

*N.T. Wright  
Under Review*

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*Revisiting the  
Apostle Paul  
& His Doctrine  
of Justification*

*by Thomas Schreiner*



In this two-volume work, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Fortress, 2013), N. T. Wright continues his multi-volume work on *Christian Origins and the Question of God*. His work on Paul is very long (probably too long), consisting of two volumes. Even though this review article is somewhat lengthy, I am not claiming to represent fully what Wright says in this mammoth work, and what is emphasized represents to some extent my own interests. Still, before evaluating what Wright says, I will spend some time summarizing the contents of the book with the hope that his book gets a fair hearing.

The book is divided into four parts: Wright begins by exploring the religious, social, political, and cultural world in which Paul lived (chaps. 1-5). He then investigates the worldview of Paul, focusing on symbol and praxis (chaps. 6-8). The third part zeros in on Paul's theology under the themes of monotheism, election, and eschatology (chaps. 9-11). Finally, he considers how Paul's theology interfaces with both the Greco-Roman and Jewish world of his day (chaps. 12-15). The last chapter discusses Paul's aims and intentions (ch. 16).

Another word about the plan of the book might prove helpful. Wright's treatment of

Paul's worldview (chaps. 6-8) precedes the explication of his theology (chaps. 9-11), since Wright believes that Paul's theology flows from his worldview. In addition, chaps. 12-15 return to the discussion of the historical, cultural, social, and religious world discussed in chaps. 2-5. In these final chapters Wright unpacks (now that he has explained Paul's theology) how Paul's theology relates to its first-century context. Wright's work, then, is earthed in history. He has no patience for those who attempt to do Pauline theology apart from the historical context of the day.

### THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF PAUL'S DAY

The book is launched with a fascinating discussion of Philemon, comparing Paul's perspective on the runaway Onesimus with Pliny's response to the runaway slave of Sabinianus. What is particularly striking is how Paul's response differs from Pliny's, and we are introduced to Paul's theology as he encounters a practical situation in everyday life. Paul's theology, Wright claims, was introduced to explain and sustain his worldview. The symbolic praxis at the heart of Paul's worldview was the unity of the people of God, and hence Paul exhorted Philemon to be reconciled to Onesimus, for

they were brothers in the same family. They were members of the same family because of the Messiah and what he had accomplished in his death and resurrection.

One of the key features of Wright's book surfaces in the first chapter. He roots his work in history. Exegesis and theology are grounded in the historical context of Paul's day, and hence Wright unpacks the Jewish and Greek worlds Paul encountered. Wright doesn't give in to postmodern despair; he believes that we can really grasp Paul's thought and intentions. By employing critical realism, hypotheses can be tested and verified. Wright doesn't claim that we know exhaustively or comprehensively, but we aren't locked into historical nihilism either. The genuine Paul can be discerned by us.

The historical cast of Wright's work explains Part 1 of the book, where he situates Paul in his historical, religious, and social context. He emphasizes the prominence and influence of the Pharisees. What is particularly important is the story of Israel. The Jews

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were the children of Abraham, the people of the promise. They were the means by which Yahweh was going to bless the whole world, but something had gone horribly wrong, for the promises weren't fulfilled and Israel was still in exile. Israel's exile was due to sin, and hence the Pharisees believed that the Torah

had to be applied to every dimension of life to undo the devastation wrought by sin. One could say that Israel wasn't technically in exile since they lived in the land. But they were under the thumb of the Romans, and so they were, practically speaking, under the curses of the covenant. Loyalty to Torah especially meant observing the boundary markers, the badges that separated Jews from Gentiles, the commands that came to the forefront during the Hasmonean revolt. Israel was not looking for an ethereal post-mortem existence but

a renewed world; a world in which Yahweh reigned over an obedient people and human beings flourished under the Lord's rule.

Wright also provides sketches of the Greek philosophies that were current during the

New Testament era, considering the thought of Plato, Aristotle, the philosophy of the Cynics, and especially the philosophy of the Epicureans and Stoics. The common denominator was the conviction that human ignorance could be transcended through the study of philosophy, for philosophy was not an arcane endeavor but the path to virtue and wise living.

The role of religion in the Greco-Roman world is also examined. Religion was pervasive and affected every area of life, so that it reached the home and the public square. It consisted more in what people did than in what they believed. Sometimes scholars have claimed that Paul wasn't religious, but, says Wright, there are religious elements in Paul's letters, such as baptism, the Lord's Supper, prayers, and dying and rising with God.

Finally, the role of the imperial cult is introduced. The imperial cult clashed with the Jewish worldview because it offered an alternative eschatology, a competing story about human flourishing. The emperors were celebrated as those who would and could transform the world, standing in contrast to the monotheism, election, and especially the eschatology found in Jewish writings.

## **PAUL'S WORLDVIEW**

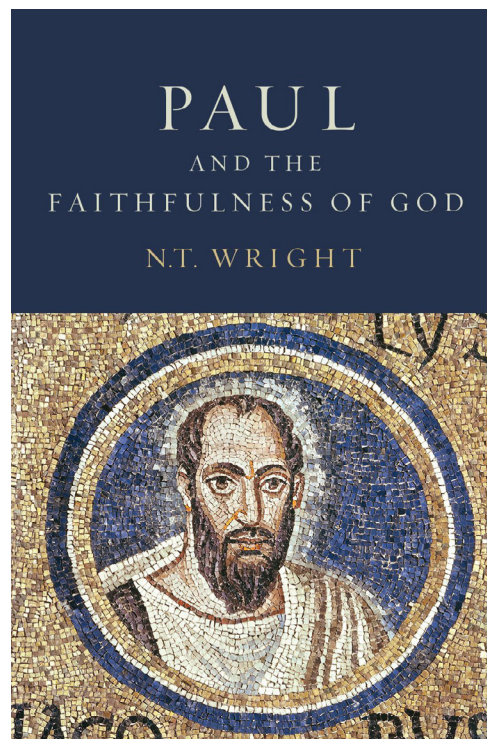
What were the symbols and praxis in Paul's world? The Jews focused on Temple, Torah, land, family, zeal, prayer, and Scripture. The boundary markers of Sabbath, circumcision, and food laws separated them from Gentiles. All of these matters were reconfigured and redrawn by Paul: the temple was the people of God, the land pointed toward the new creation, the family of Abraham consisted of both Jews and Gentiles, and the boundary markers of the Torah which separated Jews from Gentiles were no longer in force. Everything was shaped by Paul's monotheism which included Jesus Christ in the identity of God, by the election of both Jews and Gentiles in the church of Jesus Christ, and by the hope for a new creation.

When it came to the pagan world, Paul taught that idols were dehumanizing and robbed human life of its fullness. Even though Paul doesn't mention the Roman Empire specifically, his focus on the one God, on his rule over the world in Jesus, on Jesus as the true son of God, and on the church as the true Israel, subverted the pretensions of empire. In particular, the church in its holiness, unity, and witness stands out as the central symbol of Paul's thought.

Paul trumpeted the one family of God, the true temple in the world. The church is one because it is incorporated in Jesus the Messiah, who as the crucified and risen one represents renewed Israel, so that all who are in Christ belong to Israel. Baptism and the Lord's Supper communicate that believers are new exodus people, those who have been freed from exile, and hence they are one because they are united with Jesus Christ.

