

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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**Series:** Exposition of Romans

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### Excursus: Justification Revisited (Part III)

John Piper recently expressed his own concern over the growing influence of N. T. Wright's new perspective on Paul, saying, "I think his understanding of Paul is wrong and his view of justification is harmful to the church and to the human soul. Few things are more precious than the truth of justification by faith alone because of Christ alone. As a shepherd of a flock of God's blood-bought church, I feel responsible to lead the sheep to life-giving pastures. That is not what the sheep find in Wright's view of Paul on justification. He is an eloquent and influential writer and is, I believe, misleading many people on the doctrine of justification."<sup>1</sup> Piper has every reason to be alarmed. "To put it bluntly," writes Carl Trueman, "it seems to me that the current revision of the doctrine of justification as formulated by the advocates of the so-called New Perspective on Paul is nothing less than a fundamental repudiation not just of that Protestantism which seeks to stand within the creedal and doctrinal trajectories of the Reformation but also of virtually the entire Western tradition on justification from at least as far back as Augustine. I do not say this in order to shock or to create bad feelings against its exponents but simply to clarify how serious the issue is. Indeed, the advocates of the New Perspective would, I am sure, find my statement of the significance of their position to be in accordance with how they understand their position. We are not talking here of the old debate between imputation and impartation which has historically separated Protestants and Catholics; we are talking rather of a debate which pits the New Perspective against both Protestants and Catholics on the grounds that the traditional Reformation discussion actually takes place within a tradition which has a fundamentally defective view of what God's righteousness, and thus the believer's justification, are all about. For Protestants, the issue is particularly acute. Given the role of the doctrine of justification by grace through faith both in the theology of the Reformation, and as perhaps the defining feature of Protestantism over against post-Tridentine Catholicism, the kind of revision being proposed by the New Perspective involves a fundamental redefinition of what Protestantism, at least in its conservative, confessional form, is. That the New Perspective is being advocated not simply by mainstream liberal scholars such as E. P. Sanders and James D. G. Dunn but also by evangelicals such as N. T. Wright is particularly significant. Wright's magisterial work in debunking the Jesus Seminar has made him a significant evangelical presence; that he combines this historical scholarship with a basic revision of the doctrine of justification more or less guarantees that the New Perspective will not just be something which impacts upon the liberal theological world but also upon the evangelical world as well. All this is not to say that the Protestant notion of justification is an evangelical central dogma form which all other doctrines can be deduced; but it is to point to the singular theological importance of the doctrine in church history and in historic evangelical identity."<sup>2</sup>

#### I. N. T. WRIGHTS UNDERSTANDING OF JUSTIFICATION

The word translated "justification" is also the same word for "righteousness." The noun is used thirty-three times in Romans alone—and, therefore, it must be carefully understood. As a result of the "New Perspective on Paul" people like N. T. Wright have advanced ideas that bear little if any resemblance to that advocated by the Reformers. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the definition of words *DIKAIOSUNE* (righteousness) and *DIKAIOO* (justify). Wright contends, despite the total lack of lexicon support, that these terms refer to "membership within a group" or "to make

or declare a person a member of a group.” Note his rendering of Phil. 3:9, “He is saying, in effect: I, though possessing covenant membership according to the flesh, did not regard that covenant membership as something to exploit; I emptied myself, sharing the death of the Messiah; wherefore God has given me the membership that really counts, in which I too will share the glory of God.”<sup>3</sup> In Wright’s construction, forgiveness of sin has the character of a by-product, a bonus that comes with covenant membership. The removal of one’s sins is not connected directly to justification. Justification for Wright simply confirms an already-possessed status as members of God’s covenant. The whole coherency of justification as meeting the problem of the wrath of God against sin, and therefore as being absolutely grounded in the substitutionary atonement by Christ which diverts that wrath from us, is lost or obscured in the membership interpretation. These things may not yet be denied by Wright, but there is no intrinsic connection between them and justification.

