

**Miscellanies on the “New Perspective”  
and Pauline Biblical Theology**

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*(Reader’s Note: These are notes and thoughts I assembled during the above specified time period. Since I am not a blogger, I simply put them into a Word document. My plan was to eventually take some of these nascent, half-formed reflections and turn them into full blown essays. However, it looks like time constraints will prevent me from undertaking any such project. Thus, I take the risk of setting these forth now, in rough and unfinished form, in the hope of spurring further conversation and discussion over New Perspective issues.)*

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Discussion over the so-called “New Perspective on Paul” (NPP) continues to generate more heat than light in Reformed circles. Because I am regularly asked what I think about this movement in contemporary biblical scholarship, I thought it might be worthwhile gathering up some rather inchoate thoughts and putting them down in one place for others to interact with as they wish.

I do not claim to have the NPP mastered. In fact, even the most voracious reader would need several long lifetimes (without the happy interference of wife or children) to even begin to sort through all the literature. If Pauline scholars are good at anything, it’s writing big books and long monographs. I have read a sizable portion of the literature, I suppose, over the last eight years, but there is still a great deal I have not delved into. So these thoughts are preliminary in character. A final assessment of the “Sanders’ revolution” and the “New Perspective” it gave birth to is probably still several generations away.

I should also point out that I do not really believe there is anything like a monolithic NPP. When you hear, “The NPP denies doctrine x” or “The NPP believes z” you need to do some digging. Scholars who may fall, more or less, under the NPP umbrella come from a wide variety of denominations and backgrounds. Some are unquestionably orthodox and evangelical, others are flaming liberals.<sup>1</sup> So the label’s value is questionable from the outset, but it appears to be here to stay. Perhaps, though, we should speak of a diverse array of “New Perspectives on Paul” rather than a singular “New Perspective.”

Further, I should also point out that I think the ties that bind NPP scholars, insofar as there are any, are twofold: First, there is a careful historical inquiry into the nature of first century Judaism. (For this reason, it might be better to speak of a “New Perspective on Judaism” than a NPP.) This is why Sanders has emerged as a leading voice in the

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<sup>1</sup> For example, look up “truth, ultimate” in the index of Sanders’ book *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*.

NPP movement. He did much of the pioneering historical work in the 1970s, seeking to get to the core of Judaism's "pattern of religion." All NPP theologians, to some extent, are bound to interact with Sanders' writings and are thus on what has been called the "Sanders-Dunn trajectory."

The other common feature is openness to a biblical-theological reading to Paul. That is to say, NPP scholars recognize that Paul is at least as concerned with matters of redemptive history as he is with an individual *ordo salutis*. I think this eschatological sensitivity is the most salutary feature of the NPP. It opens the door to consider more widely aspects of Pauline theology that the Protestant tradition, largely dominated by anti-Roman polemics, has missed. It also meshes well with the insights of the best of Reformed biblical-theology, a movement that has blossomed since the pioneering work of Gehardus Vos.

With those initial caveats out of the way, let's seek to give a preliminary Reformed appraisal of the NPP. My readers should note I have no single NPP scholar in view, nor even a "profile" of the ideal NPP theologian. I do interact most heavily with N. T. Wright since he is the most widely read, most controversial, most evangelical, and most profitable NP scholar. In part, I want to give an apologia for reading Wright, though that doesn't exhaust my purpose in writing. This paper is not intended to be an "essay" with a coherent, overarching thesis; instead, I've thrown random thoughts together in an almost aphoristic fashion in hopes stimulating fresh discussion and open-minded reading. You can think of this piece as a "New Perspective" weblog of sorts, since if I had a blog that's probably where these thoughts would have first seen the light of day.

This is an important topic that deserves our consideration. These issues and personalities are likely to dominate the theological landscape for the foreseeable future, so we best learn how to interact with them sooner rather than later. What is a Reformed, biblical-theologically oriented Christian to do with the "New Perspective"?

## 1.

I think a big part of the problem we Reformed people have in interpreting Wright is with what he does *not* say. When held up to the template of Westminster confessionalism, there seem to be a lot of gaps in Wright's presentation of Pauline theology. The question the Reformed interpreter of Wright then faces is this: How do I fill in those gaps? With orthodoxy or heresy? Do I give Wright the benefit of the doubt or not?

Some of this confusion may be traced back to Wright's style, particularly the way he likes to play off his own view against popular/traditional views. So: He reads NT "coming" passages in a preterist sense and we wonder if he denies the Final Coming of Jesus. He focuses on the resurrection, not heaven, so we wonder if he believes in the heavenly intermediate state. He reads "judgment" passages as references to politico-historical events, and we wonder if he denies the reality of hell. He says justification is about covenant membership, and we wonder if he has denied personal soteriology, forgiveness, etc. He says Jesus struggled with his vocation, and we wonder if he believes in the deity

of Christ. He says the righteousness of God refers to God's own (action or attribute of) righteousness, not something imputed, and so we wonder if he denies the concept of imputation altogether. He says he will approach Scripture as a historian and so we wonder if he will just treat the Bible as a mass of untrustworthy contradictions. He writes god with a small 'g' and we wonder if he's just another irreverent liberal. And so on.

Those who have read and listened to more of Wright seem to be far more ready to give him the benefit of the doubt than those who have only been exposed to slivers. Many of those who have read a great deal have been forced to pause and wonder where Wright is going, but they keep on reading with openness and find that in virtually every single case he ends up back in the safe harbor of orthodoxy. Those who have not read as much, or for whatever reason are less inclined to trust Wright, end up assuming the worst when they have to fill in the gaps an incomplete reading of the Wright corpus leaves them with. This is why there is so much debate over “what St. Wright really said.”

I point this out not because I think it solves anything, but because I think it's important from a methodological standpoint. Perhaps the best advice to those who have grave concerns over Wright's project is simply to tell them to keep reading. Wright is undertaking a massive project, and not everything is said all at once or right up front.

Related to this is Wright's audience. If Wright were to state up front all his conclusions -- something of a personal confession of faith -- chances are, a lot of Reformed concerns (language differences aside) could be put to rest. But Wright is speaking largely to an audience that does not have many orthodox presuppositions to begin with. He's even speaking evangelistically and apologetically, you might say. His project is to take these people on a journey from post-Enlightenment biblical "scholarship" to a destination point that is more or less traditional orthodoxy. But liberals won't take him seriously if he puts his orthodox cards on the table first, without doing all the painstaking legwork of showing the "logic" of his view of Jesus, Paul, Christian origins, etc. A few, like Crossan, of course, "see through" Wright and have already declared him an "elegant fundamentalist." I think that's exactly right. In the end, Wright is doing nothing more than freshly restating the same old faith, with a few new scholarly twists.

Finally, if I were to write a “reader’s guide to Wright” for Reformed theologians, a large part of it would be devoted to terminological issues. Reformed theologians need to be willing to admit that the Bible’s theological vocabulary is not systematic, nor does it match up with the vocabulary of Reformed scholasticism. Terms like “regeneration” and “sanctification” have come to function quite differently in Reformed discourse than they do in the Scriptures. There is nothing wrong with this, provided we take care to exegete Scripture on its own and not simply read in our pre-made definitions of terms. We dare not reduce orthodoxy to parroting a few key slogans or playing the right “language game.” The mismatch of biblical and confessional terminology is not a criticism of either the Scriptures or the tradition; it is just a fact of life.

But then along comes a scholar like Wright who wants to “get back to what Paul really said.” As Wright exegetes Paul, he simply looks at the key terms in their context,

without reference to their confessional meaning. He does not translate the fruit of his exegesis into Reformed categories (and there's no real reason or obligation for him to do so). But Reformed readers will not be able to understand Wright on his own terms until they take into account this slippage in vocabulary. For a Reformed reader to read Wright honestly, he must become theologically multi-lingual. Any of discussion of Wright's orthodoxy will have to move in at least three different universes of discourse: (a) Scripture itself; (b) Reformed orthodoxy; and (c) Wright's own terminology. Until these kinds of problems and issues are dealt with, Reformed interaction with Wright will just spin its wheels in the theological mud. No critique of Wright will get traction until it comes to grips with the *substance* of his views, rather than merely focusing on the *terminology*.

## 2.

I admit I do have a serious problem with those in the Reformed world who have so narrowly and technically defined the gospel and so identified it with certain extra-Scriptural, highly rarified slogans that they can't see Wright as a brother in Christ. They may disagree with his exegesis here and there, but why the need to vilify him as a dangerous heretic? Why not one iota of appreciation for a man who has done so much to defend the basics of historic Christianity in the face of staunch skepticism? And if the response is, "But wait! Wright denies the basics of historic Christianity!" then that just reveals our problem. He doesn't deny the basics of historic Christianity! If we think that, we don't know those basics ourselves! Many in our tradition have turned the gospel into something so narrow and ideological, virtually the rest of Christendom would have to be excluded. Even if it turns out that Wright's proposal for, say, 2 Cor. 5:21, is incorrect, that doesn't make him a flaming heretic. He affirms grace alone, Christ alone, the Trinity, the incarnation, the resurrection, etc. He affirms we need to have our sins forgiven. He affirms the cross propitiated God's wrath against sin. For him, the gospel is the message about King Jesus, announcing that the crucified and risen one is now Lord over all. These things could not be more obvious to anyone who is committed from the start to give Wright a fair reading. So what if his formulations aren't the same as the Puritans of 350 years ago? Many in our own camp (e.g., Tim Keller) do not feel obligated to articulate theological truth in archaic or scholastic categories of a by-gone age. There is a legitimate place for contextualization – and that is a big part of Wright's project. If you can't recognize him as a brother in Christ, you need to have your theological glasses examined. If you think he's "denied the gospel," you need to recheck your definition of "gospel."

Really, it's the all-or-nothing way some in the Reformed camp treat this debate that concerns me most. We strain at gnats and swallow camels. We are an arrogant people and need to repent. We need to set aside our agendas and read Wright on his own terms.

## 3.

I'd say the lack of breathing room to even have a cordial discussion over these things is a greater problem than the fine points of Pauline exegesis. Sure, Wright (in some ways)

asks people to rethink a 500 year old tradition. Luther and Calvin asked people to rethink traditions a lot older than that! Wright has always made it clear his ultimate loyalty is to the text of Scripture, not particular formulations. If someone wants to take me back to the pages of Scripture to rethink things -- especially when that person already affirms the ancient creeds, the Reformation *solus*, etc. -- then I'm more than happy to take another look with him. Wright is simply not a threat to the Reformed tradition. Those who see it that way have either, in good Pharisaical fashion, badly distorted that tradition to protect their own turf, or they have badly misunderstood Wright, or some combination. The stakes simply aren't as high in this battle as they'd like to think. (Now, the NPP should make Lutherans cower in fear . . . after all, the entire movement essentially vindicates the Reformed view of the law over against the Lutheran law/gospel dichotomy!)

Orthodoxy and heresy are not determined by private or even denominational slogans and standards; these things are defined by the great creeds and confessions that belong to the whole church. The logic employed by some of our pastors and theologians would force us to conclude that a narrow group of Reformed churches are the only true expressions of the body of Christ that have ever existed. Charges of "denying the gospel" have been substituted for the hard work of actually demonstrating such a claim exegetically. There's no breathing room for the give and take of mature discussion; it's just a bunch of name calling.

In particular, some critics of Wright speak condescendingly, as though only an uninitiated, poorly read student would be swayed by Wright's works. Warnings are issued to not be overcome by Wright's charm, winsomeness, or fresh prose. But this kind of bullying betrays a hard-headed arrogance. Wright is not some charlatan that must be guarded against. As with any Bible teacher, he must be read discerningly, and his views must be tested against Scripture even as the Bereans tested Paul's preaching against the inspired Word. But to treat Wright like some kind of snake-in-the-grass who deceptively steals away people's orthodoxy is uncharitable and slanderous.

#### 4.

More Wright thoughts: Repeatedly, it seems Reformed readers of Wright refuse to give him a fair shake. They try to cram him into some pre-existent, familiar category like "Romish" or "liberal" or "neo-orthodox," without realizing that he does not fit any of those categories and must be read on his own terms. Again, all I'd ask for is a fair reading of Wright. So far, in my estimation, that's precisely what he hasn't gotten from many in the Reformed world.

There may be a bright exception to that trend, however. It seems quite a few guys in exegetical departments (OT, NT) at our seminaries are favorable to Wright. They study with open Bibles all day and know that the confessional categories do not always match the biblical vocabulary. But the systematics profs, who spend all their time in theology textbooks, can't seem to get the blinders off when they read Wright. I know that's not a hard and fast rule, but it seems to be a trend. And I think it's very telling . . .

I'm not attacking systematic theology, but I do think we need to remember the text of Scripture is supposed to control the system, not the other way around. Our systems are human, fallible, and therefore must always be open to correction. No faithful systematic theology is "closed."

## 5.

To be honest, Wright's work on the whole does not strike me as all that original. A lot of his proposals about justification, God's righteousness, the faith of Christ, works of the law, his use of intertextuality, his understanding of Second Temple Judaism, and so forth, have been floating around in the circles of NT scholarship for several decades. Wright's novelty is simply saying those things better and (I would argue) putting them in a more traditional package than a lot of others have placed them. Most of the cool biblical-theological stuff in Wright's Romans commentary was already out there in other forms -- just compare it to Stott's IVP Romans commentary or Witherington's *Paul's Narrative Thought World* to find similar tidbits. This isn't to downgrade Wright's contributions, which are still immense and growing; it's just to point out that this whole debate is really about a lot more than just one guy. Read Wright, but don't overlook Witherington, Hays, Garlington, Grieb, Byrne, Baker, Christiansen, Dunn, Thielman, Schreiner, and so on. Read with discernment, but by all means read them! Do not simply assume the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformers or 17<sup>th</sup> century Puritans had every last thing figured out. They did not. Every age brings its own questions to text, and quite often those questions will drive us to view the text in a different light and from an alternative angle, allowing previously unnoticed insights to burst forth from the pages of Scripture.

## 6.

Now we turn to the *real* issues.

Whatever contrasts Paul is drawing between himself and the Judaizers, or between works of the law and faith, have got to be understood in terms of eschatology. The contrast is not between two different individualistic soteriologies -- one based on meritorious works, the other based on faith alone. That Lutheran way of reading Paul has now been shown to be wanting. It simply cannot deal with numerous texts in a coherent fashion (e.g., Rom. 3:27-30).

The problem with the Judaizers was their refusal to abandon the features of the old age and move into the new world inaugurated by Christ. It's as though they've begun to step into the new creation, but want to keep one foot in the old Adamic/Judaic cosmos as well. Their affection for Torah has prevented from keeping pace with the Gentiles, who submitted to God's righteousness by faith. The Judaizers are still living on the wrong side of the cross.

For Paul, what counts is being in the new creation. The issues are framed in terms of eschatology. Works of Torah could not bring in the new creation. Now that Christ and the Spirit have done what Torah could not, the Torah must be set aside. The Judaizers had

faith, no doubt, but it was still sub-eschatological faith since it didn't reckon with the full newness of the new era. It was faith shaped by Torah (and Jewish traditions added to Torah) rather than centered on Christ.

In the end, this *is* a form of Pelagianism since it demands covenant blessing on human terms. Thus, the “traditional” reading is not altogether wrong. But it’s not nearly as simple as the ahistorical “law/gospel” reading tries to make it.

## 7.

I don't think we can fragment the Torah the way much of our tradition has done (and even the pre-Reformation tradition). The law categories of moral, civil, and ceremonial simply don't work exegetically, even if they are useful rules of thumb for various other purposes. Paul treats the Torah as a seamless whole, as a covenantal economy (cf. Gal. 5:3; Heb. 7:12).

True, the works of the law the Judaizers were concerned about may have been concentrated in those ceremonial things that set Jews visibly and culturally apart from Gentiles, but the Torah must still be dealt with holistically. Paul says those who have entered the new age are not under the Torah. Period. Not just part of Torah, but all of it. His challenge to “works of the law” may focus on those so-called ceremonial aspects of the Mosaic legislation that became acid tests of covenant loyalty in the Maccabean period, but Paul always keeps in view the law of Moses as a unified covenantal system. (Several NPP scholars, such as Dunn and Garlington, are emphatic that “works of the law” has reference to Torah as a whole, not merely a portion of it.)

It seems, then, venerable talk about the “third use of the (moral) law” isn't quite right. As far as Paul's argument in Galatians is concerned, “works of Torah” are *no longer* adequate ways of expressing fidelity to the covenant Lord because they are subeschatological. *Now* that Christian faith has come (or, eschatological faith) we must express faithfulness and devotion in ways appropriate to the new creation (cf. Gal. 6:15). For Paul, the law of Moses has been transformed into the law of Christ. This is new law gives us the family rules for the New Covenant community.

The law was good and necessary for a season, but now its time has come to an end. Kevin Bywater has nicely illustrated this: Just as milk is health-giving and nourishing for a time, but then goes bad and becomes deadly poison after its expiration date, so it with Torah. The law was healthful for Israel until its purpose in God's economy came to full realization. For Israel to continue clinging to Torah after Christ has come is to drink a fatal potion. In the New Covenant, we are not under Torah, but under grace; not under Moses, but under Christ (Rom. 6:14; Heb. 3:5-6). Torah's expiration date came in the “fullness of time;” Christ redeemed us from Torah and brought us into his kingdom (cf. Gal. 4).

This doesn't mean a totally different morality; indeed, Paul's new creation ethic is analogous to the ethic of Torah at point after point. However, it does mean morality has

been elevated to a new plane and in many ways takes on a new, cruciform shape that often seems to be only dimly present in the program of Torah. We live in union with the glorified Christ and in the sphere of the Spirit. These things were tasted only in a shadowy way in the old age. So covenant living has undergone transformation and the Judaizers haven't owned up to this. They're still in Adam and the old Israel -- in other words, in the flesh and under the curse.

## 8.

Even though Paul claims the new covenant community is no longer under "Torah," Paul can still appeal to various regulations of Torah from time to time, of course. The Torah is still the Word of God and still applicable. In this sense, it is entirely appropriate to follow the Westminster Confession in speaking of a "general equity" of the law of Moses. But now the Old Covenant law as a whole functions more as wisdom instruction than any kind of legal code. And reading it rightly (and especially making application) requires reading it through the lens of Christ's work. In short, Torah remains inspired Scripture for us (12 Tim. 3:16), but it is not our covenant any longer.

The Torah has undergone a transfiguration, a death and resurrection in Christ. This means typology is the key to reading Torah properly. Indeed, this is why the Pharisees read Torah and never found life -- they read it in a "flat" way rather than a Christocentric way, as prophecy about the gospel. So for Paul the Torah was a necessary chapter in the story of redemptive history, but it's also a chapter that is now closed. The things the church learned in that phase of her maturation should stay with her and continue to inform her in various ways, but we look to Christ, the fulfillment of Torah, not Torah itself, for our pattern of life. Grasping the meaning of Christ's story -- his life and death -- is the key to understanding the "logic" of Paul's otherwise seemingly haphazard use of the Torah in the church. The Torah foreshadowed the new age in strange and paradoxical ways (cf. Rom. 3:21ff; Heb. 10:1ff), but these paradoxes can only be unraveled when the Torah is looked at in the light of Christ.

## 9.

Think of the Torah as the church's kindergarten teacher. You've heard the saying, "Everything you need to know you learned in kindergarten." Well, in one sense that was true for the church. Everything she would need was present in seed form in the Mosaic instruction. For example, the system of uncleanness laws and Levitical washings typified death and resurrection in Christ through baptism (Rom. 6).

The problem with dispensationalism (especially in its more antinomian forms) is that it says, basically, everything the church learned in kindergarten she can now forget. God has started over with a completely different curriculum. Israel's story and the church's story are radically separated. Israel's 1500 year training course was all for naught as far as the church is concerned.



But some extreme versions of theonomy have the opposite problem. They suggest the church never really gets to graduate from kindergarten, that she just stays under the tutelage of the kindergarten teacher forever. This too is a distortion of the biblical narrative.

