

# Justification Undermined

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## Introduction

Every generation in the church has faced some challenge to the biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone. One reason why the doctrine faces such opposition is because it strikes at the heart of human pride. The doctrine of justification requires a person to forsake all his own righteousness in order to enter into God's favour.<sup>1</sup> It requires him to cast himself, by faith, entirely on the Lord Jesus Christ and his work for sinners. It is always tempting, even to the Christian, to rest on his own activity in order to enter into God's favour.

One contemporary challenge to justification in the modern church comes under the name of the 'New Perspective on Paul' (NPP). James D. G. Dunn coined the phrase 'the NPP' in his 1982 Manson Memorial Lecture, published the following year.<sup>2</sup> As one can tell from this phrase, the NPP focuses on the writings of the apostle Paul.<sup>3</sup> It is a 'new perspective' because it fundamentally departs from the way that Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin and their Protestant heirs have understood the apostle Paul. In fact, the NPP claims that the Reformation's understanding of Paul's letters has obscured and distorted rather than elucidated the apostle's thought.

While there is diversity among NPP proponents such that one cannot automatically attribute the views of one proponent to another, there is a shared commitment uniting their scholarship. This article will pursue a set of fundamental questions: What are prominent NPP proponents saying about the apostle Paul? How does the NPP break from the Reformation's understanding of Paul? What implications does this discussion have for our understanding of the biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone? Is the NPP compatible with classical Christian orthodoxy on the points in dispute?

## The Origins of the NPP

It is important to stress that the NPP did not originate in Reformed or evangelical theology. Neither did it spring from the creeds and confessions of historic Christianity. It is not a call to the church to recover her confessional heritage. The NPP, rather, has emerged from the historical-critical study of the apostle Paul. Nor has the NPP arisen overnight. It is, in many respects, the fruit

of a discussion within the historical–critical tradition that has been continuing for at least two centuries. We will not trace that history here.<sup>4</sup> It is important to recognize that the NPP is not as new as its name might suggest.

What within the historical–critical study of Paul has contributed to the rise of the NPP? First, historical–critical study has often assumed that man is not nearly as sinful as the Reformers understood him to be. Man therefore has some remaining ability to co-operate with God in his salvation. Second, historical–critical study has often rejected the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone in favour of an understanding of justification in terms of the transformation of the believer in union with Christ. Reformed theology, to be sure, has understood union with Christ to be crucial to the doctrine of justification. The imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer presupposes his union with Christ. The sins of the believer are transferred to Christ and the righteousness of Christ is transferred to the believer. This transfer, or imputation, takes place between Christ and sinners united to him (2 Cor. 5:21).

The historical–critical tradition, however, frequently and mistakenly equates union with Christ with the inward transformation of the sinner.<sup>5</sup> It takes a consequence of the believer's being in union with Christ (his sanctification) and makes it to be the sum-total of union with Christ. Albert Schweitzer, in his *Mysticism of Paul the Apostle* (1931), particularly pressed this understanding of union with Christ. More recently, E. P. Sanders, an important NPP proponent, has advocated a modified form of Schweitzer's understanding of union with Christ. In so doing, Sanders understands Paul's doctrine of justification to be a fundamentally transformative grace.<sup>6</sup>

The third and perhaps most important trajectory contributing to the NPP is a relatively recent one. Since World War II, many historical–critical New Testament scholars have reassessed ancient Judaism.<sup>7</sup> New Testament scholars have increasingly argued that earlier generations have misunderstood the distinguishing differences between the early church and first century Judaism. It is this concern that has given particular impetus to the NPP.

### **The New Perspective on Paul—Its Major Proponents**

Before exploring the claims of the NPP, we will briefly introduce three important figures associated with the NPP. The first is E. P. Sanders, Arts and

Sciences Professor of Religion Emeritus, Duke University. In his landmark book, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (1977), Sanders surveyed a substantial body of ancient Jewish literature. He concluded that first century Judaism shared a common theology. Sanders termed that theology ‘covenantal nomism’.

‘Covenantal nomism’ consists of three core beliefs. First, there is election by grace. Sanders has in mind here God’s choice of Israel to be his people. Jews understood themselves to be members of a people chosen by divine grace. Second, there is keeping one’s place in the covenant by obedience to the law. Third, atonement is available for the transgressions of covenant members. Paul and first century Judaism, Sanders argues, were essentially agreed on these particulars. They did not have fundamental differences concerning election by grace, human sinfulness, a person’s ability to keep the law, and God’s willingness to accept atonement for the sinner’s transgressions.

So where did Paul part ways with first century Judaism? Sanders argues that Paul had two main differences with Judaism. First, Paul and Judaism disagreed whether Jesus was in fact the Messiah. Second, Paul and Judaism disagreed in their answer to the questions, ‘Who belongs to the people of God? How do you identify a member of God’s people?’ Jews believed that one who observed all the commandments of the Torah (the Jewish law) was a true member of the people of God. Paul believed that one who trusted in Jesus for salvation was a true member of the people of God.

Sanders does not understand the difference between Paul and ancient Judaism to lie in different answers to the Philippian jailor’s question, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’ (Acts 16:31). The differences are ones of christology (the doctrine of the person of Jesus Christ) and ecclesiology (the doctrine of the people of God). It is not fundamentally one of soteriology (the doctrine of salvation). Sanders’s proposal is a radical one. He challenges the Reformational way of understanding Christianity as an essentially gracious religion and first century Judaism as a religion of works or merit.

A second leading figure associated with the NPP is James D. G. Dunn who served as the Lightfoot Professor of Divinity, University of Durham and has authored a substantial body of exegetical work sympathetic to the NPP. He has produced not only a commentary on Galatians, but a two volume commentary

on Romans, and a lengthy Pauline theology.<sup>8</sup> Unlike Sanders, Dunn has tried to associate himself with British evangelicals and has published many of his works with traditionally evangelical series and presses. His commentary on Romans, for instance, was published in the Word Biblical Commentary series.

A third and more influential proponent of the NPP within the evangelical church has been N. T. Wright. A prolific scholar and popular author, Wright presently serves as Bishop of Durham in the Church of England. Wright perceives himself to be not only evangelical but also Reformed. He has spoken of himself as a ‘good Calvinist’.<sup>9</sup> He has gained a hearing among some Reformed ministers and teachers on both sides of the Atlantic. Wright’s NPP scholarship and Wright’s self-identification as Reformed sharpens the following question: ‘With respect to the doctrine of justification, is the NPP compatible with Reformed theology?’ To put it another way, ‘Does the NPP reinforce or contradict what Reformed theology has said about the doctrine of justification?’

