to incorporate forgiveness into their definition of justification because in order for God to justify sinners he must forgive them; forgiveness becomes a functional aspect of justification. Wright’s arguments for including covenant membership in the definition of justification work the same way. “Justification” does not mean “covenant membership” any more than it means “forgiveness,” but both are entailed by Paul’s use of the doctrine.

that Hill says about Romans, and a lot more. Justification is not less than soteriological; but it is also ecclesiological as well.<sup>40</sup>

Wright treats “covenant membership” as a kind of shorthand for everything bound up the doctrine of justification. Both covenant and justification, as the flow of his commentary on Romans 1-3 reveal, are concerned with the universal (Jew and Gentile) problem of human sin and the consequent wrath of God. “Covenant,” in Wright’s scheme, is God’s plan for dealing with that sin, including both judging the wicked and rescuing his faithful people. Those who are so rescued are “justified” – namely, they are declared to be a part of his sin-forgiven, vindicated family, over against those who are condemned. Right standing in the divine law court is not a by-product of covenant membership; rather, it is the very essence of covenant membership. To be justified is to be made a member of the people who enjoy by faith in the present full assurance of future vindication at the last day. These people are not marked out or constituted by “works of Torah” since that would give the universal problem of sin a particularistic answer, available only to Jews; rather, they are identified by their faith in Jesus as the crucified and risen Messiah and loyalty to him as the world’s true king. In short, tying covenant membership into justification does not marginalize soteriological concerns; if anything it heightens them, since the

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<sup>40</sup> I do not see how Hill’s view can avoid a highly individualistic understanding of justification. Insofar as Wright is rejecting this sort of individualism, he is bound to come into conflict with those who have severed justification from the church.

salvation of the world in the fullest sense was the purpose of the Abrahamic covenant all along.

Wright brings together justification and covenant in a fairly familiar way. God has made covenant promises to Israel through Abraham. The sin of Israel, however, makes one wonder how the nation will fare in the divine law court at the great assize. Israel's sin is not just Israel's problem; it is also God's problem, because God has promised blessing to Israel. So: How will God keep his promises to Israel in light of Israel's unfaithfulness? How will God act righteously, keeping the Abrahamic covenant, even though the people of Abraham themselves deserve wrath? How will the checkered narrative reach resolution? In Romans 3:21ff, Christ is set forth as the answer to these questions. Through his death and resurrection, the covenant promises come to fulfillment. The righteousness of God is demonstrated in punishing sin at the cross. But that same event also secures forgiveness for his people. By faith, the death and resurrection of Christ are reckoned to them, so that they share his covenantal status in the divine law court. In this way, God proves he is both just and the Justifier of those who have faith in him. Hill simply does not do justice to the flow of Paul's – or Wright's – argument.

Further, Hill says that in Romans 1:16-17, God's righteousness must be his gift to sinners, not his own covenant faithfulness. After all, it is the world that is on trial, not God. Romans, in other words, is not a theodicy. But here we have a good example of how Wright's biblical theological approach can help us read

Romans more faithfully. Hill essentially ignores the Old Testament covenantal background in Romans 1:16-17. Paul quotes from Habakkuk, a book in which the covenant faithfulness of God is most certainly the central issue. The ancient prophet wondered how God could be true to his promises to Israel if the covenant people were about to be overrun by a pagan nation. The same question kind of question drives Romans, as Wright explains:

The original passage in Habakkuk belongs within a book full of woe and puzzlement. The Chaldeans are marching against Israel; all seems lost. What is Israel's God up to in allowing it? This is, once more, the question of the righteousness, or justice, of God (this alone should ward off the idea that Paul was quoting at random a verse that merely happened to contain two catch words) . . .

What does this [vision] mean in practice for the prophet? It means believing God will eventually punish the idolatrous and violent nation (2:5-20), that God will remember mercy in the midst of wrath and bring salvation to Israel (3:2-19). This thematic parallel with Rom. 1:18-3:20 and 3:21-4:25 is striking and continues to suggest that Paul does, indeed, have the larger context from Habakkuk in mind.<sup>41</sup>

In other words, Romans is a new covenant Habakkuk.<sup>42</sup> Wright's reading of

Romans 1:16-17 accounts for the Habakkuk quotation in a way Hill's cannot.

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<sup>41</sup>*Romans*, 425-6. Note that in the sixteenth century, the Reformers did not offer a monolithic exegesis of Romans. The Reformers shared a basic perspective, but there was a wide degree of divergence on Romans 1:16-17 and other key passages in Romans. See Alistair Roberts' helpful reminder, "N. T. Wright and Reformation Readings of Romans," available at [http://www.tentmaker.org.uk/potterswheel/wright\\_and\\_reformation\\_readings\\_of\\_romans.html](http://www.tentmaker.org.uk/potterswheel/wright_and_reformation_readings_of_romans.html). Roberts show how arbitrary and groundless it is to regard Wright as unreformed because of his exegesis of Romans 1. Actually, Wright's take on "the righteousness of God" closely resembles that of Bucer.

<sup>42</sup> In addition to Wright, see Richard Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale, 1989). Getting the Habakkukian background in Romans 1 right is critical, since the way we understand the programmatic statement in 1:16-17 has downstream implication for how the entire epistle is read. If Romans is read in light of Habakkuk, Romans 9-11 become the real theological core of the letter and make perfect sense in terms of how Paul's argument unfolds. Without paying sufficient attention to the Habakkukian framework, chapters 9-11 look like a misplaced appendix. Many traditional commentaries on Romans handle the movement from chapters 1-8 to chapters 9-11 very awkwardly for just this reason.

Paul is facing a question much like Habakkuk's, namely, Why has Israel rejected the gospel? How can this sad fact be squared with God's righteousness, that is, with his faithfulness to the covenant he made with Israel? Wright reads Romans as God's ultimate answer to the questions posed by Habakkuk about divine covenant loyalty, because in Romans, Paul points to Christ's death and resurrection as the unique and definitive revelation of God's righteousness. Hill simply overlooks this old covenant key to the structure and flow of Romans. For Hill, an individualistic doctrine of justification is the centerpiece of Romans; for Wright; God's renewal of the cosmos, centered on Christ's resurrection and our union with him, is the focal point.<sup>43</sup>

Hill's overview of Romans 1-5 does precisely what Wright warns against: it leaves several pieces of Paul's argument on the cutting room floor. Hill's reading accounts for 3:21-26 (as does Wright's), but ignores 3:27-31. Hill says that Paul's use of the term propitiation indicates that God's wrath, not covenant membership, is the problem. But, of course, Wright also insists that in 3:25 Paul has in view propitiation, indicating that he sees the problem of divine wrath as well.<sup>44</sup> Hill says that the issue in Romans 4 is not covenant membership, but the reckoning of righteousness. Aside from the fact that Hill has set up a false dichotomy, he overlooks the question that provokes Paul's discussion in Romans

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<sup>43</sup> On the centrality of the resurrection to God's covenant plan, see Romans, 504. Several "New Perspective" scholars have done excellent work on Paul's use of the Old Testament. Indeed, factoring in the Old Testament to our theology of salvation is one of the great contributions biblical theology has to make.

<sup>44</sup> *Romans*, 474-6.

4 to begin with: Romans 4:1 is best translated, "What then shall we say? Have we found Abraham to be our forefather according to the flesh?"<sup>45</sup> The chapter as a whole concerns the scope of Abraham's family! That family is not defined by works of the law, but by the righteousness of faith (= covenant membership + forgiveness of sin). Romans 4 continues the train of thought Paul began in 3:27-31. Paul shows that Abraham was justified by faith, apart from Torah and before receiving circumcision. In other words, he was justified as a "sinner," in the Jewish lingo of the day. Abraham proved his covenant membership, then, by persevering in the faith (cf. 4:13-25).

Moreover, for Wright, "covenant membership" is *not* an ecclesiological concern to the exclusion of soteriology.<sup>46</sup> Rather, ecclesiology and soteriology interpenetrate one another. To be saved is to be incorporated into Christ's people, and to be incorporated into Christ's people is to be saved. The purpose of the covenant itself is rescue from sin and reversal of the fall, as Wright has

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<sup>45</sup> *Romans*, 487ff.

<sup>46</sup> It is simply not fair for Hill to say, "In Wright's construction, forgiveness of sin has the character of a by-product, a bonus that comes with covenant membership." In his commentary on Romans (494-5), Wright explains how "righteousness" or "justification" relates to covenant membership:

We should note, in particular, that Paul's effortless rewording of Genesis 17:11 indicates clearly, what we have argued all along, that for him a primary meaning of "righteousness" was "covenant membership." God says in Genesis that circumcision is "a sign of the covenant"; Paul says it was "a sign of righteousness." He can hardly mean this as a radical alteration or correction, but rather as an explanation. The whole chapter (Genesis 15) is about the covenant that God made with Abraham, and Paul is spending his whole chapter expounding it; if he had wanted to avoid covenant theology he went about it in a strange way. Rather, we should see here powerful confirmation of the covenantal reading of "righteousness" language in 1:17 and 3:21-31. "He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the covenant membership marked by the faith he had while still uncircumcised."

repeatedly argued.<sup>47</sup> Covenant membership and forgiveness are correlated in Wright's approach.<sup>48</sup> Hill's concern to keep justification in the sphere of soteriology is not necessarily at odds with Wright's emphasis on the ecclesiological nature of the doctrine. Again, Wright does not deny what Hill affirms; but he affirms much else besides. The way Hill abstracts justification from its broader covenant context reinforces Wright's point about our need to study the biblical texts afresh with more Hebraic presuppositions undergirding our exegesis.

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<sup>47</sup> *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 33; *Romans*, 399.

<sup>48</sup> *Romans*, 465 is key:

The main subject Paul expounds in this section [3:21-4:25] is God's creation of a single worldwide family composed of believing Jews and believing Gentiles alike. Since the main thing standing in the way of this achievement is human sin, the central focus of this paragraph [3:21ff] describing how God has done it is the way God has dealt with sin through the death of Jesus. "Justification" in Paul regularly includes both aspects: the rescue of sinners from sin, and the creation of the worldwide family of forgiven sinners. The universal scope of this eschatological Abrahamic family is emphasized in the "all" of 3:23 . . . God's aim in calling Abraham in the first place was to put the world to rights. Only through the creation of a single forgiven family, comprising Gentiles as well as Jews, can that purpose be fulfilled.

See also 473:

We must remind ourselves again that this declaration, this decision of the judge, is what constitutes these people as "righteous." The word is primarily forensic/covenantal and only secondarily (what we would call) "ethical." God's justifying activity is the declaration that this people are "in the right," in other words, announcing the verdict in their favor. Calling them "righteous," as one must on this basis, should not be misunderstood to mean that God has after all recognized that they possess ethical characteristics that have commended themselves, caused their sins to be overlooked, and persuaded the judge that they deserved a favorable verdict. To say that they are "righteous" means that the judge has found in their favor; or, translating back into covenantal categories, that the covenant God has declared them to be the covenant people.

Hill's critique of Wright loses sight of the content of the Abrahamic covenant, which was to create a single, worldwide, blessed family (cf. Gen. 12:1-3, especially as it follows on the heels of the fragmentation of humanity into multiple families at Babel; cf. also Rom. 4:11-12, Gal. 2:11-21, Gal. 3:8, and Wright's exegesis of Gal. 3:15-20 in *Climax of the Covenant*, ch. 8). If justification is unrelated to covenant membership, justification cannot be related to the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise – which it most certainly was for Paul.

Hill's critique only works if justification is severed from the church and the covenant. But there is no need to truncate the doctrine of justification in such a way. "Justification" language works in a variety of ways in Pauline theology, and our doctrine of justification should strive to do justice to the full range of the biblical definition rather than homing in on this or that fragment.<sup>49</sup> Wright has

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<sup>49</sup> A good deal of time interacting with Wright has been wasted on logomachies. It is critical that we do more than just compare Wright's theological lexicon to that of Reformed dogmatics. We must look at the actual content and coherence of Wright's reading of Paul as a whole. We have to read him on his own terms, noting that he views the NPP itself a minor corrective to traditional approaches to Pauline theology. Jon Barlow's essay "Levels of Theological Discourse and the New Perspective," is helpful here:

[http://www.christianity.com/partner/Article\\_Display\\_Page/0,,PTID23682|CHID125043|CIID1532882,00.html](http://www.christianity.com/partner/Article_Display_Page/0,,PTID23682|CHID125043|CIID1532882,00.html). Barlow reminds us that a word can function in different ways in different contexts. He makes the point that we should consider carefully the overall shape of Wright's theology before condemning him for not using a technical vocabulary that matches the Reformed confessions (which, ironically, differ amongst themselves anyway). Wright is well aware of the terminological issues, but is willing to engage in a process of redefinition in obedience to Scripture itself. Towards the end of his lecture, "New Perspectives on Paul," he lays out the rationale and consequences of his approach:

[T]o restate the point of method. I remain committed to understanding Paul in his own right and his own terms against all traditions about him, including my own. I remain convinced that Luther and Calvin would say Amen to that point of principle. And I believe, and have argued in my various exegetical works, that this reading of Paul makes far more sense of his letters, in whole and in their various parts, and in their mutual relations, than all other readings known to me. Part of that exegetical task is to relate Paul to the Jewish world of his day, and this reading I believe does that far better than the traditional one, though debates naturally remain about many aspects of the Jewish context . . .