Wright emphasizes the importance of narrative in Paul's thought. Those who see Paul as an apocalyptic thinker are suspicious, thinking that a smooth and unbroken narrative is imposed on Paul's theology, for the theology of the cross is full of disruptions and surprises. Wright insists, however, that a storied narrative doesn't rule out apocalyptic, for the story contains ups and downs, advances and setbacks. The Old Testament looks forward to a new creation, to the fulfillment of God's promises, to God making the world what it should have been so long ago. Human beings were to rule the world for God, but they rebelled and failed to realize the purpose for which

they were made. Still, the goal was not withdrawn, for God promised that his rule over the world would become a reality through human beings, and then everything would be as it should be. Human beings weren't simply made to have fellowship with God; they were created to reign over the new creation, to exercise creaturely responsibility as God's vice-regents. Jesus Christ has come to fulfill the story of Israel, to bring to pass what God intended when he called Abraham, by setting the world right again.



Israel was called by God as the solution to the human problem. Israel had a vocation and a task to fulfill, but it failed in that task, for Israel too was in Adam. So, the issue for Israel is not so much whether it was saved but its failure to carry out the vocation entrusted to it. Still, the

mission of Israel is not abandoned: God fulfills his promise to Israel through Jesus as the faithful Messiah. As the true Israel, Jesus fulfills Israel's vocation, showing that he is the true and last Adam, the true and new Israel. So, the fundamental issue for Paul isn't how one finds a gracious God,

but how the curse of exile can be removed so that Israel (and the whole world) can obtain the promise of a new creation. God's faithfulness to his creation and to his covenant promises becomes a reality through Jesus as the crucified and risen Lord.

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One way to identify what is going on in Paul's world is to ask questions, and Wright puts this to good use, asking, Who are we? Where are we? What's wrong? What's the solution? What time is it? So, how does Wright answer these queries? Who are we?

We are believers who are incorporated into Jesus, the true Israel, the circumcision, the new temple indwelt by the Spirit, and the one family of Abraham. Where are we? We are in the good world God created where Jesus reigns as Lord, though evil and sorrow are not yet vanquished. What's wrong, and what's the solution? There are enemies, demons, false teachers, Caesar, and death. The solution is the Spirit, resurrection, prayer, and God's final rule and judgment. What time is it? It is the already but not yet. God reigns in Christ, but the final victory hasn't been accomplished.

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## PAUL'S THEOLOGY

Paul needed to do theology, says Wright, because his worldview was radically different from both Jews and pagans. Theology was necessary to sustain the church in its unity and holiness, and the need for theology leads to volume two where Wright unpacks Paul's theology under the themes of monotheism, election, and eschatology, reworking each theme in relationship to Jesus as Messiah and the Spirit. Wright maintains that the common polarities in Pauline theology are integrated when we rightly grasp the narrative and story characterizing his thought, and thus apocalyptic shouldn't be played off against salvation history, nor is the forensic opposed

to the transformational and participatory. All these themes fit into the larger story of Paul's covenant theology. Paul believed his theology or philosophy was superior to paganism because it truly led to human flourishing, and Jesus' lordship put the lie to Caesar's claim to be the world's true lord.

### *Monotheism*

Monotheism was central to the Jewish worldview for it confesses the goodness of the world and the evil of idolatry, showing

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that dualism is a false path. Demons try to lure people away from the one true God, but they can never bring to the world the peace and joy for which it longs.

For Paul, monotheism is redrawn around Jesus who shares God's identity. Early Christians believed that Jesus was equal with God but were also fiercely monotheistic. Jesus' equality with God wasn't fundamentally apparent from his claiming to be the Son of Man or even from the Damascus Road encounter. Nor was Jesus' divinity grasped from experiences

with Jesus as the risen Lord in worship as Hurtado proposes. Bauckham is correct in saying that the pathway to understand Jesus is not through anticipations of the incarnation in exalted persons or angels. Jesus' inclusion in the identity of God was present from the beginning, before any NT documents were written. Indeed, Jesus' identity with God was never controversial or debated. Wright proposes in particular that the divine identity of Jesus was apparent because he fulfilled the OT promise that God would return to Zion, that he would come to his temple. Christians recognized that in Jesus' death and resurrection, God had indeed returned to Zion. He had redeemed his people just as he promised. He has come to dwell and reside with his people in

Jesus the Messiah.

The divine identity of Jesus is also apparent from his sonship, from 1 Corinthians 8:6 where the Shema is redefined to include Jesus, and from Jesus being the wisdom of God (Col. 1:15-20). Jesus is also identified as the Lord or *kyrios* of the OT, and even as God in Romans 9:5. Three factors led to a high christology, according to Wright, though none was sufficient in itself to bring about this result: 1) in Jesus the Lord returned to Zion; 2) Jesus' messianic identity was confirmed by his resurrection from the

dead; and 3) Jesus' personal presence with his people in a new mode.

In a similar way, the Spirit was understood within the divine identity, so that the reflections of the early church fathers on the Spirit are fundamentally correct, even if they are clothed in Greek philosophy. The Spirit dwells with his people, empowers them, and strengthens them to worship and to live in a way that pleases God. God returned to the temple in the Spirit, and his glorious presence became a reality through the Spirit. The unity of the church, then, is also the work of the Spirit.

Much discussion has poured forth on Paul's understanding of the human dilemma: did the plight precede the solution, or did Paul see the solution and then argue for the plight? Wright says there is truth in both notions. Certainly Paul already saw a problem since the promises weren't fulfilled and Israel was still in exile. Clearly something was wrong in Israel. At the same time, Paul's recognition on the Damascus Road that Jesus was the crucified Messiah provoked him to reassess the plight of Israel. He now perceived in a deeper and more profound way that Israel was also in Adam, that Israel was also captive to the power of sin. Wright warns that such a reading doesn't capitulate to the old perspective where salvation is merely from sin so that those who are saved go to heaven in the end. Instead, the

promise is a new creation, a new world that is transformed as a testimony of God's faithfulness to the world he has made. Along these same lines, the resurrection of Jesus pointed to the plight of Israel, for it revealed the future destiny (and hence the present deficiency) awaiting the people of God. In other words, the ultimate enemy was death, not the Gentiles, nor even the Roman empire. The transforming work of the Spirit in the new covenant also unveils the cancer in the heart of human beings, for the Spirit's life-changing work reveals Israel's spiritual poverty apart from the Spirit.

### *Election*

If Israel is as bad off as the Gentiles, if it too is vitiated by idolatry and self-serving, what becomes of Israel's election, of God's promise that Israel would be the means by which the world is transformed? In using the word election the focus is on the purpose of Israel's election, the promise that Israel would be the means of blessing for the entire world. Abraham, in other words, was called to undo the curses introduced into the world by Adam. That was Israel's commission, that was Israel's task. Israel was to be the people of the one true God, loving him with all their heart and soul. In its obedience to Torah, Israel was to show that it was shaped by God's wisdom. Israel was the people among whom God



dwelt in the tabernacle and the temple. As God's elect and saved people, Israel was to be a blessing to the world. What God commanded Adam to do was promised to Abraham. The covenant with Abraham promises salvation for Israel, a salvation that goes from Israel to the world.

God's righteousness is his faithfulness to his covenant, but God is not only faithful to the covenant but also to creation, to his creational intentions in manifesting his righteousness. God's righteousness, his covenant faithfulness, testifies that he will fulfill his promise of a new exodus, but his righteousness also includes his covenant justice, his punishment of those who flout his law. God's covenant faithfulness, his righteousness, can't be equated with his mercy, his steadfast love, or salvation, even though it includes all these notions.

Wright also considers here the issue of supersessionism regarding the election of the people of God. He categorically

rejects such an idea, for calling Paul's theology supersessionist is as silly as calling the Qumran community's theology supersessionist when they saw themselves as the new Israel. No, Paul believed his theology of election represented a fulfillment of

what God promised in the OT.