### Our Problem According to the NPP

In a previous article we observed that the problem to which justification is a solution is ‘sin’. The NPP has come to a different assessment of what Paul thought to be the plight of humanity. This does not mean that NPP proponents are in all respects agreed on what that plight is. Nor does this mean that they understand ‘sin’ to have no place whatsoever in Paul’s doctrine of justification. They are agreed, rather, that the particular Reformational understanding of humanity’s plight in relation to justification is a fundamentally mistaken one.

We will now turn to consider three NPP discussions that address the problem that occasions the solution of justification. The first two attempt to criticize the Reformation’s understanding of the human plight. The third offers an alternative understanding of problem according to Paul.

### Krister Stendahl

Krister Stendahl (1921-2008) was Lutheran bishop of Stockholm, Sweden, and taught New Testament at Harvard Divinity School. Although we did not mention him in our biographical introduction to the NPP, he is an important precursor to E. P. Sanders. In two famous lectures, published roughly a decade before Sanders’s *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, Stendahl argues that the religious experiences of Augustine and Martin Luther profoundly skewed the

Western church's understanding of Paul.<sup>10</sup> Both Augustine and Luther were ridden with a guilty conscience. Each sought and found relief in his understanding of Paul's gospel. Each saw 'justification by faith alone' to be a solution to the problem of his guilty conscience.

Stendahl claims that the historical Protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone owed more to Augustine's and Luther's anguish of soul than it did to anything that Paul had written. Stendahl famously insists that Paul had a 'robust conscience'. By 'robust conscience', Stendahl means that the apostle was not taken up with personal guilt from which he found release through justification. In other words, there is said to be no evidence that Paul the Jew ever came to the point where he sought release from the crushing load of a burdened conscience. The conviction of Paul's robust conscience is tied to Stendahl's understanding of Paul's 'Damascus Road' experience (Acts 9, 22, 26). Christians have historically understood this event to be the occasion of Paul's conversion. They have also understood this event to be the occasion when the Lord Jesus called Paul to be the Apostle to the Gentiles.

Stendahl claims that while Paul experienced a 'call' on the Damascus road, he did not experience a 'conversion' as Christians often use that term. Historic Christianity understands Paul to have been *both* converted *and* called to be an apostle to the Gentiles. Stendahl maintains that Paul's decisive transition from Judaism to Christianity must not be explained in terms of 'conversion' but only in terms of the apostle's newfound call to preach to the Gentiles.

Paul's thought, Stendahl continues, is therefore not taken up with the question 'How do I find a gracious God?' Paul is concerned to address two other questions. The first question is, 'What happens to the Law (the Torah, the actual Law of Moses, not the principle of legalism) when the Messiah has come?' The second question is, 'What are the ramifications of the Messiah's arrival for the relation between Jews and Gentiles?' To put it another way, 'What is the "place of the Gentiles in the Church and in the plan of God?"'<sup>11</sup>

According to Stendahl, what captures Paul's transition from Judaism to Christianity is not the question 'What must I do to be saved?' but the question 'Now that Christ has come, what does this mean for how you define the people of God?' Stendahl was advancing an insight that E. P. Sanders would take up

at greater length in his scholarship on first century Judaism: Paul really focuses on ecclesiology (the doctrine of the church). He is not so much concerned with soteriology (the doctrine of salvation).

### A Response

We may respond to Stendahl along two lines. First, Stendahl is correct to say that Paul does not give us much evidence of someone who ‘felt guilty’ under Judaism. Paul does tell us that he regarded himself to be and was regarded as a pious and righteous man—‘as to righteousness, under the law blameless’ (Phil. 3:6). It is important to remember, however, what guilt is. Guilt must not be equated with feelings of contrition. Guilt is fundamentally one’s obligation or accountability to divine justice. A legitimately sentenced prisoner is guilty whether he admits it or not, whether he expresses remorse or not. When guilt is properly defined, then we may say that Paul, in company with sinful humanity (Rom. 1-3, 5), came to see himself as a sinner guilty in the sight of a holy God.

Second, while Stendahl is correct to say that Paul was called as apostle to the Gentiles, he is mistaken to deny that Paul was converted. Both Paul’s ‘call’ and his ‘conversion’ appear together in his account, in Acts 26:16-18, of Jesus’ words to him on the Damascus road.

But rise and stand upon your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me, and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.

Notice what Jesus tells Paul: Paul is to go to the Gentiles. He is given a call. That call is to proclaim to the Gentiles a certain message. The content of the message is not merely that God is forming a new people. The content of the message is that God is forming a people out of sinners who have been marvellously brought, by divine grace, from darkness to light, from Satan’s power to God; and who have received the forgiveness of sins. The message that Jesus commands Paul to bring to the Gentiles is one that centres upon the guilt and power of sin, and upon what Christ has done to cancel the guilt of and ‘break the power of reigning sin’ in sinners who trust in him for salvation. If

the message that Paul carried to the world was a message of the ‘forgiveness of sins’ of those who trust in Christ, then surely Paul found that same forgiveness from the same Christ whom he met on the Damascus Road. Consider also the connection that Jesus establishes here between the opening of the eyes and the turning from darkness to light. Paul’s experience of blindness and his subsequent recovery of sight (Acts 9:8-9, 18) is therefore a symbolic indicator that he himself had been ‘turned from darkness to light’, that is, converted.

### **E. P. Sanders**

E. P. Sanders, whom we met in our biographical introduction, challenges the Reformational understanding of the human plight according to Paul from another direction. The Protestant Reformation, Sanders argues, was mistaken to claim that Paul advanced the gospel of grace in opposition to Judaism as a religion of merit. The Reformation erroneously claimed that Judaism was a religion in which a person’s good works brought him into God’s favour.

First century Judaism, Sanders argues, was a gracious religion. Paul, to be sure, parted ways with Judaism. The apostle even expressed that difference in the phrase ‘justification by faith not by works of the law’. Sanders rules out the idea that the doctrine of justification is the Apostle Paul’s way of expressing his dissatisfaction with Judaism as a religion of merit. Paul and Judaism are fundamentally agreed on the place of grace and works in one’s salvation.

### **A Response**

Sanders’s criticism of the Reformation hinges on his thesis that first century Judaism was a religion of grace. While Sanders has persuaded many scholars that Judaism is gracious, he has not persuaded all scholars.<sup>12</sup> Sanders has certainly established that Judaism was not a religion of crass ‘merit-mongering’ in the way that many early- and mid-twentieth century New Testament scholars understood it to be. Judaism was conversant with the language and even with the concept of grace. But Sanders is mistaken to say that Judaism is a thoroughly gracious religion. It is one thing to say that Judaism made room for grace. It is another to say that Judaism was a thoroughly gracious religion, that it was a religion of grace from start to finish.