Neither of these approaches (dispensationalism or theonomy) fits with Paul's metaphor in Gal. 3-4. The church grows through history in a way analogous to a child maturing into adulthood. The lessons learned in the early part of life set the trajectory for the rest of life, but with greater age comes greater freedom, greater responsibility, and greater privilege. Thankfully, we have the Spirit to guide us in these things and help us continually internalize the lessons we learned in Sinai's classroom.

## 10.

I think Paul's contrast between the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants (e.g., Gal. 3-4) is only a relative contrast. There is no sharp law/promise (or law/gospel) dichotomy in Paul. Law and gospel, properly speaking are two phases in God's one plan of redemption.

After all, it is circumcision, a pre-Mosaic, Abrahamic ordinance that is at the center of the debate with the Judaizers. Abraham's faith was still old creation faith. True, it had an eschatological orientation, since Abraham was looking ahead to Jesus' day with joy (Jn. 8). It foreshadowed Christian faith and therefore Abraham is something of a type and exemplar for us. But it was still pre-eschatological. It belonged to the immature phase of covenant history. As Richard Hays has ably demonstrated, Abraham was a type of Christian believers; the eschatological anti-type is found in the new covenant community.

Paul is concerned in Gal. 3-4 to show, I think, how Christ has fulfilled *both* the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants, albeit in different ways. And of course, he also shows that the Torah stood in the way of the fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham since it fragmented the people of God rather than uniting them in one family (Gal. 3:20). (Think of the graded system of holiness: High Priest, priests, Levites, Israelites, God-fearers, all with different levels of access to God's presence).

Paul's overriding concern throughout is to show that those who are baptized and have the Spirit, whether Jew or Gentile, are the true members of the blessed eschatological family God promised Abraham. But in no way should the Abrahamic covenant simply be equated with the New Covenant. It too was a shadow of the good things to come.

Therefore Abraham and Moses must be read as chapters within a single covenant story. Each covenant head contributes something to the plot of the narrative, but not until Christ's death and resurrection does the story reach its climax. These are different but complementary chapters in the administration of the covenant of grace.

## 11.

As a sidenote, it is always worth pointing out why circumcision had to be abrogated in the new age. Remember the context in which circumcision was instituted: right after Abraham tried to produce the promised seed in his own strength with Hagar. The sequence of Gen. 15-16-17 is critical. God "weakens" the male organ of generation to remind Abraham that it is God's power, not his own, that will bring about the fulfillment of the promise. Circumcision is simply the male equivalent of female barrenness. It was a symbolic castration.

But now that God has provided the true promised seed, Jesus Christ, through the ultimate barren womb, that of a virgin, circumcision is obsolete. To go on circumcising (for covenantal purposes, of course) is a denial that Jesus is the promised seed. It's a denial that the new age has come. The irony is that while circumcision should have been a continual call to humility and self-abandoning trust, the Jews managed to turn it into its opposite – into a sign of Jewish pride and privilege. And so Paul rightly tells those who want to go on practicing covenantal circumcision to go the whole way and castrate themselves (Gal. 5:12).

## 12.

If circumcision (for covenantal purposes) is now a mutilation (Phil. 3:2; cf. Gal. 5:12), there is a great deal of irony involved. Since the castrated were excluded from priestly service under the Levitical order, Paul is saying the badge of inclusion in the covenant community has *now* become a mark of exclusion from the covenant community. Circumcision disqualifies, rather than qualifies, one for membership in the kingdom. As Garlington has said, circumcision is now an exit, not an entrance, ritual!

Similarly, if circumcision was a sign of Israel's fleshly inability to produce the promised seed of the woman, it is highly ironic it would become something Israel boasted about as a sign of her intrinsic superiority over the nations. If anything, circumcision should have humiliated Israel. (By analogy, imagine someone boasting he was so clean that he needed baptizing! Baptism, too, is humbling because it is a sign of God's promise and action, not our own. The only thing we bring to the font is spiritual dirt.)

## 13.

To better understand the temporary nature of Torah and Paul's critique of Torah, an analogy with the Temple might help. When Jesus clears the Temple (e.g., Mk. 11:15ff), he does so not only because it has become a den of robbers, but also because the old covenant system (Temple included) is now obsolete. In other words, Jesus has not only *ethical* reasons, but also *eschatological* reasons, for cleaning out the Temple and temporarily shutting down the sacrificial system. The stone temple is redundant now that the true temple has come. The animal sacrifices are unnecessary now that the true Lamb of God has arrived. This is precisely how Paul is dealing with the old Torah: in terms of inaugurated eschatology.

Paul's critique of the dietary laws works the same way. When Paul says Judaizers made their belly their god (Phil. 3:19), he is not saying they are guilty of over-eating. Rather, he is saying they've made Jewish dietary regulations into an idol. By keeping their citizenship in earthly Israel they have forfeited citizenship in the heavenly kingdom (3:20). Their allegiance to dietary observance has transcended their loyalty to God himself, and so they are excluded from his new age and new creation. Their religion is now no better than paganism (cf. Gal. 4:8ff) because it belongs to the old world order.

#### 14.

Perhaps we should attempt to synthesize some of these thoughts into a coherent "Pauline theology of Torah."

Consider all Frank Thielman's summary as typical of the direction that biblical-theological scholarship is moving:

1. The Mosaic law no longer regulates the lives of God's people.
2. A new "law" has taken its place.
3. The Mosaic law remain valid, but in a new way.

Taken from *The Law and the NT*, 176.

It is that "new way" that requires of us the difficult hermeneutical task of figuring out how old creation law applies in the new creation. As Theilamn says elsewhere in the same book, the law has to be "creatively appropriated in this new, eschatological situation" (182). He says the law continues to "offer guidance for the Christian community . . . but [it must be] reinterpreted through the eschatological lens of the gospel" (35).

Transformation of Torah is a pretty standard way of dealing with the Mosaic law in NT scholarship, today, both inside and outside NPP circles.

More extensively, N. T. Wright has summarized Paul's theology of law in a similar. This is my summary of Wright's summary, given in his unpublished 1980 dissertation on Romans. Though the dissertation is a bit dated, it still has his clearest statement and most succinct summary of the place of Torah in redemptive history. I really don't think he's changed his mind on this stuff; much of his Romans commentary rehashes material already in the dissertation. I don't have time to type out the full section, but this is the gist of it:

He says there have been three basic approaches to the law, loosely classified as Lutheran (Christ abolished the law), Reformed (Christ fulfills the law) and apocalyptic (Christ ushers in the Messianic age in which the law is transformed). [I'd call this third option eschatological, rather than apocalyptic]. Wright says his view hopes to incorporate the best of all 3 approaches, but is nearest to the last. Then he summarizes Paul's theology of the law in several propositions:

1. The law is and remains God's law, holy, just and good. It is not abolished, but established. This is the strength of the Reformed view. He says the Jews were right to rejoice in their possession of the law, and the law has now been transferred in *a new way* to the church. (This “new way” constitutes the new Torah of the church, the Torah of Christ. Interpreting and applying the old creation Torah to new creation situations is our hermeneutical challenge, though Paul’s epistles get us started on the project.)
2. The law was given only to Jews, whereas God's plan was to save a worldwide people. Therefore justification must be apart from the law, since otherwise this worldwide intention would be frustrated. This is fundamental to Rom. 3:21 and Paul's critique of the law in Galatians. While the law is good (see 1 above), it clearly had a secondary role in God's purposes.
3. The law reveals itself as a temporary phase in the purposes of God. The law ‘came in alongside’ into the sweep of God's purposes from Adam to Abraham to Christ (Rom. 5:20). Wright points out the temporal language in Gal. 3 (‘until,’ ‘no longer’). When Messiah comes, the law must go. Many attempts at unpacking Paul’s theology of the Torah try to turn it into a timeless system of ethics. While such a permanent rule of life does exist, that’s not what Paul means by “law” in Gal. 3.
4. Paradoxically, though the law itself is good, the role of the law from Moses to Christ is essentially negative: it condemns Israel so that the world might be saved. How so? How does the gracious law become an instrument of death and condemnation? The law binds Israel to Adam, revealing and magnifying her sinfulness. The law acts as a tutor, reminding Israel of her sin, showing that the law cannot be the way of salvation, and thus pointing forward to God's further purposes in the future. The law cannot save because it is weak through the flesh (Rom. 8:3) -- that is, because Israel is in Adam. The law's ministry of condemnation (2 Cor. 3) is part of God's larger plan to save the world precisely by the ‘casting away’ of Israel. This is the exact analogue to the saving death, under the curse of the law, of Israel's representative (Gal. 3:13). National righteousness, therefore, turns the law into a national mascot in order to avoid the scandal of the cross. The law, in various ways, therefore, witnesses to a righteousness that comes apart from the law and is, therefore, available worldwide (Rom. 3:21).
5. The death and resurrection of Christ ends the bondage, under the law, of the sons of God. To be ‘in Christ’ is to have escaped from Adam, from sin, from the flesh, and from the law. Rom. 10:4, then, has a double meaning:  
[A] In one sense the law belongs to the period between Sinai and Calvary, and on Calvary its work is complete. The cross takes away the Torah-established barriers between Jew and Gentile. It ends the period of time in which the law enslaved the people of God. In that sense the law is abolished.  
[B] Because the law revealed its own temporary nature, in another sense the law has been fulfilled. It pointed to the worldwide plan of salvation which God has now put into operation through Christ. In this sense, Christ is the goal of the law. Wright points out some subsidiary meanings of Rom. 10:4. For example, Christ condemns the abuse of the law as a charter of national privilege. He achieves the salvation which Torah pointed to

but could not effect. He fulfills the law by writing its righteous precepts on the hearts of his people.

[Note: The material on Rom. 10:4 is just not all that clear. He should've polished it up a bit more. It's hard to see how he's holding all this together, in the little comment he gives. His commentary is better on this verse, but there are still lingering questions.]

6. The Christian is characterized by the Spirit's work in giving faith, which is the writing of the law on the heart. This is the spiritual circumcision, the badge of membership in the new worldwide family of God.

7. The faith which thus fulfills the law is itself distinguished not only by its propositional content, but also by its accompanying way of life, which is also inspired by the Spirit. Thus, Christians fulfill "the requirements of the law as understood in the light of Christ. This is not say Christianity simply replaced one halakah with another, nor to undercut sola fide, but to do justice to Paul's multiple emphases."

End of summary.

Clearly, Wright is no antinomian. He believes the Christian way of life transcends the Torah in various ways (especially because it conforms to Christ's pattern of self-sacrificial love in the power of the Spirit), but the law shadowed these things and therefore can still be employed as an ethical guide, so long as we interpret it in light of Christ's work. Faith fulfills the law not only by believing the gospel, but also by living out the true, righteous intentions of the law.

Wright holds together the paradoxical nature of the law. It is a gracious gift that becomes the agent of sin and death. On the one hand the law is an administration of the covenant of grace. At the same time, it is used by God as a means of increasing and intensifying sin, focusing the problem of sin in one place (on Israel) so that Jesus can deal with it once and for all on the cross.

## 16.

The NPP has been accused of attacking the traditional Protestant doctrine of imputation. In particular, Wright's unwillingness to use the term "imputation" to describe the mechanism of justification has been one of the most troubling aspects of his work for many in the Reformed camp.

Part of the problem is the whole doctrine of the "imputation of Christ's active obedience" presupposes a meritorious covenant of works. But the covenant of works idea itself was a latecomer in Reformational theology, and never gained total acceptance. If the NPP theologians don't construct a covenant of works out of Gen. 1-2, they can hardly be faulted since many notable Reformed theologians have not either. In Wright's Romans commentary, he makes it plain he rejects merit theology altogether. I stand with him in that move.

That being said, allow me to speculate on why Wright does not use “imputation” language.<sup>2</sup> I think it is **first and foremost** for exegetical reasons. There is no passage which spells out the doctrine as such. Rom. 4:3-5, usually the linchpin in arguments for imputation, is no exception. There are several problems with reading Rom. 4:3-5 as teaching that Christ’s active obedience is imputed to believers.

First, that interpretation gets the meaning of *logizomai* wrong in the context. Its usage in 3:28 and 6:11 must mean “consider” or “regard,” not “impute.” In 4:8 (Ps. 32:2), it refers to someone’s personal sin not being regarded as his own; obviously, no transfer of sin from one person to another is in view. There is no reason to take it in any other sense in the rest of Rom. 4.

The “imputation of Christ’s active obedience” view also mishandles the background passage (Gen. 15:6) to Rom. 4:3-5 by ignoring the obvious fact that *Abraham’s faith*, not *Christ’s obedience*, is the subject of *logizomai* in the context. Throughout the passage it is “faith” God is “regarding,” not something Jesus has done. It is something in the believer (faith) that causes God to account him as righteous.

Thus, in Rom. 4, it is a real stretch to read “righteousness” as shorthand for the “active obedience of Christ.” Rather, in context, the believer is “regarded” as “righteous” by God, meaning he considers the believer a fit member of the covenant and therefore a proper recipient of the covenant promises.

True, God only regards believers righteous because their faith links them with The Righteous One, Jesus Christ. But in this chapter, Paul is only concerned with setting forth *the terms of true covenant membership* (faith in “him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead,” 4:24), over against those who insist on circumcision (cf. 4:11ff). He is arguing that Abraham’s New Covenant family is defined and demarcated by resurrection faith, not by Jewish identity badges. The proof of this interpretation is found in Rom. 4:1, which introduces the theme of membership in Abraham’s family, following on the heels of Paul’s thoughts in 3:28-29.

After exegesis, the **second big reason** Wright does not use “imputation” is theological. For Wright, union with Christ (what he calls “corporate Christology”) is central to Paul’s thought. He suggests justification presupposes union with Christ. If I am *in Christ*, he is my substitute and representative. All he suffered and accomplished was for me. All he has belongs to me.

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<sup>2</sup> To my knowledge, Wright only dismisses imputation language when dealing with justification and the active obedience of Christ. I have not seen him deny the imputation of Adam’s sin to his natural posterity or the imputation of Israel’s sins to Christ on the cross. I would assume he teases out “original sin” in terms of humanity’s original union with Adam, though he may not use imputation to describe the relationship. I doubt Wright will take a strong stance on any particular theory of the transmission of sin. Wright also claims that Jesus was Israel’s representative on the cross. Representation includes or presupposes notions of substitution and imputation.

With regards to justification, this means my right standing before the Father is grounded in Christ's own right standing before the Father. So long as I abide in Christ, I can no more come under the Father's negative judgment than Jesus himself can!

I have this assurance because Jesus died in my stead, taking the penalty my sins deserved to secure my forgiveness. On the third day, he was raised to life for my justification. His resurrection was his own justification, as the Father reversed the Jewish and Gentile death sentences passed against him. But it was the justification of all those who are in him as well. He was raised up *on the basis of* his flawless obedience to the Father. Death could not hold him because he was a righteous (sinless) man. His status is now my status.

This justification requires no extrinsic transfer. It does not force us to reify "righteousness" into something that can be shuffled around in heavenly accounting books. Rather, because I am *in* the Righteous One and the Vindicated One, I am righteous and vindicated. My in-Christ-ness makes imputation redundant. I do not need the moral content of his life of righteousness transferred to me; what I need is a share in the forensic verdict passed over him at the resurrection. Union with Christ is therefore the key.

Note well, this does not downplay the significance of the active obedience. Without it, Jesus' body would still be in the tomb. But to be precise, I am not justified by a legal transfer of his "obedience points" to my account. I am justified because the *status* he has as The Sinless One, and now as The Crucified and Vindicated One, has been bestowed upon me as well.

Allow me to illustrate. Suppose a woman is in deep, deep debt and has no means at her disposal to pay it off. Along comes an ultra wealthy prince charming. Out of grace and love, he decides to marry her. He covers her debt. But then he has a choice to make about how he will care for his bride. After canceling out her debt, will he fill up her account with his money? That is to say, will he transfer or impute his own funds into an account that bears her name? Or will he simply make his own account a joint account so it belongs to both of them?

In the former scenario, there is an imputation, a transfer. In the second scenario, the same final result is attained, but there is no imputation, strictly speaking. Rather, there is a real union, a marriage.

I would suggest the first picture (the imputation picture) is not necessarily wrong, though it could leave adherents exposed to the infamous "legal fiction" charge since the man could transfer money into the woman's account without ever marrying her or even caring for her. It could become, as Wright has said, "a cold piece of business."

The second picture (the union with Christ picture) seems more consistent with Paul's language, and for that matter, with many of Calvin's statements. It does not necessarily employ the "mechanism" of imputation to accomplish justification, but gets the same result. Just as one can get to four by adding three plus one or two plus two, or just as one

can get home by traveling Route A or by Route B, so there may be more than one way to conceive of the doctrine of justification in a manner that preserves its fully gracious and forensic character.

Thus, Wright (and others who emphasize union with Christ as the presupposition of justification, such as Galington and Gaffin) is not denying the forensic nature of justification. Nor are they suggesting that our merit plays any role in our justification. Nor are they denying the “great exchange”: namely, that on the cross Christ became what we were – sin – so that we might become what he is – the embodiment of God’s righteousness (cf. 2 Cor. 5:21). They uphold the *intention* of the doctrine of imputation and affirm everything imputation is designed to safeguard. But they cover the same ground in a different way.

Finally, **third**, I would surmise that somewhere in the background, Wright has ecumenical concerns that make the word “imputation” problematic. By refraining from using the term “imputation,” he opens the door a bit further to some kind of convergence with Rome and other traditions within Christendom. That’s not to say he’s willing to give up any real ground to Rome. He insists, after all, that justification is forensic and gracious. But I think he does see “getting back to the Bible” as the best hope of reuniting a fragmented church. We must stop insisting on extra-biblical formulations and slogans as conditions of fellowship. We must look at the substance of a doctrine, not merely its form of expression.

Wright points out in several contexts that no one is justified by assenting to the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Rather, we are justified by trusting in Christ. But if that is so, many people can be confused about the doctrine of justification and still wind up justified at the last day. It is our *faith* that unites us to Christ, not our doctrine and not our theological propositions, however important they may be. This does not lead in an anti-doctrinal direction; obviously, Wright is very concerned about getting even the details of Paul correct. But it does mean, as Wright says in his Romans commentary, that we must turn “justification by faith” into “fellowship by faith.” Justification is not only a doctrine to defend and fight for; it is a doctrine that ought to be used to unite the church. If we really believe justification is by faith and not by moral or intellectual performance, we should be forbearing, longsuffering, and quite forgiving towards those who can’t hammer out the details of the doctrine in the best possible way.

## 19.

The NPP has successfully brought to the fore the ecclesiological dimension of Paul’s thought and ministry. I hesitate to call this the “sociological” dimension of Pauline theology because for Paul the church is no merely human society. Rather, it is God’s new creation, the firstfruits of the reconciliation of all things in Christ (cf. Eph. 1:10, 2:11ff).

In other words, through the cross and resurrection God has established the promised new world order spoken of by the prophets. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, and the rest could point



to the co-joining of Jew and Gentile in the church's worshipping assemblies and say, "Yes! That's what we were talking about! That's what we were hoping God would do in the fullness of time." We underestimate the radical newness and importance of the union of Jew and Gentile believers in Christ. This is not merely a "sociological" event; it is internal to the gospel itself. It is the reversal of Babel's curse and the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham (Gen. 11-12).

Paul's unfolding argument in Galatians reveals this. Sometimes the argument in Galatians is treated as a rather "timeless" debate over grace vs. legalism. But on that approach, several large chunks of the letter get left on the cutting room floor. Such a reading cannot account for the eschatological thrust that opens and closes the letter (1:3f, 6:11ff), nor the large redemptive historical section in the middle (3:15-4:7).

But the ahistorical reading runs into other fundamental problems as well. What is the key issue back of the letter? The question that drives Paul's logic and fuels his passion in the letter is not Luther's question: "How can I find a gracious God?" That question needs answering, and Galatians can be used to answer it. But it's not the issue at hand and we best not project Luther's experience back into the Galatian situation. Beginning in 2:11ff, Paul is asking, "Who belongs at the communion table together?" In chapters 3 and 4, this question becomes "Who are Abraham's children?" In chapter 5, it becomes, "Who is in the Spirit?" And in chapter 6, it is "Who is in the new creation?"

