

THE NEW PERSPECTIVE ON PAUL, N.T. WRIGHT, AND A DEFENSE
OF THE TRADITIONAL PROTESTANT UNDERSTANDING OF THE
DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION

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Certain Protestant scholars have recently accused the Reformers of misunderstanding Paul's teaching on the doctrine of justification. They have attacked the traditional doctrine of justification and claim that the Protestant church has erred in its teaching on the topic. Some believe that the misunderstanding of justification started with Augustine, which many reformed would affirm, and multiplied during the Reformation.¹ One of the leading critics who support the New Perspective on Paul is N.T. Wright. This paper will expound upon Wright's understanding of Paul with a focus on justification and defend the traditional Protestant doctrine based on biblical passages and Reformed confessions. The central theme is that Wright has understood that "works of the law" kept by Jews in the first-century were not intended to merit salvation but only kept as badges of being covenant members that maintained their status and contributed to their final justification. A long look at Wright's understanding of justification as covenant membership while defending the traditional reformed doctrine, with a central focus on imputation of the righteousness of Christ to the believer is crucial in gaining an accurate understanding of this doctrine.

Justification and Covenant Membership

"Justification...is not a matter of how someone enters the community of the true people of God, but of how you tell who belongs to that community".² This sentence is enough to confuse anyone who has grown up under the

¹ N Wright, *What St Paul really said* (Oxford: Lion, 1997), 115.

² *Ibid.*, 119.

traditional Protestant understanding of justification. Wright claims that justification shouldn't be thought of in terms of soteriology, but ecclesiology; not about getting in, but about staying in.³ One will quickly realize that this clashes with the Reformed understanding that justification is a once-for-all act whereby the sinner is declared righteous through the instrument of faith by the righteousness of Jesus Christ; in other words it's about getting in. Therefore the traditional understanding believes that justification is about soteriology and sanctification would fall more under the banner of ecclesiology as one progressively grows in holiness through the means of grace in the church. The root of the problem lies within Wright's definition of *dikaiosune* ("righteousness") and *dikaioo* ("justify"). One will not find a lexicon which defines *dikaiosune* as "membership within a group" or *dikaioo* as "to make or declare the member of a group" and this is what Wright bases much of his interpretation on.⁴ He even goes so far as to translate passages replacing "righteousness" with the term "covenant membership", which obviously breeds confusion!⁵

Through the lens of Wright's understanding, justification is a declaration of one being a member of the covenant, not about an individual's salvation. Wright is correct in understanding justification as declarative but he denies that it changes anything. Wright says, "The word *dikaioo* [justify] is...a declarative

³ Ibid.

⁴ C.E. Hill, "N.T. Wright on Justification" (n.d.), <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/nt-wright-justification/>.

⁵ Wright, *What St Paul really said*, 124.

word, declaring that something is the case, rather than a word for making something happen or changing the way something is.”⁶ Paul seems to not agree with this based on Romans 5:1, which reads, “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” It is obvious here that justification within the life of an individual has changed them and brought them into the covenant community. Justification is a declarative word but it is declaring that something has happened. The two ideas are so closely bound together it is impossible to separate them. Wright seems to understand that becoming part of the covenant community is the first step with justification coming later.⁷ This is simply backwards and doesn’t agree with the *ordo salutis*, which places adoption (becoming part of the family or covenant membership) after justification, not before. Wright believes that it is God’s call that brings one into the covenant, which is before justification.⁸ This idea will not stand because one has to respond in faith and repentance after receiving the call, which is the individual’s responsibility, in order to be justified.⁹ One has to be justified (forgiven and made righteous) before becoming a part of the covenant community. How can one be part of the pure, holy family of God without first being made righteous, or being justified, in his sight? Justification is the basis or

⁶ Bruce McCormack, *“New Perspectives on Paul” in Justification in perspective: historical developments and contemporary challenges* (Grand Rapids Mich. ;Edinburgh: Baker Academic ;;Rutherford House, 2006), 258.

⁷ John Piper, *The future of justification : a response to N.T. Wright* (Wheaton Ill.: Crossway Books, 2007), 43.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁹ John Murray, *Redemption : Accomplished and applied.*, Repr. (Grand Rapids Mich.: Eerdmans, 1980), 106.

prerequisite for becoming part of the covenant community, not only the declaration that one is a member.

What is the Gospel?