Let us offer two examples to illustrate the point. First, it is true that first century Jews could speak of their election by grace. And yet they could also speak of

God electing Israelites because of the merits of the patriarchs or because of good works that he foresaw that these Israelites would do.<sup>13</sup> This is not a doctrine of unconditional election. It is a doctrine of conditional election. God does not choose Israelites out of his mere free grace and love. God chooses Israelites partly because of their own good works or the good works of other people. By biblical standards, first century Judaism was not a thoroughly gracious religion because it did not uphold the doctrine of unconditional election.

Second, it is true that first century Jews could speak of God as both providing and accepting means of atonement. In this sense, they looked to divine grace for the pardon of their sins, and for their acceptance in His sight. The problem comes when we see in what ways many Jews thought atonement could be made. The rabbinic literature pointed to four means of atonement: sacrifice, repentance, sufferings, and death.<sup>14</sup> It is a problem to say that repentance, suffering, and death are atoning. (One is reminded of the sacrament of penance in the Roman Catholic church, where it is a person's works of penance that partially remit the temporal punishments for his sins.)

It is a problem because God is said to look on these human works as the reason why he pardons sins. The Bible teaches, however, that atonement is wholly a work of God and not at all a work of man. By biblical standards this doctrine of the atonement is not a thoroughly gracious one. It is not thoroughly gracious because it says that we must pay in part the penalty for our sin. The biblical and thoroughly gracious doctrine of the atonement says that Christ and only Christ paid in full for the sins of his people.

### **N. T. Wright**

A developed and positive NPP understanding of the problem according to Paul comes from N. T. Wright who follows James D. G. Dunn when Dunn argues that the key to understanding the 'problem' with Judaism according to Paul lies in Paul's phrase 'the works of the law' or simply 'works'.<sup>15</sup>

Wright and Dunn claim that when Paul speaks of 'works of the law', he does not mean a person's efforts to earn salvation. When Paul objects to the 'works of the law' he is not implying that Judaism was a religion of merit. Wright and Dunn follow Sanders when they understand first century Judaism to have been a religion of grace and not one of merit. What, then, are the 'works of the law'?



How do they express Paul's disagreement with Judaism? Dunn argues that the 'works of the law' are works that were required by the Torah, or the Mosaic Law, especially those works that served to distinguish Jew from Gentile. Examples of the 'works of the law' include circumcision and the dietary laws. These works served as 'boundary markers' between Jew and Gentile. They placed a public and visible barrier between the observant Jew and the non-observant Gentile.

The 'boundary marking' character of these laws, Dunn claims, posed a problem within the early church. Jewish Christians who continued to observe these laws could give the impression that the church, like Judaism, was set apart from the world by the 'works of the law'. There were even teachers within the church who promoted this view. It is in view of the activity of these teachers that Paul is said to have penned the Epistle to the Galatians. According to Dunn, Paul would not stand for membership in the church to be marked out by the 'works of the law'. For Paul, the only Christian boundary marker for the church was 'faith' and not the 'works of the law'.

The Galatian problem, according to Dunn, had to do with the identity of the church. How did one know who was part of the church? Was it by circumcision and other characteristically Jewish laws ('works of the law') or was it by 'faith' in Jesus Christ? Which was the true Christian boundary marking device? N. T. Wright agrees with Dunn that the 'problem' that Paul addresses in the early church has to do with the identity of God's people. The problem is not with persons attempting to earn God's favour by their good works. Commenting on Galatians 3, Wright defines the problem that occasioned the epistle.

In particular, the polemic against the Torah in Galatians simply will not work if we 'translate' it into polemic either against straightforward self-help moralism or against the more subtle snare of 'legalism', as some have suggested. The passages about the law only work—and by 'work' I mean they will only make full sense in their contexts...—when we take them as references to the Jewish law, the Torah, seen as the national charter of the Jewish race.<sup>16</sup>

The concern of legalism, or the sinner's meritorious activity, is not Paul's concern in Galatians. Commenting on Philippians 3, Wright defines what he

understands Paul to mean by the phrase ‘my own righteousness based on Torah’.

It is *membership* language. When Paul says he does not have a righteousness ‘of my own,’ based on Torah,...he is speaking of a righteousness, a covenant status which was his as a Jew by birth, marked with the covenant badge of circumcision, and claiming to be part of the inner circle of that people by being a zealous Pharisee. That which he is refusing in the first half of verse 9 is not a moralistic or self-help righteousness, but the status of orthodox Jewish covenant membership.<sup>17</sup>

When Paul rejects his former Jewish righteousness, he is not rejecting an effort to merit justification through his own performance. He is rejecting the status of a specifically ‘Jewish covenant membership’.

### A Response

Since this understanding of ‘works’ is important to Dunn’s and Wright’s understanding of Paul’s teaching on justification, let us respond to it. Dunn and Wright are correct to recognize that in Galatia the focal point of the controversy surrounded such works as the dietary laws (Gal. 2:11-14) and circumcision (Gal. 5:2-6). Any responsible interpretation of Galatians must take this fact into account. The meaning of the phrase ‘works of the law’, however, is not ‘boundary-marking device’. The meaning must be ‘deeds done’. Romans 9:10-11 helps us to see what Paul means by ‘works.’

And not only so, but also when Rebecca had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God’s purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of his call...

Paul claims that election is not at all based upon human ‘works’. Election is based solely upon the sovereign decree of God. Importantly, Paul defines what he means by ‘works’ in this passage. He speaks of works in terms of a person doing something good or bad. Works here are not Jewish boundary-markers. Rather they are deeds done. ‘Works’ belong to the realm of performance. They do not belong to the realm of identity.

A second passage showing what Paul understood works to be is Romans 4:4-5. ‘Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift, but as his due. And to the one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the

ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.’ Paul contrasts two ways of justification in verse five: justification by ‘works’ and justification by ‘faith’. How does Paul define works in this passage? Are they fundamentally boundary-marking devices? No. Paul understands ‘works’ to be deeds done. We see this from Paul’s claim that ‘works’ bring a ‘wage’, or ‘what is due’. Again, we see that ‘works’ belong fundamentally to the realm of performance.

We should also note such passages as Titus 3:5 (‘He saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy...’); Ephesians 2:8, 9-10 (‘For by grace you have been saved through faith...not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them’); and 2 Timothy 1:9 ([God] ‘saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works, but because of his own purpose and grace which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began’).

These passages also help us to see that when Paul speaks of ‘works’ he means ‘deeds done’. Sometimes NPP proponents acknowledge that these passages define works in terms of activity. But they do not always see it as a problem for their position because they do not all accept Paul as the author of these particular letters. For Bible-believing Christians, however, these letters show, as do Romans and Galatians, that by ‘works’ Paul means ‘deeds done’. If Paul means ‘deeds done’ when he speaks of ‘works’ in justification, then why do circumcision and the dietary laws figure so prominently in Galatians? These laws, after all, did visibly and publicly distinguish Jew from Gentile. The evidence from Galatians certainly lends plausibility to Dunn and Wright’s thesis.

