

Report of the Special Committee

to Study the

New Perspective on Paul

**A Report Adopted by the
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Reformed Church of the United States**

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INTRODUCTION

Esteemed Fathers and brethren,

The mandate of your committee is to study the New Perspective on Paul, concentrating on the teaching of justification by faith, and report back this year. Below is a brief analysis of the NPP and a short response. Following this is a more lengthy presentation and critique of the views of N. T. Wright, an Anglican bishop and New Testament Scholar.

Rather than provide an in depth analysis of the New Perspective on Paul—which would involve summarizing a lengthy history of academic New Testament scholarship, as well as a presentation of the positions and details of a number of authors, most of which we deem irrelevant to the interests of Synod—your committee has chosen to study and report on those points and persons of the NPP that are showing some measure of impact among the Reformed.

With this in mind, we have focused on the most essential, influential and controversial claim, namely the “Sander’s thesis.” The fundamental aspect of this claim is that first century Judaism was a religion of grace. The bulk of the report focuses on N. T. Wright. He is the foremost representative of the most palatable version of the NPP, having a measurable impact within Reformed and evangelical circles.

In presenting a synopsis of the NPP with a concentration on Wright’s views we believe we will have presented to Synod what is necessary to know about the NPP in regards to justification.

The New Perspective on Paul¹

- The New Perspective on Paul is actually a variety of perspectives, the essence of which calls into question the Reformed reading of Paul's doctrine of salvation and justification. It originated within the realm of the historical-critical tradition and is now a well-established orientation to Paul's letters within New Testament academic scholarship. It began to make significant impact on the evangelical/Reformed community within the last decade or so.
- Its leading scholars are E. P. Sanders, James Dunn, and N. T. Wright. The foundations for this perspective had already been laid by previous scholars such as Krister Stendahl, but its great catalyst was Sanders. In 1977, Sanders, published his major work, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion*² in which he argued that, contrary to the Reformation paradigm, first century Judaism did not operate upon a merit-based theology, but was, rather, a religion of grace. This premise has consequently led to a reevaluation of Paul's conflict with Judaism and the early Christian Judaizers.
- NPP writers generally hold that Paul was in agreement with the main points of contemporary Jewish soteriology. His quarrel with the law and Judaism was not with legalism as articulated by the Protestant Reformers, but with either the Jewish denial of Christ as Messiah (Sanders' position) or, as in the case of Dunn and Wright, that Judaism was dominated by ethnocentric tendencies. These tendencies were influencing Jewish Christians over against Gentile Christians. In this case Paul was not exercised about matters of salvation—at least not directly. Being the apostle to the Gentiles, Paul was concerned with the burning question of how Gentile Christians were to be accepted into the church. In his original context, then, Paul addressed his teaching of justification by faith at the problem of racial and religious/ethnic segregation. Salvation was not the issue.
- Since Paul is not, or at least not primarily, using "justification" to address the problem of salvation by works, it follows that justification cannot be thought of as an element of soteriology— or least not as central to the gospel. The question that Paul is considering in the matter of justification is not "How can I be saved?" but "How can I be in or know that I am in the covenant people of God?" Justification is now thought to be less about soteriology and more about ecclesiology.

We recognize that this summary of the NPP is extremely brief, but it captures the core of the NPP. What is evident about the NPP is that much rides on how we understand the soteriology of first century Judaism.

The "Sanders Thesis"

As noted above, E. P. Sanders set forth the case that 2nd Temple Judaism was a religion of grace. On the basis of extensive research of rabbinic literature of the period (from about 200 B.C. to 200 A.D.), Sanders claimed that 1st century Judaism universally exhibited a pattern of religion that he calls "covenantal nomism." Sanders provides a complex picture of "covenantal nomism," but in simple terms it means that the religion of Israel focused on the covenant in which keeping the law was for the purpose of staying in the covenant, not for piling up merit. One got into the covenant by the grace of God and one stayed in the covenant by obedience to the law. If one transgressed the law, atonement was sought and made through sacrifice. Sanders acknowledges that statements from the Rabbinic sources exist that indicate merit-theology. But these are exceptions to the norm, which was grace. The result of this thesis for our interpretation of Paul, therefore, is that Paul's statements against Judaism can no longer be understood as keeping the law in order to gain one's acceptance with God. Because the rejection of this notion of Jewish legalism changes how one thinks of the nature of Paul's conflict, it has led to a reinterpretation of justification itself. This is not to say that everything rides upon how one conceives of first

¹ For in depth treatments of the New Perspective on Paul see, Guy Prentiss Waters, *Justification and the New Perspective on Paul*, (Phillisburg: P & R, 2004) 1-149, and Stephen Westerholm, *Perspective Old and New On Paul: The "Lutheran" Paul and His Critics*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), xi-258.

² E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1977).

century Judaism. But it is evident that how we understand the soteriology of Judaism is of central importance. The question we address below is, “Was there legalism in Judaism of the first century?” We answer in the affirmative that, contrary to Sanders, legalism was prevalent in first century Judaism.

Before looking at some of the evidence, we should note that we are not suggesting that Judaism was only or completely a graceless religion. This is neither necessary nor true. Many Reformed and evangelical critics of Sanders acknowledge that he has done a service in giving a fuller picture of the Judaism that has been hitherto seen. The old picture, perpetuated especially by German scholars like Rudolf Bultmann and Joachim Jeremias—that Judaism was nothing more than a manifestation of a full-fledged Pelagianism—does not hold water.³ Many, if not most, critics of Sanders maintain that first century Judaism amounted to a form of synergism and thus, more or less, depending upon the place and Jewish group—it was not monolithic—refer to it as Semi-Pelagian. Guy Waters writes, “...according to Sanders own evidence ancient rabbinic Judaism is a Semi-Pelagian religion. In this religion, to be sure, the language of the grace of God is not absent...nevertheless...it is ultimately synergistic.”⁴ And, we would add, if ultimately synergistic, then it was ultimately a form of works-based soteriology, that is, legalism. This is seen in and outside the New Testament.

Within the NT we find several passages that picture this form of legalism within Judaism. We will define legalism succinctly as the effort to make a contribution to one’s redemption or salvation. It is helpful to understand that such legalism can be manifested either in barefaced or in subtle ways. Recognizing that either a blatant manifestation or subtle manifestation of legalism still constitutes a form of legalism is important because, according to Moises Silva, Sanders fails to see legalism in Judaism because he seems to acknowledge only when it is brazen. After acknowledging some of Sander’s contribution, Silva maintains that he “shows very little sensitivity, however, to some subtler concepts (and others not so subtle) that lie at the very root of legalism.”⁵ The NT often presents the legalism of Judaism in its more subtle shape. We will briefly look at three NT passages.

A. Matthew 15:1-20

Then came to Jesus scribes and Pharisees, which were of Jerusalem, saying, Why do thy disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? for they wash not their hands when they eat bread. But he answered and said unto them, Why do ye also transgress the commandment of God by your tradition? For God commanded, saying, Honour thy father and mother: and, He that curseth father or mother, let him die the death. But ye say, Whosoever shall say to his father or his mother, It is a gift, by whatsoever thou mightest be profited by me; And honor not his father or his mother, he shall be free. Thus have ye made the commandment of God of none effect by your tradition. Ye hypocrites, well did Esaias prophesy of you, saying, This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoreth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.

And he called the multitude, and said unto them, Hear, and understand: Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man; but that which cometh out of the mouth, this defileth a man. Then came his disciples, and said unto him, Knowest thou that the Pharisees were offended, after they heard this saying? But he answered and said, Every plant, which my heavenly Father hath not planted, shall be rooted up. Let them alone: they be blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch.

Then answered Peter and said unto him, Declare unto us this parable. And Jesus said, Are ye also yet without understanding? Do not ye yet understand, that whatsoever entereth in at the mouth goeth into the belly, and is cast out into the draught? But those things which proceed out of the mouth come forth from the heart; and they defile the man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders,

³ Waters writes, “First, let us recognize that Sanders has provided a more balanced picture than prevailed in earlier German scholarship, viz., of a purely Pelagian system. Sanders correctly reminds us that the rabbis were conversant with the language of grace and forgiveness, and were certainly aware of their own sinfulness and, at times, God’s holiness,” (Waters, *Justification*, 55). Precisely how the Reformed have understood Judaism is a study in itself.

⁴ Waters, *Justification*, 152.

⁵ M. Silva, “The Pharisees in Modern Jewish Scholarship: A Review Article,” in *The Westminster Theological Journal*, Vol. XLII, Spring 1980, No. 2, p. 395-405. Quote is from page 405.

adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies: These are the things which defile a man: but to eat with unwashed hands defileth not a man.

It is evident to all but the morally degenerate that legalism can only operate in the realm of an imperfect standard. The bar of ethical perfection must therefore be lowered if one is to contribute something toward his own salvation. This is exactly what Jesus accuses the Pharisees of doing; they were reducing the law of God to ceremonial practices *in order to be clean before God*. Through their vain traditions, the Pharisees robbed the law of its force and its purpose. The result was an externalism that left them unclean and defiled before God in spite of all their washings and ceremonies. They considered themselves clean, but Jesus, by pointing to the depth of sin, exposed the vanities of their washings and their implicit Semi-Pelagian view of sin. It is not that which enters into the man that defiles the man, but that which comes out of him. Sin does not lie in the external act but in the wickedness of the heart — the stew from which all sins arise. This matches the description of Christ in Matthew 23:27 “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men’s bones, and of all uncleanness.” Thus the Pharisees exhibit two points which are the hallmarks of legalism: they lower the standard and they failed to comprehend the gravity of sin. This is legalism at its root and branch.⁶

B. Luke 18:9-14

And he spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess. And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner. I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for everyone that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.

In this passage Jesus opposes legalism, that is, those who “trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others.” This statement is Luke’s definition of legalism. To illustrate it Jesus appeals to the Pharisee as the paradigmatic legalist. His audience was composed of those familiar with the Pharisees, so His depiction of them as self-righteous was not a mere abstraction — it was a real life example that would not have been thought slanderous. Indeed there were probably those who smarted under his arrows. Why would Jesus oppose legalism here, before a general audience, if it did not exist in Judaism? Why would he naturally appeal to the Pharisee if the Pharisee was looking to God’s grace? Indeed, the very rebuke of not understanding mercy dictates that the whole notion of grace and mercy was a problem with the Pharisaical means of salvation.

In addition to the blatant manifestation of legalism in Judaism, there was also its subtle form. The Pharisee does not claim any merit of his own, but gives God glory for everything that he is. There is no humility here, and certainly not brokenness nor a sense of unworthiness. But he does give God credit for it all. Yet Jesus maintained that such a one trusted in himself, even though he gives credit to God. His error was much deeper than that of outward pretense. Blinded to his own arrogance and the horror of his own condition, he relied on himself.

At best, the Pharisee reflects a synergistic outlook rather than that of grace. He feels himself righteous before God on the basis of his God given virtues rather than God’s provision of sacrifice. He does not take credit for his virtues, but thanks God for them. This is the divine side of the synergism. But then he catalogues all the

⁶ “The Judaism of the Pauline period does not seem to have been characterized by a profound sense of sin. And the reason is not far to seek. The legalism of the Pharisees, with its regulation of the minute details of life, was not really making the Law too hard to keep; it was really making it too easy. Jesus said to His disciples, “Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no wise enter into the kingdom of heaven”....A low view of law leads to legalism in religion; a high view of law make man a seek after grace.” J. G. Machen, *The Origin of Paul’s Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947 orig. 1923), 179, quoted in Silva, “Pharisees in Modern Jewish Scholarship” 405. etc.

virtues for which he is thankful. He is not an extortioner, unjust, an adulterer, and certainly not like the publican who was at the place of worship the same time he is. He then speaks of the outward ceremonies that he performs which are even more than the law commanded: he fasted twice on the Sabbath and gave tithes of all. This is the human side of the synergism and it receives the greater emphasis. Though the Pharisee rightly thanks God, his point of reference is on his own virtues (the gifts of God) and the publican. He was not focused on God or even on the sacrifice. He was focused on his virtues.

This parable, then, was spoken by our Lord against those who “trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others.” It is opposed to anyone who trusts anything in themselves, including the works of God for which they feign to be thankful. No matter how commendable and admirable internal righteous affections may be, and though they may be the work of God, they cannot be the basis of any trust concerning righteousness. What could be more obvious? The contrast between the self-righteousness of the Pharisee and the total reliance of the publican is precisely the difference between legal and evangelical righteousness promoted by the Reformers and taught in all of Scripture. The publican did not even offer his contrition and poorness of spirit to God as a ground of righteousness, but simply called upon the mercy of God.

C. John 5:37-40

And the Father himself, which hath sent me, hath borne witness of me. Ye have neither heard his voice at any time, nor seen his shape. And ye have not his word abiding in you: for whom he hath sent, him ye believe not. Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me. And ye will not come to me, that ye might have life. I receive not honor from men. But I know you, that ye have not the love of God in you. I am come in my Father's name, and ye receive me not: if another shall come in his own name, him ye will receive. How can ye believe, which receive honor one of another, and seek not the honor that *cometh* from God only? Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father: there is *one* that accuseth you, *even* Moses, in whom ye trust. For had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me: for he wrote of me. But if ye believe not his writings, how shall ye believe my words?

Jesus clearly depicts the rulers as trusting in Moses for eternal life. Jesus clearly teaches that the grace and mercy of God as found in God's Messiah are evident even in Moses. What more could He be contrasting than precisely “justifying oneself” over and against God's gratuitous justification. It's hard to see how one could avoid understanding Christ to be condemning legalism. Note the reason for the law keeping was for eternal life; they trusted in Moses. This was more for them than a matter of staying in the covenant and maintaining covenant identity or trying to set up the conditions for national deliverance. Many were in the covenant, but most were not as scrupulous. Not so these leaders. They searched the Scriptures focusing on the commands of Moses. Why? So that by knowing and scrupulously keeping the law of Moses, they might receive honor from men and eternal life from God.

Jesus declares null and void the faith that the Jew placed in the Scriptures given by Moses and his [the Jew's] observance of the commandments given by Moses—for this is the meaning of “think ye have eternal life.” This faith was declared null and void, not because there was a failure to follow them zealously, nor a failure of great sincerity. The failure of such was simply because it was directed at the wrong “objective correlative” of faith. Faith in the teachings of Moses as lawgiver and the law given could never bring life. This was not because grace and the Messiah are not taught by Moses, but because the faith was not directed to the life-giving element. This life-giving element was the promise concerning Jesus Christ, without which all observance of commandments and days and ceremonies were vain indeed.

In conclusion, we note that many other passages could be appealed to bolster the points we have already. But this brief sample of passages is enough to show that there was legalism in Judaism and the so-called “Sander Revolution” along with its consequent reinterpretation of Paul is unfounded and an over-reactionary rush to judgment.

II. N.T. Wright on Justification

A. Wright's Methodology

The key to understanding Wright's views of justification is to be aware of his exegetical methodology. As

will become abundantly clear, both in theory and in practice, Wright understands Paul’s first century Jewish world-view (with the broad story that structures it) to be critically important for understanding Paul’s terminology. This world-view approach drives Wright’s exegesis rather than the text itself.

On Wright’s approach to interpretation, the most important factor in exegesis is to know the writer’s world-view and accompanying narrative, because these are the more fundamental categories for understanding. Thus, Wright provides extensive analysis of phenomena of world-view in general and the 2nd Temple Jewish world-view in particular.

All world-views, explains Wright, can be divided into three levels. The first level is the world-view itself, which he defines as the “tacit and pre-theoretical point of view [which] is a necessary condition for any perception and knowledge to occur at all.”⁷ World-views consist of “four constituent elements: symbols, praxis, stories, and assumed questions and answers (the latter may be itemized: Who are we? Where are we? What’s wrong? What’s the solution?).” “Symbols” are the signs in which the relationship between the signified and the signifier is by cultural convention and is a matter of social interpretation and agreement. “Praxis” is the “way-of-being-in-the-world.” Stories are the narrative structure or framework of the world-view. Human beings live a storied existence; all our actions and words have a story behind them.⁸ Characteristically Wright remarks, “Narrative is the most characteristic expression of world-view, going deeper than the isolated observation or fragmented remark.”⁹ Finally the purpose of a world-view is to answer the questions above to the satisfaction of the individual and the group.

