

# Critical Realism and the Relation of Redemptive Act to Revelatory Word

By James J. Cassidy

The current debate over the New Perspective on Paul (NPP) with reference to the doctrine of justification has focused largely upon particular, and at times isolated doctrinal formulations. So much so, in fact, that its adherents' presuppositions have been all but overlooked. In other words, we would do well to ask the question: what is the posture of the advocates of the NPP when they approach the text of Scripture? What is their foundational assumption with reference to the authority of the Bible and the interpreter's relation, responsibility, and response to it?

In particular we will look at N.T. Wright's approach to interpreting Scripture and his presuppositions with reference to the Bible. Wright is, among the major proponents of the NPP, the most prolific in his writing and also the most popular in the church. This does not mean, of course, that his presuppositions about the text of Scripture and how to approach it are the same as the other advocates. But he is, out of all the NPP proponents, the scholar with whom we must reckon.

## WRIGHT'S CRITICAL REALISM

In the first volume of his aggressive program for a New Testament theology,<sup>1</sup> Wright sets forth his proposal for how the historian should approach the text of Scripture. This approach is dubbed by him as "critical realism."<sup>2</sup> Wright is self-consciously reacting against any kind of "reductionism" in historiography, which is to say that he wants to avoid the assumption that history is a "brute fact." This is assumed by Christian scholarship of the fundamentalist stripe which believes that the text of the bible is "objective" history; that is, history which has (as it were) dropped from the sky. Additionally Wright is reacting against critical scholarship—like that of Rudolf Bultmann—which denies any value for history from the biblical text. For such scholars, the text is untrustworthy

because the author of the text has a "bias" in his story telling and thus lacks objectivity. Wright says:

The equivalent in reading of the gospels in the twentieth century has been the apparently 'scientific' statement that 'Every text is first and foremost evidence for the circumstances in and for which it was composed.' The critic then responds to the [authors of the gospels]: 'you only say that (this story about Jesus, this word or saying) because you're a Christian.' True enough in some ways, but manifestly not enough in others. If being a mathematician might entitle somebody to a hearing on the subject of numbers, being a Christian *might* mean that someone should be given a hearing on the subject of Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

He then zeros in on Bultmann in particular:

As a particular example, it must be asserted most strongly that to discover that a particular writer has a 'bias' tells us nothing whatever about the value of the

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1. We will be drawing our material for understanding Wright's use of the critical realism approach from the first volume of the series, "Christian Origins and the Question of God": *The New Testament and the People of God: Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), see esp. pp. 32ff. Only two additional volumes have appeared in the series: *Jesus and the Victory of God: Christian Origins and the Question of God, Volume 2* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), and *The Resurrection of the Son of God: Christian Origins and the Question of God, Volume 3* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003).

2. See also Ben Meyer's, *Critical Realism and the New Testament*. Princeton Theological Monograph Series, v. 17 (Allison Park, Pa.: Pickwick, 1989).

3. *The New Testament*, p. 89. In this article all emphasis is original unless otherwise noted.

information he or she presents. It merely bids us be aware of the bias (and of our own, for that matter), and to assess the material according to as many sources as we can. 'Intellectual honesty consists not in forcing an impossible neutrality, but in admitting that neutrality is not possible.' Similarly, the fear of 'objectivization' which so affected Rudolf Bultmann's theology may be laid to rest. Bultmann, within his neo-Kantian philosophical heritage, was anxious about seeming to talk of objects or events other than by talking of them in relation to the observer. He therefore insisted (among other things) on doing theology by doing anthropology, following Feuerbach in collapsing god-talk into man-talk. We simply do not have to accept such false dichotomies. It is not the case that some things are purely objective and others purely subjective, or that one must reduce either to the other. Life, fortunately, is more complicated than that (Wright, *The New Testament*, 89–90).

This is, to be sure, a helpful critique of Bultmann, and modern scholarship in general. Here Wright unmasks the false assumption that because an author may be "biased" or not "objective" makes said author's history telling automatically unreliable. This unmasking is long overdue in biblical scholarship.

Now, that is critical realism negatively defined. More positively, Wright described critical realism in these terms:

Over against both of these positions [i.e., positivism on the one hand and skepticism on the other], I propose a form of *critical realism*. This 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 fully 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'). This path leads to critical reflection on the products of our enquiry into 'reality', so that our assertions about 'reality' acknowledge their own provisionality. Knowledge, in other words, although in principle concerning realities independent of the knower, is never itself independent of the knower (Wright, *The New Testament*, 35).

Dennis Ingolfsland, in summarizing Wright's position, says it well when he writes:

4. Dennis Ingolfsland, "The Historical Jesus according to John Meier and N. T. Wright," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 155 (Oct 1998) 467. Also, see Scott J. Hafemann's helpful review of *The New Testament and the People of God* in *JETS* 40/2 (June 1997) 305.

