

## **(W)right with God?: A Response to N. T. Wright's Vision of Justification**



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ATONEMENT AND JUSTIFICATION IN  
THE BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

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The doctrine of justification has proved to be a sticking point for N. T. Wright's ambitious attempt at a new theology of the New Testament. In now at least four monographs, Wright has circled around Paul's Gospel always keeping God's justifying work in Christ at the center of his vision.<sup>1</sup> It remains under debate whether or not he has made a successful landing. Wright himself clearly is aware of the questions that his proposal has raised and in his most recent work gives an answer to those who have questioned his interpretation of Paul's Gospel.<sup>2</sup> His rhetoric, as

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<sup>1</sup> That includes N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991/Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1992); N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997); N. T. Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2005); *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Wright, *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009). Subsequent page references in this essay correspond to this American edition. Although he addresses various critics along the way, his primary response is directed to his primary partner in debate, John Piper (see, *The Future of Justification: A Response to N. T. Wright* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007]).

always, is remarkable. His concern to combat a perverted individualism and to promote a healthy, biblical concern for God's work in this world should be welcome to all of us. At the same time, it must be said that a reading of Wright's work reveals equivocations and inconsistencies that jeopardize his entire program.<sup>3</sup> It is hard to tell whether Wright's rhetorical flourishes, or his commitment to his larger scheme of "Israel's return from exile," or both prevent him from seeing these problems. To raise questions about Wright's program is to risk appearing as a cranky traditionalist who wants to spoil the celebration of a fresh perspective with stale dogma. But perhaps, as Jaroslav Pelikan once urged, it may be possible to celebrate tradition without falling prey to traditionalism.<sup>4</sup> From the fires of the past, we might yet bring the flame and not the ash.<sup>5</sup>

Wright's program may be summarized succinctly in his repeated claim that "God's single plan to put the world to rights" is nothing other than his "plan to do so through Israel" (p. 65). The formal and material dimensions of this proposal stand or fall together. It is only as God acts in, for and through Israel that one may speak of a single, saving purpose of God. Likewise, only if God's plan is simple and unbroken may one speak of "Israel" and "Israel" alone as the vehicle of God's saving purpose. Wright's inconsistencies concerning the identity of Israel and the function of the Law call into question his proposal to read Scripture as a straight-line narrative.<sup>6</sup> We shall have to leave them aside here. Our

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<sup>3</sup> "Omnis aequivocatio mater errorum," Luther, *WA* 39:2, 28,28.

<sup>4</sup> J. Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine Volume 1: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 9: "Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living."

<sup>5</sup> The latter dictum is cited by many; I have it from Hugh T. Kerr, "Warfield: The Person Behind the Theology," *PSB* 25.1 (2004): 93.

<sup>6</sup> As a confession of the oneness of God, Wright's formal claim that Scripture tells of a single plan of God for the salvation of the world (p. 94) is all well and good, even if the target of his complaint remains obscure. [If Wright has some sort of "Lutheran" view in mind here (as he explicitly indicates at various points in his work), he misses his target widely, since "Lutherans" (both the confessional ones and at least some of the Westerholm type) will quite heartily agree with him. They would merely want to add the caveat that so long as we remain on this side of glory we cannot see the whole of the single, divine plan. As Paul himself confesses, the oneness of God is presently a matter of faith (Rom 3:27-31). The distinction between the present fallen age and the one to come turns out to be critical to the assessment of Wright's work. See also Mark A. Seifrid, "Story-Lines of Scripture and Footsteps in the Sea," *SBJT* 12.4 (2008): 96-106.] One may question, however, whether Wright remains true to his proposal. According to his reading, the Scriptures tell the story of God

putting the world right through his covenant with Israel: “Here we have it: *God’s single plan, through Abraham and his family, to bless the whole world,*” (p. 67; Wright’s italics). [In his assertion that there is a single covenant of God, in which promise and demand are joined, and which was given to Israel for the world, and fulfilled in Jesus Christ, Wright stands remarkably close to Barth’s mature theology of the covenant—perhaps unconsciously taking it up. For a useful summary of the development of Barth’s “covenant theology,” see E. Busch, “Der eine Gnadenbund Gottes: Karl Barths neue Föderaltheologie,” *ThQ* 176.4 (1996): 341–54. Wright differs from Barth in his radical redefinition of Israel, on which point his thought clearly parallels that of Oscar Cullmann. See O. Cullmann, *Christus und die Zeit: Die urchristliche Zeit- und Geschichtsauffassung* (2d ed.; Zollikon-Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1948), 104–6. His equivocation on the identity of Israel that we examine below nevertheless exposes weaknesses that are inherent to the work of both Barth and Cullmann.] Wright repeatedly argues that Israel was faithless in its calling to be a “light to the nations” (Isa 42:6; 49:6). Where Israel failed, Jesus arrived as “the faithful Israelite, through whom the single plan can proceed after all,” offering obedience to God in his faithfulness to death on the cross (p. 105). Wright correspondingly affirms that Jesus died for Israel’s guilt, taking up himself the death they deserved (p. 105). It is this concession that throws his claim of a straight-line story into question, since if the cross was a substitutionary event, one must conclude that God apparently did have a “Plan B” to his saving work through Israel (p. 73). The alternative is to say—in an inversion of Caiaphas’ judgment—that God intended *Israel* to be crucified for the sins of the world. Wright misses this problem, perhaps because he understands Jesus’ death primarily as an act of “representation.” For him the individualistic category of “substitution” is a subordinate element of a larger, corporate event. In rejecting what he calls, “the sterile old antithesis between ‘representation’ and ‘substitution’,” he argues that “the Messiah is able to be the substitute *because he is the representative*” (p. 106; Wright’s italics). [In the significance he attaches to the “faithful obedience” of the Messiah, Wright comes remarkably close to his partner in debate, John Piper (p. 105). Each in his own way regards Jesus as a representative, whose “active obedience” in fulfillment of the Law (and the divine purpose) constitutes an essential and *distinct* element of the substitutionary effect of his saving death. Admittedly, Wright argues in the interest of corporate categories that “imputation” (and therewith “justification”) has to do merely with the according of a status as a member of the people of God (pp. 90-91). Nevertheless, he recognizes that Jesus bore the death and condemnation that belonged to Israel as well as to all of us (pp. 105-106). Wright parts ways with Piper in that he understands Jesus’ “active obedience” as extending all the way through Jesus’ death, and more importantly, in that he denies its “substitutionary” significance. Piper follows the traditional Protestant *loci*, of course, and understands Jesus’ “active obedience” as imputed to the believer.] Wright thus recognizes an *individual* dimension of Jesus’ death, and yet circumscribes its role within the drama of salvation. Jesus’ death in place of us merely grants us a new status and thus places us within the people of God.

What happens within that community constitutes the main event, namely, our participation in Jesus' faithfulness and transformation into the divine image. Yet Wright does not do away with the substitutionary dimension of the saving event; he only limits it. This moment of individualism, the recognition of *Jesus* as an individual distinct from Israel, undermines his insistence that the Scriptures present a single divine plan to bless the world through the nation.

The corporate conception of "representation" that Wright embraces creates its own problems for his urging that the Scriptures present a single story-line. In Wright's reading, Jesus comes to embody Israel without reserve. Indeed, Jesus' achievement as Messiah effects the *redefinition* of God's people. The people of God is now the family marked by "faith(fulness)," and not by any ethnic boundary-marker (pp. 103-105, 117). The nation of Israel thus loses its identity. Whatever one makes of this redefinition of "Israel," it introduces discontinuity into the story of salvation. [The supersessionism of Wright's proposal is remarkably similar to the kind that Adele Reinhartz finds in Dorothy Sayers: "Caiaphas' Post-Canonical Career," (paper presented at the 63rd annual meeting of the Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas, Lund, Sweden, 4 August 2008).]