All of these then “generate” observable and discussable things such as “aims and intentions” “basic and consequent beliefs.” These constitute the second and third levels of world-view respectively. According to Wright, “[World-views] are not usually called up to consciousness... But world-views normally come into sight, on a more day-to-day basis, in *sets of beliefs and aims* which emerge into the open, which are more regularly discussed, and which in principle could be revised somewhat without revising the world-view itself.”¹⁰ These basic beliefs and aims give rise to the third level, *consequent beliefs and intentions*.¹¹ Most discourse, including that of theology, takes place right here, with both the world-view with its basic beliefs and aims being assumed. Paul’s statements in his epistles, therefore, are generated from his world-view, *especially* in narrative structure. Such statements are the consequent beliefs and intentions derived from his subconscious world-view. Thus it becomes imperative for the interpreter of Paul to know his world-view and properly relate it to his actual statements.

According to Wright, the governing narrative of Paul’s thought is to be found in the “generally accepted” subconscious world-view of 2nd Temple Judaism. Wright says, “As soon as we reach implicit narrative, and with it the level of world-view, we must see Paul’s story is the essentially Jewish story, albeit *manque*’—or, as he would have said, straightened out.”¹² Paul’s Christian story and his prior Jewish story essentially agree.

Wright gives us a brief outline of the Jewish world-view and story. First, “the symbolic world of Judaism focused on temple, Torah, land, and racial identity.” Second, “the assumed praxis brought these symbols to life in festivals and fasts, cult and sacrifice, domestic taboos and customs.” Third,

“The narrative framework which sustained symbol and praxis, and which can be seen in virtually all the writings we possess from the Second Temple period, had to do with the history of Israel; more specifically, with its state of continuing ‘exile’ (though it had returned from Babylon, it remained under Gentile lordship, and the great promises of Isaiah and others remained unfulfilled) and the way(s) in which its god would intervene to deliver it as had happened in one of its foundation stories, that of the exodus.”

Fourth, “its fundamental answers to the world-view questions might have been: We are Israel, the true people

⁷ NT Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God: Christian Origins and the Question of God*, vol. 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 36. This and all quotes dealing with Wright’s methodology are from the 1st section of this work.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 123

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 126.

¹² *Ibid.*, 405

of the creator god; we are in our land (and/or dispersed away from our land); our god has not yet fully restored us as one day he will; we therefore look for restoration, which will include the justice of our god being exercised over the pagan nations.”¹³ This, in brief, is the cognitive and mental construct—the lens—which is needed in order to understand the world-view into which and by which the New Testament writings were produced.

To understand the teachings of Paul, we need to see through this “lens” by means of comparison and contrast with the above “dominate” world-view of the collective Jewish consciousness. The technical process Wright proposes for us—and this is the heart and soul of his hermeneutical method—is to find the similarity and dissimilarity the “outer” writing of Paul has with the 2nd Temple narrative and in what way a “new story” is generated from these particular elements. “The task I see before us now is to show how the actual argument . . . , the ‘poetic sequence’ . . . , relates to this underlying ‘narrative sequence,’ that is, the theological story of the creator’s dealings with Israel and the world, now retold so as to focus on Christ and the Spirit.”

How does Wright work this out in practice? Let’s take an example from Wright’s treatment of Galatians 2, where Peter is given back to separating himself from Gentiles.¹⁴ Wright states concerning the phrase “truth of the gospel” that:

“The ‘truth’ in question is not simply a set of correct propositions, but an entire world-view, seen graphically in its characteristic praxis. Paul’s reconstrual of the Jewish world-view necessarily involved one aspect of praxis which broke the bounds of previous Jewish ways: those who hailed the Messiah Jesus as their Lord formed a single family, whose common table functioned as a vital symbol. Remove that symbol, cease that praxis, and the entire world-view is under threat.”

Reconstrual equals “retelling” the story so as to “focus on Christ and the Spirit.”

Wright is here asserting that Peter’s problem was not that he was acting contrary to the Synodical decision made at Jerusalem “to lay upon you [the Gentiles] no greater burden than these necessary things: that ye abstain from things sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication; from which if ye keep yourselves, it shall be well with you” (Acts 15:28, 29). Paul is not rebuking Peter for “laying a burden” upon the Gentiles, but of threatening a “vital symbol” in the story. That “symbol” or “praxis” was a “common table” that signified a “single family” formed by the Messiah Jesus, the “common” Lord.

What the “surface” language seems to teach us, namely, that Peter was repudiating grace and justification by faith, the world-view/narrative analysis shows us was really about eating food in common as a mark of unity and common family. From this analysis, it would be indifferent whether everybody was eating kosher food or non-kosher, as long as everybody was eating together. That is, at issue is not the validity of the dietary laws themselves, the danger of accepting the dietary laws as commanded in Scripture, and a return to a covenantal condition impossible for anyone to keep. The problem was not that Peter was slinking back into dietary conformity to a set of rules which had been abolished by the coming of Christ. The problem was that Peter was breaking the taboos of the “new family” as told by the “reconstrual” of the old story and in so doing was disrupting the “truth of the gospel.” The new world-view being forged from the old was being “threatened.”

This is how the process of narrative analysis leads to some interesting conclusions about the definition or “meaning” of particular terms well used within Christianity.

Wright’s approach to Scripture, along with that of the NPP as a whole, undermines the perspicuity and final authority of Scripture (*Sola Scriptura*). This is so because, as Guy Waters states, “[the] NPP operates with the mistaken principle that interpretation of Paul is to be controlled by a scholarly reconstruction of Judaism.”¹⁵ We cannot understand Paul apart from a specialized competence, in this case a specialized knowledge of Second

¹³ Wright acknowledges that this is not the only “Jewish” world-view going around at the time of Paul, but he argues that it was the dominate one. When one reads Josephus, for example, there is a strong sense of sin, the need for repentance, and the need for a work around to deal with the failure to keep the law.

¹⁴ This is taken from *Gospel and Theology in Galatians*, Originally published in *Gospel in Paul: Studies on Corinthians, Galatians and Romans* for Richard N. Longenecker, eds. L. Ann Jervis and Peter Richardson, 1994, pp. 222–239. *Journal for the Study of the New Testament, Supplement Series 108*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

¹⁵ Waters, *Justification*, 154.

Temple Judaism.¹⁶ Bible students without such specialized training “are therefore placed at the mercy of an academic elite. Further, it is of the nature of academic discourse to be indefinite, to resist closure, and to prize innovation over tradition.”¹⁷ This means, that if Scripture’s interpretation depends upon such specialization and scholarship, then such scholars have become a kind of necessary priesthood. The Scriptures, might be affirmed, as ultimate and final, but this scholarly priesthood has the final say on what they teach. Practically speaking, if Wright’s approach to Scriptures and his own exegetical conclusions are correct, then it follows that the ordinary reader must turn to Wright to understand the Scripture. Confidence in perspicuity is significantly diminished and Wright, and his fellow NPP scholars, has become a necessary authority at least equal to that of Scripture. For how can the Scripture hold any authority if not essentially understood apart from these scholars?

B. The “Righteousness of God”

It is Wright’s world-view/narrative analysis which leads him to redefine Paul’s important phrase the “righteousness of God,” *dikaiosune theou* (found seven times in Paul’s letters). Generally speaking the Reformed have seen the phrase as referring to the righteousness which God gives, and which avails before God’s tribunal. It has been variously understood as the status which results from justification or the grounds of justification, i.e., the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Wright sees “the righteousness of God” at the heart of Paul’s theology and the central theme of Romans. In keeping with his telling of the predominant Jewish story being told in Paul’s day, Wright clearly and consistently defines *dikaiosune theou* as God’s faithfulness to his covenant promises to undo sin and bring justice to the world.

The phrase “the righteousness of God”...summed up sharply and conveniently, for a first-century Jew such as Paul, the expectation that the God of Israel, often referred to in the Hebrew Scriptures by the name YHWH, *would be faithful to his promise made to the patriarchs* [emphasis ours].¹⁸

For a reader of the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Jewish scriptures, ‘the righteousness of God’ would have one obvious meaning: *God’s own faithfulness to his promises, to the covenant*.¹⁹

Wright argues that this meaning is not just derived from the contemporary Jewish background but that it has biblical backing especially within the prophetic books.

God’s ‘righteousness’ especially in Isaiah 40-55, is that aspect of God’s character because of which he saves Israel despite Israel’s perversity and lostness. God has made promises; Israel can trust those promises. God’s righteousness is thus cognate with his trustworthiness on the one hand, and Israel’s salvation on the other.²⁰

Notice as well that on this definition, the righteousness of God is always salvific for the Jewish nation.

Wright indicates that in the history of interpretation there have been basically two schools of interpretation concerning “the righteousness of God.” The phrase has been taken to mean either the status that God gives the sinner or it refers to God himself. Wright insists that it is the latter.

¹⁶ Waters lists three problems with this kind of logic. (1) If one were to grant the truth of the approach, you are still left with insuperable problems, i.e., the impossibility of knowing which texts Paul had access to, or the impossibility of knowing in many cases the sphere of influence that a given text had. (2) Such texts need to be interpreted and, contrary to the common assumption among scholars, these texts are not free of interpretive difficulties. (3) It is a flawed hermeneutic to say that interpretation of a primary source is based on the reconstruction of many secondary sources. Paul should be, as with any author, understood on the basis of his own terms and sentences, (*Justification*, 154-155).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 156.

¹⁸ N.T. Wright, “Romans,” in *New Interpreters Bible: Acts-First Corinthians*, vol. 10, ed. Leander I. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 398.

¹⁹ N.T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Saint Paul the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 96.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 96.

If and when God does act to vindicate his people, his people will then, metaphorically speaking, have the status of righteousness... *But the righteousness they have will not be God's own righteousness.* That makes no sense at all. God's own righteousness is his covenant faithfulness, because of which he will (Israel hopes) vindicate her, and bestow upon her the status of 'righteous', as the vindicated or acquitted defendant. But God's righteousness remains, so to speak, God's property. It is the reason for his acting to vindicate his people. It is not the status he bestows upon them in so doing²¹

Wright sees three major background concepts contributing to the common Jewish (and Paul's) understanding of the phrase. The first of these is the covenant which God set up with Abraham. The covenant, repeatedly explains Wright, was God's answer to Adam's sin. By means of the covenant, God intended to "put the world to rights."²² Wright explains, "The covenant... was established so that the creator God could rescue the creation from evil, corruption, and disintegration and in particular could rescue humans from sin and death."²³ However, the covenant people, Israel, have failed to keep the covenant and were sent into a state of exile—a state in which they still remained until God, in righteousness (=faithfulness to the covenant), came to vindicate his people. This expected vindication was seen in terms of the Jewish law-court metaphor, which is the second component of the righteousness of God. We have more to say on this element below. For now we note, that in Jewish expectation this metaphor factored in the expectation that God as judge would vindicate his people over against that of pagan overlords. The third component was the 'future element' of eschatology and this future element was expressed in apocalyptic language—language which Paul echoes when he says the righteousness of God is revealed (*apokalyptetai*).²⁴ This was simply the hope that God would at last act to vindicate his people simultaneously revealing the secret plan that he had been hatching all along.²⁵

According to Wright, Paul not only retained these three components but retained their same Jewish emphasis as well. In other words, Paul did not see the elements in a different ordering so that the law-court metaphor was at the forefront of his understanding. Like his fellow Jews, God's covenant faithfulness was still the basic meaning of "the righteousness of God." Thus, generally speaking, for both Jews and Christians the righteousness of God refers to God's covenant faithfulness, primarily expressed in his vindication of his people (i.e., justification), which would also be the great long awaited unveiling of the plan of God.

Does Wright think that Paul at all diverged from the Jewish understanding? Yes. His fellow Jews had a nationalistic view of God's covenant faithfulness. For them the righteousness of God had to do with God's vindication of them over Rome. In the gospel this truncated perception changes along two lines. First and foremost, God's faithfulness was expressed in the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. He fulfilled God's plan to undue sin through the covenant, by crucifixion. Second, the gospel teaches that God's faithful action to fulfill his covenant promises extends to Gentiles as well as Jews. This Christological twist does not change the basic definition however; it is clear from Wright's definition that the "covenant meaning" played the largest role in determining the meaning of the phrase. And the law court metaphor gave the righteousness/faithfulness of God its particular color.²⁶

Wright does not hold that every instance of "the righteousness of God" refers to God's covenant faithfulness. Concerning Philippians 3:9 – "and may be found in Him, not having my own righteousness which is from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by [on the basis of] faith"—Wright says that this instance means the status that comes from God. Paul has the Hebrew law-court background in mind, rendering it impossible for scholars to treat 3:9 as a yardstick for Paul's other uses of the phrase. A 'righteousness *from* God' is the status of righteousness which God the judge hands down, while the righteousness *of* God is his own covenant faithfulness.²⁷ He interprets Romans 10:3 in the same way. And unbelievably he takes 2 Corinthians 5:21– "For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" – to mean Paul's own apostolic ministry, which exhibits the

²¹ *Ibid.*, 99.

²² This way of expressing God's purpose with the covenant is found throughout Wright.

²³ Wright, "Romans," 399.

²⁴ Wright, "Romans," 401.

²⁵ Wright, *Saint Paul*, 99. Also "Romans," 401.

²⁶ Wright, *Saint Paul*, 99.

²⁷ Wright, *Saint Paul*, 104.

faithfulness of God. The apostolic ministry “is itself *an incarnation of the covenant faithfulness of God*. What Paul is saying is that he and his fellow apostles, in their suffering and fear, their faithful witness against all the odds, are not just talking about God’s faithfulness; they are actually embodying it.”²⁸

Remarkably, Wright does little to support his covenantal reading of the “righteousness,” beyond saying that this is the meaning of “righteousness” found in Isaiah 40-55 and assuming the covenant meaning. He states that this covenantal reading of the righteousness of God is an established fact. Clearly on Wright’s reading Paul’s supposed background understanding of covenant dominates his understanding of “the righteousness of God.”

C. Wright on Paul’s doctrine of Justification

We will analyze Wright’s teaching on justification along three well-worn lines: Wright on the nature of justification, then on its grounds, and then on its means. Before this though we would point out what has already been said above. Justification is not the “righteousness of God.” Justification is the result of God’s faithfulness (i.e., righteousness) but they are not to be confused.

1. Wright on the Nature of justification

We will start with a negative. For Wright justification is not primarily about salvation or the gospel. Or put differently justification is not the heart of the gospel. Wright maintains that the gospel and justification, though related, should not be conflated. The gospel is the announcement that Jesus is Lord; justification says that one may know he is in the covenant by faith. Justification is an implication of the gospel, but not its essence. When dealing with questions of salvation, Paul appealed to the gospel not to justification.

But if we come to Paul with these questions in mind – the questions about how human beings come into a living and saving relationship with the living and saving God – it is not justification that springs to his lips or pen.²⁹

Why does Wright drive this wedge between justification and the gospel? Along with other New Perspective writers, Wright understands the nature of the Galatians controversy to have been about Gentile acceptance into the covenant people of God. Thus, Paul was combating Jewish ethnocentrism and exclusivism. Judaizers were requiring Gentile Christians to do those particularly Jewish works of the law which marked out those belonging to the covenant community; namely: circumcision, food, and Sabbath laws. Wright does not see Paul, when speaking of justification, moving much beyond these issues to broader and more important questions of salvation. So contra Jewish nationalism or exclusivism, Paul strenuously maintained that because of Jesus’ death and resurrection membership in the covenant is signified by faith only. To use a prejudicial word but one that Wright himself uses, Paul had *ecumenical* purposes in mind when he insisted on justification by faith.³⁰ This was because the nature of the covenant was to create the one family of God.