Wright begins by laying an epistemological and world-view foundation for the historical study of Jesus and the New Testament. Arguing against both historical positivism and phenomenism, Wright advocates the philosophy of "critical realism," which proposes a "spiraling path" of interaction between the "knower" and the thing to be known. With "critical realism" as the epistemological foundation for his historiography, Wright proceeds to argue that history should be researched like other sciences, that is, by developing hypotheses and proposing tests to determine their validity.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, we should not be so naïve as to think that we can gain a perfect picture of the historical Jesus in the gospels, but we should also not be so skeptical as to think that we can get no picture of him whatsoever. So, we approach the text realizing that we have biases and presuppositions, and we go to the text being open to have those biases changed by the data of the text.

This we must bear in mind as we evaluate the data presented to us by the authors of the text of the gospels. We are to approach them and their history telling as critical realists. We can only see the historical Jesus through the lens of their own perspective. This does not mean, as much of postmodern scholarship has concluded, that we can not then "see" the historical Jesus through the gospel writers. The object of our study does not disappear just because we view him through the lens of another person's history telling. Wright says:

We are looking at events. The lens may distort, or the fact of looking with only one eye may lead us into errors of perspective; we may well need other lenses and view points to correct such errors; but we are looking at events none the less.... As applied to the gospels, this clearly means that, although we must read them with our eyes and ears open for the evangelists' own perspective ... (Wright, *The New Testament*, 90–91).

In this way then, the historian comes to the text as critic. He stands above the text, as it were, to evaluate it for truth and trustworthiness with reference to the object of study—in this case, the historical Jesus.

To summarize in a word, it's all about perspective. The interpreter must be self-conscious of his own perspective, presupposition, and biases when he approaches the text. This is the *sine qua non* of the task of the exegete, less he unduly import into the text a meaning that flows from his own preconceptions of what the text ought to say, rather than the text itself. But, what is more, the interpreter must also be conscious

of the text's own presuppositions—where the human author is coming from, i.e., his perspective—as it tells the story which stands back of the text. So, what we get in the text is never “mere history,”<sup>5</sup> or a “neutral perspective on events” (Wright, *The New Testament*, 83), as if we are receiving some kind of camera-recorded take on the story. Thus, at the end of the day, what we are left with is a picture of Jesus that is not quite pristine. Like a view through a fishbowl, it is real enough, but a bit distorted.

#### AN EVALUATION OF CRITICAL REALISM

Wright's approach is a breath of fresh air, especially if the air you have been breathing in has been filled with the noxious fumes of postmodern hermeneutics. Contemporary scholarship has been heavily bent toward the reader response approach to the Bible.<sup>6</sup> On this approach, the meaning of the text is not found within the text at all, but rather in the mind of the reader. The text is the proverbial wax nose, shaped according to the whim and will of the interpreter. Therefore, any knowledge of the text itself, and therefore the object of which the text speaks, is impossible. We revel in the deconstruction of the text and simply “have fun” with it, inviting imaginative interpretations.

It is to this type of skepticism (not to mention irrationalism) that Wright is responding. He can appreciate postmodern hermeneutic as it sought to correct the problems in more rationalistic approaches developed out of the Enlightenment. But Wright seeks to rein back in postmodern hermeneutics with its proclivity of going to the opposite extreme. In this way Wright offers a healthy critique of both modern and postmodern interpretive methods.

Likewise, for those who are particularly appreciative of Cornelius Van Til and his presuppositional approach to apologetics, much of what N.T. Wright says resonates.<sup>7</sup> We all come to the text with presuppositions—who can deny that? However, before slapping the label “Van Tillian” on Wright, we need to pause and evaluate some of his own presuppositions.

It seems that Wright, with his critical realistic approach, still has not as of yet shed his historical-critical assumptions. At the heart of these assumptions are at least two major points: (1) man stands over the Bible—not under it, and (2) there is an unbridgeable gap between redemptive act and revelatory word. It is these unbelieving presuppositions that we must expose if we ever wish to mount a meaningful and successful attack against the teachings of the NPP where it deviates from

the system of doctrine contained in the bible and summarized in the Reformed creedal documents.

Now immediately a point of clarification needs to be made. We are not saying, nor are we even remotely intimating, that N.T. Wright is an “unbeliever.” To make a judgment on such a thing goes well beyond the scope of this essay and beyond the ability of any man to know what is in another man's heart. However, the presuppositions he adopts are unbelieving presuppositions—that is, presuppositions which stem from the wisdom of man and not from God. Let us explain.

#### 1. *Man Standing Over the Bible: The Would-Be Autonomous Interpreter*

The first assumption of the higher-critical school (i.e., man stands over the Bible—not under it) stems from the would-be autonomous interpreter's thinking that he possesses some inalienable right to approach the text of the Bible in a posture of *dominance*. Such an assumption says (more unconsciously than consciously): “I am man, who knows better. Before me I have a brute text in need of handling according to modern day's most brilliant scientific innovations.<sup>8</sup> I stand after the text; thus, I am wiser than the text. I treat the text as an object of critical analysis.”