It is time to turn away from all this; to rub our eyes, and look clearly at the path by which we and our culture have come. It is time to turn back again, following the old *sola scriptura* principle, to the source and origin of one of the great doctrines of the New Testament: that when, through God's effective call (*sola gratia*) in the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ (*solus Christus*), someone comes to believe that he is the risen Messiah and Lord, God thereupon (*sola fide*) declares in advance what he will declare on the last day when he raises that person from the dead: this person is in the right, their sins have been forgiven, they are part of the single, true, worldwide covenant family promised to Abraham, the sign of the coming new creation and the counter-sign to the boast of Caesar. Justification is ultimately about justice, about God putting the world to rights, with his chosen and called people as the advance guard of that new creation, charged with being and bringing signs of hope, of restorative justice, to the world. Let's put the justice back in justification; and, as we do so, remind ourselves whose justice it is, and why. *Soli Deo Gloria!* Having thus stolen Luther's slogans, I thought I might end with 'Here I stand'; but let me rather say it in Paul's language: *hode hesteka; allo ou dunamai*



no desire to reverse the advances of the Reformation; indeed, he desires to carry the Reformation forward. He affirms that justification is grounded in Christ's propitiatory work on the cross (rather than anything in us), is fully forensic (rather than a process of transformation), and is absolutely gracious (rather than merited). Justification answers sixteenth century questions about salvation from guilt, as well as first century questions about the composition of Abraham's family. Wright brings to light new (or forgotten) aspects of Pauline theology, without jettisoning the old.

### **N. T. Wright and the New Perspective(s) on Paul**

Wright's commentary may not be bombshell the size of Barth's in terms of overall impact for reasons already stated. But it has quite a bit of ballistic firepower, nevertheless. Barth's commentary bombed the liberals' playground. Unfortunately, though, many of the theologians who feel Wright has bombed them – those within the evangelical and confessionally Reformed world – are not those Wright was aiming at when he launched his fresh reading of Paul.

It would be a massive understatement to say that Wright has proven to be controversial in evangelical and Reformed circles.<sup>50</sup> Everyone seems to have a different opinion about the man recently installed as the Bishop of Durham. Wright seems as surprised by the controversy as anyone; he seems to have expected conservatives within the evangelical and Reformed traditions to view

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<sup>50</sup> Even as I say this, however, it should also be pointed out that numerous leading evangelical scholars (e.g., Gordon Fee, Craig Blomberg, etc.) have been extremely favorable towards Wright.

him as an ally, fighting against liberals on the front lines of the battlefield. But that hasn't proved to be the case.<sup>51</sup>

The heart of the controversy centers around Wright's role in an emerging school thought tagged "the New Perspective on Paul" (NPP).<sup>52</sup> It's easy to see

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<sup>51</sup> In his Rutherford lecture, "New Perspectives on Paul," he expressed frustration with his traditionalist critics, even turning my "bombing" metaphor back around:

There are several different agendas coming together at this point. The issue is sometimes treated as a variation on old modernist controversies, at other times as a clash between a Christian absolutism and a religious relativism, and at other times as a variation on a perceived protestant/catholic divide (or even a high-church/low-church divide), with the so-called new perspective focussing on ecclesiology rather than soteriology and being condemned for so doing. And that's just the beginning. From time to time correspondents draw my attention to various websites on which you can find scathing denunciations of me for abandoning traditional protestant orthodoxy and puzzled rejoinders from people who have studied my work and know that I'm not saying what many of my critics say I'm saying. Go to amazon.com and look at the comments which anonymous correspondents have appended to some of my books . . .

[M]any conservative writers, having discovered themselves in possession of the Pauline field after the liberals got tired of it, have looked around for new enemies. Here is something called the New Perspective; it seems to be denying some of the things we have normally taught; very well, let us demonize it, lump its proponents together, and nuke them from a great height. That has not made a pretty sight. Speaking as one of those who is regularly thus carpet-bombed, what I find frustrating is the refusal of the traditionalists to do three things: first, to differentiate the quite separate types of New Perspective; second, to engage in the actual exegetical debates upon which the whole thing turns, instead of simply repeating a Lutheran or similar line as though that settled matters; and third, to recognise that some of us at least are brothers in Christ who have come to the positions we hold not because of some liberal, modernist or relativist agenda but as a result of prayerful and humble study of the text which is and remains our sole authority. Of course, prayer and humility before the text do not guarantee exegetical success. We all remain deeply flawed at all levels. But that is precisely my point. If I am *simul iustus et peccator*, the church, not least the church as the scripture-reading community, must be *ecclesia catholica semper reformanda*. Like Calvin, we must claim the right to stand critically within a tradition. To deny either of these would be to take a large step towards precisely the kind of triumphalism against which the Reformers themselves would severely warn us. But if we are siblings in Christ there are, I think, appropriate ways of addressing one another and of speaking about one another, and I regret that these have not always characterized the debate.

Note that in this quotation, Wright approves of the classic "simultaneously righteous and sinful" formula for justification! It is precisely because the justified are still sinful that the church must keep ever reforming herself according to Scripture. We have not yet arrived at the final goal, meaning that all our confessional formulations are still provisional.

<sup>52</sup> British New Testament scholar James D.G. Dunn first used the term "the new perspective on Paul" in his Manson Memorial Lecture in 1982. It has stuck to the movement in New Testament scholarship ever since.

how this label would arouse immediate suspicion, especially in Reformed circles. After all, old Princetonian stalwart Charles Hodge is often praised for his ability to claim that in all his years as a professor, not one new idea was produced by the faculty! Reformed theologians rightfully have a deep love for their tradition. And of course, if there's any part of the Bible the Reformed tradition claims to have grasped, it's the Pauline corpus, especially the doctrine of justification as held forth in Romans and Galatians. So, the NPP is *doubly* suspicious. How could anything *new* be good and true, especially concerning the apostle *Paul*?

The result of Wright's endorsement of and participation in the NPP is that Wright has been vilified by many leaders in the American Reformed context. One pastor in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) claims "the new perspective on Paul is productive of dangerous errors." He goes on to suggest that "N. T. Wright's arguments are more dangerous to the evangelical community than Dunn or Stendahl or Sanders" – despite the fact that Wright is admittedly far more traditional, evangelical, and Reformed than any of the other scholars listed! The only reason Wright appeals to "young evangelicals" within the Reformed world is "*because of their general historical-theological ignorance.*"<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Quotations from Ligon Duncan, "The Attractions of the New Perspective(s) on Paul," available at [http://www.christianity.com/partner/Article\\_Display\\_Page/0,,PTID307086%7CCHID559376%7CCIID1660662,00.html](http://www.christianity.com/partner/Article_Display_Page/0,,PTID307086%7CCHID559376%7CCIID1660662,00.html). For a much more balanced, charitable, and profitable assessment of Wright and the New Perspective from within the PCA, see Covenant Theological Seminary's "New Perspective on Paul Symposium," available at <http://www.covenantseminary.edu/news/symposium.asp>. In these lectures, Covenant's professors model the way theological controversy ought to be handled. Truth be told, I find the controversy surrounding Wright in my denomination (the PCA) highly puzzling. I know many PCA pastors who laud and honor the likes of C. S. Lewis, Lesslie Newbigin, Flannery O'Connor,

Still other Presbyterian theologians have castigated Wright's views as

"Antichristian"<sup>54</sup> and "an attack on the very heart of the gospel."<sup>55</sup>

And yet some in the Reformed world have begun to show a positive appreciation for Wright's work. The present author wrote a favorable article on Wright in this very journal a few years back.<sup>56</sup> Daniel Kirk recently gave a generally favorable review of Wright's Romans commentary in the *Westminster Theological Journal*. In his review, he points out the tension and ambivalence towards Wright in various pieces in the *Westminster Theological Journal* over the last ten or so years.<sup>57</sup> T. David Gordon gave a fairly positive review of Wright's *The Climax of the Covenant* in 1992,<sup>58</sup> while Gaffin's 2000 review of *What Saint Paul Really Said* questioned Wright's "historic biblical orthodoxy."<sup>59</sup> Doug Green, a Westminster seminary professor has gone on record appreciating Wright's

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G. K. Chesterton, and William Willimon. It is not at all uncommon for any of these figures to be quoted in sermon, essays, and books, without any controversy. And yet, Wright's credentials as an orthodox, Reformed theologian are far stronger than any of those just listed. Why is Wright more controversial than Lewis? Why is he considered so much more dangerous? Both are Anglican. Both love the Book of Common Prayer. Both have their strengths and weaknesses. Both are masters of prose. No one I know would say we should read either one uncritically. It's hard to believe the present controversy over Wright is not really about personal prejudices and ecclesiastical politics, as much as anything else.

<sup>54</sup> John Robbins, "N. T. Wright and Presbyterian Churches," available at <http://www.trinityfoundation.org/reviews/viewhorror.asp?ID=20>.

<sup>55</sup> Sydney Dryer, "Tom Wright's Ecumenical Teaching," available at [http://www.banneroftruth.org/pages/articles/article\\_detail.php?195](http://www.banneroftruth.org/pages/articles/article_detail.php?195).

<sup>56</sup> Rich Lusk, "N. T. Wright and Reformed Theology: Friends or Foes?," *Reformation and Revival Journal*, vol. 11:2, 35-52.

<sup>57</sup> Daniel Kirk, book review, *Westminster Theological Journal*, Vol. 65 (2003), 365-9.

<sup>58</sup> T. David Gordon, book review, *Westminster Theological Journal*, Vol. 56 (1994), 197-9.

<sup>59</sup> R. B. Gaffin, "Paul the Theologian," *Westminster Theological Journal*, Vol. 62 (2000), 121-41.

insights into New Testament theology, though he admits a yellow flag of caution must be raised over Wright's reworked theology of justification.<sup>60</sup>

The reasons for the controversial response to Wright are difficult to figure. Most of Wright's staunchest critics acknowledge his brilliance and winsomeness. They respect his dismantling of the Jesus Seminar and other liberal propaganda. But because he messes with the doctrine of justification, he's suspect. Because he's labeled as an "NPP" theologian, he's considered problematic. But on these points, many critics seem more concerned with the use of slogans and scholastic terminology, than with the actual shape and content of Wright's teaching.

The truth is, Wright sits loose to the NPP in many respects. The NPP is a varied movement; it is simply unfair to assume Wright has swallowed whole the liberal scholarship of men like E. P. Sanders and other leading lights in the NPP world. In fact, Wright is very critical at times of other NPP theologians, and is not afraid to buck trends. In his own words, "There are probably almost as many 'New Perspective' positions as there are writers espousing it – and . . . I disagree with most of them."<sup>61</sup> The one key point of agreement that Wright has with the more mainstream NPP theologians is Paul's use of justification to establish and protect the status of Gentiles in the church.<sup>62</sup> Wright views the NPP as a

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<sup>60</sup> Douglas Green, "N. T. Wright – A Westminster Seminary Perspective," available at [http://home.hiwaay.net/~kbush/Green\\_Westminster\\_Seminary\\_Perspective.pdf](http://home.hiwaay.net/~kbush/Green_Westminster_Seminary_Perspective.pdf). Green's piece is the best short overview of Wright I have read. I highly recommend it.

<sup>61</sup> N. T. Wright, "New Perspectives on Paul." This is a critical lecture for understanding Wright's relationship to the NPP movement as well as historic Reformed theology.

<sup>62</sup> Wright addresses this in his "New Perspectives on Paul" lecture:

corrective (in some cases, over-corrective) measure to overly Lutheranized readings of Paul which view the law in an almost entirely negative light.<sup>63</sup>

So Wright's relationship to the NPP is complex. He uses scholarship from the likes of Sanders and Dunn, but never uncritically. Unlike Sanders', and other liberal NPP theologians, he does not sacrifice exegetical integrity for the sake of giving non-Christian Judaism its own track to salvation:

[Sanders'] agenda, there and elsewhere, included a desire to make Christianity and Judaism less antithetical; in other words, to take a large step away from the anti-Judaism of much Pauline scholarship. I need hardly say that I never embraced either Sanders's picture of Paul or the relativistic agendas which seemed to be driving it. Indeed, for the next decade much of what I wrote on Paul was in debate and disagreement with Sanders, not least because his proposals lacked the exegetical clarity and rootedness which I regarded and regard as indispensable. For me, the

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It is blindingly obvious when you read Romans and Galatians – though you would never have known this from any of the theologians we discussed yesterday – that virtually whenever Paul talks about justification he does so in the context of a critique of Judaism and of the coming together of Jew and Gentile in Christ. As an exegete determined to listen to scripture rather than abstract my favourite bits from it I cannot ignore this. The only notice that most mainstream theology has taken of this context is to assume that the Jews were guilty of the kind of works-righteousness of which theologians from Augustine to Calvin and beyond have criticised their opponents; and, though Sanders's account of Judaism needs a lot more nuancing, I regard the New Perspective's challenge to this point as more or less established . . . How all this works out is still very controversial within the New Perspective. But at these points, for good exegetical and historical reasons, I find myself saying Here I Stand.