Wright's privileging of corporate categories likewise introduces confusion into his treatment of the law and the question of human guilt. On the one hand, the law served to show that Jews, like the rest of the human race, were sinful, because it was impossible to keep it perfectly (p. 118). [It is strange that Wright imagines that Luther had no conception of the goodness of the Law or the *usus politicus*, and stranger yet that Wright scolds Luther for saying precisely what Wright himself affirms, that the law condemns (p. 72).] Indeed, "Israel under the Torah cannot be declared to be God's people, because the Torah merely points to sin" (p. 121). [Wright probably does not mean this statement absolutely (which would be quite problematic), since he speaks of Jesus as Israel's *representative*. Nevertheless, his way of understanding "the people of God" anticipates the moralism that is characteristic of his program.] The Law gets in the way of the promise to Abraham "by apparently choking the promise within the failure of Israel, . . . then finally by locking everything up under the prison house of sin" (p. 123; cf. pp. 135, 200). At this juncture, Wright appeals to Jesus' substitutionary death: for the positive verdict on Israel and the world the Messiah's faithfulness unto death was necessary (p. 121). On the other hand—following Calvin—Wright argues that the law was given at Sinai as a way of life to a people already redeemed, in order to set Israel apart from the nations (pp. 72-73). Torah included the sacrificial system, through which atonement could be made, so that "one did not need or expect to be always perfect in all respects" (p. 76). Does the law bring guilt or not? The inconsistency in Wright's two opposing assessments has to do with his ambivalence concerning the substitutionary dimension of Jesus' death. As is consistently the case with him, the corporate category of representation takes over his interpretation: "The point is that Torah must be understood *within the strange single-plan-of-God-through-Israel-for-the-world*" (p. 129, Wright's italics) so that through "the Messiah and his faithful, saving death" God's people are now identified by the badge of "faith/faithfulness." By means of this problematic identification of Jesus and

attention will be focused instead on Wright's understanding of the atonement and justification, faith and Christian community into which these inconsistencies spill over.

The current attractiveness of Wright's proposal among evangelicals rests in his insistence that salvation primarily has to do with believing community. "Justification" for Wright has to do with Israel as the people of God, and then through Jesus, with all the nations who join God's people.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, "justification" does *not* have to do with the

Israel, Wright shifts the question of the law from the sphere of guilt to that of salvation-history: "Torah had a purpose all right; it was indeed God's holy law; but its purpose was to keep Israel in check, to stop God's wayward people going totally off track, until the time when, through the Messiah, the long-term ultimate promises could be fulfilled" (p. 129). Wright here thinks in terms of the Messiah as representative, so that the *usus elenchticus* that he elsewhere affirms disappears, and the *usus politicus* becomes the sole purpose of the law. Indeed, according to Wright it is an "old caricature" to speak of the law as "driving us to despair of accomplishing its demands" and to flee to Christ to find the way of faith (pp. 129, 232). The relationship between the law of God and the faith of the gospel consequently becomes a mere shift in salvation-history: life under Torah was like living with candles in the dark; now the sun has risen (p. 129). There is no overlooking Wright's inconsistency here. He must decide whether the law had the merely temporary function of restraining the evil within Israel, or if the law exposes the guilt within Israel—and the world—with which the cross has dealt. Normally, of course, the *usus politicus* is not played off against the *usus elenchticus*. If, however, one does so, one cannot have it both ways.

<sup>7</sup> In some ways Wright stands close to Albrecht Ritschl's theological program both in his tendency toward biblicism and in the priority he gives to the corporate dimension of salvation. He shares Ritschl's preference for Reformed theology, and, like Ritschl, makes appeal to the divine covenant as a fundamental category for understanding redemption. For Wright as well as for Ritschl, the distinction between old and new covenants is that of the particular and national versus the universal. Likewise, Jesus serves for Wright as a moral ideal in much the same way that Ritschl understood him as an ethical archetype. In certain respects Wright remains more committed to Protestant orthodoxy than does Ritschl, and thus maintains a distinct place for a substitutionary atonement as a satisfaction of divine wrath that is lacking with Ritschl. Nevertheless, much like Ritschl he subordinates justification to the effecting of the larger divine plan. Both understand justification in the first instance as a communal reality. Just as with Ritschl justification comes to the individual only within community, with Wright justification establishes the status of the individual within the community. Ritschl thinks more consistently in terms of the community of the reconciled, and thus leaves questions of individual faith unanswered. Wright allows more room for the individual, and thus offers a less consistent program. For a summary of Ritschl's thought see R. Schäfer, *Ritschl: Grundlinien eines fast verschollenen dogmatischen Systems* (BHT 41; Tübingen, Germany: Mohr

“imputation of Christ’s righteousness” *nor* with the new creation of the human being, but with being granted a new status, namely, membership in the people of God. “Faith” likewise does not in the first instance have to do with our standing before God, but is a badge and emblem of membership in God’s people, the necessary mark of “covenant renewal” and of our participation in the divine image. Consequently, for Wright “justification” brings final salvation only through the work of the Spirit who transforms us into the divine image manifest in Jesus.<sup>8</sup> The outward and visible acts of the believing community thereby become not merely the showplace of salvation, but its final criterion. Here, as elsewhere in his thought, Wright loses from his view the full dimensions of the final judgment. This lost horizon of judgment and the subordination of the individual to corporate concerns is not uncommon in recent evangelical thought. It deserves further reflection.

## I. THE ATONEMENT AS REPRESENTATION AND SUBSTITUTION

The priority Wright gives to community has significant entailments for his understanding of the atonement that we must consider on our way to assessing his proposal concerning justification. In rejecting what he calls “the sterile old antithesis between ‘representation’ and ‘substitution’”, he argues that “the Messiah is able to be the substitute *because he is the representative*” (p. 106; Wright’s italics).<sup>9</sup> For Wright,

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Siebeck, 1968). Correspondingly, Wright’s program likewise bears remarkable similarity to the Social Gospel in its utilitarian conception of individual faith, its image of Jesus as the initiator of the kingdom, and its emphasis on the continuity between present righteousness and that of the kingdom to come. See, for example, W. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: Macmillan, 1917), 95–166 and “The Brotherhood of the Kingdom” (1893) in *Walter Rauschenbusch: Selected Writings* (ed. Winthrop S. Hudson; New York: Paulist, 1984), 71–94.

<sup>8</sup> Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective*, 108–29.

<sup>9</sup> In the significance he attaches to the “faithful obedience” of the Messiah, Wright comes remarkably close to his partner in debate, John Piper (p. 105). Each in his own way regards Jesus as a representative, whose “active obedience” in fulfillment of the Law (and the divine purpose) constitutes an essential and *distinct* element of the substitutionary effect of his saving death. Admittedly, Wright argues in the interest of corporate categories that “imputation” (and therewith “justification”) has to do merely with the according of a status as a member of the people of God (pp. 90–91). Nevertheless, he recognizes that Jesus bore the death and condemnation that belonged to Israel as well as to all of us (pp. 105–106). Wright parts ways with Piper in that he

then, Jesus' death is primarily an act of "representation." "Substitution" is a subordinate element of a larger, corporate event. Because Israel failed to reflect the faithfulness of its covenant God, and thus to be a blessing to the nations (p. 67), God required "*a faithful Israelite, through whom the single plan can continue after all*" (Wright's italics; p. 105). Through his faithful obedience, Jesus "has attained the position of sovereignty over creation marked out for human beings from the beginning" (p.103). Wright thus speaks of "the achievement of Jesus as the crucified Messiah," (p. 117) and even of Jesus as the "hero" of the divine drama (p. 27).