Justification, in Galatians, is the doctrine which insists that all who share faith in Christ belong at the same table, no matter what their racial difference, as together they wait for the final new creation.³¹

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.³²

In Wright’s words, justification is about ecclesiology more than soteriology.³³

Like *dikiaosune theou*, justification is righteousness language, and as such reflects a covenantal, Hebrew

²⁸ Ibid., 104-105.

²⁹ Ibid., 116.

³⁰ Ibid., 151-165.

³¹ Ibid., 122.

³² Ibid 133.

³³ Ibid., 119

law-court, and eschatological background.³⁴ The covenant is that overarching concept of justification and of all of Paul's theology. God set up the covenant to undo Adam's sin. But Israel herself failed in her vocation. But where Israel failed, her Messiah succeeded. By his death and resurrection Jesus has begun to reverse the effects of sin. Justification is essentially forensic for Wright; it reflects the technical language of the Hebrew law-court, which had settings and procedures that distinguish it from contemporary Western counterparts. Wright explains,

In the lawcourt as envisaged in the O.T., all cases were considered "civil" rather than "criminal"; accuser and defendant pleaded their causes before a judge. "Righteousness" was the status of the successful party when the case had been decided; "acquitted" does not quite catch this, since that term applies only to the successful defendant, where as if the accusation was upheld the accuser would be "righteous." "Vindicated" is thus more appropriate. The word is not basically to do with morality of behavior, but rather with status in the eyes of the court—even though, once someone had been vindicated, the word "righteous" would thus as it were work backward, coming to denote not only the legal status at the end of the trial but also the behavior that occasioned this status.³⁵

Why is Wright so careful to detail the Hebrew law-court setting so as to distinguish it from contemporary (and past) settings? The answer lies in the last sentence of the above quotation: "The word [righteous] is not basically to do with morality of behavior, but rather with status in the eyes of the court..." That the verdict does *not* reflect or say anything about the morality of the one justified is Wright's "key" point whenever he describes justification in light of the Hebrew background.

[Justification] doesn't necessarily mean that he or she is good, morally upright or virtuous; simply that he or she has, in this case, been vindicated against the accuser.³⁶

It would be a mistake to think that with this emphasis on justification as a declared status Wright is teaching something close to traditional Reformed doctrine. To be sure, Wright is seeing justification as 'forensic' and he distinguishes his from all 'subjective' readings of justification and so putting himself out of accord with traditional Roman Catholicism. However, these quotes are two edged because they say that the verdict of the judge did not say anything about its moral basis. Wright's clearest statement of his point is in the following words...

Of course the word *dikaïos*, 'righteous', in secular Greek as in English, carried moralistic overtones. Granted this, it is not hard to see how it could come to refer not just to a status held after the decision of the court, but also to the character and past behaviour of either the plaintiff or the defendant. But the key point is that, within the technical language of the law court, 'righteous' means, for these two persons, *the status you have after the court finds in your favor*. Nothing more nothing less.³⁷

The effect of this thinking is to sever the verdict from a positive righteous basis. Thus far, though, we note that, for Wright, justification is the status that one has after the judge has decided in your favor, neither more nor less. Such a status carries no "moralistic overtones."

What does Wright say is the content of the status that the judge declares? What does it mean to be declared "righteous?" Traditionally, the content of the justifying verdict is that one is righteous; he or she conforms to the will of God. Wright's definition, however, involves the convergence of the covenant background with the technical law-court metaphor. The terminology itself, i.e., righteous, bears the meaning of one being in the right, but when this is hashed out theologically (with the covenant in view), "being in the right" translates into a declaration that one is a member of the covenant. The following statement is consistent with statements on justification found elsewhere in Wright's relevant writings.

³⁴ Ibid., 117-118, "Romans," 468.

³⁵ Wright, "Romans," 399.

³⁶ Wright, *Saint Paul*, 98.

³⁷ Ibid., 98.

“This is the meaning of Paul’s doctrine of ‘justification by faith.’ 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, forgiven 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.*”³⁸ [our emphasis]

Wright guards against misconceptions by noting that the declaration is not about how one enters the covenant or becomes a Christian.³⁹ Justification is the judge’s declaration that states that something is the case; it changes nothing, nor makes anything happen.⁴⁰ But more importantly, for Wright, justification is not only forensic language but “membership language.” It is God’s last day declaration that one by faith is in the right, that is, a member of the single covenant family of Abraham. It’s a declaration *primarily* about one’s *status* in the covenant. Justification does not refer to a process of becoming right; it is not God’s verdict upon the believer’s possession of a perfect righteousness; nor is justification about entering into a saving relationship with God. It is the judge’s verdict that the believer is a member of the covenant, and in terms of Paul’s argument, how you can know that you are already in the covenant, i.e., by faith only.

Wright also includes the forgiveness of sin with the declaration. For to be in the covenant is to have one’s sins forgiven, because the covenant was given by God and fulfilled by Christ for the purposes of putting the world to rights, that is, of undoing sin and creating a unified new humanity.⁴¹ But the centerpiece of Wright’s view of justification is that about covenant membership. Again, he says, that 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...*”⁴² Or take Paul’s conclusion in Romans 3:20, “Therefore by the deeds of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for by the Law is the knowledge of sin.” Wright sums up his view as follows, “His point ... was that all who attempted to legitimate their covenant status by appealing to possession of Torah would find that the Torah itself accused them of sin.”⁴³ Wright sees Paul addressing Jews in this statement, who were depending on “works of law” (=Jewish boundary markers) to demonstrate that they were members of the covenant, and that therefore should receive the verdict of the court. But Paul negates such an approach. The overarching concept of justification in Paul’s mind was the covenant, by which God intended to put the world to rights.⁴⁴ Jewish exclusivism undermined the purposes of the covenant to create one worldwide family.

³⁸ Wright, “Romans,” 468.

³⁹ Wright frequently depicts the traditional view of justification as being about how one become converted.

⁴⁰ N. T. Wright, “New Perspective on Paul,” Rutherford House lecture given at the 10th Edinburgh Dogmatics Conference: 25-28 August 2003, p. 12 [our copy].

⁴¹ In response to the charge that he drives a wedge between justification and salvation, thus downplaying the relationship of justification and sin, Wright argues that justification is a declaration comprising two things: forgiveness of sin and covenant membership. The two belong together. He writes “When we talk of God’s vindication of someone we are talking of God’s declaration, which appears as a double thing to us but I suspect a single thing to Paul: the declaration (a) that someone is in the right (their sins having been forgiven through the death of Jesus) and (b) that this person is a member of the true covenant family...” (Rutherford Lecture, p 12). To be fair Wright never has drawn a full separation between justification and soteriology. Some of his language would seem to indicate this. For instance, when he maintains that Paul would not have responded with the doctrine of justification to someone enquiring about how to be saved. His tendency is to emphasize that justification *is more* about ecclesiology than soteriology, but not exclusively so. It should be noted, though, that Wright does not seem to be saying that same thing as the Reformed when saying that justification involves the forgiveness of sins. On the Reformed view, when God justifies he also acquits one of sin, thus granting forgiveness. Further, this happens in the act of justification (Rom. 4:1-8). For Wright, however, the verdict of justification is just a statement of fact. It effects nothing save letting the believer know that he is member of the covenant. Further, Wright’s explanation of justification, as seen above, equates justification with vindication, which, he says, is not quite the same as acquittal. It should also be noted, that while Wright’s acknowledgment that justification, while primarily about ecclesiology, is to some degree soteriological, such an affirmation is fatal. For if justification has to do with soteriology to some degree or in some way, it follows that Wright’s affirmations that final justification will be based on performance, necessarily means that salvation will be based on the believer’s performance. We say more about this below.

⁴² Wright, *Saint Paul*, 119.

⁴³ Wright, “Romans,” 461.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 459.

Justification by faith is who one knows that he or she is part of that family.

Wright's third element of justification is that it is an eschatological verdict; it's part and parcel with the final judgment. In long awaited faithfulness God would finally act to vindicate his people Israel at the final judgment and thus save them. Paul maintains this basic Jewish outlook but adds a somewhat subversive twist: the verdict happens in the present for those who believe the gospel of the Messiah Jesus. "It is part of the Pauline world-view in which the creator of the world has acted, uniquely, climactically and decisively, in Jesus Christ, for the rescue of the entire cosmos, and is now, by his Spirit, bringing all things into subjection to this Jesus."⁴⁵ Wright holds that the present justification is the end-times verdict which has been brought forward into the present. As such it anticipates the verdict yet to come.

Wright understands justification to occur twice or in two stages. There is an initial/present justification and a future/final justification. Each justification has its sign or basis, "Present justification declares, on the basis of faith, what future justification will affirm publicly (according to 2:14-16; and 8:9-11) on the basis of the entire life."⁴⁶ The two justifications are related says Wright, "Justification by faith...is the *anticipation in the present* of the justification which will occur in the future and it gains its meaning from that anticipation."⁴⁷ And, says Wright, the future verdict will have the effect of *reaffirming* the present verdict.⁴⁸ It seems accurate to say that, for Wright, present justification is a precursor or antecedent to future justification. Whether thought of as an "anticipation" or a precursor, it is clear that future justification is the more important, because it is final and ultimate. For Wright, present justification affords the believer the knowledge that he is a member of the covenant, his sins are forgiven, and the Spirit of God indwells him.

Wright insists that the works that form the basis of future justification are not meritorious. Rather they are demonstrative —"effective signs" that one is in Christ.

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 ethically distinctive Jewish boundary-markers (Sabbath, food-laws, circumcision). They are the things which show, rather, that one is in Christ; the things which are produced in one's life as a result of the Spirit's indwelling and operation.⁴⁹

In short, such works show the believer's faithfulness to the covenant. At this point Wright's language comes to the similar language in Reformed systematics, which speak of believers' works as having a demonstrative (as apposed to meritorious) function at the judgment. But Wright also speaks of such works as being the basis for the future verdict. Wright is not misspeaking here.

Wright supports this thesis that there will be a future justification of the believer by appealing to typical Pauline statements about future judgment according to works, such as I Thess. 2:19, "For what is our hope or joy or crown of rejoicing? Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming?" (cf. Phil. 2:16). Wright comments, "[Paul] looks ahead to the coming day of judgment and sees God's favorable verdict not on the basis of the merits and death of Christ... but on the basis of his own apostolic work."⁵⁰ Paul clearly appeals to things he does now which will "count to his credit on the last day, precisely because they are the effective signs that the Spirit of the living Christ has been at work in him."⁵¹

Wright primarily bases his case on Rom. 2:13 "(for not the hearers of the Law are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified...." On Wright's interpretation Paul is here referring to the Spirit-wrought works of the believers. Paul was combating certain Jewish attitudes that mere possession of the Torah, and hearing it read in a synagogue was enough to "carry validity with God." To counter this, Paul appeals to God's impartial judgment both of Jew and Gentile alike. He asserts the principle that God's judgment will be just, and verse 13 under girds this point. Only doers of the law will be justified because, "Torah was meant to be obeyed, not merely listened to." Wright appeals to Rom. 8:1-4 and 10:5-11 to explain what doing the law to be justified

⁴⁵ Wright, *Saint Paul*, 118.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁴⁷ Wright, "Rutherford Lecture," 9-10.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 14.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 9. Cf. "Romans," 580.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

means. Here (in Rom. 2:13) Paul is content to state briefly what he will say with greater detail later: mere ethnic identity and possession of Torah “will be of no avail at the final judgment if Israel has not kept Torah. Justification, at the last, will be on the basis of performance, not possession.”⁵² Commenting on Rom. 8:4 “that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit,” Wright says that the once death dealing commandment now brings life because of the indwelling Spirit, implying that believers are now able to keep the law unto life, which is what the law was intended to do (Wright sites Lev. 18:5 and Deut. 30:15-20). They now fulfill the law--its righteous requirement. Wright translates Paul’s Greek word (*dikaioma*) as “righteous verdict.” And this righteous verdict is fulfilled “in us.” “The life the Torah intended, indeed longed, to give to God’s people is now truly given by the Spirit.” Does this not nullify the present verdict of justification by faith? “As I pointed out earlier, this in no way compromises present justification by faith. What is spoken of here is the future verdict – that of the last day – the ‘day’ Paul described in 2:1-16. That verdict will correspond to the present one, and will follow from (though not, in the sense, be earned or merited by), the Spirit-led life of which Paul now speaks.”⁵³

Has Protestantism, therefore, missed the boat, on Paul? Wright will not go that far. He thinks that the traditional reading is half way right. It “gets at” Paul but not wholly. At times Wright is more pointed: the popular (read Reformed) understanding of justification has distorted Paul.⁵⁴ In fact, to read Romans in the traditional way is to do the text systematic violence.⁵⁵ While the traditional reading agrees with Paul’s theology of salvation—that it is not by works but by faith – it’s not what he means by justification.

Wright makes the unsupported claim that the church has failed to get Paul right because it was misdirected by Augustine. Consequently it has not hitherto fully understood Paul against his Jewish context.⁵⁶

If it is true that Paul meant by ‘justification’ something which is significantly different from what subsequent debate has meant, then this appeal to him is consistently flawed, maybe even invalidated altogether. If we are to understand Paul himself, and perhaps to provide a Pauline critique of current would-be biblical theology and agendas, it is therefore vital and, I believe, urgent, that we ask whether such texts have in fact been misused. The answer to that question, I suggest, is an emphatic Yes.⁵⁷

The result of this misuse is that Paul has been only partly understood at best.⁵⁸ The previous quote should alert us against attempts to harmonize the Reformed understanding of Paul with Wright’s.

2. Wright on the grounds of justification

The traditional language here has been to say that the meritorious ground of justification is the person and work of Jesus Christ, and this work has been referred as his satisfaction and righteousness, or passive and active obedience. Essential to the Reformed view is the doctrine of imputation: the non-imputation of sin and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness. Christ’s redemptive work is appropriated in the believer’s union with Christ. Ultimately the basis is not multifaceted; it is singular, *Sola Christo*.

Wright consistently maintains that justification has a twofold basis: the death of the Messiah and the work of the Spirit in the believer. This translates into justification having an objective as well as a subjective basis. Regarding the objective basis, we recall, that justification for Wright concerns God’s law-court declaration that one is already a member of the covenant. But for one to enter the covenant his or her sin must be dealt with objectively, says Wright. This God has accomplished through the Christ’s death and resurrection.

⁵² Wright, “Romans,” 440.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 580.

⁵⁴ Wright, *Saint Paul*, 113.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 117.

⁵⁶ Wright, *Saint Paul*, 115.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁵⁸ In his commentary on Romans Wright says, “Sadly, this has occurred again and again, not least within the Reformation tradition, which eager for the universal relevance and the essential pro me (i.e., “for me”) of the gospel, and regarding Israel mainly as classic example of the wrong way of approaching God..., has created a would-be “Pauline” theology in which half of what Paul was most eager to say in Romans has been screened out” (“Romans,” 464).

“Justification is not only God’s declaration on the last day that certain people are in the right: it is also *his declaration in the present that, because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the person who believes the Gospel is in the right*”⁵⁹

Thus, Christ’s death and resurrection, by removing sin, renders one fit to enter the covenant. Atonement and justification are not the same; rather, justification presupposes atonement.

Further justification takes place on the basis of the subjective work of the Spirit. One must believe in the gospel and this can only happen by virtue of the Spirit’s work within the believer.

Justification takes place on the basis of faith because true Christian faith – belief that Jesus is Lord and that God raised him from the dead – is the evidence of the work of the Spirit, and hence the evidence that the believer is already within the covenant.⁶⁰

This subjective work of the Holy Spirit is the basis for both present and future justification. Regeneration results in faith, which is the basis for present justification. Sanctification results in a transformed life, which forms the basis of future justification. Wright sums up his basic view, “Because of the work of the *Son* and the *Spirit*, God rightly declares that Christian believers are members of the covenant family. The basis of justification is the grace of God freely given to undeserving sinners”⁶¹ [emphasis ours].

In should be note that Wright is saying more than that Holy Spirit plays a role in the believer’s justification. All acknowledge this. The difference of Wright from the Reformed appears to be in his emphasis that the Holy Spirit’s work is a *basis* for justification. The Reformed have been careful to steer away from such language because of its potential to confuse justification with sanctification.

