



Reformation
& **REVIVAL**
JOURNAL

**JUSTIFICATION:
MODERN
REFLECTIONS**

A Quarterly for Church Leadership

VOLUME 11 · NUMBER 2 · SPRING 2002

A Reformation & Revival Journal
Interview with N. T. Wright



Part Two



Departments

In this issue we conclude the interview Travis Tamerius conducted with N. T. Wright in Washington, DC, in November, 2001. Tom Wright is one of the freshest voices within orthodox evangelical Christian thought today and is a major contributor to both the study of the historical Jesus and the theology of the New Testament. He is an unusual academic theologian because he is comfortable in the work of the parish as well as in the world of academic New Testament study. He serves as canon theologian of Westminster Abbey in London.

R R J—You have one foot in the church and one foot in the academy. How does your participation in the liturgy of the church shape your study and how does your historical study shape your participation in the worship of the church?

N T W—Well, I am a lifelong Anglican, though I wobbled once or twice as a student and wondered whether I should be somewhere else. I just find so many bedrock reasons for

where I am that I can't imagine what it would be like not worshipping day by day in this style. When I am on the road and away from the community I try to remodel it somehow. It's not so easy to do in a hotel room. The regular reading of Scripture, within the context and framework of prayer, helps me know that as I do this my brothers and sisters are praying the same way and thus I'm still part of that community on the other side of the Atlantic.

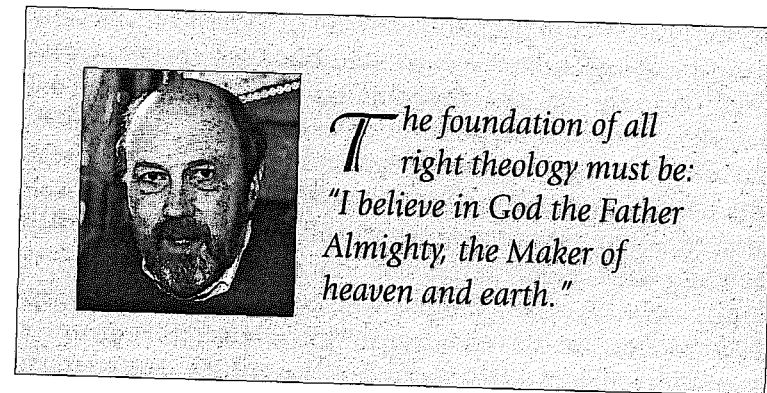
Evangelicals have usually dismissed this but liturgy has something to do with modeling the way God puts the world to rights and then glimpsing it in the dramatic action of both the Eucharist and the morning and evening prayer in the Anglican tradition. These are really such simple things. It includes a reading from the Old Testament, a reading from the New Testament, and it is all framed and flanked with prayer and Scriptural responses. It's pretty much the Bible from start to finish. The bits that are not Bible are the creed and some of the key prayers and collects that are all cloaked in Scripture. There's a sort of a liturgical time and space here. When you step into this you are glimpsing the way God actually intends the world to be and envisioning it in a powerful sense. This is actually what I think Revelation 4 and 5 are all about. The elders are casting their crowns before the throne. This is the heavenly reality that corresponds to the church worshipping on earth. This is not a vision of the future. *This is a vision of the spiritual depth of the present.*

Again and again, I come back from the details of worship, with something fresh. Suddenly, for example, a passage of Scripture read at Matins by one of my colleagues grabs me and I say, "I've never seen that before. I never heard it like that before." I'm very fortunate. I get lots and lots of Scripture coming at me all day long.

As a historian, part of my role in the Abbey is to critique the way we do liturgy. For instance, I am doing a series on the resurrection now. I just did one last week where I went after the whole way we do All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day in the Anglican Church, all of which is based on a kind of revived, post-Catholic pseudo-purgatory doctrine. I just tore this limb

from limb. I deconstructed the liturgy as we now do it. I said there is no integrity to this. There is no Scripture to support it. And there is no pastoral wisdom in it either. So, because I care about liturgy, I also care about critiquing it and the way we use lectionaries. For me, it's a natural rhythm. I am very privileged to live like this, to be in a worshipping community and then to go straight back to the desk and then at the end of the working day, or at the end of part of the working day, right back into evensong and so forth.

