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N. T. WRIGHT AND THE SIGN OF THE COVENANT

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INTRODUCTION

Within the field of New Testament (NT) studies, scholars identified with the so-called 'new perspective on Paul' (NPP) have challenged the traditional understanding of many aspects of Paul's theology. Advocates of the NPP have argued that, with a proper understanding of the historical context in which one finds the teachings of Christ or Paul, a radically different picture emerges from the pages of the NT. Based upon the spadework of E. P. Sanders, scholars associated with the NPP have argued that legalism, or works-righteousness, was not common to first-century Judaism.¹ Now, one should keep in mind that the NPP is a variegated theological movement and those writing from this perspective have not produced a homogeneous body of literature. Nevertheless, with the first-century historical data, N. T. Wright, an important contributor to the discussion, argues that Paul's struggles at Galatia were not against legalistic Jews but about the question of 'whether Jewish Christians were allowed to eat with Gentile Christians'.² Wright's contention is that the Jewish Christians were trying to protect the integrity of the covenant boundary markers, circumcision, kosher food laws, and Sabbath observance, which had been so intertwined with the covenant and their own national identity. Central to Wright's claim is the contention that circumcision was the sign of the covenant and that it was being replaced by a new sign of the covenant, faith in Christ. This essay will investigate Wright's argument and demonstrate that his claim is incorrect. The essay will proceed by: (1) setting forth Wright's argumentation to support the claim that faith in Christ replaces circumcision as the sign of the covenant; (2) a critical engagement of Wright's key arguments; and (3) a positive argument that baptism is the new sign of the covenant, not faith in Christ. Let us therefore proceed to the first part of our investigation.

¹ See E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1977).

² N. T. Wright, *What St Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 158.

WRIGHT ON THE SIGN OF THE COVENANT

According to Wright, central to the identity of first-century Judaism was their possession of the covenant, God's promised blessing upon Abraham and his descendants. God's covenant with Israel, however, did not arrive absent of those covenant identification badges that distinguished members of the covenant from outsiders, namely the Gentile pagans. Wright argues that,

at a time when Judaism's distinctive identity was under constant threat, Torah provided three badges in particular which marked the Jew out from the pagan: circumcision, sabbath, and the kosher food laws, which regulated what food could be eaten, how it was to be killed and cooked, and with whom one might share it. In and through all this ran the theme of Jewish 'separateness'.³

It was these three covenant badges that the Jews saw as those signs that distinguished them as belonging to the covenant. Wright sees an interconnected relationship between the possession of the Torah and the three covenant badges as boundary markers, or more specifically signs of the covenant. It is the possession of the Torah that separates the Jews from the Gentiles, but the Torah is most noticeably and visibly manifest in the three covenant badges.⁴ Now, for the average first-century Jew who lived in the shadow of the Herodian temple, it was unthinkable that God's people would ever be left without these distinctive signs of God's covenant. It is this mindset, argues Wright, that was the source of great conflict in the early church.

The Jews did indeed receive the Torah and the three badges as signs of the covenant, but what they did not realise is that with the advent of Christ, things were going to change. Wright argues that the Torah and its three badges were never intended to be ends in themselves but served as temporary markers until the advent of Christ:

The Messiah is the fulfillment of the long purposes of Israel's God. It was for this that Torah was given in the first place as a deliberately temporary mode of administration. In the Messiah are fulfilled the creator's

³ N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, (Christian Origins and the Question of God, Vol. 1; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), p. 237.

⁴ N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), p. 214; idem, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, (Christian Origins and the Question of God, Vol. 2; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), pp. 384-8.

paradoxical purposes for Israel and hence for the world. He is the climax of the covenant.⁵

With the advent of Jesus, the people of God, therefore, would no longer be defined by the Torah and its attendant badges but by faith in Christ. Wright contends that,

what matters is that *faith is a crucial part of the definition of Israel at her time of great crisis*. Jesus' call for 'faith' was not merely the offering of a new religious option or dimension. It was a crucial element in the eschatological reconstitution of Israel around himself.⁶

No longer were the people of God to be defined by possession of the Torah, circumcision, kosher food laws, or Sabbath observance. They were now to be defined by their faith in Jesus. Wright argues that 'a flag was quietly being run down, a story given a new ending'.⁷ Let us turn to a critical engagement of Wright's claims.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF WRIGHT'S CLAIMS

Wright's argument turns on the key question, Does faith replace the covenant boundary markers as *the covenant sign*? This requires us to examine the place of the covenant boundary markers but especially circumcision, the place of faith in both the Old Testament (OT) and NT, and the role of baptism in the NT.