<sup>63</sup> See "New Perspectives on Paul":

I discover an irony in the anti-New Perspective reaction in specifically Reformed circles. The New Perspective launched by Sanders and taken up eagerly in many American contexts was always a reaction, not to Reformed readings of Paul, but to Lutheran ones and the broader protestantism and evangelicalism that went along for the Lutheran ride, particularly in its negative assessment of Judaism and its Law. Had the Reformed reading of Paul, with its positive role for Israel and the Law, been in the ascendancy rather than the Lutheran one, the New Perspective might not have been necessary, or not in that form. For myself, it may surprise you to learn that I still think of myself as a Reformed theologian, retaining what seems to me the substance of Reformed theology while moving some of the labels around in obedience to scripture – itself, as I have suggested, a good Reformed sort of thing to do.

Elsewhere Wright has suggested that if the biblical-theological approach of Reformed scholars such as Herman Ridderbos and Charles Cranfield had carried the day, the NPP's corrective would not have been necessary.

question has always been 'But does this make sense of the text?', not 'But will this fit into some abstract scheme somewhere?'

Lots of those who joined the Sanders bandwagon, not least in America, did so because they shared his post-Holocaust re-evaluation of Christian-Jewish relations, and the implicit relativism which that engendered. I have spent considerable energy arguing against this position, and explaining that Paul's critique of Israel is not based on, or productive of, anti-Judaism as such, still less anti-semitism, but involves a far more delicately balanced and nuanced theology which cannot be reduced to such slogans.

Wright also has significant disagreements with Dunn, and he is not shy about pointing them out:

Dunn, like Sanders (and like some other New Perspective writers such as John Ziesler) has not, I think, got to the heart of Paul. Again, much of my writing on Paul over the last twenty years at least has been in at least implicit dialogue with him, and I find his exposition of justification itself less than satisfying. For one thing, he never understands what I take to be Paul's fundamental covenant theology; for another, his typically protestant anti-sacramentalism leads him to miss the point of Romans 6. I could go on.

Perhaps some of the controversy over Wright would simmer down if his critics took more time to understand what kind of "New Perspective" theologian he is. He has benefited from the NPP scholarship and interacts with it in all his major works. But it should be obvious that his "New Perspective" is quite "old," as well. Wright is reforming the Reformed tradition from within, on the basis of fresh exegesis and historical research.

Wright's work demands attention because he is utterly committed to the Reformational principle of *sola scriptura*, and therefore to the task of exegesis. He is not concerned with trumpeting this or that scholarly movement; his agenda is driven by fidelity to the biblical text, not to the NPP:

When I began research on Paul, thirty years ago this autumn, my aim was to understand Paul in general and Romans in particular better than I had done before, as part of my heartfelt and lifelong commitment to scripture, and to the *sola scriptura* principle, believing that the better the church understands and lives by scripture the better its worship, preaching and common life will be. I was conscious of thereby standing methodologically in the tradition of the reformers, for whom exegesis was the lifeblood of the church, and who believed that scripture should stand over against all human traditions. I have not changed this aim and this method, nor do I intend to. Indeed, the present controversy, from my own point of view, often appears to me in terms of a battle for the Reformers' *aims and methods* – going back to scripture over against all human tradition – against some of their theological positions (and, equally, those of their opponents, since I believe that often both sides were operating with mistaken understandings of Paul). I believe that Luther, Calvin, and many of the others would tell us to read scripture afresh, with all the tools available to us – which is after all what they did – and to treat their own doctrinal conclusions as important but not as important as scripture itself. That is what I have tried to do, and I believe I am honouring them thereby . . .

I came to this position, not because I learned it from Sanders or Dunn, but because of the struggle to think Paul's thoughts after him as a matter of obedience to scripture.<sup>64</sup>

If anything, the reason for Wright's miscommunication with Reformed theologians is due to his extreme biblicist streak. Wright is very concerned that we not employ theological formulations that twist the biblical text out of shape. He wants to keep Pauline theology as faithful to the actual Pauline text as possible. In some cases Wright's biblicism may make him seem overly stubborn, since he is stand-offish towards a variety of traditional theological formulations. But one must admire and appreciate his desire to be true to the authoritative text of Scripture. I think Wright could go further in translating the fruit of his

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<sup>64</sup> "New Perspectives on Paul."



exegetical work into traditional categories without losing as much as he thinks will be lost. But if he refuses to make the translation into a traditional Reformed framework – and he might, in the end, have good reasons for not doing so -- we must work to understand him on his own terms rather than dismissing him as heterodox.

As a result of Wright's quest for faithful exegesis, he ends up reworking some traditional doctrines, including the cherished doctrine of imputation. This not the place for a full scale analysis of Wright's view of imputation, but because his re-formulation of this traditional plank in Reformed soteriology has generated a good deal of heated discussion, a few brief comments should be made. The NPP as such says nothing one way or the other about imputation. To be sure, Wright could speak more carefully or with greater precision at points. He often seems to misunderstand the Protestant traditions he critiques. And he stubbornly (and at times inexplicably) refuses to acknowledge just how isomorphic his doctrine is with that of the tradition (a mistake his critics then replicate). Nevertheless, on any reasonable reading of Wright, his theology of justifying righteousness is fully orthodox. Wright prefers to use different language (e.g., "reckon" rather than "impute"), but the substance of his doctrine is entirely compatible with the traditional Reformed and Lutheran view of imputation. Wright himself acknowledges this, after a fashion:

What then about the 'imputed righteousness' [of God/Christ]? This is fine as it stands; God does indeed 'reckon righteousness' to those who believe.

But this is not, for Paul, the righteousness either of God or of Christ, except in a very specialized sense <sup>65</sup>

Wright's project should be seen as one of exegetical refinement, not theological overhaul. He is fearful that we have created theological frameworks in which the biblical material gets stretched and pulled and pushed, rather than retaining its natural shape. We must respect his decision as a scholar to use categories that he believes are most true to the actual cast of Paul's theology.

The case of imputation bears this out. Consider Wright's overall view of Paul's teaching. God's righteousness is his own loyalty to the covenant he made with the patriarchs. It is therefore both attribute and action – or better, perhaps, it is a divine attribute-in-action. Our righteousness, which must be distinguished from God's righteousness, is first and foremost the status we possess as members of the covenant. This status is ours by virtue of our faith in Jesus Christ, who forms a bridge between God's righteousness and our righteousness. Justification presupposes his death and resurrection as the representative, substitutionary Messiah. Justification is the divine Judge's declaration of our status as "righteous," as those who are in Christ, and therefore, in the covenant. It is strictly speaking, a forensic term, taking its roots from the law court. In the case of justifying believing sinners, the declaration that they are now in the right can only be made on the basis of grace, and must include the forgiveness of sins. The term justification, as such, does not refer to

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<sup>65</sup> "New Perspectives on Paul."

the transfer or imputation of Christ's righteousness or status to us; rather it refers simply to the divine verdict itself. This verdict in the present is granted to faith alone; at the last day, the same verdict will be delivered on the (evidentiary) basis of works.

Thus, for Wright, imputation is not to be viewed as an external transaction in which the righteousness of Christ is transferred to us in heavenly accounting books. Rather, for Wright, we are righteous in the divine law court precisely because we are in union with Christ. His death and resurrection are reckoned as our own. In Wright's own words:

Is there then no 'reckoning of righteousness' in, for instance, Romans 5.14–21? Yes, there is; but my case is that this is not God's own righteousness, or Christ's own righteousness, that is reckoned to God's redeemed people, but rather the fresh status of 'covenant member', and/or 'justified sinner', which is accredited to those who are in Christ, who have heard the gospel and responded with 'the obedience of faith'.<sup>66</sup>

Or, as he states it elsewhere, with even more clarity:

'Justification' speaks of how God declares that people are in the right; this will take place in the future when he raises them from the dead, saving them from eternal death and giving them the same kind of glorious body that Jesus already has; this announcement, and this event, is anticipated in the present when someone believes, as a result of the preaching of the gospel, that Jesus is Lord and that God raised him from the dead; 'justification by faith' is thus God's declaration in the present time that all who believe this message are already forgiven their sins and delivered from death, and that they are thereby constituted as the single worldwide

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<sup>66</sup> "New Perspectives on Paul." On the relationship of union with Christ to imputation, see my essay, "A Response to 'The Biblical Plan of Salvation,'" ch. 10 in *The Auburn Avenue Theology Pros and Cons: Debating the Federal Vision*, edited by E. Calvin Beisner (Ft. Lauderdale: Knox Theological Seminary, 2004). In that essay, I seek to explain why some theologians are satisfied viewing justification in terms of union with Christ, without feeling the necessity to resort to the language of imputation. As for my own view, I see no reason why we should have to choose between union with Christ and imputation; the former includes the latter.

eschatological family of God, transcending the former Jew/Greek distinction. But this justification, too, is already anticipated when God raised Jesus himself from the dead and declared that he was truly his son (Romans 1.3f. etc), so that *the basis of justification is God's covenant-faithful action in and through the death and resurrection of Jesus BOTH as Israel's Messiah AND as the incarnation of the one true God. Since what is true of the Messiah is true of his people, all those who are 'in the Messiah' by baptism and faith have his death and resurrection reckoned to them so that when God looks at them he sees Calvary and Easter -- and so that when they look at themselves they must learn to see those events as well, and to live accordingly. This being-in-Christ, indwelt by the Spirit, is the means by which the PRESENT declaration of 'in the right' truly anticipates the future one (Romans 8, etc).*<sup>67</sup>

In yet another place:

The imputation of Christ's righteousness is one of the big sticking points for sure. I think I know exactly what the doctrine is about and I believe you don't lose anything by the route I propose. The force of what people have believed when they have used the idea of imputation is completely retained in what I have tried to do. Why? Because in Christ we have all the treasures, not only of wisdom and knowledge (Colossians 1, and also I Corinthians 1), but in whom we have the entire package, meaning sanctification and wisdom, as well as righteousness. So Paul's theology of being in Christ gives you all of that. But the fact that it gives you more than that does rock you back on your heels a bit and prompt you to ask, "Have we made too much of this one thing called righteousness?" The key text, which is 2 Corinthians 5:21, has been read for generations, ever since Luther at least, as an isolated, detached statement of the wondrous exchange. When we do this we forget that the entire passage, for the three chapters that led up to it, and the chapter and a half that follow it (chapter

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<sup>67</sup> This is taken from an online question and answer page, available at [http://home.hiwaay.net/~kbush/Wrightsaid\\_March2004.html](http://home.hiwaay.net/~kbush/Wrightsaid_March2004.html). Emphasis added. On that same page, Wright says,

As far as I can see, Paul's central statements of something that I might be prepared to say 'imputation' about are in a passage like Romans 6, where the logic runs: by baptism, you are 'in Christ'; therefore what is true of Christ is true of you; therefore, specifically, his death and resurrection are true of you; therefore you must calculate this, do the sums, work out who you actually are -- and then live accordingly. But I think this provides a somewhat different grid of understanding to normal 'imputation' theology. The 'reckoning' thus takes place within, and as part of, incorporation into the people of the Messiah.

I agree with everything Wright says here, except his suggestion that his formulation is significantly different from the standard imputation model. There is no reason to pit union with Christ against imputation; the former includes the latter, as Richard Gaffin has so ably demonstrated.

six and the beginning of seven) are about apostleship. These are all about the strange way in which the suffering of the apostle somehow is transmuted into the revelation of God's glory. In the middle of this the statement occurs that God "made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." After this I started to read *dikaiosune theou* ("the righteousness of God") as "covenant faithfulness" in Romans. I then suddenly thought, "wait a minute." What about 2 Corinthians 5:21? And then I realized that the whole thing here is 2 Corinthians 3, the new covenant. God has made us ministers of a new covenant. We are embodying the covenant faithfulness of God. I can see how frustrating it is for a preacher who has preached his favorite sermon all these years on the imputation of Christ's righteousness from 2 Corinthians 5:21 to hear that this is not the right way to understand it but I actually think that there's an even better sermon waiting to be preached. You can always preach one on 1 Corinthians 1:30 so long as you do wisdom, sanctification, and redemption, all three.<sup>68</sup>

Note that justification occupies the same slot in Wright's *ordo* as in traditional Reformed theology. It follows upon the Spirit's effectual call to faith, and results in a new standing before the divine law court. The basis of this new status, however, is not anything in us. Rather, God reckons to our account the death and resurrection of Christ. His story – the story of Calvary and Easter – is now our story. While Wright does not talk about the "imputation" of Christ's "active obedience" here, surely, he has achieved the same result as the Reformed confessions.<sup>69</sup> In no sense may Wright's understanding of justification be viewed

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<sup>68</sup> This is from an interview with Wright, available here:

[http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/travis\\_tamerius/interview\\_with\\_n\\_t\\_wright.htm](http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/travis_tamerius/interview_with_n_t_wright.htm).

<sup>69</sup> When asked about his adherence to the doctrine of justification in the 39 Articles of the Church of England, he replied,

I agree with Articles 11, 12 and 13 which deal with this subject. But I do think that the word "merit" in article 11 (" . . . only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ") needs unpacking. Clearly in C16/C17 theology it played a particular role, which is not too far from that of Romans 5 where the obedience of the Messiah is the ground of 'the many' being declared to be 'in the right'. But - this is perhaps a critical difference between my reading of Paul and that of some others - I do not see Paul saying that

as “legalizing” or “Romanizing” the doctrine. He believes in a fully forensic, fully gracious justification, based on God’s work in Christ and received by faith alone.