RRJ—It is pretty profound to consider that prior to Gutenberg's press most people encountered the Word in liturgy. It was oralized in the context of public worship.



NTW—It was also pictured. One of the real problems here is that the Reformed tradition has been explicitly aniconic and thus has not believed in the visual. You have exactly the same debates in Judaism and Islam. Islamic art is wonderfully geometric precisely because they will not reproduce living objects, much like strict Judaism. Less strict Judaism will let you have everything from elephants to antelopes to trees to mountains but not human beings, and never human faces. The synagogue at Chorazin, an ancient synagogue (probably from the third century A.D.) has a picture of the sun and the sun has a face. Because it's the sun you're allowed to do that. The Reformed tradition has been so anxious about pictures,

so anxious about statues, so anxious about everything other than the barest plain and sparse liturgy—there is a wonderful simplicity about this sort of minimalist thinking but actually it can become a dualism, opposed to God's good creation. The foundation of all right theology must be: "I believe in God the Father Almighty, the Maker of heaven and earth." The minute that you start to say, "We better not celebrate it or that's a long step toward magical paganism," you have a problem. It's true that people do take long steps toward magic and paganism so you have to have that as you post a marker on the side—don't go that route. But that doesn't mean you don't celebrate it. Don't let the fact of adultery and fornication stop the joy of marriage. Let's do the right thing while recognizing that wrong use of the right thing is just that, the wrong use.

But this comes back to justification, doesn't it? Because there are those of the Reformed tradition who are very frightened of doing much of anything in worship in case you are attempting to do good works in order to earn God's favor. But no serious liturgy ever, ever imagined such a thing. That's why the traditional Eucharist begins with the *Kyrie Eleison*. You start by saying "Lord have mercy" and when you've said that, you sing the *Gloria*. The *Gloria* is not saying, "Please God be kind to me because I am praising you." Rather it's saying, "Because you are the forgiving, gracious God, and because it's all of grace, it's my job to shout 'hallelujah.'" We have to think this out more fully. Thus I do not worry that part of this present justification debate seems to actually be about that. Just think about the number of times Paul says this is what you must do in order to please God. This has been screened out by a lot of post-Reformation theology; yet Paul says it again and again.

RRJ—We hedge against encroaching upon God's glory and we end up removing any incentives for Christian living, any call to good works at all. Yet that is the language of the New Testament.

NTW—That's right. There was a review in an American jour-

nal, I don't know whether it was Reformed or Lutheran, but a very Protestant journal for sure, which reviewed my book, *For All God's Worth*. The book is a series of sermons about worship and the love of God. One of the sermons, which was the installation sermon given when I became the dean of Lichfield had the title "It is All God's Work." Because there is such a thing as grace, that doesn't mean that we just sit at home with our feet up and let God do everything. It's all there in Paul, who said "for this I strive with all the energy that he mightily inspires within me." I work because God is at work but it's not in order to earn God's favor. I think the attitude reflected by the review is a hang-up. That's really a kind of paranoia. And this feeds, I believe, a certain type of Christian neurosis.

RRJ—When you think about your own prayers, and your labor for renewal of the church, what does this all look like? What are your hopes? What is your ambition for the seeing the church renewed or reformed?

NTW—Well, that's difficult to express. I often think in terms of fighting the good fight of faith, though this is a metaphor I am not altogether happy about. I am a soldier under orders on one particular bit of the battlefield. I see reasonably well what my task for the next year or two is in terms of expounding the Bible and laying the historical foundations for another generation to be faithful to Scripture. This is particularly true with regard to the resurrection, which is my next big book. God is doing so many other things out there in the world and I hear the sound of it but I don't know where it's coming from or where it's going. There are all sorts of things happening, exciting things, and I wouldn't claim to be more than one little ranking officer in one part of one theater of war. I don't have a fully developed global view.