The sign of circumcision

When one examines Wright's covenant boundary markers, it is undisputed that the OT and second temple Jews saw the Torah as a boundary marker that separated Jew from Gentile (Mic. 4:2; 1 Macc. 1:41-49; 2:23-26, 49-50, 64, 67-68; 2 Macc. 6:1-19).⁸ Certainly Wright is correct to state that the covenant boundary markers of circumcision, Sabbath, and the kosher food laws separated Jew from Gentile, as is evident in the conflict at Galatia. Moreover, Wright is also correct to state that the Torah was a temporary mode of administration that looked to the fulfilment of the covenant with the advent of Christ.⁹ There is, however, question regarding

⁵ Wright, *Covenant*, p. 241.

⁶ Wright, *Victory of God*, p. 261.

⁷ Wright, *People of God*, p. 241.

⁸ Wright, *Victory of God*, pp. 385-7.

⁹ Wright, *Covenant*, p. 241.

the role that Wright assigns to circumcision, specifically in how it is supposed to be replaced by faith in Christ. The crux of Wright's argument comes in his analysis of Romans 4:11a: 'He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.'¹⁰ Wright correctly contends that circumcision 'was a "sign or seal" of the "righteousness" that was Abraham's on the basis of the faith he had while still uncircumcised'. He then goes on to state that,

By designating circumcision as a sign or seal of Abraham's status of faith-demarkated righteousness, Paul reclaims it rather than renouncing it: Faith is the indication of covenant membership and circumcision was supposed to be a pointer to that status and, apparently, to that mode of indication.¹¹

This, however, is not an accurate interpretation of Romans 4:11a.

Circumcision is indeed a sign or seal 'of the righteousness that he had by faith'. It is not, as Wright attempts to make it, a 'faith-demarkated righteousness'. Rather, it is a circumcision-demarkated righteousness and faith. Abraham's faith is not the sign or seal but the means by which he obtains the righteousness and the reason for receiving the sign of the covenant. This is indicated by the use of the genitive of source, *tes pisteos*.¹² This conclusion is also supported by Genesis 15:6: 'And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.' Here Abraham receives righteousness on account of his faith. His faith here is not the sign and seal of his righteousness or an indication of his covenant membership but the instrumental means by which he receives the righteousness.¹³ This is the whole point of Paul's argument in Romans 4, namely that Abraham did not obtain his righteousness through his circumcision but by faith. As Cranfield notes, 'The words imply that Abraham's circumcision, while it did not confer a status of righteousness on him, was nevertheless valuable as the outward and visible attestation of

¹⁰ All Scripture quotations are taken from ESV unless otherwise noted.

¹¹ N. T. Wright, *Romans*, (NIB; Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), p. 494.

¹² Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 269, n. 17; also James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, (WBC, vol. 38a; Dallas: Word, 1988), p. 209.

¹³ O. Palmer Robertson, 'Genesis 15.6: New Covenant Expositions of an Old Covenant Text', *Westminster Theological Journal* 42/2 (1980), pp. 264-5, 267; Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, (WBC; Dallas: Word, 1987), p. 330.

the status of righteousness which he already possessed.’¹⁴ Nowhere do the Scriptures refer to faith functioning as a sign or seal of covenant membership or righteousness. Rather, historically signs and seals are visible symbols of invisible realities, such as God’s grace or faith. This is why the Westminster divines state that: ‘Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace, immediately instituted by God, to represent Christ, and His benefits; and to confirm our interest in Him: as also, to put a visible difference between those that belong unto the Church, and the rest of the world; and solemnly to engage them to the service of God in Christ, according to His Word’ (WCF 27:1).¹⁵

Wright would undoubtedly grant this point, namely, nowhere is faith explicitly mentioned as a sign or seal, but he might argue that it is implicitly identified as such when the Scriptures speak of circumcision of the heart: ‘And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live’ (Deut. 30:6). In this context the circumcision of the heart is implicitly identified with faith, whereas in other places it is identified with obedience (cf. Deut. 10:16).¹⁶ It would be a mistake, however, to identify the circumcised heart as a sign and seal of covenant membership. Rather, the circumcised heart is the invisible reality to which circumcision visibly points. This interpretation is evident from the examination of a key text that explains the function of both circumcision and its replacement, baptism.

Circumcision and Baptism

The key text for examining the function of circumcision and its replacement, baptism, is Colossians 2:11-12:

In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.

