

Wright, N. T. *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2009. 279 pp.

Reviewed by Terrance L. Tiessen, Professor Emeritus of Systematic Theology and Ethics, Providence Theological Seminary.

N. T. Wright describes this book as an "initial response" to John Piper's book *The Future of Justification: A Response to N. T. Wright* (9). His full treatment of the subject is yet to come, in the fourth volume of Wright's series *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, but Piper's concerns are sufficiently substantive and widely enough shared to warrant a preliminary reply. The result is a book that is both profitable and fascinating, provided one focuses attention on the doctrine of justification that Wright finds in Paul's writings. As a response to Piper (and others who share Piper's criticisms), however, it is disappointing. Wright does not evidence as careful a reading of Piper as the latter has given to Wright, and so his frequent complaints that Piper has not "really listened to what" he is saying (e.g., 21) are frustrating. Although Wright works within the same general Reformed theological framework as Piper, Wright seems ignorant of important work done within that tradition. Consequently, what he offers as proposals in conflict with Piper and the classical Reformed tradition could often have been supported from writers within that tradition. But Wright has expressed his hope that the ongoing discussion will be mutually beneficial, changing his own mind as well as those of his critics. This is a healthy desire and I hope it will be realized.

Wright's Proposal

Wright believes that the present battles concerning justification are symptoms of larger issues, most significant of which is a general "failure to read Scripture for all its worth" (25). What Wright believes is central to Paul he finds "almost entirely ignored in perspectives old, new and otherwise," namely, "that *God had a single plan all along through which he intended to rescue the world and the human race, and that this single plan was centered upon the call of Israel, a call which Paul saw coming to fruition in Israel's representative, the Messiah*" (35). Wright believes that the new perspective began "when Ephesians was written" (44) but that, when faced with the new perspective or other features of more recent Pauline scholarship, conservative churches "have reached not for Scripture but for tradition" (44). In particular, Wright wishes to read the New Testament in its social and literary context, an intention that all evangelicals have traditionally shared, but Wright protests that objectors to the new perspectives have often departed from this principle.

To read Paul in his context, Wright describes the situation in first-century Judaism when Paul wrote his letters. He observes a tide of hope that God would act in deliverance, doing "righteous acts" in fulfillment of God's covenant promises, at that time. The individual hopes of first-century Jews were subsumed under that larger vision of God's covenant with Israel. Although many Jews had returned from Babylon, the exile continued because the great covenant promises, particularly YHWH's return to

the temple, had not yet been fulfilled. The covenantal curse of Deut 27—29 was still in force. (At this point, Wright points out the diversity of new perspectives, since Ed Sanders and Jimmy Dunn do not take Wright's position in regard to the unfinished exile.)

In the context just described, Wright finds in Scripture, in second-temple Judaism, and in Paul's reading of Scripture, that "God's way of putting the world right is precisely through his covenant with Israel. . . . God's single plan to put the world to rights is his plan to do so through Israel" (65). For first-century Judaism, the major question was not individual salvation, but God's purposes for Israel and the world (76). Torah functioned not only within a covenantal perspective, but also in a broadly eschatological one. "The way to tell, in the present, who would thus be vindicated in the future was to see who was keeping Torah (in some sense at least) in the present" (76). Paul's teaching concerning justification must be read within this context.

In his chapter on "Justification," Wright argues that justification is just one of the many biblical ways of talking about how God saves people through Christ and it is regrettable that Protestants have tended to give the concept of justification a much larger emphasis than the New Testament does. Furthermore, since Augustine, the church's discussion of justification has only borne a tangential relationship to what Paul was talking about, particularly because later theology screened out the "Jewish, messianic, covenantal, Abrahamic, history of Israel overtones" of Paul's teaching

concerning justification (82). "Justification" denotes one specific aspect or moment of God's gracious saving work, not the whole of it. Justification is "the status that someone has when the lawcourt has found in their favor," that is, acquittal (90). This declaration really does create the status of which it speaks but it does not create a morally good character.

