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*Sounding the Alarm:
N. T. Wright and Evangelical Theology*



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EVACUATING A BURNING PARADIGM?

One of the perks of a public school education is the instruction received in disaster preparation. Along with learning the alphabet, state capitals, and the table of chemical elements, a student is drilled in survival. All hazards are considered and all precautions taken. If the building is on fire or under threat of an explosive, you walk single-file along a designated path to the nearest exit. In the event of a tornado, you remain in the hallway, burrowed up against a locker, with your head tucked between your knees and beneath your arms. Rarely does a tornado touch down, rarely does the school catch fire; and yet, the posture of preparation serves a good purpose.

The reader of N.T. Wright would be wise to remember his or her schoolboy education. There is smoke in the hallowed halls of evangelicalism and it may well be time to evacuate some burning theological paradigms. To some, the call to line up at the door will suggest a false alarm: "The only thing you are smelling is a British theologian smoking a pipe in the teacher's lounge." The argument goes: how could there be any *new* paradigms for understanding historical Christianity? At best, such an assertion smacks of chronocentricity, the naïve suggestion that something unusually significant is happening in our own day and age; at worst, it betrays incredible hubris.

Thus, the smoke is cleared with a wave of the hand, and the British guest is kindly reminded of the "No Smoking" sign.

To others, however, where there is smoke, there is fire. Consider the assessment of Alister McGrath, himself somewhat akin to an evangelical fire marshal. McGrath contends that Wright, his fellow Anglican churchman and former Oxford colleague, has "lobbed a hand grenade into the world of traditional evangelical theology."¹ In particular, when it comes to reading the Apostle Paul on justification, the works of the law and the nature of Christ's death, "if Wright is correct, Martin Luther is wrong."²

That is a rather seismic *if-then*. In Protestant hagiography, Luther is the one who recovered the gospel for a darkened Europe. He prosecuted Rome for her infidelities. He unshackled the people from superstition, blind ritual and unchristian traditionalism. He gave us back our Bibles. He let God be God and grace be grace. He set the benchmark for recognizing true churches: justification by faith—the article by which the church stands or falls. Frame the conditional statement in the way that McGrath has done, and for some, it will be enough said. It will be thought that, if Wright is arguing something different, quite simply he is wrong.

The purpose of this article is to locate the smoke. My aim is to inspect existing evangelical paradigms under threat from Wright's critique. After examining Wright's analysis of early Christianity, I will identify some of the potential hazards and combustibles in evangelical theology.

WHO IS TOM WRIGHT AND WHAT IS HE SAYING?

Tom Wright is Canon Theologian of Westminster Abbey in London. Prior to his present position, he served as the Dean of Lichfield in Staffordshire, England (1993-1999) and held teaching posts at Oxford University (1986-1992) and McGill University in Montreal (1981-1986). A prolific author, Wright has long been recognized as one of the foremost Jesus scholars on either side of the Atlantic. Significant to that assessment is his ambitious project in New Testament theology consisting of six volumes on *Christian Origins and the Ques-*

tion of God. At the present time, two volumes have been published. In the first volume, *New Testament and the People of God*, Wright uses his scholarly spade to break the ground on methodology. He employs a *critical realist* approach to his historical investigation. This approach is

a way of describing the process of 'knowing' that acknowledges the *reality of the thing known, as something other than the knower* (hence "realism"), while also acknowledging that the only access we have to this reality lies along the spiraling path of *appropriate dialogue or conversation between the knower and the thing known* (hence "critical").³

Against naive Enlightenment historiography, Wright disputes the idea that our knowledge is of the sort that we know objects as bird's-eye observers, who simply "tell it like it is." Against the contentions of radical postmodernism, he disputes that we create meaning through an exercise of fictive imagination. We can have knowledge, real knowledge, which does not superimpose meaning on texts or objects that are external to us.

Wright argues that essential to historical knowledge is learning to see through the window of a worldview other than our own. These worldviews do four things.⁴ First of all, they provide the *stories* through which humans frame reality. Secondly, these stories address the *questions* being asked by a people—Who are we? Where are we? What is the problem? and, What is the solution? Thirdly, they include *symbols* and *boundary-markers* which express the worldview in daily life. And finally, they include a *praxis*, a plan of action, a way-of-being in the world. After laying out his methodological approach, Wright offers a survey of second-temple Judaism.