It is not clear (to me at least) what Wright means when he rejects a so-called "sterile, old antithesis" between "representation and substitution." It is clear, however, that in his subordination of "substitution" to "representation" Wright effectively reduces the atonement to a mere moral transaction. For Wright, Jesus is first and foremost a faithful Israelite, indeed, the one faithful Israel, who is able to serve as Israel's substitute only because he has representatively fulfilled the divine will. It is entirely appropriate, of course, to understand Jesus' obedience as essential to the atonement, and, indeed, as having been in a sense "rewarded" by God (Phil 2:8, 9-11; cf. Heb 5:7-8). In assigning priority to Jesus' "representative" role, however, Wright goes further. As "the faithful Israelite," Jesus does not in the first instance die in place of the nation. He embodies it. Israel thus saves itself in Jesus its representative, so to speak, before anything may be said to have been done in its place. Admittedly, Wright understands Jesus to serve not only as Israel's representative, but also as *God's* representative. Jesus' faithfulness is the revelation of God's faithfulness and of the divine image. But this equation does not change the dynamic of the atonement. Indeed, Wright so draws God into Jesus' faithfulness that he nearly makes God out to be nothing more than a moral authority who rewards Jesus' heroic performance. The core of Wright's conception of the atonement is, thus, moralistic. Thus, he fails to see the real drama of redemption, the exchange of our person with the person of Christ, the exchange of sin and righteousness, the exchange of death and life. He misses the "great pleasure" of the cross (cf. Johann Georg Hamann)<sup>10</sup>

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understands Jesus' "active obedience" as extending all the way through Jesus' death, and more importantly, in that he denies its "substitutionary" significance. Piper follows the traditional Protestant *loci*, of course, and understands Jesus' "active obedience" as imputed to the believer.

<sup>10</sup> "Im *Kreutz*, wie es unsere Religion schon sinnlich und bildlich nennt, liegt ein großer *Genuß* unserer Existenz—und zugleich das wahre Treibwerk unserer verborgensten Kräfte" (Johann Georg Hamann, *Briefe* [7 vols; ed. W.

that can be tasted and experienced only where Christ as Savior is not displaced by Christ as example, only where “substitution” is not demoted by “representation.”

The ordering of the relationship between “representation” and “substitution” which Wright offers implies that these two dimensions of God’s atoning work in Christ are distinct and separate. Is it not rather the case that the two are interwoven? In a sense, it is fair to say that as a human being, Jesus serves as Israel’s substitute only because he is its faithful representative. But is it not equally true to say that Jesus is able to serve as Israel’s representative, only because he has come as its substitute? Paul, thus, instructs the Galatians: “When the fullness of time had come, God *sent forth* his Son, coming to be (born) of a woman, coming to be under the Law” (Gal 4:4). The preexistent Son has entered into the world and into his kinship with Israel, as the root of Jesse and the new David. His incarnation, death, and resurrection mark a fresh *beginning*. A substitution and exchange has taken place within the fallen world. The Son has taken our place. As the Son who comes as God and Lord, Jesus is Israel’s representative only as its substitute. “Representation” and “substitution” are not separate, but interwoven dimensions of the atonement. Paul, thus, describes Christ’s work in such a way that “representation” and “substitution” meet: “Don’t you know that as many as have been baptized into Christ Jesus, have been baptized into his death?” (Rom 6:3; cf. Eph 2:11-18; Col 2:6-15). In one respect, the redeemed are present in the saving event. In this sense we may describe that event as “representative,” or, more precisely, as an event of “inclusive representation.” In another respect, those who are redeemed were *not* present in the saving event. In that sense, then we may describe the event as “substitutionary.” We understand God’s saving work in Christ properly only as we see that these two dimensions of that work interpenetrate and qualify one another. Once “representation” is separated from “substitution,” it becomes nothing more than “solidarity,” or perhaps, as with Grotius, an exemplary act. As we have seen, Wright in his own way understands Jesus’ death, or rather Jesus’ obedience in the face of death, primarily as a moral example, even if he retains the traditional Protestant understanding of the atonement in of its substitutionary dimension.<sup>11</sup> Over against Wright’s subordination of

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Ziesemer and A. Henkel; Wiesbaden, Germany: Insel Verlag, 1955–79], 4:391.16–19.): “In the *cross*, as our religion sensually and pictorially calls it, lies a great *pleasure* of our existence—and at the same time the true movement of our most hidden powers.”

<sup>11</sup> We should note that the same considerations apply to a conception of “substitution” that is stripped of any representative dimension. Once isolated in



“substitution” to “representation,” then, “representation” and “substitution” are to be understood as inseparable, interpenetrating aspects of Jesus’ cross and resurrection. In one sense, we *were* there when “they crucified (our) Lord,” in another sense we were *not*.

We also must not overlook that both the representative and substitutionary dimensions of the atonement extend beyond Jesus’ cross to his resurrection. Romans 6, to which we already have referred, makes it clear that those who have been baptized into Christ’s death also share in his resurrected life: “just as he was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so also we walk in newness of life” (Rom 6:4b). To be included and to share in Christ’s death is to be included and to share in the new life of obedience and the hope of the resurrection, that is, to share in Christ’s resurrection communicated to us by faith (Rom 6:5-11). It is not only Christ’s death that was an event of “inclusive representation,” but also his resurrection. Christ stood in our place in his death so that we might stand in his place in the life of the new creation.

Because of the priority Wright assigns to “representation,” he has difficulty in taking into account this participation in Jesus’ saving resurrection. The bare nail on the cover of the American edition of Wright’s recent work betrays its thrust: his attention is focused on Jesus’ obedience to death.<sup>12</sup> He has given extensive attention elsewhere, of course, to the resurrection of the Son of God. Even in this work, however, his understanding of salvation is tilted toward Jesus’ obedience, so that he does not appreciate the full significance of Jesus’ resurrection. His discussion there of Romans 6:1-11 is instructive.<sup>13</sup> He quite rightly understands Paul to refer to the future resurrection of believers in vv. 5 and 8: “if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him” (Rom 6:8). As he indicates, the new obedience of the Christian of which Paul speaks, our “walking in the newness of life” (Rom 6:4), implies a “metaphorical resurrection,” or more properly

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this way, “substitution” becomes nothing more than an act of “replacement.” One ends up with a bare Anselmian understanding that leaves the *communication* of the saving benefits of God’s atoning work in Christ unexplained. See Stephan Schaede, *Stellvertretung: Begriffsgeschichtliche Studien zur Soteriologie* (BHT 126; Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 625–41, esp. 629–30.

<sup>12</sup> One of Caravaggio’s paintings of Paul’s conversion appears on the cover of the UK edition. Here Wright’s idealistic conception of a transforming vision comes to expression. Despite the obvious reference to Jesus’ resurrection, the implicit theology of the cover remains the same, as does, of course, the content of the book itself.

