

Tom Wright, *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision*

A review article

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Tom Wright is perhaps the most influential evangelical New Testament scholar of our generation but also one of the most senior bishops of the Church of England. It is astonishing that he manages to contribute so significantly in both the ecclesiastical and academic spheres. His books on the New Testament are large and small, with his popular commentaries *Matthew for Everyone* etc. being a wonderful resource, and his big books representing some of the most constructive and creative thinking about Jesus and the New Testament writing that we have seen for many years.

Not that everyone has liked all his ideas. Liberals have seen him as too conservative, but conservative evangelicals and others from a Reformed tradition have been anxious about his 'new and fresh perspectives' especially on Paul and justification. His work has generated all sorts of critical responses, including recently one from the notable American preacher and teacher John Piper *The Future of Justification A Response to NT Wright* (IVP, 2008).

This book is Tom Wright's response to the responders, especially to John Piper.

It is in two parts, with four 'introductory' chapters and then three chapters of exegesis, one on Galatians, one on Philippians + the Corinthian correspondence + Ephesians, and then a long one on Romans.

The book is largely a reiteration of positions that he has explained in earlier writings – deliberately so, as Wright sees this book as one more attempt to explain his ideas in face of frustrating misunderstandings by others. His major thesis is that Paul must be understood in the context of first century Judaism, and that he saw Jesus as God's Messiah whose death and resurrection fulfilled God's ancient plan for saving the world and renewing creation through Abraham and his offspring. The gospel is about God's faithfulness to his covenant. Jesus through his faithfulness ('the faith of Jesus Christ') fulfilled the role that Israel failed to fulfil, dying for us on the cross as our representative and substitute. We receive justification – i.e. the status of being members of the covenant – as we are united with him through faith.

Wright does not see himself as undermining traditional evangelical or protestant convictions about justification through the grace of God and the death of

Jesus. Indeed, he speaks quite frequently about holding together old and new perspectives (e.g. of the law before the coming of Jesus as dividing Jew from Gentile, but also as condemning us because of our failure to keep it). Where he does differ from some evangelicals is in arguing that, while there is no question about the salvific substitutionary death of Jesus on our part, the idea of Jesus' righteousness being imputed to us is not there in Paul's teaching (which is not to say that it is all that far from his meaning). Wright also insists that in Paul salvation is through the death of Jesus, but the criterion in final judgment is our works – works which are the result of the Spirit's work in the believer. He is aware that at these points he is at odds with some evangelical tradition, but the book is a passionate plea that we do not allow our traditions, however honourable, to colour or even actually distort our reading of the biblical texts themselves.

To describe the book in more detail: in the first main chapter Wright explains what his intentions are: he starts by comparing his task with that of someone arguing for a heliocentric universe against people who, whatever is said, resolutely maintain that the sun goes round the earth. The comparison, to which he often returns in the book, vividly and polemically expresses his frustration at what he sees as other people's misrepresentation of his arguments and at their failure to listen carefully to his arguments. The comparison is also pertinent because Wright thinks that some of the defenders of the 'old perspective' on Paul are in danger of putting us and our salvation at the centre of Paul's thought, whereas Paul has God and his purposes for creation at the centre.

Wright points out that there is no one 'new perspective' on Paul. His perspective is an attempt to make sense of the jigsaw of evidence that Paul's letters present, and he argues that his critics often fail to take account of various important pieces in the jigsaw. He insists at various points in the book that he is not denying or downplaying key doctrines (e.g. as defended by Luther and Calvin), though he does think that some interpretations of Paul are legitimate applications but not Paul's primary meaning (he compares this to the harmonics in a musical note).

In his second chapter, Wright warns of reading our traditions into Paul, including our Protestant and evangelical traditions, wondering if some of us have given priority to Romans and Galatians for that reason and whether we would have come up with a rather different and more accurate view of Paul had we started with Ephesians and Colossians. We need to give the text priority, and also to read it with our ears attuned to Paul's first century context. He gives a strong health warning against the NIV, making the excessively strong statement that a church which relies too heavily on the NIV will 'quite simply, never understand what Paul was talking about', because it so often misreads Paul in line with some traditional evangelical and Protestant tradition (35).