Wright suggests that Jewish self-understanding in the second-temple period looks something like this: We are the people of the one true God who have graciously been chosen to be his people and, as his people, to be a light to the nations. We are *geographically* in the holy land, centered in Jerusalem, the city of Zion. *Theologically*, however, we are still in exile—as

the promises have yet to be fulfilled, forgiveness has yet to occur, the wrong rulers are still in power, the age of messianic blessing has been delayed, and *Yahweh* has yet to act in a decisive way in our history. Our hope is that *Yahweh* will act soon and restore righteous rulers to us as we keep covenant with him.⁵ Within this worldview, Israel's symbols—the temple, the Law, circumcision, the land, the festivals, holy war, all of these—reinforce the controlling narrative.

It is on this canvas that Wright paints his portrait of the historical Jesus and his early followers. Volume Two is entitled *Jesus and the Victory of God*. Wright asserts that there are basically five questions needing to be answered if we are to have an intelligent understanding of who Jesus was and is: How does Jesus fit into early Judaism? What were his aims? Why did he die? How did the early church come into being? Why are the gospels the way they are? A sixth question hovers on the horizon of all this investigation. If this is Jesus, so what? What difference does it make who Jesus was historically?⁶

As Wright chases down answers to these questions, a portrait of Jesus emerges which makes him both "comprehensible and crucifiable"⁷ against the background of the first-century. Employing the double criterion of similarity and dissimilarity, Wright portrays a Jesus who was similar enough to Judaism to be intelligible, yet dissimilar enough to be considered a political firebrand dangerous to the nation and deserving of death. Jesus was similar enough to the later concerns of apostolic Christianity to be the source for their theological reflection and missionary activity. His emphases were different enough from the early church, however, that it becomes unreasonable to sustain the notion that the gospel accounts are historically unreliable and should be read as hagiographic retrojections by the first Christians.

So, the reader might ask, who was Jesus and what was he all about? Wright would say that Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet who announced to Israel that her story was reaching its climactic, dramatic fulfillment. God was acting in history. The kingdom was "near," "at hand," "in your midst." So far, so

good. First-century Jews would listen to this with a fair bit of interest. It didn't take much kindling to stoke an already lit fire. They were expecting a new exodus, the messianic age, the dawn of a new era. Jesus knew this story line and told the story in familiar language. At this point Jesus was entirely comprehensible.

Both in word and in deed, Jesus is boldly declaring that he is the focal point of Israel's long and twisted story. This retelling of the Jewish story includes a redefining of the true people of Yahweh. True Israel consists of those who repent of their own kingdom agenda to follow Jesus, trusting his kingdom message and embracing his way of salvation.

But Jesus alters the traditional telling of the story. He mixes up the characters and changes the ending. He has all the wrong people living happily ever after. Yes, *Yahweh* is going to act, but it will be nothing like Israel might expect. Instead of Israel's being vindicated before her enemies, she is under the threat of judgment for pursuing a path of violent resistance to Rome, for failing to keep covenant with *Yahweh* and for rejecting Jesus' kingdom. Instead of Jerusalem and a gloriously rebuilt temple being at the center of God's plan to gather the nations for judgment and/or conversion, the holy city will be laid waste and her temple will be destroyed. Instead of *Yahweh's* bringing his kingdom to those who are obedient to the Torah and ceremonially pure, he will lay out the welcome mat for all sorts of shabby characters—prostitutes, tax collectors and Samaritans. And, perhaps most emphatic of all in the retelling of the story, the kingdom's arrival—including the

restoration of God's people from exile, the return of *Yahweh* to Jerusalem, and the divine victory over evil—will occur in and through Jesus of Nazareth.

Both in word and in deed, Jesus is boldly declaring that he is the focal point of Israel's long and twisted story. This retelling of the Jewish story includes a redefining of the true people of *Yahweh*. True Israel consists of those who repent of their own kingdom agenda to follow Jesus, trusting his kingdom message and embracing his way of salvation.

He preaches and authorizes a forgiveness that sidesteps the centrality of the sacrificial cultus. He acts in mighty deeds that symbolically express a kingdom being inaugurated in his own life and ministry. He tells stories that subvert a typical Jewish reading of the way things are and ought to be. He marginalizes the all-important Jewish symbols of temple, land, family, and Torah. It is no surprise that such a person was considered crucifiable.

His death, however, was much more than a regrettable miscarriage of justice. From the vantagepoint of Jesus' own intention, he had a vocation to die.⁸ Such an act was bound up with his self-understanding and mission. Somewhat as in the movie *Braveheart*, where William Wallace made a trip to Dunkirk in order to pick a fight, Jesus traveled to Jerusalem to stage a showdown—the climactic showdown.