At the same time I believe one of the major challenges to the gospel in the last two hundred years, especially in Western Europe and North America since we have been dominated by the Enlightenment, and now by postmodernity, is that our

Christian thinking and living is skewed. The fact that people can mistake the battle of Western culture and Islam for the battle of Christianity and Islam could make that mistake shows me just how much we have been duped and how much Christianity has been colluding with what was actually a sub- or anti-Christian movement—a global imperialism quite like the Roman Empire in the first century. I think nothing short of a return to what Jesus and Paul were actually about will get us out of this type of thinking. You just have to think through the Lord's Prayer: "God's kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven . . . give us this day our daily bread." You cannot pray this correctly unless you are mentally putting your arms around people in Afghanistan who are literally eating grass as we speak. This is very serious. And likewise you pray, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." This kind of praying energizes a vision of the church in a very striking way. Now I wouldn't claim to be more than a footnote in God's purposes but I'll be very happy if that's what I get to do and be.

R R J—One footnote might be this. You talk about justification and you say that your understanding actually propels us into the ecumenical task. But this doctrine has always been seen as the hang-up to Catholic-Protestant communion and dialogue. How do you hope, or how do you anticipate that rethinking the place and meaning and priority of justification in the biblical sense would help that?

N T W—Again, it's difficult. I think I have realized in the last five or ten years just how high and steep a mountain there is ahead of anyone who wants to think the way I do. I'll give you an example that runs parallel with this matter. I bang on about this a lot, especially when I talk about the resurrection and the future and about the fact that the Bible doesn't say very much about going to heaven after you die. It does say a great deal about the resurrection and the coming together of the new heavens and the new earth (Revelation and Romans and I Corinthians, etc.). So I tell people, "Look, we shouldn't

be thinking about what heaven is going to be like in the way we do." I was up in a plane the other day and two old ladies were looking out the window at fluffy clouds and one said to the other, "Do you think that's what heaven is going to be like?" I was actually reading the New Testament and I hoped they wouldn't notice that I was a clergyman and ask me, "Is that what heaven is going to be like?" The question of what the immediate post-death state will be is not the really interesting one. The really interesting one is the bodily resurrection. This is a point I'm going to make, which is an analogy to the point about justification. I have given addresses on that and I've had people come up to me afterwards and say, "I really enjoyed your talk about heaven." And I say, "I didn't give a talk about heaven. It was a talk about why heaven is not terribly important." They say to me, "Well you know what I mean." And I say, "No I don't. You haven't heard what I mean." And people come back from hearing teaching on the resurrection and the body and someone inevitably says, "Will there be sex in heaven?" I say, "Do you mean in the resurrection body?" "Yeah, I guess that's what I mean." This language about heaven is so strong in our culture that we just flick back to a default mode. Now, it's exactly the same with justification. I can say until I'm blue in the face that when Paul says justification he is not talking about the *ordo salutis* or a point



The whole point of what I am saying is that the word "justification" does not mean what the tradition from Augustine onward said it meant. But people cannot get it out of their heads that the word justification means "how people get saved."

in the process of the same. When Paul is talking about justification he is talking about God's *declaratory act of validating or vindicating those who are at this point in the ordo salutis*, the point where they have come to faith. When people hear that they at once say things like, "This sounds like an odd mixture of what was semi-Pelagianism and hyper-Calvinism," because I believe that grace through the gospel causes people to believe and then when they believe God justifies them. The whole point of what I am saying is that the word "justification" does *not* mean what the tradition from Augustine onward said it meant. But people cannot get it out of their heads that the word justification means "how people get saved."

In a sense, who cares? If the tradition since Augustine has used the word in a particular way, why don't we just run with it? The answer is that because the tradition since Augustine has claimed to be reading Paul we must challenge it if it is not right. And we must insist that Paul still matters. And if we read Paul this usual way we flatten him out. You can reread Romans 3:21-31 until you're blue in the face but if you really think that justification means how you get into the *ordo salutis* or how it works, or some point like that, you won't understand what Paul is really saying. Here's the problem—we have been so hung up about *ordo salutis* questions that we haven't heard what Paul was really saying. But I'm under no illusions about the problem of conveying this message and being clearly heard.