## II. THE CASE AGAINST N. T. WRIGHT

If N. T. Wright’s view of justification takes root in our Reformed and Evangelical character we might as well throw out all our Reformed Confessions and the Reformation as well! Wright’s critique of both Protestant and Catholic interpretations of Paul is the charge that Reformation-era theologians read Paul via a medieval framework that obscured the categories of first-century Judaism and resulted in a complete misunderstanding of his teaching on justification. The meaning of Paul’s phrase “the righteousness of God,” the idea of “imputation,” and even the definition of justification itself – all these, according to N. T. Wright, have been invented or misunderstood by both the Reformation and the Catholic traditions of interpretation. Did the Apostles’, especially Paul, downplay the notion that justification was not primarily about how individual sinners can escape the wrath of God through the imputation of the righteousness of Christ’s active and passive obedience?<sup>4</sup> The horrible consequences of following Wright is clearly seen in the efforts of Rich Lusk, who openly acknowledges his dependence on Wright, confidently declares, “Biblically, judgment according to works comes at the end of history, not the beginning. Only after we have had time to mature into fruit bearers does God give a full evaluation of our covenant fidelity. Judgment according to works is eschatological, not protological.”<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere Lusk, in commenting on Rev. 7:9-17, declares, “Initial reception of the white garment is by faith alone; ongoing possession of the garment is maintained by faithful obedience ... Their ‘whiteness’ before the Father’s throne is due solely to His death and resurrection. In this sense, the robes stand for initial justification. But this forensic justification cannot be separated from the *good works* that *make the saints worthy of their new apparel*. In other words, the poetic imagery points in the same direction as the theological prose of Paul (Rom. 2:13 and James 2:14ff): those who will be vindicated in the end are those who have been faithfully obedient.”<sup>6</sup> Again, if words mean anything then, we are forced to read them at face value, and only the most devoted defenders of the Federal Vision will not see this statement of Lusk as an explicit denial of *sola fide*. Although all of these men (who insist they are ‘Reformed’) would vigorously protest the charge, in the final analysis they claim that our justification is the result of the grace of God in Christ *plus* our own efforts to stay in a state of justification by maintaining covenantal faithfulness. The Westminster divines were of another opinion. They rightly affirmed that our justification before God is secured solely by trusting and resting in Christ alone (Shorter Catechism. Q. 86). But in Wright, and more explicitly in Lusk, a person must wait in constant suspense until the day of reckoning to find out whether or not their own obedience and good works (covenantal faithfulness) was enough to secure their final justification. So instead of being justified by faith alone in Christ’s perfect obedience, we are now put in the position of being justified finally by our own imperfect obedience made up of our own covenantal faithfulness. This, in the final analysis, is the exact same view of justification that the Reformers protested against in their dealings with Rome.

### A. Some Other Pauline Texts

In Ephesians 2:8-9, we read familiar words: “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” The “you” addressed in these verses were once “dead” in “trespasses and sins” and destined for God’s judgment (“children of wrath”) (2:1-3). But now, we are told, they have

been saved by grace as a sheer gift from God, apart from any works of their own. The whole scenario is recreated in Titus 3:3-7:

For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Similarly, II Timothy 1:9 stresses that God “saved us . . . not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace. In Ephesians and the Pastorals, the “works” repeatedly rejected as playing a role in salvation are good “works” in general, deeds done “in righteousness,” as Titus 3 puts it. And those “saved” or “justified” by divine grace are sinners, plain and simple, slaves of their sins and otherwise destined for divine judgment; they are not Gentiles inquiring about entrance requirements to a desired community. In broad terms, as Stephen Westerholm points out, the interpretation of these texts is not controversial. Now nothing in these texts allows us to decide what question Paul addressed in Galatians and Romans when he spoke of justification by faith, apart from the “works of the law.” The suggestion is often made—and a plausible suggestion it is—that a Pauline formula originally designed to address a particular mid-century crisis (so Galatians and Romans) was later reformulated and generalized when the original crisis had passed (so Ephesians and the Pastorals). Something along these lines is, from the perspective of the New Perspectivists, what must have happened. What can be said with certainty, however, is that already in the first century the Pauline justification texts were invoked to address the predicament of sinners facing God’s wrath; and already in the first century they were used to insist that God offers such sinners salvation in Jesus Christ by grace, through faith, apart from a demand for righteous deeds that they are in no position to meet. The claim that such a reading “modernizes” Paul can only be maintained if we date the onset of modernity prior to the composition of Ephesians.<sup>7</sup>

## **CONCLUSION:**

I agree with Piper – Wright’s understanding of justification *is* dangerous, very harmful and will, if adopted, lead to other serious errors. As it turns out, Wright, Shepherd, and their disciples in the Federal Vision are all closet Arminians -- they redefine the Reformation’s doctrine of justification, they reject the Confessional Reformed doctrines of the Covenant of Works and the imputation of Christ’s active obedience, and they teach that it is possible for a person to be initially justified, but end up being lost. J. I. Packer warns that if we travel the Arminian road, there are three precious things that we necessarily lose. These are: the clear knowledge of God’s sovereignty in our salvation, the clear sight of Christ’s glory as the Savior of His people, and the clear sense of the Christian’s eternal security in the covenant of grace. These are sad, and saddening losses, which impoverish the children of God in the same way that Roman Catholicism impoverishes them. There is more comfort and joy for God’s children set forth in the Scriptures than both Roman Catholicism as well as all forms of Arminianism allow them to possess. The fact of the matter is painfully clear: Romanism and Arminianism show themselves to be all too much akin.<sup>8</sup> It comes as no surprise then to discover, as we noted earlier in this series, that a number of recent converts from Evangelicalism to Roman Catholicism openly acknowledge that Wright and the Federal Vision served as a bridge to Rome.