What did Jesus expect would take place in Jerusalem? Wright suggests:

My proposal is that Jesus took his own story seriously—so seriously that, having recommended to his followers a particular way of being Israel-for-the-sake-of-the-world, he made that way thematic for his own sense of vocation, his own belief about how the kingdom would come through his own work. He would turn the other cheek; he would go the second mile; he would take up the cross. He would be the light of the world, the salt of the earth. He would be Israel for the sake of the world. He would be the means of the kingdom's coming, both in that he would embody in himself the renewed Israel and in that he would defeat evil once for all. But the way in which he would

defeat evil would be the way consistent with the deeply subversive nature of his own kingdom-announcement.⁹

The way in which he would defeat evil was the way of the cross, the way of his own apparent defeat at the hands of Roman and Jewish authorities. Jesus, centralizing his own character in the story line of Jewish expectation, experienced in his own body the condition of Israel's exile. He took upon himself the fate of the nation, deliberately enacting the punishment of Isaiah's suffering servant (Isaiah 53). Politically, he modeled the program of peace and rejected the path of nationalistic resistance to Rome (cf. Luke 19:42).

If Jesus' death signaled (among other things) the condition of Israel's exile, the resurrection announced the end of the exile and the dawn of the new age. God, in raising Jesus from death, had in fact ushered in the glorious age when life would be transformed. According to Wright, it is only the reality of a re-embodied Jesus, which can account for the continuation of Christianity as a messianic movement. If the story of Jesus had ended with the messianic pretender's burial in a grave, it would have suggested to his followers (using Wright's analogy) that they had bet on the wrong horse. They may have ventured to continue the movement with another stand-in leader, perhaps a close relative of Jesus. But this revolution neither fizzled out nor did it find a substitute messiah. Rather, the early Christian movement witnessed the appearance of a resurrected Jesus and then announced to the world—pagan and Jewish—that this Jesus was indeed Messiah and Lord.

THE SOURCE OF THE SMOKE

We now turn our attention to a few places where Wright challenges the conventional wisdom of evangelical theology. The four areas I wish to highlight are: his historical methodology, his understanding of Jesus as an eschatological prophet, his understanding of justification by faith and his approach to biblical authority. If you were to walk down the hallway look-

ing for fire in the cathedral, these are some of the doors that would be hot to the touch.

WRIGHT'S HISTORICAL APPROACH

Wright is serious about historical inquiry into the origins of Christianity. He is both a committed Christian and a committed historian. Wearing both hats at the same time, however, leaves him vulnerable to the criticisms of both his academic colleagues and fellow believers. His counterparts in academia accuse him of a believer's bias, alleging that he colors the evidence in order to defend traditional Christianity, or what Crossan labels "an elegant fundamentalism."¹⁰ Wright disputes his critics' claims to unbiased objectivity and argues that there is no such thing as a "view from nowhere." Every person thinks, writes, and reads from "somewhere." Such a confession does not mean that we are confined to a hermeneutical morass of radical subjectivity. But neither are we to think that non-committal, unbelieving secularism is the only legitimate place from which seriously to read the New Testament. At this point, Wright offers a very strong challenge to the methodological assumptions of the scholarly guild.

Evangelical readers will have their own uneasiness with Wright's historical study. Despite the fact that Christianity is a faith deeply rooted in history, evangelicals have been more than a bit nervous about searching for the historical Jesus. For starters, the church is still living in reaction to the Enlightenment project, which concluded its historical investigation of the New Testament by scrapping the miracles, destroying the integrity of the source documents and distorting Jesus beyond either recognition or worship. In our own day, the project is continued by the Jesus Seminar, a pseudo think-tank that leaves us with a whole lot of seminar and not much Jesus. Partly in reaction to this academic approach, and as a precaution against eroding a vital faith, Christians have ended up with Jesus' portraits radically divorced from history. It should be noted that Wright is favorable to many of the Enlightenment's questions, while remaining sharply critical of the movement's presuppositions and conclusions.

Another reason advanced for ignoring the historical investigation is that the whole enterprise seems so unnecessary. What, if anything, can be said that we don't already know? Recently, my son and I were watching an ABC special with Peter Jennings titled *The Search for Jesus*. After its dramatic introduction, which highlighted the bevy of scholars carrying out a new search for the historical Jesus, my son told me: "I don't know why they're looking for Jesus. They'll never find him." Curious about the worldview of a seven-year old, I asked him why they wouldn't find Jesus. He replied, "Because he's in heaven." For my son, the search party could be called off because he knew the Apostle's Creed: the latest word had Jesus at the right hand of the Father. Other well-intentioned Christians call off the whole historical project because they think anything that is significantly new must be significantly wrong if only because it is new.¹¹ Wright calls us to a new search for the historical Jesus, arguing that the older paradigms lack sufficient explanatory power and, also, that the increase in Jewish background literature has made possible a more plausible reading of Jesus and the early church.