For Paul the election of Israel is fulfilled in Jesus, for Jesus is the true Israel. Wright maintains that monotheism and election both meet in the person of Jesus. The word "Christ" or "Messiah" in Paul plays a major role, and Paul never forgets the messianic significance of the word. It isn't merely a title which is tacked on to the word "Jesus." The royal meaning still resonates with Paul, and thus the people of God are incorporated into Jesus as Messiah. This is where the "in Christ" language comes in. The vocation of Israel has been realized in Jesus, and those who believe in Jesus are incorporated into him; they are the true family of Abraham. The promises made to Israel are fulfilled in Jesus' death and resurrection since he has conquered death and all God's enemies. So, Jesus is the faithful Messiah of Israel, the one through whom God has shown himself to be faithful to his covenant promises.

Wright argues that the fundamental indictment against Israel in Romans 2-3, then, is not that they are sinners (though he also argues that they are sinners), but that they have been faithless to their vocation, that they haven't fulfilled their commission. Jesus stands in contrast to Israel as the faithful Messiah, as the true Israelite who has been obedient to the Lord's vocation. Wright argues, then, that the "faith of Jesus Christ" phrases aren't objective but

### **What is "Supersessionism"?**

*Supersessionism is the notion that the promises to Israel have been fulfilled in the church.*  
— Thomas Schreiner

subjective, denoting the faithfulness of Jesus. God has been faithful to his covenant to bless his people and the world through the faithfulness of Jesus as the Messiah.

Romans 4 is often wrongly read, says Wright, as if it teaches that Abraham is an example of how one gets saved, but the fundamental issue in the chapter is the composition of Abraham's family. Paul considers who are the true covenant

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members, so he discusses whether one has to accept the identity markers and badges of Jewishness like circumcision to belong to the people of God. The wages or reward in Romans 4:4 isn't about working to earn salvation but hearkens back to Genesis 15 where the reward granted to Abraham is the offspring, the people of God promised to him. Justifying the ungodly doesn't refer to the vindication of Abraham but to the declaration that the nations are in the right.

It is clear from Galatians 2, says Wright, that the same issue is paramount, for there the whole discussion is whether Jewish and Gentile Christians can eat at the same table. So, the primary issue relates to covenant membership, and hence justification has to do with whether one is a covenant member in the people of God. Indeed, the fundamental issue in Galatians 3 is who belongs to Abraham's family, who are Abraham's offspring. Galatians 3, then, doesn't contrast grace or law, nor does it engage in a polemic against legalism. What concerned Paul is the single family of God incorporated into Jesus as Messiah. Wright also emphasizes that the legal and participatory language, the apocalyptic and salvation-historical, are joined together. Paul doesn't see them as opposed but coming to fulfillment in Jesus the crucified and risen Lord.

Wright rejects imputation in 2 Corinthians 5:21, a verse which is often appealed to in defense of the teaching. He finds three problems with such an interpretation: 1) the text speaks of God's righteousness, not Christ's; 2) Paul doesn't say that righteousness is reckoned or imputed to us but says we "become" God's

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righteousness. The verbal language hardly fits with imputation; 3) Paul discusses his own ministry here, and hence it doesn't fit to inject the idea of imputation into the context. What Paul teaches instead is that the covenant faithfulness of God is embodied in his ministry as an apostle.

One of the features of Wright's view is that the Torah was given so that sin would grow to its full extent. Thus sin would be condemned and defeated in Israel. Sin was

condemned in Israel's representative—Jesus the Messiah. The sacrifice of Christ has many dimensions; he is the representative, substitute, sacrifice, and *Christus Victor*. Through his faithful obedience as the true Adam and true Israel, Jesus freed his people from sin. Jesus fulfills what we find in the OT as God's son, servant, king, and elect one.

Justification wasn't a major theme in first century Judaism according to Wright. Paul reshaped and rethought the theme because of inaugurated eschatology, a new definition of the plight of Israel, the new work of the Spirit, and the equality of Jews and Gentiles in the people of God. Hence, the fundamental question wasn't how to get saved, for salvation and justification don't mean the same thing. God will rectify and solve the problems of the world through the covenant, so that the sin, idolatry and corruption of the world will be made right. On the last day the whole world will be made right, those who belong to God will be made right through the resurrection, and the resurrection of believers will constitute their final vindication. The covenant with Abraham will then be fulfilled for all creation. Thereby God will be faithful to his covenant and to creation, and hence the two should not be separated from one another. The final judgment will be according to the life one has lived; it will be a judgment based on works. Still, the judgment of the



last day is declared in advance, so that Christians are now declared to be in the right.

Justification is not transformative but creates or confers a status. The judge's declaration actually creates a new status. It is a speech-act, just as a boss saying "you are fired" or a minister saying, "you are husband and wife" creates a new status. Even if someone was notoriously wicked, the new status declared by God as the divine judge creates a new reality. Justification doesn't occur because of a character change in the human being. A person is in the right because of God's verdict, the sovereign announcement and declaration of the covenant God.

When Paul reflects on justification, he focuses on the fulfillment of God's promises to his people in accord with his covenant.

The declaration of righteousness is based on Jesus' resurrection, and thus those incorporated in him are declared to be in the right. And as a result of this declaration they are permanently in the right, for the declaration in the present anticipates the announcement that will be uttered on the final day. Wright says that the work of the Spirit doesn't contribute to initial or final justification; those who look away from themselves and trust in Christ

will be justified. Still, justification is not about how one becomes a Christian but centers on the verdict that will be received on the final day. Of course, this verdict has already been announced and applies to both Jews and Gentiles who believe in the gospel. Those declared to be in the right are a single family, and that is the central message Paul wanted to communicate. In Galatians 2 the issue is a single family, not how we can be rescued from sin.

One might think that those who are incorporated in Christ are imputed to be righteous, but this language, says Wright, is non-Pauline. Instead, believers share in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christians stand in the right because of their faith in Christ, because they lean on what he has done. Such faith is itself God's

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work. Hence, Christian assurance depends on the death and resurrection of Jesus, on a work that lies outside oneself. Still, Wright rejects the language of alien righteousness since it separates Philippians 1:6 from Philippians 3:9.

**WRIGHT SEES THE EMPIRE AND ROME AS A COMPETING STORY TO PAUL'S THEOLOGY, TO PAUL'S CLAIM THAT JESUS IS LORD, AND THUS THE ISSUE OF EMPIRE ISN'T A MINOR ONE. SINCE JESUS IS THE ONE TRUE LORD OF THE WHOLE WORLD, HE HOLDS ROME ACCOUNTABLE FOR WHAT IT HAS DONE.**

In Philippians 3 Paul clearly focuses on covenant membership, according to Wright, since he doesn't talk about sin, the curse of the law, or salvation. So, the issue isn't salvation or trying to earn righteousness with God but membership in the covenant people. The righteousness from God in Philippians 3:9 can't be confused or identified with the righteousness of God in Romans 3:21, for in the latter text it refers to God's covenant faithfulness, but in Philippians he considers one's status before God.

Election is reconstituted via the Messiah, and those who belong to Jesus, those who are incorporated into the Messiah, are the elect. Similarly, those who are transformed by the Spirit are one family.

### *Eschatology*

Wright then turns to the third main pillar of Paul's theology: eschatology, arguing that Israel's eschatology grew out of

its monotheism and election. In the resurrection of Jesus, Israel is redefined. He briefly discusses the return of Jesus where heaven and earth will be one and judgment will be meted out to those who disobey. Believers live in the already-but-not-yet, but Wright rejects the indicative-imperative distinction, claiming it is a demythologization or even perhaps a political paganizing of the reality Paul taught.