It is here that we must recognize an important distinction. While circumcision and the dietary laws would have set apart Jew from Gentile within the church, Paul does not object to circumcision and the dietary laws because they set apart Jew from Gentile. He objects to them because they are deeds done with a view to the sinner’s acceptance before God (Gal. 3:10, Gal. 5:3).

When Peter withdrew from table fellowship with Gentile believers in Antioch, Paul did not rebuke Peter because Peter had identified the boundary markers of the people of God with the Mosaic Law and not with faith in Christ. Paul rebuked Peter because Peter’s withdrawal communicated to Gentile Christians

that they needed to be circumcised in order to be justified persons. Against his own settled principles, Peter was communicating a doctrine of justification by works (Gal. 2:11-14 with Gal. 2:15-21).

Let us summarize this discussion. Dunn and Wright define the ‘works of the law’ primarily in terms of status not performance. If the problem is defined chiefly in terms of status or identity, then what implications will that definition have for our understanding of the solution—justification by faith alone? Let us take up this question now.

### **N. T. Wright and Paul’s Solution**

In the remainder of this article, we will concentrate upon the solution that N. T. Wright understands Paul to have posed to the problem of the works of the law. We will concentrate upon Wright’s work in particular because of his influence within the church. In a recent essay, Wright identifies several words that capture what he understands to be fundamental components of the Pauline solution of justification.<sup>18</sup> We will look at three of these words that have immediate bearing on this solution: ‘righteousness’, ‘justification’, and ‘call’. Before we consider how Wright understands Paul’s solution of justification, however, we will take up what he understands Paul’s gospel to be.

### **N. T. Wright and Paul’s Gospel**

Wright has a definite understanding of what Paul’s gospel is and is not.

When Paul refers to ‘the gospel’, he is not referring to a system of salvation, although certainly the gospel implies and contains this, nor even to the good news that there now is a way of salvation open to all, but rather to the proclamation that the crucified Jesus of Nazareth has been raised from the dead and thereby demonstrated to be both Israel’s Messiah and the world’s true Lord. ‘The gospel’ is not ‘You can be saved, and here’s how;’ the gospel, for Paul, is ‘Jesus Christ is Lord’.<sup>19</sup>

Wright is clear that he does not intend to divorce ‘the gospel’ from matters of salvation. ‘The gospel implies and contains’ the ‘system of salvation’. At the same time, Wright is insistent that the gospel must not be identified with ‘a system of salvation’ or the proclamation of salvation. When Wright distances ‘salvation’ from the ‘gospel’, he also distances ‘justification’ from the ‘gospel’. He claims that ‘[justification] cannot be put right at the centre [of Paul’s

thought], since that place is already taken by the person of Jesus himself, and the gospel announcement of his sovereign kingship'.<sup>20</sup> What is the gospel for Wright? The gospel is 'Jesus Christ is Lord'. 'The gospel [is] the royal proclamation of Jesus as Messiah and Lord.'<sup>21</sup>

### A Response

Wright's definition has some degree of plausibility. The proclamation of the Lordship of Jesus Christ is a vital part of any faithful Christian preaching of the gospel. Apostolic preaching, as recorded in the book of Acts, certainly accents the Lordship of Christ. The problem with Wright's definition is that it understands the proclamation of the Lordship of Christ to be the gospel itself, and it does so in a way that distances the Lordship of Christ from the salvation purchased by Christ for sinners.

The New Testament tells us that the 'good news' is a message focusing upon the person *and* work of Christ. When we survey the letters and sermons of Paul and the other apostles in the Bible, we see that they were primarily concerned to proclaim a message to lost sinners of the saving mercies that could be found in the Son of God alone. But Wright's understanding of the 'gospel' minimizes the saving work of Christ in its emphasis upon the person of Christ.

### N. T. Wright and the 'Righteousness of God'

We have already seen that Wright does not understand the problem of the works of the law to consist fundamentally in the sinner's inability to enter into God's favour by his own performance. Rather, the works of the law are said to be professing believers' attempts to identify themselves as Christians by the Mosaic Law. We have further seen Wright distance the saving work of Jesus Christ from the gospel. We are now prepared to consider Wright's understanding of the solution of justification. When the Scripture speaks of the doctrine of justification, it does so in terms of 'righteousness...for in it [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith' (Rom. 1:17).

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (Rom. 3:21-24).

For our sake, he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21). [cf. v.19, ‘in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation’.]

In justification, there is a righteousness that is God’s, and a righteousness that is the believer’s. What is that righteousness? The Reformation, following Scripture, has argued that that righteousness is the very righteousness of Jesus Christ, imputed or transferred to the believer, and received by faith alone. By this transfer the righteousness of God becomes the believer’s righteousness in justification.

How does Wright understand that righteousness which pertains to God? The righteousness of God is ‘the aspect of [God’s] character because of which, despite Israel’s infidelity and consequent banishment, God will remain true to the covenant with Abraham and rescue Israel nonetheless’. It is ‘a form of justice’. It is ‘not the same thing as salvation’, rather, it is ‘the *reason* he saves Israel’.<sup>22</sup> To Wright, the righteousness of God is an attribute of the divine character in exercise.<sup>23</sup> It is God’s faithfulness to his own promises.

How does Wright understand that righteousness which pertains to believers? Wright categorically rejects the doctrine of an imputed righteousness.

God’s righteousness never becomes...an attribute which is passed on to, reckoned to, or imputed to, God’s people.<sup>24</sup>

If we use the language of the law court, it makes no sense whatever to say that the judge imputes, imparts, bequeaths, conveys or otherwise transfers his righteousness to either the plaintiff or the defendant. Righteousness is not an object, a substance or a gas which can be passed across the courtroom...To imagine the defendant somehow receiving the judge’s righteousness is simply a category mistake. That is not how the language works.<sup>25</sup>

The great theme of Romans, therefore, is not the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to the sinner. In keeping with his understanding of the righteousness of God, Wright understands the great theme of Romans to consist of the answers to the following questions: ‘How is God to be faithful to Israel, to Abraham, to the world? How will the covenant be fulfilled, and who will be discovered to be God’s covenant people when this happens?’<sup>26</sup>

So what is that righteousness which is the believer's in justification? If it is not the righteousness of Christ, imputed to the believer, then what is it? Wright says that the believer's righteousness is a status that God's people have when they are vindicated by God.<sup>27</sup> Their 'status of righteousness has nothing to do with the righteousness of the judge'.<sup>28</sup> The divine righteousness is God's faithfulness to His covenant promises. That righteousness, however, is neither imputed nor transferred.<sup>29</sup> How does Wright explain 2 Corinthians 5:21, a passage we considered in a previous article? Wright says that this passage is not about the imputed righteousness of Christ. It is about the apostles being the 'living embodiment of the message they proclaim'. Paul is saying that he and his fellow apostles are an 'incarnation of the covenant faithfulness of God'.<sup>30</sup>

Let us respond to Wright's interpretation of 2 Corinthians 5:21. The context of verse twenty-one speaks against Wright's view. In verse nineteen Paul says 'in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.'

