



## N. T. Wright on Justification

*If the New Testament Scriptures are seeing some renewed interest today - as I believe they are - it is probably to a large extent because of the writings of such men as Tom Wright. Along with James Dunn and E. P. Sanders, Nicholas Thomas "Tom" Wright has been a leading figure on the New Perspective on Paul and has written on much of the NT from a new and fresh perspective that captures the interest of many readers today. He has served as an Anglican Bishop for many years, and is now Research Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at the University of Saint Andrews in Scotland. Today it is not uncommon to notice also members of Reformed churches reading Tom Wright's books and that is understandable for indeed there are some things about the writings of N. T. Wright that also resonate with me as a Reformed New Testament scholar.*

Some of the things that I really appreciate about Wright are:

- The degree to which he understands our present culture and engages it from out of the light of the Gospel;
- The manner in which he has challenged those who take a more liberal view in the historical Jesus debates;
- The manner in which he understands the first century in which biblical events happened, and the analysis he presents of that culture;
- His understanding of the Lordship of Jesus Christ in a Pauline and Kuyperian fashion;
- His suggestion that Paul is often pitting the Lordship of Jesus Christ over against the lordship of Roman rulers;
- His writings also about the resurrection and the new earth, where the Lordship of Jesus Christ continues forever.

On these points and more, Reformed people should see Wright as someone who stands side by side with us, fighting the same battle for our one Lord.

### **Wright on being right with God**

At the same time, however, there is especially one area in which I think he is misdirected, namely, with respect to his view of justification by faith. On the one hand, it sounds attractive to us as Wright refers to the 'righteousness of God' as a reference to God's faithfulness to his covenant promises with respect to all the evil that Israel experiences in this world. As a judge, God's righteousness has to do especially with his impartiality and how he will right all the wrongs in the end. God has already provided the solution and revealed his righteousness through his faithfulness to this covenant purpose in the revelation of Jesus as Israel's Messiah, and more of this will be seen in the grand narrative of history as God 'puts the world to rights,' as Wright often says.

The twist to this attractive picture comes in on a number of points, however.

First, within this context of God's righteousness, the obedience of Christ does not function in the usual, classically reformed way. Says Wright,

*It makes no sense whatever to say that the judge imputes, imparts, bequeaths, conveys or otherwise transfers his righteousness to either the plaintiff or the defendant. Righteousness is not an object, a substance or a gas which can be passed across the courtroom. . . . To*

*imagine the defendant somehow receiving the judge's righteousness is simply a category mistake.<sup>1</sup>*

Second, Wright and others suggest that if we stop reading Paul through the lens of the Reformation and just read Paul on his own, we will realize that Paul's concern with respect to Israel's righteousness was not that it was a righteousness based on works they had performed but that it was a righteousness that Israel kept to her own as her national possession and as it failed to be the light to the nations that it was always meant to be. Paul's concern then was not Israel's *legalism* but her *exclusivism*. As Wright says at one point, *If we ask how it is that Israel has missed her vocation, Paul's answer is that she is guilty not of 'legalism' or 'works-righteousness' but of what I call 'national righteousness', the belief that fleshly Jewish descent guarantees membership of God's true covenant people. This charge is worked out in Romans 2:17-29, 9:30-10:13, Galatians, and Philippians 3....Within this 'national righteousness', the law functions not as a legalist's ladder but as a charter of national privilege, so that, for the Jew, possession of the law is three parts of salvation: and circumcision functions not as a ritualist's outward show but as a badge of national privilege. Over against this abuse of Israel's undoubted privileged status, Paul establishes, in his theology and his missionary work, the true children of Abraham, the world-wide community of faith. Faith, unlike the Torah, is available to all.<sup>2</sup>*

Third, along these lines, whenever Paul talks about 'works' in a negative manner, he is not speaking about meritorious works and the like but he is speaking about 'works of the law' as boundary markers. They are references not to a supposed personal righteousness but to a national righteousness. Paul is not fighting a *legalism* in which people attempt to pull themselves up by the bootstraps of their own works but *exclusivism* -- the exclusivism which boasts in circumcision, Sabbath laws, food laws as 'boundary markers'.

Fourth, according to Wright then, justification actually needs to be relocated in our dogmatics textbooks and our minds as having to do with *ecclesiology* rather than soteriology. It's not about 'how do we get saved?' but about who's in and who's out with respect to belonging to the people of God. As Wright says: *Justification...then, is not a matter of how someone enters the community of the true people of God, but of how you tell who belongs to that community.<sup>3</sup> Justification in the first century was not about how someone might establish a relationship with God. It was about God's eschatological definition, both future and present, of who was, in fact, a member of his people.<sup>4</sup>* He offers us this definition of justification: *'justification' is the declaration which God at once makes, that all who share this faith belong to Christ, to his sin-forgiven family, the one family of believing Jews and believing Gentiles together, and are assured of final glorification.<sup>5</sup>* As a result, justification actually becomes a great ecumenical doctrine because in this way faith becomes the single 'boundary marker' in the Christian church and the only 'badge of membership' that mattered to Paul and should matter to us.