The NPP as such is no threat to the Reformed teaching on imputation, and Wright’s re-casting of imputation in terms of union with Christ in his death and resurrection is borne out by exegesis, not by his desire to promote a movement or undermine the total graciousness of our salvation.<sup>70</sup>

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justification is what happens when the righteousness of Christ is imputed to us; I see him saying (in Romans 6, classically) that the death and resurrection of Christ is to be reckoned to us. This needs teasing out further. I have tried to stress in various places that I am not trying to deny what the reformers were trying to affirm, only to ground in more fully biblical thinking the underlying truths of the faith. In particular (let me just say this to those out there who may need to hear it!) I am often puzzled and distressed when people question whether I really believe in the substitutionary meaning of Jesus' death. I would simply say: read my published sermons; read chapter 12 of *Jesus and the Victory of God*; ask yourself, not whether I go through the hoops of all the words that your tradition has told you we should say, but whether I represent fairly what scripture, and Jesus himself, said about the meaning of his death. That is my only aim.

See [http://home.hiwaay.net/~kbush/Wrightsaid\\_January2004.html](http://home.hiwaay.net/~kbush/Wrightsaid_January2004.html). Some might be troubled that Wright focuses on the death and resurrection of Christ (cf. Rom. 4:25), putting less emphasis on his “active obedience” (e.g., *Romans*, 529). But a trio of Westminster divines did the same, constructing a thoroughly evangelical doctrine of justification without reference to the imputation of Christ’s active obedience (William Twisse, Richard Vines, and Thomas Gataker). The Standards were precisely worded to make allowance for such a view. See Alexander F. Mitchell, *The Westminster Assembly: Its History and Standards*, (Edmonton, AB: Still Waters Revival Books, 1992), 149ff for details. Prior to the 1580s, virtually all Reformers interpreted references to Christ’s “righteousness” in terms of his death on the cross and resurrection status, rather than to his “active obedience” to the law. For example, in Caspar Olevianus' commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism from the 1560s, *A Firm Foundation*, trans. by Lyle Bierma (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 111-12, the question is asked, “What is that thing or gift, the, that is credited to us for righteousness?” The answer is given: “The obedience of the suffering and death of our Lord Jesus, or the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. This obedience of the death of Christ is freely granted and credited to us, so that from now on it is our own and our righteousness before God.” The next question and answer further reinforces the point that Christ’s righteousness is his death on the cross.

<sup>70</sup> Other scholars have similarly situated justification within a broader doctrine of union with Christ, though not all have reached the same conclusions about how this reforms the sub-doctrine of imputation. See Sinclair Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1996); Richard Gaffin, *Resurrection and Redemption* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987); Anthony Hoekema, *Saved By Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989); Chris

Having looked at Wright as a biblical theologian and a critic-from-within of the Reformed tradition and the NPP, let us turn to his Romans commentary.

### **Features of Wrights' Commentary: Fifteen Cheers**

In a massive, wide-ranging commentary such as this, it is almost impossible to catalog all its salutary features. For the sake of simplicity and convenience, I have decided to simply list fifteen aspects of the commentary that stood out. Each of these could be expounded upon, and more could be listed, but this should be adequate to provide an overview of its most valuable contributions. This is not a systematic list; rather it is a collection of overall impressions and high points I found as I read through the commentary. Because Wright has some often been misquoted, quoted out of context, and misinterpreted, I have include copious, lengthy quotations, in an all out effort to set the record straight.

First, as already mentioned, the commentary is written in Wright's ever-fresh, breathtakingly clear prose. The commentary is well organized and designed. The introduction alone is worth the price of the entire volume, as it lays out the overall shape of Paul's argument in Romans and summarizes the letter's wide ranging context in a coherent fashion. Wright has incorporated numerous biblical-theological and intertextual insights into the commentary, without making it overly technical. The "Reflections" sections at the end of each

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Carpenter, "A Question of Union with Christ? Calvin and Trent on Justification," *Westminster Theological Journal* Vol. 64 (2002), 363-86.

exegetical section provide countless fruitful avenues for practical, contemporary application, even if one must occasionally disagree with the direction Wright takes.<sup>71</sup> This commentary, unlike so many others, is actually useful and stimulating for the preacher. A wide assortment of readers – from the advanced scholar to the new convert to the inquirer to the busy Bible study teacher – can read this commentary with great benefit.

Second, the commentary shows Wright's primary commitment to Scripture and his secondary commitment to the Reformed faith. In that respect, it is a model of faithful biblical scholarship in a contemporary context. Wright uses all the tools available to the modern scholar, yet does so in submission to biblical authority. Wright takes the text of the Bible with utmost seriousness. While he often critiques the received Protestant tradition, he generally does so strictly on exegetical grounds. And even then, he affirms that the Reformers were giving the right answers to the questions of their day.<sup>72</sup> So he is a true *sola Scriptura* Protestant: tradition is important and worthy of respect, but the Word of God reigns supreme.

Third, Wright is cognizant of the fact that Romans is not a systematic theology, but a full scale exposition and defense of God's covenant faithfulness to his creation and to Israel, through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. As we've

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<sup>71</sup> In the "Reflections," one will find helpful discussions of liturgy (485-6), homosexuality (435), suffering (617f), and contemporary use of the Mosaic law (586-7), to give just a few examples.

<sup>72</sup> E.g., 479. Wright sides with Augustine and Luther against Pelagius and medieval Romanism. But he does not allow later theological controversies to control his reading of Paul. The first century historical context was in many respects unique.



already noted, Wright views Pauline theology, and biblical theology as a whole, as narrative theology. But that's not to say that Wright reads Paul in a non-systematic way. In fact, Wright has a keen eye for the logic and cohesion of Paul's thought. He does not believe in a contradictory, muddled Paul as so many in mainstream New Testament academia do. Often, Wright points to Paul's thickly packed summary statements and rightly shows how Paul moves from the wound-up bud to the unfolding flower. Wright, as much as any commentator I've ever read, shows Paul's true genius. He has crawled into Paul's head and figured out "what makes his theology tick." Anyone who reads this commentary will come away impressed by Wright's theological abilities, but they're sure to be even more amazed at Paul himself. That's the mark of an excellent commentary.

Wright demonstrates very forcibly the logic of Paul's argument. Wright's explanation of the purpose of Romans is startling and challenging:

All that has been said so far by way of historical and theological introduction will seem strange to those traditions of reading the letter that assume its central question to be that of Martin Luther: "How can I find a gracious God?" If we start there, as many commentaries will reveal, Paul's discussion of Israel and its Torah either takes second place, or, worse, is relegated to a more abstract and generalized discussion of the sin and salvation of humans in general, in which the question of Israel's fate is essentially a side issue. Within such a reading, it has been common to highlight the doctrine of "justification by faith," in which humans must realize their inability to make themselves "righteous" and must instead trust God's action in Christ, because of which they will be reckoned as "righteous" despite not having obeyed "the law" – that is, a general or universal moral code.

This “righteousness,” the status now enjoyed by God’s people in Christ, is described in Phil. 3:9 as “a righteousness from God” . . . from which many have suggested that this status, too, is what is referred to in Rom. 1:17 and elsewhere as . . . “the righteousness of God.” Although etymologically possible, this is historically very unlikely. When the latter phrase occurs in biblical and post-biblical Jewish texts, it always refers to God’s own righteousness, not to the status people have from God . . .

In particular, the flow of thought through the letter as a whole makes far more sense if we understand the statement of the theme in 1:17 as being about God and God’s covenant faithfulness and justice, rather than simply about “justification.” It brings into focus chapters 9-11, not as appendix to a more general treatment of sin and salvation, but as the intended major climax of the whole letter; and it allows for the significance of 15:1-13 as a final summing up of the subject. Within this larger theme, there is still all the room required for that which other readings have traditionally seen as the major subject – namely, the justification and salvation of individual human beings. But in this letter at least (remembering again that this is not, after all, a systematic theology but a letter addressed to a particular situation), these vital and highly important topics are held within a larger discussion. Paul’s aim, it seems, is to explain to the Roman church what God has been up to and where they might belong on the map of these purposes.<sup>73</sup>

Note what Wright says and does not say here. He is not marginalizing the justification of individual sinners, as some critics caricature his position (as we have already seen). Rather, as a good Reformed and biblical theologian, he is recontextualizing individual salvation within the broader framework of salvation history. Wright affirms everything the Reformed tradition says; on Wright’s reading, Romans says *no less* than what it said for Luther, Calvin, or Murray. But in Wright’s view, Romans says all that, *and much, much more*. Traditional readings of Romans have been too small; they’ve limited God’s righteousness to a gift given to individual sinners. Wright’s reading broadens out the scope of

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<sup>73</sup> 403-4.

Romans to cosmic proportions. God's righteousness is more than a status given to individual sinners; it is his covenant plan for setting the whole creation back on track through Christ Jesus.

Moreover, Wright's definition of the "righteousness of God" as God's own covenant faithfulness rather than a gift of righteousness to sinners does not mean that God does not give sinners a new status of righteousness. It's simply that that status is not described by the language of "God's righteousness." To be more precise, we could say, because God is righteous, and has kept his covenant, believing sinners now receive a righteous status *in Christ*. Christ's vindication and glorification is their vindication and glorification.

Fourth, as Wright has done elsewhere, so here, he affirms his commitment to basic Christian orthodoxy, as defined by the ancient creeds and councils. In *Climax of the Covenant*, he gives a wonderful defense of the Trinity from Paul's reworked *shema* in 1 Corinthians 8, showing how Paul has redrawn Jewish monotheism to include Jesus.<sup>74</sup> He follows that up in the Romans commentary with several references to the Trinity. In his overview of Romans 7:1-8:11, he says, "if the doctrine of the Trinity had never existed, we might be forced to reinvent it."<sup>75</sup> "Though Paul does not use the language of 'person' to distinguish these three ways [of speaking about God], he sets up a universe of discourse within which some such development would ultimately appear necessary."<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> *Climax*, ch. 6.

<sup>75</sup> 556.

<sup>76</sup> 581; see also 600.

That is to say, Wright detects a continual Trinitarian subtext throughout Paul's letter. Paul never states the Trinity in so many words; but passage after passage is filled with heavily Trinitarian patterns and overtones. While Paul does not come forward with a highly articulated, explicit statement of Trinity, as the church fathers would develop over the next several centuries, he is constantly pointing in that direction. Wright detects these allusions to the truth of the Trinity in Paul's letter. He says Paul is "implicitly Trinitarian."<sup>77</sup> Wright even suggests that the theological language of Second Temple Judaism had already laid the foundations for later Christian thought about the Triune nature of God; Paul's understanding of Jesus and the Spirit took those nascent reflections to their logical conclusion.<sup>78</sup> Only if Jesus and the Spirit are somehow bound up in the identity of the one God can the argument of Romans really make sense.

In the Romans commentary, he also makes much of the deity of the man Jesus, another cardinal truth of Christian orthodoxy. Paul's theology, according to Wright, is not only Trinitarian; it is fully incarnational. Wright shows how Paul moves deftly from Jewish and royal/Davidic associations with the "son of God" title to its full divine meaning.

["God's Son"] is another key phrase that, although it occurs quite seldom in the letter, naturally takes center stage. Paul, in fact, lived, at a moment of transition in the history of this phrase and helped it on its way to subsequent development. In the OT, "son of God" can refer to angels (Gen. 6:2; Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7; Dan. 3:25; cf. Dan. 3:28; Song of Three 26). But its better known referents are Israel, adopted as God's child explicitly at

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<sup>77</sup> 575.

<sup>78</sup> 580.

the time of the exodus and looking back to that moment in order to plead for subsequent deliverance (Exod. 4:22; Jer. 31:9; Hos. 11:1 13:13; Mal. 1:6); and the king, adopted as YHWH's firstborn son – the seed of David who is also the son of God (1 Sam. 7:14; 1 Chr. 17:13; Pss. 2:7; 89:26-27). These two senses belong together, since in some Jewish thought the Davidic king represents Israel, so that what is true of him is true of the people. To belong to Israel, in a passage that seems to have become proverbial, is to be “in David” or “in the son of Jesse” (1 Sam. 19:43-20:2; cf. 1 Kgs. 12:16; 2 Chr. 10:16).<sup>79</sup>

Wright also shows how Paul applies Old Testament texts about YHWH to Jesus (e.g., 692), implicitly claiming divine status and prerogatives for the Crucified One. He shows that the death of Jesus forces us to rethink our understanding of who God is, essentially painting a Christ-centered picture of God. In giving us his Son, God has given us himself. Jesus reveals who God is from the inside out. Theology proper must never be severed from Christology.

Fifth, Wright affirms an orthodox understanding of the resurrection and spells out its implications. Of course, he has done this more fully in his *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, but there are some gems in the Romans commentary as well. Space does not permit discussing examples at length; the discussion of Jesus' resurrection on pages 418-19 is only one of many we could choose:

The point is that, for Paul, God raised Jesus from the dead by the power of the Spirit (see 8:11), in line with the scriptural promises that attributed to the breath, wind, or Spirit of God the promised new life on the other side of death, and, more particularly the new hope for the exiled and desolate Israel (Ezek. 37:5, 9-10, 14; Joel 3:1-5) . . . This formulation, therefore, provides further grounding for Paul's coming description of God's rescue,

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<sup>79</sup> 416. See also 416, 419, 420. The “son of God” is the royal representative of the people to God and God to the people. As with the title “Messiah,” so the title “Son of God” essentially includes Paul's entire “in Christ” theology.

in the Messiah, of the old, fleshly humanity, and God's constitution, in the Messiah, of the new humanity, "who walk not according to the flesh but according to the spirit" (8:4) . . .