Two questions arise in view of this statement. First, how can God justly 'not count [believers'] trespasses against them'? Second, 'on what basis can God be reconciled to sinful human beings?' Paul answers these questions in verse twenty-one. Paul can make the appeal 'be reconciled to God' (2 Cor. 5:20) because God for our sake 'made him to be sin who knew no sin to be sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God'. (2 Cor. 5:21). God does not count the believer's trespasses against him because he laid those trespasses on the Son of God at the cross. God is reconciled to the justified sinner because the righteousness of the Son of God has been imputed to the sinner. There is a 'double imputation' in this verse. The sinners' sins are transferred to Christ at the cross. Christ's righteousness is transferred to the believer when by faith he receives and rests upon Christ as he is offered in the gospel.

Wright also critiques the Reformation's doctrine of the imputed righteousness of Christ in his exposition of 1 Corinthians 1:30—'And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom, and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption.' This passage, Wright claims, will not 'sustain the normal imputation theology, because it would seem to demand equal air time for the imputation of wisdom, sanctification, and redemption as well'.<sup>31</sup> Wright is saying that if one appeals to this passage as proof for the doctrine of

imputed righteousness, then he proves too much. Such an appeal would also prove an imputed wisdom, an imputed sanctification, and an imputed redemption. No one seriously maintains, for instance, an imputed sanctification. Therefore, in Wright's opinion, Paul cannot be speaking of an imputed righteousness in 1 Corinthians 1:30.

Wright's criticism misses the mark. The reason that interpreters insist on an imputed righteousness and not, for example, an imputed sanctification, is that there are no parallel biblical passages that teach an imputed sanctification. There are, however, other passages where Paul clearly teaches an imputed righteousness. We have already studied 2 Corinthians 5:21. There is also Phil 3:9—'not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God, on the basis of faith'. As we saw in an earlier article, Paul is contrasting two righteousnesses: the righteousness that the sinner does, that is his own, and that he puts before God; and the righteousness that God has done and that the sinner receives through faith in Jesus. The 'righteousness from God' is an imputed righteousness received by faith alone.

In view of Paul's teaching (2 Cor. 5:21 & Phil. 3:9), the Reformational reading of 1 Corinthians 1:30 is not special pleading. It is a sound reading of this verse in view of what Paul says elsewhere about the righteousness of God. In summary, Wright has rejected the doctrine of an imputed righteousness for justification. If imputed righteousness is at the heart of justification, then Wright's doctrine of justification is correspondingly compromised. The question remains, what does Wright understand justification to be?

### **N. T. Wright and Justification**

We turn now to consider what Wright understands the apostle Paul to say about justification. We may begin with a definition of justification that Wright has provided.

The verdict of the last day has been brought forward into the present in Jesus the Messiah; in raising him from the dead, God declared that in him had been constituted the true worldwide family. Justification, in Paul, is not the process or event whereby someone becomes, or grows, as a Christian; it is the declaration that someone is, in the present, a member of the people of God.<sup>32</sup>



Wright recognizes that justification is ‘forensic’. In other words, justification is a verdict that finds its home in the law-court. This definition also assumes a distinction between what Wright elsewhere explicitly terms ‘present’ and ‘future’ justification. Justification in the present must be understood in terms of the ‘verdict of the last day’ being ‘brought forward into the present’. How do ‘present’ and ‘future’ justification relate to one another? To answer that question, we must define what Wright understands both ‘present’ and ‘future’ justification to be.

### Present Justification and Call

What is justification in the ‘present’? In the above quotation, Wright claims that present justification does not answer the question ‘How am I saved?’ It answers the question ‘How do I know whether I am a member of the people of God?’ In his book *What Saint Paul Really Said*, Wright claims that “‘justification’ is the doctrine which insists that all those who have this faith belong as full members of this family, on this basis and no other’.<sup>33</sup> More recently Wright has defined justification as a ‘declaration (a) that someone is in the right (his or her sins having been forgiven through the death of Jesus) and (b) that this person is a member of the true covenant family...’.<sup>34</sup>

Both definitions understand justification to be a verdict or declaration that one is a member of the people of God. Wright’s later definition, however, supplements his earlier definition. Justification is also a verdict or declaration that one’s sins have been forgiven. This latter part of Wright’s definition departs from the way that Christian teaching has historically related justification and the forgiveness of sins. Wright does not say that justification is a verdict consisting in the pardon of sins. Neither does he say that justification is the moment at which one’s sins are forgiven. Justification, according to Wright, is a declaration that one’s sins have already been forgiven. It is a declaration that one is a forgiven person.

When, according to Wright, are the believer’s sins forgiven? Not at the sinner’s justification, Wright says, but at the sinner’s ‘call’. Wright argues that ‘justification’ and ‘call’ must not only be distinguished conceptually but also separated in time.<sup>35</sup> Call is the ‘initial moment of the Christian life’, or ‘what we have often thought of as the moment of conversion’. Call is that ‘through which a sinner is summoned to turn from idols and serve the living God, to turn from sin and follow Christ, to turn from death and believe in the God who raised

Jesus from the dead'.<sup>36</sup> In Wright's opinion, the forgiveness of sins happens at one's call. Justification declares that the 'called' one has already been forgiven.

In summary, Wright does not understand present justification to be a doctrine concerned primarily with the salvation of the sinner. To be sure, justification is a verdict that a sinner who has already been called is a forgiven person. Justification, however, does not consist of the pardon of sins. Justification declares a person to have been forgiven. It is not the moment at which a person's sins are forgiven.

For Wright, present justification primarily concerns the identity and shape of the people of God. It is a declaration that the justified person is already a member of the people of God. This vindication constitutes the believer's 'righteousness', as we above observed Wright to argue. To be 'justified by faith and not by works' means that what marks us out as members of God's people are not Jewish boundary-marking devices like circumcision and the dietary laws. What marks us out as part of the people of God is 'faith' in Jesus. Faith is the true badge or identity marker of the Christian.