The two answers vying in competition to each of these questions are not those given by Augustinians on the one hand and Pelagians on the other. The Judaizers were not claiming circumcision was a "meritorious" act that garnered God's favor. If that had been the issue, Paul's response would have taken considerably different (and simpler) shape.

Instead the problem, as we have already seen, is one of unrealized eschatology and a distorted ecclesiology. For Paul, the cross and resurrection mark the beginning of a new world. Those who are in Christ are no longer subject to the "present evil age," to its customs, patterns, and habits. In Christ, a new community has been formed in which priestly privileges have been distributed to all members equally.

In this new world, the Jew/Gentile distinction, manifested in the circumcised/uncircumcised distinction, is irrelevant. Believers have been given a new life pattern, revealed by Christ and empowered by the Spirit. The covenant community has been reconfigured.

In 2:11ff Peter abandons the gospel precisely by falling back into the norms and rituals of the old aeon. He forsakes table fellowship with the uncircumcised. He confines the circle of grace to the circle of Judaism. He limits the sphere of covenant blessing to Israel. He lives as if the old Torah-erected barriers were still in place. But in so doing, he is implicitly denying that Jesus is the Messiah and that his death put the old world order to death. He is implicitly denying the good *news* of the gospel by excluding Gentiles from his table.

How does Paul answer this crisis? With an appeal to the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Justification comes to *believers*, not *Jews*. All the justified belong at the same table because they share the same status. Remember, eating together has covenantal significance in the Scriptures. To share a table was to enter into or renew a deep covenant bond. Peter's actions were an attempt to exclude Gentiles from God's table, and therefore from God's covenant. In reality, Peter excluded himself.

Therefore, justification has to do not only with the vertical (our relationship to God), but also the horizontal (our relationship to other covenant members). If we have been accepted by God in Christ, we must welcome and accept other members of his family as our brothers and sisters as well. So, Wright is right: justification is (or at least should be) the great ecumenical doctrine. Justification addresses not just "soteriological" concerns, but "ecclesial" concerns as well.

One final thought: in my reading of Galatians (influenced by the likes of Witherington and Garlington), I have concluded that the epistle's central theme is not justification *per se*. In fact, there are not all that many references to justification, and in terms of sheer space, more verses are devoted to Paul's apostolic autobiography (chapters 1-2) and to living in Christian freedom (chapters 5-6) than to justification. But I would not say that the letter is about "getting in" or "staying in" either, as some NPP theologians suggest. If anything, its central theme is apostasy – that is, how to *not* get "kicked out" of the new Abrahamic family. Those who seek to supplement Christ with something else have fallen out of the circle of covenant union and communion. The letter, much like Hebrews and Revelation, is a sustained call to persevere, to press on in Christ without looking back to Moses. In Galatians perseverance manifests itself in continual fellowship with the rest of God's people; apostasy manifests itself in division and schism.

If the letter is not about "getting in" or "staying in," but the dangers of "falling out," then a whole host of practical implications can be drawn from Galatians that are often missed. Paul teaches that there is a real apostasy – if the Galatians go back to Moses, it does not prove they "never really were Christians to begin with." Rather, it shows that they have fallen from grace (5:4). But the "fall" presupposes they were once standing in grace. Paul acknowledges the Galatians started well; but to start well is not to end well, unless one continues running in the Spirit (Gal. 3:1ff).

Their flirtation with the Mosaic covenant shows they are not living according to the good beginning they made when they heard the Word preached: They began in the power of the Spirit but are now trying to complete their salvation in the strength of the flesh (3:1ff). It shows they have become estranged and alienated from Christ (5:4). And so on. Galatians, as much as anything else, is a call to *faithfulness* – to abiding, persevering faith in Christ alone for salvation, dwelling in communion with God's family.

Stendahl's thesis regarding the introspective conscience in the West has some truth to it. No doubt, Western introspectionism has been read back into Paul. Paul's claim to blamelessness in Phil. 3 and elsewhere has to be taken seriously. Insofar as there was a righteousness to be had in the law, Paul attained it, at least from one angle. Acknowledging that is critical to understanding one of Paul's vital subpoints in the epistle to the Philippians.

In chapter 2, Paul uses Christ as a model. The Messiah forsook privileges that were his. He forfeited rights he could have claimed. He gave himself willingly for others.

At the beginning of chapter 3, Paul presents himself as a parallel case. He had privileges and rights under Judaism. But now he has given them up for the sake of the gospel. (Only if he had a "real" righteousness under the law in some way could he have renounced it.)

Now he calls on the Philippians to do the same with their rights and privileges as citizens of Rome. Philippi prided herself in being a colony of Rome. But Paul admonishes them to sit loose to their imperial privileges, remembering that their true citizenship is in heaven (3:20). They should be willing to renounce and forgo those rights privileges for the sake of the gospel and their fellow Christians, if need be.

## 21.

Should we affirm the imputation of Christ's active obedience? Yes and no.

Yes, in that, by virtue of our union with Christ, all that is true of him is now true of us. His perfect record of serving God belongs to us, just as his death and resurrection do.

However, the imputation of the active obedience formula, as it has come to be used, leaves a lot to be desired, in terms of both exegesis and theology. It misunderstands the function of the law/Torah in the economy of redemption, and, by generally down playing the significance of the resurrection, it de-eschatologizes the doctrine of justification. If you read WCF 11 all on its own, you could easily conclude the resurrection is of no soteric significance and that we could in fact be justified by a dead Christ. That's not right, per Rom. 4:25. Plus, as Garlington and others have argued, obedience can only maintain an old order; it cannot bring in a new creation (cf. Lev. 18:5). For the eschatological time table to advance, there must be a death and resurrection. Thus, Paul says that eschatological life and righteousness could not come through the law (Gal. 3). History only rolls forward into the new age when Jesus puts the law to death at the cross and rises again on the third day.

Also up for grabs is the meaning of the word "imputation" itself, in Scripture and in our theological discourse. Is it an extrinsic transfer of righteousness, or is it how we are regarded by God in virtue of union with our covenantal head? The former has become standard, but the latter coheres better with Calvin and especially Paul. The issue is how God regards those who are in Christ.

In saying these things, I admit to (a mild) reconfiguring the doctrine of justification in a way that gives union with Christ and the resurrection greater prominence than the “standard” view. The problem is that many in the present controversy seem to believe there is “only right way” to express these things. I still have not seen them actually demonstrate why the “union with the risen Christ” view that I’ve sketched out is somehow deficient. I can see people making an argument that it’s different, but not that it’s defective.

## 22.

Those who link Wright to Rome seem to be misunderstanding things. Wright’s doctrine of justification may not be exactly Protestant, but it isn’t Romish either. After all, he affirms that justification is a forensic declaration. He insists that it is not to be confused with calling or conversion, much less sanctification. Whatever problems their may be with Wright, this is barking up the wrong tree.

## 23.

Final justification is nothing other than salvation in consummated form. The shape the final verdict takes is not only “Well done, good and faithful servant,” but also “Come, blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you.” As has been argued here and in Wright and elsewhere, the final form of justification is resurrection into glory.

Thus, works are not *merely* evidential, nor do they function in an evidentiary way *extrinsic* to our union with Christ. Or to put it another way, it’s not as though salvation is one thing and evidence of salvation another; salvation includes evidence within itself.

In other words, we can say that obedient human life is the final goal towards which salvation is moving. Redemption, after all, is just the restoration of humanity to its true humanness and sonship in the Son, Jesus Christ. Thus the final verdict passed over the whole of our lives and the consummation of our salvation in the resurrection, are fully identical.

## 24.

My relatively unqualified support and endorsement of N. T. Wright throughout these “miscellanies” should not be misunderstood. I do not think Wright is above critique. He is wrong at many points, and often his Reformed critics have a legitimate beef with his writing. I disagree with Wright on the issue on women’s ordination to the priesthood; I wish he would more forthrightly affirm God’s sovereignty and the inspiration and inerrancy of the canonical autographa; and so on. In particular, here I want to offer criticisms of some of his more unguarded statements about justification.

In an online debate sponsored by SPCK, Wright had the following interchange with an (obviously Reformed) interlocutor:

Q: Your exposition of justification per Paul and the Covenant makes much sense. Given your understanding of justification in the theology of Paul, what room is there for the historic definitions of justification as set forth in the Westminster Confession and catechisms?

A: I don't have the Westminster Confession and Catechisms to hand (despite sitting here in Westminster) but I think I know what you mean. The historic definitions of justification assumed that the word `justification' (shortened hereafter to jn) means `the event of process whereby someone becomes a Christian'. In other words, it appears as a synonym for `conversion' or near equivalent. I don't believe that that is actually how Paul uses it. When Paul talks about jn he is referring to God's declaration that someone is within the forgiven covenant family -- a declaration that will be made on the last day according to the whole life lived (Rom 2.1-16), which future declaration is anticipated in the present on the basis of faith alone (3.21-31).

But when the question is raised, how does someone get in to this family, -- the question the Westm. Conf. and Catech. was asking, as with much reformation thought -- the answer must of course be that it's God's action through Christ and the Spirit, to which the human being concerned simply responds in faith. Indeed, according to Paul (Eph 2.8-10) the faith itself is `the gift of God' -- a mind-boggling idea but he is quite consistent. So the emphasis on grace and faith is exactly right, granted the question they were intending to ask.

Much more to say about this but no space here -- sorry!

Q: Thank you. What I have in mind in particular is the reformed definition of jn as "An act of God's free grace whereby a sinner is pardoned of all his sin and accepted as righteous in God's sight only for the righteousness of Christ, imputed to him and received by faith alone." As I read you, there is room for this precise definition under the bigger heading of Paul's position that jn involves one's being received into the covenant family, the family of Abraham. As you say, a commentary upon where one is and not how one gets there.

I look for this clarification as I try to understand why in the world so many Reformed men are so overwrought about what you are saying, or what they think you are saying (or not saying). It appears that they think you are abandoning, denying or wrongly modifying the historic formulations. For the life of me I cannot see the warrant for their concerns. Should I?

A: Still a huge question, let me try again. I too am somewhat puzzled by the storm in reformed circles . . . I haven't published a major book in this area, after all. Nor do I agree with Ed Sanders all down the line; the `New Perspective' on Paul is a very mixed bag of people, and I'm quite different from some of them!

The imputed righteousness thing is a problem because, though I know exactly what job that is doing within Reformed thought, I simply don't find it in Paul. 2 Corinthians 5.21 simply doesn't mean that (see the relevant section of my book *What St Paul Really Said*). Nor does 1 Cor 1.30f. The trouble is that I take every syllable of what Paul said very, very seriously, whereas the Reformed confessions were making their best shot while not always being on top of the exegesis . . . a huge claim I know, but I am prepared (though not here, obviously) to back it up. I claim the high ground: my aim is to be faithful to what St Paul actually said, as opposed to what any and every tradition, whether catholic, protestant, reformed, charismatic or whatever, tells me he said. I continue to find Paul totally stimulating, exciting and fascinating, which is more than I can say for any creed or confessional formula.<sup>3</sup>

Granted, this was an online debate in which Wright answered more tersely than perhaps he would have liked. Ultimately, Wright should be judged by his more polished published works. Still, I have admit these two paragraphs are the most confused and convoluted of any I've read by Wright, and it's only fair to offer a few criticisms. I have at least five problems with Wright's off-the-cuff remarks.

1. Wright says the historic Reformed definition of justification treats it as a synonym of "conversion." I don't know how or where he gets that, though the mistake is repeated in his commentary on Romans (481). Maybe in some evangelical circles that's been true, but not in Reformed circles and certainly not in the WCF. I've never known any Reformed theologian or preacher who has treated justification as "the event or process whereby someone becomes a Christian." When someone becomes a Christian, he is justified, but justification doesn't *make* him a Christian. Any standard *ordo salutis* treatment bears this out. Conversion (faith + repentance), that is, *becoming* a Christian, is distinguished conceptually from justification, which happens as an immediate *consequence* of becoming a Christian. So to say justification isn't about "getting in" is really beside the point. No one has claimed that, anyway. We get in by faith/baptism, which in turn serve as "instruments" (for lack of a better term) of justification. But I do think initial justification is more closely tied in to "getting in" than Wright has allowed, as I'll demonstrate below.

2. To say justification is God's declaration that someone is *already* in the sin-forgiven family also seems to miss the mark. I don't think that's precisely how Paul uses the language. All the justified are in the sin-forgiven family, to be sure. But Wright's language can be improved upon here, even if ever so slightly. Justification itself does not seem to be the term Paul uses to describe the transfer from one family to another -- Wright is correct there. Rather, justification describes one's status/standing as a covenant member. (If anything, regeneration and adoption fit better as terms to describe the transfer.) Initial justification is coordinated with "getting in," e.g. we are justified at the

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<sup>3</sup> These questions and answers are taken from an online web debate available at <http://www.spckonlinedebate.org.uk/viewtopic.php?topic=17&forum=1&3>. I have slightly corrected some of the grammar.

same moment we enter covenant with God through Christ. But justification per se is more about our status in the sin-forgiven covenant family than anything else. Justification does function in an ecclesial context, as I've already claimed, particularly in places like the end of Rom. 3 and Gal. 2, but that doesn't make the doctrine "ecclesiological" *rather than* "soteriological" since both those contexts also have in view soteriology as well as the definition of the covenant community. It needs to be stressed -- far more clearly than Wright typically does -- that ecclesiology and soteriology are of a piece precisely because the church is the saved community (Acts 2:47, etc.). But justification itself *is* soteric -- it includes deliverance from the penalty (Rom. 3:23ff) and power (Rom. 6:7) of sin. So I am at least sympathetic with Wright's critics who think he too easily relegates the soteric side of justification to the background (though he never denies it altogether!). Justification is not simply the declaration that we are *already* forgiven -- it is the declaration of forgiveness itself, and so the WSC answer (cited by the questioner) can be affirmed as far as it goes. Justification must be understood as an effectual, forensic declaration.

3. Wright's critique of the classical Reformed view of imputation centers only on the imputation of Christ's active obedience. I agree that the texts he cites (1 Cor. 1:30, 2 Cor. 5:21) do not teach (in any explicit way) the imputation of Christ's active obedience. Wright also makes this point on pages 470 and 529 of his Romans commentary. But I think Wright fails to realize that there is more to the Reformed doctrine of justification than that, and that his own position overlaps considerably with the traditional Reformed doctrine. Thus, he puts down the Reformed confessions unnecessarily. Wright's own formulations require some kind of imputation (whatever the language he might use) of Adam's sin to all his posterity in union with him,<sup>4</sup> as well as some kind of imputation of our sin to Christ as our covenant head.<sup>5</sup> Wright affirms the substitutionary, vicarious, and penal nature of the atonement, and explicitly claims Christ is our representative sin-bearer, whose death propitiated God's wrath. All that is to say, I think Wright too quickly marginalizes the *language* of imputation, though he can't really escape the *concept* in the end. Where the imputationists go beyond biblical warrant -- in my opinion as well as Wright's -- is in insisting that the 30 or so years of Christ's active obedience is imputed to believers. But certainly that was not the teaching of the early Reformers or even the WCF. Insofar as Wright's rejection of imputation focuses on the "active obedience" doctrine, he is not moving outside classical Reformed theology. But insofar as his critics are simply looking for the *word* "imputation" without considering the actual

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<sup>4</sup> For Wright's doctrine of original sin, see his commentary on Romans 5:12. While his exegesis is very cautious, he affirms the historicity of the Adamic fall narrative and its cosmic consequences. He insists that sin, and therefore death, spreads through the human race from Adam. He does not espouse any particular theory of transmission, but Reformed theologians have never agreed among themselves on this particular point.

<sup>5</sup> See Wright's commentary on Romans, 578-9. He speaks of there of Messiah representing his people so that their sin is condemned in his death and his death is counted as theirs. He says sin was heaped up onto Israel, and then upon Israel's true representative, the Messiah, in order that it might be dealt with at the cross once and for all. Wright would rather speak of "union with Christ" than imputation, in part, I suppose, because that is Paul's usual language. Wright affirms the "great exchange" of the cross -- Jesus took upon our status as condemned criminals in God's lawcourt that we might receive Christ's status as the manifestation and embodiment of God's covenant faithfulness (2 Cor. 5:21).

*content* of his doctrine, their criticisms miss the mark.

4. A full-orbed baptismal theology ties a lot of this together. In baptism we are regenerated and adopted.<sup>6</sup> It is the sacrament of initiation -- of "getting in," of "transfer from one family to another." It is also the sacrament of priestly ordination -- of enrollment into the royal priesthood of the new covenant. But it is also the sacrament of justification -- in baptism, initial justification/forgiveness is received (Acts 2:32). Baptism brings together justification and entrance into the covenant family, coordinating them in a single ritual. So Wright seems to be drawing an artificial line in arguing that justification is not about "getting in" but about the fact that you are *already* in. As has already been discussed, Gal. 2 *applies* justification to a particular ecclesiological problem, and so the doctrine of justification has (an oft overlooked) ecclesial aspect. In Gal., Paul is wrestling with matters of table fellowship and the definition of the people of God. Similarly, at the end of Rom. 3, Paul argues that if justification is by faith, then the boundary markers of the new community -- the signs that mark out the covenant people -- cannot be derived from Torah, for that would limit the blessing of forgiveness and covenant membership to the Jews. Clearly Paul feels free to use justification to protect the status and rights of Gentile believers in the church. But *soteric concerns are never excised from the discussion*. In fact that's the whole point: how is the *saved* community demarcated? How are the saved people rescued from sin? Justification does not put us in the family -- that is the function of faith and baptism -- but it does more than simply *declare* that we are in. Justification is the forgiveness of sins and the bestowal of righteousness; it is our deliverance from what we deserve; it is our legal standing in the covenant family.

5. Wright is to be commended for taking Scripture so seriously, but not all Reformed theologians imprison Scripture in a confessional box as he suggests. Wright's criticisms of other (usually unnamed) theologians are far too vague and undefined to do much good. A major problem with the NPP is its lack of scholarship in the area of historical theology, particularly sixteenth century theology. I wonder how many of the leading NPP scholars have actually read Calvin, Luther, Bucer, Knox, Cranmer, etc., instead of simply relying on second hand summaries picked up in graduate school? How many of them have really studied the Reformed confessions and understand their theological categories from the "inside"? Part of the problem here is the specialization of modern academia. It is impossible to be an expert in everything. It is near impossible to master Second Temple Judaism, Pauline theology, and sixteenth century Protestantism. We are victims of our own knowledge base. It may be some time before a scholar comes along who can master the field NPP scholars spend most of their time in, as well as Reformational studies, and put it all together for us in a coherent package that will keep both New Testament academics and pastors in Reformational-confessional churches satisfied. Of the making of books, there is no end . . .

So Wright's formulations can be improved upon, and he is not nearly as iconoclastic as he (sometimes) wants to be or thinks he is. He has not always understood the tradition he

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<sup>6</sup> I have a specific form of baptismal regeneration in mind. See the baptismal essays available at [http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/cat\\_sacraments.htm](http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/cat_sacraments.htm).



is critiquing. But his critics are often guilty of reading him unsympathetically, and therefore of creating unnecessary problems of their own. I wish the critics would at least note that Wright affirms the Reformers and the Reformed confessions answer correctly the questions they pose – even though those questions were not necessarily Paul’s own peculiar questions. Nevertheless, I admit the critics do have some valid concerns with the way Wright occasionally phrases things and with his knowledge of historical (Reformational) theology. I am not an N. T. Wright “groupie” who has been “swept away” by a clever theologian with a British accent. I believe the Reformed church has much to learn from Wright, but I daresay he could learn a thing or two from the Reformed as well.