Paul's sharp words in 1 Thessalonians 2:13-16 aren't anti-Jewish, but limited to Jews who opposed the gospel. The wrath mentioned here isn't eschatological but represents the punishment they will receive in this life. Wright rejects the two-covenant theory in Romans 9-11, which suggests that Jews could belong to the people of God without faith in Jesus. Instead, Paul demanded that Jews exercise faith in Jesus to receive eschatological salvation. Paul's argument in the first part of Romans 9, which has been so controversial in the history of the church, would not have raised any objections among Jewish readers, for they believed they were the elect people of God. But controversy would be sparked by Paul's claim that Gentiles are included in the people of God, that they are the elect as well.

The interpretation of Romans 11:26 has long been contested. Wright argues that

“all Israel” here refers to the church of Jesus Christ, and thus all Israel being saved doesn’t prophesy a future salvation for Israel. Wright argues that if salvation was promised for ethnic Israel, for all Israel in the future, Gentiles would have concluded that they could simply sit and wait for God to act. Such passivity flies in the face of the exhortations which permeate Romans 9-11. Seeing a reference to the church of Jesus Christ, both Jew and Gentile, fits with Paul’s ecclesiology generally where Jews and Gentiles are one in Christ, the circumcision, the Israel of God, the one family of Abraham.

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### **PAUL’S THEOLOGY APPLIED TO THE WORLD OF HIS DAY**

In chapters 12-15 Wright correlates Paul’s theology (his monotheism, election, and eschatology) to the three worlds he lived in: Jewish, Greek, and Roman. In the first section of the book he explicated the ideological and cultural context of Paul’s world, in part two Paul’s worldview is unpacked, and in part three Paul’s theology is set forth. Wright sees the Empire and Rome as a competing story to Paul’s theology, to Paul’s claim that Jesus is Lord, and thus the issue of empire isn’t a minor one. Since Jesus is the one true Lord of the whole world, he holds Rome accountable for what

it has done. In a number of places Wright sees a polemic against Rome. Hence, the peace and security of 1 Thessalonians 5:3 hails from Rome. Similarly, Paul contrasts heavenly and earthly (Roman) citizenship in Philippians 3:20, and Jesus is exalted over Caesar (Phil. 2:9). Paul doesn’t commend authorities without reserve in Romans 13, for the authorities are under God’s command and ordination, and thus they are also relativized by eschatology. Wright acknowledges that the polemic against Rome could be exaggerated, for Paul does counsel submission to authority insofar as it promotes justice. Still, Rome was the fourth evil empire of Daniel’s vision with an idolatrous story of its own supremacy. Such pretensions to glory were unmasked by Paul, though his critique against Rome is rather subtle and appears in coded language.

Wright also reflects on Paul and religion. Religion, of course, is a tricky word that can be defined in a number of different ways. In many ways Christianity was radically different from every other religion, for there was no temple, no sacrifice, no priesthood, no oracle, and no relationship to the city. On the other hand, Paul employed the language of sacrifice, believed God directed his people, consulted the Scriptures, prayed, and emphasized the church as a community. Believers in Jesus Christ were the new exodus community



who were initiated into the church through baptism. Those baptized are freed from sin (new exodus!) and empowered by the Holy Spirit. In a similar way, the Eucharist proclaims the solidarity and deliverance of the people of God. Paul's religion, then, had points of continuity and discontinuity with the culture of his day.

Paul's relationship to the philosophies of his day is also explored. In some ways Paul opposed human philosophy since it fails to understand the cross. But that doesn't mean that Paul rejected everything from the Hellenistic world. It has long been recognized in NT studies that we don't have a strict separation between Judaism and Hellenism, for Hellenistic culture penetrated the Jewish world, though that doesn't mean that the distinctiveness of Judaism was lost. What sets Judaism apart (among other things) is its narrative, its construal of what God is doing in the world, especially in the new exodus.

When we think about philosophy, the question of truth arises. According to Paul, the failure to see the truth isn't rooted in the intellect but in human rebellion, in the refusal to submit to God's lordship. It doesn't follow, however, that Paul refuses to use arguments and reasons for his convictions, for he believes that the Spirit uses such to bring people to truth.

Paul's monotheism also sets him apart from the pantheistic Greco-Roman world, or any gnostic claim that the material world is evil, or the Epicurean notion that the world emerged by chance. Since the world was created by God through Jesus Christ, the things in the world can be received with thanksgiving. The material world isn't evil but will be transformed. Contrary to Stoicism, the world is heading somewhere, so we aren't waiting for a great conflagration which will begin a process by which all events in history will be repeated all over again. The material world, though marred by evil, is good and destined for renewal.

Paul's ethics overlapped to some extent with other thinkers in the Hellenistic world, though the story that informed his ethics, the theology that undergirded his ethics, was radically different. For Paul an ethical way of life is the work of the Spirit and is patterned after the life of Jesus. Christians live in light of the new creation, and they believe in virtue and moral progress. We see overlap in ethics with a philosophy like Stoicism in a text like Philippians 4:8. On the other hand, Paul's ethic stands out in emphasizing patience, humility, sexual purity, and especially love. The distinctiveness of Paul's thought surfaces in his physics (what is), ethics (how we should live), and logic (what is truth), for every dimension of life and thought is reshaped by Jesus.

Paul also differed from Stoicism in that his message wasn't restricted to the upper classes, for Paul's message was for all people everywhere. Another difference with Stoicism stands out, for Christianity's embrace of suffering and the cross is central, and thus the emphasis is not on the self. Wright also has a withering critique of Troels Engberg-Pedersen, for the latter brackets out Pauline theology and apocalyptic in doing his historical work, and such a bracketing strategy can't account for Paul's thought.

Paul's Jewish context is presented in the penultimate chapter. Throughout the book Wright emphasizes that Paul was a Jewish thinker, even though he was the apostle to the Gentiles. Paul didn't denigrate Judaism but argued that Jesus fulfilled Jewish hopes, for Jesus' resurrection demonstrated that the new world has dawned in Jesus. So, Paul doesn't invent a new religion or leave his Jewish roots behind but sees Jesus as the fulfillment of these hopes. Any notion that such a view is supersessionist is strongly resisted. The Qumran community wasn't supersessionist in seeing their own community as the fulfillment of OT prophecies, and in the same way Paul's theology of fulfillment wasn't supersessionist. Nor does the inclusion of the Gentiles indicate supersessionism, for the OT itself promised that Gentiles would be folded into the one people of God.

In one sense Wright agrees with Krister Stendahl that Paul was called instead of converted, but at the end of the day he argues that Stendahl's reading must be qualified significantly, for Paul saw his persecution of the church as a sin. In a sense, then, Paul was both called and converted since he was personally transformed. Still, we shouldn't say Paul switched religions. He was transformed by the Messiah, by the love of God.

Paul was ethnically Jewish but ate with non-Jews. Paul no longer felt constrained to keep the boundary markers of Torah, for he believed that a new world, a new age had dawned. Paul died and rose in the Messiah, and thus the regulations of the old covenant did not apply any longer since a new world had dawned. Thus Paul saw his previous persecution of the church as a radical misunderstanding of what it means to be Jewish. The promises given to the Jews are fulfilled for those in Christ so that there is now one family in Jesus made up of both Jews and Gentiles.

Wright argues that Mark Nanos fails to see the newness in Paul's thought, for the latter says Paul continued to observe Torah, but such a reading reads the text at the level of propositions instead of seeing Paul's eschatological and apocalyptic thought. Galatians 2:11-14 demonstrates that Paul wasn't Torah observant, for he

didn't keep the food laws when eating with Gentiles. Paul was flexible and observed the law when with Jews, but he didn't believe the boundary markers of the law were mandatory, even for Jews. Believers in Jesus, both Jews and Gentiles, are the circumcision and true Jews. They belong to Jesus as the crucified and risen Lord. So, believers in Jesus Christ, according to Wright, are a third race, and Abraham is the father of a single family. Gentiles are not subordinate to Jews; Jews and Gentiles are equal in Christ and are both incorporated into the one olive tree. The great story that began with Abraham and culminates in the return from exile has now become a reality and is fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

The failure to see the story, the narrative of Paul's world, is Wright's chief complaint with regard to Francis Watson's work on Paul. Watson fails to account for the covenant nature of Pauline thought. Paul was uniquely Jewish but not a renegade Jew, according to Wright, since he saw Jesus as the fulfillment of Israel's messianic hopes.