3. Wright’s Rejection of Imputation

Wright vigorously denies the imputation of Christ’s righteousness, a doctrine which lies at the heart of the Reformed system of salvation. On the basis of Paul’s supposed Jewish background, Wright rejects the traditional doctrine completely and in clear categorical terms.

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.⁶²

This clear rejection strongly indicates that differences between the Reformed and Wright are *fundamental*.

Though Wright does not delineate his reasons in a single place in a consecutive fashion, one can derive from his various writings four reasons for his rejection of imputation. First, the Hebrew law court metaphor that informs Paul’s view of justification rules out imputation. The idea of the judge imputing his own righteousness to the defendant or plaintiff is foreign to Paul’s Jewish way of thinking about the law-court. Wright simply asserts that this was not the way the Hebrew law court worked. When referring to the judge’s righteousness, such language contemplated the justice and equity of the judge’s decisions. But the judge is never thought of as giving his righteousness to another. This is the point of the previous quote.

⁵⁹ N. T. Wright, “Justification: The Biblical Basis and its Relevance for Contemporary Evangelicalism” in *The Great Acquittal: Justification by Faith and Current Christian Thought*, Gavin Reid ed, (London: Collins, 1980), p. 14. [our copy]

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Wright, *Saint Paul* 98.

The second reason concerns the rule of Christ's obedience.⁶³ Traditionally this rule is thought to include the law of God, along with the special will of the Father, which included those special purposes pertaining to the accomplishment of redemption.⁶⁴ Wright, however, says that when Paul speaks of Christ's obedience he is referring to the special commission God gave both him and Israel to do, but which Israel had failed to accomplish. This commission is *not* the law. Wright maintains that on this score Christ's obedience to the law is beside the point; such obedience is not what Paul has in mind.⁶⁵ Wright comments, "[Christ's] faithfulness completed the role marked out for Israel and did so for the benefit of all, Jew and Gentile alike."⁶⁶

What does Paul suppose the Messiah was obedient to? A long tradition within one strand of Reformation thought has supposed that Paul was here [i.e., Rom. 5:18f] referring to Jesus' perfect obedience to the law....[This] is almost certainly not what Paul has in mind here. The [Messiah's] obedience refers to his obedience to *God's commission (as in 3:2), to the plan to bring salvation to the world*, rather than his amassing a treasury of merit through Torah obedience. Obedience to the law would be beside the point; the law has a different, and much darker, function in the argument than is often supposed.⁶⁷ [emphasis ours]

Christ's obedience was to a special vocation to save the world. This is not the same as saying that Christ kept the law vicariously.

Thirdly, Christ came to fulfill the negative sanctions of the law. For Wright, God gave the law to increase sin in Israel; it was never intended to be vicariously obeyed by Christ on behalf of those united to Him. When Paul speaks of the law (read Torah) as causing trespasses to abound (Rom. 5:20) or causing sin to appear exceedingly sinful, Wright interprets these to mean that Torah increased the knowledge of sin in *Israel*. He writes, "Grace has super abounded where sin abounded—that is, in Israel itself, where the full effects of Torah's magnification of Adam's sin were felt."⁶⁸ Thus, Romans 7 is a "demonstration of what happened to Israel as result of Torah."⁶⁹ In exacerbating sin in Israel God was drawing sin into one place. Ultimately it was heaped on Christ, Israel's messiah. Wright elaborates on this "darker" function of the law as follows,

God's covenant purpose... is to draw the sin of all the world on to Israel, *in order that it may be passed on to the Messiah and there dealt with once and for all*. "Sin" is lured into doing its worst in Israel, in order that it may exhaust itself in the killing of the representative Messiah, after which there is nothing more that it can do.⁷⁰

Thus, in the grand design of God, Jesus fulfilled this negative function of the law.

Fourthly, and conversely believers fulfill the positive function of the law, not Christ. For Wright the doers of the law are those who are indwelt by the Spirit and keep the law because of His work. This relates to Wright's view of future justification detailed above. On this view, a person does not need the perfect law-keeping of another. When it comes to law-keeping and covenant living, one needs to be regenerated and enabled by the Spirit. In other words, the law gives life to those who keep the law themselves, which they are enabled to do through the Spirit. The following statement gives the sum of Wright's position on the law.

Torah could not of itself condemn sin in the flesh in such a way that it (sin) was fully dealt with. It could only heap up sin in the one place. Nor could Torah of itself give the life, which tantalizingly, it held out. In

⁶³ I borrow this language from Daniel Sladek's unpublished essay, "Justification in the Theology of Nicholas Thomas Wright," 2004.

⁶⁴ John 17:4 "I glorified Thee on the earth, having accomplished the work which Thou hast given Me to do."

⁶⁵ This is not to say that Wright think that Christ did not keep the law. Rather Christ's law-keeping was not the obedience that Paul has in mind, for instance in Rom. 5:19 "through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous."

⁶⁶ Wright, "Romans," 470.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 529

⁶⁸ Ibid., 530.

⁶⁹ Wright, "Romans and the Theology of Paul" in *Pauline Theology, Volume III*, ed. David M. Hay & Elizabeth Johnson, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) [our copy p. 16.]

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 18.

Christ the covenant God has done the former, in the Spirit this God has done the latter.⁷¹

Wright attempts to assuage the fears of traditionally minded folks by informing them that his own understanding of Paul gets at the same concerns of the reformers, yet without their fully articulated doctrine of imputation. He writes,

Paul's doctrine of what is true of those who are in the Messiah does the job, within his scheme of thought, that the traditional Protestant emphasis on the imputation of Christ's righteousness did within that scheme. In other words, that which imputed righteousness was trying to insist upon is, I think, fully taken care of in (for instance) Romans 6, where Paul declares that what is true of the Messiah is true of all his people. Jesus was vindicated by God as Messiah after his penal death; I am in the Messiah; therefore I too have died and been raised. According to Romans 6, when God looks at the baptized Christian he sees him or her in Christ. But Paul does not say that he sees us clothed with the earned merits of Christ. That would of course be the wrong meaning of 'righteous' or 'righteousness.' He sees us within the *vindication* of Christ, that is, as having died with Christ and risen again with him. I suspect that it was the medieval over-concentration on righteousness...that caused the protestant reformers to push for imputed righteousness to do the job they rightly saw was needed. But in my view they have thereby distorted what Paul himself was saying.⁷²

Thus while Paul did not teach imputation of Christ's righteousness as the Reformed have always believed, his doctrine of Christ's representation addresses the same concerns that the Reformers had.

Though our main critique is below, we will give a brief response to this point here. Mere incorporation into Christ, being seen in Christ and in his vindication does not do the job that the Reformers thought imputation addressed. The Reformers were concerned to retain the Pauline emphasis that justification was *sola fide*. Thus they taught that righteousness was imputed rather than imparted. However, to say that the believer participates in Christ's vindication does little to address just how this vindication happens. It leaves the door open to impartation. One could be vindicated in Christ as one is infused with the Spirit, is sanctified, and consequently vindicated on the final day. So Wright's comment, "He sees us within the *vindication* of Christ," does not seem to share the same concerns of the Reformers.

4. Wright on justifying faith

Traditionally, faith has been understood to be the instrumental cause of justification. Faith has a receptive function; it receives and rests upon Christ. In so doing, faith unites the believer to Christ, so that one then appropriates the benefits of His redemptive work. The traditional emphasis on the instrumental function of justification has been necessary to avoid attributing to faith any meritorious function. Wright, however, downplays the receptive and uniting function of faith. Summarizing the Reformed position, Wright correctly states, "Faith is not the reason why I am declared to be in the right so much as the means whereby I am joined to Christ so that his merits and death become mine." Wright then clearly judges this to be in error, "This is in some ways a neat scheme, but it is not what Paul says about faith..."⁷³ On his outlook, "faith" is Paul's shorthand expression for the believer's response of faithfulness to declaration and ongoing reality of Christ's lordship and, which, functions as the badge of covenant membership. We will flesh out Wright's view of "faith" in the following three points.

First, faith, for Wright, is a badge of covenant membership. One regularly finds in Wright statements like the following: "Christian faith is thus the appropriate badge of membership in God's renewed people."⁷⁴ Whereas the Judaizers insisted that the identity markers of the covenant were "works of law" (=circumcision, food-laws, and Sabbath-laws), Paul argued that justification is by faith. That is, faith constitutes the preeminent identity marker of covenant membership.

⁷¹ Ibid., 18 .

⁷² Wright, "New Perspectives on Paul," 14.

⁷³ Wright, "Justification: The Biblical Basis and its Relevance for Contemporary Evangelicalism," 13, (our copy).

⁷⁴ Wright, "Romans," 468.

Secondly, Wright’s downplaying of the receptive function of faith is seen when he speaks faith’s “prepositional content.” Commenting on Rom. 10:9— ‘that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus, and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved’--Wright says that this is “one of the clearest in all of [Paul’s] writings, of what precisely Christian faith consists of.... It is the confession of Jesus as Lord and the belief that God raised him from the dead.”⁷⁵ Such faith is the evidence of the transforming work of the Holy Spirit. Wright emphasizes Paul’s statement in Romans 10:9 because it accords with his redefinition of the gospel, which is that the gospel is the proclamation that Jesus is Lord. The main response one makes to such a call is obedience, not trust.

Third, from this vantage point Wright has no problem conflating faith with obedience, as the following statement shows,

Faith and obedience are not antithetical. They belong exactly together. Indeed, very often the word “faith” itself could properly be translated as “faithfulness,” which makes the point just as well. Nor, of course does this then compromise the gospel or justification, smuggling in “works” by a back door. That would only be the case if the realignment I have been arguing for throughout were not grasped. Faith, even in this active sense, is never and in no way a qualification, provided from the human side, either for getting into God’s family or for staying there once in. It is the God-given badge of membership; neither more nor less.⁷⁶

Wright’s comments on Paul’s phrase the “obedience of faith” confirms this understanding. He interprets this not to mean “the obedience which comes from faith” but “the obedience which consists in faith.”⁷⁷

The “obedience” which Paul seeks to evoke when he announces the gospel is thus not a list of moral good works by faith. Faith, as Paul explains later (10:9), consists in confessing Jesus as Lord (thereby renouncing other lords) and in believing that God raised Jesus from the dead (thereby abandoning other world-views in which such things did or could not happen, or not to Jesus; cf. too 4:23-25). This faith is actually the human faithfulness that answers to God’s faithfulness. As we will discover in chap. 3, that is why this “faith” is the only appropriate badge of membership....⁷⁸

So, for Wright “faith” *must* be understood as “faithfulness” or “obedience,” because obedience is the only appropriate response to the gospel call. That is, the call to faith in the gospel is a call “to obedience to Jesus’ lordship... The gospel issues a command, an imperial summons; the appropriate response to it is obedience.”⁷⁹ Guy Waters’ interpretive comments concerning Wright’s view of faith are on target.

Faith and faithfulness, then, amount to the same thing. Faith, Wright will protest, is not a work (in the classical sense of the word), since works for Paul belong to a different discussion from that conducted by the Reformers. In short, whereas faith in present justification is conceived as a badge without particular reference to obedience, faith, conceived as faithfulness or a life of covenantally faithful obedience, is the *ground* of the believer’s future justification.⁸⁰

Though Wright does mention it in passing, he gives very little emphasis to the fiducial element of faith.⁸¹ The conclusion of the matter is that Wright’s view of faith, in conceiving of it as faithfulness and assigning it the identity marking role, and then hinging future justification on such faithfulness, despite his protests to the

⁷⁵ Ibid., 664.

⁷⁶ Wright, *Saint Paul*, 160.

⁷⁷ Wright, “Romans,” 420.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Guy Prentiss Waters, *Justification and the New Perspective on Paul*, (Phillisburg: P & R, 2004), 138-139. We are aware that Wright never uses the word “ground”, but rather “basis” when referring to justification. But we are not convinced that there is a real difference. Either word has God looking to the believer’s faith (present justification) or entire life (future justification) to base/ground his decision to justify.

⁸¹ Ibid., 468. On the fiducial element Wright says “[faith has] an actively trusting content (casting oneself on God’s mercy.” But then he goes on to mention the when applied to Jesus the word means “faithfulness.”

contrary, ends up being a denial of justification *Sola Fide*.

III. Critical Response

A. The meaning of ‘righteousness’

Wright’s whole project, at least as it relates to Paul’s doctrine of justification, rests on his redefinition of “righteousness.” We recall that Wright sees “righteousness” as referring to one’s relationship to the covenant. Wright succinctly redefines “righteousness” as follows, “It...denotes not so much the abstract idea of justice or virtue, as right standing and consequent behavior, within a community.”⁸² The net effect of everything that Wright has to say about “righteousness” is that the verdict of justification does not reflect the moral behavior of the justified. It only reflects the decision of the court.

For Wright, at least part of Paul’s meaning “righteousness” (and its cognates) is rooted in the O.T. background (Rom. 3:10, 3:21). Thus, the obvious way to interact with Wright’s redefinition is to test it both against the O.T. usage and Paul’s. We find Wright’s definition and description of righteousness language to be unscriptural at several points. First, Old Testament meaning “righteousness” is primarily forensic and ethical rather than covenantal.⁸³ Covenant does not comprise the primary meaning of ‘righteousness language’. Second the law-court background is not as Wright depicts. In particular, the O.T. law-court contained a punitive element, which invalidates Wright’s thesis that the background was civil. Third, the forensic background clearly signifies that the status of righteousness necessarily has regard to the righteous behavior as the basis for the justifying verdict.

1. The Hebrew word *sedeq/sedeqah* is the main word-group for righteousness language in the O.T., and is translated in the LXX with *dik-* word-group (*dikaia*, *dikaiousune*, *dikaioo*, respectively in English, “righteous,” “righteousness,” and “justify”). It carries different but closely related, meanings depending upon the context. There appear to be some usages where (in reference to God) the meaning of ‘faithfulness’ may obtain. For instance, in Psalm 31:1, David cries, “In You, O Lord, I put my trust; Let me never be ashamed; Deliver me in Your righteousness.” Here some scholars see David referring to God’s commitment to fulfill his covenant promises. A clearer instance of *dikaiousune* meaning faithfulness is in Exodus 15:13 where the LXX translates *hesed*, a word associated with God’s constant and faithful love, with the ‘righteousness’. We would only note in passing that even if there is a group of passages where the faithfulness to covenant meaning stands, this meaning is a minor note in O.T. usage.⁸⁴

Indeed the primary meaning of righteousness (*sedeq/ah*) concerns “conformity to a norm,” as opposed to status within or faithfulness to the covenant. A long-standing debate exists in biblical scholarship concerning the root *sdq*, whether its meaning is normative or relational. The former conveys the sense of conformity to a norm or standard, the later, fidelity to a relationship. Due to its complexity we will leave this debate aside,⁸⁵ yet make a couple of observations about the relational meaning, which under girds Wright’s covenant-reading. To say that

⁸² N. T. Wright, “Righteousness,” in *New Dictionary of Theology*, Eds. S. B. Ferguson and D. Wright (Leicester: IVP, 1988), 591.

⁸³ All references to “covenant” in our discussion of Wright’s view pertain to God’s covenant with Abraham. Thus when we say that the meaning of “righteousness language” is not essentially covenantal, we have the “Abrahamic covenant” in view. In other words the meaning of “righteousness” as we find it in the O.T. obtained outside of God’s covenant relationship with Abraham. Whether this could be said of the Adamic covenant is not something we address here, nor is it our intent to sever the meaning of righteous from that original relationship or even to say that “righteousness” not covenantal. As will be clear, our point is that “righteousness” cannot be reduced to the confines of God’s covenant relationship with Abraham.

⁸⁴ See Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 82. Moo cites 15 passages where the meaning of *dik*-word group in the LXX “probably” have this meaning. These are Exod. 15:13; Ps. 35:24; 36:6, 10; 71:2; 89:16; 103:17; 111:3; 119:40 143.1, 11; 145:7; Isa. 38:19; 63:7.