## 25.

I have already suggested that Paul contrast between “works of the law” and “faith in Jesus Christ” is an eschatological contrast. This does *not* mean that it is *not* soteriological. After all, salvation itself is an eschatological category. But it does the contrast partakes of the redemptive-historical shift from old covenant to new.

Further proof of this is found if we look at what Paul does *not* say. For example, Paul never pits faith against “obedience,” or against love for God and neighbor. Faith is contrasted specifically with the law – that is, the Torah – because Paul has in view two redemptive historical ages. This is very clear in Gal. 3. Paul speaks in temporal categories about the law – when it was given, when it expired. But he also speaks of faith *coming* when Christ came. The period of law and the period of faith, in other words, can be laid end to end.

This does not mean there was no faith in the B. C. period of history. Nor does it mean the Old Covenant people were supposed to earn their own salvation apart from faith. Rather, Paul is speaking of what most characteristically defined the people of God in each age. The Old Covenant required faith, but that faith expressed itself specifically in keeping the requirements of the Jewish law. The law confined certain blessings and privileges to those who were under its yoke as a way of life. The New Covenant requires obedience to law – specifically the law of Christ – but that obedience has its source in Christ-focused faith and the Spirit of Christ.

## 26.

Somehow Norman Shepherd has gotten mixed into Reformed critiques of the NPP.<sup>7</sup> This is odd because [a] Shepherd confesses to be rather unfamiliar with NPP literature, including its treatment of Second Temple Judaism; and because [b] his exegesis of Paul is basically traditional (however much his critics might want to dispute that point). Perhaps he has been lumped in with the likes of Wright and Dunn because some in the Reformed camp have found his doctrine of justification to be equally troubling, though they usually pay little attention to what he’s actually written and said. This is not the place for an

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<sup>7</sup> My discussion of Shepherd here is based on private conversations, his October 2003 Auburn Avenue lectures, his book *Call of Grace*, and various other writings.

extended defense of Shepherd's orthodoxy (for that consult my [hopefully] forthcoming essay, "A Wolf in Shepherd's Clothing?"), but I will offer a few thoughts. (Please keep in mind that Shepherd's views have never been judged heretical by any Reformed church court. He should not be held responsible for my feeble attempts to articulate his views. Unavoidably, I have mixed in many of my own thoughts.)

First of all, Shepherd does not believe there is a merit theology in the Bible. He rejects any notion of a meritorious covenant of works with the first or Last Adams. For Shepherd, the covenant is not a contract but a loving, familial bond of mutual promise and obligation. God never offered man a Pelagian plan of salvation, even hypothetically. Along with Calvin, Shepherd would've been happy if the scholastics had never introduced the word "merit" into theological discourse (cf. *Institutes*, III.15.2). It is a dangerous and unscriptural category, and wreaks havoc wherever it shows up. It's not even clear what merit is supposed to mean, and those who advocate a merit theology do not agree amongst themselves what the term means.

Since Shepherd despises merit and does not believe it is possible, even hypothetically, he should never be accused of teaching that good works justify us *meritoriously*. Those who have accused Shepherd of legalism in this sense are simply speaking a different theological language, very likely because they are imposing their "meritorious covenant of works" paradigm on him, rather than understanding his doctrine on its own terms.

In line with the Reformational reading of the NT and against the NPP, Shepherd *does* believe the Jews had twisted God's gracious law into a legalistic system of merit. Shepherd simply does not agree with the NPP's assessment of Second Temple Judaism and therefore cannot be regarded as a NP scholar in any real sense. He is not part of the "Sanders' revolution" and is not riding on the "Sanders-Dunn" trajectory. He thinks Jews were seeking to earn a wage from God by doing good works apart from faith. He believes Paul is critiquing a form of proto-Pelagianism in several passages. He really couldn't be any more in step with the anti-Romish, sixteenth century reading of Paul on this particular point. He is not afraid to draw parallels and analogies between the Jewish opponents of Paul and the Roman Catholic opponents of Luther and Calvin.

However, he *is* in line with *some* of the most important insights of the NPP. For example, he agrees with the NP's understanding of Paul's critique of the law, at least to some extent. While Shepherd would say that Paul is critiquing Jewish abuse of the law, he also believes embedded in his challenge to legalism is an eschatological critique of the law (see, e.g., *Call of Grace*, 54ff). Paul did not deprecate "works of the law" simply because they were meritorious attempts at self-salvation (though Shepherd does believe that); rather "works of the law" are defective also because they belong to the old age and are therefore sub-eschatological, falling short of the "new obedience" called for and called forth by the gospel of Christ. Paul is arguing that Jews who remain within the perimeter of Torah possess no special edge over the Gentiles in the matter of salvation. In fact, by stubbornly clinging to Torah instead of submitting to the terms of the New Covenant, they have failed to keep pace with the believing Gentiles, who have raced ahead of them into the Messianic eschaton (Rom. 10).

Shepherd has said that “justification by works of the law” is rejected by Paul because it would limit justification to the Jews. If justification is by works of the law, then Gentiles are excluded. Like the best NPP scholars, Shepherd cites Rom. 3:27ff to prove that Paul’s rejection of Torah is predicated on a rejection of Jewish exclusivism. So whether he puts it in NP language or not, he believes justification is an intrinsically social and ecclesial doctrine. Without being a devotee of the NPP, Shepherd brings together many traditional and NPP themes.

Again, with the best of the NPP and the Protestant tradition, he says “works of the law” cannot be limited to ceremonial regulations, but includes the Torah as a totality, as a holistic way of life. We no longer serve God under the old, obsolete Mosaic system and to cling to it as if it were still operative is to deny the gospel in its fullness and turn Torah into an idol. Shepherd agrees with the NPP “two ages” understanding of Paul’s statement that we are not “under Torah but under grace.” The law/grace juxtaposition is redemptive-historical.

Like the NPP, especially Wright, Shepherd is willing to speak of several “tenses” of justification. Shepherd teaches that future justification is according to works. Final justification is *to the (faithful) doers of the law* (Rom. 2:1ff) and *by those good works which make faith complete* (Jas. 2:14ff). Justification will not be fully realized until the resurrection. In fact, Shepherd points out that the main reason justification comes up at all in the Scriptures is because someday we will all stand before God’s judgment seat and answer for our deeds done in the body. This makes the question of justification the most practical question of all.

Shepherd argues that in James 2, “justification” cannot be referring to a *demonstration* of justification, e.g., justification does and cannot mean something like “show to be justified.” Rather, James has in view the same kind of justification as Paul – forensic, soteric justification. Good works justify *persons* in James 2, not *faith* or one’s *status* as a justified sinner. James is not telling his readers how to “justify their justification” or how to “give evidence of a true and lively faith.”<sup>8</sup> Instead he says their *persons* will *not* be justified by faith alone, but *also* by good works of obedience they have done. The use of the preposition “by” is important since it indicates a sort of dual instrumentality in justification. In other words, in some sense, James is speaking of a justification in which faith and works *combine together* to justify.<sup>9</sup> This is right in line with the emphasis of the

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<sup>8</sup> Granted, in James 2:18-21, he speaks of the evidential value of works – they *show* or *prove* the reality of our faith. But when James actually speaks of justification, he has persons in view (e.g., Abraham, Rahab), not their faith.

<sup>9</sup> This is not a denial of *sola fide* or WCF 11.2 (“faith is the alone instrument . . .”). For one thing, when Paul points to faith as the unique receptor of justifying righteousness, he is speaking of initial justification. But it is indisputable that the biblical data on final justification brings works into the picture. Faith is *always* the sole instrument of justification in that faith alone lays hold of Christ. Works cannot lay hold of anything. But faith’s unique role in justification does not exclude other instruments functioning *in other senses*. Thus, works can become instrumental means (or “inferior causes”) in a different sense, as Calvin pointed out. Similarly, in some sense, baptism is an instrument of justification since in the sacraments Christ is applied to the believer and the believer is not justified until that application takes place (cf. WCF

NPP on future justification according to one's life pattern. Neither Shepherd nor the NPP believe these works to be meritorious, but they are necessary. There is congruence between the life we live and the destiny we will receive.

To unpack this a bit further, we can reconcile Paul and James by taking into account the factor of time. (I have not seen Shepherd make this move, but I think he'd approve.) Initial justification – the pole the Reformers focused on in their disputes with Rome – is by faith alone. Hence *sola fide* must stand unchallenged. Final justification, however, is according to works. This pole of justification takes into account the entirety of our lives – the obedience we've performed, the sins we've committed, the confession and repentance we've done. At the last day, our works will not have any meritorious value. In that sense, even before the great white judgment throne, we will plead nothing but the blood and resurrection of Jesus. We will place no confidence in anything we have done – even what God has done in us and through us! Nevertheless, God's verdict over us will be in accord with, and therefore in some sense based upon, the life we have lived. Those who have done good (as a life pattern) and those who have done evil (as a life pattern) will be judged accordingly (cf. Jn. 5:29-30). Our profession of faith and our life's work must match.

So Shepherd affirms many of the best NPP insights, without entering the loop of the NPP itself. Shepherd's work should be regarded as independent confirmation that [a] the NPP is not at odds with traditional Reformed theology, since Shepherd is a traditional Reformed theologian whose work overlaps considerably with the NPP; and [b] the NPP is quite possibly on to something since other scholars with high regard for Scripture, but moving in different academic circles, are reaching analogous conclusions. (Similar observations can be made from the ministry of Steve Schlissel, who did a lot of work on the issue of Gentile inclusion and justification before reading the NPP materials. He demonstrates exegetically that Paul uses the doctrine of justification to address the issue of Jew-Gentile solidarity in the church. Schlissel provides independent confirmation of justification's ecclesial significance.)

## 27.

As many have pointed out, one problem with the NPP is that it treats Lutheranism as normative of Protestantism as a whole. For example, when the NPP contrast its redemptive-historical approach to Paul with a strict law/gospel dichotomy reading of Paul, the NPP is actually siding with the best of Reformed theology over against Lutheranism. I would suggest one reason the NPP is so controversial in Reformed circles is because so many Reformed theologians have bought into the *Lutheran* law/gospel antithesis, rather than the covenant theology of Calvin. (I know Calvin paid lip service to a strict law/gospel dichotomy as well, but it wasn't normative for his theology as a whole as it was for the Lutherans. Calvin viewed the Mosaic law as a gift of grace, not a hypothetical covenant of works.)

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11.4 and WSC 92). Frankly, we just don't have the theological vocabulary at this point to do full justice to the richness of Scripture's teaching, so some sloppiness is unavoidable.

The NPP is not really much of a threat to traditional Reformed theology (though it does require some exegetical modifications). However, it should scare Lutherans to death. Wright's work is very compatible with a Reformed worldview, but confessional Lutherans (and Lutheranized Reformed folk) will find it very difficult to appropriate any of his insights. They have turned the law/gospel dichotomy into a totalizing hermeneutic rather than seeing the law as an administration of the covenant of grace for that period of history.

## 28.

The Bible clearly teaches that future judgment will be according to works. This was a common presupposition among Paul and his Jewish opponents. But how is this final judgment to be understood?

Clearly, our works can never have any meritorious value. If God were to judge us according to strict justice, everyone would be condemned.

But the Bible nowhere says God will apply absolute justice at the last day. So why do we make that assumption? The only places where God enforces strict justice are the cross and hell. For the covenant people, at least, it seems God will use "fatherly justice" in the final judgment, not "absolute justice." He will judge us the way parents evaluate their child's art work, or the way a new husband assesses the dinner his beloved wife has made. The standard will be soft and generous because God is merciful. Our works will not have *merit* before God, but they will *worth* precisely because of the covenant relationship we are in. (Compare this notion to those passages in Scripture which claim a particular saint is righteous, or has kept the law, or has done good, e.g., Jn. 5:29, Lk. 1:6, Ps. 7:8, Acts 13:22, etc. These examples show the kind of "soft" evaluation God makes of his people – and the kind of evaluation they should make of themselves and other covenant members. Even David, for all his sin and folly, is regarded as a doer of the law in the Rom. 2:13 sense; cf. 1 Ki. 15:5.)

This is why judgment according to works is not something that undermines Christian confidence. We can have assurance because we are *in Christ*, and the *Father* will not evaluate us apart from him. Union with Christ and familial love form the lens through which the Father looks upon us and our works. We are appraised as sons and daughters, not as servants or slaves.

We can also rest assured that God will not judge us apart from our faith. Judgment according to works *includes* an evaluation of our faith. Good works, after all, are just the heart and soul of genuine faith. Faith itself is always an active; it is always active, even when its principle act is to receive and rest upon Christ. As Luther put it, "faith is a busy thing." In other words, *faith is as faith does*. Faith is either dead or alive. A dead faith does not justify (Jas. 2). A living faith shows itself in works. Thus, we are justified only by a living faith.

All that is to say: A judgment about works is really a judgment about faith, and vice versa. For example, it is not eisegesis to assume that the doers of the law in Rom. 2 are those who have demonstrated the “obedience of faith,” not those who have scored 100% on a moral exam. For Paul, as for James and the entire OT, there is no sharp divide between faith and its fruit. Faith and obedience are integrated into a holistic response to God’s covenant grace. God is not looking for perfection from his people; rather he desires a core commitment of loyalty that overshadows everything else we do, no matter how badly we may fail from time to time.

We have a number of false presuppositions that keep us from dealing with this issue the way we ought. The mistaken assumptions make rather simple texts (e.g., Rom. 2 and Jas. 2) very opaque. Our framework of “absolute justice” rather than “familial love” taints our reading of key passages. We need to clear up our thinking and get back to the Bible. We need to reframe our understanding of the last judgment in covenantal terms.

## 29.

Wright has drawn criticism because he says justification is a covenantal doctrine – that is to say, it functions on the horizontal axis of human fellowship and community. This is a standard feature of the NPP.

But Wright never denies that justification also functions vertically, in terms of our relationship with God. If Wright focuses more on the horizontal than the vertical, perhaps it is to counterbalance the Protestant tradition, which has leaned hard to the vertical, often excluding horizontal considerations altogether. Wright’s corporate concerns are a necessary antidote to centuries of working exclusively with individualistic soteriologies.

I have been told by numerous critics of Wright that for him “salvation is just a matter of belonging to the right group.” Wright is then viewed the same way a nominal Roman Catholic would be, who simply counts on his church membership to save him apart from any genuine faith, loyalty, or obedience towards God.

But the evidence simply doesn’t warrant the critique.

First, reflect on the nature of Second Temple Judaism. Many Jews believed in salvation “by being a part of the right group.” Consider passages such as Mt. 3, Jn. 8, and Phil 3. But even then covenant membership could not be conceived of apart from some sort of fidelity on the part of the people. That’s what the Pharisees were all about, after all – showing loyalty to God by keeping their intensified version of Torah (that is, the Torah interpreted in light of and supplemented by the oral tradition of the rabbis). So even before Saul became Paul on the Damascus Road, the idea of salvation “by group membership alone” would have been repugnant.

Plus, ancient Jews believed that “group membership” in Israel was soteric not because of the group itself, but because of God’s election and covenant. That’s the essence of the

Pharisees appeal back to Abraham: he was the covenant father and they were related to him. What the Pharisees missed is that membership in Abraham's family was not theirs automatically apart from humble service to the Lord of the covenant. They took it for granted and became presumptuous. They misread the terms of the covenant and became covenant breakers.

But the point is clear: we should not think that horizontal concerns rule out vertical concerns. They are complementary. It's easy to see why the Pharisees would think in horizontal categories: after all, the promises of the covenant were made to Israel (the group) as a whole. To be a part of that group was to be a part of those who would receive the fulfillment of the promises. They wanted to be the advance guard of the true Israel that would receive all God had pledged to do. Paul's claim, of course, is that the church of Jesus Christ is the firstfruits of the new creation, the eschatological shape of the people of God.

The problem with the Pharisees, then, was putting confidence "in the flesh" – that is, relying on their own conception of covenant loyalty (e.g., Jewish traditions) rather than allowing God to define the terms of the covenant for them (which were transformed when Jesus stepped into the drama of Israel). Jesus and Paul challenged the Pharisees not because they had a corporate view of salvation per se – as if church membership and salvation had to be pried apart in the new age – but because they misunderstood the true nature and conditions of that salvation.

But now consider what the NT says about the church. It is the elect people (Eph. 1:4), the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13), the bride of Christ (Eph. 5:21ff), the fullness of Christ (Eph. 1:20ff), the new creation (2 Cor. 5:17), the recipient of Israel's noble titles and privileges (1 Pt. 2:5ff), and the communion of those united to Christ (Rom. 6:1ff). *It sounds as if being a part of this group just might have something to do with salvation!* And indeed, it does. In a very real sense, salvation does come by being a part of the right group – the church (cf. Acts 2:47). Throughout Scripture, the promises of salvation are directed to a group of people, to a community, not merely to random, isolated individuals. In Scripture the horizontal and vertical are always held together. As someone has pointed out, God's promise was "I will be your God, and you will be my *people*," not, "I will be your God, and you will be my *persons*." The divine promises have as their object a people, a community, a family.

So if anything, Wright shows more biblical balance than the Reformed tradition, at least in its more scholastic and modern formulations. If we are too prideful to accept a helpful corrective from theologians outside our immediate circles on this kind of point, then we have major problems. We need a little dose of humility.

Second, Wright does acknowledge that justification is a soteriological doctrine. In *What Saint Paul Really Said*, on page 107, he writes:

Paul stresses by repetition, the underlying point: the gospel of Jesus reveals God's righteousness, in that God is himself righteous, and, as part

of that, God is the one who declares the believer to be righteous. *Once again we must insist that there is of course a 'righteous' standing, a status, which human beings have as a result of God's gracious verdict in Christ.* Paul is perfectly happy with that . . . But Paul does not use the phrase 'God's righteousness' to denote it. God's righteousness is God's own righteousness.

Never mind what Wright says here about the righteousness of God. That is a separate exegetical question dealt with elsewhere. The point here is that Wright acknowledges that Paul uses "righteousness" language to describe a soteric status, not just membership in a group. To be "righteous" is not just to be in the covenant community; it is to have a share in the Messiah's own standing in the Father's lawcourt.

In his internet article, "The Shape of Justification," Wright makes two crucial points with regard to present justification:

a) God vindicates in the present, in advance of the last day, all those who believe in Jesus as Messiah and Lord (Rom. 3.21-31; 4.13-25; 10.9-13). The lawcourt language indicates what is meant. 'Justification' itself is not God's act of changing the heart or character of the person; that is what Paul means by the 'call', which comes through the word and the Spirit. 'Justification' has a specific, and narrower, reference: it is God's *declaration* that the person is now in the right, which confers on them the *status* 'righteous'. (We may note that, since 'righteous' here, within the lawcourt metaphor, refers to 'status', not 'character', we correctly say that God's declaration *makes* the person 'righteous', i.e. in good standing.)

(b) This present declaration constitutes all believers as the single people, the one family, promised to Abraham (Gal. 2.14 - 3.29; Rom. 3.27 - 4.17), the people whose sins have been dealt with as part of the fulfilled promise of covenant renewal (Jer. 31.31-34). Membership in this family cannot be played off against forgiveness of sins: the two belong together.<sup>10</sup>

In (a), Wright affirms that justification is a forensic event, basically synonymous with the forgiveness of sins. He clearly distinguishes this objective act on God's part from the subjective transformation that God always works in believing sinners. Wright even says that the declaration itself actually grants the status "righteous." It would be hard to imagine a more robust assertion of justification's soteric significance. Wright is fully aware that in passages like Rom. 3:21-26, justification is functioning as a soteric category and presupposes Christ's propitiation of God's wrath.

But Wright – like Paul – doesn't stop there. In Rom. 3:27ff, Paul goes on to apply justification by faith to the question of covenant membership. Paul also uses justification to defend the rights of Gentiles within the covenant community in Gal. 2. This is Wright's point in (b). Wright suggests that justification not only creates a new status in

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<sup>10</sup> Found at <http://www.angelfire.com/mi2/paulpage/Shape.html>.