In support of this, we come back again to Wright's own words, in which he sets forth a “critical realist” epistemology, when he says:

... 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* ... (Wright, *The New Testament*, 35).

When this principle is then applied to the work of interpreting the text of Scripture, the interpreter is to “dialogue” and have a “conversation” with the “thing known” (i.e., say for instance, the text of the gospels). On this thinking, the human interpreter is, at best, on an equal footing with the text of Scripture; just as two

5. Wright, *The New Testament*. See his discussion on pp. 82ff.

6. For a fine survey of the history of higher criticism in general, and reader response hermeneutics in particular, see John Barton's *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1996).

7. Perhaps this goes towards explaining why N.T. Wright has become so popular within conservative Reformed circles.

8. For the connection between critical realism in the field of science and critical realism in the field of theology and hermeneutics, see Ian G. Barbour, *Religion in an Age of Science: The Gifford Lectures 1989–1991* (San Francisco: Harper, 1990).

people are on equal footing as they have a dialogue or conversation.

The question then becomes: *if I and the author of the gospels are on an equal footing, why should I believe what they have to say about Jesus?* Wright may respond, “because we establish the basic reliability of that author as a good historian by drawing in other sources” (for “sources” read: Second Temple literature). At first blush, we may be encouraged to hear Wright argue for the basic reliability of the authors of the gospels. But is this a good and faithful approach to establishing the gospel writer’s knowledge of Jesus? Somehow we can not help but to desire a greater assurance. As for us, we believe it is a (grave) mistake to try to establish the truth of the text of Scripture before discussing its *inspiration*.<sup>9</sup>

The answer to the question *how do I know the historical Jesus*, can only be answered on the basis of an infallible and inspired text. Furthermore, we trust that we get the historical Jesus in the Bible, not because we have established Mark (for instance) as a reliable historian by having a conversation with him. Rather, because Mark was inspired by the Holy Spirit to write truth; and we know that truth through the same Spirit who enlightens our minds to trust and believe Mark’s account. Yes, there is something to be said for establishing Mark as a good historian, but at the end of the day the only reason why we would believe Mark is because of the Holy Spirit’s work in us.

The Reformed creedal tradition speaks clearly to this issue. For example, the Westminster Confession of Faith says:

The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man ... but wholly upon God ... and therefore it is to be received, *because it is the Word of God* (1.4).<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, the Confession goes on to affirm:

We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the Church to an high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scripture, and the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the con-

sent of all the parts, the scope of the whole, (which is to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man’s salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God; yet, notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth, and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the word in our hearts (Confession of Faith, 1.5)

Some explication of these paragraphs in the Confession is necessary. The Confession is teaching us that we “may” come to have a high regard for Scripture as we look at the evidences contained therein of its being divinely inspired, but that is never the reason *why* we believe them to be the Word of God. The reason why we are to have a high regard for the Scripture is, according to paragraph four, *because it is the Word of God* and—now in the language of paragraph five—because of the Holy Spirit *bearing witness by and with the word in our hearts*.

In other words, we do not, in the words of Cornelius Van Til, “first ... establish the question of the truth of the Bible before [we discuss] its inspiration” (*The Doctrine of Scripture*, 69). To do otherwise is to assume that there is an authority apart from and outside of Scripture to which Scripture itself must bow. Scripture does not come to the bar of human reason and man’s demand for proof of its authority. Rather man must come to the bar of Scripture and humbly submit to its inherent authority as the inspired Word of God. Critical realism does not take the latter position, but the former. It places man, at the least, on a par with Scripture as he converses and dialogues with it.

Now, this is not to dismiss Wright’s laudable efforts in arguing for the basic historical reliability of the gospel account(s) with reference to the historical Jesus. As the Confession says, such evidences in the text which commend the biblical account as reliable may certainly induce us to a high view of the Bible as the Word of God. So, our qualm is not with Wright’s effort to defend the reliability of the biblical account as much as it is with his *posture* towards the Bible in his critical realist approach. As we will discuss below, this posture yields bad fruit with reference to not only the doctrine of Scripture, but also with the doctrine of justification.

All this is to say that at the end of the day Wright falls prey to the same modernistic assumptions he seeks to subvert. Critical realism is a contemporary scientific (and thus an epistemological) principle being applied to

9. See C. Van Til, *The Doctrine of Scripture* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1967).

10. All citations from the Confession of Faith are from: *The Confession of Faith and Catechisms: The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms as adopted by The Orthodox Presbyterian Church with Proof Texts* (Willow Grove, Pa.: The Committee on Christian Education of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2005). Emphasis mine.

the discipline of reading an ancient (but what is more, inspired) text. The modern historian, if he is to get to the historical Jesus, must read through the presuppositions of the author. Even then, the reader is still left with a distorted picture. The problem of the (false) dichotomy between the Jesus of history and the Jesus of faith, the Jesus of *Historie* and the Jesus of *Geschichte*, remains unresolved.