R R J—You mean by the indication of all the responses you have received already.

N T W—Exactly. I want to say: Look at what Paul actually says when he talks about how people become Christians. Look for instance at 1 Thessalonians where he says quite a lot about it without ever using the word justify or any of its cognates. He talks about the gospel coming to you in the power of the Spirit. You accepted that word not as the word of man but as what it really is, the word of God that is at work in you believers. It's quite clear what Paul is talking about, that he comes into

town announcing that Jesus is Lord, as a royal herald. He is saying that the crucified Jesus is the Lord of the world. And this is not, "Here is a way of salvation. You might like to apply it to yourself." It's not, "Here is a new way of being religious and you might enjoy it." This is really an imperial summons: "On your knees!" Nobody ever went into a Roman town and said, "Caesar is lord and you might like to have this experience of acknowledging him as lord if that suits you." They said, "Caesar is Lord, get on your knees and we want the tax right now."

And when that message is announced, some men and women find to their astonishment that they believe it. I say to their astonishment because it's stupid. Paul says that it's stupid. He knows it. You can just imagine it. It's like someone telling a joke in a foreign language and not knowing why people laugh. Paul was going around the Roman world saying that this crucified Jesus is the lord of the world. He must have felt many times this is the craziest thing imaginable yet when I say it, lives are changed, the community emerges, people love each other. That is grace. And it is all of grace. But then the minute they say, "I really believe that Jesus is Lord, I really believe that God has raised him from the dead" and so on, then the doctrine of justification comes in and says you are all one in Christ Jesus. And, the proof is right there in Galatians 2:11-21. The first major discussion of justification is really all about who you are allowed to eat with. It's not about how to go to heaven when you die.

R R J—On numerous occasions, Marcus Borg has been a partner with you in dialogue despite the fact that the two of you disagree quite substantially in your reading of the New Testament. Through it all, the two of you have kept your civility while sharpening the points of contention. What have you learned in this commitment to a civil, theological debate?

N T W—It is difficult, I confess. Marcus has been a good friend for many, many years, long before we ever got into this

controversy. When we have stayed with them or they have stayed with us we always had a great time together. We just do all kinds of stuff. That friendship, I think, is tested on both sides whenever we really do serious dialogue. I think this is because we both find that we are frustrated, that we seem to have made no impact on the other one at all.

I think friendship is important. But this goes back beyond that. In Oxford, when I was doing graduate work, there were all sorts of different points of view and some sharp disagreements. There was always a sense in which I would disagree with you but I would also defend to the death your right to say what you say. I think that's a standard academic perception. However, I know in many circles it's not an easy position to maintain. This is not peculiar to Christians and theology. One of the periodicals I take is the *Times Literary Supplement* (which is like an English version of the *New York Review of Books*). Week after week the correspondence columns are full of angry letters from authors who say "If professor so and so had read what I said on page 250, he would never have accused me of omitting this or thinking that." And then the following week the reviewer says, "If professor so and so could see the valid point I was making in my review he doesn't deserve to be. . . ." People really get steamed up and this all gets rather personal.

I think, at least for me, one of the keys is the historical task. There are documents out there. There is evidence out there. Not nearly as much as we like. But we can all read Josephus, at least in principle. We can all read the Dead Sea Scrolls. We can all argue the case. And part of the difficulty is that people haven't learned how to argue properly. What they have learned to do is declaim. And if I just declaim and you just declaim then we clash like two rhinoceroses. And then we retreat, slightly bruised, to our own happy hunting grounds where our own folk like hearing the snortings that we make (continuing with the rhinoceros image) until it's time to have another one of those clashes. I really don't enjoy that. I do enjoy serious dialogue and debate. There hasn't been enough of that really.