Furthermore, and less emphasized in classical Reformation theology, the key passages in Romans and Galatians "are all drawing on, and claiming to fulfill, two central passages in the Pentateuch: Genesis 15, where God establishes his covenant with Abraham, and Deuteronomy 30, where Israel is offered the promise of covenant renewal after exile" (94). God's purpose in the Old Testament has the whole creation in view and God's covenant with Abraham, fulfilled in Jesus, is the way by which God puts the world to rights in the new creation. God's saving work is, simultaneously, covenantal, forensic and eschatological. The new world had been inaugurated in Jesus (eschatology), God's promises to Abraham had been fulfilled (covenant) and, since Jesus had been vindicated, all those who belong to Jesus were vindicated as well (lawcourt).

The problem with God's single-plan-through-Israel-for-the-world was that Israel had not offered the obedience which would have enabled the blessing of the world to be achieved. Jesus, the Messiah, therefore represents his people, "standing in for them, taking upon himself the death which they deserved, so that they might not suffer it

themselves" (105). By this means, those who are in Christ (their substitute because he is their representative) are acquitted, as Christ himself was vindicated in his resurrection. For this reason, the Spirit of the Son is poured out upon Messiah's people "so that they become in reality what they already are by God's declaration" (106). The doctrine of justification is thus "trinitarian in shape" (107). Everyone must appear before the judgment seat of Messiah and "at that judgment seat, the verdict will be in accordance with one's 'works'" (108).

In the second part of the book, Wright proceeds to exegesis, with chapters given to Galatians and Romans, and an "interlude" that treats Philippians, Corinthians and Ephesians. In this part of the work, Wright examines in detail how the framework that he has just laid out is found in Paul's letters. From his reading of Galatians, Wright spells out his conviction that the primary issue in Paul's mind when he speaks of justification is God's declaration of membership in the Christian family, composed of both Jews and Gentiles. The "works of the law" that threaten to divide Jew from Gentile are not moral "good works" but the demands of Torah that set Jews apart. The faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah is the instrument by which justification, in the sense of redefinition of God's people, takes place. Those who belong to him, to the Messiah-redefined family, are those who believe in Jesus not those who do the "works of the law." The Jew who believes in Jesus dies to the old identity defined by Torah and rises into the new identity defined by Messiah himself.

In Philippians, Wright finds again the four elements of a believer's status as "righteous," a court judgment in his favor, covenant membership, hearing now the verdict which will be announced at the end, and God's verdict on Jesus himself, whom God raised from the dead. In Ephesians, Wright finds the two "halves" of Paul's gospel emphasis side by side. Ephesians 2:10 speaks of sinners saved by grace through faith, which the old perspective has emphasized. But Ephesians 2:11-22 addresses the concern of the new perspective, Jews and Gentiles coming together in Christ. These belong together, for Jew and Gentile are brought to the same point of helpless guilt and are together raised to glorious heights in Christ. Through the gospel, Gentiles gain entrance to the covenant and Jews receive the Spirit. The cross rescues sinful human beings from their eternal fate and rescues "fractured humanity from its eternal antagonism" (172).

From study of Romans, Wright continues his case for understanding the "righteousness of God" in 1:17, 3:21, and 10:3 as "God's faithfulness to the covenant with Abraham, to the single-plan-through-Israel for the world." Such an understanding, he believes, makes best sense of many texts in the book which are often left on the side. To that faithfulness of God, the only appropriate human response is faith in God, and particularly in Jesus. But the final judgment will be "according to works" (Rom 2:13; 14:10-12; cf. 2 Cor 5:10; Gal 5:19-21; Eph 6:8; Rom 8:1, 13), works which God's children are to do to please God (Rom 12:1; 14:18; 2 Cor 5:19; Eph 5:10; Phil 2:12b-13; Col 1:10; 1 Thess 4:1; 2 Thess 1:11). Wright notes, however, that "this is not the logic of merit. It is

the logic of love' (188) and it encompasses the work of the Spirit who frees believers from slavery to sin and for obedience to God. That future judgment (Rom 2:1-16) corresponds to the present verdict, which Rom 3:21-31 teaches is "simply and solely on the basis of faith" (190).