### A Response

The implications of Wright's position are significant. If Wright is correct, then the Reformation profoundly mistook justification and, on this point at least, needlessly caused longstanding division within the church. The question is whether Wright has accurately captured what the apostle Paul says about justification. There are at least three problems with Wright's position as we have developed it thus far. One problem with Wright's position is that it fails to explain the sequence of Paul's reasoning in the opening chapters of Romans. In Romans 1:17-3:20, Paul is concerned to explain the universal human problem of sin and unrighteousness. He summarizes his argument at Romans 3:9, 'What then? Are we better than they? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin?' What is God's gracious solution to the problem of human unrighteousness? Paul speaks of this solution precisely in terms of the 'righteousness of God' (3:21, 22) on the basis of which the sinner is justified (3:24). The guilty sinner is justified—pardoned and declared righteous—solely because of the righteousness of Christ imputed by God and received by faith alone. What Paul is saying in Romans 1–3 is that the believer's justification is the divine *solution* to the real and universal human problem of the guilt of sin. The *problem* as Paul describes it in the opening chapters of

Romans is fundamentally moral. The problem is not fundamentally concerned with how one can identify or mark out the people of God.

In the same fashion, the solution is tailored to the problem. The solution is that the sinner is, by faith, declared righteous because of the work of Jesus Christ for him. The solution is not that the identifying mark of the people of God is Christian faith. Perhaps one might say that membership in the people of God is an implication of justification. It is not biblical to say, however, that membership in the people of God is the primary concern of justification.

A second problem with Wright's position is that it does not do justice to Paul's statements that the believer's justification is based upon the atoning death of Jesus Christ.

Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God (Rom. 5:9).

[We] are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received through faith (Rom. 3:24).

In him [Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses... (Eph. 1:7).

Paul establishes justification upon the death of Christ. That death is expiatory (it makes satisfaction for the sinner's sins) and propitiatory (it turns the wrath of God from the sinner). Because Christ died this kind of death for his people, in justification they experience the pardon of sins and are brought out from under the wrath of God. It is not clear how, in Wright's understanding, justification is based upon the atoning death of Christ. Why did the Son of God have to shed his blood and to bear the wrath of God so that the believer could be declared an already-forgiven member of the people of God? Why was it necessary for Jesus Christ to suffer and die for God to make such a verdict?

A third problem with Wright's proposal has to do with the way in which he defines 'faith' and 'works' in justification. According to Wright, 'faith' and 'works' are badges that define or identify a person as a member of the people of God. For Paul, Wright says, only 'faith'—not 'works'—is the acceptable badge of membership in the church. Is this how Paul understands 'faith' and 'works' in justification? The evidence suggests otherwise.

We have above observed Paul to claim that ‘works’ in justification are ‘deeds done’. They are not primarily an identity marker. What about ‘faith’ in justification? ‘Faith’ in justification is not fundamentally an identity badge. Faith is the opposite of ‘working.’ Faith in justification receives the imputed righteousness of Christ. This is precisely what Paul argues at Romans 4:4-5. ‘Works’ belong to the domain of the marketplace. To ‘work’ is to receive a ‘wage,’ or ‘what is due’ (4:4, cf. 6:23). What about ‘faith’? Faith is ‘not work[ing]’ (4:5). If it is not working, then it is receiving. What does faith receive? Faith receives ‘righteousness’ in justification (4:5). Paul’s statements in Romans 4:4-5 show us that ‘faith’ and ‘works’ in justification are not badges of membership. They have to do with performance. Either the sinner trusts in his own performance (‘works’) or he rests in the finished performance of Jesus Christ alone (‘faith’).

### Future Justification and Judgement

Wright speaks of both present and future justification. Were we to conclude our discussion now, our survey of Wright’s position on justification would be incomplete. We have yet to look at what Wright calls ‘future’ justification. Defining what Wright means by ‘future’ justification and how it relates to ‘present’ justification is not as easy as it might first appear. On the one hand, Wright claims that one’s present justification is ‘the anticipation, in the present, of the verdict that will be reaffirmed in the future’.<sup>37</sup> This statement suggests that future justification and present justification are one identical verdict. This understanding might gain support from places where Wright speaks of a future judgment ‘according to works’.<sup>38</sup> ‘Judgment according to works’ can be read to say that one’s works as a believer simply and only show that a person is already forgiven and accepted. This reading follows biblical teaching which says that at the last day the believer will not be vindicated or accepted because of what he has done. The believer has already been justified in Christ. At the last day, the believer’s good works will simply evidence or show that he is a justified person.

On the other hand, Wright elsewhere suggests that the verdict of future justification is not one and the same with the verdict of present justification. Wright claims that the works of the believer do not serve solely to evidence that he is a justified person. The works of the believer are the basis upon which God justifies or vindicates him. They help secure the favour of God in justification.

Commenting on Romans 2:13 ('Not the hearers of the law but the doers of the law will be justified'), Wright says 'justification, at the last, will be on the basis of performance, not possession'.<sup>39</sup> Appealing to Romans 2:14-16 and 8:9-11, Wright claims 'present justification declares, on the basis of faith, what future justification will affirm publicly on the basis of the entire life'.<sup>40</sup> In summary, '[justification] occurs in the future...on the basis of the entire life a person has led in the power of the Spirit—that is, it occurs on the basis of “works” in Paul’s redefined sense’.<sup>41</sup>

What are these “works” in Paul’s redefined sense? Wright answers this question in his comment on Romans 2:13 ('Not the hearers of the law but the doers of the law will be justified').

Paul means what he says. Granted, he redefines what 'doing the law' really means; he does this in chapter 8, and again in chapter 10, with a codicil in chapter 13. But he makes the point most compactly in Philippians 1.6: 'he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion on the day of Christ Jesus.' The 'works' in accordance with which the Christian will be vindicated on the last day are not the unaided works of the self-help moralist. Nor are they the performance of the ethnically distinctive Jewish boundary markers (Sabbath, food laws, and circumcision). They are, rather, the things which show that one is in Christ; the things that are produced in one's life as a result of the Spirit's indwelling and operation.<sup>42</sup>

Wright tells us what justifying works are not. They are not the boundary markers of the Jew. They are neither the activity of the non-Christian nor of the Christian prior to his becoming a Christian. The works on the basis of which a Christian is justified, Wright claims, are the works of a Christian person.<sup>43</sup> They are the works wrought by the Spirit of God indwelling a Christian.

## A Response

By so defining 'works', Wright parts ways not only with the Reformation's understanding of 'works' but also with the Reformation's understanding of 'justification'. The Reformers insisted that one's justification is based solely on the righteousness of Christ, imputed to the believer and received by faith alone. Justification therefore excludes any and all activity—past, present, or future—of the justified person from the ground or basis of his justification. This is what the Reformers understood Paul to be saying when the apostle declared that we are 'justified by faith and not by works of the law'.