God's lawcourt; it also creates a new family in the world. To be justified is not only to be forgiven; it also means one has entered into the community that possesses that status of "righteous." And so Wright's conclusion is exactly proper: covenant membership and forgiveness are simply two sides of the same coin and cannot be played off against each other. To put it another way, right standing before God, including forgiveness, is intrinsic to covenant membership. Just as we enter into covenant by faith/baptism, so we enter into a state of justification by faith/baptism.

Thus, Paul uses justification to answer more than one question. He uses it to answer a question about *how* we are saved. We are saved when God justifies us (or forgives us, or declares us righteous) by faith. We are justified by faith because by faith we lay hold of Christ and come to share in the benefits of his death and resurrection. By faith we are united to him so that we share in his status in God's cosmic lawcourt.

But he also uses justification to answer the question about *who* may be saved. Is this justification only available to Israel, the possessor of Torah? Or is it also for Gentiles? Paul answers: if justification were by works of Torah it would be for Jews only, and Gentiles would have to submit to Torah and enter into Israel in order to receive the blessings of justification. But God is not the God of the Jews only; he is also the God of the Gentiles. And so justification must be apart from possession of or practice of Torah. It must be *by faith* and *through grace*, for in that manner it is available to all, Jew and Gentile.

The issue on the table in Paul's day – or perhaps it would be better to say the issue *dividing* the table in Paul's day – concerned the status of the Gentiles. So it is not surprising he spills a good deal of ink defending the rights and privileges of Gentiles qua Gentiles. One weapon in his arsenal was his doctrine of justification. He can appeal to other factors as well – such as prophecies that spoke of the Gentiles sharing in Israel's blessings – but in the main he appeals to justification by faith apart from works of Torah.

In Luther's day the question was a bit different. Luther was plagued by a tormented conscience. Luther needed peace of mind. He craved assurance of forgiveness. The medieval church held out forgiveness like a carrot, dangling in front the people, goading them on to more good works, in an effort to attain righteous standing at the end of a long process of moral renewal. Luther found the answer to his problem in Paul's doctrine of justification. And rightly so. If justification was apart from works of Torah, certainly it was apart from works of penance and indulgences. But the way some Reformers (and their theological descendants) handled the text of Paul, in their anti-Roman zeal, you'd think *the Pharisees* were selling indulgences to build St. Peter's cathedral! They all too easily collapsed their sixteenth century concerns into Paul's first century concerns. The Lutheran and Reformed doctrine(s) of justification was/were constructed in order to answer a question about individual soteriology and assurance that Paul was not facing squarely in his day. Paul can be used to answer that question – he provides all the necessary materials – but an *application* of Paul to an extra-Pauline question should not be confused with exegesis itself.

Now, that raises another question. Isn't Luther's problem – the problem of forgiveness -- the ultimate problem? Isn't it the most important question we can ask ourselves? And if so, why wouldn't Paul deal with it directly? Well, in a sense, he does, but in a different context. Luther was asking an individualistic question. Or at least, he framed his soteriological concerns in an individualistic manner. Paul, on the other hand, was concerned with corporate realities. He wanted to show how God made good on his promises to forgive *a people*. But even then, I'd be the first to say that while Paul never poses Luther's precise question, he answers it anyway, in places such as Rom. 3:22ff. Paul doesn't present justification by faith alone as the answer to a troubled conscience lacking assurance, *but the doctrine does answer to that problem when needed*.

This is not impossible to understand. If I ask, "What is 3+2?" and you answer "5," you have answered my question. But someone could come along later and ask, "What is 4+1?" The answer you gave is still valid, even though the question has altered. I realize a mathematical analogy is far removed from Paul, but the point stands: *Paul wrote more than enough to answer his own questions, and Luther's questions, and questions to be asked in the centuries to come*. We can't even begin to dream of the applications the Pauline doctrine of justification will have in the future.

### 30.

Don Garlington's work *Faith, Obedience, and Perseverance* is essential reading for anyone desiring to understand Paul's teaching on justification and the obedience of faith. Garlington holds to what may be described as a modified NPP position. His book can serve as a wonderful doorway into the NPP from a basically Reformed perspective. Here are a few observations from and about the book (including long quotations, since the work is quite inaccessible for many):

1. Garlington's thesis is straightforward: The "obedience of faith" in Romans is perseverance in Christ (rather than perseverance in Torah), a perseverance requisite to eschatological salvation. This obedience of faith, which derives from Christ's own obedience, is the link between present justification by faith alone and future justification according to works. Ultimately, faith, obedience, and perseverance resolve into the same reality. They can be distinguished but never separated.
2. Garlington lays out the basic issue Paul confronted with the Jews and Torah:

Paul's conception of faith's obedience speaks to the heart of his controversy with Second Temple Judaism regarding the law. What was at stake was not "legalism" vs. "grace" in the heretofore understanding of the terms but rather the on-going status of the Torah as defining the people of God. Israel, in its insistence that the law is eternal and unchangeable, demanded that all who would enter Yahweh's covenant must submit to its entrance-rite, circumcision, and thereafter make a commitment to the law, Israel's "constitution," as the expression of God's will for his people (cf. Jdt. 14:10; Gal. 5:3). Given such a scenario, "the obedience of faith" is

Paul's battle cry, his manifesto, that, by virtue of the Christ who has received "all" without distinction (Rom. 1:5-7; 15:7-12, *passim*), people of varying descriptions can be reckoned among the faithful – quite apart from circumcision and the particulars of the Mosaic code. From one vantage point, then, debate about the law can be reduced to Paul's ethnic inclusiveness as opposed to the particularism of his Jewish kinsmen; from another, the dispute revolves around a basic question: What does one think of Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ? Is it he or the Torah which forms the gateway to salvation? . . . .

Paul's opposition to Jewish covenantal nomism can be reduced to his insistence on *Christ-fidelity vs. Torah-fidelity*. The core issue in Romans (and Galatians) is an "either-or:" either *Christ* or *Torah* as the embodiment of the righteousness of God and the way to salvation. To phrase it otherwise, Where is salvation to be found: in allegiance to Christ or to the law? For Paul the answer was obvious: Christ takes the place of Torah, and henceforth any faith not directed to him is illegitimate by definition. His thought thus penetrates beyond the "boundary markers" of the covenant to the underlying mindset which came to focus in these boundary marking mechanisms, i.e., the conviction that the law of the Sinai covenant is eternal, unchangeable, and Yahweh's sole provision for the welfare of his people. At the end of the day, from the apostle's perspective, *one must decide between Christ and the Torah* (6-7).

3. In this light, Garlington makes some rather remarkable comments on Rom. 4:4-5:

In following this "covenant nomism" model, it is not to be denied that in, most conspicuously, Rom. 4:4-5 Paul challenges a works-principle in Judaism. Yet the ensuing context (vv. 9-12) supports the contention that Paul's concern is not with a merit theology but with the works of covenant loyalty subsequent to circumcision (cf. Gal. 5:3). That "the one who works" receives a "wage" (v. 4) is not a particular problem, because the "wage" in question is eternal life bestowed at the end of this age on those who remain faithful to Yahweh, whose will is enshrined in the Torah. Qualitatively, the Jewish position is no different than that embodied in the parable of Matt 20:1-16: the workers in the vineyard receive the wage of their labor, i.e., the eschatological kingdom of God as preached by Jesus. Hence, the works envisaged by Romans 4 (and other passages) are just those demanded by the Torah; they accompany faith and eventuate in the life of the age to come. To be sure, works *are* a condition of "staying in" in the covenant. Yet "staying in" is not "getting in." Israel's works are but its response to Yahweh's saving grace: they are tantamount to *perseverance*, not "works righteousness legalism." As we shall argue throughout, it is in the same sense that "good works" (= perseverance) in Paul's own theology are a condition of "staying in" Christ (6-7).

In other words, there is continuity from the OT to Second Temple Judaism to Paul. Yet, Paul took the basic soteriology of the Old Covenant and transposed it into a new key, even while maintaining its basic structure.

4. Garlington argues the key issues in Paul's theological polemic against the Judaism he left behind in order to follow Christ as apostle to the Gentiles cluster around eschatology and Christology. Paul has produced a christologically-shaped eschatological critique of Torah:

Israel's idolatry [e.g., Gal. 4:8-9] is its tenacious insistence that the Torah is God's definitive provision for eternal life and, therefore, its clinging to the law as an object of trust to the exclusion of Christ. Or, to say it another way, its joy was in Torah, not in Christ.

In the final analysis, the basic dispute revolved around eschatology, or better, as far as Paul was concerned, around the complex of eschatology and Christology. It was, most pointedly, Paul's "eschatological Christology" which was the deciding factor . . . Paul's quarrel was not with his ancestors, but his contemporaries. Unlike them, the light of the new creation has dawned on Paul (2 Cor. 4:6), convincing him that he should no longer be a "zealot" for the paternal traditions (Gal. 1:14; Phil. 3:6) . . . Thus, however valid the law may have been for its time, "*now* the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law" (Rom. 3:21). Therefore, Israel's problem for Paul was its insistence on remaining on the wrong side of the eschatological divide, commensurate with its rejection of Jesus of Nazareth and its desire to remain within the "fence" of Torah (*Ep. Arist.* 139-42).

For Paul, however, since the advent of Christ, there is a new covenant (2 Cor 3), and a new creation (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 5:16). Far from being the "commandment of life" (Bar. 3:9, 14; 4:1), the law for him actually fosters sin, wrath, death, and condemnation (Rom 3:19-20; 4:15; 5:20; 7:1-13; 2 Cor 3:6-7); its real purpose was to point to Christ (Rom 10:4; Gal 3:23-25). And now that Christ has come, circumcision preeminently is no longer one of the commandments of God; it counts for nothing (1 Cor 7:19; Gal 5:16); what is of importance is not circumcision but the new creation (Gal. 5:16); indeed, to make Gentiles submit to circumcision is to endanger "the truth of the gospel" (Gal. 2:5, 14). Consistent with this is Paul's denial that the special days of Israel (Gal. 4:10; Col. 2:16-17) and its food laws (Rom 14:2-4; Col 2:16-17) are of any lasting significance: they belong to the "elements of the world" (Gal 4:3, 9; Col 2:20). Since the "law of Christ" (Gal 6:2; 1 Cor. 9:21) has jettisoned many of the distinctives of Israelite self-identification, Paul feels no compulsion to make Gentiles live as Jews (Gal 2:14). Unlike many of his Jewish compatriots (Rom 10:2), he is no longer a "zealot" for the paternal traditions (Gal 1:13-14; Phil. 3:6), because a radical reversal has taken

place: he is now the persecuted, proof of his zeal for Christ! As a matter of course, then, his boast is no longer in the Torah, the God of the Torah, and his standing as an Israelite (Rom 2:17, 23; Phil 3:4-6), but in Christ (Gal 6:14; Phil 3:3; Rom 5:3). Henceforth his striving to attain to the resurrection is motivated not by a desire to be one of the vindicated obedient of Israel (2 Macc 7; *Test of Moses* 9) but by a passion to be found in Christ, because he has been apprehended by Christ (Phil 3:5-14) . . .

In Rom 2:22, Paul questions whether his Jewish kinsmen, who abhor idols, are not themselves guilty of idolatry, i.e., the idolatry of elevating the law of Moses to a position of unwarranted devotion and bestowing on it a permanence it was never intended to have in God's ultimate plan. Over against Israel, which . . . would not loosen its grip on an unmodified Torah, Paul saw in Jesus of Nazareth both the goal and the termination of the law. Hence the only distinction to survive the resurrection is that of faith and unbelief as respects him, God's Christ. In this light, Israel's preference for the law to the exclusion of Christ could for Paul be nothing less than . . . an act of sacrilege (40-43).

In other words, Paul essentially redefines the people of God by redrawing the boundary lines which mark out the covenant community. The church is identified by Christ, not Moses; by faith, not "works of Torah;" by baptism, not circumcision; and by the fruit of the Spirit, not the works of the flesh. Eschatology and Christology drive a new ecclesiology.

5. Garlington argues that the phrase "the obedience of faith" is deliberately ambiguous, expressing two ideas, namely, "the obedience which consists in faith, and the obedience which is the product of faith" (30). Grammatically, Paul's construction is best read as "faith's obedience" or "believing obedience." Garlington demonstrates that this "obedience of faith" has as eschatological cast to it. This eschatological coloring is most clearly seen in reference to Paul's mission to the Gentiles: he desires to promote the obedience of faith *among all nations* (ch. 1; cf. 144). Garlington shows how tightly Paul has intertwined faith and obedience, even using them as interchangeable terms in parallel passages (16):

1:8	your <i>faith</i> is proclaimed in all the world
16:19	your <i>obedience</i> is made known to all
10:16a	but all have not <i>obeyed</i> the gospel
10:16b	for Isaiah says, 'Who has <i>believed</i> our report?'
11:23	if they do not remain in <i>unbelief</i>
11:30	by their <i>disobedience</i>
11:31	so they now have been <i>disobedient</i>
1:5	the <i>obedience of faith</i> among all nations

Note 1:5/15:18 and 1:8/16:19 form inclusions around the letter as a whole. A similar interchange of belief and obedience is found at the end of Heb. 3. There are other indications of the close connection of faith to obedience in Romans. For example, in Rom. 10:3, Paul speaks Israel's failure to *submit* to God's righteousness – presumably a submission that includes and perhaps even consists of faith. In Rom. 6:16-17, obedience covers the entire response on the part of the Roman Christians to the gospel pattern of teaching.

The note of perseverance is also included in Paul's formulations, particularly in 1:5 and 11:23ff. *Faith* cannot be divorced from *faithfulness*. As Garlington writes in his concluding reflections, "obedience always involves faith, and faith always involves obedience. Thus faith and obedience should not be compartmentalized or turned into separate stages of Christian experience" (144). In fact, faith and obedience so blend into one another that it is impossible to tell where stops and the other begins. "In other words, [for Paul], *faith and works are two ways of saying the same thing*" (146). He includes perseverance in this definition of saving faith:

*Faith, obedience, and perseverance . . . are not separate entities but three aspects of the same entity. The faith with which the Christian walk commences is unreserved trust in Jesus the Son of God. This faith, however, does not exist in the abstract; its quality as trust is put to the test in trials and exigencies which attend "this present evil age." Thus tested, "faith" becomes "obedience" which is "perseverance." In short, *faith, obedience, and perseverance are one and the same* (163).*

Garlington also points out that in the Hebraic worldview, "hearing" and "doing" were inseparable. In Rom. 2, Paul (like James in James 2!) says being a hearer is not enough; one must also be a doer. Garlington, as usual, relying on a wide swath of NT scholarship, explains:

The combination of "hearing" and "doing," as Dunn notes, was characteristic of Judaism. Indeed, as Wilckens affirms, the *shema* of Deut 6:4 – "Hear, O Israel" – has doing in view. However, what would have sounded odd was Paul's *contrast* of the two here – hearing *versus* doing – because the respective appellations "hearers of the law" and "righteous" were complementary and overlapped in large measure: hearing /believing and works are two ways of saying the same thing. This leads us to infer that in driving a wedge between these interdependent components of Jewish self-definition Paul has in mind *a different kind of "doing the law,"* a doing, as we shall see, commensurate with "the obedience of faith" (59)

Garlington notes that Gal. 3:2 links hearing and with the obedience of faith, but then shows how Paul's division of hearing and doing in Rom. 2 serves his polemical purpose:

[H]earing and faith in the OT and in later Jewish thinking are virtually synonymous: to hear rightly *is* to obey. Consequently, "the *obedience* of faith" (Rom. 1:5) and "the *hearing* of faith" (Gal. 3:2) depict the same activity, i.e., believing response to the gospel. In fact, the resemblance of the two phrases would be even clearer if we translate the latter as "the *response* of faith." Nevertheless, Paul juxtaposes "the hearing of faith" (Christianity) and "works of the law" (Judaism/Judaistic Christianity). Naturally, this raises the question, In what sense can such a contrast be meaningful, given the common heritage of Paul and his Jewish kinsmen? The answer is bound up with an earlier observation, viz., that in Rom 2:13, Paul, in a very un-Jewish manner, pits "hearing" against "doing," for the purpose of remonstrating with Israel that its *particular hearing and doing* are unacceptable to God in final judgment. Similarly, Gal 3:2, in context, is sufficiently clear that the hearing of faith directed toward the gospel (= "the faith," 3:25), as opposed to the "other gospel" (= "works of the law," 3:2) of the circumcision party. What one finds in more or less seminal form in Gal 3:2 is expounded at greater length in Rom 10:14-21 (62).

6. Garlington closes the chasm between present justification by faith alone and future justification according to deeds by unpacking the Pauline phrase "the obedience of faith."

While Paul is adamant that it is faith alone which justifies here and now, he is equally insistent that it is the "doers of the law," Rom 2:13, who will be justified in the eschatological judgment. As Cosgrove rightly stresses, *justification*, not simply judgment, belongs not only at the beginning of life in Christ but also at its final consummation: there are, in fact, two moments of justification. In addressing the problem, we shall argue that it is none other than "faith's obedience" which bridges the gap between these seemingly polar opposites (44).

Initial justification is by sheer, naked faith. The sinner has no works to offer; he simply lays hold of Christ by faith. But as he matures, he becomes more and more conformed to Christ's image. At the last day, the vindicated will not appear before God's judgment seat empty-handed. They will offer the fruits of their faith, and by these fruits they will be judged. Those who, by grace, have done good will enter into eternal life, while the wicked will be cast away.

Law fulfillment is the basis of future justification, but this law keeping is nothing more or less than the obedience of faith. It is not obedience considered apart from Christ or faith that will avail at the last day; rather it is precisely faith-filled obedience *in Christ* that will justify in the consummation (156; cf. 157).

7. Garlington identifies the heart of Romans as the covenant faithfulness of God in light of (or in spite of?) the redefinition of the people of God:

To pick up on a suggestion of R. B. Hays, on its most basic level, Romans is a theodicy, i.e., Paul justifies the faithfulness of God to Israel, notwithstanding his reception of the Gentiles by *faith alone* and the apparent abandonment of his promises to Israel. “Roman demonstrates,” according to Beker, “that the question of God’s faithfulness to Israel is answered in the gospel, and the affirmation of God’s faithfulness demonstrates in turn the reliability of God’s act in Christ for the salvation of the Gentiles.” Thus, by redefining the people, Paul is able to justify God, because his intention all along was to keep faith with a community newly formed after the clay (the old Israel) spoiled in the potter’s hand (9:20-21 = Isa 29:16; 45:9; esp. Jer 18:1-11). In this light, Rom 9-11, as anticipated by 1:16 (“to the Jew first”) and 3:1-8, ought to be regarded as both the center and pinnacle of the letter. Perhaps the most succinct statement of Paul’s theodicy is 3:26: God remains righteous even while justifying the one who has faith (alone) in Jesus. As Davies notes, the “righteousness of God” accents God’s faithfulness in keeping his promises (45).

Like other NPP commentators, Garlington sees Paul’s purpose in Romans as much broader than merely an explanation of how individuals “get saved” or how the various pieces of the *ordo salutis* puzzle fit together. Paul’s concerns are theological in the full sense – Romans is about the gospel *of God* (1:1). In this epistle, Paul covers the whole wide sweep of God’s purposes, from creation, to fall, to recreation. He defends the covenant fidelity of God in the face of charges to the contrary and shows the astounding mercy of the God of Israel to sinners, both Jew and Gentile.

8. Garlington has a Hebraic, covenantal understanding of the righteousness of God. He sketches out the meaning of “righteousness,” then draws a couple of implications related to justification:

As modern research has indicated, “righteousness” is essentially a relational concept. As predicated of God, it is his fidelity to the covenant with Israel: “God is ‘righteous’ when he fulfills the obligations he took upon himself to be Israel’s God, that is, to rescue Israel punish and Israel’s enemies.” As is well known in the Psalms and Prophets, God’s righteousness is synonymous with his salvation, i.e., his deliverance of Israel from bondage and his vindication of it in the presence of its enemies. His “righteousness,” in short, is his “act to restore his own and to sustain them within the covenant,” arising out of his prior commitment to them. Thus, the “righteousness of God” which has *now* been manifested apart from the law (Rom 3:21) is “God’s action on behalf of those to whom he has committed himself.” In Paul’s estimation, of



course, God has pledged himself equally to Gentiles as to Jews, requiring in return their commitment of faith/faithfulness as defined in terms of the new covenant rather than the old.