Although Paul is often focused on the fulfilment of God's promise to enlarge Abraham's family, this is all about the forgiveness of sins, precisely because the purpose of God's covenant is to put the world right through his chosen people. Interestingly, though Paul highlights the death of Jesus in his thumbnail sketch of the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8, "in the two crucial passages where he speaks of the faith of the Christian as embodying the faith spoken of in the Old Testament---Romans 4:23-25 and Romans 10:6-11---it is the resurrection that takes center stage" (247). This signals that the cross was a victory. Thus, justification is not simply the remitting of sins, "it is the declaration that those who believe in Jesus are part of the resurrection-based single family of the one Creator God" (248).

Commendation

It is heartening to read Wright's description of the hermeneutical "rules of engagement" according to which he intends to read Paul's writings. These locate him solidly within the evangelical tradition so that the discussion can go on between scholars committed to the same hermeneutic, which promises to be maximally fruitful

for all concerned. Wright's emphasis on God's covenants, particularly the one made with Abraham, as the framework within which Paul's teaching concerning salvation (including justification) must be understood, is very good. This makes it a discussion between Reformed theologians, not a critique of Reformed theology by someone outside the fold.

Wright's insistence on the importance of the lawcourt metaphor in the biblical account of justification is excellent, but his speaking as though this puts him at odds with classic Reformation soteriology is puzzling. Wright states well what the judge in the lawcourt does when justifying someone: "He *creates* the status the vindicated defendant now possesses, by an act of *declaration*, a 'speech-act' in our contemporary jargon," but the judge does not "give that person his own particular 'righteousness'" (69). This is exactly what Luther and Calvin were insisting upon.

Wright's statement of biblical truth is often inspiring and he effectively demonstrates how criticisms of his work are frequently invalid. For instance, with regard to John Piper's argument that God's righteousness is his concern for his own glory, Wright speaks beautifully: "The great story of Scripture, from creation and covenant right on through to the New Jerusalem, is constantly about God's overflowing, generous, creative love---God's concern, if you like, for the flourishing and well-being *of everything* else. Of course, this too will redound to God's glory because

God, as the Creator, is glorified when creation is flourishing and able to praise him gladly and freely" (70).

Wright does well to observe the difference between Luther and Calvin with regard to the role of the law in the life of believers. I find plausible Wright's suggestion that "if it had been the Reformed view of Paul and the law, rather than the Lutheran one, that had dominated biblical scholarship," the new perspective would have been unnecessary, and justification would have been commonly understood "within the context of 'being in Christ'" (72). Wright also does us a service in sensitizing us to the pressing problem regarding the place of Gentiles in the new covenant community of God's people. It is important that this not be overlooked, as happens when we consider justification only in terms of the forgiveness of sin and reconciliation with God. Both these dimensions are very tightly intertwined in Paul's letter to the Galatians. We are both children of Abraham and children of God, through faith in our faithful representative, Messiah.

Of further value is Wright's careful unpacking of the Holy Spirit's work in the believer's salvation. This is what grounds Wright's insistence that the final verdict of justification, which is according to works, is the same as the present verdict declared because of faith, and entails no merit on the part of the obedient believer. Wright is also careful to forestall synergistic representations of present and final justification. The

point is not that God does part of it and we do part of it, but that passivity or quietism are inappropriate in the life of a believer in Jesus.

Christians risk de-Judaizing Paul and Wright's proposal challenges this in a healthy way. Israel's covenant unfaithfulness led to their failure to bring blessing to the nations but God still brings his covenant promise to fulfilment through the faithfulness of Israel's Messiah. This is not a renunciation of God's promise to Abraham but a way of bringing it to fruition. Discussion of how *pistis Christou* should be translated is bound to continue, but the argument of Wright and others that it denotes the faithfulness of Christ (rather than faith in Christ) can not easily be dismissed, and Wright's own exegetical preference does not endanger classic Reformation insistence on the instrumentality of faith because this is something that Wright himself regularly affirms. Since God's plan is fulfilled by the Messiah's faithfulness, "the badge of the covenant people from then on will be the same: *pistis*, faith, confessing that Jesus is Lord and believing that God raised him from the dead (Romans 10:9)" (208).

The fundamental Protestant orthodoxy of Wright's project is well summed up in his self-assessment:

Nothing that the Reformation traditions at their best were anxious to stress has been lost. But they are held in place, and I suggest even enhanced, by a cosmic vision, a high ecclesiology generated by Paul's high Christology and resulting in a high missiology of the renewal of all things, and all framed by the highest doctrine of all, Paul's vision of the God who made promises and has been faithful to them, the God

whose purposes are unsearchable but yet revealed in Jesus Christ and operative through the Holy Spirit, the God of power and glory but above all of love (247).