<sup>13</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Christian Origins and the Question of God 3; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2003), 251–4.

stated, Jesus' resurrection in metaphor. For Wright, this "walking in newness of life" is a continuation of the "exodus" theme: just as Israel was freed from slavery in Egypt and led into the promised land, our underlying status is freedom from sin and our ultimate destination is the life of the age to come. While the appeal to the pattern of the exodus is not entirely wrong, Wright's focus on Jesus' obedience as a model for our own leads him to underestimate our share in Jesus' resurrection. At least three observations are in order. First, although Paul's language *implies* that our present participation in Jesus' resurrection is to be understood metaphorically, Paul does not, in fact, employ metaphor, but uses direct speech that makes the comparison explicit: "In order that, *just as* Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, *so we, too*, might walk in newness of life" (Rom 6:4). Second, in this direct speech the similitude or likeness that grounds the potential metaphor becomes clear. Our new obedience corresponds to the resurrection of Christ *in that* "the glory of the Father" manifest in Christ's resurrection and "the newness of life" that is given to us are implicitly equivalent. It quickly becomes apparent from a scan of Pauline usage that these expressions signify the effecting of the new creation and its presence, respectively.<sup>14</sup> One is led, therefore, to the striking and profound conclusion that Paul's metaphorical transfer of *meaning* from Christ's resurrection to our new obedience is based on the transfer of *the reality* of Christ's resurrection here and now to those who believe.<sup>15</sup> Our new obedience is nothing other than the resurrection in transferred form. This "transferred resurrection" comes to full metaphorical expression in Colossians and Ephesians: we have been raised with Christ and seated with him "in the heavenlies."<sup>16</sup> Indeed, it is the realistic metaphor, the

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<sup>14</sup> On "glory" see: Rom 5:2; 8:18, 21; 9:23; on "newness" see: Rom 7:6; 2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15.

<sup>15</sup> See Joachim Ringleben, "Luther zur Metapher," *ZTK* 94.3 (1997): 336–369; "Metapher und Eschatologie bei Luther," *ZTK* 100.2 (2003): 223–240. Luther speaks significantly in respect to 2 Cor 5:21 of Christ being made metaphorically into sin ("Christus . . . factus est peccatum metaphorice"), on which see Gerhard Ebeling, "Christus . . . factus est peccatum metaphorice," in *Wort und Glaube, Band 4: Theologie in den Gegensätzen des Lebens* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 1995), 583–609.

<sup>16</sup> See Col 2:12–13; 3:1; Eph 2:5–6. Wright himself momentarily recognizes the import of these verses, but then quickly slips into his salvation-historical scheme in which the "transferred" resurrection loses its real weight: "Without downplaying the future hope of actual resurrection itself, the fact that the church lives in the interval between the Messiah's resurrection and its own ultimate new life means that the metaphorical use of 'resurrection' language can be adapted to denote the concrete Christian living described in 2.10." Wright, *The*

transfer of the reality of the new creation into our life in the present order that guards against a totalistic metaphor that would suppose that our life in the present order is resurrection life. Paul's metaphorical realism guards against the Corinthian error that we encounter again in the Pastoral Epistles, the subsuming of the resurrection life into the present age (1 Cor 15:12-19; 2 Tim 2:18-19; cf. 2 Thess 2:2). It is not clear that Wright's symbolic appropriation of the Pauline metaphor sufficiently guards against such a totalizing approach: "building for the kingdom" may well displace the hope of the kingdom breaking in upon this world. For Paul, baptized believers in Christ live in the intersection of the times. We make progress and enter the promised land of resurrection life only because in Jesus Christ we already share in that resurrection life here and now. Third, Wright's loss of perspective stands out all the more sharply in his treatment of Paul's statements about our death. In contrast with his discussion of Jesus' resurrection, he leaves this language unexplored and effectively treats it as direct speech. Consequently, for Wright believers *in a certain sense* live in an "intermediate state," dead to sin but not yet literally raised from the dead. Quite right, of course. But Paul's realistic metaphor goes missing. Christian obedience is no intermediate state and is far deeper and greater than new behavior.<sup>17</sup> The difference between Wright's handling of Christ's death and Christ's resurrection is remarkable in that while Paul employs more or less direct speech to describe our participation in Christ's resurrection, he uses full-blown metaphor to describe our participation in Christ's death: "we were baptized into his death; we were buried with him, through baptism into death; we have been planted together with the likeness of his death; our old person has been crucified with him; we have died with Christ" (Rom 6:4, 5, 6, 8). Our reckoning of ourselves as dead to sin does not differ from our reckoning ourselves alive to God in Christ. Paul's language shares in metaphor in both instances. In both instances, however, he speaks of real participation here and now in Christ, both in Christ's resurrection as well as in Christ's death. Jesus' resurrection is much more than a goal to which we are to be conformed. It is also a reality in which we already share: "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation. The old things have passed away. Behold, the new has come!" (2 Cor 5:17). Only those who in the present life possess the life of the resurrection shall enter into the life of the resurrection at the coming of the Lord. The reality of the new creation in which we share in Christ goes missing in Wright's work, because Wright understands Jesus first and foremost as Israel's representative.

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*Resurrection*, 237; see also 236–40.

<sup>17</sup> Wright, *The Resurrection*, 251–3.

Wright has difficulty not only in accounting for Jesus' resurrection, but also for his death. This is not the only remarkable irony about Wright's scheme, as we shall see! In his representative role, within the larger divine plan, Jesus loses his individual identity and becomes generic. Wright's Jesus, thus, cannot utter the cry of dereliction, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" since he represents the entire nation and fulfills "the-single-plan-of-God" of which he is fully aware.<sup>18</sup> In this way, contrary to Wright's own intent and concern, he dehistoricizes Jesus. His elevation of Jesus' representative role makes Jesus into an image and model of obedience. It is at this point, again, that Wright fails to capture the true dynamic of salvation. Our salvation goes beyond *what Jesus did* in obedience to the will of God. It includes *what Jesus suffered*.<sup>19</sup> It is not merely Jesus' obedience unto death that saves us, but his very death itself. "He was crucified on account of *weakness*, but lives by the power of God" (2 Cor 13:4). Jesus saves as the Crucified One who lives, not merely as the Obedient One who was vindicated.

In depersonalizing Jesus, not only does Wright miss the depths of Jesus' suffering, he also—again, ironically—misses the heights of New Testament Christology, despite his admirable concern with it. In a way that transcends Wright's proposal, Jesus appears in the New Testament not merely as the Suffering Servant who fulfills the divine purpose, but also as the one human being *who acts as God*.<sup>20</sup> That is already clear in the Markan ransom saying, according to which the Son of Man acts freely out of love and with the power to redeem, apart from any reference to the Father: "the Son of Man *gives his life as a ransom for many*" (Mark 10:45; Matt 20:28). Likewise, according to the Johannine witness, Jesus lays down his life of his own accord. No one takes it from him. The *commandment* he has received from the Father paradoxically rests in his *own* authority to lay down his life and take it up again (John 10:17-18).

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<sup>18</sup> Wright subsumes the cry of dereliction under Jesus' vocation: the kingdom comes through the suffering of the righteous. Jesus' suffering thus becomes generic—and the cry of dereliction is explained away. See N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Christian Origins and the Question of God 2; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1996), 600–1.

<sup>19</sup> Karl Friedrich Ulrichs rightly underscores this matter in reference to the debate over the meaning of "the faith of Christ." See K. F. Ulrichs, *Christusglaube: Studien zum Syntagma pistis Christou und zum paulinischen Verständnis von Glaube und Rechtfertigung* (WUNT 2/227; Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 6, 193.

<sup>20</sup> Paul's identification of Jesus as God is diminished in Wright's Christology of the divine image, according to which the human Jesus displays the divine character. One might perhaps describe this tendency as Eutychian. See Seifrid, "Story-Lines of Scripture," 97.

In Romans 5, Paul speaks not only of the obedience of Christ (Rom 5:19), but also, and in the first place, of the “gift by the grace of the one human being, Jesus Christ,” a gift and grace that is equivalent to the grace of God (Rom 5:15).<sup>21</sup> Jesus suffers not merely as an obedient human being fulfilling the divine will, but as very God, who gives himself for us and, thus, saves us. Christ’s triumph is that of *his own* all-conquering love, a love that is nothing other than the love of God itself (Rom 8:39). The atonement is something larger than a moral accomplishment or transaction. It is *Christ’s own* defeat of sin and death: “it was for this purpose that Christ died and lived again, that he might rule as *Lord*, both over the dead as well as over the living” (Rom 14:9; cf. 2 Cor 5:14-15).

