

Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision

N. T. Wright

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Readers of this journal are well aware of the controversy surrounding N. T. Wright's reading of Paul's theology. Since the publication of his 1997 book, *What St. Paul Really Said* (Eerdmans), Wright has been associated with what has been called 'the new perspective on Paul' and has endured withering criticism. Wright here responds to John Piper's critique, *The Future of Justification: A Response to N. T. Wright* (Crossway, 2007); his aims are to set forth definitively his exegesis of Paul on justification, to defend his evangelical credentials and to demonstrate his loyalty to the Reformation spirit.

First, Piper criticises Wright for situating Paul within the context of first-century Judaism rather than the heritage of Reformed theology. Wright responds that Piper's move is a 'disturbing' departure from evangelical interpretive method (p. 51). Evangelicals, in faithfulness to the Reformed vision of 'always reforming', have strived always to hold their tradition more lightly than their Bibles, allowing the latter constantly to purify and transform the former. Piper, secondly, attempts to situate Wright as a scholar pursuing what is fashionable whereas Piper is a pastor who recognises that the pressing need of the day is for a faithful articulation of justification. This is unfair. Wright also writes with a pastoral concern, and he, too, is attempting to interpret Scripture faithfully.

A third preliminary point by Piper to which Wright responds is that the crying need of the day is for individuals to be assured of their standing before God. This is indeed important, but in Wright's view, Paul's theological vision is more robust and comprehensive, involving God reclaiming humanity for his name and restoring his broken creation. This inevitably involves, of course, other important issues, such as the salvation of individuals and the assurance of salvation, but Wright's main burden is to understand *Paul's* concerns, taking in the whole of his theology.

The orienting point for Wright is the Scriptural narrative, the account of the Creator God's call of Israel to be the people through whom God redeems creation. This mission of God helps to inform Paul's use of 'righteousness' language, and Wright contends that the best way to understand Paul's use of this word, along with related terms, is to relate it to God's own 'covenant faithfulness'—God's faithfulness to his own creation (p. 63) and his faithfulness to his promises to Israel (p. 65). When applied to humans, 'righteousness' and 'justification' language have the law court for an interpretive context. When God justifies a person, then, God de-

clares that one to be in the right. He vindicates him, finding him to have the status of 'righteous' in the eyes of the court (p. 69).

Much more, of course, must be said about Christian salvation than this, but Wright's contention is that for Paul, justification functioned very narrowly. In later Christian theological development, however, it became loaded with far more freight than it was supposed to bear. In one sense, this is to be expected in the course of the development of Christian doctrine. But when we expect Paul to be addressing later concerns when he talks about justification, we will be confused and disappointed. There are other theological tools at Paul's disposal, such as believers' incorporation into Christ, the work of the Holy Spirit and the death and resurrection of Christ. Each of these radiates significance and the manner in which they all inter-relate must be grasped rightly in order to understand how Paul's thought works. This is largely Wright's point in chapter 4.

Some may remember the Edinburgh Dogmatics Conference in 2003 in which Wright had a lively, direct and charitable exchange with Simon Gathercole over this topic. Many had come with suspicions heightened, prepared to disagree strongly with Wright. After intense theological dialogue and a wonderful time of fellowship, however, there was a clear recognition that many criticisms were wide of the mark and that Wright's work was in direct continuity with the spirit of the reformers. Most of the attendees left having embraced a brother and ally in the pursuit of faithfulness to God. In the same way, this book is a vigorous exercise in Scripture interpretation, and a charitable reading ought to help eliminate confusion and misunderstanding.

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