Wright believes that the gospel according to Paul was not about individual salvation by faith alone but it is the proclamation of Jesus as Lord.¹⁰ Here Wright is somewhat confusing. He acts as if the salvation of man is only a by-product of the mission of Jesus and His being enthroned as Lord. Of course there is a universal plan of redemption but the central part of that is the salvation of man (at least in the eyes of man it is, which is to whom the gospel is to be proclaimed to). The gospel, meaning “good news”, is not good news to man until there is an offer of salvation through Christ’s work.¹¹ An account of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection becomes good news when one realizes their part in the drama. Until then it is only a story of wrath and judgment for the sinner. Wright attempts to portray the average Protestant as one who believes he is the center of the universe and that God’s eternal plan for the world is all about him, but this simply isn’t true. Do some Protestants lack an understanding of the big picture of God bringing redemption to all things including creation (Rom. 8:21)? Of course! But can one be blamed for viewing their personal salvation as the central theme of the

¹⁰ Wright, *What St Paul really said*, 46.

¹¹ Piper, *The future of justification*, 89.

gospel? Absolutely not! This in no way diminishes the Lordship of Christ, but Wright acts as if the two can't be held together.

God's Righteousness and Imputation

One of the most crucial aspects of the debate with the New Perspective and Wright is the topic of God's righteousness and imputation. As this is central to the debate a significant amount of space must be allotted to it. Wright understands the righteousness of God as his faithfulness to the covenant and vehemently denies the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the sinner. He labors on the forensic, law-court imagery of justification and scoffs at the idea of the judge's righteousness being granted to the forgiven, but he never considers that what is not possible with a human judge is possible with God as judge. No one would argue that at times the characteristic of righteousness is based on one's faithfulness to the other party within the covenant, but this isn't the case every time. Was God not righteous before he made the covenant with Israel? God is righteous and so is the one who believes in Christ as seen in the following verse discussed. In defending his view, once again he translates one of the most critical verses of Paul in favor of imputation to support his theory. Instead of believers becoming the "the righteousness of God" in 2 Corinthians 5:21, Wright translates that believers become the "covenant faithfulness of God." Not only does this not make sense but also exegetically it's a stretch.¹² Unfortunately, Wright falls into the camp of "Biblicism"; the assumption that in order for an idea to have the status as doctrine it must be stated in so many words in the Bible, as

¹² Ibid., 24. See Piper for exposition on the passage

he grounds his argument against imputation based on the fact that the word is not used by Paul.¹³ This argument falls on deaf ears. Some of the most essential doctrines of the Christian faith are not mentioned by word in the Bible. Based on this logic, how does Wright handle doctrines such as the Trinity, incarnation, and hypostatic union?¹⁴

Surprisingly, it seems that Wright has misunderstood the Reformed perspective of imputation and at times confuses it with the Roman Catholic understanding of infusion of righteousness. The Greek word for the idea of imputation is *logizomai*. This word can be translated as reckon, count, or impute. It is first seen in the Septuagint in Genesis 15:6 as God “counts” Abraham as righteous because of his faith and is used by Paul to support his arguments in multiple places (Rom. 4, Gal. 3). This was before Abraham ever did any good works or performed the “covenant badges” as the New Perspective likes to call them. Abraham was not even circumcised; the chief sign (or badge) of the covenant of God with Israel, yet he was already counted as righteous. Surely we aren’t to believe that Abraham was made morally righteous by infusion in Genesis 15 especially considering in the following chapter he fails to trust God to fulfill the covenant of providing him with an heir as he tries to make it happen for himself with Hagar. This is where Wright seems to get really uncomfortable. Wright argues that this status of “righteous” which is given doesn’t mean

¹³ N Wright, *Justification : God’s plan & Paul’s vision* (Downers Grove Ill.: IVP Academic, 2009), 46.

¹⁴ Michael Horton, “Justification by N.T. Wright,” *White Horse Inn* (n.d.): 5.

“virtuous”, but simply a right standing.¹⁵ Here he is arguing against a straw opponent as the traditional reformed understanding would have no problem with this! A believer is imputed with the righteousness of Christ, not infused with it, as the Roman Catholic view would understand. Justification and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ is not an infusion of God’s righteous essence into the believer. Calvin condemned Osiander for such a heretical idea stating, “we deny that Christ’s essence is mixed with our own” or that we are “righteous in God by the infusion both of his essence and of his quality”. He goes on to say of Osiander that “he throws in a mixture of substances by which God—transfusing himself into us, as it were—makes us part of himself.”¹⁶ It is obvious that the Reformers rejected any type of idea of a moral infusion of righteousness or mixture of God’s essence with man; nevertheless the imputation of righteousness is real and truly constitutes the believer as righteous. Believers are justified in a law-court sense to be righteous based on the benefits of Jesus Christ being reckoned to them. This heresy of Osiander sounds similar (but not identical) to the idea of infusion that is embedded in the doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church whereby grace is infused to man making him just. This justification is grounded in one’s good works made possible by the infusion of grace.¹⁷ The traditional understanding is that this imputation of righteousness found in justification does not change the inner life of the believer, but it does change his

¹⁵ Wright, *Justification*, 68.

