The Wright way to read Paul

By Doug Harink in the December 1, 2009 issue

In Review

Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision

N. T. Wright
InterVarsity

Few theologians are doing more to change the face of Protestant (particularly evangelical) theology than N. T. Wright. A world-class New Testament scholar,

former professor at Cambridge, McGill and Oxford, author of numerous scholarly articles, essays and (very large) books, Wright has not confined himself to the halls of academia. He is bishop of Durham in the Church of England and involved in all of the administrative, pastoral and political tasks that such a post requires. Yet he continues to turn out many books, not only for scholars but also for ordinary Christians. His work is consistently bold, creative and controversial.

Justification is no exception. It is likely to become his most controversial book to date, for it offers a fundamentally new reading of a doctrine at the center of Protestant and evangelical theology.

What is wrong with the traditional Protestant doctrine of justification? At least two things, according to Wright. First, it tends on the whole to be highly individualized and spiritualized: it is focused on “my relationship with God” and on “going to heaven when I die,” which are made possible when God imputes his own righteousness or the righteousness of Christ to the sinner who has faith that Christ has taken human sin upon himself and died a sacrificial, substitutionary death on our behalf. Through faith in Christ’s atoning death, the traditional belief is, we are saved, apart from any “works” we might do to try to earn salvation. Salvation (going to heaven and being assured of that) is purely a matter of God’s justifying grace.

The second thing wrong with that doctrine of justification, according to Wright, is that it is a massive exegetical failure; it has thoroughly dehistoricized, de-Judaized and “decovenantalized” Paul’s theology. Traditional justification doctrine can be explicated virtually without reference to creation, God’s covenant with Abraham, Israel’s history and hopes, or the relationship between Jews and gentiles in the early Christian movement.

Rooted (or, according to Wright, entrenched) in Augustinian and Reformation traditions, contemporary evangelical proponents of the traditional doctrine—discussed in *Justification* particularly as represented by the American Reformed theologian John Piper, who has launched a vigorous attack on Wright’s work—more or less reject the methods and conclusions of the “new perspective on Paul” (NP) that was pioneered and championed by E. P. Sanders, James D. G. Dunn and Wright himself.

NP is all about contextualizing Paul’s theology thoroughly within Jewish and Roman history, within Second Temple Judaism, and (especially important for Wright) within

Jewish covenantal theology. In Wright's version of NP, Paul's Jewish covenantal vision embraces, presupposes and explicates God's long-unfolding plan to redeem and renew all of creation through the biblical history running from Abraham and Israel to the Messiah and the church. Wright repeatedly uses the (admittedly awkward) phrase "God's-single-plan-through-Israel-for-the-world" to signify this covenantal-historical plan. Individual believers certainly have their place in that plan, but they are not at the center of the story as they are in traditional justification doctrine.

What, then, is justification for Wright? He presents his understanding of the doctrine on the basis of extensive study of first-century Judaism and Paul's reworking of core Jewish themes in the aftermath of the coming of the Messiah. Well over half of the book is taken up with exegesis of the justification passages in the Pauline letters. The covenant with Abraham (Genesis 15) is crucial for Paul. In that covenant God promises through Abraham's "worldwide family" to deal with the plight of humankind as narrated in Genesis 3-11: to liberate humanity from the destructive effects of sin in individuals and the whole (now fractured) human community.

The meaning of justification (*dikaiosis*) must be discerned within this covenantal framework. To be "righteous" (*dikaios*) just means to be *a member of Abraham's family*. In the language of the law court, "righteous" is the verdict which God pronounces over Abraham and his worldwide family (Genesis 15:6) because of Abraham's faith. God justifies (*dikaio¯o*) it. Unlike the traditional notion of justification in which righteousness is "imputed" to individuals, the verdict of righteousness declares the status of *dikaiosyn¯e* upon members of the covenant family—those who believe, as Abraham did.

God's righteousness is God's own faithfulness to the covenant with Abraham and through that with Israel and the whole creation, culminating in the sending of the Messiah. Jesus' own faithful death as the Messiah (the meaning of *pistis Jesou Christou*) offers up both Israel's and humankind's response of faithfulness to the covenant. In him, therefore, righteousness is fulfilled on both sides of the covenant. He is the Righteous One in whom alone the "worldwide family" of Abraham has its basis.