This theology of the resurrection drives a decidedly eschatological reading of the letter. The flesh/Spirit contrast in Paul is not a dualism that denies the goodness of human physicality. After all, the *Spirit* raised Jesus *bodily* from the grave. Rather, flesh and Spirit have to do with two ages in redemptive history, and two humanities. The resurrection is the signal that the new epoch has arrived in human history. The resurrection not only identifies Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God, it also announces the dawning of the promised "age to come."

Sixth, the commentary reveals Wright's explicit commitment to *sola fide* and *sola gratia*. This will come as a shock to those who have only read Wright's critics, and not the man himself. In his comments on Romans 3:28, he acknowledges the long standing tradition, stretching back through Luther to Aquinas, of glossing Paul's argument with the word "alone." Wright will admit no mixture of faith and works in our initial acceptance by God. In Reflection #3 following the exegesis of Romans 3:27-31, he acknowledges that though Paul is not dealing with a full blown system of Pelagianism, there is no doubt what Paul would have said about such a system: "It stinks." For Wright, the entire Christian life is by grace, through faith. He is as far from a doctrine of merit or works righteousness as Luther and Calvin were.

While denying that the “righteousness of God” language in Romans 1 and 3 refers specifically to imputation, Wright does in fact acknowledge that justification entails a righteous standing that comes from God as his gracious gift:

Once the wider context (of 3:1-8, on the one hand, and 4:1-25, on the other) is appreciated, and the specific argument of 3:21-26 itself fully grasped, it is quite impossible that this phrase should mean, as NIV, “a righteousness from God,” that is, the righteous status that believers enjoy as a gift from God and in God’s presence. Paul does indeed hold that those who believe the gospel are reckoned “righteous” (e.g., 3:26, 28), and he can speak of this as “a righteous status *from God*” (*he ek theou dikaiosune*, Phil 3:9). But this status, which Paul describes in that significantly different way, is not the same thing as God’s own righteousness. It results from the revelation of that righteousness, of God’s salvific covenant faithfulness; the present passage is, in fact, the fullest statement of this.<sup>80</sup>

Wright’s view of justification by grace is utterly orthodox:

This justification happens “freely”; it is neither deserved nor paid for, but is pure gift. More particularly, it is “by God’s grace” . . . “Grace” is one of Paul’s most potent shorthand terms, carrying in its beautiful simplicity the entire story of God’s love, active in Christ and the Spirit to do for humans what they could never do for themselves . . .

It is important to say that the battles of Augustine and Luther were not entirely mistaken. Paul’s whole thought is characterized by the free grace of God, and any suggestion that humans, whether Jewish or Gentile, might somehow put God in their debt, might perhaps earn their good standing within God’s people, would be anathema to him.<sup>81</sup>

Obviously, these statements need to be kept in view when examining Wright’s doctrine of future justification, which we shall come to below. Initial justification is the basis of everything else, and in that initial justification it is

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<sup>80</sup> 465.

<sup>81</sup> 471, 479. Further, page 529 presents justification in thoroughly Reformational terms: “With audible overtones of Isa. 53:11, [Paul] declares that, as Adam’s disobedience gave ‘the many’ the status of being ‘sinners’ . . . so Christ’s obedience has given ‘the many’ the status of being ‘righteous’ . . . Justification, rooted in the cross and anticipating the verdict of the last day, gives people a new status, ahead of the performance of appropriate deeds.”

simply impossible to provide a shred of evidence that Wright believes works are causative or meritorious. Future justification is simply the outworking and completion of what God has already begun by grace alone, though faith alone.<sup>82</sup>

In harmony with the traditional Reformed view, Wright links justification with renewal and transformation as inseparable aspects of God's saving work.

The same grace that justifies also sanctifies:

Grace reaches where humans are, and accepts them as they are, because anything less would result in nobody's being saved. Justification is by grace alone, through faith alone. But grace is always *transformative*. God accepts us where we are, but God does not intend to leave us where we are. That would be precisely to "continue in sin, that grace may abound." Unless we are simply to write Romans 6 out of the canon, the radical inclusivity of the gospel must be matched by the radical exclusivity of Christian holiness . . . True freedom is not simply the random, directionless life, but the genuine humanness that reflects the image of God. This is found under the lordship of Christ. And this lordship makes demands that are as testing and difficult as they are actually liberating.<sup>83</sup>

Thus, *sola fide* and *sola gratia* are fully affirmed. In terms of soteriology, Wright's view is virtually indistinguishable from traditional Protestant orthodoxy. In terms of exegesis, he has made some significant refinements, of

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<sup>82</sup>In Wright's excellent essay "Justification: The Biblical Basis and its Contemporary Relevance" (available at <http://www.loveintruth.com/garlington/wright-just.htm>), he says,

Chapter 8 [of Romans] thus rounds off the train of thought that began in 2:1-16, and proves that the present verdict of 'righteous' will indeed be reaffirmed on the last day. Christians are those who 'by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honour and immortality' (they *seek* for it, even now they do not *earn* it), those to whom God 'will give eternal life'. The last paragraph of chapter 8 looks on once more to the future judgement day, when *this shall be all my plea; Jesus hath lived, hath died for me* and, says Paul, has been raised from the dead and even now intercedes on behalf of his people.

Obviously, then, future justification according to works has to be understood within the broader context of our union with Christ and initial justification by faith alone. Even at the last day, our works will have no merit and our final acquittal will be grounded in nothing other than or in addition to Christ's person and work.

<sup>83</sup> 471, 479, 548.



course, because he (rightly) suggests that traditional Reformed theology has all too easily screened out the Bible's numerous "judgment according to works" passages (appoint we shall return to below). A fair reading of Wright must keep both those points in view. Whatever adjustments and advances he has made in the precise terminology we use and in our exegesis of particular pericopes, his theology as a whole retains a Reformational and Calvinistic shape. He is a full blown monergist in the classical sense.

Seventh, Wright answers those critics who have suggested he has reduced faith to mere mental assent. He shows that faith in the Hebraic, and therefore Pauline, sense, includes faithfulness, trustworthiness, and loyalty (see, e.g., 453). His comments on Romans 10:9 form a compact, systematic, and rather Calvinistic discussion of the nature of Christian faith. He asserts that faith is not a "vague religious awareness, a general sense of the presence of the deity." Rather, it is specifically focused on the God who has revealed himself in the story of Jesus' self-giving love and vindication. Wright also affirms that faith is wrought in our hearts by the Spirit; in no sense is it an independent human contribution. "Genuine heart level belief can only come about, Paul believed, through the action of the Spirit in the gospel. This faith is the sure sign that the gospel has done its work."

Earlier in the commentary, Wright describes in detail the various facets of faith:

Though faith has an affective content (being aware of God's presence and love), a propositional content (believing that Jesus is Lord and that God

raised him from the dead), and an actively trusting content (casting oneself on God's mercy), we should not ignore the meaning the word has in the same passage when applied to Jesus: faithfulness. Paul does not so easily distinguish, as we do, between believing in God and being loyal to God. Notice how closely verbal confession and belief in the heart are linked in 10:9-10 . . .

Christian faith is thus the appropriate badge of membership in God's renewed people. It is accessible to all, not, like the Torah, restricted to Jews only. It perfectly expresses both that self-abandonment that refuses to claim anything as of itself, but simply casts itself on God's mercy, and, paradoxically, that genuine humanness that honors God, trusts God's power to raise the dead, and so truly worships the true God and is remade as a true human being in God's likeness.

Eighth, Wright comes down on the right side (in my opinion) of the "faith of Jesus Christ" debate. Following the groundbreaking work of Richard Hays, this has become a controversial issue in Pauline studies (though it is not necessarily related to the NPP since some non-NPP theologians accept Hays' thesis, and some pro-NPP theologians reject it).

Precisely because Jesus is the new Adam and new Israel, he must be viewed as the ultimate man of faith and therefore a model and exemplar for properly responding to God. But more than that, he is also the one who has vicariously fulfilled the demands of the covenant in our stead. Commenting on 3:21-22, Wright says,

This righteousness, this world-righting covenant faithfulness has been revealed "through the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah." Though the phrase could mean "through faith in Jesus the Messiah," the entire argument of the section strongly suggests that it is Jesus' own *pistis* that is spoken of and that the word here means "faithfulness," not "faith" . . .

[His faith is not] a kind meritorious work, an “active obedience” to be then accredited to those who belong to him. To be sure, Paul would have agreed that Jesus believed in one he called Abba, Father, and that this faith sustained him in total obedience; but this is not the point Paul is making here. The point is that Jesus has offered to God, at last, the faithfulness Israel had denied (3:2-3).<sup>84</sup>

For Paul, speaking of Christ’s faith is simply another way of describing his obedience to his vocation (cf. Rom. 5:12-21 and Phil. 2:5-11). But, of course, Wright points out that this excludes any kind of merit theology (467, 470).<sup>85</sup> Rather, Paul is working out a New Adam and New Israel theology, in which Jesus does what his typological precursors could not. By standing faithfully, Jesus does what Adam and Israel should have done but did not. Our faith, then, derives from and participates in Christ’s faith. That is not to say Christ believes for us (anymore than he obeys for us); it is to say that faith (and obedience) are bound up in God’s gift of Christ to us. Once again, everything hangs on union with Christ.

Ninth, returning to the topic of justification, Wright deals very ably with the various “tenses” of Paul’s doctrine of justification, while never losing sight of its covenantal and forensic character. For Wright, justification is an issue precisely

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<sup>84</sup> 470. Wright immediately goes on to note a further reason Jesus’ own faithfulness is in view here: the next phrase makes reference to our response of to the gospel. It would be redundant for Paul to mention our faith twice in one thought. Rather, the point is that God’s righteousness comes “through the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah, for the benefit of all who believe.”

<sup>85</sup> In his essay, “Justification: The Biblical Basis and its Relevance for Contemporary Evangelicalism,” Wright further explicates his view:

Paul never says that Christ obeyed the law: he is no legalist needing to earn anything, and even to say that he ‘earns’ righteousness for his people still falls short of the truth because it has not removed; but merely adjusted, the irrelevant and misleading idea of ‘earning’ itself. Christ is obedient to God’s whole saving plan, of which the law is only a small part.

because we will all someday stand before God's judgment seat. Will we be a part of the people who are acquitted or condemned? Final acquittal comes to those who have kept the law. But that law-keeping is ultimately a matter of faith. Torah (in its eschatological design) is fulfilled in those who believe in Jesus. As Wright's reading of Romans points out, life in Christ and the Spirit, described in chapter 8, unfolds the meaning of final justification by works in chapter 2.

Taken out of context, Wright's comments on page 440 may seem problematic: "Justification at the last, will be on the basis of performance, not possession [of Torah]." But this is not a raw legalism. Wright's words, in the broader context of his commentary on Romans 1-3 *cannot* be taken to mean, "Justification is on the basis of merit, not grace." Wright gives no hint that works are causative in justification. Rather, Wright is simply holding together the two poles of Paul's justification theology: future justification is according to works (as the evidence and outworking of faith), while present justification is by faith alone. Future justification is granted to the doers of the law precisely because they are ones who are in Christ, and who therefore share in the verdict the Father passed over him, and because they are the ones who possess the Spirit, enabling them to fulfill Torah's righteous requirements. Works are not meritorious, but demonstrative. On page 529, Wright ties it all together: "Justification, rooted in the cross and anticipating the verdict of the last day, gives people a new status, ahead of the performance of appropriate deeds." An even fuller summary is given on page 613, commenting on Rom. 8:33-36:

[In] vv. 33-34, we are back in the lawcourt, as in the middle of chap. 3. In 2:1-16 the whole human family faced the judgment of God; in 3:19-20 the whole world was in the dock, with no defense to offer against massive charges. Now we look round for possible accusers, and find none. Any that might appear have to face that fact that God, the judge, is the justifier; in other words, that the verdict has already been pronounced by the judge whose righteousness has been fully displayed. And that verdict – that those in the Messiah, marked out by faith, are already to be seen as “righteous,” even ahead of the final vindication – is precisely what the lawcourt dimension of “justification” is all about. We should note that at this point Paul is once again speaking of the *final* day of judgment, as in 2:1-16 and 8:1. As he looks ahead to that future moment, he puts his confidence in the *past event* of justification and hence the *present standing* of God’s people that results from it, knowing that “those God justified, God also glorified.” The logic of justification comes full circle.

If nothing else, these comments should forever squelch the notion that justification is not a soteriological concept for Wright. It most certainly is soteriological – and indeed, is used to answer questions about accusers and condemnation at the last day. On page 664, Wright again affirms the soteric side of justification, but ties it in with his familiar concept of covenant membership:

“Righteousness” denotes the status people have on the basis the basis of faith: a present legal status that anticipates the future verdict of the divine lawcourt, a present covenantal status that anticipates final affirmation of membership in God’s people.

The discussion of Rom. 3:22ff on page 471 should also be consulted. The passage needs to be read in full, but this is the real core of it:

This “justification” [in 3:22ff] takes place in the present time, rather than in the future as in 2:1-11. This particular “justification” is the surprising anticipation of the final verdict spoken of in that passage, and carries both the lawcourt metaphor and that we would expect from the sustained metaphor of 3:9, 19-20, and the covenantal meaning that we would expect from 2:17-3:8 – these two being, as we have already explained, dovetailed together in Paul. It is God’s declaration that those who believe are in the

right; their sins have been dealt with; they are God's true covenant people, God's renewed humanity.