This dynamic or “action-oriented” understanding of righteousness (as opposed to “status” only) has a twofold bearing upon our particular concern. For one thing, it supports our contention that the controversy between Paul and Judaism had respect not to “grace” vs. “legalism” in the commonly accepted sense of the terms but to Pauline inclusiveness as opposed to Jewish restriction of God’s covenant favor to Israel (though including proselytes). For Paul to draw upon a term so well-fixed by his Jewish heritage was, in effect, for him to say that Yahweh’s pledge to uphold and sustain the ancient covenant people now has equal applicability to “the Greek,” who is no longer obliged to become as “the Jew” in order to participate in the “righteousness of God.” As J. A. Ziesler puts it: “God’s righteousness is his own covenant loyalty, now in Paul widened beyond a covenant with Israel and made universal . . . .” Consequently, “*God’s* righteousness,” according to Rom 3:21-22; 10:3 (Phil 3:9), is no longer peculiarly that of Torah, but is now embodied in Christ, the “telos” of the law. Hence, justification in Paul is primarily concerned to answer the question, On whose behalf does the God of Israel act in the reclamation of his creation; is it Israel only or also the Gentiles? . . . Paul employs justification as a tool for bringing down the “dividing wall of hostility” between Jew and Gentile (Eph 2:14). Throughout Romans particularly, justification, along with other arguments, serves to buttress the proposition that “there is no distinction” between Jew and Gentile.

For another thing, because “righteousness” assumes as its frame of reference the Hebrew (as contrasted with Greco-Roman) notion of righteousness, we are alerted to the possibility that the semantic range of the verb “to justify” is broadened by its relation to the Hebraic concept of the “righteousness of God.” According to Reumann’s findings, righteousness/justice/justification terminology in the Hebrew scriptures is “action oriented,” not just “status” or “being” language, and “*binds together forensic, ethical, and other aspects in such a way that some sort of more unified ancient Near Eastern view can readily be presupposed.*” “Justify” is an adequate translation of [the Greek] as long as we are mindful that more is at stake than a “heavenly decree.” If God’s righteousness is “his intervention in a saving act on behalf of his people, then [“to be justified” means] “to be an object of the saving righteousness of God (so as to be well-pleasing to him at the judgment)” (45-48).

In other words, justification is forensic, but also *more than forensic*. It includes reintegration into the community and the covenant relationship. It includes the right-wising – the setting right – of one’s situation. In Paul, justification points to restoration

in at least three directions simultaneously: Justification (a) reconciles sinners to God, (b) unites Jews to Gentiles, and (c) grants to believers definitive righteousness. In other terms, justification includes (a) forgiveness, (b) covenant membership, and (c) what John Murray called definitive sanctification.

9. Garlington appeals to the way justification language functions in passages such as Rom. 5:9-10, 6:7, Gal. 2:15-21, and 1 Cor. 6:11 to unpack this “broader than forensic” sense of justification (48; cf. 146n10, 152f, 155). Following Ziesler, he concludes justification “is not just a vindicated status, but a vindicated life” (48-9); “not merely [restoration] to a standing, but to an existence in the relationship” (106). This fuller understanding of justification provides insight

into how Paul can move so deftly from justification by faith here and now to ultimate justification by “doing the law, “ although, in point of fact, he actually follows the opposite course in Romans: he first addresses himself, in 2:13, to the future justification of the “doers” of the law and thereafter, in 3:21-4:25, to present justification by faith. It is as though he states his conclusion first and afterwards provides its premise (49).

Garlington then demonstrates the way in which Paul’s two key OT prooftexts, Hab. 2:4 and Gen. 15:6, support his theology of justification in Romans since both emphasize “the obedience of faith” in their broader context. Paul can use either pole of justification to refute Jewish exclusivism: future judgment according to deeds means that bare possession of Torah and the mark of circumcision will not avail at the last judgment. The Jews will have no special advantage over the Gentiles with regard to final justification. But the Jews also no longer have any special standing over the Gentiles in the matter of present justification, since it is by grace through faith, apart from Torah. Whether Paul looks at the present or to the future, there is no difference between Jew and Gentile.

While Paul uses his doctrine of justification to do more than undermine covenantal presumption on the part of the Jews, this is a central function of the doctrine.

Cosgrove’s analysis of justification language . . . has adequately demonstrated that the apostle characteristically construes “to justify” with prepositions indicating instrumentality, not evidential basis. In his words: “The question never becomes whether one can be justified *on the basis of* the law or works but remains always whether one can be justified in the sphere of the law” . . . . [T]he thrust of Paul’s argumentation in Romans (and Galatians) is that remaining within the sphere of the Sinai covenant has become irrelevant as regards eschatological justification. Indeed, it can be the greatest stumbling block to justification, because determined allegiance to the Torah obstructs one’s view of Christ, the “telos” of the law. Hence Israel cannot be justified *within the arena of* or, in more conventional terms, *by means of* the law (covenantal nomism), because the law thus implemented excludes one from Christ.

In short, because such is the real issue under debate, we are prevented from prejudging that there was in Paul's mind a necessary contradiction between doing good in this life and justification in final judgment. In other words, an attempt on Paul's part to circumvent a "legalistic" understanding of justification is simply out of accord with the aim pursued by him.

Following Motyer, Garlington desires to situate Paul's doctrine of justification within a broader biblical doctrine of righteousness (152ff). This allows him to hold together justification and sanctification without tension in a single soteric package. The righteousness of God is aimed at rescuing the creation from sin. But this means more than simply *declaring* them righteous in a forensic sense (152-3). Garlington quotes Motyer:

The basis of the whole life of the people of God is his righteousness – his outreaching, saving mercy which rescues his creation for himself. This righteousness has now been supremely expressed in Christ. But as men are grasped by it, "justified" and made acceptable to God, so they are stamped with the image of their righteous saviour, and summoned to live in imitation of him as his people (154).

Justification, in other words, is a comprehensive "right-wising" of our lives, establishing us as righteous before God and providing the basis for a life of righteousness.

[Justification] is defined as the power of Christ taking over our life, so that justification is seen to be coextensive with new creation. Consequently, what is customarily termed "sanctification" is actually the extension of "justification," or, better, "rightwising." Among other things, any rigid distinction between "justification" and "sanctification" seems to be ruled out of court . . . (155)

Garlington cites Oliver O'Donovan, who argues that a rigid distinction between justification and sanctification led Protestantism back into "the very uneschatological moralism" from which the Reformation was supposed to deliver us: "The correlate of a 'justification' which has nothing to do with 'righteousness' is a righteousness which has nothing to do with justification, and this soon presented itself to Protestant thought under the heading 'sanctification'" (155). In other words, the process of Christian growth in the power of the Spirit is really an extension and outworking of justification. Justification is not itself a process of dynamic change (progressive sanctification, in systematic terms), but it does include definitive sanctification. After all, it is absurd to say that God can declare me righteous without that verdict taking effect in the space-time arena. God's word is always effectual. The standard justification/sanctification makes some important points, but misses others.

Without deprecating what Luther intended by his famous phrase, we are not, again in strictly Pauline terms, *simul iustus et peccator* but rather *tunc*

*peccator – nunc iustus* (“once a sinner, now righteous”). The believer has died to “sin,” i.e., the age of apostasy as dominated by the flesh, and been raised in newness of life that he might “live to God” (Rom 6:1-11) (156).

..

Thus, while conceding that the justification/sanctification model has been unsurpassed in its insistence that salvation is all of God, what has been termed “sanctification” is actually the outworking of the “righteousness of God,” commencing with the vindication/rightwising of the believer in Christ and eventuating in eternal life (157; cf. 160-1).

Only the regenerate are initially justified; only the sanctified are justified finally. We have tried to hard to section off justification from the rest of God’s saving work. Justification’s unique feature is its forensic, declarative element. But only those already renewed by the Spirit, and thereby given faith, are justified in this life. Only those whose faith is working itself out in love have a legitimate hope of justification at the last day.

10. Garlington decisively refutes and rejects the hypothetical interpretation of justification by works in Rom. 2. Paul is not formulating a principle of justification by meritorious works according to strict justice, only for the purpose of showing that such a justification is impossible. Paul is not doing “pre-evangelism” in Rom. 2, using the law to set up man’s need for salvation. Rather Rom. 2 cites righteous Gentiles as proof that Jews should not boast in mere possession of Torah, apart from fulfilling Torah by the obedience of faith. The hypothetical reading simply doesn’t wash.

[S]uch interpretations [as offered by Calvin, Hodge, and Moo] falter because there is nothing in Paul’s language to suggest either that the viewpoint represented is someone else’s (the Jew’s) exclusively or that he is speaking in hypothetical terms. His pronouncements about future justification by “doing good” are as realistic as his declaration of God’s wrath upon the one who “does evil.” On this he and his Jewish interlocutor are in agreement. Indeed, it is just in terms of the *continuity* of Pauline and Jewish theology at this point that the genius of the argument of Rom 2 emerges. In other words, because the Judaism of Paul’s day knew of a future vindication based on present fidelity to the covenant, his concern is seen to be that of calling into question the prevailing understanding of who “the righteous” are and the grounds on which they may expect to be justified . . .

[Quoting Dunn:] Like his fellow Jews and the whole prophetic tradition, Paul is ready to insist that a doing of the law is necessary for final acquittal before God; but that doing is neither synonymous with nor dependent upon maintaining a loyal membership of the covenant people (60).

The works called for in Rom 2 are precisely the works of faith – or, to use the language of Rom. 1, the “obedience of faith.” (See pages 67ff for more.) These works are to be distinguished from the “works of Torah” which Paul excludes from justification. Justification at the last day will be graciously granted to Jews and Gentiles who have been faithful to the covenant.

But Garlington gives his formulation of final justification careful pastoral safeguards. While he suggests that the “obedience of faith” comprises the beginning, middle, and end of Paul’s preaching (145), the obedience of faith can never be interpreted in meritorious or legalistic terms. All Christian obedience derives from the obedience of Christ himself. All obedience is situated within the context of a system of grace and faith (146). Good works are nestled into a covenantal relationship of familial love (cf., e.g., 151, in which Garlington refers to the ethical demands of the covenant as “house rules”). Stressing “doing” does not land us back in some kind of works-righteousness morass:

[A]lthough the obedience in question entails specific and concrete acts of a lifestyle pleasing to God, it is equally important that we not miss the wood for the trees. That is to say, the future justification of God’s people is not made to hinge on, say, 51% (or more!) of law-keeping, because *obedience itself is the product of faith; and where true faith and love exist, there must be ultimate vindication*. When cause and effect are thus kept in proper sequence, any initial anxiety at the notion of justification by “doing” should be ameliorated, if not quelled altogether . . . [W]hile ethics are clearly involved [in the final verdict], the bedrock issue is whether one has worshipped and served the Creator rather than the creature (the obverse of Rom 1:25). In a word, the *only* sin that can separate the believer from final salvation is the sin of apostasy . . . [A]nything resembling “works-righteousness” is further excluded by two important data. (1) The salvation outworked by us is *God’s doing* . . . . (2) Our perseverance is motivated by love, the appropriate response of those who have been delivered from bondage and caused to walk in newness of life . . .

Accordingly, faith is the indispensable element in the consummation of eternal life, not only in its inauguration. Or, in Berkouwer’s words, *sola fide* is at the heart of justification, but no less at the heart of sanctification. “In the bond between faith and sanctification we perceive, no less than in the bond between faith and justification, the pulsebeat of the gospel. If faith will but lift its blossoms to catch the sunlight of God’s grace, the fruit will be a life imbued with holiness . . . . With this marriage of faith and works in view, it is clear that all works done in this life are subjected to God’s judgment, and that everything hinges on whether they are done in faith.” In a nutshell, Paul’s logic of “getting in” and staying in” Christ is “the logic of faith.” (147, 148, 149; the entire discussion in 146ff should be consulted)

In short, the faith which serves as the sole instrument of initial justification is a gift of God's grace through Christ and the Spirit. But the good works joined to faith through which we receive final justification are also the product of God's grace through Christ and the Spirit. It's grace, grace, grace, from top to bottom, front to back, and right to left.

11. Garlington is fully cognizant of the fact that his work will raise some eyebrows among traditional Reformed Protestants. However, he also claims that "the positions herein espoused are not without biblical precedent among Protestants – including the Reformers." But his final appeal is to Scripture, not tradition:

[W]hile the debate cannot be abstracted from an awareness of confessional standards, the exegete must be allowed to probe the biblical text, free to draw whatever conclusions are consonant with his/her exegesis. It is fully my conviction that the agenda of scholarship is not to be set by church-historical controversies with the unspoken – if not spoken! – assumption that certain conclusions are to be avoided at all costs. We do well to listen to Berkouwer: "the way dogmatic logicism is not that of faith, which always listens, listens – to the Word" (4-5).

Garlington's commitment to follow the text wherever it leads is seen in his reformulation of the classic *ordo salutis*. After laying out his broadened doctrine of justification, he says:

Because these conclusions are at variance in some regards with the customary Protestant theology, it will be well to offer some comment on the notion of the *ordo salutis* undergirding that theology by adding my voice to those who, in recent days, have taken issue with the sort of "order of salvation" propounded in Protestant dogmatics. We proceed, however, with an awareness that the underlying motivation of the *ordo salutis* is entirely laudable, viz., namely the maintenance of the sovereignty of God's grace and the preservation of *sola fide* (158).

Garlington cites Gaffin and Hoekema as critics of the *ordo salutis*. The *ordo* is defective not only because its uses terminology in a rigid fashion that does not match the Bible's own vocabulary, but also because "it is devoid of the exclusively eschatological air which pervades" all of Paul's theology. "Put otherwise, the *ordo salutis* represents a de-eschatologization of Paul's outlook, because for the apostle soteriology *is* eschatology. All soteric experience . . . derives from solidarity in Christ's resurrection and involves existence in the new creation inaugurated by his resurrection." The *ordo* scheme loses the tension between resurrection realized and resurrection yet to be, depriving categories such as justification, sanctification, adoption, and regeneration of any eschatological significance (158).

The solution is to view these various categories – justification, sanctification, etc. – as various aspects of our union with Christ, rather than as discrete acts, each with its own structure (cf. 159ff). I would want to go farther than Galington,

Gaffin, and Hoekema in re-casting and re-working the traditional *ordo*, integrating the church, sacraments, and covenant conditionality in a fuller way. But their work is sufficient to demonstrate a wholesale re-evaluation of Reformed scholastic soteriology is needed.

12. One of the features of Garlington's book I most appreciate is his intertextual reading of Scripture. Garlington continually finds critical allusions to OT narratives and prophecies in Paul, showing that Paul's entire theology grew out a rethinking and reworking of the OT in light of the death and resurrection of Christ. I really can't give examples here because of space considerations; you just simply have to read Garlington's work and experience the "Aha!" light bulb flashes for yourself.

### 31.

N. T. Wright has been accused of peddling Pelagianism. But nothing could be further from the truth as these remarks from chapter 7 of *What Saint Paul Really Said* reveal:

I must insist, right away, that if you come upon anyone who genuinely thinks that they can fulfill Pelagius' program, in whichever form or variation you like, you should gently but firmly set them right. There is simply no way that human beings can make themselves fit for the presence or salvation of God."

In other words, Wright affirms *sola gratia*, in accord with the Calvinist tradition.

### 32.

I ask critics of the NPP to run a thought experiment with me: What if it was true? What if the NPP was proved right? What would actually change? Would it mean that the Reformation was really a big mistake? That we should immediately reunite with Rome? That we should reject *sola fide* and Calvinism?

Actually, none of the worst fears of NPP critics need be realized. There is not nearly as much friction between the NPP and Reformed theology as some claim. Many NPP scholars acknowledge the legitimacy and value of the Protestant Reformation. To my knowledge, no leading NPP scholar (e.g., Wright, Dunn) has advocated returning to Rome undoing the Reformation. Wright says justification is the great ecumenical doctrine that should bring us together rather than drive us apart, but he never says Rome's errors on justification or in other doctrinal areas are insignificant or should be swept under the rug. In fact, he is severely critical of Rome at times. Hopefully, I have expounded Wright's forensic and gracious doctrine of justification thoroughly enough to show that he is no Romanist.

It is not hard to find explicit praise for the Reformers in NPP material. Wright has said that if Protestantism had stayed true to Calvin, the “correction” of the NPP movement would probably not have been needed. Dunn says that Luther

had fully grasped Paul’s principal thrust on the sufficiency of faith. His own experience had taught him thoroughly that any attempt to add conditions to the acceptability of human beings before God is an essential breach and distortion of the essential truth of the gospel. And his restatement of this insight, not least in his lectures on Galatians, lit a torch which has continued to illuminate Western Christianity ever since.<sup>11</sup>

Dunn goes on to critique Luther’s individualism and his failure to read Galatians in light of its historical context. But he agrees with Luther on the *essential* point of the gospel. Thus, the NPP is not a “different gospel” so much as a recontextualization of the old gospel. The NPP is fully compatible with a traditional Protestant theology. It teaches us to read some texts differently and it forces us to focus on some different issues, but it is not substantially antithetical.

### 33.

Paul states just as emphatically as James that the doers of the law will be justified (Rom. 2:13; James 2:14ff). But who are these doers of the law? Is Paul speaking hypothetically of a class of sinless people who do not really exist? Or does he have something else in mind?

Let’s start by unpacking what it means to keep the law. The law simply did not require perfect obedience. It was not designed for the angels or sinless humans. It was given to a fallen-but-redeemed nation at Sinai, and was perfectly adapted to their maturity level and ability. God was not mocking the people when he called on them to obey the whole law (Dt. 28:1ff). He had given them grace and they had no excuse for apostasy.

Law keeping in this context is not a matter of scoring 100% on an ethics test. It is not even a matter of scoring 51%. It simply doesn’t work that way. Conformity to the law was a matter of relationship, not something mechanical. The law called for a life of faith (Hab. 2:4), a life of full-orbed loyalty to the Lawgiver. If one sinned, one did not automatically become a “law breaker.” After all the Torah made provision for sin in the sacrificial system. If one repented by performing the proper offering, one maintained his status as a covenant keeper. Only apostasy itself constituted covenant breaking. All other sins could be dealt with within the confines of the covenant relationship.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *The Theology of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians*, 141-2.

<sup>12</sup> An analogy with marriage might be helpful. A husband may sin against his wife in a myriad of ways (e.g., forgetting to take the garbage out, watching the game on t.v. when he should reading to the kids, etc.) without breaking covenant. The wife does not actually have grounds for divorce unless he “apostatizes” from the relationship by adultery or desertion. We have to distinguish the sin of covenant breaking itself from sins that do not rupture the covenant.



Thus, David, despite his flagrant sin, was regarded as having kept the law (1 Ki. 15:5). Elizabeth and Zecharias were by no means sinless but are called “blameless” and “righteous” before God. They had not measured up to an abstract standard of moral perfection but they *had* done what the law required (Lk. 1:6). Paul, like the psalmists before him, often appealed to his own righteousness and blamelessness. He even claimed to have a clear conscience!

An illustration may help. If I say my 5 year old son is “obedient” I do not mean he is sinlessly perfect. I do not mean he never needs discipline. I am simply describing the overall shape, or pattern, of his life. As a way life, he obeys. As a habit, he obeys. And so forth. When the Bible speaks of people having kept the law, or walking blamelessly, it is not speaking in the highly rarified language one might use in systematic theology; rather, it is speaking in the everyday language of real life. It is a Father assessing the ethical condition of his children.