Wright goes on in chapters 3 and 4 to look at Jewish ideas of covenant and law and then at justification. He argues, here as throughout the book, for the overriding importance of covenantal ideas within Jewish and Pauline thinking; justification is covenantal (to be recognized as part of the covenant people) and forensic (to be declared to be in the right by the judge – a matter or status) and escha-

tological (with God's future verdict being given to us when we come to Christ) – all of these things belonging together and being interrelated and intertwined. Wright finds plenty of evidence of us being justified through and because of the death of Christ, but no clear evidence of Christ's righteousness being imputed to us. Paul's understanding is that Christ died as our representative and we are justified by union with him and his death. He argues that evangelical scholars have sometimes given too much weight to the doctrine of justification, as though this were the whole of Paul's doctrine of salvation. Wright uses one of his interesting illustrations, arguing that justification may be seen as the steering wheel of the car, but the other parts of the car are vital for its operation.

He then turns to his exegetical chapters. He looks first at Galatians, arguing his covenantal reading especially from chapters 2–4; he argues for translating *pistis Iesou* as 'the faithfulness of Jesus', referring to Jesus' faithful giving of his life on the cross. He argues that the failure of the law for Paul is both because it divides Jews and Gentiles, but also because of our breaking of the law.

He goes on to what he entitles an 'Interlude', looking selectively at passages from Philippians, Corinthians, and Ephesians. He examines Philippians chapter 3, then various passages from 1 & 2 Corinthians, arguing strikingly that 2 Cor. 5:21 'that we might be the righteousness of God' means 'so that we apostles embody in our own lives the fact that, in Christ, the God of the covenant has been faithful to his single-plan-through-Israel-for-the-world' (141-42). So far as Ephesians is concerned, he argues that new and old perspectives are found here, focussing his attention on Eph. 2:11-22.

Wright's final main chapter is, appropriately, on Romans. He gives particular attention to Rom. 2 arguing forcefully that verses 26-29 refer to Christian Gentiles, drawing attention to the weight of evidence that shows that Paul believes in judgment according to works (see also Rom. 14:1-12, 2 Cor. 5:10). When it comes to Rom. 3 & 4 he sees his view as embracing old and new perspectives: God's-plan-through-Israel-for-the-world is worked out through 'the faithfulness of Jesus Christ' in his propitiatory death on the cross. Through this we are declared righteous. We are not given the righteousness of the divine judge or of Jesus as the Messiah, but...

What the judge has done is to pass judicial sentence on sin, in the faithful death of the Messiah, so that those who belong to the Messiah, though in themselves 'ungodly' and without virtue and merit, now hear themselves hearing the lawcourt verdict, 'in the right'. And the point, putting covenant and lawcourt together, is that *this is what the single-plan-through-Israel-for-the-world was designed to do!* The covenant purpose is accomplished, being turned into the single-plan-through-Israel's-faithful-representative for the world. And 'the world', therefore must now include the rest of Israel as well as the Gentiles (180-81).

He proceeds through Romans, insisting that the discussion of Abraham in chapter 4 is not just an illustration of someone being justified through faith, but is a key part of Paul's argument about God working out his plan through Israel,

Abraham's family; Abraham's faith in chapter 4, his trust in God's grace, is 'the badge' of his covenant status and of the true people of God. He traces Paul's covenant-focussed argument on through the later chapters of Romans, emphasizing especially chapters 9–11, which often feature rather peripherally in older perspectives on Romans but which is seen to be integral to Paul's whole argument when the covenantal framework of his thinking is recognized (with Deut. 30 being key background).

Evaluating the work of one theological master (i.e. Wright) explaining another theological master (i.e. Paul) is not easy, especially for a reviewer who has not read all the debates and discussions to which Wright is responding. Wright's book is not very long, and he writes well; but his argument is often detailed, even dense, reflecting his lifetime's study of Paul. I am slightly apprehensive that the book may, therefore, not achieve what Wright hopes for – yes, it will clarify some things, but readers will not always follow the intricacies of his exegetical arguments and so be persuaded.

However, this reviewer is fully persuaded that:

1. Wright's big picture of Paul's theology is essentially correct. Paul sees Jesus as central to God's cosmic salvation plan for the world, undoing Adam's sin and fulfilling the story of Israel as her Messiah and Messiah to the world..
2. Wright is not a traitor to the theology of the Reformation and historic evangelicalism, but a doughty and significant exponent of biblical Christianity, for whom justification by faith, salvation through the grace of God, and atonement through the sacrificial death of Jesus are all of great importance. His new perspectives are not at the expense of the major insights of older perspectives, rather the opposite, since his big picture is a context in which the major older perspectives make even more sense, arguably, than they did before. Of course, Wright differs from other commentators on particular points, and he is surely not right on everything (he himself used to suggest that he could be wrong on 20% of issues, though he didn't know which the 20% were! [4]); but he is seeking to be faithful to the biblical text, and he is right to invite us to discuss and debate his work in that way.