Wright's comments on Romans 2:1-16 are very intriguing. Wright does not believe "justification to the doers of the law" is a hypothetical construct. Rather, Wright argues, Paul has in view Gentile Christians, who by faith and the Spirit (as unpacked in the rest of the letter, e.g., 3:31, 8:1-4) do the things of the law, despite the fact that they do not possess the Torah "by nature" as the Jews do. The scene in these verses is the final judgment. Future justification is awarded to those whose lives have demonstrated covenant fidelity. But in no case are their works regarded as meritorious or causal in justification. Nor are they means of justification instead of or in addition to faith. Rather, these works are the sign that God has graciously brought them, by the faithfulness of Jesus and in turn by their own participation in that faithfulness, into his eschatological family.

Tenth, Wright stands against the postmodern tide and rejects universalism. In his comments on Rom. 5:18-19, he affirms Christ is the only way of salvation: "[Paul's] universalism is of the sort that holds to Christ as the way for all." Wright is no religious pluralist. He is a Christian exclusivist.

Even Jews must trust in Christ to fully realize the covenant blessings promised to their ancestors. Wright stands against post-Holocaust New Testament scholarship (not the least, leading NPP scholars!) to boldly proclaim Christ alone as the hope of sinners, including Jewish sinners (427-8). He advocates evangelism of the Jews:

But it is impossible to suppose that Paul, for whom Jesus' Messiahship was the central content of the gospel and for whom the Jewish question of God's righteousness had in principle been addressed and solved precisely by Jesus' messianic death and resurrection, would have been content to keep this gospel only for non-Jews.

Paul would not have been grieved by Jewish unbelief in chapters 9-11 if it held no consequences for how those Jewish opponents of the gospel would fare at the final judgment. Paul's defense of God's righteousness in the face of the Jewish rejection of Christ allows us to use Paul's letter to answer contemporary objections to Jewish evangelism. It is sometimes asked how Christians can consider the Jewish people condemned outside of Christ, when ostensibly Christian people have been responsible for such horrific suffering on the part of the Jews. Any answer to the question, "Where was God in Auschwitz?" must be complex, and must be given in an appropriately pastoral tone. But whatever answer we give, to be true to Paul's gospel, it must include a look backwards and look forwards. It must look back to the cross: God himself has suffered unspeakably in the cross of Christ.<sup>86</sup> God is not an aloof, unfeeling deity; rather, he experienced human suffering and death in the flesh of the man Jesus. And it must look ahead to the future: God will finally set the world right, and his faithful people will be vindicated at the last day. Suffering is temporary; resurrection glory is forever.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> On Wright's Christocentric view of God and his theopachism, see his wonderfully provocative essay, "Jesus and the Identity of God," available at [http://home.hiwaay.net/~kbush/Wright\\_JIG.pdf](http://home.hiwaay.net/~kbush/Wright_JIG.pdf).

<sup>87</sup> 426-7.

Eleventh, Wright's redemptive-historical and eschatological approach to the book is not unique, but Wright does handle this approach uniquely well. Examples abound on nearly every page. We shall only catalog a few more prominent examples here.

Thus: Wright understands that the complexities of Paul's discussion of the status of the law arise precisely because of the turning of the ages that has taken place in Christ. Wright shows the significance of reading "law" as not "generic morality" but specifically as "Torah." Indeed, "law" (*nomos*) means "Torah" throughout Romans. In other words, the argument in Romans has to be read vis-à-vis the standing of old covenant Israel and the inauguration of the new covenant in Christ. Paul's theologizing about Christ and the covenant people arise in a distinctively Jewish matrix, shaped by the Hebrew Scriptures, now reinterpreted in light of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

This impacts Wright's understanding of Paul's critique of "works of the law."

The Torah revealed that Jews were sinners, right along with the Gentiles:

Put simply, then, Paul's point here [in 3:9-20] is that the verdict of the court, i.e., of God cannot be that those who have "works of Torah," on their record will receive the verdict "righteous." We remind ourselves again that he is not speaking of Gentiles here, but of Jews; we already know, from 1:18-2:16, that Gentiles will not be justified as they stand. "The Jew" of 2:17 will come into court, metaphorically speaking, and "rest in Torah," producing "works of Torah"; these it will be claimed, demonstrate that he or she is indeed a member of Israel, part of God's covenant people. No, says Paul. To cite one's possession of Torah as support will not do. Torah will simply remind you that you are a sinner like the Gentiles. That was the point of the hints in 1:18-2:16 and of the direct charge in 2:17-29 – not, as is sometimes said that the Jews are "legalists," but that they have broken the law they were given. And



transgression of Torah shows that Jews, like Gentiles, are “under the power of sin” (3:9). To appeal to Torah is like calling a defense witness who endorses what the prosecution has been saying all along.<sup>88</sup>

Indeed, the Torah intensified the problem of Adam’s sin in the creation.

According to Wright, “works of the law” are, “(a) biblical rules that (b) defined Jews (and proselytes) over against pagans.”<sup>89</sup> These works are not limited to the so-called ceremonial laws, but include the whole way of life called for by Torah.<sup>90</sup> But these works cannot save. That was never God’s intention in giving the law in the first place. The law served a focused, but temporary, purpose in God’s plan, one that has now been fulfilled and transcended in Christ. The Torah did not save even in the old aeon when it marked out the covenant community; in the new age, the distinctives of Torah have been transformed to make way for the entrance of the Gentiles into full covenant membership apart from coming under Torah’s tutelage.

Eschatology is the key to Paul’s theology of law, and, in fact, to his theology as a whole. But, of course, eschatology is just the outworking of Christology and

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<sup>88</sup> 459-60.

<sup>89</sup> 460.

<sup>90</sup> Because Wright (and other NPP scholars) have been misunderstood here, it might help to cite another quotation from the commentary. On pages 480-1, Wright says that “works of the law” are those things which define “Israel over against the nations . . . *not only* Sabbath, food laws, and circumcision, though these are obvious things that, sociologically speaking, give substance to the theologically based separation” (emphasis added). “Works of the law” focused on these ceremonial observances, which became acid tests of covenant loyalty, especially in the second temple period (see, for example the Maccabean martyrs). But “works of the law” as such included Torah’s entire way of life, including moral and social commands, not just the ceremonial. Wright, like Dunn, Garlington, and other NPP theologians, views the Torah holistically. Interestingly, some early Reformers, including Bucer took “works of the law” in the more restricted ceremonial sense! See Roberts’ “N. T. Wright and Reformation Readings of Romans.”

Pneumatology. God has sent Christ and the Spirit to do what the good, but impotent, Torah could not. Indeed, Christ and the Spirit are our new Torah in the new age. Wright's commentary on Romans 8:1-4 bears out all these theological relationships. The essence of the law's righteous requirement now finds realization in those who are in Christ and in the Spirit.<sup>91</sup>

Further, Wright's eschatological use of the exile/exodus motif is brilliant, especially the way he ties in the narrative of Israel with Paul's thought progression in Romans 6-8. The purpose of Romans 6 is not to tack Christian ethics onto a doctrine of justification by faith alone, which he has just expounded in the preceding chapters. Rather, the question about living in sin (6:1) arises precisely out of the contours of the redemptive-historical summary given in 5:12-21, and prior to that, 4:1-25. Romans 6 addresses the concern, "Now that the age of Torah is over, and we are no longer under the law, how are we to live? What pattern of life have we been given in the new age?" I'm not altogether convinced of Wright's approach to Romans 7, since I do not think Paul's own experience with the law can be excised from the passage, but I do think we have to take into account the connections Wright draws with Israel's history, and back of that, with Adam.

Wright also detects subtle echoes of Isaiah and other Old Testament prophets throughout Romans. In particular, the overtones of Isaiah 53 form the basis of a

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<sup>91</sup> A further summary of Paul's eschatological critique of Torah is found on 402. See also 440 and 480 on the meaning of "law" in Romans.

very coherent and Reformational understanding of the cross. Christ has fulfilled the prophetic hopes in his death and resurrection. Wright's close reading of the text also uncovers a condensed reference to the sin offering in Romans 8:3, further explicating the biblical backdrop to Paul's atonement theology. And so on. Wright's commentary is virtually a self-contained course in biblical theology.

Flowing out of these matters, twelfth, Wright grasps the fundamentally eschatological nature of the gospel and the Christian life. We've already touched on this a bit, and these thoughts are developed with even greater fullness in his monumental work on the resurrection, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, but the Romans commentary introduces them as well. For example, Wright recognizes the Paul's Gentile mission was eschatological in character. Since the new age had dawned in Christ, Paul knew it was time for the Gentiles to come into the kingdom in accord with the prophetic promises:

[Paul] quickly came to regard the events of Jesus' death and resurrection as the apocalyptic moment for which he and others had longed, and he rethought his previous way of viewing the story of Israel and the world as a result.

This can be seen precisely in Paul's vocation to be "apostle to the Gentiles," a theme of considerable significance for Romans. Paul did not take the message of Jesus the Messiah to the gentiles out of mere frustration that his fellow Jews had refused it, as a kind of displacement activity, but rather out of the conviction that, if God's purposes for Israel had indeed now been fulfilled, it was time for the Gentiles to come in. As becomes increasingly clear, his Gentile mission was an eschatological activity – that is, a task to be undertaken once God had acted climactically and decisively within history. It was a key feature of the new age that had now dawned, part of Paul's sense that God's future had arrived in the present, in the person and achievement of Jesus and the power of the Spirit. Although Paul clearly believed that there was a further and final

event still to come, which he describes variously at different points in his writings, the great promised “end” had already begun to happen.<sup>92</sup>

Wright also takes note of Paul’s eschatological ethic. As Wright reads Paul, the Torah has been transformed by the death and resurrection of Christ. The Torah hinted at and pointed to this eschatological form of life in a myriad of ways, but only through the new Torah of Christ and the Spirit does it actually come to pass in the covenant community.

The life the Torah intended, indeed longed, to give to God’s people is now truly given by the Spirit . . . Those who find Torah’s righteous decree fulfilled in them – those, that is, who will share in the resurrection life (8:10-11) – are those who in the present do not “walk” according to the flesh but according to the Spirit . . . [Paul] emphasizes constantly the way in which the Spirit’s present work anticipates the Spirit’s future work of resurrection.<sup>93</sup>

Throughout the commentary, and especially in his “Reflections,” Wright unpacks his notion of eschatological living – namely, that Christians are to live the life of the future in the present. The Spirit does what the Torah could not. As recipients of the gift of the Spirit, we are to live *now* as we shall live *then*, in the resurrection, because the same Spirit who raised Jesus is at work in us. The future has come to us in the ministry of the Spirit of Christ. Thus, we do not merely *keep* the law as a collection of rules; rather, we *fulfill* it (cf. Rom. 13:8, 11-

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<sup>92</sup> 402.

<sup>93</sup> 580. Note that this sheds light on the meaning of Romans 2:13 as well. The “doers of the law” who will be justified at the final judgment fulfill the law by believing the gospel of Christ and walking in the power of the Spirit. No merit is involved. Wright himself makes this point on page 440, where he suggests that Paul’s notion of “doing the law” must be filled in not with some form of Pelagianism, but with the content of the next six or so chapters of the epistle. See especially the ways in which Paul plays with the term “law” in 3:27, 3:31 and 8:2. As 3:21 and 10:4 suggest, Torah is fulfilled principally and paradoxically by believing the gospel.

14) – and in the theological discourse of the New Testament, “fulfill” is a term supercharged with eschatological significance.

Thirteenth, Wright views redemption as the reclamation, maturation, and glorification of the creation. Throughout the work, Wright shows he has a big view of grace. Just as sin affects more than individual hearts, wrecking institutions and structures as well, so grace brings healing and transforming power to more than just individual hearts.<sup>94</sup> Redemption means the restoration and transformation of the creation.<sup>95</sup> “Glory – the splendid reign over the world for which the human race was designed from the beginning, and the splendid form of human existence that will be appropriate for that role – was lost through sin, but regained through the Messiah in his resurrection.”<sup>96</sup> The theme of the kingly rule of the new humanity in Christ is woven throughout the commentary.<sup>97</sup>

For Wright, grace is both “political” and “personal.” (Following Wright, I’m using “political” here in the classic sense, to stand for the broad organization of human life in community, though certainly civil government is included since it

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<sup>94</sup> See in particular 532, in which Wright accuses pietism of having a truncated view of sin, limiting it to personal, and particularly sexual, immorality. These things matter enormously, of course, but there are other dimensions, of which the last century has seen so many examples, which are often untouched by traditional preaching . . . A true analysis of sin, structural and personal, should lead to a true discovery of grace, structural and personal.

<sup>95</sup> 524.

<sup>96</sup> 595.