And here's something else I've picked up as an outsider taking part in American culture. I realized this when I was at Harvard two years ago and I think it's an accurate perception. A lot of the American debates are still conditioned by folk memories of two things. One is the War of Independence against the British. The second is the Civil War. The Mason-Dixon line, or something like it, still influences theology and culture. People in New England look to the South and expect to find rabid fundamentalists, rednecks, slavers, right-wing monsters, etc. Of course there are always enough people like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson to enable them to say, "There you are. I told you." People south of the line look north and they expect to see lily-livered liberals, damn Yankees, people going soft on everything. And of course there are plenty of people like Bishop John Shelby Spong of whom they are able to say, "There you are. That's what happens when you go liberal."

Now, I see this divide differently. I am just as much a product of my culture, I am certain. But we all have to be more self-critical. You can't assume that because you are Americans you can put the whole world into the various boxes of your particular cultural assumptions. So that, for instance, I am perceived as very conservative about Jesus' death and resurrection. But don't make the mistake of thinking that this means I am pro-guns, or pro-bombing everyone in sight, or whatever. In England a lot of theologically conservative Christians are quite radical politically. Again I don't like the radical political package we've got in England at the moment. But some elements of it, I think, are mandated by the gospel. Others, I think, are just crazy ideas. So let's get out of our various boxes and have the maturity to say enough knee-jerk reaction here. Let's get right down to the historical roots and see where we go from there. That is always difficult and it will surely demand real patience.

RRJ—Your academic writing is infused with a lively, prosaic style and the occasional dash of humor. It's not the typical menu for scholarly works.

N T W —Well, I suppose that is a particular British style. I think it's the sort of thing that lots of people would say but few people would actually write. I don't really know why that is. Scholars are often frightened to have a twinkle in the eye lest people not take them seriously. I think one of the reasons they still take me semi-seriously is because of my three big books (*Climax of the Covenant, New Testament and the People of God*, and *Jesus and the Victory of God*). There's hardly a footnote out of place and quite frankly that's how you get respected in the guild. You don't get respected by making lots of sound and fury or even by having good research students. You get respected by the fact that you've paid your dues; you've done the stuff and you know your way around. I intend to continue doing this kind of work, God willing, in two or three more of these big academic books. When John Dominic Crossan accused me of not taking him seriously I was able to go through my index and show that I had more references to him and Robert Funk than any of the other major Jesus' books included. When he accused me of not taking the non-canonical materials seriously, I was able to go through and show that I had more references to Thomas and the rest of this type of material than even he and Funk had used.

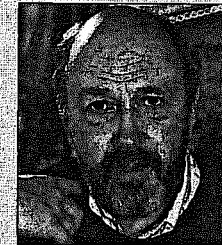
R R J —Let's be clear here. You've got to do twice the work in order to outflank these guys because they are going with the grain of where that part of the culture is going. So you have to get up very early in the morning, literally and metaphorically, and be prepared to run twice as fast in order to get there before they do.

I was visiting a couple of weeks ago with a geography professor at the University of Missouri and was reminded of the power of mapping out a symbolic world. This gentleman used advanced satellite technology and copiously studied the journals of Lewis and Clark in an effort to more accurately locate the bed of the Missouri River when the explorers took their famous trip in 1802. His conclusions relocated the place of the river and some of the landmark site of Lewis and Clark's expedition. That didn't sit too well

with some small towns which had planned celebrations or with a multimillion dollar museum laying claim to the site where they began their trip. This professor had moved the river just a little bit on the map and he stirred up quite a ruckus. With much of your work there is a similar feel to it.

N T W —It's a very similar thing. That's a very good analogy. Yes.

R R J —You have moved the riverbed just a little bit and have said this is where the emphasis really needs to be. People have to suspend their prior judgments and begin to think in different categories, with a different approach. You repeatedly warn them about going back to their default mode.



It seems to me that if there is a function for scholarship in God's world it is that scholarship has to say exactly this: "Sorry this is where it was. Here is the evidence. Do you want to live in the real world or in your imaginary one?" The answer of postmodernity is that a lot of people would much prefer the imaginary one.