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## PAUL'S AIMS AND INTENTIONS

In the final chapter, Wright reflects on Paul's aims and intentions as the apostle who proclaimed the arrival of the new creation. Paul in one sense, says Wright,

was a philosopher who articulated a theology to support his worldview. Still, Paul was fundamentally a man of action. In particular, he wanted to form and sustain churches which were marked by reconciliation (so we are back to the theme of reconciliation in Philemon again). His churches had a new kind of philosophy, theology, and politics, as those empowered by the Spirit and incorporated into Jesus Christ.

Wright sees his book as breaking free from the disjunction between Judaism and Hellenism introduced into the study of Paul by F. C. Baur. Rudolph Bultmann really continued the theme of Paul as an apocalyptic thinker who rejected his Jewish roots, but Wright maintains that Paul saw his gospel as a continuation and fulfillment of the story found in the OT. We don't have a smooth line of fulfillment, but we do find that what the OT prophesied is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. God was faithful to what he promised and has kept his covenant promise to Abraham.

Paul's aims and intentions in his mission and church planting can be summarized under the term "reconciliation." But reconciliation must be understood in a full-orbed sense, so that it isn't abstracted from everyday life. Once we understand Paul's world, we will be able to see that his churches were in a sense philosophical



communities, religious groups, and political bodies. The reconciliation lived out in churches represents what God intends to do for the entire creation, so that the church is a new city, or best, a new temple. Paul wasn't just winning souls; he was building a new temple, a place for God

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through the Spirit to reside. Thus heaven and earth would be reconciled through the death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah. The church's mission and reality witness to God's faithfulness. In that sense the church is God's royal priesthood in the world, mediating his blessing to others. The united and holy church is where all nations will stream to worship God, and it was Paul's aim for this single family of Abraham to be one in Christ. The church

would be the means by which God's reign would be extended over the entire creation, so that God would be all in all and would be worshiped.

Paul's mission wasn't simply to see souls saved but to see the whole creation renewed, which meant that rulers (like Rome) would be unmasked for the frauds they were. The church would express its worship of one God as a united body. In order to sustain the unity and holiness of the church, Paul taught his "philosophy" or theology to unpack and explain what it meant to be one in the Messiah.

What we see in Paul, then, is both salvation history and apocalyptic, both fulfilling covenant theology. The covenant accounts for the theme of fulfillment of the story of Israel, but it also explains the disparities and irregularities in Israel's history. In a similar way, the juridical and participatory themes in Paul, which are so often conceived of as polar opposites, are united in Christ.

The entire vision articulated by Wright is summed up in Ephesians, for in Ephesians the church is God's temple indwelt by the Spirit. The goal is to see the world transformed, to experience a new creation, to see individuals reconciled (like Onesimus and Philemon).

## EVALUATING N. T. WRIGHT

### *What I Like About Wright's Treatment of Paul*

This brief sketch (and it is brief since the work has over 1,500 pages of text!) only touches on the breadth and depth of

**EVANGELICALS IN PARTICULAR CAN BE GRATEFUL TO WRIGHT, FOR HE BELIEVES THE STORY, THE WORLDVIEW, AND THE THEOLOGY OF PAUL ARE COHERENT, THAT THEY FIT TOGETHER. FOR THOSE OF US WHO HAVE STUDIED PAULINE THEOLOGY, HOW OFTEN WE HEAR THAT THIS PIECE OR THAT PIECE DOESN'T FIT WITH WHAT PAUL SAYS ELSEWHERE. HIS THOUGHT IS CRITICIZED FOR BEING INCOHERENT, INCONSISTENT, OR EVEN CONTRADICTORY. BUT WRIGHT WILL HAVE NONE OF THAT. HE REGULARLY CRITICIZES THE CRITICIZERS.**

what Wright has written. What he has accomplished in this multi-volume series is truly amazing. Many have thought that such comprehensive works were a thing of the past. We might think that no one

today would attempt to write a scholarly and comprehensive account of Christian origins. But now Wright has written magisterial volumes which focus on Jesus and Paul. One of Wright's great strengths is that he attends to the big picture. He isn't content with only seeing the pieces but he arranges the puzzle pieces so that we can see the landscape. In a world of scholarship where scholars work on this or that corner of the puzzle (which is itself a good thing!), we also need those who give us a panoramic view. Since Wright takes the risk of explaining the universe of the NT worldview and theology, he opens himself up for criticism. Virtually no one is going to agree with every feature on his map. Still, we can be grateful that Wright has given us a map.

Evangelicals in particular can be grateful to Wright, for he believes the story, the worldview, and the theology of Paul are coherent, that they fit together. For those of us who have studied Pauline theology, how often we hear that this piece or that piece doesn't fit with what Paul says elsewhere. His thought is criticized for being incoherent, inconsistent, or even contradictory. But Wright will have

none of that. He regularly criticizes the critics. They think Paul is incoherent or inconsistent, but such judgments, says Wright, demonstrate that they fail to see the whole Paul. Some scholars insist that Paul is an apocalyptic thinker and squash down any reference to salvation history, or vice-versa. Similarly, some trumpet Paul's justification and forensic thought and minimize transformation and participation, while others find the real key to his thought in union with Christ and transformation and see justification as a polemical doctrine. Wright correctly dismisses such gambits as falling prey to a partial vision of Paul. Their Paul is too small. Wright correctly argues that Paul's thought embraces salvation history and apocalyptic, the forensic and transformative. How refreshing it is to read someone who takes Paul seriously as a thinker, seeing him as a theologian with a coherent vision. Wright sees so clearly the fulfillment theme in Pauline theology; what is promised is fulfilled, the covenant promises come to fruition in Jesus.

Another towering strength in Wright is that he places Paul in historical context. Even if one disagrees with his historical judgments, Wright attempts to read Paul in light of the world in which he lived. Naturally, one would need to be an expert in the Greco-Roman and Jewish worlds to assess Wright's sketch of the historical and cultural world in which Paul lived. I am not

an expert, but it seems to me that he has largely succeeded. But even if we disagree, Wright is trying to read Paul historically. He is attempting to let Paul be Paul, to hear the real Paul, the historical Paul. Of course, many scholars today think such an enterprise is impossible, claiming in our postmodern (or post-postmodern?) times that we can't know what authors intended when they wrote. Wright isn't naïve. He doesn't claim that we can discern exhaustively what Paul communicated in his letters. He frames and tests hypotheses under the framework of critical realism, which he explained in his first volume in the series. His critical realist approach is helpful and optimistic. Even though we can't get to the bottom of Paul, we are not hermeneutical nihilists. When we place Paul in his historical context, we can know, says Wright, Paul's worldview, his theology, and his aims and intentions. The historical Paul is not shuttered away but is accessible to us. Hence, Wright's sketch of the Greco-Roman and Jewish worlds in which Paul lived assists us in understanding the real Paul. Wright thinks we can understand the historical Paul and that we learn about him through history and exegesis. I can only gratefully agree.

Wright's creativity also shines through in his scholarship. Is that a blessing or a liability? Probably both, but mainly a blessing. Wright's creativity is evident in how he has written his Pauline theology.