Wright’s interpretation of the atonement primarily in terms of Jesus’ role as Israel’s representative, thus, not only obscures its substitutionary dimension, it obscures the exchange of persons that is at the heart of that substitutionary understanding. The message of the New Testament is not merely that God has done something for us in Jesus. It is that in Jesus Christ God himself has exchanged places with us, taking our persons, our sin, our death, our judgment upon himself and giving *himself* to us so that we might have his righteousness and life. Paul, thus, summarizes Christ’s saving work in profoundly personal terms when he speaks of the life he lives as that of “the son of God, who loved me and gave himself up for me” (Gal 2:20). Wright’s commitment to the priority of corporate categories leads him, in stark contrast, to a moralistic—and, indeed, rationalistic—conception of the atonement.

## II. JUSTIFICATION IN LIMITED PERSPECTIVE

Wright’s loss of perspective on our full participation in Christ and his resurrection limits his perspective on God’s justifying work in Jesus. On the one hand, Wright rightly understands Jesus’ resurrection as, “the ‘vindication’ of Jesus, his ‘justification’ after the apparent [*sic*] condemnation of the court that sent him to his death” (p. 106). He, thus,

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<sup>21</sup> The same idea appears regularly in the Pauline prescripts, e.g. “grace and peace to you, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 1:7). In the “grace-wish” of Galatians, Paul names Christ along with the Father as the source of grace and describes him as the one, “who gave himself for our sins, that he might redeem us from the present evil age” (Gal 1:4). Christ’s death is not merely an act of obedience toward God. It is simultaneously a free act of love toward us. On this theme, see Wiard Popkes, *Christus traditus: Eine Untersuchung zum Begriff der Dahingabe im Neuen Testament* (ATANT 49; Zürich, Germany: Zwingli Verlag, 1967), 271–95.

acknowledges the *effective* character of God's justifying pronouncement. On the other hand—at least in his most recent work—Wright follows a strict and narrow *ordo salutis* within which our justification “denotes *one specific aspect of or moment within*” the sequence of thought having to do with salvation by grace (p. 87, Wright's italics).<sup>22</sup> He, thus, insists that our justification is nothing more than “*the status that someone has when the court has found in their favor*” (p. 90). Not even his appropriation of Austin's “speech-act” theory sways him from this judgment: as a “speech-act” the decision of the judge creates nothing more than a new status of membership within the people of God (p. 69). Although it is difficult to tell, given the shifting sands of Wright's thought, this characterization of “justification” appears to mark a significant change over against his earlier insistence that “justification” is a mere declaration about the faith that God finds in his people: that declaration would constitute a “constative” utterance, not a “performative” one in Austin's terms.<sup>23</sup> In any case, the status given in the divine declaration is not the status of the judge, who does not transfer his righteousness to the defendant by imputation, nor in any other way (pp. 66-69). Even if consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, one wonders how this rigid interpretation of justification can be squared with Wright's proper insistence elsewhere that the justification and righteousness for which the people of God hope is their final *vindication*.<sup>24</sup> In fact, in his discussion of 1 Cor 1:30, Wright joins Paul in celebrating the risen and vindicated Christ as *our* righteousness, and indeed, as our final vindication (pp. 155-157). Wright is able to equivocate on this matter, because he regards the initial status given in justification as the gift of forgiveness and of the Spirit, and, thus, is happy to speak of this initial justification as “vindication” (p. 90).<sup>25</sup> Now, however, there are two “vindications”: the initial vindication that sets us within the people of God and a final vindication in the resurrection to life eternal. Wright insists on limiting the language of justification to our initial “status” and reserves the references to our sharing in God's righteousness to the progress and consummation of our salvation (68-71).<sup>26</sup> The link between the two for Wright is the sure and certain work of the Spirit who transforms us (188-189). His thought is, thus, nicely Augustinian and Tridentine, despite his

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<sup>22</sup> Wright himself suggests that “this [understanding of ‘righteousness’] is something that no good Lutheran or Reformed theologian ought ever to object to” (p. 90).

<sup>23</sup> See, e.g., Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective*, 159–60.

<sup>24</sup> Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 98–9, 131.

<sup>25</sup> See also, e.g., Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 98–9.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

attempts to distance himself from this theology. An initial vindication and a final vindication hardly differ from initial and final justification, even if Wright varies his language. The “status” of believers in the people of God is likewise drawn into this equivocation, since it is no longer clear if their standing within the people of God consists purely and entirely in the forgiveness of sins or if it includes their transformed life. Indeed, Wright elsewhere tilts toward the latter, arguing that “justification” is not about becoming a Christian, but about God’s recognition of true human beings, in whose heart the Spirit is at work.<sup>27</sup> Wright, thus, drives a wedge between Jesus and us: we can no longer have him in an unqualified way here and now as our righteousness. We must be transformed into his image in order to share in salvation. How much transformation is enough?

The driving force behind Wright’s distinction between the risen Christ and our justification lies again in Wright’s subordination of “substitution” to “representation” in the atonement. As we have noted, Wright is able to speak of justification in traditional terms: “. . . in Romans 3, Paul’s point is that the whole human race is in the dock, guilty before God” (p. 90). Correspondingly, “justification” has to do with “acquittal” and “forgiveness” (p. 90). The human being stands, so to speak, in the divine “lawcourt.” Justification takes place *coram Deo*. Quite right. When, however, Wright treats Paul’s confrontation of Cephas in Galatians 2:11-21, we are no longer in a “lawcourt,” but at a dinner table. Here “justification” does *not* mean “to be granted free forgiveness of your sins.” It means *instead*, “to be reckoned by God to be a true member of his family, and hence with the right to share in table fellowship” (p. 116). There is nothing wrong, of course, with arguing—as, in fact, Paul does—that no one can be justified by “works of the law,” *both* because the law brings guilt *and* because the one God saves both Jews and Gentiles (Rom 3:19-20, 27-21). Nor is it wrong to give attention to the details of the text, even if Wright’s dissonant readings of Galatians and Romans strain credulity. Wright goes further, however, and plays off membership within the people of God against forgiveness and acquittal. Precisely what is our standing within the people of God, if it is not participation in the community of forgiven sinners? Wright speaks of “being reckoned a true member of the family” in terms of “*faithful* membership” (emphasis mine) in “the Christian family” (p. 116). This status in the “Messiah-redefined family” appears to be

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<sup>27</sup> See the discussion below and Mark A. Seifrid, “The Narrative of Scripture and Justification by Faith: A Fresh Response to N. T. Wright,” *CTQ* 72.1 (2008): 38–40.