¹⁴ C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans*, (ICC, vol. 1; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), p. 236.

¹⁵ Also see, e.g., Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology: New Combined Edition* (1932-38; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 617-18.

¹⁶ Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), p. 364.

Now, to be sure, Paul metaphorically uses circumcision in this context, indicative by the fact that it is 'a circumcision made without hands'. Nevertheless he uses the imagery of the rite of circumcision, namely cutting away the foreskin. In his metaphorical use of circumcision, we see the function of circumcision as a sign, the removal of the foreskin represents cutting away 'the body of the flesh', or the body of sin (so NIV).¹⁷ This is parallel with v. 12 and being 'buried with him in baptism'. Baptism, according to Paul, is putting to death the old man (Rom. 6:1-6), or the burial of the body of the flesh, the body of sin. There is then a parallel between the function of circumcision and baptism: they both symbolize the cutting away or burial of the body of sin (cf. Col. 3:5-9).¹⁸ Circumcision and baptism both point to the work of Christ; circumcision looks forward and baptism looks back to the work of Christ.

Now, it is important to notice that the circumcision of the heart, what is visibly signified in circumcision, and the burial of the body of sin, what is visibly signified in baptism, occur *dia tes pisteos* ('through faith'). When the preposition *dia* is combined with the genitive it conveys the idea of 'by means of' or 'through'.¹⁹ In other words, faith is the instrumental means, not the visible sign or seal, by which the believer

¹⁷ O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg: P & R, 1980), p. 164; also John Calvin, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians & Colossians*, (CNTC, Vol. 11, eds. David F. Torrance and T. F. Torrance, trans. T. H. L. Parker; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 332. This is a highly contested verse and there are various interpretations. Wright contends that cutting away the body of flesh represents a disassociation with one's previous life, the old body, and joining a new body, the church (N. T. Wright, *Colossians & Philemon*, [TNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986], p. 106). O'Brien and Dunn argue that it refers to the crucifixion of Christ (Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, [WBC; Dallas: Word, 1982], 117; James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, [NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996], p. 158). Given the parallel between baptism and circumcision and Paul's use of similar imagery (Col. 3:5-9; Rom. 6:4), Wright's interpretation appears to be the most out-of-place. Dunn and O'Brien's interpretations are not in conflict with what I have suggested. The believer is crucified with Christ through his union with him (Rom. 6:5).

¹⁸ Robertson, *Covenants*, p. 166; also Meredith G. Kline, *By Oath Consigned: A Reinterpretation of the Covenant Signs of Circumcision and Baptism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), p. 47; similarly Dunn, *Colossians*, p. 212; O'Brien, *Colossians*, p. 176.

¹⁹ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), pp. 368-9, 432.

enters the covenant and receives the righteousness of Christ. That Paul places circumcision and baptism in parallel, means they perform the same type of signatory function. This is something that even Wright acknowledges:

For Paul, baptism in some ways at least plays the same role within the establishment of the Christian covenant people that circumcision played within the Jewish family, i.e., that of marking out the covenant people with the sign that spoke of their unique identity.²⁰

Just as OT Israelites and proselytes received the sign of the covenant, so NT converts and those born within the church receive the new sign of the covenant. Contra Wright, therefore, circumcision has not given way to faith but to baptism. To confirm further this conclusion, we must examine the function of faith as it specifically relates to the signs of the covenant, circumcision and baptism.

The function of faith

Wright explains that faith functions as the new covenant boundary marker. To support this claim he argues that whenever Israel has been in a period of distress, in exile for example, the prophets have stressed the need for the people to be marked by faith: 'If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all' (Isa. 7:9b), and, 'Whoever believes will not be in haste' (Isa. 28:16b). Wright contends that,

the well-known passage in Habakkuk contributes the same idea. When all other boundary-markers disappear in the great moment of judgment, the people of YHWH will be marked out by their faith: 'Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them; but the righteous live by their faith' (Hab 2:4). 'Faith', as far as these texts is concerned, is not simply to be understood as a single, miscellaneous religious quality, 'virtue', or attribute. It is the distinguishing mark of the true people of YHWH at the time of crisis.²¹

In one sense, Wright's statement is certainly true, the people of God should always be marked by faith in both times of peace and distress. However, the Scriptures do not assign faith the function of a sign or seal, or boundary marker, such as circumcision or baptism. Or, to use the nomenclature of systematic theology, the Scriptures do not assign faith a

²⁰ Wright, *Romans*, p. 495.