Much attention is currently being paid to a reassessment of the relationship between faith and works in justification. Though concerns have been expressed about errors in this regard in the work of some proponents of the "new perspective," Wright's analysis is wholesome. The follower of Christ does, "out of love and obedience to Israel's God, the works which would function as a sign in the present that he was part of the people who would be vindicated in the future, on the last day, when God would act in his long-promised judgment and mercy" (147).

Concerns

Wright objects frequently and strenuously to the classic Reformed doctrine of the imputation of Christ's righteousness to sinners as part of his own conviction that God's righteousness is his covenant faithfulness. In stating his objection, however, Wright often misconstrues what the Reformed tradition (within which Wright himself works) means when it speaks of the imputation of Christ's righteousness. Consequently, Wright's criticism fails on this point. The difference between his position and that of his critics is actually rather slight and his emphasis on the believer's union with Christ is very good. It is because we are "in Christ" that God declares us not guilty in spite of our sin. As Wright himself puts it, with reference to Rom 6:1-11: "what is true of the

Messiah (dying to sin, rising to new life) is now to be 'reckoned' as true of all those who are baptized into him" (229).

Wright's insistence that God's righteousness *is* his covenant faithfulness is another peculiar idiosyncrasy. Given the importance of God's covenants within Reformed theological construction, no Reformed scholar would deny that God's faithful fulfilment of his covenant promises is entailed in God's essential attribute of righteousness, his being rightly related to himself and everyone else, but to reduce the latter (God's essential nature) to the former (God's action) is both puzzling and erroneous. Elsewhere, thankfully, Wright himself speaks in proper terms of God's covenant-fulfilling action as the outworking of his character. Thus, when speaking of God as "always giving out, pouring out, lavishing generous love on undeserving people, undeserving Israel and an undeserving world" (70-71), Wright says: "That is the sort of God he is, and 'God's righteousness' is a way of saying, 'Yes, and God will be true to that character'" (71). Would that Wright had always spoken in this way, of God's righteous acts as expressive of his being the Righteous One.

We can appreciate the care with which Wright sets out to read Paul in his context, but his reduction of "works of the law" to observance of Torah's Jewish distinctives is problematic. While maintenance of the Jew/Gentile distinction was clearly a problem that Paul had to address in his proclamation of the new covenant in Jesus, and granted that this is often not given sufficient significance, the problem of self-

justification among the Galatians and Romans can not be reduced to that issue. The effect of limiting it in that way necessarily limits also the righteousness of Christ, which was his complete moral perfection, not simply his being a good old covenant Jew. Anyone who seeks God's vindication through personal righteousness remains under condemnation for breaking not just ceremonial taboos but for falling short of God's intentions for humanity created in his image. The law which Israel failed to keep and for which she suffered the curse of Deuteronomy 30, which her representative, the Messiah, then obeyed fully, can surely not be restricted to boundary markers. It clearly entails moral disobedience on Israel's part and moral obedience on Christ's.

Those in Christ are declared by God to members of his family, but that truth, captured clearly in the concept of adoption, must not be deemed the essence of justification which has to do with God's statement that we are rightly related to him on account of our being in Christ, the Righteous One. Because of this, we are deemed children of Abraham and given the gift of God's Spirit. The large place given to God's covenant with Abraham in Wright's work is healthy, but he needs to put it in the context of the Adamic disobedience which can also be construed covenantally. Jesus fulfills the promise made to Abraham but he does so, more fundamentally, as second Adam. If this were given sufficient attention, the two dimensions of justification, horizontal and vertical, would be seen in proper relationship to one another. Wright needs to go further back than Abraham, as Paul does.

Wright has done us a great service in this work, despite its weaknesses. He offers correctives both to old and new perspectives on Paul, and his work will hopefully foster wholesome conversation, not just name-calling. Wright assesses his contribution accurately, I think, when he sees it as “a theology of justification which includes all that the old perspective was really trying to say within a larger framework which, while owing quite a bit to aspects of the new perspective, goes beyond it” (140).