A third reason for the church's disengagement from a first-century Jewish Jesus is our tendency to think in abstractions and universals. It has been common for dogmatic theology to work in broad categories, loosely connected to the actual exegesis of specific historical texts. When this happens—when Christian theology becomes unhitched from biblical studies—theology "lapses into a mere *ad hoc* use of the Bible, finding bits and pieces to fit into a scheme derived from elsewhere."¹²

There is a suspicion that, if we read the Bible the way Wright does, we are left with little of relevance to our own day and age. Consider the basis for such evangelical anxiety. Wright carefully and critically works through the primary source material (biblical and extra-biblical) with the aim of arriving at the most plausible reading of the character of early Judaism and Christianity. He continually poses the question, how was this heard in its original audience? When Jesus spoke about repentance, the kingdom of heaven or forgive-

ness of sins, what sense did those terms make to first-century listeners? When he cleansed the temple, withered a fig tree, rode a donkey into Jerusalem, what significance did those actions hold for second temple Jews? Questions such as these reveal Wright's aim to situate Jesus more thoroughly in his particular Jewish milieu.

Wright's Jesus, then, starts out very context-specific. Jesus was not going around dispensing a clever assortment of universal wisdom sayings. He was not setting up a timeless system of ethics. He was speaking a specific message (the kingdom of God) to a specific people (his Jewish contemporaries) and acting out the presence of *Yahweh* in Israel's very particular story. A nervous evangelical may fear that this historical Jesus becomes less accessible to our own day and age. For evangelicals, the Bible is a preached Book. It is central to the church's ongoing proclamation of God's Word to the world. The Bible is believed to have eternal authority and continuing relevance. Wright's approach would seem to compromise that confessional stance. His insistence on a knowledge of Jesus mediated through historical investigation would appear to threaten a pious reading of the Bible that pursues an immediate 'meaning' of the texts.

In response, Wright would say a number of things. First of all, he would argue that our knowledge of Jesus must be based on the Jesus of history. We honor God in our thinking and praying and obeying, not by disregarding history and inventing our own Jesus but, rather, by rigorously committing to discover the Jesus who lived in first-century Judea. Secondly, and correlative to the first point, Wright would warn against the distortions which result from reading our own worldview into the world of the Bible. Simply stated, "well-meaning and pious readers have often been guilty of thinking in categories that are entirely alien to the world of first-century Judaism."¹³ Vitality interested in what the Bible *means*, readers have often lacked a proportional interest in what the Bible *meant*. Thirdly, a more committed study of New Testament history and theology is highly relevant to discipleship in this new millennium. Far from shutting up our Bibles to history, the approach by Wright

prepares the way for the continuing appropriation of Jesus' original mission and message. Wright suggests:

Within the history as we shall see, there will be plenty of material for theology to go to work, though it may be surprised at what it finds. The silhouette of the cross against a darkened sky is more, not less, evocative for our study of the portrait of the man who hung there. And the total historical picture, in all of its complex simplicity, will challenge the most experienced iconographer.¹⁴

Elsewhere, Wright notes:

It should be clear that the church's use of the Gospels prior to, and indeed since the rise of so-called critical historiography has given scant attention to what the Gospels themselves are saying about the actual events of Jesus' life and his kingdom proclamation. It should also be clear that therefore the church is, in effect, sitting on but perhaps paying no attention to a central part of its own tradition that might, perhaps, revitalize or reform the church were it so be significantly investigated.¹⁵

Clearly then, Wright's historical engagement aims to take serious seekers back to another world—a world where Herod reigned, Rome was in control, John was beheaded, Jewish messianic movements dreamed and schemed and Jesus preached the good news of the kingdom. Having lived faithfully then and there, in the dust and drama of ancient Israel, we discover the resources for living out a faithful discipleship here and now.

JESUS AND ESCHATOLOGY

Wright offers a second point of challenge to the more typical evangelical approach in his understanding of Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet. Wright argues that Jesus is most properly understood as an eschatological prophet warning of coming destruction. According to Wright, Jesus stood in continuity with the great prophets of old by offering a critique from

within. He was calling Israel to repentance and announcing *Yahweh's* salvation to those who obeyed the prophetic summons. To those who ignored the message of Jesus, however, continuing to pursue their own kingdom agenda, Jesus threatened judgment.