## 2. *The Unbridgeable Gap: Redemptive Act and Revelatory Word*

Connected with the first assumption is the second; i.e., that there is no relation between redemptive act and revelatory word. The would-be autonomous interpreter is left on his own to get to the significance and the meaning of the redemptive work of God in history through Jesus of Nazareth. This kind of interpreter, far from taking the posture of a servant who submits to the text of Scripture, stands above the text of Scripture using it like a tool to get beyond and behind the text to the redemptive act itself. In this vein, Wright readily admits that what Jesus did in history had redemptive significance—if only we can get back there and find out exactly what it is he did and why. And of course this is exactly what Wright thinks we can do, using the critical realist method.<sup>11</sup> Wright explains:

To begin with, history involves not only the study of 'what happened' in the sense of 'what physical events would a video camera have recorded,' but also the study of *human intentionality*.... this involves looking at, or at least for, the 'inside' of an event. We are trying to discover what the humans involved in the event thought they were doing, wanted to do, or tried to do (*The New Testament*, 109).

In this way then, the interpreter tries to look for the "inside meaning" of a historical event. And he does so by asking three basic questions of the historical subject: 1) what was their aim, 2) their intention, and 3) their motivation. With reference to their aim, Wright explains:

By *aim* I mean the fundamental direction of a person's life, or some fairly settled subset of that fundamental direction. This aim is thus the directional aspect of an individual's *mindset*, by which I mean the individual subset of, or variant on, the *worldview* held by the society or societies to which the individual belongs (110).

It should be kept in mind where Wright is heading with this notion—what is the meaning, the "inside", of the events of Jesus' life. And it is the goal of the biblical interpreter to get to that meaning through the critical realist method; or, having "dialogue" and "conversation" with the text of the gospel accounts.

Wright continues in his *The New Testament* to explain what he means by "intention."

By *intention* I mean the specific application of the 'aim' in a particular (and in principle repeatable) situation.... When we look at Jesus' 'intention' in going to Jerusalem for his last and fateful Passover, we must see it in the light of his overall 'aim': how did his intention on this occasion relate to the underlying aims and goals which motivated him throughout his ministry (110–111)?

So, in other words, through the biblical text, the historian gains historical data (i.e., what Jesus did), although he does so through the lenses of the gospel writers. So, the interpreter's job is to get back of those lenses, and by way of "dialogue" with the text, try to determine the meaning (or the "inside") of Jesus' actions. Of course, we see this approach as faulty because we believe that the interpreter is not to try to get behind the lenses of the author, but rather he is get those lenses for himself! The lenses through which Mark (for example) tells his story of Jesus *is* the authoritative, ultimate, and final revelatory interpretation of the "inside" and the "why" of Jesus' actions. In so much as we can speak of Mark's "bias," "agenda," or "perspective" on Jesus, that much we can say it is God's<sup>12</sup> "perspective" on the events of Jesus. The "lens", then, through which Mark views Jesus is not something to be by-passed by the interpreter, but is that with which he has to do. We will try to reinforce this point below.

However, before we do that, we must discuss the third and final aspect to moving from event to meaning, the "motivation." Wright explains:

By *motivation* I mean the specific sense, on one specific occasion, that a certain action or set of actions is appropriate and desirable. Jesus' aim was (we may say) to inaugurate the 'kingdom of God'; his intention, towards the end of his life, was to go to Jerusalem; within both of these he was motivated on one particular day to go into the Temple and set about overturning tables (111).

11. *The New Testament*, see his discussion on pp. 109–118.

12. Contrary to Wright's common usage of "god," I am happy to maintain the capital "G."

We could not agree more! But the question for Wright is still an epistemological one: how do you know what Jesus' aim, intention, or motivation was? Wright rightly cautions against speculations as to what is in the mind of our historical subject when he says, "This does not mean that history is covert psychology" (111). Again, we are in full agreement. So, how then can we know the intentions—i.e., the meaning—of Jesus' actions? Wright admits it's not easy because Jesus is "a subject of whom we only know what history has happened to leave behind," although,

We *might* be able to make intelligent guesses at the psychological state of Napoleon, or Martin Luther, or even Jesus; but to do so is to face enormous difficulties (Wright, *The New Testament*, 111).

We hope we do not draw an uncharitable conclusion from this statement when we say that Wright has just leveled the playing field in the historical and interpretive effort between secular and sacred history. It is true we most certainly *may* guess as to the aims, intentions, and motivation of a historical subject like Martin Luther. But, if the Westminster Confession is correct in what it says about Scripture, the Gospels included, then we most certainly *may not* offer any intelligent (or otherwise!) guesses at the aims, intentions, and motivations of "even Jesus." For Mark (or, for that matter, any of the other three evangelists) provides us with the holy, inspired, and infallible interpretation (i.e., the "why") of Jesus' actions.