While applauding these features of the book, I wonder whether, like many scholars who have good ideas, Wright has over-stated his case at points. It is so easy, especially when responding to the deficiencies of others' viewpoints, to state one's own case so strongly that it comes over as unbalanced, which then makes reaching consensus more difficult!

Wright is definitely correct to emphasize the Jewish covenantal context and thrust of Paul's theology, but is he right then to insist that 'righteousness' in Paul means covenant-faithfulness on God's side and covenant-membership on our side? Yes, the ideas of covenant and righteousness are related and intertwined, but when it says that 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness', is that actually saying that he was counted as one of God's covenant people, or that he was counted as someone in right relationship with God? The ideas overlap and belong together, but there is a difference of nuance, with

'righteous' in the Hebrew and the Greek, as in the English, suggesting things like uprightness, being in the right, being just, not *primarily* being one of God's people.

Similarly when Paul speaks of Christians being justified through Jesus, he is thinking within an OT covenantal context and of people being brought into God's covenant people. But the justification group of words do not in themselves express that idea: again they have to do with being in the right, being acquitted, being in right relationship, and even living ethically upright lives. Wright is so concerned that we do not lose sight of Paul's big picture and that we do not interpret Paul in terms of individualistic salvation and justification that he seems sometimes to be subtly reinterpreting words away from their original meaning.

Something similar may be said about his insistence that the righteousness of God is God's covenant faithfulness. Wright is probably right when he argues against Luther (and the NIV) that in 1:17 'the righteousness of God' that is revealed is not 'a righteousness from God', as though Paul was referring to the gift of righteousness that we receive when we believe. Paul has a bigger eschatological concept of God acting 'righteously' to put the world right and indeed to bring people back into right relationship and upright living (compare the vision of Isa. 61). This is tied up intimately with God's covenant purposes as worked out through Abraham and his descendants. But the word 'righteousness' does not in itself express that: it expresses the fact that this covenant-making God is a holy and good God who upholds what is right, punishes and deals with what is wrong, judges and establishes what is good (all of which things Wright asserts of God... at the same time as seeming to distance the 'righteous' words from those things, insisting on them meaning 'covenant faithfulness/membership'). The point is admittedly a fine one because Wright does see the covenant as God's way of acting righteously and enacting righteousness.

Wright accuses other evangelicals of having too restricted an understanding of Paul, as though justification were the whole of Paul's theology, when it is only the steering wheel. I wonder if Wright himself has too much of a one-track mind, so that everything is covenant, whereas in fact covenant is a key ingredient, maybe even the engine, but to Paul's Greek-speaking readers the righteous/righteousness/justify words would have conveyed something closer to the old perspectives than Wright seems to want to allow. They conveyed ideas of being put right with God, of acquittal, and even of ethical righteousness. Wright emphasizes forensic acquittal and also speaks of the Holy Spirit and ethics, and yet he seems reluctant to allow that the righteousness words convey these ideas (e.g. in Romans 6 and 8 with regard to ethical righteousness [e.g. 207]). I am not saying that Paul's Christian readers would have been ignorant of the covenantal nature of salvation, and anyway we cannot limit his own understanding to what we guess to have been the understanding of his readers. But I am still not sure that Paul meant to convey precisely what Wright suggests when using the righteousness words.

It may be the same with Wright's insistence on translating *Christos* as 'the Messiah'. The name 'Christ' quite clearly reflects Paul's covenantal Israel-oriented

theology; the Christ is the Messiah, as is quite explicit in Rom 9:5. I am sure that Wright is correct – he explains this at length in his *Climax of the Covenant* (44-46) – in saying that, when Paul speaks of ‘Jesus Christ’, he has not forgotten what ‘Christ’ means; it has not become just another name for Jesus like a surname (as in some modern usage). And yet, although it is a name with meaning and a context, I agree with Howard Marshall, when he comments on Paul’s use of *Christos*: ‘My impression is that the titular force is weakening and often it has become more of a name’ (*New Testament Theology*, 426.) So, for example, when Paul says in 2 Cor. 5:19 that ‘God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself’, Wright translates it ‘God was in *the* Christ...’. But there is no ‘the’ in the Greek; contrast Romans 9:5. This may not be a decisive argument against Wright’s translation of 2 Cor. 5:19, since Greek use and non-use of the article is very flexible. And yet, if *Christos* = the Messiah = the King (a translation sometimes favoured by Wright), it is difficult, if not impossible, to imagine Paul speaking of God being ‘*en basilei*’, i.e. ‘in king’, or in other contexts of us being ‘in king’; he would have to say ‘in *the* king’. There is thus a strong case for saying that Paul in 2 Cor. 5 and elsewhere is using *Christos* as his name for Jesus without always intending to emphasize the meaning of the name, whereas Wright’s consistent translation brings the meaning to the fore, which then helps to lend weight to his own admirable campaign to get us to read Paul covenantally. I am not sure that his Greek readers would have understood all Paul’s uses of *Christos* quite as Messianically as Wright does.