It is in the precise nature of this eschatological judgment that Wright is at variance with both scholarly tradition and popular evangelical understanding. Wright contends that we have traditionally misread the judgment that Jesus threatened. When Christ warned in his parables and in the Olivet discourse (Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21) about approaching doom, he was not announcing the end of the world as we know it. He was anticipating the desolation of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Jewish Temple, which occurred in A.D. 70.

Some, following the lead of Albert Schweitzer, have read the judgment teaching of Jesus as a prediction of the imminent end of all things, an end destined to be cosmic and universal in scope. According to this reading of the apocalyptic imagery of Matthew 24:29 ("Immediately after the suffering of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of heaven will be shaken"), Jesus gave a mistaken forecast of the near future. The end didn't come. Celestial objects kept their place. Jesus was hopeful, but deluded. Further, it is held that Jesus' followers perpetuated his mistake by living out an "interim ethic" in anticipation of the dissolution of the world.

Wright agrees with Schweitzer that Jesus offered a warning about imminent destruction. But the destruction threatened was not regarding the entire cosmos. Rather, Jesus was employing apocalyptic imagery from the Old Testament to warn the Jews of a shake-up of their symbolic worldview—a shake-up involving the destruction of the Temple, the severe punishment of the Jewish people and the vindication of Jesus and his followers

This view argues strongly against popular evangelical prophecy, which pollutes the world of Christian publishing and television programming. The typical approach reads the apocalyptic language in the Olivet Discourse as literal (in line

with Schweitzer), but relegates it to the still-yet future. Wright argues that both the scholarly tradition descending from Schweitzer and pietistic interpretation are fundamentally mistaken. The cosmic imagery is not referring to a literal dislocation of the sun, moon and stars. The apocalyptic language is "an elaborate metaphor-system for investing historical events with theological significance."¹⁶ The Jews knew "a good metaphor when they saw one, and used cosmic imagery to bring out the full theological significance of cataclysmic socio-political events."¹⁷

These socio-political events centered in and around Jerusalem from A.D. 66-70. Thus, the great tribulation announced by Jesus in Matthew 24 is, for us, an event in the past rather than the future. Likewise, the coming of the Son of Man, spoken of in that particular passage, belongs with the calendar rather than the crystal ball. Because of this pervasive historical reading of the Olivet discourse, Wright is often criticized for an over-realized eschatology which leaves no place for a future *parousia*. In response, he repeatedly assures his critics that he does believe the New Testament speaks of events which are still to come, citing Romans 8, I Corinthians 15 and Revelation 21-22.¹⁸ Wright's position does not deny the creedal affirmation of Christ's coming again to "judge the living and the dead." His position simply emphasizes the fact that the pervasive thrust of New Testament eschatology refers to an apocalyptic 'end' to be fulfilled in the first century.

At this point, some evangelicals might wish to argue for an additional future referent to the Olivet pericope, perhaps invoking a *sensus plenior* for the passage. But Wright counters:

Conservative protestants . . . who have pressed me personally to allow for second-level meanings in Mark 13 and its parallels, meanings that make the passage to refer not only to first-century events but to events yet to come, seem clearly to be looking for a let-out, a way of focusing not on what the passage refers to but on something else. How can this be loyalty to the text?¹⁹

Wright's eschatological reading has raised additional

questions: how can the crucifixion and resurrection be the defeat of evil and the return of *Yahweh* to his people when evil continues unabated to this day? How can the judgment of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 be the end of the evil age and the emergence of the great and coming day of the Lord when the obvious—that much remains unchanged—is too readily observable. Wright argues that we must begin thinking in terms of the dialectic between achievement and implementation. In the death and resurrection of Jesus, *Yahweh* achieved the decisive victory over sin and death. The church has been entrusted with the ongoing task of implementing this achievement.²⁰

PAUL AND JUSTIFICATION

Another area in which Wright challenges conventional evangelical wisdom is in regard to the place and meaning of justification within Paul's theological reflection.²¹ Wright alleges that we misread Paul's confrontation with Judaism if we read the second-temple Jew as a proto-Pelagian, or as a sixteenth century Roman Catholic straw man, who needed to be told that a person was not saved by works of self-improvement but rather by God's free grace in Christ Jesus. Such a reading is anachronistic and misses the context of Paul's thinking.

Roughly put, it is thought by some that Jews believed in works, and Jesus and Paul believed in grace. Such a picture does not accurately describe Paul's problem with Judaism.