There has never been anything quite like it: Wright weaves together the historical context, the Pauline worldview, and Paul's theology into a coherent whole, so that Paul addresses the world of his day. We can hear, as Wright unfolds his narrative, Paul speaking to the Stoics, the Epicureans, Second Temple Jews, and believers in Jesus Christ.

Wright's creativity is also evident in the story he detects in Paul's thought (more on this later). Israel was in exile, and in Jesus' death and resurrection we have the

**I BELIEVE WRIGHT IS ALSO CORRECT IN SAYING THAT THE SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM IS IN THE MESSIAH JESUS. HE IS ON TARGET IN SAYING THAT MESSIAH IS NOT JUST A PROPER NAME IN PAUL. BELIEVERS ARE INCORPORATED INTO JESUS AS THE CRUCIFIED AND RISEN LORD.**

restoration of Israel. Of course, the story doesn't begin with Israel in exile, but with the covenant, the promises given to Abraham, the promise that the entire world would be blessed in and through Abraham and his descendants. In other words, God would fulfill his promise through the covenant, by virtue of his covenant

faithfulness. Obviously, this is central to Wright's reading, which is evident to anyone who reads the title of the book! Paul's theology is all about God's covenant faithfulness, the fulfillment of his promise to renew all of creation. Human beings will only truly flourish in the new creation when God dwells in their midst through the Spirit. The church, says Wright, represents now an anticipation of the new creation to come, a place where Jews and Gentiles, males and females, slaves and free, are reconciled to one another and to God.

I am relaying only bits and pieces of the story, but I, for one, think that the basic story Wright draws is right. Israel was in exile (i.e., the promises weren't fulfilled) because they had failed to keep the Torah. The curses of the covenant fell on Israel because of her disobedience. Israel believed that the Torah,

given to them by God, was the means by which the world would receive blessing. But, as Wright so aptly puts it, Israel found out that it too was in Adam. Israel couldn't be the solution to the world's problems since Israel too was part of the problem. The evil wasn't only out there in the Gentile world; it was also inside the Jewish world.

Sin isn't just a Gentile problem or a Jewish problem but a human problem.

I believe Wright is also correct in saying that the solution to the problem is in the Messiah Jesus. He is on target in saying that Messiah is not just a proper name in Paul. Believers are incorporated into Jesus as the crucified and risen Lord. Jesus, then, is the true Israel, and those who are members of Abraham's family, those who are the circumcision, belong to Jesus. Hence, both Jews and Gentiles now form the single family of God, reconciled to God and reconciled to one another. The Pauline story is about Jesus being the Lord of the world, and hence all other gods and demons are shown to be frauds. Jesus rules at God's right hand, and hence the new creation has dawned, even though it still must be consummated. The church of Jesus is to live out that lordship with love and grace, as it awaits the renewal of creation. Wright reminds us that the church impacts the world when the world sees its holiness and unity. When the church lives in such a way, it attests that it is the new temple, the place where the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Jesus dwell.

Some have accused Wright of supersessionism, but I think he rightly fends off that charge. The Qumran community, as he notes, was certainly not supersessionist for thinking that they were the community of the new covenant, nor was Rabbi Akiba

supersessionist in hailing Simeon ben-Kosiba as the Messiah. Paul didn't believe that he repudiated Judaism but fulfilled it, for in Jesus the promises to Abraham and to David were fulfilled. Along the same lines, Wright clearly shows the deficiencies of Nanos's reading of Paul, which opts for a two-covenant solution. Paul believed that Israel would only be saved by confessing Jesus as the Messiah.

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### **CONCERNS ABOUT WRIGHT'S TREATMENT OF PAUL**

It seems as if discussions on Wright easily become a matter of whether one is "for him" or "against him." But such an approach isn't helpful and blunts the kind of discussion that is needed. It is fitting to be grateful (see above) for his contributions to scholarship and for his service to the church. He is clearly not an enemy of evangelicalism but a friend. At the same time, we serve scholarship and truth in raising questions and concerns as well. If demonizing Wright is irrational, we must also beware of an uncritical adulation where any disagreement with him is viewed as an attack. Mature discussion takes place when we honestly dialogue about places where we agree and differ with kindness and grace.



*Empire*

I begin with what strikes me as the least important disagreement, i.e., the issue of empire. Certainly, Paul proclaimed Jesus as Lord, and thus he was also the Lord of Rome and sovereign over the emperor. Monotheism means that God brooks no rivals, and hence Caesar must not be exalted or worshiped. I am open to Wright being correct here, but it seems that Paul didn't expend much energy in combatting emperor worship in his letters. Wright argues that the language is coded, but what is code to one is invisible to another. Perhaps Paul doesn't address empire specifically because most ordinary people didn't really take it all that seriously. They tipped their hat to it; they did their duty when they were required to do so, but in most places where Paul planted churches people were concerned about and devoted to other things. Other gods were probably more important in their everyday life than emperor worship.

**I WONDER IF WRIGHT'S EMPHASIS ON STORY, AS HELPFUL AS IT IS, OVERLOOKS OR DOESN'T ACCOUNT FULLY FOR THE GENRE IN WHICH PAUL WROTE ... WRIGHT'S NARRATIVE APPROACH DIMINISHES THE EXPOSITORY CHARACTER OF PAUL'S WRITINGS.**

*The Lord's Return to Zion*

Wright also suggests that Paul's high Christology stemmed in part from the belief that in Jesus Christ the Lord had come to Zion; he returned to his temple. Let me pause and say that Wright contends convincingly for the notion that Paul's Christology was high. I found almost all of his arguments convincing. For that matter, his work on the identity of the Spirit is also excellent; he agrees that the early church fathers were faithful to the NT in their Trinitarian vision.

So, the issue raised here is quite specific and narrow. Did Paul's high Christology derive significantly from the notion that the Lord returned to Zion? Certainly, we have temple theology in Paul, especially in the notion that the Spirit indwells his people. Perhaps I misunderstand Wright, and he is referring to the Gospels instead of Paul when speaking of the Lord returning to Zion, but where does Paul emphasize that Jesus returned to the temple? It seems that such language is used with reference to the Spirit. Paul speaks of Christ indwelling his people, but it isn't clear that such language

signifies the Lord returning to his temple. Hence, support seems to be lacking for the notion that Paul's Christology was profoundly shaped by the Lord returning to his temple.

### *The Story*

Appreciation for Wright's emphasis on the story and the big picture was expressed above. Certainly, Paul had a worldview and a story from which he approached the world. On the other hand, he wrote letters, explicating his theology in a discursive style. The letters are occasional to be sure, responding to situations in his churches. None of the letters represents the whole of his thinking, nor are his letters systematic treatises. I wonder if Wright's emphasis on story, as helpful as it is, overlooks or doesn't account fully for the genre in which Paul wrote. I am not saying Wright is mistaken here. I think there is a story in Pauline theology. But with every strength there is a weakness. Wright's narrative approach diminishes the expository character of Paul's writings. We can compare Wright's Pauline theology with the fairly recent book by Udo Schnelle, *Apostle Paul: His Life and Theology* (Baker Academic). I am not endorsing everything Schnelle says, but when we compare Schnelle to Wright the former stands out for its logical and expository clarity, and the kind of exposition Schnelle offers matches in many

respects the nature of Pauline theology.