⁸⁵ Mark Seifrid, “Paul’s Use of Righteousness Language Against Its Hellenistic Background,” in *Justification and Variegated Nomism: Volume 2—The Paradoxes of Paul*, ed. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O’Brien, & Mark A. Seifrid, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 420. Seifrid writes, “A number of recent studies have concluded on the basis of etymology and usage that the concept of a standard or norm is generally associated with the [*sedeq*] word-group....The root [*sedeq*] is associated with concepts of legitimacy and normativity throughout the entire Northwest Semitic language group....” 420-421.

righteousness reflects a primarily relational meaning, and has in view fidelity to that relationship (fulfilling the obligations and promises of the relationship), has the effect of internalizing “righteousness” to the relationship in view (and, apparently, of relativizing righteousness to the relationship and to its norms). In addition, the relational meaning ends up being normative. For example, applying this basic meaning to God’s righteousness would then refer it to his fidelity to the covenant. But normativity is still present, notes Mark Seifrid, who, responding to the view that “God’s righteousness consists in his fidelity to his people in saving them”—says that this “formulation cannot escape the idea of a norm (in this instance, “fidelity”) which is to govern God’s action.”⁸⁶ God’s faithfulness implies that God is complying with the demands and promises of the covenant that he has established.

Wright tears the moral overtones from the righteousness and truncates its meaning to covenant. However, the biblical concept of righteousness will not succumb to Wright restrictions. The primary import of righteousness is conformity to a norm (God’s law) and the broader setting is not the Abrahamic covenant but often creation. Indeed, the broader setting is theological (God’s righteousness and justice). At first glance, Reformed readers might be uneasy with this observation due to the Reformed emphasis on covenant theology. However, the observation does not contradict traditional covenant theology, for the Reformed have never identified or reduced righteousness to the confines of the Abrahamic Covenant. But, more importantly, the evidence for a broader setting and normative meaning for ‘righteousness language’ is clear enough. Abraham’s appeal to God’s righteousness/justice proves the point: “Far be it from You to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous should be as the wicked. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right(?)” (Gen. 18:25). This verse is telling. First the setting is clearly non-covenantal. Sodom was not in covenant with God! Only Lot could be said to be affiliated with the covenant. Further, God is said to be the judge of all the *earth*. His righteousness functions here outside the realm of covenant. Abraham is not imposing a covenant category upon non-covenant people either (as if he were saying “if they reflected covenant behavior”), for strictly speaking, if a citizen of Sodom were righteous, by definition he would be in the covenant. Abraham appeals to God’s righteousness/justice (we grant that *sedeq* is not used here, but the note of righteousness/justice is clear)⁸⁷ as ruling out the option of bringing unjust judgment, i.e., condemning and punishing the righteous. For God to condemn the righteous with the wicked, Abraham saw as an unjust act, one that God would never do. Abraham is not saying that it would be an ‘unfaithful’ act, one out of accord with a promissory relationship such as a covenant. Second, that righteousness involves conformity to a norm is seen in Abraham’s contrasting of the righteous against the wicked, a contrast between moral character and behavior, rather than covenant status. The righteous would be those who were upright. Despite Wright’s revisions, for Abraham it was at least theoretically possible for there to be righteous Gentiles.

Not only was it theoretically possible for there to be righteous Gentiles in Sodom, but in fact many covenant outsiders are actually referred to as righteous.⁸⁸ Abimelech, a pagan king, stays the wrath of God by pleading his own blameless behavior relative to marital law: *But Abimelech had not come near her; and he said, “Lord, wilt thou slay a nation, even though blameless?”* (Gen. 20:4 NASB). Though righteousness language is not used in this instance, the episode is clearly juridical, which is the natural home of all righteousness language in the O.T. Noah, a non-Israelite, is called a righteous man: “This is the genealogy of Noah. Noah was a just [righteous] man, perfect [blameless] in his generations; Noah walked with God.” (Gen. 6:9; 7:1) And this assessment is prior to the establishment the so-called Noaic covenant (Gen. 6:18). Job also is praised as an upright man: ‘There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job, and that man was blameless, upright, and one who feared God and shunned evil’ (Job 1:1). On this basis Job would later seek to be “justified” before God: “See now, I have prepared my case; I know that I shall be vindicated (*etsedaq*, verb form of *sedeq*).⁸⁹ Yet he knows that ultimately

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 416.

⁸⁷ Henri Blocher, “Justification of the Ungodly (Solo Fide),” *Justification and Variegated Nomism: Volume 2—The Paradoxes of Paul*, ed. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O’Brien, & Mark A. Seifried, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 465-500. “Who can miss a clear notion of justice in the key question of Abraham’s intercession, though no [*sedeq*] word is used.... What would be unjust, a denial of the right, would be the indiscriminate slaying of the wicked and righteous together,” 475.

⁸⁸ Much of the follow analysis is indebted to Stephen Westerholm, *Perspective Old and New On Paul: The “Lutheran” Paul and His Critics*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 261-296.

⁸⁹ Job 13:18 cf. 40:8

his own integrity will not justify him: “But how can a man be righteous before God?” (Job 9:2).⁹⁰

Further, not only are covenant-outsiders labeled and described as righteous and seek justification, but, conversely, being a covenant-insider did *not* constitute someone as righteous. To be sure, Israel is called a “holy nation”⁹¹ (Deut. 7:6) but its status as covenant people and its reception of the promised-land did not happen because they were ‘righteous’; ‘Therefore understand that the Lord Your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness, for you are a stiff-necked people’ (Deut. 9:6, notice that here the contrast is moral and behavioral, not covenantal). Even for the Israelite, to be righteous, meant keeping the law of God. This is the clear meaning of Deut. 6:25 ‘And then it will be righteousness (*sedeqah*) for us if we are careful to observe all these commandments before the Lord our God, as He commanded us.’ “The sinaitic covenant,” says Westerholm, “may...be said to provide its members with a framework with which righteousness is to be pursued, and where unambiguous guidance is given on how to attain it. Still, not even Israelites within the covenant are righteous without doing righteousness.”⁹²

In the O.T. the righteous are often contrasted with the wicked. This is not a contrast of covenant status, that is, a contrast of Jews and gentiles. The focus of the contrast is on *ethical behavior*. The first Psalm establishes the point. God is said to know the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish (v.6). The way of the righteous man is described negatively as not *walking* in the counsel nor *standing* in the path of sinners, nor *sitting* in the seat of scoffers! (v.1). Positively, the righteous man delights in and meditates upon the law of God (v.2). Again the emphasis cannot be on covenant status since the emphasis is clearly on whether one conforms to the law. Indeed, it is correct to assume that the wicked in Psalm one may have included Israelites.

Many covenant people are said to be the equivalent of unrighteous. The contrast of righteousness in the Hebrew is *rasha*, usually translated ‘wicked.’ It is often juxtaposed to ‘righteous’ as in Psalm 1:6 “For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, But the way of the ungodly will perish” or as in Proverbs 3:33, “The curse of the Lord is on the house of the wicked, But He blesses the habitation of the just [righteous].”⁹³ Jeremiah puzzles over the prevalence of wicked people in Israel. “Righteous are You, O Lord, when I would plead with You; Yet let me talk with You about Your judgments; Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why are those happy who deal so treacherously?” (Jer. 12:1). God will cut off Israel, which included both righteous and wicked, and says to the land of Israel, “Thus says the Lord, “Behold, I am against you; and I will draw My sword out of its sheath and cut off both the righteous and the wicked from you” (Ezek. 21:3). The prophets were to warn the wicked in Israel, “When I say to the wicked, ‘You shall surely die’; and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, to save his life, that same wicked man shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand (Ezek. 3:18). The evidence could easily be multiplied and argued from different angles. The point is that these wicked Israelites, though they possess the covenant status, were not righteous. Righteousness can only be reduced to a covenant meaning by ignoring and overturning an ocean of evidence.

2. What about the forensic background of righteousness language? Wright speaks of ‘righteousness’ as having a forensic background and by this he means that the covenant was understood through the lens of the Hebrew law-court metaphor.⁹⁴ In the Hebrew law-court, which was civil, ‘righteous’ only referred to covenant status. It referred to one’s vindication, not acquittal before the court and said nothing about one’s prior behavior. In Wright, this version of the Hebrew law-court becomes a tool used to dislodge the moral import of ‘righteousness’ from the verdict of justification. No longer does the verdict mean that one is “righteous” in sense of conforming to law so that accusations do not stick. No longer do believers need a perfect righteousness in order to be justified.

We will detail a few points in response to Wright’s forensic meaning shortly. But most important of all that could be said, and this cannot be emphasized enough: despite all that creativity and acumen that Wright applies in describing and proving his case, despite the surface similarity his view of the law-court may have with historic

⁹⁰ Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969) 261.

⁹¹ It might be well to point that the language of “holiness” fits Wright’s understanding better than “righteousness.” God calls Israel a “holy people” (Deut. 7:6). This is a reference their status as his covenant people, not their character (righteousness) because it his eye they were still a “stiff-necked” people (Deut. 9:6).

⁹² Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New*, 288.

⁹³ See the series of contrasts throughout Proverbs 10.

⁹⁴ To speak of the law-court background as a metaphor is patently unbiblical. The divine law-court is spoken of in non-figurative terms in both Testaments. This hardly needs to be proved.

Protestantism and his distancing himself from the Roman Catholic process view of justification, despite all his reference to sin having been objectively dealt with by Jesus' death and resurrection, one salient and stubborn reality refuses to bend to Wright's arguments: God is perfectly righteous, and because he is so righteous he requires man to be righteous, that is, to do the law (Gal 3:10; 5:3), otherwise man will not pass the muster at the judgment (Rom. 2:13). Wright nowhere reckons with the fundamental fact that God is a righteous God requiring perfect righteousness from men.

As with his definition of righteousness in terms of covenant, so Wright's depiction of the Hebrew law-court, however much it may reflect Paul's contemporary Jewish setting, does not square with the O.T. And Paul writings show fundamental continuity with the O.T. Wright asserts that the law-court was civil and not criminal, that the verdict conveyed vindication, not acquittal. And the verdict was rendered to either the defendant or the plaintiff. In response, it should be noted that Wright is correct up to a point in saying that Hebrew law-court was civil. That is, as he rightly states, there was no state-sponsored prosecutor, no equivalent of a district attorney. Two disputants took their case before a judge, who then decided the issue. However, these facts do not mean that the law-court was not criminal! It is better to say that the law-court was, by today's procedures, civil in form, yet often criminal in function. The plaintiff in Israel often brought accusations, which, if they proved true, resulted in a defendant's condemnation, and the punishment, which was then meted out by Israel. And if the plaintiff's accusation was not proved, then the defendant was *acquitted* of the charges.

This reality of condemnation in the O.T. judicial background tells against Wright's depiction of the Hebrew law-court as well as his truncating of God's righteousness to his covenant faithfulness. In both Testaments there is clearly a phenomenon that can accurately be called God's punitive or retributive justice. Wright dismisses this as a "Latin irrelevance."⁹⁵ But retributive justice clearly is a part of God's righteousness as is seen in Jeremiah 51:56 'Because the plunderer comes against her, against Babylon, And her mighty men are taken, everyone of their bows is broken; For the Lord is the God of recompense, He will surely repay'. No text spells this principle out more fully than II Thess. 1: 5-8...

"which is manifest evidence of the righteous judgment of God that you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you also suffer. Since it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you, and to give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who did not know God, and those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ."

To be sure, with his phrase "the righteousness of God," Paul is speaking of God's gift of righteousness, not his punitive justice. The point simply is that Wright's assertion that God's righteousness is his covenantal faithfulness is truncated. The evidence is actually more varied and will not fit Wright's reductionism. Having said this, it must be observed that in the main text in which Paul discusses the righteousness of God, he does so in relation to God's retributive righteousness (Rom. 3:25-26).⁹⁶ The righteousness of God as a gift would not be given if God's righteousness was not exerted against sinners. But since God did *punish* Christ on the cross, he is both just and the justifier of those who have faith in Christ. Regarding the matter of God's retributive justice, Blocher's judgment seems appropriate, "Textual facts are so clear-cut and so stubborn that only a tremendous pressure from the spiritual and intellectual environment explains their disregard by eminent theologians."⁹⁷

3. Furthermore, on the basis of his civil reading, the declaration of "righteous," says Wright, refers only to the status one had in the eyes of the court; it does not reflect foundational moral behavior. This scenario flies in the face of a mountain of evidence to the contrary. In the O.T., justification or vindication by the court was to be based on behavior that conformed to the law. God commands Israel's judges to "justify the righteous and

⁹⁵ Wright, *Saint Paul*, 103. To be clear Wright does think that God punishes sin. He speaks of Christ's death, for instance, as penal. But he does not want to attribute such God wrath to his righteousness. Righteousness, for Wright is covenantal and salvific.

⁹⁶ Peter T Obrien, "Was Paul a Covenant Nomist?" in *Justification and Variegated Nomism: Volume 2—The Paradoxes of Paul*, ed. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O'brien, & Mark A. Seifried, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 287, fn. 158.

⁹⁷ Henri Blocher, "Justification of the Ungodly (Solo Fide)," in *Justification and Variegated Nomism: Volume 2—The Paradoxes of Paul*, ed. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O'brien, & Mark A. Seifried, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 476.

condemn the wicked Deut. (25.1).”⁹⁸ (Notice the assumption here is that one of the main tasks of a judge was to “condemn” the wicked). Justifying the wicked and condemning the righteous is an abomination to God (Prov. 17:15). God expected the kings of Israel to judge righteously as well: “then hear in heaven and act and judge Your servants, condemning the wicked bringing his way on his head and justifying the righteous by giving him according to his righteousness” (1 Kings 8:32). In the Psalms of Innocence, the psalmist, against the back drop of a legal setting, cries out for vindication on the basis of his righteousness: “The Lord shall judge the peoples; Judge [Vindicate] me, O Lord, according to my righteousness and according to my integrity within me” (Psal. 7:8). Yet Wright says that God himself does not look to the moral behavior of those whom he vindicates. Commenting on Romans 4:3—“And Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness”—Wright says, “Paul does not mean that God was looking for a particular type of moral goodness (referred to as “righteousness”) that would earn people membership in the covenant....nor is “righteousness” the same thing as moral goodness. “Righteousness,” when applied to human beings, is, at bottom, the status of being a member of the covenant; “faith” is the badge, the sign, that reveals that status because it is its key symptom.”⁹⁹ But looking to and rendering a verdict corresponding to the “moral goodness” or lack thereof of the disputants is precisely what God *required* of Israel’s judges and kings. Such behavior is the assumed basis for vindication in Psalms of Innocence, and it is the clear testimony of the O.T. that God will not justify the wicked. God “will by no means clearing the guilty (Exod. 34:7). David declared to Saul “May the Lord repay each man for his righteousness and his faithfulness” (1 Sam. 26:23). (Notice: in David’s mind God will repay his righteousness – sparing Saul’s life – so righteousness could not here mean covenant status or faithfulness). A judge in Israel was required to justify the righteous. A judge’s verdict stated not only that a defendant was righteous in the eyes of the court, but that he was righteous in the eyes of the court *because* his prior behavior conformed to the law.

To be fair, we must acknowledge that Wright does say that once the verdict of “righteous” was given, and it was carried out of the court, only then could one reason backward to the behavior that occasioned to the verdict. It must be emphasized that in this way Wright does say that certain behavior (presumably the “righteous” kind) formed the basis of the verdict of “righteous.” Wright seems to be on the right track here. But this qualification gives rise to the following question: “If the verdict is only about status and carries no overtones about the prior behavior, how is it possible to reason backward from the *declaration* to the behavior that occasioned it?” On the basis of the evidence sampled above, “righteous” was about status and the behavior that occasioned that status. It always carried moral overtones. When one was justified by the court, his relevant behavior stood vindicated.