## **ENDNOTES**

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<sup>1</sup> John Piper, [www.desiringGod.org](http://www.desiringGod.org) (Aug. 2, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Carl Trueman, “A Man More Sinned Against than Sinning? The Portrait of Martin Luther in Contemporary New Testament Scholarship: Some Casual Observations of a Mere Historian.” [www.crchico.com/covenant/trueman](http://www.crchico.com/covenant/trueman). Elsewhere in commenting on the attempt by Wright and Norman Shepherd (and their followers in the Federal Vision) to drive a wedge between Luther and Calvin, Trueman writes: “It is worth noting at this point the

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difference between the theologies of confessional Lutheranism and of the Reformed churches concerning the importance of justification. For both traditions, justification by grace through faith on the basis of the imputation of the righteousness of Christ is basic. As a result, any and all attempts to drive a major wedge between the two on this point, whether as part of a nineteenth-century Tractarian agenda or as part of the tiresome contemporary campaign to find space for explicit or implicit repudiations of imputation within the Reformed confessional community, are disingenuous at best and without either historical or confessional integrity. Indeed, one might say that as far as the doctrine of justification is concerned, if you are not on the road to Wittenberg and Geneva, then the old proverb is indeed true: all roads lead to Rome.” In The Faith Once Delivered: Essays in Honor of Dr. Wayne Spear, ed. A. T. Selvaggio (P & R, 2007) p. 42.

<sup>3</sup> N. T. Wright, What Saint Paul Really Said, (Eerdmans, 1997) p. 129. Charles Hill, Professor of NT at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, made this observation about Wright: “How does one go about determining the meaning of a word when it is called into question? This happens with other controversies as well. When faced with definitional problems, how should we attempt to resolve them? One sort of mechanical but still indispensable way is to look at lexicons. Lexicons are compiled by people who have tried to encompass all the uses, or categories of uses, of words from the sources. Lexicographers are human and fallible; they sometimes have biases and blind spots. And lexicons don’t give you the particular contexts. But they are invaluable nonetheless as integrated attempts at exhaustive evaluations of the meanings of words. Challenge: find a lexicon which defines the Greek word *dikaiosune* (‘righteousness’) as ‘membership with a group’ or *dikaioo* (‘justify’) as ‘to make or declare the member of a group.’ Cf. his “N. T. Wright on Justification” III M Magazine Online, (Vol. 3, No. 22) May 28 to June 2, 2001. A number of fine critiques of Wright include those by Mike Horton, available at [www.whitehorseinn.org](http://www.whitehorseinn.org); Paul Helm, available at <http://paulhelmsdeep.blogspot.com/2009/10/wright-and-reformation-3823.html>; Dan Wallace available at <http://bible.org/node/17773>; and David Mathis, available at <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/publications/34-3/book-reviews/justification-pauls-visi...>

<sup>4</sup> N. T. Wright declares that the whole concept of imputation is “a cold piece of business,” op. cit. p. 110. While J. D. G. Dunn, another of the advocates of the new perspective also denies imputation altogether cf. his The Theology of Paul The Apostle (Eerdmans, 1998) p. 94-97.

<sup>5</sup> In The Auburn Avenue Theology Pros & Cons: Debating the Federal Vision, ed. E. C. Beisner (Knox Seminary, 2004) p. 146.

<sup>6</sup> As cited by me in Risking The Truth: Handling Error in The Church, ed. M. Downes (Christian Focus, 2009) p. 143.

<sup>7</sup> This section is adapted from Westerholm’s lecture, “Justification by Faith is the Answer: What is the Question?”, given at Concordia Theological Seminary: Symposium on Exegetical Theology (5/22/06). A fuller development is seen in his excellent Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The “Lutheran” Paul and His Critics. (Eerdmans, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> I have summarized Packer, cf. his “Arminianism” in Puritan Papers: 1968-1969 Vol. 5, ed. J. I. Packer, (P & R, 2005) p. 39.