I need to keep reiterating that I agree with Wright on the overall framework of Paul’s thought, but it sometimes feels as though he is over-egging a good case. I wonder if that is not the case with his appearing to insist that Paul is not writing about individual salvation in his letters but about the Israel of God. I entirely agree that for Paul salvation is being brought into the people of God, and that this is something that Protestants have not always recognized sufficiently; I agree that a letter like Romans is primarily about the place of Jews and Gentiles in the purposes and people of God. But Wright knows very well that people in the ancient world were interested in individual salvation (look at the mystery religions), as of course were Paul and his readers. There is a huge interest in the whole of the New Testament, not least in the writings of Paul’s companion Luke (think of the rich man who built his barns, of Zacchaeus, of the Pentecost call to people to be baptized, of the Ethiopian eunuch, etc.); individuals were interested in life after death, in entering the kingdom, in ‘what must I do to be saved and to inherit eternal life?’. The salvation which the NT offers is not individualistic, but individuals are called to enter into it. Paul himself had a very individual conversion experience, when he discovered the grace of God for sinners (something he had not understood as a Pharisee, though of course he had some idea of grace), and he called individuals to faith and baptism. So Paul’s letters definitely have a covenantal focus on the people of God, but Paul is interested in how people – yes, individuals, Jews and Gentiles – enter the life of the people of God, through Christ. He is not just interested in the sociological or political aspect of God’s work through Christ and his cross, but also in how individuals come to faith and in life after death for individuals. (On the subject of life after

death, I am not entirely happy with Wright's sweeping comments on Romans 8, where he says: 'Salvation does not mean "dying and going to heaven", as so many Western Christians have supposed for so long. If your body dies and your soul goes to a disembodied immortality, you have not been *rescued from* death; you have, quite simply, died....' [207]. I agree that Paul's view is once again bigger than many of our conventional views and that Wright is probably right in speaking of 'life after life after death', but still the traditional view is not very far from Phil 1:23, where Paul's 'going to be with Christ' is in an important sense coming through death and even being delivered from death.)

There are other points to ponder. The old perspective may have got things wrong, or at least oversimplified, in suggesting that Paul's gospel was one of salvation through grace and faith and that his Jewish opponents were into salvation by human achievement. Wright and others rightly say that the Jews knew themselves to have been chosen by God's grace, and that they saw their law-keeping as their covenantal response and responsibility. Paul's problem with them, then, was that they were boasting about their Jewish status and position before God, not because they were claiming to have earned their position by their own righteous law-keeping. There is certainly a lot of truth in this, but a consequence has been a tendency among some to conclude that for Paul and his opponents grace was not a distinctive and defining issue.

That conclusion will not do. It is impossible to get away from (a) the huge emphasis on grace in Paul, for example in Galatians, also in Eph. 2:1-10, or (b) the stubborn fact that Paul does contrast the way of grace with the way of 'works of the law' and he does seem to assume that his Jewish opponents are trusting not just in their Jewishness, but also in their law-keeping. The simplest explanation of this is by reference to Paul's own conversion: as a law-keeping Pharisee he did of course have some idea of God's grace to Israel, but he was evidently putting his trust in his Jewishness, in the Jewish law and in his zealous adherence to it. (Compare Luke's parable of the Pharisee and the tax-collector in Luke 18:9-14.) But then on the Damascus Road he discovered the failure of this way, the failure of his law-keeping, the depth of his own sin and the amazing grace of God – to sinners like himself. His religion is transformed, and from now, and in his letters, there is an unremitting objection to all human boasting or trusting in human religion or work, and an overwhelming emphasis on the grace of God, and on the need to receive simply through faith.