This is where Geerhardus Vos can provide for us a helpful as well as a thoroughly believing and consistent approach to bridging that gap between act and word, between the historical Jesus and the inspired

text of the Gospels. Vos puts it succinctly in his *Biblical Theology*:

... revelation does not stand alone by itself, but is ... inseparably attached to another activity of God, which we call *Redemption*.... Revelation is the interpretation of redemption.<sup>13</sup>

Or, to put it another way:

Divine acts are no doubt an integral part of revelation, but they derive their revealing power only from *divine words* preceding, accompanying and following them, by which they are placed in their proper light.<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, Michael Horton, thinking Vos' thoughts after him, summarizes the relationship between "redemptive event" and "revelatory/interpretive word" well when he writes,

... revelation unfolds in exact proportion to the unfolding of redemption, announcing and *interpreting the acts of God in history*.<sup>15</sup>

Accordingly then, the problem with Wright's overall orientation to the New Testament is that he does not see the New Testament as authoritative and divine "revelatory/interpretive word." To be sure, Wright speaks of the New Testament as authoritative. However, he recasts that term in a whole new light (Wright, *The New Testament*, 139–143). He compares the Bible to a Shakespearean play, the Old Testament being the first four acts of the play. He asks us to imagine this play which had four acts and then the fifth act was left off, to be improvised by the actors along the general trajectory of the first four acts.<sup>16</sup> If the Old Testament is the first four acts, and the Gospels are the first scene of the fifth act (with the epistles and Revelation giving us some hints as to how the play should ultimately end), that leaves those doing theology in the church as the improvising actors trying to faithfully follow the trajectory of the first four acts and first scene of the fifth act. Wright summarizes his position when he says:

I am proposing a notion of 'authority' which is not simply vested in the New Testament, or in 'New Testament theology', nor simply in 'early Christian history' and the like, conceived positivistically, but in the creator god himself, and this god's story with the world, seen as focused on the story of Israel and thence on the story of Jesus, as told and retold in the Old and New

13. Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2000) 5–6.

14. Review of *Prolegomena van Bijbelsche Godgeleerdheid*, by E.H. van Leeuwen; cited in Danny Olinger, ed., *A Geerhardus Vos Anthology: Biblical and Theological Insights Alphabetically Arranged* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 2005).

15. Michael S. Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002) 233. See also his quote on page 234 from R.B. Gaffin's *Resurrection and Redemption* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing; 2nd edition, 1987).

16. Wright revises this analogy in his most recent volume *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture* (San Francisco: Harper, 2005). Instead of speaking about the authority of the Bible in terms of a five act play, he speaks of a commanding officer who tells his soldiers a "story" to get them up to date and prepare them for their mission. Wright says, "The narrative will bring them up to date; now it will be their task to act out the next chapter in the ongoing saga."

Testaments, and as still requiring completion (Wright, *The New Testament*, 143).

Presumably, we in the church today are completing that story. But if the Old and New Testaments are the 4.1 acts of a five act play—the balance of which we are to improvise—how ultimate of an authority does that give the Bible as a revelatory interpretation of God's redemptive acts in history? How does this view of the authority of the Bible jive with a robust Reformed view like that found in the Westminster Confession when it teaches:

The Old Testament in Hebrew (which was the native language of the people of God of old), and the New Testament in Greek (which, at the time of the writing of it was most generally known to the nations), being immediately inspired by God, and, by His singular care and providence, kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentic ... (Confession of Faith, 1.8).

Critical realism, then, while sounding innovative and promising, falls terribly short of the approach to Scripture advocated by the best of the Protestant tradition.<sup>17</sup> Wright's view on the authority of the Bible, by not presupposing its authenticity, inspiration, and infallibility at the beginning, has compromised the absolute authority of the text of Scripture as an infallible interpreter of redemptive history. This, in effect, makes the Bible out to be no better (even if no worse) than any other secular historical document.

H. Ridderbos summarizes (though, of course, writing before Wright's day) the problem of Wright's critical realistic approach well in critiquing historical-critical exegesis when he writes,

... what we have learned plainly reveals the inadequacy of every secular approach to the New Testament. A secular approach to the New Testament is one that begins by consciously abandoning the revelatory character of this written tradition. In the words of those who employ so-called historical-critical exegesis, such exegesis excludes the canonicity of Scripture, provisionally and hypothetically, and treats those writings as profane literature.... The objection to the historical-critical method is not that it is historical. In that respect it has brought to light many things that formerly were either unknown or too often neglected. The objection is that the origin of the historical method is secular, not revelatory.<sup>18</sup>