At this juncture Wright differs from the Reformers. Wright allows what the Reformers forbid. Wright permits a Christian's obedience to contribute to the basis of his justification. According to the Reformers, when God justifies a person, he looks on one thing—the imputed righteousness of Christ. According to Wright, when God justifies a person, he looks on two things—the death of Christ and the obedience of the Christian.

These statements on 'works' in justification pose a problem for at least two reasons. First, there is the problem of consistency. At points, Wright wants to say that present justification is the bringing into the present the verdict of the last day. In other words, they are one and the same verdict. At other points Wright seems to be saying that future justification and present justification are two different verdicts. Future justification, after all, is based upon Christian obedience, much of which does not exist at the time of Wright's present justification.

There is a second and more pressing problem—that of fidelity to biblical teaching. To claim that justification is in any way based upon Christian obedience, and that Christian obedience supplements the perfect righteousness of Christ as the sole basis of the believer's justification is contrary to Scripture. Wright's recent book, *Paul in Fresh Perspective*, has hardly clarified matters. Wright claims that '...the Spirit is the path by which Paul traces the route from justification by faith in the present to justification, by the complete life lived, in the future'.<sup>44</sup> In view of his previous statements, one should read this claim to say that the verdict of future justification will be based on the 'complete life lived'.

In the very next sentence, however, Wright speaks of the 'judgment according to works in Romans 2:1-16'. In isolation, this latter statement could be read to say that judgment will be *in accordance with* one's good works but not *based upon* them. Wright goes on to say that 'when Paul looks ahead to the future and asks, as well one might, what God will say on the last day, he holds up as his joy and crown, not the merits and death of Jesus, but the churches he has planted who remain faithful to the gospel'.<sup>45</sup> Such a statement suggests an unsettling confidence in the virtue or merit of one's Christian obedience at the Day of Judgment.

It is at this juncture that we note that some defenders of Wright have claimed that Wright is not using theological language as precisely as some of his Reformed readers do. These defenders argue that when Wright says that a

person is justified ‘on the basis of’ his good works he means nothing more than, and nothing other than, that a person is justified ‘according to’ his good works. In other words, when Wright says that a person is justified on the basis of his works, he means only that those good works show him to be a justified person. Those works do not ground or merit justification in any way.

One appreciates the charitable spirit reflected in such defenses as these. We have a biblical obligation to interpret a person’s statements in the most charitable light possible. In the same spirit of charity, however, we must conclude from Wright’s own statements that he understands the work of Christ *for* us and the work of the Spirit *in* us to be the dual basis upon which the believer is justified.

Driving us toward this conclusion is the fact that Wright has denied that Paul teaches that the righteousness of Jesus Christ is imputed for the believer’s justification. Had Wright maintained that the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ is the sole ground of justification, then we could perhaps feel the force of his defenders’ objection. In that case, there would be something to which we could point that would fully explain why the believer can be pardoned and accepted by a holy God—specifically, the perfect obedience and full satisfaction of Christ.

Wright, however, has denied that Paul teaches an imputed righteousness for justification.<sup>46</sup> Wright prefers to speak of the believer being ‘within the vindication of Christ’. This expression is vague and lacks the precision of ‘imputed righteousness’. By itself it does not enable the reader to settle the question whether for Wright a believer’s good works contribute to the basis of his justification. A determining reason for our conclusion is that Wright’s rejection of an imputed righteousness in justification is coupled with language that naturally points to the believer’s Spirit-wrought works as a co-ground or co-basis of justification. His language naturally suggests that a believer’s good works constitute part of the basis of his (future) justification.

Consider a question that Wright himself asks and answers:

In this way, Romans 8:1-17 provides the real answer to Romans 2:1-16. Why is there now ‘no condemnation’? Because, on the one hand, God has condemned sin in the flesh of Christ...and, on the other hand, because the Spirit is at work to do within believers what the Law could not do—ultimately

to give life, but a life that begins in the present with the putting to death of the deeds of the body and the obedient submission to the leading of the Spirit.<sup>47</sup>

Had Wright simply said ‘there is no condemnation for those whom the Spirit is pleased to quicken’, one could not object to that statement. He would simply be affirming the biblically necessary relationship between justification and sanctification. He would not necessarily be conflating justification and sanctification.

Wright’s language, however, places the work of Christ and the work of the Spirit in tandem for justification. There is no condemnation ‘because...God has condemned sin in the flesh of Christ’ and ‘because the Spirit is at work to do, within believers, what the Law could not do’, i.e. the putting to death of sin and the obeying the direction of the Holy Spirit. Wright offers us two coordinate grounds or bases of justification—the work of Christ *outside* us, and the work of the Spirit *within* us. The believer is justified because of the work of Christ for him and because of the work of the Spirit in him. Such a statement closely resembles a statement Wright published nearly three decades ago: ‘Paul is concerned with the attempt to seek justification on grounds other than those set out above, grace and faith, the cross and the Spirit.’<sup>48</sup>

In summary, the problem with Wright’s doctrine is that it confuses the biblical doctrines of justification and sanctification. To be sure, justification and sanctification are inseparably joined. They must never be separated from one another. Neither, however, must they ever be confused or conflated. It is this latter error that we see in Wright’s doctrine of justification.

### Closing Thoughts on Wright’s Doctrine

What are the implications of Wright’s doctrine of justification for Christian proclamation and Christian living?

First, Wright’s doctrine of justification is a denial of *sola fide* (justification by faith alone). The Scripture teaches that faith is the sole instrument that receives the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ for the believer’s justification. Wright maintains, however, that faith does more than receive in justification. The good works produced by faith, Wright claims, justify us. Wright is correct to say that saving faith necessarily produces good works. He is wrong to say that those good works justify us.



Second, Wright's doctrine of justification is a denial of *imputed righteousness*. The imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ, according to biblical teaching, is the sole basis upon which God both pardons the sinner and accepts and accounts him righteous in the sight of God. Wright affirms that God pardons the sins of believers and that Christ's death is atoning and propitiatory. He does not, however, affirm the imputed righteousness of Christ as a biblical teaching. He does not understand Paul to teach that the perfect obedience and full satisfaction of Jesus Christ is credited to the believer for his justification. We will have to present our own Spirit-enabled works alongside the work of Christ as the basis of our justification at the Day of Judgment. It is untrue to say that Wright is giving us Reformed doctrine in different dress. Wright offers the church a different doctrine, one that compromises biblical teaching.

Third, Wright's doctrine confuses an *implication* of the doctrine of justification with justification itself. Wright understands the doctrine of (present) justification fundamentally to concern the unity of the church and the fellowship of believers. One does not have to accept the costs and liabilities of Wright's doctrine in order to see the legitimate connection between justification and our life together in the people of God.