Wright emphasizes grace, though it is interesting that he gives much more attention to Eph. 2:11-22, with its new perspective overtones, than to 2:1-10 with its massive emphasis on grace rather than works. Wright also emphasizes faith. He says that for Paul it is the 'covenant badge' of being justified. Humble trust in God marks out those who are in the family of Abraham, who had such faith. There is evident truth in this. But is it accurate to call faith the 'badge' (or sign or mark) of covenant membership? Is it not rather, at least in the first instance, the way into covenant membership? Wright seems cagey about saying this: in his earlier writings, he seems to want to separate both faith and justification from actually becoming a Christian. So in *What Saint Paul Really Said* he comments

that 'Justification is not how one *becomes* a Christian. It is the declaration that they *have become* a Christian' and 'Faith is the badge of covenant membership, not something one "performs" as a kind of initiation test' (125). But I am not sure if this quite works. Faith is not an initiation 'test', but faith expressed in baptism – declaring Jesus is Lord and going down into the water – was for Paul an initiatory ritual; it was the way of putting one's trust in Jesus and his saving death, the way to enter the new life of God's people. This is emphatically not a work, but it is an active receiving of a gift, the gift of being made right with God and of membership of his people. So yes, faith should be the continuing mark of Christian life, but faith is at the heart of Christian initiation, and so is justification: when I first put my trust in Jesus in baptism I was united to Jesus, put right with God and made a member of his covenant people. Justification happens, then, when I became a Christian through faith (past tense), and the result is that I am now justified (present tense), and I continue to live by faith in the Son of God. Wright's apparent downplaying of the past tense seems unnecessary and confusing. I wondered, perhaps unfairly, whether his perspective on this ties in with the view of those in the new perspective who say that Paul is not talking in his letters about how to 'get into' the saved people of God, but about how to 'stay in'; I wondered if it reflected his own focus on covenant membership, rather than the old perspective's focus on being put right with God.

So far as the badge of covenant membership, Paul would likely see baptism as a strong contender, being such a theologically and experientially powerful conversion-ritual in the early church. The receiving of the Holy Spirit, which typically went with conversion, would be another; see Gal. 3:2. Faith is the way into covenant membership, and 'faith working through love' is authentic Christian living (Gal. 5:6), but I am not sure about the word 'badge'.

There are numerous other things that deserve discussion, including his interpretation of 2 Cor. 5:21. Despite his careful and interesting argument, I am still inclined to a rather traditional interpretation. It is obviously correct that in the context Paul is speaking about his own apostolic ministry (as Wright emphasizes), but in the course of doing so he is also speaking very explicitly and powerfully about Christ's reconciling ministry, and speaks of 'us' being ambassadors for Christ, inviting people to 'be reconciled to God' (v. 20). It makes perfect sense to see v.21 as explaining the basis of that invitation: 'For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God'. This is arguably one of the pithiest gospel sentences in Paul's letters, describing the substitutionary death on Christ on our behalf and its justifying purpose and effect. The verse comes close to the idea of imputed righteousness, even it is not quite there. Although he speaks of the 'faithfulness of Jesus' on the cross, Wright seems reluctant to see that Paul might also view Jesus as the one whose sinlessness and faithfulness under the law during his life qualified him to take our sins and whose Spirit enables us to begin to live ethically new lives (204). This latter point is more evident in Rom. 8:3-5 than in the 2 Corinthians text, though I see the word 'righteousness' in various Pauline context as having a broader range of meanings than is often recognized.

My rather lengthy engagement with Wright does not do justice to all the nuances of his thinking, and might suggest that I side with those who find his views dangerously unorthodox. I do not. I find him to be one of the most stimulating interpreters of Paul with whom to engage and sometimes to disagree. And I greatly regret the negativity of some of those who have attacked his views. *Justification* is, in turn, a distinctly polemical book, with Wright even comparing his critics at one point to Paul's opponents in Galatia (92). Such polemics may be defended: we are perhaps sometimes too polite and indirect in our criticisms these days. Paul could of course be very forthright. I was reminded of his repeated '*Me genoito*', 'Certainly not', and wondered if Wright's 'Don't be ridiculous' on page 181 was quite a modern, slightly more barbed, equivalent. But in our context at least, and probably in Paul's, the danger with polemical language is that it alienates instead of helping people to listen. Mind you, it is a difficult choice: sometimes you feel you need to shout in order to be heard! I hope people will listen to Tom, and recognize the importance of his contribution to NT studies, and that we will all agree on the basics but also on the need to go on searching the Scriptures, for what they say and not for what we might want them to say.

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Jon Newton

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