N T W —That's absolutely right. It seems to me that if there is a function for scholarship in God's world it is that scholarship has to say exactly this: "Sorry this is where it was. Here is the evidence. Do you want to live in the real world or in your imaginary one?" The answer of postmodernity is that a lot of

people would much prefer the imaginary one. The trouble with the imaginary one is that it only works in very specific, limited conditions. Postmodernity does not work on the West Bank. It does not work in Bosnia. It certainly doesn't work in Afghanistan. You know, postmodernity is fine when it really doesn't matter to you and me today whether we go and take a swim in the river or go and climb a tree or do this or that. We can tell our own stories and do our own thing. But where there are lines drawn on the ground and you get shot if you cross them, postmodernity is suddenly shown up.

Interestingly, there is a book that my son read and annotated for me earlier this summer which argues that postmodernity is actually colluding with the concept of western empire because it's a way of telling us that we are all right, that everybody has different stories and this is just *our* story. In other words, it would be difficult to mount a critique of empire from within by postmodern arguments because why would you do that if this is the story we want to tell. You know the things that enable us to be postmodern and free-floating are themselves the products of high-tech modernity.

R R J —Who was someone who shaped your early Christian pilgrimage, preferably someone we've never heard of?

N T W —You probably will not have heard of this man—Richard Gorrie. I think he's retired now. He ran the Scripture Union boy camps in Scotland when I was going through my teen years. He was, and is, a very wonderful, quiet, godly, intelligent, devout man. He is totally committed to following Jesus and to enabling others to do the same. But without any of the brash, "I know what's right for you and I'm going to lay it on you as a sort of guilt trip thing." He would expound the Scriptures faithfully, morning and evening, and he would lead a team of others doing the same. He would talk with us individually if we asked him and sometimes would invite us to talk to him, if we desired to do so. I always found him an amazing person. Many times I would write to him and seek his advice on things. His advice was unfailingly wise and bib-

lical. He was somebody I always felt good being with but it was always a bit scary because of his own holiness and devotion. But it was not a hard, dry thing. It was a warm and lovely thing. But there was a sense that when you went to see him that you were a bit on holy ground even though he would be the last to claim that for himself. But that is how others and I perceived him. That was a wonderful thing to have through my teens. It was he who gave me the first opportunities I had of standing on my hind legs and talking about a passage of Scripture to other people. He encouraged me and loaned me commentaries. I look back on his influence with enormous gratitude.

R R J —In those early years what books or authors impacted your life?

N T W —The C. S. Lewis Institute asked me the same question. I actually had difficulty answering. Through my early years, and into my teens, like millions of others the Narnia books were a spectacular source of wisdom. This was not just for the big stories, important though they are, but for the little nuggets. You know, "Child," said Aslan, "one who is never told what might have been." Or someone saying about Aslan, "He is not a tame lion." Or when in the *Voyage of the Dawn Treader* someone says, "Have you no idea of progress and development?" And the prince says, "I have seen them both in an egg. We call it 'going bad' in Narnia." Just a wonderful put down. Lewis, of course, was himself the master of the put-down. Lewis could see the flaw in an argument and just cut it down at its knees. For someone growing up in the confusing world of the sixties, having one's memory and imagination stocked with things like that enabled me, more times than I remember or imagine, to hear the easy sixties liberalism of the time and think, "Wait a minute! That doesn't actually make sense. Someone has challenged that." That was hugely helpful to me.

In my teens, there was another book, which I have no idea if it's even in print or if anybody even knows about it today, by

a woman named Isobel Kuhn—the book called *By Searching*. It was her life story. It was her own autobiography and told of her own coming to faith and her struggles with faith and the things she found in her own prayer life. I must have read that a half of dozen times and found it enormously helpful as a kind of a pattern, a human model.

I suppose that the two books that helped me when I was growing up intellectually, doing my Ph. D. work, were the two big commentaries on Romans I read at the time, one by Cranfield and the other by Käsemann. Now I disagree with these commentaries in all sorts of ways but both of them showed me what it meant to take the text utterly seriously. They also taught me to strain every possible nerve of historical thought and evidence to get into the text of Romans, absolutely no holds barred. I am enormously grateful for that. No doubt there are many others.

R R J —Did you ever have a chance to hear Lewis?