¹⁶ Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian religion* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 3.11.5.

¹⁷ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic theology.*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1941), 512.

state restoring divine favor to him. As Calvin understood, the believer “grasps the righteousness of Christ through faith, and clothed in it, appears in God’s sight not as a sinner but as a righteous man.” This, Calvin says, is “the imputation of Christ’s righteousness.”¹⁸ The concept of being clothed in the righteousness of Christ is consistent with the reformed understanding of imputation and with the Bible itself (Job 29:14, Isaiah 61:10). Because of this act of justification, the believer now has “peace with God” and “assurance of salvation” (Rom. 5:1-10).¹⁹ To be sure, an inward change will come about through sanctification, which is a life-long process as opposed to the once-for-all act of justification.

Paul clearly taught this doctrine of imputation as seen in the book of Romans. Paul uses the language of imputation when he writes, “the one to whom God counts (or imputes) righteousness apart from works” (Rom. 4:6) and “Righteousness is counted (imputed) to them” (Rom. 4:11). If earlier, Paul stated that “None is righteous” (Rom. 3:10), then this must be an alien righteousness that is being counted to the believer and the grounds for their entrance into the family of God.²⁰ Once again it is seen that one must be right with God, or justified, before entering the true covenant family of God. Paul went to great lengths in the first two chapters of the book of Romans to show that all are guilty before God and that no one can reconcile themselves by their good works (Rom. 4:6). It is God who “justifies the ungodly” (Rom. 4:5). How could this simply be

¹⁸ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian religion*, 3.11.2.

¹⁹ Berkhof, *Systematic theology.*, 513.

²⁰ Piper, *The future of justification*, 76–77.

a declaration of one already being in the covenant? The person was ungodly when justified by God and therefore outside of the covenant. As mentioned earlier, this was the case with Abraham in Genesis 15 that Paul uses as an example in Romans 4 and Galatians 3. One wonders why Wright has such a problem with this doctrine of a positive imputation when he affirms “the non-reckoning of sin”.²¹ It’s easy to see that this is the same idea only in a negative sense. Wright states that it is the death and resurrection of Jesus, not his righteousness that is reckoned to the believer.²² This sounds more like a confusion of the doctrine of the believer’s union with Christ and the doctrine of imputation.

Reformed Confessions and Catechisms

It would do one well to consider the vast amount of support of this doctrine from Reformed confessions and catechisms. One must remember the great minds that worked together to formulate these documents and to see their harmony on the doctrine of justification and imputation of Christ’s righteousness to the believer is a testimony to the accuracy of their conclusions. Though not exhaustive or in any particular order, the following statements made over time should encourage one in belief of this glorious doctrine. The Westminster Shorter Catechism explains justification as “the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone”.²³ The Westminster Larger Catechism

²¹ Wright, *Justification*, 220.

²² Horton, “Justification by N.T. Wright,” 20.

²³ “Westminster Shorter Catechism”, 1647, Question 33.

expounds upon the shorter stating that men are counted as righteous “not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but only for the perfect obedience and full satisfaction of Christ, by God imputed to them...”.²⁴ Later the WLC states “God in justification imputeth the righteousness of Christ.”²⁵ The vocabulary used, especially the term of impute rather than infuse, should be noted by the reader. The Belgic Confession states, “by faith in Christ we are justified, even before we do good works.”²⁶ It goes on to affirm that Jesus Christ’s “righteousness is ours by faith”.²⁷ It is very significant that this is not mentioned as a general righteousness but the actual righteousness of Jesus that is reckoned to the believer. The Heidelberg Catechism announces that God “will graciously impute to me the righteousness of Christ” and that “I am righteous in Christ”.²⁸ Heidelberg is shouting this doctrine in the next question saying, “God, without any merits of mine...grants and imputes to me, the perfect satisfaction, righteousness and holiness of Christ.”²⁹ The great Westminster Confession of Faith makes the strong statement that God does not infuse righteousness into the individual but imputes “the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them” and they receive his righteousness by faith.³⁰ The London Baptist Confession of 1689

²⁴ “Westminster Larger Catechism”, 1647, Question 70.

²⁵ Ibid., Question 77.