For Paul, faith in Jesus Christ—faith brought about by the eschatological gift and power of the Holy Spirit—rather than "works of Torah" (i.e., being Jewish) is the badge of membership in Abraham's family, in which, through Christ, both Jews and

gentiles share on the same basis—namely faith. The church embodies and testifies to God's reconciling and healing mission toward the whole human community.

Faith is thus our means of sharing in justification in the present. But faith also anticipates God's final act of eschatological justification, when God makes all things right. *Dikaiosyn¯e* is the final hope not only of Christians and the church, but also of all humanity and all creation.

That is just a bare sketch of the Pauline doctrine of justification as Wright sees it. Set against this vision—a vision that includes the sweep of biblical narrative, the mission and history of Israel, the social and political mission of the Messiah and the church, and the hope of redemption for all creation—the traditional doctrine of justification appears unbearably thin, abstract and irrelevant to all but the individual believer concerned about a "right relationship with God" and about "going to heaven."

For that very reason the traditional doctrine is increasingly losing its grip on the theological imagination of younger ecclesially, socially and politically engaged evangelicals. The proponents of the traditional doctrine are "running scared" and launching more and more desperate attacks on Wright and the "new perspective on Paul." By contrast, Wright says, there are more and more people "who, not from a love of novelty . . . but from a genuine hunger for spiritual and theological depth, grab on for dear life to the perspectives I have tried to offer."

He is right. For good reason his impact on contemporary evangelical theology—and beyond—is already huge, and growing.

Nevertheless, some caveats about Wright's project are necessary. First, he exudes almost unbounded confidence in his ability to read Paul straight, as it were—to give us (as the title of one of Wright's earlier books claims) "what Saint Paul really said."

"The text is the text," Wright declares over and over again, which for him means that once all the study of the technical terms has been done, and one has examined the "controlling narratives" and Paul's use of scriptural quotations, "eventually you arrive at the position of saying, 'Stand *here*; look at things in *this* light; keep in mind *this* great biblical theme, and then you will see that Paul has said exactly what he meant, neither more nor less.'"

Is this hermeneutical naïveté, or hubris? Whatever it is, it lends to many sections of the book—particularly the first three chapters—an imperious and schoolmasterly

tone that must try the patience of all but the most loyal fans.

With those strong claims Wright is almost able to hide the way in which his interpretation depends on a massive theological construct which he brings to the reading of Paul. That is, the grand covenantal-historical narrative that provides for him the hermeneutical key that unlocks all Pauline doors is nowhere straightforwardly set forth in Paul's letters. Wright has built it up out of earlier scholarly studies of Second Temple Judaism and then discerned it everywhere in Paul—reworked in the light of Christ, to be sure. That hermeneutical move is on display on virtually every page in this book, and every important exegetical argument depends on it.

He is, of course, right to claim that proponents of the "old perspective" im pose a theological construct on Paul. But his own reading of Paul, while more illuminating than the old way, is also a construct.

We should also be aware that there are scholars who criticize the traditional reading of Paul and make appreciative use of NP, but who don't end up where Wright does. You would not know that by reading *Justification*.

One of the most significant of these alternative (and to my mind more compelling) readings is the apocalyptic interpretation of Paul. Scholars currently associated with this orientation (J. C. Beker, J. L. Martyn, Martinus de Boer, Beverly Gaventa, Douglas Campbell, to name a few) do more than utter "howls of protest" against Wright's covenantal-historical approach. Like Wright, they engage in careful historical research, produce detailed commentaries and write large-scale interpretations (including Campbell's own massive attack on the traditional doctrine of justification).

Apocalyptic interpretation of Paul disputes Wright's proposal that a grand, long-unfolding, covenantal-historical narrative lies behind Paul's every theological move. They emphasize the fact that the crucified Jesus of Nazareth is the risen, exalted and glorified Messiah of God, and that this was an utter interruption and destruction of any covenantal narrative that might have informed Paul the Pharisee. That fact destroyed—crucified—Paul's world, and he himself died to that world. Galatians 6:14 registers the apocalyptic shock of the cross for Paul, a shock that left nothing intact.