To summarize our points, righteousness language, which essentially means conformity to a norm, was not restricted to covenant. The covenant cannot be said to be part of the meaning of the righteousness. Remove the covenant concept and righteousness would have been, and indeed was, used with the same import. In the law-court a judge was commanded and expected to decide the case on the basis of the merits or conformity to the law relevant to the case and declare his verdict accordingly. The result was a righteous status *and*, consequently, one’s prior behavior stood vindicated. Further, judges of Israel also condemned the guilty, which were then punished by the people. Hardly a civil law-court as Wright maintains. Thus, the O.T. cannot be used to support Wright’s reading of Paul on justification.

B. Justification in Paul

We recall that according to Wright, Paul’s doctrine of justification in large part reflects the threefold meaning of righteousness of Second Temple Jewish background. It is God’s forensic declaration that one is in the right, that is, a member of the covenant by faith in the gospel, a declaration, which anticipates and gets its meaning from a second rendering on the final day, the basis of which will be the believer’s Spirit-wrought faithfulness to God. We critique this approach below along three broad lines: (1) Paul’s understanding of “righteousness” was ethical and forensic rather than covenantal; (2) Paul did not teach that justification was future; (3) Wright’s critique of imputation fails to own up to the role of the law in Paul’s understanding of

⁹⁸ Deut. 1:16-17; Exod. 23:7; Isa. 5:23.

⁹⁹ Wright, “Romans,” 491.

justification.

Wright’s reading of justification is based supposedly on Paul’s world-view, which was shaped by the O.T./covenantal understanding of “righteousness”—a reading that we have shown to be seriously flawed. The righteousness language of the O.T. contained ethical/forensic meanings and overtones and was not coextensive with the covenant. This fact serves to pull the rug from underneath Wright’s interpretation of Paul. No longer can he assert that Paul “righteousness language” has *overtones* to the covenant.

It must be remembered that all righteousness language in Paul is cognate in form and in meaning. The Greek root is *dik-*, and the main words are the adjective *dikaios*, “righteous,” the noun *dikaiosis*, “righteousness,” and the verb *dikaio*, “to justify.” A brief sample of Paul’s usage shows that he was not using such terms in technical, but rather in conventional ways, which conform to the usage of the Old Testament Hebrew, the Greek LXX, and in large measure to the secular Greek of Paul’s day.¹⁰⁰

Concerning the adjective *dikaios* “righteous,” Paul does not mean something like ‘no one has covenant status’ when he declares that “no one is righteous no not one” Rom. (3:10). In Paul’s mind the reason why no one is righteous lies in man’s ethical and moral depravity. Men do not seek God. No one is good. Inside, men are full of death and poison. With their words and deeds men destroy and murder and so on (Rom. 3:10-18). Nor is he saying that no reflects covenant behavior because he is referring to all men, many, if not most, of whom were outside the covenant. Again Paul does mean covenant-outsider when he speaks of the rarity of someone willfully dying for a “righteous man,” since he contrasts this with the helpless, sinners, and enemies for whom Christ died. (Rom. 5:7-10). Once more, through his obedience, Christ constituted many *righteous* (Rom. 5:19), which cannot mean that he gave them membership status in the covenant, since (1) these are already in Christ; (2) the contrast is with *sinners* in Adam (which is a reference to all mankind, not just Gentiles).¹⁰¹ Finally, Paul argues that the law itself is “holy and just [righteous] and good” (Rom. 7:12). In context Paul is defending the law against the charge of causing evil, in which case it would be evil (Rom. 7:7). Calling the law righteous does not mean that it is somehow how covenantal, since the contrast is with evil. To Timothy Paul says that the law was not made for the *righteous* man, but for the lawless, etc. Paul contrasts the word “righteous” with “lawless,” and “lawless” does not mean those without the law but those who do not obey the law (1 Tim. 1:9).

As for the noun “righteousness,” Paul instructed Christians to present their members “as instruments of righteousness to God” as opposed to unrighteousness (Rom. 6:13). In keeping with his covenantal reading Wright argues that “slaves of righteousness” means slaves of God, who has shown his righteousness, that it, been covenantally faithful.¹⁰² Once again he strips ‘righteousness’ of its moral meaning. The term ‘righteousness’ here clearly has moral overtones as is plain from the context: “and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness” (v18). Paul contrasts being a slave to righteousness to that of sin. And being a slave to sin involved presenting “your members as slaves to uncleanness and of lawlessness, leading to more lawlessness (v19), which Wright correctly describes as, “wild and uncontrolled *behavior*”¹⁰³ (emphasis mine). But the symmetry of Paul’s contrast requires that if slavery to sin entails “vicious” behavior, then slavery to righteousness entails righteousness behavior. When we present our members to righteousness the result will be sanctification, i.e., ethical holiness. Elsewhere Paul speaks of deeds done in righteousness, which refers to deeds that are right and are done in order to attain righteousness (Tit. 3:5). In 1 Tim. 6:11 “righteousness” is contrasted with greed and made parallel to “godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness.” Christians should walk in the light, the fruit of which “consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth” (Eph. 5:9). Here Paul is using “righteousness” in the ordinary way,¹⁰⁴ and none of it can bear out Wright’s covenant reading.

¹⁰⁰ We owe much of this analysis to Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New*, 261-296.

¹⁰¹ Paul is not using “sinners” in the contemporary Jewish jargon as in Gal. 2:15. Sinners are those who disobey God and Paul applies this word to Jews as much as to gentile (1 Tim. 1:15, where counts himself the foremost sinner).

¹⁰² Wright explains Paul use here as follows, “‘Righteousness’ here is not so much “virtue” or moral goodness, but rather...a periphrasis of “God”; it is the divine righteousness, revealed in the death and resurrection of the Messiah (3:21-6), the righteousness through which grace has operated. It would in any case be odd, in view of the whole chapter, to think of Christians being enslave to “virtue,” a quality they are to exhibit and even possess, rather than in some sense to God” (“Romans,” 545).

¹⁰³ Wright, “Romans,” 546.

¹⁰⁴ “In brief, and in the broadest possible terms... (ordinary) [righteousness], as contrasted with sin, must be what one *ought* to do, the [righteous] (in the ordinary way) is the one who does [righteousness], and to [justify] is to “declare (to be [righteous], or to be) innocent of wrong doing” (Westerholm, *Perspectives Old*

Similarly, Paul's use of the verb *dikaioo*, is forensic, and stated positively means to be declared righteous or innocent of wrong doing.¹⁰⁵ Negatively, justification in Paul does not mean a declaration of covenant standing. For instance, Abraham was not reckoned to be in covenant standing when he believed, "For what does the Scripture say? "And Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." (*Rom.* 4:3). Recall Wright's insistence that justification is not how one enters the covenant, but that one *already* is in the covenant. But Abraham's faith is reckoned righteous, i.e., he was justified (4:2), before the covenant was formally administered, and, before he was circumcised (*Gen.* 15:18; *Rom.* 4:10-12). "Righteous" here cannot be equated to covenant membership.

For Paul, only those who do the law, and hence are innocent of all wrong doing, will be justified (*Rom.* 2:13). There is no sense here of justification indicating covenant status, since he is talking directly to Jews who already had covenant status, but were not obeying the law. In principle, justification is rendered to the righteous, those who do the law. In context Paul has God's impartiality at the final judgment of *all* men, Jew and gentile, in view. The principle of 2:13--that only doers of the law will be justified--applies to all. It is not one's status with the covenant that is up-front but one's conformity to the law.

In Paul's view of the law-court, justification involves being acquitted of all charges, not a declaration of covenant status. In 1 Cor. 4:3-5 Paul says, "But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you, or by a human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I know nothing against myself, yet I am not justified [*dedikaimai*] by this; but He who judges me is the Lord. Therefore, judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the things hidden of darkness and reveals the counsels of the hearts; and then each one's praise will come from God."¹⁰⁶ Being justified here clearly means to be found innocent of wrong doing, acquitted. Paul is speaking of his faithfulness to his ministry obligations, not to his status in the covenant. We remember that Wright refuses to define justification in terms of "acquittal" and its synonyms on the ground that it (the declaration of righteous entailing "acquittal") could not be applied to the accuser if his accusation was upheld.¹⁰⁷ Paul, however, speaks of justification as being free from wrong doing in the eyes of the court. At a minimum this is acquittal.

Justification, according to Paul, addresses the problem of human guilt before God. The context of Paul's major discussion on justification is not a dispute between the Jewish and Gentile believers, but THE dispute that God has with rebellious man (*Rom.* 1:18). Peter T. Obrien comments...

"...although it is true that in his letters to the Galatians and the Romans Paul intends to show who are the true members of the new covenant people, this is not only, or even his major, concern. The discussion of justification in Romans is set against the backdrop of a world under judgment and the awful reality of God's wrath against human sin and rebellion (1:18-3:20): the whole world is accountable before God" (3:19-20).¹⁰⁸

Paul, after lengthy arguments demonstrating that all men are under sin (*Rom.* 3.9), sums up his view of the matter: "Now we know that whatever the Law says, it says to those who are under the Law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God" (*Rom.* 3:19). The whole world is guilty before God and we have no defense for ourselves. The remedy to this awful plight is not in the covenant per se, but in Christ, through whom we receive justification. His discussion centers on the means of justification (faith not works) and its grounds (the redemption that is in Jesus Christ). For Paul the nature of justification is such that it addresses the terrible problem of human guilt and unrighteousness. This is in contrast to Wright, who relegates justification to the declaration that one has covenant status and sees the covenant as addressing the problem of sin through

and New, 265). Westerholm also notes that "Paul's ordinary usage thus approximates normal Greek usage..." (*Ibid.*, 265, footnote 8). Note also Charles Hodge's explanation, "... when we say that a man is righteous, we generally mean that he is upright and honest; that he is and does what he ought to do and be. In this sense the word expresses the relation which a man sustains to the rule of moral conduct," *Systematic Theology*, Vol. III, (Grand Rapid: Eerdmans, 1975), 119.

¹⁰⁵ Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New*, 264-5. See Charles Hodge's discussion (*ST Vol. III*, 119-20).

¹⁰⁶ Though Paul is here speaking of the vindication of his service, which should be cross referenced with his view of the final judgment in 1 Cor. 3, his use of justification language is undeniable. And the point is that such language does not have covenant status in view.

¹⁰⁷ Wright, "Romans," 399.

¹⁰⁸ Obrien, "Was Paul a Covenantal Nomist?," 289.

its faithful messiah. For Paul, to be justified means to be declared righteous by God, with the result that one now has right standing or righteousness status (implicitly, acquitted of all guilt) before the divine tribunal: “But that no one is justified by the Law in the sight of God is evident; for, “The just shall live by faith” (Gal. 3:11). The justified *because* they are justified, *not because they are in the covenant*, are no longer under condemnation (Rom. 8:1).¹⁰⁹ This means that no one can successfully lay any charge or accusation against God’s elect and condemn them (Rom. 8:32-33). The reason why? “[I]t is God who justifies” (Rom. 8:32). Clearly it is God’s justifying action that removes any threat of condemnation. Paul goes on to say that no one can condemn the believer because of Christ’s death, resurrection, and intercession for them (v34).¹¹⁰ For Paul, the question that justification answers is whether God has anything against me, not whether I am a member of the covenant.

That Paul’s language and understanding of justification was not covenantal does not mean that justification bears no relation to covenant. We only point out that covenant and “righteousness” cannot be confused. The fact the “righteousness” and “justification” in Paul has to do with right standing and right behavior puts an end to Wright’s ecclesiastical reading of justification. Clearly in Paul’s view, justification falls with the locus of soteriology (Rom. 1:16-3:20).

C. Did Paul teach future justification according to works?

We recall that Wright maintains that Paul held to a future justification on the basis of Spiritual works. Justification happens twice: present justification on the basis of faith, future justification on the basis of one’s life. This is the eschatological dimension of justification. He explains future justification using terms like “vindication” and “reaffirmation” but the content of the future verdict will be the same as that of the present; it is God’s law-court declaration that one is a member of the covenant, that one’s sins are forgiven. The future works-verdict is anticipated in the present by God’s faith-verdict.

In response, we acknowledge that similar language can be found in various Reformed systematics and confessions. For instance, Ursinus speaks of the believer undergoing a judgment of “acquittal” on the final day, whereas the unbeliever a judgment of condemnation.¹¹¹ This final-day “acquittal,” however, is not the same as justification. God, by such acquittal will not be justifying the believer for a second time. There will not be a re-judgment. The Reformed, unlike Wright, have seen justification as a singular, undivided event and have emphasized that justification has already taken place for the believer, never to be repeated as such. Further the verdict of justification rests completely upon the completed objective work of Christ, apprehended by faith, and, therefore, there is no need for a second judgment of justification. The judgment day acquittal, in Reformed thought, refers to the open and public manifestation of the righteous judgment that God has *already* made. To explain, God has rendered the verdict of “righteous and acquitted” upon the believer in the present. Similarly the condemned have also been judged: “He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe has been condemned *already*, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God” (John 3:18). Both the present justification of believers and the condemning judgment upon the wicked and unbelieving from eternity have already occurred but are not yet open and public. The final judgment is principally an open manifestation of the righteous judgments of God. Waters sums up traditional Reformed thinking as follows, “...the future declaration simply restat[es] and mak[es] public the former declaration.”¹¹² When the Reformed,

¹⁰⁹ It should be noted that we are not here implying that Wright does not believe that the believer is free from condemnation because of the death of Christ. He holds that we are saved from sin and condemnation because of the death of Christ. However, the verdict of justification concerns not the removal of condemnation but the present reality of covenant status.

¹¹⁰ Wright’s comments on Rom. 8:33 are close but not fully on target. Rightly he says that Paul is using law court language. “Any [accuser] that might appear [will] have to face the fact that God, the judge, is the justifier; in other words, that the verdict has already been pronounced by the judge whose righteousness has been fully displayed. And the verdict—that those in the Messiah, marked out by faith, are already to be seen as “righteous,” even ahead of the final vindication—is precisely what the lawcourt dimension of “justification” is all about,” (“Romans,” 613).

¹¹¹ “He that believes on the Son of God shall not come under the judgment of condemnation; but he shall come under that of acquittal” (Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, (Phillipsburg: P & R, 266).

¹¹² Waters, *Justification and the New Perspective on Paul*, 210.

reflecting Scripture (Matt 10:37-38; 1 Cor. 5:1-5), use justification language of the final judgment, it is with this public sense in mind. In clear terms, on that day God will openly declare what is already true of his sheep, that they are justified only because of the “satisfaction, righteousness and holiness of Christ.”¹¹³ And he will openly condemn the wicked, who have already been judged. If Wright is saying only this, then we have no bones to pick.

But there are in fact at least three significant differences distinguishing Wright’s view from the Reformed. First, though Wright qualifies future justification as *reaffirming* present justification (which by itself would be in keeping with Reformed thinking), he typically speaks of it as a *second, distinct* verdict, anticipated by initial justification. The Reformed, however, have seen the future judgment of the believer as the public affirmation of the *former* verdict and thus the vindication of God’s righteous judgment as well as the vindication of believers for having trusted and served Christ. Secondly, for Wright, the future verdict carries more weight than the present. This is seen where he speaks of present justification as simply an anticipation of the corresponding future declaration—a declaration which gives the present its meaning. But for the Reformed justification carries *all* the weight; it anticipates not a second verdict, but *all* the blessings of eternal life, which are partially realized now and fully realized at the *parousia*. Third, although Wright qualifies the nature of works unto future justification — that they are the result of the Spirit’s work and “show” that a believer is in Christ—he frequently says that such works are the *basis* of the future verdict. In contrast, the Reformed assign the believer’s works both in the present and at the judgment strictly an evidentiary role. The following quote from Witsius is representative of the Reformed view

Nor will [God’s] righteousness of the judgment of that day be in the least diminished through the works of believers, by which they shall be judged, are imperfect. For, they will not be mentioned as the causes of their right to claim the reward, to which perfection is requisite; but as effects and signs of grace, and of union with Christ, and of a living faith, and of justification by faith, and their right to life: for which their unfeigned sincerity is sufficient.¹¹⁴ [emphasis added]

We list below several insuperable problems with any view of future justification, including, of course, Wright’s.