This critique is all important for being able to properly evaluate Wright's system as a whole (and then, by extension, his more particular theological points), especially as that system stands upon his secular and unbelieving presuppositions. Now, it is important that we quickly qualify this last statement, as we did above, to say that we are not making judgments on the man's heart. Our point here is not to conclude that Wright is an "unbeliever," or even a secularist. But what we desire to point out is that while he himself may be a believer, he is inconsistently resting his belief upon presuppositions that are extra-biblical and unbiblical. Wright, in taking his lead from contemporary developments in epistemology,<sup>19</sup> has assumed a secular posture before even coming to the text of the New Testament. He seems to have adopted the old Rogers and McKim proposal (see footnote 17) that what matters with reference to the biblical text is not so much its form but its content. Standing in the tradition of neo-orthodoxy, such a proposal advocates a dialectical relation between the human text and the divine Word. On this thinking God's Word may be found in the human text, but the human text is not itself the Word of God. Therefore, Mark's account is the "vehicle" through which God's Word in Christ may be found, not because of it, but in spite of it. In this way the Gospel accounts are lenses and windows through which God's actions in Christ are seen, but are not themselves God's actions of revelation.

However one thing is for sure, Wright's view is a far cry from that of Vos and Ridderbos. For Wright there are human historians, and only human historians. Mark is a historian on the level of any other historian of his

17. See the 2005 Auburn Avenue Pastor's Conference (available here: [http://www.auburnavenue.org/auburn\\_avenue\\_media.htm](http://www.auburnavenue.org/auburn_avenue_media.htm)). We may rightly paraphrase Wright's view of the inspiration and authority of the Bible like the one advocated by us as being a "distinctly American phenomenon." It is difficult to assess what exactly he means by that. Be that as it may, to affirm the full, plenary, inspiration and infallibility of the Bible is not restricted to American evangelical theology. Such a concern goes back, at least, to the 17<sup>th</sup> century British theology of the Puritans, the Continental Reformed churches and—back of them to—John Calvin and the other early Reformers. This is, however, a debated point. See, on this, Rogers and McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979). And, in response to their argument, see John D. Woodbridge, "Biblical Authority: Towards An Evaluation Of The Rogers And Mckim Proposal," *Trinity Journal* 1.2 (1980) 165–236 and R.B. Gaffin "Old Amsterdam and Inerrancy?" *WTJ* 44 (1982) 250–89 and 45 (1983) 219–72.

18. Herman Ridderbos, *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1988) 49. The emphasis is mine.

19. For the development of his epistemology with reference to New Testament history, see Wright, *The New Testament*, 32ff.

day. But this leaves us then with no authoritative interpretation of the historical events of God's redemption. Contrary to this, we must stand with the Ridderbos/Vos formulation; i.e., that as we read about Jesus through the story telling of Mark we are lead to conclude that—to put it in the words of Abraham Kuyper—"God is the historian."<sup>20</sup>

If we are correct here to associate Wright's view of Scripture with the so-called Rogers and McKim proposal (though in revised form and with Wright's own nuance), then what we have here is not an orthodox view of Scripture, but a Barthian one. This is not the place to get into the widespread debate concerning Barth's view of Scripture and how close or (as the case may be) how far away his view was compared to the early Reformers. If Wright is, in fact, persuaded that the view we are advocating is a "distinctly American phenomenon," we would encourage him to consult carefully R. B. Gaffin's article on Old Amsterdam's view of inerrancy (again, see footnote 17 above). But all these issues aside, and whether one's view is American or whatnot, the fact remains that Wright's view of the inspiration and authority of the Bible leaves us with a secularized text.

He would do well to, once again, heed the cautionary words of Ridderbos when he writes,

"The history of theology makes embarrassingly clear the dangers that threaten us when the character and the authority of the New Testament teaching are consciously or unconsciously determined by the presuppositions of the spirit or philosophy of the time. For that reason the teaching and the nature of the authority of the New Testament cannot be explained by analogy from an extrabiblical schema or principle but only by

20. Quoted in R.B. Gaffin "Old Amsterdam and Inerrancy?" *WTJ* 44 (1982) 268.

21. Some helpful work has already been done critiquing Wright's view of justification, not the least of which is R.B. Gaffin "Paul the Theologian," *WTJ* 62 (2000) 121–141. Beyond Wright, see Gaffin's helpful critique of James Dunn in "Atonement in the Pauline Corpus" in *The Glory of the Atonement: Biblical, Theological, and Practical Perspectives* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2004), and for a survey and critique of the NPP as a whole, see Guy Waters *Justification and the New Perspective on Paul: A Review and Response* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2004); Stephen Westerholm, "The 'New Perspective' at Twenty-Five," in *Justification and Variegated Nomism: a fresh appraisal of Paul and Second Temple Judaism*, ed. D.A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2001–2004) 1–38; Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New: The "Lutheran" Paul and His Critics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2004).

22. *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997).

the old Reformation rule, 'according to the analogy of faith' ..." (*Redemptive History*, 75).