N T W —No, not consciously. It might have happened had I lived in Oxford or somewhere. I might have met him at church or somewhere else. I might also have met Tolkien but I didn't. I became a fellow at Merton College in 1975, just after Tolkien had died. Had I been at Merton a year earlier I would have found myself, no doubt, sitting down and having lunch with him.

R R J —I want to try and clarify the differences between you and E. P. Sanders a bit more. Would you say the basic premise of Sanders stands with the New Perspective but it should be modified, improved upon, even expanded?

N T W —I think what E. P. Sanders did was break the logjam of assumptions about Judaism. The idea for centuries had been that Judaism was all about legalistic self-righteousness, about earning merit. The point was to show quite clearly the way in which Lutheran scholarship had understood the controversy between Paul and Judaism in the light of the six-

teenth century polemic of Luther against medieval Catholicism. This polemic had been picked up wholesale and dumped on Judaism so that you what you got was the language of works of supererogation. I think because Sanders asked a very limited range of questions he only began to engage with many of the issues that are there in the Jewish text. I mean coming to a book like 4 Esdras with the question of getting in versus staying in, and this happens is a very odd thing to do. Because 4 Esdras is saying "Jerusalem has just been destroyed; what are we going to do?" He is not saying, "I am starting from scratch as a human being and want to know how I find a gracious God?" That is not what he is asking. Sanders has screened out the political dimensions as well as the theological dimensions and thereby has squelched and compressed a lot of the important Jewish texts (never mind Paul), out of shape. However, I already believed (as a sort of Calvinist) that the law was a good gift of God. It was not meant to make Israel into a legalistic self-righteous people but rather it was given to help people who had been redeemed through the exodus to find the way of life. It was not given so that by it one could earn grace, but rather to celebrate grace, to respond to grace. So the conclusion I reached was not a huge step. I think it is much, much harder for somebody in a classic Lutheran tradition to see this. In a sense, rather ironically, I see Sander's move as something which I, from a more Reformed perspective, could appropriate more easily than somebody from a Lutheran perspective might. That's not to say that I agree with his exegesis.

R R J —Isn't the question that lurks behind the E. P. Sanders' revolution and those who respond to the new perspective this: "How would you actually detect legalism when you see it in the ancient Jewish literature?" You find people who snatch various phrases out of the texts and say, 'Aha, see there!'

N T W —That is a very fair question. My teacher George Caird said when I read the Mishnah that is what I mean by legalism.

You know people are often not satisfied with one definition. They will say, "Is it a this or is it a that?" And when you have given them that, they then say, "But what happens on the Sabbath?" This results in more and more and more endless definitions that have to be learned and applied. That produces a rulebook mentality. Even if you say the whole thing comes under the rubric of grace, by the time you get nineteen stages down the development of the casuistry you just have to wonder how much of this really is grace. There are many Jews, to this day, for whom keeping the Torah is, as much as they understand it, a response to the love of God and I honor that.

The other thing going on with Sanders is this post-Enlightenment idea that "all religions are basically the same." At least this is seen to be true with Christianity and Judaism. Of course, I wouldn't agree with that. Sanders is flattening out the differences between Christianity and Judaism in order to say, what many people would say at a much broader level, that really Christians and Jews need have no quarrel with one another. So it's really a post-holocaust reaction. Thus an evangelical would want to critique that on the grounds that fundamental to Christianity is this: "Jesus is the Messiah and died and rose from the dead." Of course any Jew who says that is becoming a Christian. And there is a difference.

E. P. Sanders' teacher was W. D. Davis, who died recently. He saw all of this quite clearly. He once said to me, "If Christianity and Judaism are really just the same sort of thing, then what's the fuss to be a Christian?" He clearly saw that there was something utterly distinctive about Christianity, while honoring its Jewish roots. There are many of us who see the force of Sanders' basic point about not leveling against first-century Judaism criticisms appropriate to sixteenth-century Catholicism, but who would agree with his teacher that this doesn't reduce the uniqueness of Christianity. I think my published writings make my own position very clear on that.