### *Eschatological Salvation of Israel*

I don't want to linger long on this point, for good commentators disagree on the meaning of Romans 11:26, and a longer discussion is needed to arbitrate the matter. Still, I am not convinced that the salvation of all Israel in Romans 11:26 includes both Jewish and Gentile believers. It is difficult to believe that the definition of Israel shifts from 11:25 to 11:26 when there is no clear signal that Israel shifts its referent from one verse to the next. Furthermore, a mere two verses after 11:26 Paul clearly identifies Israel as God's elect (11:28), which indicates that Paul continued to look forward to the fulfillment of God's promises to his people. Furthermore, Wright misinterprets life from the dead in Romans 11:15, for the expression more naturally refers to the final resurrection, and such a resurrection occurs after the end-time acceptance of ethnic Israel.

### *Return of Christ*

Related to the above is Paul's frequent reference to the return of Christ, to what is called his second coming. I was quite curious, given Wright's somewhat controversial views on this issue in the Gospels, what he would say about the matter when it came to Paul. What was

striking was how little he said about the subject. One would almost think Christ's return was of little consequence to Paul, since Wright's discussion on the subject is so brief. His attenuated discussion made me wonder if Christ's return is put on the back burner because it isn't of much interest to Wright. Other elements of the story entrance him more. Of course, he doesn't deny the return of Christ, but the topic isn't given its due weight in Wright's exposition. It seems to play quite a minor role in the story he tells, which means, at the very least, that the story needs to be expanded, for the theme is actually quite prominent in Paul's thought.

#### *The Role of Israel*

I agree with Wright that the promises of Abraham were given to Israel, but he seems to make a leap in saying that Israel was the solution to the world's problem. That is a step too far. It seems it would be more precise to say that Israel points to the Lord as the solution to the world's problem. Paul says that Israel believed it was a light for Gentiles, but that isn't quite the same thing as saying that Israel would solve the world's problem, as if Israel itself would undo the sin of Adam.

Wright argues that Israel isn't indicted

**JUSTIFICATION DOESN'T, ACCORDING TO WRIGHT, PRIMARILY MEAN THAT WE ARE RIGHT WITH GOD. IT FUNDAMENTALLY MEANS THAT WE ARE MEMBERS OF THE CHURCH, THAT WE ARE COVENANT MEMBERS. I BELIEVE WRIGHT HERE MAKES A CATEGORY MISTAKE. HE RIGHTLY SEES THAT RIGHTEOUSNESS RELATES BOTH TO CREATION AND COVENANT. RIGHTEOUSNESS AND THE COVENANT AREN'T SEPARATED ONE FROM THE OTHER. BUT IT DOESN'T FOLLOW FROM THIS THAT RIGHTEOUSNESS MEANS COVENANT FAITHFULNESS OR COVENANT MEMBERSHIP. INSTEAD ... JUSTIFICATION MEANS THAT ONE IS IN THE RIGHT, THAT ONE IS DECLARED TO BE IN THE RIGHT.**

primarily for its sin before God (though he does say that they have sinned as well) but for failure to carry out its vocation. Now Romans 2:17-29 does refer to Israel's vocation, but the text doesn't say that Israel's fundamental fault was failure to carry out its vocation. Instead, Israel is indicted for sins like adultery and stealing and robbing temples. Similarly, when circumcision comes up (Rom. 2:25-27), Israel is censured for disobedience in general, not for failing in its mission. Contrary to Wright, it seems that Paul's main complaint (cf. Rom. 3:10-20) is Israel's sin, not that it failed in its mission to the Gentiles.

I also wonder where Wright gets the idea that sin is collected in one place, i.e., in Israel, and thus the sin of Israel is placed on Jesus, so that Jesus draws the sin of Israel into one place. After all, sin is certainly a problem in the Gentile world as well (Rom. 1:18-32). Perhaps Wright sees this notion in texts like Galatians 3:13, for he understands the first person plural pronoun to be limited to Jews, and thus Jesus took the curse upon himself only for the Jews. The first person plural in the next verse (Gal. 3:14), however, certainly includes Gentiles, which casts doubt on Wright's interpretation of Galatians 3:13. But even if Wright is correct on Galatians 3:13, it still isn't clear that sin is collected in one place. Sin is placed on Jesus, but Jesus died as a representative for both Jews and Gentiles (2 Cor. 5:14-15), and hence his sin-bearing role isn't limited to Israel.

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### **RECONCILIATION AND ONE FAMILY AS CENTRAL?**

Wright doesn't use the language of center, but it seems that he sees the unity of the church, reconciliation with God and one another, as the center of Paul's thought. Such a proposal is certainly a possible reading of the evidence. I suppose Wright would say that his whole reading of the evidence justifies the claim. Certainly the

unity of the church and reconciliation with one another are very important to Paul, and we can be grateful that Wright has reminded us of this truth.

The center proposed is possible. On the other hand, Wright tells a large sprawling story, admitting that his own retelling is partial and perspectival. In the midst of the story I found myself wondering why reconciliation and the unity and the holiness of the church are the central truth and symbol in Pauline thought. Wright has certainly shown us that reconciliation and unity are crucial for Paul, but more argumentation and defense is needed for seeing it as the most important theme and the most prominent symbol. The question raised here leads to the next discussion, for it seems that Wright emphasizes the horizontal relationship (unity in the church) more than the vertical (relationship to God), though he certainly doesn't deny the latter and believes it is important as well.

#### *Justification*

That brings me to justification, which continues to be the place where Wright is most controversial—at least for confessional and evangelical Protestants. Wright's view is both helpful and confusing. He rightly emphasizes that justification is a forensic reality, that it has to do with the law court. Hence, he rejects the notion

that justification is transformative and life changing. It is a declaration by the judge that one stands in the right. All this seems exactly right.

On the other hand, he also defines justification in terms of God's covenant faithfulness and our covenant membership. It seems, then, that justification doesn't, according to Wright, primarily mean that

**BOTH SALVATION AND JUSTIFICATION, THEN, ARE SOTERIOLOGICAL REALITIES. JUSTIFICATION MOST NATURALLY REFERS TO ONE WHO IS DECLARED TO BE IN THE RIGHT BEFORE GOD, AND THAT FITS BETTER WITH SOTERIOLOGY RATHER THAN ECCLESIOLOGY.**

we are right with God. It fundamentally means that we are members of the church, that we are covenant members. I believe Wright here makes a category mistake. He rightly sees that righteousness relates both to creation and covenant. Righteousness and the covenant aren't separated one from the other. But it doesn't follow from this that righteousness means covenant faithfulness or covenant membership. Instead, as Stephen Westerholm shows in his recent book, *Justification Reconsidered: Rethinking a Pauline Theme* (Eerdmans), justification means that one is in the right,

that one is declared to be in the right. This is not to say that righteousness has nothing to do with the covenant. Better to say that God's saving righteousness fulfills his covenant promises instead of saying that righteousness means covenant membership or covenant faithfulness. Indeed, it seems as if the emphasis on covenant membership sits awkwardly with the notion that righteousness is declarative, for justification means that we stand in the right before God.

The matter of justification deserves further comment. Wright often criticizes those who identify justification with salvation, pointing out that the words justify and salvation mean different things. He is certainly right on this score,

but he neglects an important point as well. Wright, as noted above, puts justification in the ecclesiological category. It doesn't communicate, says Wright, that one has become a Christian; it tells us whether one is a covenant member, a member of the church of Jesus Christ. I continue to be unpersuaded. Yes, justification and salvation don't mean the same thing, but they have the same referent. Salvation means that one is spared from the eschatological wrath to come, while justification means that one is declared to be right on the final day. Wright himself says that this eschatological



verdict has been declared in advance, the end time announcement has been declared in advance with reference to those who believe in Jesus Christ. When he talks like this, it seems that he is thinking mainly of soteriology, i.e., our relationship to God (hence the confusion mentioned above). Both salvation and justification, then, are soteriological realities. Justification most naturally refers to one who is declared to be in the right before God, and that fits better with soteriology rather than ecclesiology.