²¹ Wright, *Victory of God*, pp. 259-60.

sacramental function as it does circumcision and baptism. It is this sacramental function that one must contrast with Wright's view.

When we examine the relationship between faith and the signs of the covenant we see that there is an important connection between the two. We see that Paul explains that circumcision is not only a covenant boundary marker, a sign that members of the covenant receive, but that it can also be a sign of being cut off from the covenant community. The cutting off of the foreskin either symbolized the cutting away of the body of sin or being cut off from the covenant community.²² This is evident, for example, when Paul explains what happens to the person who does not fulfill the obligations of the law: 'For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision' (Rom. 2:25). For the one who breaks the law, his circumcision is no longer a sign of covenant membership but of covenant curse – he is cut off from the covenant.²³ It was the uncircumcised man who was cut off from the community and the covenant: 'Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant' (Gen. 17:14). Of course, every single circumcised Israelite broke the law; this did not mean that they were all cut off from the covenant. The difference between the one who was blessed and cursed was the presence of faith: 'For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God' (Rom. 2:28-29). The presence of faith, ultimately in Christ, determined whether circumcision was a sign of covenant blessing or of curse.²⁴ The same relationship between faith and baptism holds true.

We see in the NT explanations of the significance of baptism, especially as it relates to its OT types, the symbolization of the dual aspects of covenant blessing and curse. Paul, for example, calls the Red Sea crossing a baptism: 'All were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea' (1 Cor. 10:2). Peter explains that the waters of the deluge were a type and that baptism is the antitype:

²² Kline, *By Oath Consigned*, p. 43.

²³ Moo, *Romans*, p. 169; similarly Wright, *Romans*, p. 448; cf. Cranfield, *Romans*, p. 172; Dunn, *Romans*, p. 121.

²⁴ Cranfield, *Romans*, p. 176; Calvin, *Romans*, pp. 56-7; Wright, *Romans*, p. 449; Moo, *Romans*, p. 174; cf. Dunn, *Romans*, p. 127.

when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you [*ho kai humas antitupon nun sozei baptisma*], not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 3:20-21).

Now in these two typological examples of baptism, what made the difference between those who passed through the Red Sea and those who entered the safety of the ark unharmed and those who drowned in the flood and in the Red Sea was faith in Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 10:4; Heb. 11:7).²⁵ If one may paraphrase Paul, a person's baptism can become 'unbaptism' if it is not joined by the presence of faith in Christ.²⁶ Baptism either symbolizes the forgiveness of sins, participation in the new covenant, and being part of the new creation, or drowning in the waters of God's judgement and wrath. The difference between covenant blessing and curse lies in the presence or absence of faith.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

We have examined Wright's claim that faith is the boundary-marking sign of the new covenant and have rejected it for several reasons. First, it gives the impression that faith was somehow secondary and that circumcision was primary. While this may have been true of second temple Judaism, it is not true of the Scriptures. The evidence shows that faith has always been primary in both the OT and NT as the eleventh chapter of Hebrews makes so clear. Second, it is correct that circumcision gave way to a new sign of the covenant but it was not faith. Rather, the new sign of the covenant is baptism. Baptism serves the same function as circumcision, symbolizing the cutting away or burial of the body of sin for the one who unites the sign with faith, or symbolizing being cursed in the waters of God's wrath or being cut off from the covenant community. Third, Wright fails to recognise the role and function of the sacraments in both the OT and NT.

²⁵ Kline, *By Oath Consigned*, pp. 65-70; see also Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 724-5; J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter*, (WBC; Dallas: Word, 1988), pp. 213-18; Leonhard Goppelt, *A Commentary on 1 Peter*, (ed. Ferdinand Hahn, trans. John E. Alsup; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993 [1978]), pp. 265-8.

²⁶ Similarly John Calvin, *Romans and Thessalonians*, (CNTC, vol. 8, eds. David F. Torrance and T. F. Torrance, trans. Ross Mackenzie; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995 [1960]), p. 55.

THE SIGN OF THE COVENANT

The sacraments, circumcision and baptism, are visible signs that point to invisible realities, such as grace and faith. While one should never deny the important truth that the people of God must always be marked out by faith in Christ, and that this faith in Christ will separate the covenant community from the unbelieving world, at the same time one must recognise the difference between faith as the instrumental means of participating in the covenant and the visible signs of the covenant, circumcision and baptism. The people of God have always been marked by their faith in Christ, but now the sign and seal of their faith has changed from circumcision to baptism.