#### MOVING TOWARDS A CRITIQUE OF WRIGHT ON JUSTIFICATION

Of course, the hot button issue right now in both church and academy is Wright's (and with him other advocates of the NPP) view of the Pauline doctrine of justification. Now, it is beyond the scope of this article to offer a full-orbed critique in this regard.<sup>21</sup> However, perhaps we can offer some suggestions—based upon the above evaluation of Wright's over all approach to the New Testament—of how Wright's critical realism affects his doctrinal conclusions.

For the NPP in general and Wright in particular, the secret to properly understanding the teaching of the New Testament is to understand the broader Jewish community in which the authors of the New Testament lived. Wright seems to correctly point out that much of Judaism in the Second Temple Period was lead by a theology of grace, and not a legalistic soteriology. For instance, he writes:

So it was that the maintenance of traditional Torah-based boundary-markers in Galilee, or in the Diaspora, had little to do with a detached theology of *post mortem* salvation, let alone the earning of such a thing by one's own religious or moral efforts, and a great deal more to do with the preservation of traditional Jewish identity (Wright, *The New Testament*, 168).

Therefore, he concludes, we should not read Paul as reacting against a so-called "works righteousness" religion. In this way, then, much modern scholarship has misinterpreted Paul by reading Martin's Luther's spiritual experiences into his writing. According to Wright, "Paul is misunderstood if he is seen as an earlier edition of Luther" (Wright, *The New Testament*, 382 n43).

From this, Wright seems to conclude that we, in the Reformation tradition, have misunderstood what "the gospel" really is according to Paul. Wright states in *What Saint Paul Really Said*.<sup>22</sup>

The word 'gospel' and the phrase 'the gospel' have come to denote, especially in certain circles within the church, something that in older theology would be called an *ordo salutis*, an order of salvation. 'The gospel' is supposed to be a description of how people get saved; of the theological mechanism whereby, in some people's lan-

guage, Christ takes our sin and we his righteousness.... If we continue to use a word that we find in the New Testament in a sense which the New Testament itself doesn't support, that is our responsibility.... I simply wouldn't use the word 'gospel' to denote those things.

Thus, justification has nothing to do with the imputation of our sin to Christ and of Christ's righteousness to us. Again, Wright denies this core teaching of the Reformation doctrine of justification when he says:

If we use the language of the law court, it makes no sense whatever to say that the judge imputes, imparts, bequeaths, conveys or otherwise transfers his righteousness to either the plaintiff or the defendant. . . . To imagine the defendant somehow receiving the judge's righteousness is simply a category mistake (*What Saint Paul Really Said*, 98).

Then, after he considers a couple of passages which speak of the believer's justification, Wright continues:

*But the righteousness they have will not be God's own righteousness.* That makes no sense at all.... But God's own righteousness remains, so to speak, God's own property. It is the reason for his acting to vindicate his people. It is not the status he bestows upon them in so doing (99).

If this is correct, Wright is attempting to bring about a paradigm shift in theology of Copernican proportions. But where Wright and his cohorts go wrong, in our opinion, is in applying this profile of Second Temple Judaism in general to the Judaizers against whom Paul is combating in Galatians (among other writings, of course) in particular. The problems in the churches to which Paul writes are particular to those churches. The problem was with professing Jewish Christians teaching that, despite the fact that Christ has come, the Gentile believer needs to add to his faith the works of the law in order to be justified and be accepted into the covenant family of God. This is a unique situation, and all the Second Temple literature on Judaism's view of the law will never be able to perfectly speak to the doctrinal debates in the early church (exactly because Second Temple Jewish literature is not written in the context of the first century Christian church). Granted, it is written within that time period, but Second Temple literature is not written in the cultural/religious milieu of the Christian church.

Now some scholars and historians may read this as

being naïve. Can we not, after all, learn anything from ancient Jewish historical and cultural studies to aid us in our interpretation of the New Testament? Of course we can! We are not denying that. But what we are denying is the practice of applying such studies to the text of the New Testament as the standard for interpretive work, rather than the text of Scripture itself. Instead of, first and foremost, reading Paul against the backdrop of Second Temple Judaism, we need to read him against the backdrop of the unfolding of God's redemption as it is interpreted for us in the Word of God. In other words, we need to read Paul in the context of the biblical revelation from Genesis to Revelation. We do well to once again recover, in the words of Ridderbos, that "old Reformation rule" of the analogy of faith: Scripture interpreting Scripture.

Nevertheless, when one assumes a posture toward Scripture as Wright does in his critical realist approach to the question of the historical Jesus, that same posture carries over to one's interpretation of Paul and his doctrine of justification. When Scripture itself is not absolutely authoritative and sufficient for determining the person and work of Christ, it will not be sufficient for determining the biblical doctrine of justification. If Scripture is not the infallible interpreter of God's work in salvation history, it is also not the infallible interpreter of what Paul means when he speaks of justification, the righteousness of God, or imputation.