In making this criticism, Wright is echoing aspects of the work of Ed Sanders, a towering figure in Pauline scholarship these past twenty-five years. In 1977, Sanders wrote *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, in which he argued that Judaism was not a legalistic religion of works-righteousness. Looking copiously

at the background literature, Sanders claimed that no serious-minded Jew would have considered entry into the covenant people attainable by law-keeping. The law was not an entrance requirement. Rather, within the covenantal scheme of things (which Sanders labels "covenantal nomism"), God graciously chose a people to be his own possession and entrusted them with his Torah, the standard for living responsively to his grace. The Jews were already inside the covenant because of God's initiative; they maintained that covenantal status by observing the law.

In two studies of Pauline theology to date, *The Climax of the Covenant* (1991) and *What Saint Paul Really Said* (1997), Wright accepts Sander's basic point.²² We have to reconsider the problem with Judaism as Paul saw it. Blind-eyed sketches of ancient Judaism create a caricature of the Jews' having the wrong sort of religion, rescued by Jesus and Paul, who have come to announce the right sort. Roughly put, it is thought by some that Jews believed in works, and Jesus and Paul believed in grace. Such a picture does not accurately describe Paul's problem with Judaism.

The "works of the law" which could not justify (Romans 3:28) were not the works of the merit-seeking moralist. Rather, these works were those peculiar to the Jew as a Jew. The Jews could not be saved by insisting on their national, racial privilege. The importance of this shift in emphasis is underscored by McGrath when he writes:

It is important to appreciate at this point that it is not merely evangelical interpretations of the phrase "works of the law" that are called into question by Wright. Having studied the development of the Western interpretation of Paul on justification over a period of 1,800 years, I have to report that, until recently, virtually every writer within that tradition of interpretation treated the notion of works of the law in this manner, irrespective of whether the interpreter is Protestant or Catholic, evangelical or not. It is for this reason that the general line of interpretation, developed by Sanders, which is echoed in (yet modified by) Wright, is of such significance.²³

According to Wright, what frames Paul's discussion of the "works of the law" and justification are the important ideas of eschatology, covenant, and the lawcourt. Various first-century Jewish sects considered their intensification of Torah observance a signal that they would be vindicated in the future day of judgment.²⁴ Their obedience to the law was not self-help, gutting it out in order to be saved. Rather, particular groups of first-century Jews intended to be the advance guard of God's righteous kingdom and saw themselves as the true Israel living in anticipation of that great and glorious day. Imagine Paul's speaking into this world with his gospel announcement. Jewish expectation in the second temple period was fairly well laid out like an elaborate Etch-A-Sketch drawing. Paul, following the lead of Jesus, comes in and shakes up the picture.

Paul argues that the Jewish works of the law were inadequate in their failure to recognize the decisive importance of what God had done in and through Jesus. What Israel anticipated at the end of time—vindication, deliverance, victory over evil, final judgment—God had accomplished in the middle of time through the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.²⁵ It was this great eschatological event, revealed to Paul in the vision of an exalted Jesus, which set Paul's mind to rethink the plight of humanity and God's grand solution.

Paul discovered that God had acted climactically on behalf of his people in Jesus. God had displayed his righteousness (*dikaïosunê theou*) understood as his "covenant faithfulness") by keeping the promise made to Abraham and his descendants. He had dealt with sin once for all and would now vindicate his people. But who, in fact, were the people to be vindicated? According to Paul's gospel, all those who believe in Jesus would now belong to God's covenant family. Irrespective of racial identity and Torah observance, access had been opened to all nations because of Jesus' death. The Jews could no longer cling to the Torah as a union card for admittance into God's restored Israel. All the laws that fenced them in as a distinct people (food laws, circumcision, sabbath observance) had to be radically reconsidered in the light of God's renewed covenant community.

In this context, justification marks out who belongs to this new renewed family. Justification,

is not a matter of how someone enters the community of the true people of God, but of how you tell who belongs to that community. . . . It was about God's eschatological definition, both future and present, of who was, in fact, a member of his people. In Sanders' terms, it was not so much about 'getting in', or indeed about 'staying in', as about 'how you could tell who was in'. In standard Christian theological language, it wasn't so much about soteriology as about ecclesiology; not so much about salvation as about the church.²⁶

Those who are recognized as belonging to this new covenant community are those, whose sins are forgiven, who are recognized as 'righteous' before God's law court.