1. *Double Jeopardy*.¹¹⁵ This follows from the fact that Wright affirms that justification happens twice,¹¹⁶ that both (present and future) verdicts are the same, and that justification involves the forgiveness of sins. If on the final day the faithful, because they are faithful, will be acquitted of sin, then it follows that one’s sin will be dealt with on the final day. This raises the specter of retrial. To be sure, Wright does not speak of future justification in such terms; he never says that it will be a retrial. Furthermore, he clearly states that presently justified are forgiven, and thus safe and secure from the wrath to come.¹¹⁷ However, his positive affirmation that future justification involves a second verdict, which will be the same as the first implies that the believer will be going through the judgment again for the same purpose, i.e. to be justified. And given that final justification will be on the basis of one’s entire life, then this certainly places the believer in a quandary. It raises questions about the nature of present justification: “are believers really justified if they await the future verdict on the basis of their works?” “What does such justification really amount to?” The believer appears to be caught in some form of double jeopardy. The problem with double jeopardy is that a second trial nullifies the first trial and its verdict, especially when the defendant is found guilty a second time around. The question we ask of Wright is this: If the believer is declared in the right and forgiven of sins with the first verdict, then why will an identical verdict be rendered at the final judgment? Wright needs to clarify and exonerate his views of these kinds of implications, but as they now stand his statements do lend themselves to a charge of double jeopardy.

2. *Under-realized eschatology*. Wright is correct to acknowledge that justification is eschatological; it is the

¹¹³ Heidelberg Q/A 61.

¹¹⁴ Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenant Between God and Man: Comprehending a Body of Divinity*, Vol. I, (Kingsburg, CA, den Dulk Christian Foundation 1990), 424.

¹¹⁵ Webster defines this as “...the subjecting of a person to a second trial for the same offense the person has already been tried for.”

¹¹⁶ “And now we discover that this declaration, this vindication, occurs twice,” (Wright, “New Perspectives,” 14).

¹¹⁷ Wright, “Romans,” 519.

final verdict of God. For Paul, this verdict is rendered in the present day, however, upon those who trust solely in Christ. For Wright, an earnest of this verdict is rendered in the present, but this is not definitive and final. God's final verdict of justification is not fully realized for Wright until the last day. And as we have observed, on Wright's view, the final day adjudication is more important. Is the believer, then, with respect to his justification caught up in the eschatological tension that certainly applies to other realities like adoption, redemption, or sanctification? It would seem that on Wright's views the answer would be yes. However, this is problematic at least at three points.

First, justification differs in nature from realities such as redemption and sanctification, because unlike those, it is a judicial *verdict*. Such verdicts by their very nature carry finality. This applied in the Hebrew court as elsewhere. Wright cannot respond by saying that the process is different in the divine court, because he sees Paul as understanding the divine law-court as dictated by the Jewish pattern.

Secondly, justification necessarily must be fully realized now because the blessings of salvation such as eternal life, reconciliation, redemption from sin, are incumbent upon right standing with God, i.e., justification. Only righteousness and remission of sin entitles one to eternal life (Rom. 5:17-18), and only righteousness and remission of sin conditions a state of peace between God and men (Rom. 5:1-11).

Third, the clear emphasis in Paul is that justification is a present reality that is definitive and final. This is not only a matter of pointing out the aorist and perfect tenses of the verb *dikaioo* (justify). When Paul speaks of justification using these Greek tenses, he also speaks of the present results of being so justified. No text brings this out clearer than Romans 5. In the first verse Paul declares the conclusion to which he has been driving since chapter three—"therefore having been justified by faith we have peace with God" (Rom. 5:1). Here Paul says that the believer is justified. God has rendered the verdict and the result is that we are reconciled to God. And because the believer is justified and reconciled with God now he has even greater certainty about the future judgment: "*much more* then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him" (Rom. 5:9 emphasis).¹¹⁸ One of the essential features of the Christian life involves 'looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus' (Tit. 2:13). Because there is now no condemnation (now and forever) for those in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:1), and no can lay any accusation against God's elect (v. 33), a future justification is simply unnecessary. Because of the finality of justification, the believer is in possession of eternal life now. He is a new creature now. And all this present reality with its future benefit has nothing to do with anything the believer does in the Spirit; it is so because of Christ, "having been justified by *His blood*" (Rom. 5:9). It makes no sense to speak of a future verdict based on works when the verdict has already been rendered, unless that verdict is not a final. In which case, it would be only a precursor to the real verdict of the future (which, of course, is Wright's view). But it is not Pauline to speak of justification as a precursor to the real one later on. For Paul the eschatological verdict of justification is fully realized *now* (Rom. 1:17; 3:21). While many of the blessings of heaven are not fully realized in the present, this is not the case with justification.

3. *Faulty exegesis* (of Romans 2:13, 8:4, and 10:5). Romans 2:13 says, "doers of the law will be justified." Paul here iterates the criterion of the law, rather than teaches future justification according to works (of any kind). Paul does not state clearly that he has Christians in mind; indeed the context contemplates the whole of mankind. More importantly, this passage is part of a larger argument that concludes with the indictment that all are under sin and "by the deeds of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for by the Law is the knowledge of sin" (Rom. 3:20). In short, the purpose and conclusion of Paul's argument is to "categorically [exclude] works of having any legitimate role in justification."¹¹⁹ Moo says "Doers of the law" are no more and no less than those who do the works of the law; and the works of the law, Paul claims cannot justify."¹²⁰

4. *Denies Sola Fide*. This charge runs contrary to Wright's explicit affirmations of *Sola Fide*. But Wright's

¹¹⁸ Wright's exegesis of this verse gives the true meaning and then takes it away. He says, "...how much more": If God has done the difficult thing, how much more will the easy thing be done now.... Those already justified by Jesus' sacrificial death... will be rescued from this coming wrath... Hope for this rescue is securely based... because God has already effected reconciliation when we were... God's enemies." But amidst these sound statements Wright says, "Just to be clear... "justification" when applied to the future as in 2:13 [refers to the future of believers] in terms of their acquittal in the final Assize" ("Romans," 519).

¹¹⁹ Waters, *Justification*, 177.

¹²⁰ Moo *The Epistle to the Romans*

affirmations, that faith amounts to faithfulness, that the “obedience of faith” means the obedience which consists of faith and that future justification will be on the basis of works, militate against his affirmation of *Sola Fide*. But one of Paul’s main purposes in his discussion of justification (in Romans, Galatians, and Philippians) is to exclude complete works as means or as grounds for justification. For Paul faith and works are categorically antithetical because the law carries the underlying principle of doing where faith is not doing. Paul says, “faith is not of the law” (Gal 3.12), and, “But to him who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly (Rom. 4:5). Paul’s language is consistent and unqualified; justification is by faith alone.

5. *Denies that only the ungodly are justified.* Paul clearly teaches a doctrine of what may be called extraordinary righteousness or justification.¹²¹ Ordinarily a judge justifies the righteous. God, however, justifies the ungodly (Rom. 4:5; 5:6). A future justification on the basis of works, at least in part, grounds the verdict in one’s Spirit-wrought life and works, i.e., one’s godliness. This contradicts Paul’s clear teaching.

6. *Confuses sanctification and justification, thus introducing a doctrine of infusion and process.* This point is akin to the previous, but due to its contentious nature is important enough to warrant separate treatment. We recognize that Wright explicitly disavows that justification involves a process or that it is based upon works, where the term “works” is taken in a meritorious sense. Further, it seems to be a category mistake to charge Wright with teaching justification based upon “righteousness” which is the result of the Spirit’s transforming work, since “righteousness” and “justification” have to do with covenant membership, not upright behavior and the like. God is not looking for perfect righteousness to ground the verdict of justified, i.e., conformed to law; he is looking for evidence to base his verdict of covenant standing, i.e., you are in the covenant. Yet even on this scenario justification (though redefined) is based on the transformation wrought within the believer by the Holy Spirit such that the believer has been *changed* from being lawless to law-abiding. In the end “righteousness” or ethical behavior still grounds the verdict of “righteous.” One may call it covenant faithfulness or covenant righteousness but that would not matter. For the works that God looks to are of the law-abiding kind. And when we ask how the Spirit changes the believer, the answer must be by His inward work, which can easily be described in terms of infused grace. The believer’s righteousness is now in himself, though from the Spirit. This is all implied when Wright says, “Justification, at the last, will be on the basis of performance not possession [of the law].”¹²²

7. *Relaxes the demands of the law.* The verdict would be necessarily rendered upon those who are to some degree godly but still less than perfect. But an imperfect obedience means that one has not been a doer of the law (Gal. 3:10). If one responds that the verdict is rendered on the basis of the Mediator’s work, then it would follow that talk of future justification according to *our* works is superfluous. If one responds that God does not require perfect obedience, then he fails to understand that God, being holy and righteous, cannot abide with sin. Many deny Christ’s active obedience by arguing that God does not require perfect obedience. But they fail to realize such a denial compromises the atonement as well. For if God can live with imperfection, then why did he punish Christ because of sin? The fact is that man must be ethically and morally perfect (Matt. 5:48).

8. *Overlooks the analogy between Christ and Adam.* With this analogy Paul rules out intermediating works and character in the imputation of sin or of righteousness. In Romans 5:12-19, Paul argues that just as the guilt and condemnation of sin are imputed to all because all participate in Adam’s transgression, which is imputed to them unto death without their own personal transgression of the law (v13-14), so Christ’s righteousness is imputed unto those in him unto justification, without their having personally obeyed the commandment. Wright’s view of future justification amounts to a variation of mediate justification, which Paul rules out.

9. *Justification takes its meaning from Christ.* Wright says that present justification anticipates and takes its meaning from future justification. However, justification is meaningless apart from Christ. Through his death we become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21); He was raised for our justification (Rom. 4:23 *et al!*)! Christ is our righteousness and nothing else (1 Cor. 1:30).

In summary, Wright’s doctrine of future justification is amazingly out of accord with Paul’s teaching! For Paul, God renders the verdict of the final day ahead of time in the present when someone receives and rests upon Christ.¹²³ This verdict, because of its finality, affords the believer unspeakable comfort and assurance. The judgment holds no fear to the believer, because he has already been judged in Christ. This is why Jesus can say,

¹²¹ Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New*, 263.

¹²² Wright, “Romans,” 440.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life” (John. 5:24).

D. Is imputation foreign to Paul?

We delineated above, four reasons why Wright rejects the traditional doctrine of imputation. Imputation is out of accord with Hebrew law court which is the forensic setting for Paul’s doctrine of justification. In such a setting there is no sense of the judge transferring in any way his own righteousness to a defendant. Imputation disproportionately emphasizes Christ’s obedience to the law. Paul, however, speaks of Christ’s obedience to the special commission that God gave Israel. Additionally, the main purpose of the law was to increase sin in Israel so that its curse would eventually be carried out on the messiah. Wright emphasizes Christ’s role in fulfilling the negative sanctions of law undergoing the exile of death. Finally Spirit-led believers fulfill the positive sanctions of the law. They are the doers of the law that will be justified, who will receive the “righteous verdict” in themselves on the final day.

There is no need to provide an in depth biblical case for the imputation of Christ’s righteousness (or of Adam’s sin). We refer the reader to the effective treatments of the subject present in the standard Reformed theology texts.¹²⁴ Only three points need to be made here in response to Wright’s view.

First, we have already shown that Wright’s reconstruction of the Hebrew law-court is not correct. Though civil in form--compared to Western judicial practices, it was still often criminal in nature, depending upon the case. One could actually be condemned and punished. The law-court setting included elements that Wright leaves out. Furthermore, while Wright claims that Paul subverts the Jewish world-view at significant points, in the main Paul has retained the basic structures of understanding the law-court common to Jews of his day. In reply, we would observe that in one sense Paul’s entire conception of justification is rooted in a *radical break* from normal thinking about how justice was to be administered. For instance, Paul is not straight-jacketed by the common (and supposed) law-court thinking when he speaks of God justifying the *ungodly*, which was not what judges were allowed to do! Again, if Wright wishes to maintain that the imputation of Christ’s righteousness was not something that Paul would have thought because in his Jewish background a judge’s righteousness was never transferred to a defendant, then he must also maintain—and indeed he does--that Paul never thought of the imputation of the believer’s sin upon Christ because that was also was not part of the Jewish law-court. But surely the imputing of the sinner’s guilt to Christ is precisely how Paul thought of Jesus’ death. We quote Paul’s statement on this point in full.

God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, *not imputing their trespasses to them*, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us; we implore you on Christ’s behalf, be reconciled to God. For He *made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us*, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him (2 Cor. 5:19-21 emphasis added).

Observe that the subject of the action in v21 (he made Him...to be sin) is identical to the subject of verse 19 (God... was not imputing [counting] their trespasses against them). These verses inform another and provide clear insight into Paul’s way of thinking about the divine law-court. It is clear that Paul naturally conceives of God as a judge who reckons or counts. In this case he does not reckon trespasses against those who actually committed them. This does not mean, for Paul, that God disregards such trespasses, however. Instead, “He made him who knew no sin to be sin for us” (v21). The idea that God still counts or reckons sin to Christ follows from his statement of verse 19, though in verse 21 it is implicit. God counts sin against Christ. This conclusion is reinforced when we consider that Christ being made sin could only refer to judicial imputing or accrediting,

¹²⁴ In addition to treatments in Murray, Hodge, and other Reformed systematic see also the contemporary and essentially effective defenses of imputation by D. A. Carson, “The Vindication of Imputation: On Fields of Discourse and Semantic Fields,” in *Justification: What’s at Stake in the Current Debates*, ed. Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Treier (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2004), 46-78. And by John Piper, *Counted Righteous in Christ: Should We Abandon the Imputation of Christ’s Righteousness?* (Wheaton: Crossway Books; 2002). Nowhere does Wright give any serious interaction with standard arguments for imputation.

otherwise Christ would have been sinful in his person, and thus his death would have been that of a blemished, imperfect sacrifice. While Jews may have had some vague notion of the Suffering Servant taking upon himself Israel's sin (Isa. 52-53), it is doubtful that they conceived of sins being reckoned to the messiah. Further, in the divine law-court there is a third party, which Wright seems not to acknowledge, namely the one mediator between God and man, the man Jesus Christ (1 Tim. 2:5; cf. 1 John 2:1). And it is the Mediator's righteousness, not the judge's, which is imputed to the believer (2 Cor. 5:21) Paul does not seem bound to think of God's law-court according to the Jewish status quo, at least as Wright conceives of it.

Second, Wright argues that Christ's obedience to the law is beside the point, when Paul speaks of his obedience. We must again notice that Wright is reading Paul in light of the Jewish world view and story that he (Wright) has constructed. God set up the covenant in order to deal with the sin of Adam. That was the special commission of Israel, one that it failed to accomplish, but, Jesus, the faithful servant, succeeded in doing. This commission and not the law is the prominent point in Christ's obedience, according to Wright.

While specific texts often do emphasize the special commission of Christ given by the Father, this emphasis does not exclude Christ's vicarious obedience to the law or even diminish it. We observe that when Paul and other NT writers speak of the work of Christ they emphasis (and oftentimes exclusively so) the death of Christ. And further those texts that deal either with Christ's obedience to the Father or with his relationship to the law do not *explicitly* indicate Christ's vicarious obedience to the law. For instance, Paul in Galatians makes two explicit connections between Christ and the law both which focus on his curse-bearing death. In Galatians 3:10 Christ is said to have taken upon himself the curse of the law, and in Gal. 4:4-5 Paul tells us that Christ was born under the law in order redeem the church from the law. Contextually this means that he went under the law in order to fulfill its curse. Paul's references to Christ's obedience also draw attention to Christ's death. Romans 5:19 says, "by One man's obedience many will be made righteous," where obedience refers to the "one righteous act" (v. 18), arguably a reference to His death. And in Philippians 2:8 – He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross – Paul links Christ's obedience to the Father's commission for him to suffer death. In these verses Christ is spoken of as being obedient and His death is highlighted. But the rule or standard of his obedience is not specified in such a way so to exclude or even diminish His obedience to the law.