Wright often says that those who hold onto the so-called old perspective distort Paul, since they speak of putting one's faith in Christ and then going to heaven. Wright says this is fundamentally flawed since the promise is not an ethereal heavenly existence but the new creation. We can grant this point as a good corrective, though most old perspective scholars I know already agree that our future destiny is a new creation. In other words, Wright's proposal about the new creation isn't as new and as radical as he thinks it is. Still, he rightly says that our future life will be in a transformed world, a new creation.

If our destiny is the new creation, the soteriological dimension of justification still remains, for only those who are justified will enter the new creation. Those who face God's eschatological wrath will experience the final judgment instead of

participating in the new creation. Wright doesn't deny the wrath of God and the judgment to come, but in an exceedingly long book on Paul it doesn't receive enough attention or comment. In other words, he waxes eloquently on the unity of the church (a horizontal reality), but by comparison his reflections on God's wrath and the final judgment are relatively abbreviated. The brevity of his comments have consequences, for he doesn't give the same weight to escaping God's wrath and the final judgment that Paul does. Getting the story right doesn't mean just including every bit of the story; it also means that each element in Paul's theology is given proper weight.

I am not making any accusations here about Wright's orthodoxy or evangelical credentials. It is a matter of emphasis instead of denial. Still, it seems that he emphasizes the horizontal much more than he stresses the vertical. Both themes are certainly present. Nevertheless, Wright doesn't give us an in-depth and profound discussion on the nature of sin in Paul. He repeatedly says that the problem is sin. Yes and yes. But he doesn't linger over what sin is or unpack its significance. He doesn't focus on its refusal to honor and glorify God. Obviously, he believes these things, but the emphasis and the passion seem to be elsewhere. But if the fundamental and most horrendous issue in life is sin, i.e., rebellion

**WRIGHT INSISTS RIGHTLY THAT JUSTIFICATION ISN'T A PROCESS. ONE DOESN'T BECOME MORE JUSTIFIED AS TIME PASSES, AND THOSE WHO ARE JUSTIFIED ARE ASSURED OF FINAL SALVATION. ON THE OTHER HAND, WRIGHT ALSO SAYS THAT FINAL JUSTIFICATION IS BASED ON WORKS. IF FINAL JUSTIFICATION IS BASED ON WORKS, THEN HOW CAN BELIEVERS HAVE ASSURANCE THAT THEY WILL BE JUSTIFIED ON THE FINAL DAY?**

against God, a proud and stubborn refusal to honor God as God, then one of the most important issues is whether one can be saved from God's wrath; whether one will be saved (delivered) or justified (declared to be in the right) on the last day.

Wright writes movingly on the assurance justification gives to believers, for those who are justified can be sure of final salvation. He helpfully reiterates that justification is forensic and not a process. It is a verdict, a declaration from God that gives believers' confidence as they face the final day. I wondered again how such a statement fit with covenant membership or covenant faithfulness as the definition provided for justification, for the emphasis on assurance seems to put justification in the realm of soteriology, where there is confidence about individual final salvation.

Wright's statement about individual assurance raises another question. He insists rightly that justification isn't a process. One doesn't become more justified as time passes, and those who are justified are assured of final salvation. On the other hand, Wright also says that final justification is based on works. If final justification is based on works, then how can believers have assurance that they will be justified on the final day? Wright never answers or attempts to answer that question. I

would suggest along with many others that it is better to conceive of works as the fruit or evidence of justification. Wright knows the distinction posited here but finds it to be unhelpful. Still, the language of basis should be rejected, for it suggests that works are the foundation of our right-standing with God, but how can that be the case if justification is by grace? And how can we truly have assurance if justification is based in part on works? Paul grounds justification on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Just as Jesus was declared to be in the right at his resurrection, so too all those who are united with Christ by faith also stand in the right because they belong to the one who has been vindicated by God.

Assurance and final justification are linked to imputation. In one sense Wright seems to believe in imputation, for he says believers are in the right with God because they have

died and risen with Christ (Rom. 6). In any case, the issue shouldn't be limited to whether it is legitimate to speak of active and passive righteousness. What is at stake is whether Christ is our righteousness, whether our righteousness finally lies outside of ourselves and is found in Jesus Christ. It seems that Romans 5:12-19 teaches that Christ's righteousness is ours, for believers are united with Christ (and all that he is for us) instead of being united with Adam. Another clear text on imputation is 2 Corinthians 5:21. The one who never sinned took our sin upon himself, so that we receive God's righteousness as we are united with Jesus Christ.

**WHAT IS AT STAKE IS WHETHER CHRIST IS OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS, WHETHER OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS FINALLY LIES OUTSIDE OF OURSELVES AND IS FOUND IN JESUS CHRIST.**

Wright's objections (stated above) to this reading of 2 Corinthians 5:21 aren't compelling for three reasons. 1) We enjoy God's righteousness because of what Christ has done, his sinless life and sacrificial death. He died as a substitute for us, and hence his death is our death. Because we are united with Christ, God's righteousness (right standing with God) is granted to us.

This is a righteousness that is ours only through the work of Jesus Christ. 2) Wright thinks the verb "become" (*genōmetha*) can't be equative, that the verb carries the notion of "becoming." But the verb "become" (*ginomai*) is very flexible in Paul, and it can easily be taken as equative (cf. Rom. 11:6; 12:6; 1 Cor. 3:18; 4:16). But even if the verb means "become," it doesn't rule out imputation, for believers become something they weren't before ("righteous!") by virtue of union with Christ. They receive right standing with God as a gift. 3). The first person plural pronoun doesn't indicate Paul is only thinking of his apostolic ministry. Paul's use of pronouns

is also flexible and shouldn't be straitjacketed. Yes, the first person plural in the previous verse refers to Paul, but Paul shifts between the first person plural as a reference to himself and the first person plural as a reference to all Christians in this very paragraph, for when Paul

says "God reconciled us" in 2 Corinthians 5:18, he isn't limiting that action to himself but includes all believers. So too, in 2 Corinthians 5:21 the "we" most naturally refers to all believers.

Since we are talking about new perspective matters, one other issue should be raised. Wright still writes as if E. P. Sanders's vision of Judaism (his covenantal nomism)

is completely convincing. But there is now plenty of evidence out there about the diversity of Judaism. Some Jews were legalistic. That is plain from Luke 18:9-14 alone. Legalism isn't a Jewish problem but a human problem. I believe this is a more convincing reading of texts like Romans 4 than the one Wright posits. Yes, exclusivism and nationalism and boundary markers were a problem. The new perspective has helped us see that so clearly. We are grateful for a clear reminder on this matter. But new perspectivists like Wright don't seem open to any modification of Sanders's construal of Judaism. They insist that there is no polemic against legalism in Paul. It seems that some new perspectivists aren't as open as some old perspective adherents. We see a both-and problem in Paul: both exclusivism and legalism. The new perspective has helped us see an emphasis that was too often neglected. But Wright insists that it is only one way; there is only one problem (nationalistic exclusivism), and he continues to advocate this line, even though there are good historical and exegetical reasons to see also a polemic against legalism in Paul's letters. Here is another place where Wright focuses on the horizontal (boundary markers) and fails to see the vertical (one's relationship to God).

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#### *Final Word*

Discussing disagreements has a negative side effect, for we tend to focus on those and to forget where we agree. So too here, the concerns and disagreements may cause us to neglect the many places where there is agreement. So, let me say again how thankful I am for the scholarship and wisdom evident in Wright's work. We all stand in his debt, for he has helped us to see in a new way the coherence, historical rootedness, and practical ramifications of Pauline theology. Wright's work on Paul will be profited from and read for years to come. May the conversation continue with charity, grace, and forthright dialogue.

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