

# A Critical Examination of N. T. Wright's Doctrine of Justification

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## INTRODUCTION

With the rise of the new perspective on Paul (NPP) there have been many modifications offered to the traditional protestant view on many teachings within the Scriptures. With Stendahl's ground breaking essay, followed by the work of Sanders and Dunn, the NPP has challenged the typical reading of the gospels and Paul based upon a need to read the New Testament (NT) within its first century context, not in the context of the debates over justification, whether in fifth century north Africa or sixteenth century Europe.<sup>1</sup> In this re-contextualized evaluation of the teaching of the NT, scholars of the NPP claim that works-righteousness and legalism were not at the heart of Paul's teaching but rather the inclusion of the Gentiles into the covenant people of God. Central to Paul's message, NPP proponents claim, is the proper understanding of the phrase, the works of the law. This phrase refers not to crass legalism but to the covenant badges, circumcision, food laws, and Sabbath observance. In other words, could Gentiles be admitted to the covenant apart from the covenant badges? It is

within this matrix that one finds the traditional protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone set on an entirely different trajectory.

N. T. Wright, one of the most popular and prolific proponents of the NPP, contends that the doctrine of justification:<sup>2</sup>

in the first century was not about how someone might establish a relationship with God. 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.

Central to Wright's claim is that justification is about ecclesiology, not soteriology. If Wright's claim about justification is true, then, needless to say the NPP represents something of a Copernican revolution in the Church's understanding of the Scriptures. This essay will argue that the NPP, specifically Wright's doctrine of justification, represents an incorrect reading of the NT. The traditional protestant reading, more specifically as it comes from reformed confessionalism, as it comes through the Westminster Standards, is still correct.<sup>3</sup> To demonstrate Wright's errors we will first examine his doctrine of justification as he has presented it in his popular and academic works. Second, the essay will critique his views on justification demonstrating that reformed confessionalism still represents the teaching of the Scriptures. The essay will then conclude with some observations.

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1. Krister Stendahl, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," in *Paul Among the Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 78-96; E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1977) 1-29; James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul and the Law* (Louisville: Westminster / John Knox, 1990) 183-241.

2. N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997) 119.

3. *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1646; Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1976).

## WRIGHT ON JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

Central to Wright's understanding of justification are two key tenets: (1) a proper understanding of the term *righteousness*, and (2) what a first century Jew would have understood by the term *justification*. One should also examine Wright's specific evidence in support of his views, namely his exegesis of Romans 4:1-8. How, then, does Wright define the term *righteousness*?

*Righteousness*

It is important, Wright argues, to understand properly the concept of righteousness. Righteousness is not something that is imputed to the Christian by faith, as argued in traditional reformed explanations of justification but rather is a demonstration of God's faithfulness to his covenant promises. Common exegesis of Paul has involved the imposition of doctrinal categories from the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, categories that are foreign to Paul's first century Jewish worldview.<sup>4</sup> The first century Jew was not concerned about how one might have a saving relationship with God. Rather, the first century Jew was already a member of the covenant and possessed a relationship with his covenant Lord. What was perplexing for the first century Jew was, how could the chosen people of God be under the Roman occupation? Had not God promised in his covenant to Abraham that Israel would rule over the nations? Yet, Israel was under the thumb of Rome. Though Israel was in the promised land, they were essentially in exile. It is with these questions that God's righteousness, or covenant faithfulness, enters the picture.

Wright argues that *righteousness* refers to God's covenant faithfulness: "The question of the righteousness of god, as expressed by Jews in this period, can be stated as follows: when and how would Israel's god act to fulfill his covenant promises?"<sup>5</sup> In other words, when would God bring the Israelites out of exile, out from under Roman rule? Wright argues that God's covenant faithfulness, or righteousness, is the major theme of Paul's epistle to Rome and is the primary focus of Romans 3:21-4:25: "God's righteousness—that is, God's faithfulness to the covenant with Abraham—has been unveiled in the gospel events concerning Jesus."<sup>6</sup> Wright states that God's covenantal faithfulness, or righteousness, was manifest through Christ's ministry—Christ had dealt with the covenant curses due Israel, began to lead her out of exile, and inaugurate the eschaton, the

age to come: "Israel's god had at last acted decisively, to demonstrate his covenant faithfulness, to deliver his people from their sins, and to usher in the inaugurated new covenant" (Wright, *People of God*, 458). The righteousness of God, then, is primarily a demonstration of his covenantal faithfulness. Texts such as Romans 1:17, then, should be read as: "For in [the gospel] the righteousness [covenantal faithfulness] of God is revealed."<sup>7</sup> This primary significance of the term *righteousness*, of course has implications for Wright's views on justification.