#### CONCLUSION

This is an important lesson, especially for readers of this journal, as they find themselves ministering in the context of Christ's church. This article is really about the doctrine of Scripture and what may happen when that doctrine is not approached with thoroughly consistent Christian and believing presuppositions. Where ever the doctrine of Scripture has been compromised, unhealthy spiritual fruit inevitably is produced. Perhaps we, ministering in the twenty-first century, can appreciate the wisdom of our forefathers who ministered in the seventeenth century when they formulated the documents of the Westminster Assembly. It is no coincidence, nor a mistake, that they placed their teaching on Holy Scripture at the head of the Confession of Faith; even before the doctrine of God. This, we would contend, was not to send a message that the bible was prior to or more important than God—they did not believe in or practice any form of "bibliolatry." Rather, in their godly wisdom, they realized that if one gets their doctrine of Scripture wrong, there is very little hope of

developing sound doctrine at any other point. The only way to assure the sound pattern of the doctrine of God or justification (or whatever), is to first establish as a foundation and presupposition the correct doctrine of Scripture, from which flows all other truths of what we are to believe concerning God and what he requires of us. May we, as Confessional Presbyterians, by the grace of God and to his Glory, hold fast to that revealed Word which has been entrusted to us. ■

**In Brief: John Mitchell Mason on  
the New York ‘High Churchism’  
Controversy**

The Christian’s Magazine, an influential periodical, edited by Dr. Mason, was commenced in January, 1807. The immediate occasion of it was the publication of certain assaults upon Presbyterian doctrines and polity. Being honestly opposed to the monarchical principle of Church government—and (as truth can afford to smile at unsupported pretensions) being perhaps unnecessarily sensitive to the assumptions and the bearing of an hierarchy which denies to all other denominations of Christians the possession of any valid sacraments or ministry, and which studiously withholds from them the very appellation of *Church*—he felt provoked to a conflict which he could not, he thought, without pusillanimity avoid. Respecting the ability with which it was sustained on his part, there is probably no diversity of opinion on either side....

His own views in undertaking the publication are thus given in a letter to Mr. Thornton, of London:—“You were kind enough to request any publication of my own. I have but one, a periodical entitled the Christian’s Magazine, which, for aught I can tell, it requires some assurance to submit to your perusal. The chief part of the reviewing department has hitherto been devoted to certain publications on the subject of church government. You will there meet, if you should have the curiosity to look at it, with opinions opposed to the divine right of the Episcopal Hierarchy, and these very freely and strongly expressed. But I flatter myself that dissonance of views on this point will not—I am sure *ought* not—to alienate affection among those ‘who have obtained like precious faith, through the righteousness of God and Saviour Jesus Christ.’ Perhaps I owe to my dear and valued Episcopal friends in England an account of my reason for such a work. I do not choose to retreat into that common right of opinion which they

as cheerfully grant as they openly take. I had never on this ground entered into the controversy. But it was impossible to avoid it. The press teemed, and the pulpit resounded, with excommunications of all non-episcopal churches—declaring them to be without a ministry, without sacraments, without ordinances—and their members to have no other hope of salvation than what they founded upon the ‘*uncovenanted mercies of God.*’ This was too much. And as some, who walk humbly before God, were in danger of having their peace embittered, it was judged necessary, in vindication of what is infinitely more important than any external order, to put these exclusive doctrines to the test; and that naturally involved the merits of the general question. You have my explanation. That ever[y]thing has been written as it ought to have been written, I am far from supposing. Some things, not unworthy the attention of Christians, I hope, the magazine contains. Such as it is, I send it; and shall find no fault if you send me back the severest flagellation for the Presbyterians that England can furnish.”

To a brother in the ministry he had previously written:—“It has become necessary to employ measures of defence against the outrages of the Hierarchists. We have long treated them with courtesy, even while they showed no disposition toward an exchange of civilities. But there is a point beyond which concession is dishonour, and to that point matters have now arrived. Treated with contumely from the pulpit and the press; their ministrations branded as impieties and themselves as thieves and robbers; the Presbyterian clergy cannot sit down any longer under Episcopal abuse without at once sacrificing their consciences and authenticating their disgrace. It is not, however, intended so much to wage war against the prelatists, as to establish the Scriptural truth. This seems to be present duty. To pass over the subject of church government, I think a common and sinful omission on the part of evangelical ministers. Laudably bent upon the precious doctrines of the cross, which bear directly upon the sinner’s hope, they have insensibly dropped the habit of instructing their flocks in the constitution and arrangements of the Christian Church. This is certainly for a lamentation. It has thrown disrespect upon the Redeemer as king over his holy hill Zion; and the churches on both sides of the Atlantic are smarting under the effects of their negligence.”

From Jacob Van Vechten, *Memoirs of John M. Mason, D.D., S.T.P. with Portions of His Correspondence* (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1856) 284–287. ■