<sup>97</sup> On 524, Wright shows how protology (the original Adamic situation) sets the course for eschatology. Our hope, realized in Christ, is that God’s plan and pattern for the creation will be fulfilled in the end, sin notwithstanding. God’s grace ensures that the human project will be realized. On 530, he makes clear the Christ does not merely balance out the fall of Adam. Instead, “the reign of sin is matched, and out-matched, by the reign of grace.”

too comes within the orbit of Christ's healing grace.) Wright rejects a truncated, pietistic view of the gospel that limits its concern to the horizon of individual soteriology. In other words, he is pro-Christendom (though he might not use the term "Christendom" because of its current associations). Those who have been influenced by worldview-oriented Dutch Calvinism and theocratic Puritanism will find much to rejoice over.<sup>98</sup>

Along these lines, Wright explains how God's righteousness – that is, his saving purposes – includes the individual, but also transcends the individual:

In biblical thought, sin and evil are seen in terms of injustice – that is, a fracturing of the social and human fabric. What is required, therefore, is that justice be done, not so much in the punitive sense that phrase often carries (though punishment comes into it), but in the much fuller sense of setting to rights that which is out of joint, restoring things as they should be. Insofar, then, as God's covenant with Israel was designed, at the large scale, to address the problem of human sin and the failure of creation as a whole to be what its creator intended it to be, the covenant was the means of bringing God's justice to the whole world . . . God's righteousness, seen in terms of covenant faithfulness and through the image of the lawcourt, was to be the instrument of putting the world to rights – of what we might call cosmic restorative justice . . .

The sense of covenant faithfulness and the sense of things being put to rights, held apart within both the Reformation and Enlightenment as "theology and ethics" or "salvation and politics," were not far removed in the mind of a Jew like Paul. Just as the messiah was destined to be the Lord of the world, so also, and for the same reasons, God's covenant with Israel had always been intended as the means of putting God's world to

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<sup>98</sup> As Green writes ("N. T. Wright – A Westminster Seminary Perspective"),

This is where Wright has significantly challenged my thinking. He has a big vision of the implications of the lordship of Christ, one that has social and political as well as individual implications. I now find myself asking whether I tend to reduce my faith to a narrow exercise of "private religion." I can see why some "post-theonomists" find him attractive . . . although Wright avoids the error of the classic theonomists who, in my opinion, place the Law rather than Lord (i.e., the gospel) at the center of their reflections on the social and political implications of the gospel.

rights. When, therefore, God's righteousness was unveiled, the effect would be precisely that that the world would receive justice – the rich restorative, much-to-be-longed-for justice of which the psalmists had spoken with such feeling (e.g., Pss. 67:4; 82:8).<sup>99</sup>

Fourteenth, Wright's anti-Caesar polemic grasps an essential core feature of Paul's theology that many commentators, especially in the wake of the post-Enlightenment split between religion and politics, have missed. Wright shows that Christ is the reality and Caesar the parody. But he extends this: now the church is the true empire, and Rome is merely a parody of the true humanity. The gospel shows up the bankruptcy of Rome's idolatry.

But we need to remind ourselves to whom Paul's great letter was sent. Looming up behind the various discussions of why Romans was written is an issue not usually noticed. Paul was coming to Rome with the gospel message of Jesus the Jewish Messiah, the Lord of the world, claiming that, through this message, God's justice was unveiled once and for all. Rome prided itself on being, as it were, the capital of justice, the source from which justice would flow throughout the world. The Roman goddess Iustitia, like the Caesar cult itself, was a comparative novelty in Paul's world; the temple to Iustitia was established January 8, 13 CE, and Iustitia was among the virtues celebrated by Augustine's famous *clypeus virtutis*, the golden shield set up in the Senate house and inscribed with the emperor's virtues (27 BCE). So close is the link between the new imperial regime and the virtue Iustitia that this goddess sometimes acquires the title "Augusta." So, without losing any of its deep-rooted Jewish meanings of the covenant faithfulness of the creator God, Paul's declaration that the gospel of King Jesus reveals God's *dikaisyne* must also be read as a deliberate challenge to the imperial pretension. If it is justice you want, he implies, you will find it, but not in the . . . *euangelion* that announces Caesar as Lord, but in the *euangelion* of Jesus.<sup>100</sup>

Wright's commentary on Romans 13 is a brilliant working out of Paul's counter-imperial worldview. Paul's claim that Jesus is now Lord and Emperor of

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<sup>99</sup> 399-401.

<sup>100</sup> 404-5.

the world is heavily freighted with political implications; and yet Wright shows that this did not make the gospel revolutionary or anarchistic.

But did Paul not believe, and hint at several points in Romans itself, that the gospel and rule of Jesus the Messiah, the world's true Lord, subverted the gospel and rule of Caesar, whose cult was growing fast in precisely the cities (Corinth, Ephesus, and so on) where he spent most of his time? Yes; and this is perhaps part of the point. If the gospel of Jesus, God's Son, the King who will rule the nations (1:3-4; 15:12) does indeed reveal God's justice and salvation, which put to shame the similar claims of Caesar (1:16-17; Phil. 2:5-11; 3:19-21); if it is true that those who accept this gospel will themselves exercise a royal reign (5:17); and if Paul suspects that his audience in Rome are getting the message – than it is all the more important to make it clear that this does not mean a holy anarchy in the present, an overrealized eschatology in which the rule of Christ has already abolished all earthly governments and magistrates. Precisely because Paul is holding out for the day when all creation will be renewed (8:1-27), when every knee shall bow at the name of Jesus (Phil. 2:10-11), it is vital that the excitable little group of Christians should not take the law into their own hands in advance . . .

God does not intend Christians should become agents of anarchy, which would replace the tyranny of the officially powerful with the tyranny of the unofficially powerful. The ultimate overthrow of pagan power comes by other means, and Paul has outlined in Romans 5 and 8 what those means are. Rome could cope with ordinary revolutions. Rome could not cope, as history bears witness, with a community owing allegiance to the crucified and risen Messiah as the world's true Lord.<sup>101</sup>

Even as Paul acknowledges that all government comes from God and is to be honored, he is ready to critique and challenge the hubris of rulers who exercise totalitarian tyranny.

According to Paul (and the Jewish tradition in which he stands) the rulers are not themselves divine; they are set up by the one God, and they owe this God allegiance. Romans 13 constitutes a severe demotion of arrogant and self-divinizing rulers. It is an undermining of totalitarianism, not a reinforcement of it. By implication, if the rulers themselves are given the

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<sup>101</sup> 718-19; see also 722.



task of judging wicked people within their sphere of authority, they themselves will be judged by the God who set them up.<sup>102</sup>

Romans 13 is both descriptive and prescriptive: Rulers, as such, are set in power by God. But because rulers are God's servants, they must reflect his wise and holy rule in their own manner of ruling. As Wright says, the "authority of the state . . . is strictly limited" since "rulers exist by God's will and pleasure."

<sup>103</sup>All these insights into Paul's "politics" are obviously relevant in our own day.

Finally, Wright refuses to join Dunn in spiritualizing away the references to baptism in Romans 6. Wright is able to preserve a high view of baptismal efficacy that is not "magical" or "superstitious" because he reads Romans 6 in light of the exodus account.<sup>104</sup>

Paul's question [in 6:1] is this: Do Christians find themselves now in the Adam solidarity or in the Christ solidarity? Do they still live under the reign of sin and death, or do they live under the reign of grace and righteousness? Since God's grace reaches down to the kingdom of sin to rescue those who are there, must Christians regard themselves as still being in that dark sphere in order that grace may do its proper work? And must they then live in the manner appropriate to that old kingdom?

To this question there can only be one answer, but the manner in which Paul gives it is revealing. Christians, he says, have left the old solidarity, and belong to the new; they must behave accordingly. The transfer is effected by dying and rising with the Messiah. And the event in which this dying and rising is accomplished is baptism.

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<sup>102</sup> 719.

<sup>103</sup> 723.

<sup>104</sup> In fact, Wright views Romans 6-8 as a retelling of the exodus narrative. Wright shows how baptism is an exodus event. We are freed from the Pharaoh of sin and death in order to live a new life of obedience to God (Rom. 6). From the Red Sea crossing, we move to Sinai, and a discussion of the Torah (Rom. 7). Then Paul describes our wilderness wandering, as we follow the pillar and cloud of Christ and the Spirit (Rom. 8:1-16) on our way to the promised land of the new creation (Rom. 8:17ff). I disagree with Daniel Kirk's criticism of Wright's reading of these chapters. I think Wright has done more than enough to establish the presence of an exodus subtheme in this section of Romans.

This comes as a shock to many a good Protestant reader, accustomed to regard baptism as simply an outward expression of a believer's faith, and anxious about any suggestion that the act itself, or indeed any outward act, might actually change the way things are in the spiritual realm. (This anxiety has at least as much to do with the legacy of the Enlightenment, of Romanticism, and of Existentialism, as with the theology of the sixteenth century, let alone of the first; but that is too remote a topic for now.) The words "sacramentalism," "ritualism," and even "magical," spring naturally to mind, and are not dispelled by those writers, like Albert Schweitzer, who have been eager to assert the significance, in Paul, of physical baptism as the key event in which sinners are brought into the kingdom . . .

First-century Christian beginnings included water baptism; the discussion in vv. 4-5 seems to allude to the physical rite; Paul's readers would naturally understand the passage in a literal sense . . .

Nor is there any conflict between "baptism" as a physical act (a "ritual," in the loaded sense that is still sometimes used) and "faith" as an interior event . . . As a first century Jew, Paul was happily innocent of the dualistic either/or that keeps such things apart in some contemporary thinking. He was well aware of the problems that arose when baptized persons, regularly attending the eucharist, gave lie to these symbols by the way they were living; he addresses this problem in 1 Corinthians. Yet he never draws back from his strong view of either baptism or the eucharist, never lapses back into treating them as secondary.<sup>105</sup>

Like Calvin, he also uses baptism as a pattern for the entire Christian life. He understands how Romans 6 works within the flow of the letter. Paul's exhortation bases the imperative on the indicative: since you have been united to Christ in baptism, be who you are! "Indeed in the present passage one might actually say that he is urging faith on the basis of baptism: since you have been baptized, he writes, work out that what is true of Christ is true of you (v. 11)."<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> 533.

<sup>106</sup> 535.

For Wright, as for Calvin and Paul, the basic pattern of Christian living – of mortification and vivification in Christ, as Calvin would say – becomes ours in baptism.

### **Gripes with Wright's Commentary: A Few Boos**

None of this is to say that Wright has written the perfect commentary. My enthusiasm for Wright's theological project is tempered at points by some minor, but rather significant, weaknesses. I do have a few gripes about Wright's reading of Romans and his methodology in general. This section is not intended to "balance out" the scales; the good of Wright's work still far outweighs the bad. But we would be remiss to overlook some of the commentaries flaws.

As a Reformed pastor, I would have been gratified had Wright chosen to include John Murray as one of his discussion partners, along with Douglas Moo, James Dunn, Joseph Fitzmeyer, and Brendan Byrne. Older Reformational and pre-Reformational discussion partners would have lengthened the commentary, no doubt, but also added to its value. (In this respect, Philip Edgcumbe Hughes' *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, published by Eerdmans in 1977, is still an excellent model, incorporating a wide range of historical sources.)

There are a few places where Wright seems to misunderstand the Reformed tradition, in particular certain aspects of the Reformed doctrine of justification. Perhaps a quick refresher course in historical theology from an American Reformed seminary would help him understand his critics on this side of the Atlantic. Until he describes Reformational theology in terms today's

Reformed theologians recognize as their own, miscommunication will be inevitable.

In several other places, traditional Reformed exegesis should have been considered, even if only to disagree with it. For example, interacting with Murray could have sharpened Wright's exegesis of Romans 11. I did not find Wright's essentially amillennial reading of that passage convincing, not the least because he failed to interact with and refute the strengths of Murray's view.

More significantly, Wright suggests that traditionally "justification" has been used as entry language, e.g., justification describes how one becomes a Christian.<sup>107</sup> But I simply think this is wrong. I know of no historic Christian

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<sup>107</sup> This problem crops up occasionally in the Romans commentary, but also comes through in his summary in the "New Perspectives on Paul" lecture:

In other words, Paul uses 'justify' to denote something other than, and logically subsequent to, what we have often thought of as the moment of conversion, when someone who hasn't before believed the gospel is gripped by the word and the Spirit and comes to believe it, to submit to Jesus as the risen Lord. Here is the central point in the controversy between what I say about Paul and what the tradition, not least the protestant tradition, has said. The tradition has used 'justify' and its cognates to denote conversion, or at least the initial moment of the Christian life, and has then debated broader and narrower definitions of what counts. My reading of Paul indicates that he does not use the word like that; and my method, shared with the reformers, insists that I prefer scripture itself to even the finest traditions of interpretation. The fact that the Christian tradition has since at least Augustine used the word 'justify' to mean 'become a Christian', whether broadly or narrowly conceived, is neither here nor there. For Paul, 'justification' is something that *follows on from* the 'call' through which a sinner is summoned to turn from idols and serve the living God, to turn from sin and follow Christ, to turn from death and believe in the God who raised Jesus from the dead.

In my view, this is Wright at his least clear and most confusing. He defines justification much better in other places. Besides, I think he's simply got the point of historical theology wrong. It simply isn't true that most of the Christian tradition has used the word "justify" to mean "become a Christian" or as a synonym for "conversion" or "calling." If anything, there is a large swath of Christendom that has used "justification" in just the opposite way, that is, as a rubric for the entire process of salvation from beginning to end. I cannot find a Protestant or a Romanist who uses "justification" in quite the way Wright describes as standard (certainly his view of Augustine is wrong).