Calvin argues that Rom. 2:13 is speaking hypothetically. *If* someone did the law, they could justified by works . . . but of course, no one does so, so “doers of the law” is an empty set. But what happened to using Scripture to interpret Scripture? Why not plug into Rom. 2 the people that Scripture says elsewhere did the law? That makes far more sense than filling in Paul’s terms with our own notions of what “doing the law” might entail. The justification by works envisioned in Rom. 2 cannot be any more hypothetical than the condemnation spoken of. (Note also that the vindication promised to the obedient in Rom. 2 cannot be reduced to mere rewards piled on top of salvation itself. The whole context has to do with eternal salvation vs. eternal destruction.)

Several other texts bear on Rom. 2. In James 1:22, James speaks in non-hypothetical terms of doing the law. Jesus is not kidding or messing around when he speaks of a future justification according to our words (Mt. 12:37; 25:31ff). When Jesus describes two paths – one leading to life, the other to death – he isn’t propounding a hypothetical way of salvation by walking the narrow path of obedience (Mt. 7:24). Rather, he is demanding obedience as a non-negotiable condition of salvation. When Hebrews says that without holiness, no man will see the Lord, it is not proposing holiness as a hypothetical plan of salvation by merit (Heb. 12:14). When Jesus requires cross bearing and life-losing as a condition of eternal life in the gospels (e.g., Lk. 9:23, Jn. 12:25), he means exactly what he says. And on and on we could go.

### 34.

The symbolism of Revelation has a bearing on our theology of justification that often goes unnoticed. Rev. 3:4 and 19:8, 14 employ the image of a white robe given to the saints. But what is this white robe? Clearly, it links back to the priestly garments of the Levitical order. We find the priestly robes described in great detail in Ex. 28. In the New Covenant, all believers receive these clothes so they can minister in the Lord’s house as palace servants (cf. Gal. 3:27-8).

But how do they come to possess these robes? Do the robes signify the imputed righteous status of Christ? Or do they symbolize the righteousness of the saints? The lexical data does not solve the dilemma so we have to look to the broader teaching of Scripture. In Zech. 3, we have a prophetic narrative of Joshua being clothed in white so he can stand in the Lord's presence. On the one hand, the white robe is a gift of grace. Joshua is stripped of his filthy garments, symbolizing his sin, and given the clothes of another (3:1-5). On the other hand, this gift is not given apart from the requirement of obedience. Joshua can only continue to stand in the Lord's presence if he obeys the Lord (3:6).

The initial clothing in white is received by faith alone. This is the beginning of Joshua's justification. But if Joshua is to remain justified – that is, if the garments he has received are not to become re-soiled with his iniquity – he must be faithful. Thus, initial justification is by faith alone; subsequent justifications include obedience.

The plot thickens if we return to Rev. 3 and 19. Both these passages depict eschatological scenes. In Rev. 3 the final reward of the righteous is in view. The believers in Sardis already have their garments (3:4a), given presumably at conversion/baptism (initial justification). Those who have walked in faith have not defiled their garments. Therefore they shall go on living in the Lord's presence because they are loyal to him. This is the same pattern we found in Zech. 3: initial reception of the white garment by faith alone; ongoing possession of the garment is maintained by faithful obedience. The Sardis saints are even said to become *worthy* of the white robes. Worth does not indicate merit, of course, but it does reveal God's fatherly pleasure with their good works of charity and service in the face of intense suffering. Obedience is intrinsic to saving faith in this passage.

Rev. 19 does not develop the imagery with as much theological detail or precision, but nevertheless echoes the same pattern. The bride of the Lamb is robed in white linen, again, the garments of a priest. This white linen stands for the righteousness of the saints – righteousness received by virtue of her union with her husband, but also a righteousness worked out as she follows her Lord into battle.

The fluidity of these symbols suggests a certain fluidity in our doctrine of justification. The white robes stand first and foremost for Christ's free gift to his people. Just as he is clothed in white (cf. Rev. 1, 19), so he clothes his people in white. 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 the good works that make the saints worthy of their new apparel. In other words, the imagery points in the same direction as the prose of Paul (Rom. 2:13) and James (2:14ff): those who will be vindicated in the end are those who been faithfully obedient. There is no hint of a merit theology in these passages, but there is no escaping the close nexus formed between priestly investiture, justification, and obedience. To the question, "Are the saints robed in Christ's righteousness or their own obedience?", the imagery of Revelation answers, "YES!" In other words, the word pictures drawn in this book do not

support a rigid separation of justification from holy living. Justification and sanctification are of a piece, both symbolized by the same white robes.

### 35.

I have claimed above that God's judgment of us at the last day will be "soft." That is, God will judge us as a Father and Husband, not as a cold, aloof Sovereign. Some might wonder: How does this not slide right back in the late medieval Pelagianism of Biel and others who, essentially, argued that Jesus had lowered God's standards and made it possible for us to save ourselves by works?

Several comments should be made here. First, the soteriology I have offered is still thoroughly monergistic, whereas as the late medieval scholastics were moving in a decidedly semi-Pelagian and even full-Pelagian direction. They spoke of autonomous cooperation with God's grace and so forth. I utterly reject that. Every last stitch in the garment of salvation is woven by God himself.

Second, I would insist on the utter sufficiency and uniqueness of Christ's self-offering on the cross. He died in our place and for our sins. Nothing has to be added to that in order to secure our salvation. But the point of the cross is not just to remove sin in a legal, forensic sense. It is to destroy sin altogether. (I think this is a large subtheme in Rom. 6-8). God saves not only by removing the barrier of guilt, but also by renewing us to his image. If our salvation did not include the latter, it would be incomplete. By insisting on works for salvation, I am not saying we merit anything; rather I am claiming that God's work of redemption is comprehensive. Ironically, those who seek to maximize grace by downplaying the requirement of obedience actually minimize grace because they truncate the wholeness of God's saving action.

Third, the "softer" standard simply seems to be the teaching of Scripture. Pietistic Protestantism has created a sort of "holy worm" theology in which we are never allowed to "feel good" about anything we've done. Everything we do, no matter how noble or faithful, is tainted with sin and therefore worthy of condemnation.

However true that is in the abstract, it's simply not the way Scripture evaluates things. The Bible repeatedly speaks of believers and their works as "good," as "worthy," and so forth. Calvin himself spoke quite frequently of God's gracious forbearance and fatherly indulgence in judging believers and their works. (For quotations, see Lillback's *The Binding of God*, e.g., 196, 197. Calvin focuses on God's fatherhood when describing his evaluation of our works. That is an emphasis often missing in contemporary discussions of future justification.)

So emphasizing future justification according to a fatherly evaluation of our works does not fall back into the errors of medieval scholastic soteriology. If anything, it takes us back to Paul who proclaimed again and again that future justification by works was part of his gospel (Rom. 2:16). But how could this future judgment be *good news* unless it

somehow includes consideration of our new status in Christ and our new relationship to God himself as our Father?

### 36.

Since the question of Wright's compatibility with the Westminster Standards is obviously an important question for many, I thought I'd throw out a few more thoughts. The real focus of debate has been justification, so I'll focus on that.

1. Wright himself functions within the tradition that produced the 39 Articles. He is not theologizing autonomously. The 39 Articles, of course, are quite Calvinistic, and overlap considerably with the Westminster Standards. So we should expect *a priori* Wright to be fairly friendly to Westminster's views.

2. Wright has said

I claim the high ground: my aim is to be faithful to what St Paul actually said, as opposed to what any and every tradition, whether catholic, protestant, reformed, charismatic or whatever, tells me he said. I continue to find Paul totally stimulating, exciting and fascinating, which is more than I can say for any creed or confessional formula.

These words should resonate with everyone who loves the Scriptures. As a PCA pastor, I desire to be loyal to the Westminster Standards, but I too find them dull in comparison to Paul and other inspired writers who stand behind the Confession. Reading the Confession is like reading an encyclopedia or dictionary; reading the Bible is simply exhilarating. That's *not* a criticism of the Confession; it's just the way things are. But I do think if we ever find ourselves more enamored with the Confession than with Paul himself, we have big problems.

3. Consider the WSC on justification.

Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.

Wright may not define justification in the Biblical sense in just this way, but I don't think he contradicts anything in the WSC answer either:

[a] He believes justification is a forensic *act*. See his extensive use of the law court metaphor in *What Saint Paul Really Said* and the Romans commentary. He rejects the Romish view of justification as an extended process of moral reform.

[b] He believes justification is gracious. He rejects merit theology altogether and renounces Pelagianism. See the Romans commentary on, e.g., Rom. 3:21-26.

[c] He believes justification includes forgiveness and pardon. See "The Shape of Justification."

[d] He believes that in justification we come to share in Christ's righteous standing before the Father. Justification is a soteric category. See his "Shape of Justification" article. (I'll say more on imputation and active obedience below.)

[e] He believes justification is by faith alone. See his Romans commentary on 3:28.

Again, if asked to define justification, Wright would not necessarily give the WSC answer, but he I don't see how any of his work brings him into contradiction with the Confession. In other words, a pastor who is oath bound to uphold the view of Westminster can appropriate much of Wright's exegetical work and stay within the perimeters of the Confessional view. Wright and the Confession are not identical, but they are compatible.

4. Wright's criticisms of the received Protestant doctrine usually have more to do with the way certain prooftexts are used than the nature of the doctrine itself. But however much Wright may reinterpret certain texts that have been used to buttress the traditional doctrine, the doctrine's general shape remains intact. Again, Wright sometimes sounds iconoclastic, but by his own admission he remains well within the bounds of an evangelical soteriology.

5. Wright's big contribution is not taking away anything from the traditional doctrine of justification, but adding to it. For him, justification has a surplus of meaning not captured by the traditional creeds and confessions. For example, the WSC answer quoted above says nothing about covenant membership. But for Wright the blessings of forgiveness and of righteous status cannot be separated from covenant membership. He argues exegetically for stretching justification to cover both forgiveness/right-standing *and* membership in the eschatological people of God. But rather than pulling against each other, these two sides of the doctrine actually reinforce each other (e.g., membership must be by faith alone so that it is available to the Gentiles). Again, Wright takes nothing away from the traditional notion of justification; he adds to it, so it becomes fuller and richer.

6. Wright's criticisms of the "active obedience" construction do not put him outside the pale of the Reformed camp. In fact, if any thing, he should be more at home in the WCF than the 39 Articles! After all, the Articles speak of the imputation of Christ's "whole" obedience while the WCF omitted the word. This was a self-conscious move on the part of the Westminster divines, since some of the more notable members of the assembly believed only the passive obedience of Christ was imputed (Gataker, Vines, and moderator Twisse, to be specific). This is a fairly well known and indisputable fact about the Confession.

7. Wright's emphasis on future justification is even anticipated by the WSC. In WSC 38 speaks of our "acquittal in the day of judgment" and cites Mt. 25:23 (a "works" passage) as proof.

8. Questions remain about imputation. I still do not think Wright has spoken definitively to this issue. On the one hand, he does not think that the "imputation of Christ's active obedience" is the Pauline formula. On the other hand, he does use concepts that are closely related to imputation, if not synonymous with it. For example, he speaks of Israel's sin being "heaped upon" Christ and he speaks of Christ's work being "reckoned" to us and his status "conferred" upon us. (See *\_Climax\_* 39, 202, and "Shape" for examples.) His focus is more on union with Christ (or what he calls "corporate Christology"), but even that seems to be inclusive of imputation: if I am joined to Christ, then his history is my history, and that includes his life of obedient faithfulness. Unfortunately for many in the Reformed world, Wright has not taken the time to show precisely how his own views relate to the traditional view. But whatever he might claim, it is obvious to me his basic position matches up with the traditional one pretty well.

Since Wright is concerned to ground so much of Paul's theology in the OT, it might be interesting to ask Wright how he understands an Old Covenant ritual such as laying hands on a sacrificial animal before slaughtering it. Traditionally, this has been understood as a kind of symbolic transfer or imputation of the worshipper's sin to the sacrificial victims, who will then die and undergo transformation as the worshipper's substitute and representative. Other OT passages, such as Isa. 53, could easily be read as including some kind of imputation.

9. Critics of Wright should remember that those in the Reformed world who appreciate Wright are not advocating

[a] an uncritical appropriation of Wright's work; or

[b] using Wright as a new measure of orthodoxy.

In part, this is why the whole present "controversy" is so surprising. Wright hasn't cornered the market on Pauline theology. He doesn't have a monopoly on biblical theology. Reformed "fans" of Wright simply want him to be a part of the ongoing discussion as all of us seek to come to a better understanding of God's revealed and inscripturated truth. Wright doesn't have everything "right." I don't know anyone who thinks that anyway. We aren't trying to form a "Tom Wright party" within the PCA (he would despise such a thing anyway; cf. 1 Cor. 1-3). We aren't suggesting a wholesale appropriation of his views. Speaking for myself, I have found Wright's work on the gospels, the historical Jesus, Pauline theology, exegetical and historical methodologies, and so forth, to be fresh, provocative, insightful, and edifying. But I also have serious disagreements, some of which I have registered in these "Miscellanies." Wright can be "wrong" on a lot of issues.

But the Reformed tradition doesn't have everything right either. We all still have much to learn. Insofar as Wright can help us come to a deeper and broader understanding of the Word, let us use him. In those places where we find him in conflict with the Word, let us reject him. It's that simple, really. But cutting off debate prematurely by labeling Wright and those who have been persuaded of some of his exegetical conclusions as "dangerous" or "heretical" is simply inexcusable. Trust God to care for and protect his church, and let the discussion take its course. Not only will the Reformed world benefit from engaging such a discussion, but Christendom as a whole will be blessed by our thoughtful participation!

Finally, I think those who have been edified by Wright are a bit distressed to see his name dragged through the Reformed mud. He certainly doesn't need a peon like me to defend him, but I am saddened and frustrated at the hostile response he has received in some quarters. Rumors have even flitted about to the effect that *dislike* of Wright has been made a litmus test of orthodoxy in some presbyteries. As best I can tell, Wright is in basic continuity with Reformed biblical and covenantal theology. Even Wright himself has been miffed by the response of some conservative Presbyterians, since for him, the major breakthrough was moving from a basically Lutheran view of the law to a basically Calvinistic view.

### 37.

Rom. 6:7 is certainly a difficult verse. I side with Garlington, Leithart, Wright and others in viewing the verse as stretching the doctrine of justification to include some kind of definitive deliverance from sin's reign and mastery. (Justification can still be easily enough distinguished from "sanctification" in this view, so this does not represent a Romanizing tendency. And I disagree with Gundry, who sucks the forensic meaning of out justification in Rom. 6:7, leaving only deliverance from sin. It's a both/and, not an either/or.)

This kind of reading of Rom. 6:7 has precedent within classical Reformed theology. For example, in *A Treatise on Sanctification: An Explication of Rom 6:1-8:4* by James Fraser (first published 1774; my reprint has a forward by Sinclair Ferguson), Fraser comments on Rom. 6:7:

He that is dead to sin, as here (ver. 7), is justified from sin; so delivered from the reign of sin as to penal effect, and hath the prospect of eternal life. Then he brings into view what I may call the practical dominion of sin . . . Now let us consider what respect the sinner's being justified hath to this matter. It is plain, it is by justification he is brought from under the law and its curse; it is by justification he is brought under grace; *it is by justification that he is brought into that state in which sin shall not have dominion over him, to hold him as a slave in its service.*

We see then how much to the apostle's main purpose is what he asserts here (ver. 7), that he who is justified is dead, viz. with Christ is justified

from sin. It is a principle he improves to great account in the following discourse; and the mention of being justified is in this place exceedingly congruent and fit. It was against his doctrine of justification by grace through faith, and not by works, that the objection (ver. 1) was brought, as if it favoured men's continuing in sin. In opposition to this, the apostle, by the principle he lays down here (ver. 7), and by what he derives from it in his following discourse, shows that *justification through faith doth indeed deliver a man from sin, with respect to its legal reign and its practical dominion at once*. How unreasonable then, to charge such a doctrine with favouring sin!

There is this advantage likewise by the explication given of ver. 7 that it gives to justification in that verse the precise meaning the word hath in all the apostle's preceding discourse on the subject of justification.

Fraser then goes on to compare Paul's usage of justification in Rom 6:7 to its usage in Acts 13:39. Basically, justification includes or is even synonymous with liberation. It includes what John Murray called "definitive sanctification."

Essentially, then, for Fraser justification does not promote licentiousness because justification *includes* deliverance from the reign of sin. Justification includes not only a transfer of Christ's legal standing to believers, but also a transfer of the believer from the realm of sin's reign to the kingdom of Christ, in which grace reigns through righteousness. Fraser was certainly not the only Puritan to read Rom. 6:7 in this "forensic plus" sort of way and this reading continues to be popular in Reformed circles.

### 38.

Alastair Roberts pointed out the following Wright quotation to me, commenting on Phil. 3:

The first of these (the status of being 'in Christ') is particularly important, and is the theme of verse 9, which sums up a good deal that he says at more length in Romans and Galatians. Paul draws out the contrast, the same contrast he's been talking about throughout the passage, between those who are regarded as members of God's covenant people because they possess, and try to keep, the Jewish law, the Torah, and those who are regarded as members of God's covenant family because of what the Messiah has done. In 2:8 he described the Messiah's achievement as his 'obedience, even unto death'; here he describes it as his 'faithfulness'; but the two mean substantially the same thing. And the way we share in 'the Messiah's faithfulness' is by our 'faith'. Our belief that the crucified and risen Jesus is the Messiah, the Lord of the world, and our loyalty to him, are the sign and badge that we have a credit balance consisting simply of him, over against all the debits we



could ever have from anywhere else. This is Paul's famous doctrine of 'justification by faith', which continues to be a comfort and a challenge to millions around the world.

'Justification' isn't just about how someone becomes a Christian . . . .  
(*Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters*, 120-1).

These remarks come quite close to traditional formulations, as Al pointed out to me, as well as displaying Wright's fresh insight. Wright says Jesus' life of faithfulness (sometimes called his "active obedience" in Reformed dogmatics) is credited to us, canceling out and overcoming whatever debts we might owe because of our sin. (There's nothing more traditional in Reformed scholastic discussions of justification than these sorts of accounting metaphors!) But Wright adds to the conventional picture something that has been missing, namely the dimension of covenant membership. At the beginning of Phil. 3, covenant membership is obviously the issue: Paul's mentions the circumcision party (those who continued to insist on circumcision for covenant membership) and his standing as a Jew among Jews. But Paul has renounced those sorts of fleshly ways of identifying the people of God. Now union with Christ by faith is all that counts. In him, the eschatological hope the Jews held out for comes to realization.

### 39.

When Paul was still known as Saul, was he a good man or a bad man? On the one hand, we find that he claims to have been blameless according to the law (Phil. 3). On the other hand, he says he was a blasphemer and persecutor (1 Tim. 1).

One solution to the apparent contradiction is to say that Phil. 3 represents Paul's *self*-evaluation at that time. In other words, prior to his conversion-call (I intentionally use both terms here), he saw himself as righteous according to the standards of Torah. In reality, Paul was much like the other Pharisees we see in the gospels – full of self-righteous hypocrisy. In 1 Tim. 1, we have his *Christian* evaluation of his life before the Damascus Road experience. On this reading, there is no doubt: Had Saul been run over by a speeding camel before being stopped in his tracks by the risen Jesus, he would have gone straight to hell.

Another solution is a bit more complex. We can be certain that once Saul encountered the message of Christians like Stephen, he rejected the gospel in unbelief. Like other Jews, he was offended by the notion of a crucified Messiah. Thus, he *began* to blaspheme at that point in time. When he could not refute Stephen – and especially when Stephen claimed to have what every Jew longed for, namely, a vision of heaven opened up to him (Acts 7) – Saul went into a covetous rage. If Paul has personal experience in view at some level (which I think he does, though I admit the text has other redemptive-historical layers as well) in Rom. 7, this may explain the role that the sin of covetousness plays in the narrative he tells about the law, sin, and death.

The picture, then, would be something like this: Saul was an upstanding covenant member in Israel, zealous for the traditions of the fathers and walking in the messianic hope of Israel. But when he was actually confronted with the shape that that hope had taken in history – the crucified Messiah – he stumbled, along with the mass of Israel. Saul’s old covenant faithfulness/blamelessness, followed by stumbling over Christ, until that same Christ finally restores his, becomes a miniature type of Israel’s story (Rom. 11).