something more than being forgiven and acquitted (p. 117).<sup>28</sup> Is it contingent upon the faithfulness and true humanity effected within us by the Spirit?<sup>29</sup> The answer appears to be, “Yes.” For Wright, as we have seen, justification is God’s acknowledgement of those who belong to the covenant community, the granting of a status within the people of God. That status is marked by “faith,” or more properly, by the “faithfulness” which is present prior to any justifying judgment.<sup>30</sup> As a mere “finding of the facts,” justification is contingent upon a prior work of God’s grace in us. Our justification at the final judgment is no different. On this point, Wright appeals to Calvin’s *beneficia duplex*—justification and sanctification—that are given within the larger reality of union with Christ (p. 85). As we have seen already, however, Wright, quite unlike Calvin, limits the significance of justification to the status *initially* granted to the believer within the community and correspondingly expands “sanctification” so that it becomes the decisive element of union with Christ. What God said and did for us in Jesus is not a single, undivided reality in which we participate. For Wright, it is parceled out into a declaration of status that is followed by an “actual rescue” (p. 170). We must become “in reality” what we already are “by declaration.” (p. 106). Wright thus strangely embraces a fictional understanding of justification, the caricature that is often attributed to Protestant theology. In so doing, he again creates problems for his own understanding of justification. Does not justification, according to Wright himself, mark out those who share in the faith(fulness) of the Messiah?<sup>31</sup> How, on Wright’s reading, can we be declared to be something that in reality we are not?<sup>32</sup> We must leave it to Wright to sort out this inconsistency. In his view, in any case, the Spirit enables us to freely choose to become what is pleasing to God, and reflect God’s image as it is seen in Jesus, as we look away from ourselves to the faithful Messiah (and to the Spirit as well, as we shall see). *In this way*, we become fit to stand at the final

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<sup>28</sup> For Wright, “membership in the covenant” means being a “forgiven sinner,” but that “only among other things.” See Wright, *Paul in Fresh*, 121. These “other things” apparently are not aspects of forgiveness, but distinctly “other” than forgiveness.

<sup>29</sup> Wright’s urging that the problem of sin and that of judgment—as manifest in the divine dispersion of humanity at Babel—“sit comfortably side-by-side” does nothing to resolve this question (p. 118).

<sup>30</sup> Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective*, 117–25, 159–160; *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 113–31.

<sup>31</sup> Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective*, 122.

<sup>32</sup> Is it, perhaps, that Wright is an unwitting member of the school of Karl Holl and understands justification in terms of God’s foreknowledge of the work he intends to perform in his people?



judgment (pp. 144, 149, 156, 226, 239). As Wright repeatedly insists, his conception of salvation is *not* Pelagian. It is Augustinian through and through.<sup>33</sup> Fair enough. But the question remains as to whether it is biblical. It is certainly not reformational.<sup>34</sup>

Wright's position becomes even more difficult when he comes to 2 Cor 5:21: "[God] made the one who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, in order that we might become the righteousness of God in him." Here, as elsewhere, Wright understands "God's righteousness" as "God's covenant-faithfulness," expressed in God's action of reconciling the world to himself. Despite the obviously universal dimensions of the saving event, Wright understands Paul to speak here of himself and other apostles. It is Paul, not the Corinthians, who embodies the righteousness of God, a righteousness manifest in what Paul does as Christ's ambassador (pp. 162-165). Wright, thus, understands "God's righteousness" in moral terms and transfers the force of "our becoming the righteousness of God" entirely to the apostle (cf. 2 Cor 5:19-20). Paul supposedly speaks here of the representative faithfulness of Jesus that he embodies and which is finally to be embodied in the Corinthians.

Several observations are in order. In the first place, it is clear from the context that the scope of the atoning event is universal: "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation" (2 Cor 5:17). Paul makes it clear that his apostolic ministry is nothing other than a giving forth of that which he has received, namely his reconciliation to God through Christ. Only in this way does he act as an ambassador of Christ. When, therefore, he speaks of God's atoning work in Christ, he does not merely refer to himself, but also to the Corinthians, to whom he immediately appeals out of the atoning event: "And working together [with God, who acted in the saving exchange in Christ] *we, too, urge* you not to receive the grace of God in vain" (2 Cor 6:1).<sup>35</sup> The reconciling word of the apostle is nothing other than the reconciling work of God accomplished in the saving exchange in Christ. Paul works together with God in that God makes appeal through the apostle who announces this work to the Corinthians.<sup>36</sup> That work of God in Christ is effective and complete: "If

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<sup>33</sup> Of course, medieval theology sought and found ways to circumvent the implications of Augustinian anthropology and to introduce the contribution of the human being. Wright likewise seems to have found his own way of doing so.

<sup>34</sup> It can be little wonder, then, that his proposal has met with such alarm and has provoked such a strong response from John Piper!

<sup>35</sup> The little particle *de* in 2 Cor 6:1 links what Paul says there to what precedes.

<sup>36</sup> The adverbial *kai* following the conjunction  $\delta\epsilon$  marks out 2 Cor 5:21 as spoken in reference to the Corinthians: *Synergountes de kai parakaloumen mē*

one died for all, all died” (2 Cor 5:14); “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation” (2 Cor 5:17); “God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself” (2 Cor 5:19). Just as God’s making Christ to be sin was not a process but an event, so our being made the righteousness of God is not a process but an event that has taken place in Christ. The text speaks of a dramatic substitution, an exchange of persons in the cross and resurrection in which Christ was made what we are. Wright misses this exchange of persons and its effective character. He instead understands Christ as a visible representation of God’s righteousness that morally transforms the apostle and keeps God’s righteousness entirely separate from justification. What God has given as an unqualified gift in Christ, Wright would like to attain by the power of the Spirit.

Here the individualism inherent to God’s work in the crucified and risen Jesus that Wright attempts to drive out reenters his reading unnoticed through a back door in corrupt form. All the justified members of the people of God embody God’s righteousness and faithfulness, but some, like the apostle, embody that faithfulness more than others (pp. 166-167). This embodiment of God’s faithfulness, moreover, constitutes for Wright what it means to be “truly human” (p. 209).<sup>37</sup> The conclusion then lies at hand: all of us are human, but some of us are more human than others. We shall consider this highly problematic individualism in the second essay.

It becomes apparent, then, in Wright’s wrestling with 2 Cor 5:21 that he overlooks essential elements of the justifying event. The problem lies in his description of “the lawcourt,” according to which God appears as the judge who finds the facts of the case before him in an impartial verdict (pp. 68-71). As the term “lawcourt” already suggests, the scene Wright imagines presupposes the division of powers of a modern democracy.<sup>38</sup> In the biblical contexts that provide the relevant background to the language of justification, the pronouncement of the judge and its effect were fully connected. To rule is to judge, and to judge is to establish one’s rule: one “*does* judgment” (□*asah mishpat*). Thus, Israel’s *shophetim* appear in the biblical texts as those whom the Lord raised up to deliver Israel from its enemies (e.g. Judg 2:16–18). The same dynamic is apparent in the summary of David’s rule: “David

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*eis kenon tēn charin tou theou dexasthai hymas* (2 Cor 6:1).

<sup>37</sup> See also Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective*, 109, 124.

<sup>38</sup> Even in this setting, however, the pronouncement of the judge *effects* the verdict, at least in criminal cases. In his analysis of speech-acts, Austin recognizes this performative dimension of judgment. See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*. (William James Lectures; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 152–3.

ruled as king over Israel; David executed justice and righteousness for all the people” (2 Sam 8:15).<sup>39</sup> Within the contexts of the Hebrew Scriptures, the judgment of priests, elders, or the *pater familias* involved a similar joining of judicial and executive powers.<sup>40</sup> In the Roman period, rulers, governors, and magistrates likewise bore not only judicial but also executive authority.<sup>41</sup> The New Testament image of the final judgment takes a corresponding form. The Son of Man shall come as king, not merely to make a declaration of status, but to pronounce a verdict and, thus, to *effect* it: “Come . . . inherit the kingdom” and, conversely, “Depart from me . . . into the eternal fire” (Matt 25:34, 41). According to Paul, we must appear before the *bēma* of Christ, not merely to hear a verdict, but to be *recompensed* for the things done in the body (2 Cor 5:10).