²⁶ “Belgic Confession”, 1561, Article 24.

²⁷ Ibid., Article 26.

²⁸ “Heidelberg Catechism”, 1563, Question 56, 59.

²⁹ Ibid., Question 60.

³⁰ “Westminster Confession of Faith”, 1647, 11.1.

may say it best when it recognizes that men are made righteous “by imputing Christ’s active obedience unto the whole law, and passive obedience in His death for their whole and sole righteousness.”³¹ The Geneva Confession also states “the obedience which he yielded to the Father may be imputed to us just as if it were ours.”³² The harmony from this overview of various reformed statements of faith on these doctrines, particularly the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to the believer, is astounding. It’s as if a great throng of the reformed are shouting in unison, “It’s not our works, but his righteousness!” Man is guilty before God and needs an alien righteousness, which is only found in Christ. It is obvious that the Jews in Paul’s day were seeking this through meritorious works and not only practicing covenant badges as maintenance of their status as members of the covenant. Jesus himself made their status very clear and it was not as part of the covenant (Matt. 23:37; John 8).

Future Justification

Finally, the issue of the relationship of present and future justification must be addressed. People often have good intentions but in the effort to achieve what they set out to do, things go awry. It seems that in an attempt to emphasize Jesus as Lord over all creation and man’s obedience to Him, Wright ends up overshadowing justification by faith with his strong highlighting of the place of works in the believer’s life. What role will works play in the final judgment of believers? Wright seems to believe that the final judgment will be based on

³¹ “London Baptist Confession of 1689”, n.d., 11.1.

³² “Geneva Catechism”, 1545, 1545.

works or the entire life lived as he stresses Romans 2:13.³³ As the obscure should always be interpreted by the obvious, in the following chapter Paul makes it clear that “by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight” (Rom. 3:20) and that “one is justified by faith apart from works of the law” (Rom. 3:28).³⁴ Wright says, “at that judgment seat the verdict will be in accordance with one’s works”.³⁵ The reformed perspective would not argue on the point that there is warrant for a final judgment that accounts for works, but the two justifications of present and future must not be separated.³⁶ There is but one true justification and the final judgment will be an echo of the declaration of being justified in this life by God through Jesus Christ. One must not conceive of an idea of being justified in the present through faith and being justified in the future by works. If this is not what Wright means he seems to be close to it by stating, “Present justification declares, on the basis of faith, what future justification will affirm publicly on the basis of the entire life.”³⁷ Works do play a role in the final judgment as seen clearly in Romans 2:6-7, but our judgment is not based on these works (Rom. 3:28; 4:4-6; 11:6; Eph. 2:8).³⁸ These works will be evidence of our faith being true and genuine (James 2). It will be the fruit on the tree that proves its life. Again, works do have a significant role, but they are

³³ Wright, *What St Paul really said*, 126–127.

³⁴ Piper, *The future of justification*, 110.

³⁵ Wright, *Justification*, 108.

³⁶ Horton, “Justification by N.T. Wright,” 9–10.

³⁷ Wright, *What St Paul really said*, 129.

³⁸ Piper, *The future of justification*, 110.

not the foundation for our justification; this is only found in the blood and righteousness of Christ, which is attained through the instrument of faith. As the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England states, “We are accounted righteous before God, only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ by faith, and not for our own works or deservings.”³⁹

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are some great truths to reap from Wright and his perspective. Certainly Christians should have a more comprehensive understanding of God’s redemptive drama unfolding on a universal stage founded in the covenant with Abraham, progressing through Israel and reaching its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. The gospel “is not simply going-to-heaven-when-I-die, but a renewed cosmos.”⁴⁰ Though this is true, Christians shouldn’t feel guilty for valuing their personal salvation and treasuring it in Christ above all. One should also have zeal to grow in holiness and view salvation as more than just “fire insurance”, which without a true change of heart is no salvation at all. Regeneration brings on a new creation and true believers are to live a life of holiness by doing good works that were prepared for them by God (Eph. 2:10). Wright has good intentions in putting such a strong emphasis on having Jesus as Lord and not just Savior. Wright’s prominence of the righteousness of God being on display in His faithfulness to His covenant is beautiful and reassuring to the believer. All should adopt this vast picture of God’s kingdom rushing in upon

³⁹ Ibid., 113.

⁴⁰ Horton, “Justification by N.T. Wright,” 25.

creation and growing throughout time as a framework. Though there is some to gain from Wright's perspective, in the end, much of what Wright says can confuse more than help a believer on the doctrine of justification as he often seems to bend Scripture to support his own theories.

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