Justification has to do with community, with the church. *Paul's Gospel created a community; his doctrine of justification sustained it.<sup>6</sup>* More than that, justification is "*the great ecumenical doctrine*" because it, after all, is what tells you who is in; it is "*the doctrine that rebukes all our petty and often culture-bound church groups and which declares that all who believe in Jesus Christ belong together in one family....at the same table.<sup>7</sup>*" Whereas Paul's opponents want to raise boundaries like circumcision, sabbath, and food laws, Paul, according to Wright, takes the position that the only 'boundary marker' or 'badge of membership' that matters is faith.<sup>8</sup>

To conclude our review, then, it should be noted that whereas the casual reader may read parts of Wright's enormous corpus and think it agrees with a Reformed approach to Scripture, the reformed person who reads more broadly and carefully will detect that what Wright presents us with an understanding of Paul, has extensive consequences both in our understanding of soteriology and ecclesiology.

## Is Wright right?

The degree to which Wright should be considered correct on the above reconstruction of Paul's writing, depends on whether or not one accepts at least two of his premises.

The first is the premise that Paul was not dealing with the question of merit in the face of Jewish opposition in the same way as Martin Luther was confronting erroneous approaches to merit from Roman Catholic opposition. Wright and others in the New Perspective have suggested that Judaism understood the doctrine of grace quite well and were in that respect very close to being Reformed in their approach on this point. Especially, E. P. Sanders argued along those lines. In the last decade or so, many have disagreed. In the two volume work, *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, one will find many essays disputing this premise. Stephen Westerholm<sup>9</sup> has moreover shown very conclusively that the Judaism of Paul's day was really quite similar to the semi-Pelagianism that brought about the Reformation, as remarks about grace and merit were often placed side by side without being considered opposed to each other. Certainly, in Judaism one does not have any notion that any and all human contributions are excluded as a basis for election or salvation - something on which both Paul and the Reformers agreed! In other words, the backgrounds of both Paul and the Reformers was quite alike after all. Where the New Perspective has been a healthy corrective, perhaps, is in reminding us that the question 'how do I get to heaven?' was not necessarily the question every Jew was asking in the New Testament and the answer was not always found in legalism.

The other premise that undergirds Wright's work has also come under attack. Many scholars have argued that Paul's use of the term 'works' and 'works of the law' does not always have to do with 'boundary markers' such as circumcision, sabbath, and food laws. Rather these terms are references to the broader requirements of the law and the holy and moral actions they call for; within that broader reference they may sometimes have in mind the things that separate Jews from Gentiles, but most of the time they simply do refer to the fact what is a natural (and not just Jewish!) inclination, namely, the inclination to think one can merit the favor of God through our own efforts. Here too, there has been a gain from the New Perspective discussions in that we are reminded in NT studies that the Jew-Gentile question was probably the number one problem that the early Christian church was preoccupied with in its early stages. But that does not need to deny that in that same period, Paul needed to defend and promote the principle of salvation by grace and by grace alone.

If one wishes to have one clear text that proves that the New Perspective's approach to Paul is not the clear teaching of Paul, the reader is invited to consider Romans 4 and ask the question 'what does this passage possibly mean if one follows this approach?' In my *Romans 4 and the New Perspective on Paul*,<sup>10</sup> I survey both readings, the scholarly discussion on this, and draw the conclusion that while our traditional Reformed reading can use some 'tweaking', it is certainly more faithful to the Scriptures.

I believe that the majority of scholars in the Reformed and evangelical world have been telling Wright in the last decade that his doctrine of justification is quite misdirected. Has he listened? Sometimes one thinks so. In his most recent and most extensive work *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, he writes at one point:

The justification of the ungodly, by the fresh act of divine grace, is not only the divine means of forgiving sinners. It is also, for the same reason and as part of the same act, the divine means of creating the single Abraham-family. Indeed, it is because of the forensic verdict that the covenantal declaration can take place: the one God 'justifies the ungodly', bringing them into the one family.<sup>11</sup>

Here at least Wright appears to recognize both positions, but unfortunately, these kind of comments are few and far between and really do not go far enough with respect to the retraction that is really needed. He remains quite insistent that his reading of Paul is the correct one.

To be sure, justification is *related to* the doctrine of the covenant, to the doctrine of adoption into God's family, as it is to eschatology. In my judgment, however, Wright's view on this point is both confused and confusing. Confused with respect to the writings to Paul and the truth of Scripture, and confusing to those who would read Paul. When the person in the pew needs to read Wright in order to understand Paul, something is amiss. And whenever so many of God's people remind a scholar that he is quite alone in his interpretation, we need to listen carefully for we do all our work - also exegetically – '*with all the saints*' (Eph. 3:18).

It is my conviction that Lord's Day 23 of the Heidelberg Catechism is still a better and more wonderful reflection of the truth of Scripture and the principles of grace needed by all. Sadly, the view of N. T. Wright on this point is in conflict with this Lord's Day and the historic Reformed view.

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## **Notes**

1. *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 98.
2. "The Paul of History and the Apostle of Faith" *Tyndale Bulletin* 29 (1978) 65, cf. 71.
3. *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 119.
4. *Ibid.*
5. "The Shape of Justification (2001)", *Pauline Perspectives: Essays on Paul. 1978-2013* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013) 221.
6. *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 158.
7. *Ibid*, 158-9.
8. *Ibid*, 132.
9. *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The 'Lutheran' Paul and his Critics*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) 341-51.
10. See note 1.
11. *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013) 961.