This reading preserves the truth of both Phil. 3 and 1 Tim. 1. Saul was a true covenant member. But he apostatized when he was confronted with the Christian gospel. He refused to enter the new age by faith in Jesus because he could not wrap his mind around the thought of a Messiah who experienced curse and died at the hands of the Romans (signifying exile). Of course, even the disciples closest to Jesus struggled to understand this, despite being with him three years and receiving explicit teaching, so Saul’s struggle is very comprehensible.

Moreover, like other Jews, Saul probably rebelled against the new Christian teaching because it meant that Jews would lose their “most favored nation” status in God’s eyes. The fact that Christians were very quickly relativizing Torah’s requirements and even preaching to Gentiles and accepting Gentile converts as brothers was simply too much to take (Acts 6ff).

When Saul was confronted by Jesus on the Damascus Road he was forced to admit that the Crucified One was now enthroned at God’s right hand as Lord of glory. He was also forced to recognize that he was persecuting the people of the Messiah, the new Israel. He realized that from the time he encountered Stephen onwards, he had become a blasphemer. In retrospect, his actions made him the greatest of sinners. As an expert in the Hebrew Scriptures, he should have known better! He pridefully joined in Stephen’s execution rather than humbly admitting that Stephen had won the argument.

This way of putting the pieces together allows us to take *both* Phil. 3 and 1 Tim. 1 at face value. Saul had been a faithful covenant member for a time and then fell away. When he was blinded on the road to Damascus, he was restored to faith and moved into the new, messianic age.

This fits with other details in the NT. After all, Paul does indicate that Israel was walking in the covenant *until* Jesus came and provoked the mass of the nation to apostasy (cf. Rom. 10). Many of the parables and discourses of Jesus indicate the same pattern. This may also account for the fact that the Pharisaical party was theologically orthodox, but (became) deeply hypocritical (Mt. 23). The presence of Jesus drew that hypocrisy out into the open where it could be dealt with.

I admit this alternative picture is not totally satisfactory. Not every piece of evidence fits my hypothesis, at least on a broader, national scale (and perhaps not for Saul/Paul individually considered either). For example, according to John the Baptist, Israel is

already unfaithful before Jesus begins his public ministry (Mt. 3). We'd also have to ask why Jesus continually ran into demons in the synagogues. When did the nation become so widely demon possessed? Does our knowledge of second temple Judaism shed any light on this? I do not have all the answers, but this is a thesis that deserves at least some exploration.

#### 40.

John Calvin said the formula *sola fide* "is true and yet false, according to the different senses it bears." Calvin's support of the *Regensburg Book*, in which Lutherans (Melanchthon), Reformed (Calvin and Bucer), and Romanists (Eck) came to agreement on justification (using a double justification formula) also shows his willingness to nuance the doctrine.<sup>13</sup> Too bad so few Calvinists share his spirit today. We have become more concerned about protecting certain cherished formulations than the biblical content of the gospel itself. We have lost Calvin's ability to nuance, to hold varying truths in tension, and to work towards unity with theologians who may have alternative approaches to the same scriptural teaching. May God restore among us a Calvinism is that true to Calvin himself and worthy of his venerable name!

#### 41.

For too long, the Bible has been read through the lens of individualism and experientialism. Getting hold of the corporate and redemptive-historical dimensions of Paul's thought better helps us understand how Old Testament passages like Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36-37 have come to fulfillment in Christ. These sorts of passage are regularly individualized and psychologized, and therefore ripped from their covenantal context.

The old covenant was "stone hearted" – that is to say, its central feature was the "Word made stone" in the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments were deposited in the Ark of the Covenant in the center of the tabernacle/temple. Everyone in the ancient world knew that temples were microcosms of both the universe and the individual person (especially the High Priest). The Most Holy Place contained the "heart" of the Old Covenant, namely, the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments. (The centrality of the Ten Commandments to the Sinaitic/Mosaic covenant is obvious from a careful reading of Exodus.)

Thus, when Ezekiel speaks of the Lord removing Israel's heart of stone (note that it's singular!), he's not saying every person living under the Old Covenant regime was wicked and hard-hearted, nor that they would all undergo an individual conversion experience when the new covenant arrived. Rather, he's saying they were tied to an inferior, preliminary covenant system centered in the tabernacle/temple. He's referring to the covenant document engraved on tablets of stone at the center Israelite society.

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<sup>13</sup> See Lillback, *The Binding of God*, 190ff.

The promise of a heart of flesh is fulfilled in the incarnation, as Jim Jordan has shown:<sup>14</sup> “The Word was made flesh and tabernacled among us” (Jn. 1:14). Jesus himself is the heart of the New Covenant. What the stony heart of the law could not do, the Word-in-Flesh has done (cf. Rom. 8:1-4). He has established a new covenant and formed a new community.<sup>15</sup>

It’s critical to notice that promises such as those in Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36-37 are given to a community *in exile*. The promises of a new heart and a new covenant are really promises of a *new exodus*, as corroboration with Isaiah (especially chapters 40-66) reveals. Thus, when these prophecies are appropriated by Paul and applied to the church (e.g., 2 Cor. 3; Heb. 8), his point is clear: The church is God’s promised New Israel, the community the prophets spoke about ahead of time. Just as Israel was sprinkled with water and blood in the Mosaic exodus (cf. Ps. 77:17, 1 Cor. 10; Ex. 24), so we have received a greater water and blood sprinkling – the promised baptism of the Spirit and the blood of Christ (cf. Ezek. 36:25, Acts 2, 1 Pt. 1:2). The covenant of stone is now an epistle of flesh; the church herself is the living letter and temple of the new age. The stony Ten Commandments (or, better, Ten Words) have been replaced by Christ himself, who is the Word made flesh and the heart of the new covenant. Through union with him, the new covenant community is itself the enfleshment of the new word of the gospel (cf. 2 Cor.3).

This also factors into our reading of John 3.<sup>16</sup> In the redemptive historical sense, no one was born again, or born from above, until Jesus came. Old covenant saints looked ahead to the new creation by faith, but did not yet experience it in fullness. In that sense they were still “in Adam,” who was made “from below,” from the dust of the earth. Jesus is the pre-eminent Born Again One, the One Born From Heaven. He is born of water and Spirit, not the dry dust of the earth, as his Virginal Conception proves. In union with him, we share in this new creation existence. We too have been born again, from above.

The term “regeneration” is only used twice in the New Testament and in neither place does it function in the way it has come to be used in Reformed systematics for a “transubstantiated heart,” as Jordan has calls it. In Matthew 19:28, the “regeneration” is identified as the new kingdom age Jesus came to inaugurate. Jesus himself is the embodiment of this regeneration; in union with him, his people also become a new creation (cf. 2 Cor. 5:17). From Tit. 3:5, we can surmise that we enter this new creation through the waters of baptism. As we are washed with water from above, we are united in covenant with the Savior (cf. Rom. 6). Thus, technically, no one was “regenerate” under the old covenant. Regeneration, in the Bible’s vocabulary, refers to a corporate and redemptive historical reality co-extensive with the new covenant. “Regeneration” is, essentially, union with the glorified Christ by the Spirit, through faith.

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<sup>14</sup> See his essay, “Thought on Sovereign Grace and Regeneration.”

<sup>15</sup> As Jordan has argued elsewhere, the restoration prophecies came to a preliminary fulfillment in Israel’s return from exile. And yet it is obvious that Israel was still in some sense in the old age and in need of an even greater prophetic fulfillment. For the purposes of simplicity, we will focus on the old covenant/new covenant relationship, and essentially ignore the restoration-from-exile covenant.

<sup>16</sup> Again, Jordan’s essay, referenced above, is very helpful here.

John 3, therefore, is not a discussion about personal soteriology as such. Rather, Jesus is making a point about redemptive history and wonders aloud why Israel's best teacher cannot grasp it. Nicodemus should have seen that the promises of Ezekiel and the other prophets required a great change in redemptive history, not just a change in the hearts of individuals.

Unfortunately, much of modern evangelicalism has truncated God's saving work, reducing it to the individual's private experience. Reading Scripture in a redemptive-historical, promise-to-fulfillment framework enables us to break free of this individualistic bias and see the "big picture" of what God has done, is doing, and will do.

## 42.

The NPP also sheds light on what the NT means by the "mystery" of God. The mystery theme is quite pervasive in the apostolic writings, and shows up across genre lines, in the gospels, the epistles, and Revelation.

In Scripture mysteries do not have to do with things that are eerie or spooky. Instead they have to do with things that were previously veiled, but that have now been revealed. Specifically, mysteries often have to do with *two becoming one*. For example, Paul says the incarnation is a mystery because the two natures – deity and humanity – have been conjoined in one person (1 Tim. 3:16). Marriage is a mystery because the two – husband and wife, or Christ and the church – become one flesh (Eph. 5:32).

The church is a mystery as well (Eph. 3:8) because in it the two people groups of the old world – Jew and Gentile – are married together into Christ. They become one flesh, one new man. Paul, as apostle of the mystery, is something of a matchmaker. His preaching coalesces Jews and Gentiles into the New Covenant society. In his epistles, he becomes something of a marriage counselor, helping the "newly weds" deal with problems stemming from the baggage each has brought into the relationship (e.g., Rom 14).

The usage of mystery throughout the NT brings out some interesting connections. In Mk. 4:11ff, the mystery of the kingdom is that most Israel is bad soil and will not receive the word of Jesus. This is why Jesus cites Isa. 6: He is explaining why his messianic mission to Israel will appear to "fail."

In Eph. 3:5-6, the mystery is the revelation that Gentiles are now fellow partakers of the promises with the Jews, so that there is no longer any Jew/Gentile distinction in the New Covenant community. In Col. 1:24-29 and Rom. 16:25-27, Paul announces that it is his calling (as apostle to the Gentiles) to make this once-secret mystery public by proclaiming it far and wide. In Rom. 11:25-26, we find the mystery has to do with the "dance" of Jew and Gentile as one people group is largely cut out to make room for another to be grafted in, with the ultimate goal that both people groups would experience redemption together in the same covenant tree.

In Rev. 10:1-7, the mystery appears to be Jesus uniting Jew and Gentile (symbolized by land and sea) in inaugurating the New Covenant. When this union of two peoples into one is completed, the mystery of God is finished (cf. Rev. 11:15).

However, the mystery is more than simply the inclusion of the Gentiles. It means Jew and Gentile together, in and through Christ, have entered the promised new age and have received the treasures of the kingdom, including access to the heavenly sanctuary. This is why the lowest New Covenant Gentile believer has a status above and beyond the greatest Old Covenant Jew, John the Baptist (cf. Mt. 11).

### 43.

Many texts become more perspicuous if we keep in mind the possibility – and indeed ubiquity – of Gentile God-fearers in the Old Covenant. After the special covenant with Israel is set up, Gentiles are not altogether excluded from the hope of salvation. Israel's special status in God's economy did not mean she alone could receive salvation, and that if Gentiles wanted to be saved they had to first become Jews. Rather, Israel is set aside as the special priestly people precisely so she can minister salvation to the nations around her. She is distinct, yes, in part, to keep her pure. But she was not to be isolated from the nations altogether. She was to be a light to nations, extending God's grace to them. Even in the Old Covenant, Israel was to have a missional existence. Salvation would come through her since the covenant seed-line had been entrusted to her, the oracles of God had been delivered through her prophets, the sacrificial system and temple were hers, and so on. But these privileges were held on behalf of the nations, not as an end in themselves.

We find Gentiles *who chose to remain Gentiles* trusting in Israel's God all over the OT. There was no reason for a Gentile who worshipped YHWH to submit to circumcision, unless he wanted to take up the priestly mantle himself. Melchizedek, Ishmael, Abimelech, Joseph's Pharaoh, the Egyptian mid-wives, Jethro, Naman the Syrian, Obed-edom, Hiram of Tyre, Uriah the Hittite, the Queen of Sheba, Nebuchadnezzar, Jonah's Ninevites, and so on, all show us that the grace of God was not confined to the boundaries of Israel. In Numbers 15, we find Gentiles are permitted to participate in the sacrificial system. In fact the only OT rite Gentiles were excluded from as Gentiles was Passover. Their inclusion in the scope of God's redemptive grace was manifested in the Feast of Tabernacles, in which 70 bulls were offered during the festival for the 70 nations of the world (cf. Gen. 10).

These Gentile God-fearers are referred to in Ps. 118:2-4, and other places in the Psalter where the nations are called upon to praise God. 1 Chron. 16 calls on Gentiles to join in the worship of YHWH at David's tabernacle. Though it is a controversial text, I think those Paul refers to in Rom. 2 who keep the law though they do not have the law are Old Covenant Gentile God-fearers. (Wright follows Cranfield in viewing these law-keepers as New Covenant Gentile Christians, but viewing them as Old Covenant Gentile God-fearers makes better sense of the historical flow of the passage.)

In Rom. 4, Paul says Abraham was initially justified as a Gentile, prior to his circumcision. Paul takes this as a basis for describing the two-fold fatherhood of Abraham. Again, I think these two faith-families existed in the Old Covenant; now in Christ they have been merged into one family (cf. Gal. 3). The Genesis narrative itself bears this out: After Sarah's death, Abraham remarries and has another, non-Jewish "faith family."

In Acts we find Gentile God-fearers as well, such as the Ethiopian eunuch who had been in Jerusalem to celebrate a liturgical feast and who was reading from Isaiah; and Cornelius, whose devotion to the God of Israel is evident from his life of prayer and service (Acts 8, 10-11). In these cases, the "conversion" narratives we find in Acts aren't about conversion at all. They are about non-Jews entering the blessedness of the new creation. They move from God-fearers to full-fledged members of the new messianic priestly community.

All this is to say that dividing the body up into "haves" and "have-nots" strikes at the heart of the mystery of the gospel. Jews wrongly assumed their "most favored nation" status would be permanent. They believed it would endure into the messianic age. Jews were offended by the gospel, in large measure, precisely because it challenged their unique status. It confronted their pride and their supposed monopoly on God's gifts. In some cases it may have also offended their commitment to some kind of "merit" theology, but the main issue on the table in the NT is the status of the old Israel in light of God's new work among the Gentiles.

#### 44.

Critics of the NPP, and especially of Wright, could perhaps be soothed if they came to a better understanding of precisely what the NP is doing to our understanding of Paul. Michael Thompson's fine little booklet, *The New Perspective on Paul*, defuses some misconceptions about the NPP's threat to Protestant orthodoxy: "[T]o my knowledge, no proponent of an NP reading denies that Paul taught justification by grace through faith in Christ. Likewise, no NP proponent as far as I am aware denies that Paul would also have rejected any notion that a person can *earn* salvation." What's at stake is whether or not Paul's *opponents* believed in earning salvation. But even if Paul is not dealing with Pelagianism in a first order kind of way, he has still provided more than enough theological material to work out a robust condemnation of Pelagianism. The NPP is not opening the back door to a works-righteousness program.

We need to carefully distinguish *exegesis* from *theology*. The NPP scholars – Wright, Dunn, etc. – are doing exegetical work on the Pauline texts. Reformed scholars – especially those who have been critical of Wright – are doing theology. Obviously the two pursuits are related, but their agendas and vocabularies may differ significantly. Exegetes will set their own questions aside and try to determine what questions Paul himself asked and how he answered them. Theologians bring their own set of questions to text and seek to draw out answers. *Exegesis* is concerned with the meaning of a text; theology (as defined here) deals with its *application* of the text to a specific problem.

This is why it isn't enough to scan Wright's corpus, looking for "imputation" language. We must look at the concepts he is working with, whatever he may call them. Wright may configure the content of "justification" differently than Reformed theology has, but everything the Reformed doctrine contains can be found in Wright in one place or another. This is why Wright's supporters often feel he's being misread – an alien grid is being imposed on him, rather than allowing him to speak on his own terms and in his own terms.

#### 45.

I am certainly not qualified to evaluate Sanders' conclusions regarding Second Temple Judaism's pattern of religion. I think he is helpful in correcting Christian distortions of Judaism, which in some cases have led to wretched and wicked mistreatment of Jews.

But I daresay Sanders wouldn't recognize legalism even if it was staring him in the face. Whatever the exegetical problems our Reformed forebears may have had, they were not nearly as pastorally naïve as Sanders. He says the Jews believed in electing grace. They knew they had not merited God's choice or favor. They could earn something they already had, after all. Fair enough. But if Judaism, as Sanders portrays it, believed "getting in" was by grace and "staying in" was by works, then Judaism had a legalistic strain after all. Both getting in and staying in covenant are matters of grace (cf. Gal. 3:1-2). We must do good works to abide in the covenant, but such obedience is never the product of autonomous human effort (Phil. 2:12-13).

My guess that is first century Jews professed to believe in grace all the way down, though they also insisted on "works of Torah" to remain within the covenant. To a large extent, that pattern is isomorphic with Paul's view of salvation: works don't save, but they are necessary to salvation as the fruit of grace and faith (Eph. 2:8-10). Sanders' descriptions of Judaism at times resonate with what we hear Paul saying.

But as PCA Pastor Stewart Jordan has suggested, while the Jews may have known better than to think in terms of *individualistic merit*, they certainly created a *culture of merit*. The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector is the perfect illustration. The Pharisee is bursting with pride even as he *thanks God* for his virtues (Lk. 18). It is obvious from the pages of the NT that the Jewish community was filled with rivalry, pride, dissension, betrayal, and unfaithfulness.

There is a critical lesson here for us. As Calvinists, we know salvation is by grace alone. But we can still create a culture of merit in which doctrinal knowledge, extra-biblical lifestyle choices, and so forth create an in-group and an out-group in our churches. Or even worse, our churches themselves become in-groups, identified by all kinds of secondary doctrines and practices. At that point, no matter how much we protest against Pelagianism, we are drifting into Phariseeism and Galatianism. We have become sectarian rather than catholic.



The point of the NPP, as I see it, is not that we need to have a brighter, more positive outlook on first century Judaism. The Holocaust was very wicked and to the extent that Christians have harbored ungodly bitterness and prejudice against Semites, we should be sensitive and seek forgiveness when necessary. But post-Holocaust guilt cannot be allowed to drive the agenda of NT scholarship. The picture of Judaism painted by the NT is not pretty. Jesus and Paul challenged the Jews, especially their leadership, head on. Jesus destroyed the temple in 70 A. D., once and for all punishing Israel for her covenant infidelity.

Rather, the NPP has opened our eyes to see more clearly the basic issues Paul confronted in his letters. In the NPP understanding, Paul still opposes Judaism with just as much vigor as in the traditional picture. His grounds for doing so are slightly altered, but the opposition is still there. Sanders may draw all kinds of unorthodox conclusions about the possibility of salvation for non-Christian Jews, but those things are not built into the NPP itself. If anything, the NPP pushes us in just the opposite direction: it argues that being Jewish is not sufficient in itself for salvation since salvation is for any and all ethnic groups, Jew and Gentile, only in Christ.

Finally, I think a lot of Reformed brethren are making rather hasty judgments about the NPP, and especially Wright. The NPP is very difficult to understand for a typical Reformed theologian. There is a great deal of literature to master and the movement is quite diverse. Understanding the NPP requires a significant paradigm shift. It requires a new set of categories. A lot of men are proclaiming this or that about the NPP, and it is obvious they really don't know that they are talking about. I would suggest that anyone who wants to criticize the NPP needs to first take the time to give the major works of Wright a careful, sustained, and sympathetic reading. Thielman, Garlington, Hays, and Witherington should also be consulted. Michael Thompson's small booklet on the NPP should be read. Then, if one wants to make deep and engaging criticisms of the NPP, he may do so. I certainly have criticisms of the movement as a whole, as well as individual theologians within the movement. But critiques "from the outside," that show a very shallow grasp of the real issues, are unlikely to do anyone any good. Instead they just enflame passion and suspicion apart from knowledge.