Critics of Wright's understanding of justification (an understanding often termed the "new perspective") may conclude that he is dancing on a land mine and threatening the settled ground of core orthodoxy. Wright, however, believes that if you start from his angle and emphasize justification in the context of Jewish thought (its covenantal, judicial and eschatological dimensions), you get the rest thrown in. "If you start with the popular view of justification, you may actually lose sight of the heart of the Pauline gospel; whereas if you start with the Pauline gospel itself, you will get justification in all its glory thrown in as well."²⁷

Wright argues that this reading offers a much more plausible and coherent understanding of Paul, the law, Judaism and justification. It offers the most faithful reading of the pertinent texts. In its biblical and historical context, then, justification is not "how someone *becomes* a Christian. It is the declaration that they *have become* a Christian."²⁸

It is worth mentioning here that Wright considers the new perspective on justification to be extremely relevant to the contemporary church (*What Saint Paul Really Said*, 157-161). Properly understood in its biblical and historical context, justification calls the church to a more communal self-aware-

ness, an energetic pursuit of unity, a commitment to holy living and a courageous confrontation with the powers of the world.

Of pressing interest to many evangelicals is Wright's claim that justification is the doctrine that impels the churches, in their current fragmented state, into the ecumenical task. It cannot be right that the very doctrine which declares that all who believe in Jesus belong at the same table (Galatians 2) should be used as a way of saying that some, who define the doctrine of justification differently, belong to a different table. (*What Saint Paul Really Said*, p. 158)

In recent years there has been considerable dialogue between Protestants and Roman Catholics regarding their divisions and their unity. Questions abound: What should determine eucharistic fellowship? Who should we recognize as members of the family? Is there anything to be gained by dialogue? Does a commitment to the ecumenical task inevitably lead to compromise?

For those Catholics and Protestants uninterested in dialogue, all that remains is a reenactment of the Reformation War. Protestants inherit a framework, which asserts that the mark of a church's legitimacy is her allegiance to justification by faith properly defined. Losing this cardinal truth, she has lost all. Such a paradigm reinforces the historic war policy: the opposing armies must drop their theological arms, unconditionally surrender their doctrinal position or we'll continue to shell them with the same dogmatic buckshot.

If Wright's exegesis stands—that is, if Wright is correct in assessing the biblical and historical dimensions of Paul, the law, and justification by faith—then it follows that both camps (Protestant and Catholic) would have something to learn from a more precisely focused doctrine of justification. And what they learn could set a match to some longstanding paradigms in the western church.

WRIGHT AND BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

Finally, Wright challenges evangelicals to a reconsideration of biblical authority. From the outset, it should be noted that the issue is not *if* the Bible is authoritative but the *manner* in which it is authoritative.²⁹ Too often the Bible is read like a code book for all of life's questions, a sort of Chilton's auto manual giving us an exhaustively detailed blueprint for the repair of life and church and society. It is this way of reading the Bible that leads to an endless amount of clever proof-texting, whereby we force Scripture to address what it never intended to address. Wright seeks to offer a different model.³⁰ He likens a Christian reading of the ancient text to what he terms "faithful improvisation." Imagine, he says, that we discover one of Shakespeare's lost plays. Further, imagine that the play is lacking a fifth and final act. What would be necessary for that play to come to life would be a trained group of Shakespearean actors to improvise the final act. These actors would not simply be winging it. Rather, they would immerse themselves in the first four acts and the other plays of the famed English writer. They would then act out their parts, striving to be faithful to the developing plot and character portrayals.

The church's reading of the Bible is likened to this imaginary group of actors. We have a script (what Wright terms a "meta-narrative") consisting of four parts: Act One is creation; Act Two is the fall; Act Three is Israel; and Act Four is Jesus and the church. The fifth and final act is the church's ongoing improvisation of the developing story. We, as Jesus' actors, are called to inhabit the world of the Bible and then act out that worldview for a new day.

The promise of such a model is the merging of the two different worlds of the writer and the reader.³¹ On the one hand, we are not radical revisionists when it comes to reading the Bible. There is authorial intent. There is an existing narrative. So we are called to a faithful reading that is continuous with the received script. We are called to consider what the Bible means by considering what the Bible meant. On the

other hand, the changing world of the changing reader demands that the church continually reenact the ancient story as Script-inspired and Spirit-inspired actors. Loyalty to the original playwright and composer demands faithful improvisation of the original script and score for a new audience and a new day.

CONCLUSION

Wright's ambitious theological project will continue to sound an alarm to the occupants of existing evangelical paradigms. Questions will continue to be raised about Wright's picture of second-temple Judaism, his understanding of Jesus' own self-consciousness, his understanding of Paul and the law and his reading of New Testament eschatology. At the end of the day, the primary consideration for a thoughtful evangelical must be this: has Wright achieved a more plausible and comprehensible picture of the origins of early Christianity? Is the picture of Jesus and the early church clearer because of Wright's interpretation of the biblical text and the worldview, which informs the biblical text?