Indeed it is impossible to separate and diminish Christ's obedience to the law from his obedience to the Father's special commission once we see that the Scriptures never separate aspects of Christ's obedience. They always speak of it as a whole. Christ came to fulfill the will of God: "Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work (John. 4:34). To be sure this involved His fulfillment of prophecy, His healing of the sick and binding of Satan and ultimately His death. But since the law is the chief expression of God's will for man, it follows that Christ's obedience to the law was central to His work. It was not a side note.

In actual fact Christ's obedience to the law could not be a side-note because the law is the standard of righteousness and therefore of justification. We have noted above that righteousness generally means "conformity to norm." The law is the norm forming the basis of righteousness. It is righteous, holy, and good (Rom. 7:12) and conformity to it is the very heart of righteousness. Moses writes "And then it will be righteousness for us if we are careful to observe all these commandments before the Lord our God, as He commanded us" (Deut. 6:25). Because it is the norm of righteousness the law, then it is the necessary standard of God's judgment. The principle is clear; only the righteous will be justified, and the righteous are those who do righteousness, that is, do the law (Rom. 2:13). Justification can be defined as God's declaration that one is just, that is, that one conforms to divine will, which is chiefly expressed in the law. Since only doers of the law are justified, it must follow that the believer is justified on the basis of Christ's obedience to the law as well as His obedience to special will that He received from the Father.

This is not to say that the divine law is the only standard of God's judgment. In short, the standard of judgment is the revealed will of God. Men will be judged according to light they have received. While not all men will have known the gospel or even the complete Law of Moses, but all do know the moral law, for it is written on their hearts. (Rom. 1:32; 2:15).

Some may reply saying that Christ's obedience to the law was indeed important and necessary in order for Christ to be a sinless sacrifice. In other words, his obedience was preparatory for his death, not a vicarious obedience for others. But this view again relegates the law to a secondary role in justification. *The reason the law cannot be so relegated is that it represents the demands of divine justice which must be fulfilled for God to*

justify.

Third, Wright maintains that the law has a sinister function; it makes sin appear sinful. It draws sinners unto Christ. But it is a truncated view of the law to speak only of its negative functions. Wright himself admits that the law holds out life to those who obey it. This, of course, is a fatal admission that the positive sanctions of the law cannot go unfulfilled. As noted above in our critical comments concerning future justification, Wright’s folly resides in thinking that the believer fulfills the positive demands of the law unto justification. When Paul contrasts law-righteousness with faith-righteousness in Romans 10:5-6, the antithesis is between the means, not the content of the righteousness *per se*. The righteousness of faith and the righteousness of law are the same insofar as that they both can give life if fulfilled. But only faith justifies since no sinner actually keeps the law.

E. Faith and justification

Wright describes faith as the badge of covenant membership and equates it with faithfulness. He refers to faith as the basis of present justification, and since he identifies faith with faithfulness (i.e., faithful covenant living), faith/faithfulness is also the basis for future justification.

In response, we note that Wright never interacts seriously with traditional Reformed thinking about faith and justification. This is unfortunate in light of the excellent work done by Warfield and Murray, not to mention a host of other writers Reformed and otherwise. His attitude is more dismissive than anything else, and this is because he, along with other NPP writers and much of biblical scholarship, have pigeonholed virtually the whole traditional protestant reading of Paul as being bound in medieval theological captivity.

Is faith the badge of covenant membership as Wright says? Certainly it is true that faith can and does function to identify the covenant people of God. Reformed definitions of the church for instance have centered on the idea of a community of believers. At a formal level, however, the sacraments, particularly baptism, have this identity marking function. While not a traditional way of speaking, if we were to employ this language and ask, “What is the badge of covenant membership?” The more natural answer would be “baptism.” Wright will sometimes speak of faith as an effective sign of covenant membership. He may not be using the word “sign” in a full sacramental sense, but, nevertheless, the sign of covenant membership is baptism (Rom. 4:11 assuming that baptism has replaced circumcision). The Heidelberg Catechism speaks of the distinguishing function of baptism.¹²⁵ Of course this will raise the question as to why Paul, against the Judaizer’s effort to push circumcision as the covenant badge, didn’t respond by appealing to baptism. Our answer is that Paul did not see the debate as primarily concerning the matter of covenant identity. Rather for Paul it concerned the far more crucial matter of one’s standing before God’s tribunal and one’s salvation.

More importantly, Wright speaks of faith as being equivalent to faithfulness; it includes the believer’s obedience. To be sure, Wright qualifies his statements, saying that he his not bringing in works through the backdoor. But does “faith” equal “faithfulness” in Paul? For Paul, faith is opposed to works, because they are categorically different. The one who works does not believe; the one who believes does not work (Rom. 4:4-5). The law is not of faith, nor faith of the law (Gal. 3:12). And it is this faith, stripped of *all* works, which justifies. For Paul, only faith is congruent with grace – “For this reason it is by faith, that it might be in accordance with grace....” (Rom. 4:16; cf. Rom. 11:6).

The traditional case for faith as the instrumental means of justification is well grounded in Paul’s writings. For instance, Galatians 2:20 states, “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by *faith in the Son* of God, who loved me, and gave Himself for me.” It’s difficult to see how “faith” in this verse can mean faithfulness or anything other than “trust.” Again faith, for Paul, is focused upon Christ, and, therefore, cannot mean faithfulness, “[J]ust as it is written, “Behold, I lay in Zion a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense, And whoever believes on Him will not put to shame” (Rom. 9:33). Paul has chosen some very bizarre ways to speak of “faithfulness” if such is his meaning.

Moreover, Paul *never* says that one is justified on the *basis* of faith, though Wright says that’s his meaning. Paul clearly grounds justification solely in the obedience of Christ (Rom. 5:19), and characteristically speaks of justification as “by faith” or “through faith,” but not on the basis of faith (Rom. 3:20; 5:1 *et al*). Perhaps the lone exception is in Phil. 3:9—‘and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the Law, but

¹²⁵ Heidelberg Q/A. 74.

that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God by [or “on the basis (*epi*)”] of faith.’ This cannot, however, be construed as “basis” in the sense of grounds; *epi* + *dative* denotes instrument of result and must be viewed as referring back to the instrument of means.¹²⁶ The righteousness which is derived “through faith in Christ” is the righteousness which “comes from God” as a result of faith. The righteousness from God “on the basis of faith” simply explains how it is that this righteousness comes to us “through faith in Christ” in the previous clause.

What is the meaning of Paul’s phrase *eis hupakain pisteos*, “the obedience of faith” (Rom. 1:5 & 16:26). Is Wright correct in taking it in the appositional sense, as referring to the obedience which consists in faith? Or does he mean the obedience which faith produces?¹²⁷ For our purposes, we do need to decide here between interpretations. Reformed commentators have taken the phrase in this appositional sense, as well.¹²⁸ Faith is obedient whole response of commitment to the gospel call (2 Thess. 1:8). Wright does not err in thinking that obedience consists in faith, but in interpreting the phrase to refer to “faithfulness.” Recall Wright’s statement, “The “obedience” Paul seeks to evoke when he announces the gospel is thus not a list of moral good works but faith... faith is actually the human faithfulness that answers to God’s faithfulness.”¹²⁹ We respond that faithfulness may not be a list of moral good works, but faithfulness does involve doing such works. In this way Wright adds works to faith, a move that Paul would stridently oppose.

For Paul faith is in or upon Christ and it unites the believer to Christ, a function that Wright denies.¹³⁰ However, the uniting function of faith is clearly seen, for instance, in Ephesians 3:16-19.

that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man; that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height, to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Here, Paul says that Christ dwells in the heart through faith (See also Gal. 2:20; 2 Cor. 13:5). This union begins experientially for the believer when he believes (Eph. 1:14 “having also believed, you were sealed *in Him* with the Holy Spirit of promise”). The function of faith is to unite the believer to Christ and thereby appropriate his merits.

V. Evaluation

Having presented Wright’s views on justification and finding them at variance with Paul’s, we now come to the task of evaluation. Do Wright’s views on justification constitute minor deviations from Paul, but in substance retain his doctrine? Or are they a more serious matter of error, and, if so, to what degree of error? It is our judgment that Wright’s views significantly undermine Paul’s doctrine of justification and of the gospel at several points. These are as follows.

1. Wright’s approach to Scripture undermines *Sola Scripture*, that is, the principle that the Scriptures are the final standard for faith and practice. The ultimate authority of Scripture is obscured because its meaning can only be discerned by those who possess specialized knowledge and skills. This renders at least significant portions of the NT mute. The Scriptures do not speak sufficiently apart from this priesthood of scholars.

¹²⁶ F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, (Chicago, IL, The University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 123, paragraph 235.

¹²⁷ Ronald B. Wallace *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 106.

¹²⁸ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes*, Vol. I, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 13-14.

¹²⁹ Wright, “Romans,” 420. Note here that Wright denies that faith is works and then affirms that faith is faithfulness.

¹³⁰ Wright, “Justification: The Biblical Basis and its Relevance for Contemporary Evangelicalism,” 13.

Further by making the interpretation of key Pauline concepts and passages dependent upon scholarly reconstructions of Second Temple Judaism, Wright implies the Scripture is not sufficiently clear for ordinary readers to be able to understand the way of salvation found therein.

2. *Wright drives a wedge between justification and the gospel, by placing the emphasis of justification upon ecclesiology rather than soteriology.* Justification for Paul is part of the substance of the gospel (Rom. 1:16-18). It cannot be removed or made to stand at the periphery of the gospel without serious distortion to the same.
3. *By emphasizing the relational/covenantal meaning Wright strips “righteousness” of its moral/ethical weight, and the guilt of sin is likewise stripped of its gravity.* The result is that the believer no longer needs to ask, “what is my righteousness before God?” This very real concern becomes largely a non issue on Wright’s view of “righteousness.” The very heart of justification is the inherent righteousness of God and the righteousness which God requires of man. To remove this, or make it a non issue or a side note, as Wright does, has destructive ramifications for the doctrine of justification. Do away with “righteousness” and the believer need not really know the greatness of his sins and misery.¹³¹ Therefore, he need not ask “what is my righteousness before God?” Henri Blocher writes, “The keener the sense of the right, the more likely the focusing on the sinner’s plight of guilt and legal debt before the God of justice and judgment.”¹³² The erroneous foundation for this denial of justification is the covenant/relational reading of “righteousness.”
4. *Wright’s denial of imputation strikes at the heart of Paul’s doctrine of justification and the atonement.* For Paul, to be justified is to be reckoned as righteous (Rom. 4:3-8). Paul does not separate justification from imputation, and certainly does not deny the latter. In addition, denying imputation opens the door to the believer’s works playing a role toward his justification, because Christ’s active obedience has not been imputed to the believer. To be sure, not all who have denied imputation have walked through that door, but Wright does when he speaks of future justification based on one’s entire life.
5. *Future justification based on performance undermines the doctrine of salvation grace.* It may be thought that this criticism is off base since, for Wright, justification is not soteric but is essentially about ecclesiology. Thus Wright cannot be accused of teaching salvation by works when he speaks of future justification based on performance, since justification is not primarily about salvation. To be sure, if Wright completely separated and sealed off justification from salvation and spoke the latter in terms of grace and faith to the exclusion of all works whatsoever, then we would in fairness conclude that, while erroneous, Wright is not teaching salvation by works. But as we have noted above, that though Wright does see justification as belonging to ecclesiology, it is still, though much less, about soteriology. He precisely states that justification *is more* about ecclesiology than soteriology. In this case, it is still a matter pertaining to salvation. In his Rutherford Lecture, Wright states that for Paul justification is the declaration that one’s sins have been forgiven and that one is a member of the covenant, thus indicating a soteriological connection of justification. But most importantly Wright’s view of future justification fuses salvation, covenant, justification, and the believer’s performance. Future justification like present justification will involve the declaration that one’s sins are forgiven and that one is a member of the covenant. Thus, critical issue on that day will be one’s status within the covenant. This is because covenant for Wright is salvific. So to be declared to be in the covenant implies that one has been saved. And to be declared to be in the covenant you must have faith, i.e., be faithful to the covenant. In short, one’s covenant faithfulness keeps you in the realm of salvation and thus your salvation will rest in part on your performance. This is close to the synergistic foolishness of the Galatians which Paul condemned: “Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” (Gal.3:3).
6. *Faith as faithfulness destroys Sola Fide.* Works are smuggled in through the backdoor. Wright may call works “signs” or evidence of the Spirit and faith, but such qualification means nothing if these “signs” and evidence form the “basis” of God’s final adjudication. Further, when faith is defined in terms of faithfulness, the instrumental character of faith, which is alone congruous with grace, is lost. The resting and receiving of Christ is lost. Because faithfulness entails the believer’s obedience, justification becomes based on inward

¹³¹ Notice Wright’s description of sin, “In biblical thought, sin and evil are seen in terms of injustice—that is, of a fracturing the social and human fabric,” (“Romans,” 399).

¹³² Blocher, “Justification of the Ungodly (Solo Fide),” 484.

and ontological change within the believer, which in traditional terms is sanctification. Wright vociferously denies this charge, yet at that same time he maintains that faith means faithfulness.

The Crux of the Matter

The crux of the matter is that Wright's view of justification by faith takes one's eyes off of Christ. Justification is now thought to be based upon both the work of Christ and that of the Spirit, so that the believer looks to Christ's objective work and to the Spirit's subjective work *for justification*. However, the Heidelberg Catechism says that, "only the satisfaction, righteousness and holiness of Christ is my righteousness before God."¹³³ The Belgic Confession affirms, "And, verily, if we should appear before God, relying on ourselves or on any other creature, though ever so little, we should, alas! be consumed."¹³⁴ The Scripture locates our redemption one hundred percent in the work of Christ. By *His* blood we are justified; by *His* obedience many are made righteous. Unto us *He* has become wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption. God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His *Son*. He who has the *Son* has the life; he who does not have the *Son* of God does not have the life. (1 John 5:11-12 emphasis added). Again the Heidelberg asks, "Do those also believe in the only Savior Jesus, who seek their salvation and welfare from "saints," themselves, or anywhere else?" The catechism then answers, "No; although they make their boast of Him, yet in their deeds they deny the only Savior Jesus; for either Jesus is not a complete Savior, or they who by true faith receive this Savior, must have in him all that is necessary to their salvation." By setting the Spirit's work alongside Christ as a basis for justification, and by basing justification upon the believer's faithfulness, Wright's doctrine renders Christ an incomplete savior.

VI. Recommendations

1. That Synod adopt the following statement with regard to N.T.Wright's doctrine of justification. "We judge that the teachings of N. T. Wright on justification by faith are another gospel and call upon him to repent of his errors."

Grounds.

- a. Wright removes justification from the core of the gospel.
 - b. Wright undermines the full sufficiency of Christ's work by grounding justification also in the work of the Holy Spirit.
 - c. Wright rejects the centrality, necessity, and importance of perfect righteousness for eternal life.
 - d. Through his wholesale rejection of imputation, Wright denies that the believer stands clothed in the perfect righteousness of Christ.
 - e. Wright denies the finality of justification by faith.
 - f. Wright makes the believer's works necessary for their ultimate justification when he defines faith in terms of faithfulness.
2. That on behalf of Synod the stated clerk be directed to send this report and a letter to N. T. Wright, calling upon him to repent of his errors.
 3. That this report be made available to the churches of the RCUS, and sent to all denominations in fraternal relationship, and to member denominations of NAPARC and ICRC.
 4. That this committee be continued and reconstituted to study the theology of the so-called Federal Vision and report next year.
 5. That this committee be directed to contact and interact with committees of other Reformed and Presbyterian denominations that have established committees to study the NPP, the Federal Vision, and/ or the teaching of N. Shepherd.

¹³³ Heidelberg Catechism Q/A 61.

¹³⁴ Belgic Confession, Article 23.

Committee members,

Rev. Tracy Gruggett, Rev. David Fagrey, Rev. C. W. Powell,
Rev. Warren Embree, Elder Jess Johnson

[The report was adopted without dissent by the 259th Synod of the Reformed Church in the United States, meeting in Bakersfield, California, May 16-19, 2005. – Stated Clerk]