Two passages illustrate how Paul relates justification to the identity and life of the church. In Romans 15:7, the apostle says 'therefore, welcome one another as Christ has welcomed us for the glory of God'. Paul has in the previous chapter been addressing a difficult situation in the Roman church. The 'strong' and the 'weak' have not been pursuing the kind of unity that should characterize the fellowship of believers. Paul continues this concern for unity into the next chapter. In Romans 15:7 he lays down a principle for Christian unity: just as we have been accepted, so too we ought to accept one another. In other words, Christ's sacrificial love for us as ungodly and unlovely sinners should dictate the way that we relate to one another as believers. Christ accepted us not because he saw anything lovely or praiseworthy in us. In fact, he has accepted us in spite of our demerit. We should treat fellow believers, Paul says, in the same way. The doctrine of justification, then, has powerful implications for the life and fellowship of the church.

A second passage is Ephesians 2:13-14—'But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself

is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility.’ Here Paul tells us that the ‘blood of Christ’ is the basis of the bringing together of the people of God. It is the basis of the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile to one another in the body of Christ, and of the removal of the barriers that could separate Christian brothers and sisters in the church. The apostle again shows us the profound implications of the justifying work of Christ for the life of the church.

Perhaps this is why Wright’s work is at first glance plausible and attractive: he emphasizes justification as a doctrine that has practical implications for the body of believers. Upon more careful study, however, we find that Wright’s understanding of justification comes to the church at a tremendous and unacceptable cost—the cost of the integrity of the gospel of grace. Wright asks us to choose between the biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone and justification as a biblical teaching that fundamentally concerns Christian unity. But true, biblical fellowship and unity are possible only when they are anchored in the biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone.

How should we as Christians who embrace the Bible’s teaching on justification respond to Wright’s work? Our response should be first of all to prize and to treasure the perfect and unchanging imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ for the sinner’s justification. At the same time, we should never neglect—in word or in deed—the necessary practical implications of our justification for our life together as the body of Christ. If the Son of God has truly shed his blood for our redemption, how can we possibly respond in any other way than in accepting fellow believers as Christ has accepted us?

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## ENDNOTES

1. As I noted in “Justification Defined,” ‘To be sure, God set his favour upon a person when he chose that person in Christ before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4). By ‘favour’ here and in some other places in this discussion, I am referring to an elect sinner being reconciled to God through Christ.’
2. “The New Perspective on Paul,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 65 (1983): 95-122. N. T. Wright uses the phrase ‘New Perspectives on

- Paul' (plural) as well as the phrase 'New Perspective on Paul'. See Wright, 'New Perspectives on Paul,' in ed. Bruce McCormack, *Justification in Perspective: Historical Developments and Contemporary Challenges* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House/Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), pp. 243-64.
3. Historically, Christians have maintained that the apostle Paul authored all thirteen letters attributed to him. Many scholars within the historical-critical tradition argue that only seven of the thirteen are authentically Pauline. Many NPP proponents do not accept the authenticity of all thirteen letters.
  4. See my *Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004), pp. 1-22.
  5. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., *By Faith, Not By Sight: Paul and the Order of Salvation* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2006), pp. 40-41.
  6. E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), pp. 505-508.
  7. This reassessment began in earnest with W. D. Davies's, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism: Some Rabbinic Elements in Pauline Theology* (4th edn.; Phila: Fortress, 1980).
  8. J. D. G. Dunn, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* (BNTC; London: A. C. Black/Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1993); *Romans 1-8, 9-16* (WBC 38A-B; Waco, TX: Word, 1988); *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). A substantial collection of Dunn's writings on the NPP is *The New Perspective on Paul* (rev. ed.; Mohr Siebeck: Tübingen/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).
  9. Wright, 'New Perspectives,' p. 248.
  10. Krister Stendahl, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," pp. 78-96 in *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays* (Phila: Fortress, 1976); "Paul Among Jews and Gentiles," pp. 1-77 in *ibid.* The former was first published in 1960. The latter originated in public lectures in 1963 and 1964.
  11. Stendahl, "The Apostle Paul," p. 84, as quoted at Waters, *Justification*, p. 24.
  12. Two representative criticisms of Sanders are Robert H. Gundry, "Grace, Works, and Staying Saved in Paul," *Biblica* 66 (1985):1-38; and D. A. Carson, "Introduction," in D. A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid (eds.), *Justification and Variegated Nomism, Vol. 1: The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck/Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), pp. 1-5.
  13. See the discussion at Waters, *Justification*, pp. 38-41.
  14. See the discussion at Waters, *Justification*, pp. 48-51.
  15. See Dunn, *Theology*, p. 354-79.
  16. N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), pp. 121-2.
  17. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, p. 124. Emphasis original.
  18. Wright, "New Perspectives on Paul." For interaction with Wright's most recent

book on justification, *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision* (London: SPCK, 2009), see my review at [www.reformation21.org](http://www.reformation21.org).

19. Wright, "New Perspectives," 248-9.
20. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, p. 114.
21. N. T. Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2005), p. 100.
22. Wright, "New Perspectives," p. 250. Emphasis original.
23. See the analysis of John Piper, *The Future of Justification: A Response to N. T. Wright* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2007), pp. 62-3.
24. Wright, "New Perspectives," p. 250.
25. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, p. 98.
26. Wright, "New Perspectives," p. 251.
27. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, p. 99.
28. Wright, "New Perspectives," p. 252.
29. *Ibid.*
30. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, p. 104-5. Emphasis removed.
31. Wright, "New Perspectives," p. 252.
32. Wright, "Romans," in ed. Leander E. Keck, *New Interpreter's Bible: Acts—1 Corinthians*, Vol. 10 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), p. 468.
33. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, p. 133.
34. Wright, "New Perspectives," p. 258. See also p. 260.
35. Wright, "New Perspectives," pp. 260, 255-7.
36. Wright, "New Perspectives," pp. 256, 257.
37. Wright, "New Perspectives," p. 260.
38. Wright, "New Perspectives," p. 253.
39. Wright, "Romans," p. 440.
40. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, p. 129.
41. Wright, "New Perspectives," p. 260.
42. Wright, "New Perspectives," p. 253-4.
43. Wright recognizes in this statement that these works are evidentiary. Our present concern, however, is to address Wright's statements that these "'works' in Paul's redefined sense" are part of the basis on which a person is justified.
44. Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective*, p. 148.
45. *Ibid.*
46. Wright, "New Perspectives," p. 61. Emphasis removed.
47. Wright, "New Perspectives," p. 254.
48. "Justification: The Biblical Basis and its Relevance for Contemporary Evangelism," p. 18, cited in Peter T. O'Brien, "Was Paul a Covenantal Nomist?" in eds. Carson, O'Brien & Seifrid, *Justification and Variegated Nomism, Vol. 2—The Paradoxes of Paul* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck/Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), p. 292.