Also, the idea that justification is not the way one becomes a Christian, but the declaration that one already is within the covenant family, seems to pose all kinds of problems. It's obvious

theologian, before the Reformation or after, Protestant or Roman Catholic, who uses justification as a synonym for one's initial conversion. Wright has constructed (and soundly defeated) a straw man.<sup>108</sup> Historically, of course, the problem has been in confusing justification with the process of sanctification, not justification with calling.

At the same time, justification does in fact happen at the conception of the Christian life. Whether or not justification includes entrance depends on how widely or narrowly "entrance" is defined, but I see good reasons for suggesting that justification is in fact entrance language in Paul. One is declared righteous and becomes a member of God's new family in the same act. Justification is that initial declaration by God over the believer that he is now in the right; that person then continues to stand in state of justification because he is in Christ by faith. It is very difficult to see just what Wright hopes to gain by denying that

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that justification is related to entrance into the covenant in the New Testament. He's right to distinguish calling from justification, but wrong to bifurcate them as though one happened and then the other. Rather, the Spirit calls a person to faith in Christ through the Word; the moment a person believes the gospel message about King Jesus and receives baptism in his name, he is justified (that is, incorporated into the community of vindicated and forgiven sinners). Conversion/calling is completed and initial justification received at the same time. In justifying us, God is not declaring something about us that was already true apart from his declaration; rather the declaration itself makes it true. In justification, God says, "I forgive you and make you a part of my family." It is an effective "speech act," if you will. Justification constitutes us as God's people.

Obviously, in correcting Wright in this manner there is still room for his teaching on eschatological justification. But that does not negate the importance of the justifying verdict we receive on the front end of our Christian lives. For example, it seems to me that Wright's language above would sever the obvious New Testament connection between baptism and forgiveness (e.g., Acts 2:38). Baptism, after all, is the way one becomes a Christian/church member; but it's also the way one receives justification (forgiveness + covenant membership). So I think justification can function as entrance language in certain contexts. Just as with other aspects of the *ordo*, whether a particular term refers to "realized eschatology" or "future benefits not yet received" depends upon the context.

<sup>108</sup> My best guess is that Wright is reacting to something he picked up in his British pop evangelical background here.

justification is “entry language” since he certainly does not view justification as an extended process.

A related problem is Wright’s description of faith as a “badge” of covenant membership (e.g., 420, 468). This works in some contexts, but can be confusing in others. The people of God are demarcated by faith, to be sure, but faith is more than a mere badge that identifies the covenant people. It is more fundamentally the means by which those people are united to Christ and receive his faithfulness on their behalf. Of course, at times Wright acknowledges that faith is more than a badge and he soundly defeats the view that reduces faith to *assensus*. But several thorny questions crop up in light of his “faith as covenant badge” view: How does faith relate to the old covenant badge of circumcision and the works of the law? How does faith relate to baptism as a badge for the new covenant? How does faith relate to other, more visible covenant boundary markers, such as love (John 13:35) and obedience (John 15:10)? Wright needs to provide answers to these sorts of questions to round out his view.

Just as troubling is Wright’s stance towards traditional “imputation” language. Doug Green has suggested we throw up a yellow flag of caution at this point. Wright’s reticence to speak in the traditional categories is puzzling, and for some, a sign that he must have something sinister up his sleeve. While he affirms that he is not giving up anything in the traditional Reformed view, he needs to demonstrate that more substantively. I don’t think Wright says anything fatally wrong on this point, since he is emphatic that we are justified by

virtue of our union with Christ, as the crucified and risen one. However, his categories and terminology do not line up with those of popular Reformed theology, and miscommunication is the inevitable result – especially so, given the sensitivity of American Presbyterians to formulating things “just right” on such an important point of doctrine. I would admonish Wright to speak more clearly, translate his work back into the categories of Reformed scholasticism as much as possible, and answer the important historical questions he usually leaves unaddressed. I think if/when Wright does this, his critics will retract many of their complaints and those who have filled in his gaps with Reformed orthodoxy will be vindicated. Of course, if Wright believes he has good reasons for *not* undertaking such a translation project, he should explain that rationale.

“Imputation” is a particularly important doctrine in Reformed systematics because it bears so much soteriological weight. In classic Reformed theology, Adam’s sin is imputed to his posterity, the sin of Christ’s people is imputed to Christ on the cross, and the righteousness of Christ is imputed to believers as the ground of their justification. Wright is reticent to use “imputation” in any of these cases, even though he says virtually an imputationist could want, albeit in different language. The substance and shape of his doctrine of justification is very Reformed, even if he refuses to use the slogans and terms in familiar ways. Again, this is a place where his biblicism can be frustrating to friend and critic alike. If the classical Reformed construction imposes an alien philosophical grid of theological framework on Paul, he needs to show how that is so.

Wright affirms that “all sinned” in Adam, even though he does not advocate any particular theory of original sin.<sup>109</sup> He affirms that Christ is the representative sin bearer, such that sin has been condemned in his cross.<sup>110</sup> And he asserts that believers are righteous because they are in Christ and share in his standing before the covenant law court.<sup>111</sup> But he dances around the issue of imputation itself, refusing to acknowledge how close his own formulations are to those of traditional Reformed theology. This has proven to be not only incredibly frustrating for Reformed critics of Wrights, but also for Reformed defenders of his work. The questions stands: Why won’t Wright simply agree to use “imputation” language?

Also, Reformed critics have pointed out that Wright does not have a fully worked out covenant theology. He does not apply the concept of covenant to the pre-fall situation consistently, ignoring one of the major insights of Reformed theology. Almost from its inception, Reformed theology has viewed the Adamic situation in the early chapters of Genesis through the lens of the covenant. There is good exegetical warrant for this (Murray’s objections notwithstanding). But Wright limits his use of covenant to the post-fall situation, at least in this work.

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<sup>109</sup> 526f.

<sup>110</sup> 578f.

<sup>111</sup> 529. I do not see how Wright’s view of union with Christ can avoid the entailment of imputation in some form or fashion. If we’re united to Christ, surely all he accomplished is now ours. Don Garlington, in *Exegetical Essays* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 292, has criticized Wright for insufficiently highlighting union with Christ in his doctrine of justification. He suggests that Wright “has not allowed for the all-important presence of Christ within God’s courtroom. Indeed, we do not get our righteousness directly from the judge, but we do get it from Christ.” But I think at most Garlington’s critique amounts to a matter of emphasis (or lack of it). Wright certainly has a doctrine of union with Christ and it obviously factors into his doctrine of justification.



For example, on 467, he says “the purpose for which the covenant was made” was to deal with sin. But, in truth, the covenant pre-dates sin. Adam was created in covenant with God. *After the fall*, God’s covenantal purposes *expand* to include rescue from sin, but this is only so the more ultimate covenantal purpose of a glorified and mature creation can be accomplished (cf. Rom. 8:17ff).

Wright’s point about the covenant and sin isn’t wrong, but it should be nuanced (and one would think that, given his understanding of the covenant’s cosmic scope, he would not disagree). His focus on the Abrahamic covenant is understandable, given its prominence in Romans, but he could more fully integrate Abrahamic program into God’s design for the creation by using covenant language more broadly.

Wright’s comments on Romans 7, which read the passage as a theological analysis of covenant life in the old creation under Torah, are excellent, but he should have given more attention to the traditional reading of the passage as an introspective examination of Christian experience and the struggle to obey. Even if Wright is right – and I do think he and others who read the passage the same way are on to something – there should be analogies in the passage with present Christian experience and Paul may in fact be calling upon those parallels, as well as covenant history, to develop his theology of Torah. To my mind, Wright has not explained satisfactorily the use of first person language in the passage.

Wright could have strengthened the value of his commentary, and perhaps of his argument, had he interacted with chapter 5 of Don Garlington’s

*Faith, Obedience, and Perseverance*. Garlington is an NPP scholar, but reads Romans 7 in the more traditional sense of “living between two worlds,” as simultaneously Spiritual and fleshly, as “already” saved in one sense but “not yet” fully saved in another.

Further, many Reformed readers will come away with questions after reading through Wright’s explanation of predestination and election in Rom. 8-11. This section of the work lacked the clarity of the rest of the commentary. He is attempting to walk a thin line, avoiding questions that cannot really be avoided. He is correct that Paul’s concerns are specific to redemptive-history and the problem of Israel’s unbelief, rather than giving an abstract philosophy of providence or history. He is also correct that chapters 9-11 form the real core of Paul’s theological argument (or theodicy) in Romans. The unbelief of Israel is not a sidebar to a larger issue; rather, it is *the issue* that generates the matrix of arguments in the entire letter precisely because Israel’s *infidelity* calls into question God’s own fidelity. But Wright should have more forthrightly admitted that something very much like historic Calvinism must have served as a presupposition for Paul’s explication of Israel’s twisted story. Israel’s history makes no sense apart God’s absolute sovereignty standing behind it. Frankly, it is clear enough from Wright’s other comments<sup>112</sup> that he is essentially Calvinistic

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<sup>112</sup> For example, on page 603 he warns against mechanical, deterministic understandings of God’s action. But he also acknowledges that divine action and human action are not on the same plane. God’s sovereign grace, which Wright correctly identifies as “the major theme of this entire passage [8:18-30],” is not incompatible with human freedom. Faith is a gift of the Spirit’s work, not a human contribution to salvation. On page 620, Wright asserts that the

in his view of providence and soteriology, but he seemed to want to hedge a bit in the commentary. He could have comforted a lot of Reformed readers by saying, “Well, yes, Paul believed very much in absolute predestination, but that isn’t quite the topic here . . .” Wright does that in other published writings, so his reluctance to do it here is odd.

Wright also has (to my mind, anyway) some troubling views on economics and politics, seen fullest in his *The Millennium Myth*, but also showing up occasionally in the Romans commentary. I entirely agree with Wright’s focus on public aspect of Christ’s lordship, and the political nature of the gospel. However, I am not at all convinced that he’s worked out the implications of Christ’s lordship in a wise or practical fashion. For example: The struggling, debt enslaved “third world” needs rescue, but I do not see anyway Wright’s suggested plans could actually help things.<sup>113</sup> His use of the Jubilee concept seems out of place and arbitrary, given his hesitancy to apply other aspects of the Mosaic legislation to social problems.<sup>114</sup> Or, to take another example, while Wright takes human depravity too seriously to be a pacifist, he oddly refuses to

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Augustinian/Calvinian tradition has not grasped what Paul is actually talking about in chapters 9-11 because it has lost track of Israel’s role in the unfolding argument. His criticisms do not invalidate the tradition, but seek to bring the exegesis back to Paul’s first century concerns. Later Wright qualifies his criticisms, with a very Calvinistic exegesis of Romans 9:19-20 (641). Also, in his earlier essay, “Justification: The Biblical Basis and its Relevance for Contemporary Evangelicalism”, he writes, “Faith is not a ladder to salvation, an alternative to the law: salvation remains a gift of grace, free and undeserved . . . As all the Reformers (and not just Calvin) saw, this of course implies a doctrine of predestination.”

<sup>113</sup> 548.

<sup>114</sup> 586-7.

acknowledge that Romans 13 has a direct bearing on the issue of just war and seems uncomfortable with Paul's sword imagery.<sup>115</sup>

Finally, Wright's commentary is heavy on theological and ethical content, but does not pay sufficient attention to the literary shape of the letter. This may seem like a strange criticism. After all, Wright continually looks at the subtetxt of Paul's letter, detecting submerged narrative patterns and intertextual allusions to the Hebraic Scriptures. He even points out cases of onomatopoeia<sup>116</sup> and irony.<sup>117</sup> But Wright does very little with the larger literary structures in the book. The ornate literary architecture of Romans is generally ignored. Obviously, one commentary cannot be expected to deal with every facet of the text, but insofar as literary shape has a bearing on theological substance, a discussion of Romans' literary architecture would have been helpful.

## **Conclusion**

N. T. Wright's commentary on Romans is destined to be a classic that will serve Christians of varying traditions and scholarly interests for generations to come. It is a *must own* and *must read* sort of book – which is unusual for a commentary. As already mentioned, the introduction alone is worth the hefty price of the book – but the exegesis itself is virtually priceless for those who really long to know the mind of the apostle Paul. This review, of course, cannot do justice to Wright's massive contribution. Hopefully I have said enough to

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<sup>115</sup> 720, 723; see also 586.

<sup>116</sup> 480.

<sup>117</sup> 415.

demonstrate why I think the commentary is a landmark work in Pauline scholarship and belongs on the shelf – if not the desk – of every Reformed pastor. Those who are more interested in holding centuries-old theological and ecclesiastical grudges than in fresh exegesis of the text will find Wright frustrating, but he cannot be safely ignored by those who want to understand the mind of Paul. He is truly a gift to the church.

There are problems with Wright's work to be sure. But even the exercise of wrestling through those places where Wright gets Romans wrong is valuable. He is a formidable theological discussion partner, whether or not one agrees or disagrees with him in all the particulars. One cannot read Wright's exegesis without coming away with a renewed sense of the majesty and beauty of the epistle to the Romans.

Overall, Wright's commentary should be regarded as a masterpiece of biblical scholarship and it is sure to bless students of Paul for years to come. I highly recommend it. Despite the fact that Wright will continue to be a lightning rod in some circles, his work is crucial for ministry, missions, and teaching in the church of Christ.

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