Correspondingly, while those who judged in Israel are enjoined to strict impartiality with regard to persons, they are called to passionate intervention on behalf of the oppressed: “Learn to do good; seek justice; set matters right for the oppressed; judge for the orphan, contend for the widow” (Isa 1:17; cf. Deut 10:18; Ps 68:5). The judge is to take the part of those who have been defrauded of their rights, to enter into contention on their behalf. Jesus’ parable of the importunate widow expresses the biblical expectation, including its effective dimension. She appeals to the judge, “Give me vengeance against my opponent!” (Luke 18:3). Jesus promises in the parable that God is ready to take the part of all his oppressed children who cry out to him at the coming of the Son of Man. Indeed, in the past God already entered into contention with his people Israel who themselves oppressed the weak in their midst. The same has taken place in Jesus Christ, who became the object of our murderous lies and violence (Rom 3:10-18; cf. John 7:7; 15:24-25). Here our unbelief, disobedience, and idolatry, already announced by Scripture, are laid bare: the fallen human being and God are in a deadly contention. The question of God’s faithfulness is *not* that of a Leibnizian theodicy, that is, one in

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<sup>39</sup> Absalom stirred up his insurrection by promising to *effect* the justice that had been neglected by his father (2 Sam 15:1-6). Solomon’s famous judgment likewise was predicated upon his executive authority (1 Kgs 3:16-22).

<sup>40</sup> Not to be overlooked here, either, is the legislative authority of the judges, and especially of the Davidic kings: they “legislated from the bench” creating fresh law by their decisions (see Keith W. Whitelam, *The Just King: Monarchical Judicial Authority in Ancient Israel* [JSOTSup 12; Sheffield, UK: JSOT Press, 1979]). Righteousness had to be established ever anew in the face of continuing injustices and disputes: the promise of God’s righteousness, fulfilled in Jesus Christ, may be understood as the final and definitive bringing of justice to the world.

<sup>41</sup> See G Thür and P. E. Pieler, “Gerichtbarkeit,” *RAC* 10.368-401.

which God is made to stand before the forum of human reason.<sup>42</sup> The question is rather that of whose word is true and shall triumph. Is it the word of a human being, who in the refusal to give thanks to the Creator creates idols and so claims to be wise? Or is it the word of God, which tells us the truth about our idolatry? In this conflict of judgments, the apostle is certain that God, and not the human being, shall triumph: “Let God be true, and every human being a liar” (Rom 3:4; Ps 51:6).<sup>43</sup> By the wonder of God’s grace, this deadly confrontation brings us life in Jesus Christ.

The justification of God—the revelation of God’s righteousness—turns out to be our justification *by the communication of God’s righteousness to us in Jesus Christ*. It is this “wonderful exchange” between God and the human being in Christ in 2 Cor 5:21 that Wright overlooks. In his incarnation and cross, Christ became what we *are* and, thus, came to embody sin (so deep is the reach of sin) in order that in his resurrection we might become the righteousness of God (so radical is salvation). Paul does not speak here of mere conformity to a moral ideal, but of our participation in the life of the resurrection, the new creation that has begun already here and now (2 Cor 5:17). God’s righteousness itself appears here in the human creature, namely, in the resurrected Christ (2 Cor 5:21). In Christ, God *comes* to be righteous, not, of course, in himself, but in us and in the world. We, thus, “become the righteousness of God”—not in ourselves, but *in Christ*, in whom we share (2 Cor 5:14-19). Christ is the one meeting place, the mercy-seat, where the righteous God and the fallen human being meet. The forensic dimension of the event and all that one might say about “imputation” become apparent here. As the wonder of God’s grace, this communication of God’s righteousness to the human being does not fit into the scene of any human “lawcourt,” and certainly not the one that Wright imagines.

The same divine triumph appears in the suffering and deliverance of the Isaianic Servant, a pattern to which Paul makes appeal in the context

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<sup>42</sup> A recent monograph fatally misconstrues theodicy in this way: J. R. Daniel Kirk, *Unlocking Romans Resurrection and the Justification of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).

<sup>43</sup> Wright recognizes the lawsuit between God and Israel (pp. 63-67) and yet not that with the nations—since in his view “God’s righteousness” must be limited to a covenantal relation—and the covenant exists only with Israel. Perhaps for this reason, the conflict between God and the world—God’s wrath in its understandable form—plays no role in Wright’s conception of justification.

of 2 Cor 5:21.<sup>44</sup> As is the case with Paul, the Lord appears in these contexts not as an impartial arbitrator, but as party to a conflict with the nations, with their idols, and with disobedient, unbelieving Israel.<sup>45</sup> Despite his contention with his people, the Lord's final message is one of comfort: he contends for his people against their oppressors and in so doing, contends against the idols.<sup>46</sup> The salvation which the Lord brings his people is judgment. The Lord's judgment is the salvation of his people: "Those who contend with you shall be as nothing and perish—you shall seek them and you will not find them . . . for I am the Lord your God who takes hold of your right hand" (Isa 41:12-13). The Isaianic language echoes the appeals of the psalmists for the Lord to contend for them,<sup>47</sup> and corresponds to the call upon those who rule and judge in Israel "to do justice" for the oppressed.<sup>48</sup> Here again, to triumph in judgment is not merely to secure a verdict but to see that verdict effected. Correspondingly, with Paul, "justification" is a forensic *act* that effects the new creation. The idea of "justification" as a *mere* pronouncement of status that Wright offers does not match biblical thought (pp. 68-70).<sup>49</sup>

As the larger context of 2 Cor 5:21 makes clear, the communication of God's righteousness is also the communication of God's glory to the fallen human being in Jesus (cf. 2 Cor 3:4-18). Here we touch on a debate between Wright and Piper, and, more significantly, on Wright's pivotal claim that God intended Israel to be a "light to the nations" (Isa 42:6; 49:6). The question here is that of whether and how the human being participates in the divine glory. Wright rejects Piper's definition of God's righteousness as "God's concern for God's own glory," which, as Wright correctly observes, suggests a God concerned for nothing but himself.<sup>50</sup> The righteousness of God instead expresses "God's concern

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<sup>44</sup> See 2 Cor 5:17; 6:1-2; cf. Isa 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12.

<sup>45</sup> Isa 43:22-28; 48:1-12; 50:1-11.

<sup>46</sup> Isa 40:1-2; 41:8-13, 21-24, 25-29; 43:8-13; 44:6-8; 45:8-25; 54:1-17.

<sup>47</sup> E.g. Ps 7:6-11; 35:1-28; 43:1-5; 54:1-7.

<sup>48</sup> E.g. Judg 4:4-5; 2 Sam 8:15; Ps 72:1-4; Jer 22:3, 15-16.

<sup>49</sup> For further discussion see Mark A. Seifrid, "Paul's Use of Righteousness Language Against Its Hellenistic Background," *Justification and Variegated Nomism: Volume 2, The Paradoxes of Paul* (WUNT 2/181; eds. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien and Mark A. Seifrid; Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck/Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 39-74.