In light of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus as God and Lord, according to this perspective, Paul discerns that there is no forward momentum in any aspect of cosmic or human history, including the covenantal history of Israel. "God's

plan”—strangely, as Paul himself confesses—amounts to subjecting every aspect of creation and human and even covenantal life under the enslaving powers of sin and death, the “principalities and powers,” the “elemental principles of the *kosmos*.” That is the dark vision throughout Paul’s Letter to the Romans.

The history of the gentiles is one of decline, idolatry, disorder and enslavement (Rom. 1:18-32), an enslavement to which “God handed them over.” Even those to whom Torah was given as a covenantal blessing do not do what the Torah requires (Rom. 2:17-29). In Adam, that singular representative human being, the whole human race fell under the “dominion” of sin and death through his one act of disobedience (Rom. 5:12-21). The person “under Torah,” discovering that even Torah itself has been enslaved by sin, finally loses the struggle against sin, and is overcome by death (Rom. 7). Creation is going nowhere but to death and decay, to which it has been “subjected” (Rom. 8:19-22). And stunningly, even Israel, the chosen bearer of all of the gifts of God, is finally “imprisoned” by God, together with all the gentile peoples, in disobedience (Rom. 9-11; see 11:32).

This is not a story of creation and history and covenant “going somewhere,” as Wright repeatedly insists, but a story of idolatry, disobedience and enslavement under the powers of destruction. This is “the present evil age” of which Paul speaks in Galatians 1:4 from which we cannot expect a hidden and surprising outcome, but from which we need deliverance. For Paul, *dikaiosis*, justification, is always in the first place that radical divine deliverance. If the proponents of traditional justification theory often worry that Wright is in some sense too optimistic about creational and covenantal history, they appear to have Romans on their side.

It is, then, not through the history of creation and covenant that God brings about the messianic age, but against it and for it. Paul does not counter the litany of idolatry, decline and disobedience of Romans 1-3 with an account of what God was doing all along beneath the surface, unseen by us. He announces the radically unanticipated “But now” of the gospel (Rom. 3:21), which occurs “apart from Torah”—apart from covenant history.

Abraham and Sarah put their trust not in the long- unfolding history of the covenantal promise, but in the God “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist” (Rom. 4:17). God counters the disobedience of the first Adam not with a progressive covenantal development over time, but with a Second Adam (Rom. 5:12-21). The human struggle with sin and its captive servant,

the Torah, is victorious only through “rescue” from “this body of death,” “through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom. 7:24-25). Only the Spirit of God delivers us from condemnation and fear and sets us joyfully within the family of God (Rom. 8:1-16). Creation itself, subjected to death and decay, waits with eager longing for redemption from its own bondage. And Israel, that divinely elected bearer of the gifts and covenants of God, must finally not trust in its own historical achievement, but wait for “the Deliverer [who] will come from Zion,” the singular messianic agent of God’s covenant-keeping mercy who brings about the final rectification (*dikaiosis*) of all things, as the demonstration of God’s righteousness (*dikaiosyn¯e*) (Rom. 11:26-27, 32).

For Paul, creation, human history and the covenant people are not saved through a hidden promise and its historically unfolding and ultimately revealed and realized fulfillment; they are saved through death and resurrection.

As I noted, Wright’s core complaint against traditional justification theory and the “old perspective” on Paul has to do with its individualist, spiritualist, dualist tendencies. Justification, in the traditional mode of thinking, is for and about individuals seeking a right relationship with God, and it is essentially a means of escape from creation and history. By contrast, Wright offers us a “hopeful” vision of creation and history “going somewhere,” in which we are called to participate—a history culminating in the coming (and second coming) of the Messiah, which brings about the justification of individual believers and finally of the covenant people and creation. The apocalyptic interpretation, for its part, discerns the gospel of justification in the messianic- apocalyptic deliverance of all things and all peoples (including Israel as Israel) from cosmic and historical enslavement, into the glorious freedom of God the Father in the Son through the Spirit.

Wright displays abundant confidence that both “God’s Plan and Paul’s Vision” (as his subtitle puts it) are eminently explicable. As a cautionary note about “God’s plan,” we might simply refer all Paul interpreters to Paul’s own disclaimer in Romans 11:33-36. About “Paul’s vision” we might point to the ongoing conflict of interpretations of Paul—old perspective, new perspective, apocalyptic and others—which suggests that the vision of the apostle of justification remains, despite our efforts, somewhat beyond our grasp.