My Berean hunches tell me yes. Wright has provided us with a history of early Christianity that is magisterial in scope, remarkably solid in its hermeneutical foundation, and grand in its witness to the Jesus of history. He has well situated his readers inside the narrative thought world of second temple Judaism. It is there, in that ancient air, on that dusty soil, that Jesus is to be understood and believed. It is that Jesus, so firmly grounded in the Jewish world of a backwoods province in the ancient Roman Empire, who is the Jesus of our own hopes and aspirations, our worship and allegiance.

Author

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Notes

1. Carey Newman, ed., *Jesus and the Restoration of Israel: A Critical Assessment of N.T. Wright's Jesus and the Victory of God* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1999), 178.
2. *Jesus and the Restoration of Israel*, 169.
3. N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*. Volume I of *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1992), 35.
4. *The New Testament and the People of God*, 123-24.
5. *The New Testament and the People of God*, 243.
6. N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*. Volume II of *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress, 1996) 90-91.
7. *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 98.
8. *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 593.
9. *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 564-565.
10. *Jesus and the Restoration of Israel*, 297, n. 84.
11. Stephen Evans, though not dismissing the need for historical investigation, finds Wright's historical portrait problematic because of its elements of novelty: "it must be said, that to the degree that Wright's reading of the narrative is absolutely original, it seems less probable that it could be true, insofar as the reading is seen as an attempt to describe the significance of Jesus' life in a way that is useful for Christian theology." *Jesus and The Restoration of Israel*, 203.
12. *The New Testament and the People of God*, 138.
13. *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 613.
14. *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 611.
15. *Jesus and The Restoration of Israel*, 251.
16. *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 96.
17. *New Testament and the People of God*, 333.
18. *Jesus and the Restoration of Israel*, 261-272.
19. *Jesus and the Restoration of Israel*, 265-266.
20. *Jesus and the Restoration of Israel*, 272. This church's role in implementing the kingdom is described in these popular works by Wright: *The Way of the Lord: Christian Pilgrimage in the Holy Land and Beyond* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); *The Lord and His Prayer* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1996); *Bringing the Church to the World* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House, 1992)
21. It should be recognized that Wright has yet to write a full and sustained exposition of justification. Future publications (not least, a commen-

- tary on Romans scheduled to appear in 2002) will treat the issue in more detail.
22. Wright goes beyond Sanders in many ways, both in his methodology and in his conclusions. It should be noted that not all of the theological socks match, which are commonly lumped into the categorical drawer named the 'new perspective'. There are differences between the respective theologians proposing this rethink of Paul's interaction with Judaism.
 23. *Jesus and the Restoration of Israel*, 173.
 24. N.T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1997) 119.
 25. *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 36, 127.
 26. *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 119.
 27. *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 113.
 28. *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 125.
 29. Wright states: "The modes of reading and interpretation that have been followed are, in fact, functions of the models of inspiration and authority of scripture that have been held, explicitly or (more often) implicitly within various circles, and which have often made nonsense of any attempt to read the Bible historically." *New Testament and the People of God*, 60.
 30. The model can be found in *New Testament and the People of God*, 140-142 and in his lecture and published essay, "How Can the Bible Be Authoritative?" in *Vox Evangelica*, April 1991.
 31. Such a model has been recently employed in various areas such as pastoral ministry, worship, the doctrine of baptism, Christian apologetic and Christian ethics. See J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh. *Truth is Stranger Than It Used to Be* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995) 182-184; Marva Dawn and Eugene Peterson. *The Unnecessary Pastor*, (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing), 29-30; Marva Dawn. *A Royal 'Waste' of Time: The Splendor of Worshipping God and Being Church for the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999) 53-54; Rodney Clapp. *A Peculiar People: The Church as Culture in a Post-Christian Society* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 138-139; Donald Bridges and David Phypers, *The Water that Divides: A Survey of the Doctrine of Baptism*, (Ross-Shire, Britain: Mentor Press, 1998), 174-175; Eugene Peterson, *Eat This Book*, (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing), 84-85; See also France Young, *Virtuoso Theology: The Bible and Interpretation*, (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 1993); Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996), pp. 304-306. Hays describes the church as an embodied metaphor, called to 'perform' the Scriptures.

Whenever a client retains a patron of some sort (lawyer, doctor, coach, etc.), the implication is that the client is going to remain committed to the patron for as long as it takes to receive the desired benefit. So just as it would be a travesty for sick patients to have confidence in their doctors only during the first consultation and thereafter to ignore their advice, so it is unthinkable that people could receive forgiveness from God just at their first act of faith and after that see no further need to believe and obey him.

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