<sup>50</sup> Of course, Piper does not intend to present this image of God, but leaves himself open to this charge by taking his orientation from the contemplation of the divine being in itself, i.e. from God's hidden majesty (which cannot properly be the object of our contemplation). See J. Piper, *The Future of Justification: A Response to N. T. Wright* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), 57-71. On Luther's related rejection of Aristotle's Supreme Being, see Oswald Bayer,

. . . for the flourishing and well-being of *everything else*" (p. 70; Wright's italics).<sup>51</sup> God's righteousness is manifest in God's granting blessing and salvation. In this respect, Wright stands closer to the Scriptures than does Piper. Not only the biblical references to God's righteousness, but also references to God's glory speak of it as the revelation of God's saving mercy—a mercy that (like God's righteousness) arrives through judgment. Just as God's glory once came near to Israel at the "mercy seat," so now God's glory comes near to dwell with fallen human beings in the crucified and risen Christ.<sup>52</sup> Those who believe in Christ boast in the hope of the glory of God, once rejected but now restored in him (Rom 1:23; 3:23; 5:1). God wills to make known "the riches of his glory" on vessels of mercy whom God prepared for this very purpose (Rom 9:23). The revelation of the glory of the Lord brings salvation (Isa 40:1-11), and rises and shines upon his people, drawing the nations to him (Isa 60:1-3; cf. Ps 96:2-3). The listing of passages could go on and would include the Isaianic references to the Servant of the Lord being made a "light to the nations" (Isa 42:6; 49:6; cf. Isa 42:12; 49:3). It is not through the Servant's obedience or fidelity that the Servant comes to be a "light." The Servant—both as Israel and as Israel's deliverer—manifests the glory of the Lord *as the object of the Lord's deliverance*. Unlike the lifeless idols, the Creator promises salvation and brings it to pass in and for his Servant, thus, making the Servant "a light to the nations." The Servant's active role of bringing justice to the nations (Isa 42:1-4; 49:7-13) is subordinate to the Servant's passive role as the *recipient* of justice. The Lord takes him by the hand, preserves him in trouble, and through him brings forth "new things" (Isa 42:5-9; 49:8). It is through *his own experience of being delivered* that the servant delivers others from violence, sufferings, and death. He first listens, then speaks and

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*Freiheit als Antwort: Zur theologischen Ethik* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 1995), 36, n. 36: "While Aristotle, in order to preserve that Supreme Being of his from unhappiness, never lets him look at anything but himself, because he thinks it would be most unpleasant for him to see so much suffering and so many injustices. The prophets, however, who did believe in God, had more temptation to regard him as unjust—Jeremiah, for instance, and Job, David, Asaph, and others." (Luther, *WA* 18:784, 36–785, 10; see also *WA* TR 1:73, 31–32).

<sup>51</sup> Wright's confession of God's self-giving goodness runs into conflict with his earlier insistence that the world and those in it revolve around God (see Wright, *Justification*, 23).

<sup>52</sup> As rightly noted by Cristof Gestrinch, *The Return of Splendor in the World: The Christian Doctrine of Sin and Forgiveness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 296, n. 61.

embodies the Lord's work that he announces.<sup>53</sup> In *answering* and helping his servant—who not only is identified with Israel, but also distinct from it—the Lord comforts his people and delivers them from oppression—and also from their own unbelief and idolatry.<sup>54</sup> Formed by the Creator in his experience of suffering and deliverance, the servant, thus, displays the Creator's glory. In the book of Isaiah, as in the Psalms, “light” signifies the saving work of the Creator alone, the One who alone “forms light and creates darkness, who makes peace and creates evil” (Isa 45:7).<sup>55</sup> Israel—in so far as the image of the servant includes the nation<sup>56</sup>—does *not* (as Wright claims) fail in its calling to be a “light to the nations.” Indeed, its calling never rested in its own obedience or actions, but in the redeeming work of the Lord who is Creator. It is not any moral quality within Israel that causes it to shine, but purely and entirely the glory of the Lord, which rises upon the rebellious nation precisely in the midst of the misery and retribution that have come upon it (Isa 60:1-3). The Isaianic language thus stands in stark contrast to Wright's moralistic interpretation of “light” as imitative participation in God's faithfulness and goodness.

Over against Wright, then, one must say that it is *by means of the spoken Gospel* that we *see* the transforming vision of the glory of the Lord—the glory of Christ, God's image—and we see that this glory is communicated to us. God the Creator *speaks* and *creates* light in the darkness. The one who raised Jesus shall also raise us with Jesus and present us before him together with the apostle who bears this *spoken* message—in his very life (2 Cor 3:18; 4:6; 2 Cor 4:4-6, 13-15).<sup>57</sup> In this

<sup>53</sup> Isa 42:5-9; 49:1-6, 7-13; 50:4-9; 52:13-12.

<sup>54</sup> E.g. Isa 42:18-43:7; 43:22-43:8; 46:3-13; 48:1-11 50:4-9; 52:3-6.

<sup>55</sup> See Isa 50:10; 51:4; 52:10 (cf. Isa 40:5); 53:11 (1QIsa<sup>a</sup>, 1QIsa<sup>b</sup>, and LXX); 56:1; 58:8-9; 60:1-3, 19-20 (cf. Rev 22:5); 62:1. Deliverance, correspondingly, appears as the granting of sight to the blind (Isa 42:7, 18-25; 43:8-13; 44:9, 18; 59:9-10). “Light” thus stands alongside the related Isaianic images of salvation, including the making of a way (Isa 40:3-5; 42:16; 43:19; 51:9-11), the giving of drink (43:20; 44:3; 45:8; 48:21; 49:10), and, especially, the opening of the ears of the deaf (Isa 42:19; 43:8; 50:4-5).

<sup>56</sup> It is more likely that Israel is in view in Isa 42:6, than Isa 49:6, of course, where the servant's work is to restore the nation.

<sup>57</sup> Consequently, it is in the incarnate, crucified and risen Christ and in the Gospel that we behold the glory of the Lord (2 Cor 4:3-6), not in one another, and certainly not in our moral transformation. (Cf. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant*, 188–9). The apostle is indeed the bearer of the Gospel—and of the dying of Jesus. Yet it is not in his person, a mere earthen vessel that he is, but in his *speaking* in the midst of distress that light shines forth *sub contrario* (2 Cor 4:7-15). In the communication of God's glory creature and Creator necessarily

way, the Creator gives his glory without reserve to the human creature while it remains the glory of the Creator alone.<sup>58</sup> Together with the Servant, those who believe are made to be “a light to the nations,” *not* as those who emulate a moral ideal of faithfulness or divine goodness, but as those delivered by the Lord. This deliverance makes them new creatures and children of God, who are in fact called to imitate the God, *who is already their Father*. This new obedience does not displace the work of the Creator that makes us God’s children anew, but arises from it. It is not without significance that in the context of 2 Cor 5:21 Paul continues his exhortation of the Corinthians with an appeal to Isa 49:8, that is, with words directed to the servant of the Lord: “At an acceptable time I heard you [sg.], and in the day of salvation I helped you [sg.]” (2 Cor 6:2). It is quite clear that Paul here speaks of the crucified and risen Christ as the Isaianic servant, through whom God brings about a new creation (cf. 2 Cor 5:17). Christ’s experience of suffering and comfort is now that of the apostle who communicates this comfort—given to him with the sufferings of Christ—to the Corinthians (2 Cor 1:3-7; 4:7-15). It is, then, not only the apostle, but also the Corinthians, who in Christ are “made to be the righteousness of God.” The transgressions of the world and its enmity toward God are overcome in his Servant, as the Lord promises Israel in the book of Isaiah. The communication of God’s righteousness, thus, corresponds to the communication of God’s glory and takes the same form: righteousness remains God’s alone, and yet is given to us in Jesus Christ.

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remain distinct.

<sup>58</sup> Indeed, the Creator’s glory is manifest and known only as it is given “to the creature, through the creature”: so Johann Georg Hamann (*Aesthetica in nuce* [in *Samtliche Werke*; 6 vols.; ed. Josef Nadler; Vienna, Austria: Herder, 1949–57], 2:198.28–30). On this topic, see Oswald Bayer, *Schöpfung als Anrede: Zu einer Hermeneutik der Schöpfung* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 1990) 9–32; Gestrich, *The Return of Splendor in the World*, 1–28.