Wright argues that the divine righteousness, or covenant faithfulness, is not the same thing as the righteousness that humans possess when they are declared members of the covenant. Wright states that:<sup>8</sup>

in the Hebrew law court the judge does not give, bestow, impute, or impart *his own 'righteousness'* to the defendant. That would imply that the *defendant* was deemed to have conducted the case impartially, in accordance with the law, to have punished sin and upheld the defenseless innocent ones. 'Justification,' of course, means nothing like that. 'Righteousness' is not a quality or substance that can thus be passed or transferred from the judge to the defendant. The righteousness of the judge is the judge's own character, status, and activity, demonstrated in doing these various things. The 'righteousness' of the defendants is the status they possess when the court has found in their favor. Nothing more, nothing less. When we translate these forensic categories back into their theological context, that of the covenant, the point remains fundamental: the divine covenant faithful is not the same as human covenant membership.

This statement is an important element of Wright's view on justification. God's righteousness remains his own. God does not impute his righteousness to the member of the covenant. Wright stipulates though the

4. N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 17, 122.

5. N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God, vol. 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 271.

6. Wright, *People of God*, 458; also idem, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God, vol. 3 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003) 246.

7. On Rom 1:17 see Wright, *Saint Paul*, 100-03; also idem, *Romans*, NIB (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002) 425-428.

8. N. T. Wright, "Romans and the Theology of Paul," in *Pauline Theology*, vol. 3, eds. David M. Hay and E. Elizabeth Johnson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 38-39.

same word, righteousness, is used for both God's covenant faithfulness and the human's status within the covenant, it demonstrates only their close reciprocal relationship, not their identity (Wright, "Romans," 39). Wright argues that when the term *righteousness* is used in connection with human beings that it is a term that means, "membership within the covenant" (Wright, *Covenant*, 148; idem, *Romans*, 465, 491). In other words, the righteous God, one who is faithful to his covenant, declares those, who place their faith in Christ, to be righteous, members of the covenant, or recipients of God's covenantal faithfulness. This understanding of righteousness, both human and divine, informs Wright's understanding of justification.

### Justification

Wright argues that there are three foundational presuppositions that one must understand before he can properly understand the doctrine of justification. First, Scripture speaks of justification in terms of covenant. One must not read justification in terms of the covenant theology of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries but in terms of second-temple Judaism and the covenant promises that God made to his people. Second, justification is spoken of in terms of law-court language. When God made his covenant promise to Abraham, patriarch of the people of God, it was God's way of correcting the sin of Adam and putting the world to rights. In the law-court the people of God will be vindicated before the world and shown to be "in the right." Third, Scripture speaks of justification in terms of eschatology. Justification is not part of some abstract system of doctrine by which people are saved but is rooted in the decisive action of God in Jesus Christ whereby he rescues the cosmos from sin through the Holy Spirit, bringing all things under the authority of Jesus (Wright, *Saint Paul*, 117-118). From these three premises, one can begin to see the nature of Wright's view of justification emerge.

Justification is not about the imputation of a communicable attribute of God to the one who professes faith in Christ. Rather, justification is the vindication of the covenant people of God before the world. Justification is about demonstrating that the people of God are "in the right" before the unbelieving world, those who refused to place their faith in Jesus Christ and oppressed

the people of God. The people of God had placed their faith in the one true God who, through the covenant, would put the world to rights. Yet, what was difficult for the Israelites is that it appeared as though God was doing nothing to fulfill his unbreakable covenant—the Israelites were in exile under Roman rule. When and how would God vindicate, or justify, the people of God?<sup>9</sup> Wright summarizes the overall context in which one finds the Scripture's message of justification (Wright, *People of God*, 335):

- a The creator god calls Israel to be his people;
- b Israel, currently in 'exile,' is to be redeemed, precisely because she is the covenant people of this god;
- c Present loyalty to the covenant is the sign of future redemption;
- d Loyalty to this covenant is being tested at this moment of crisis;
- e At this moment, what counts as loyalty, and hence what marks out those who will be saved / vindicated / raised to life, is ...

Though Wright ends his last summary point with an ellipsis, he eventually fills in the blank with, faith in Jesus Christ. It is Jesus Christ who was the ultimate fulfillment of the covenant promise that God made to Abraham. Loyalty to the covenant was no longer to be demonstrated by a commitment to Torah and its attendant badges of covenant membership, circumcision, food laws, and Sabbath observance but by the new sign of covenant membership, faith in Christ. No longer were the covenant members to see the Torah as the rallying point of the covenant but Jesus himself (Wright, *Victory of God*, 201). Moreover, if Torah no longer defined the covenant people of God but faith in Christ was its defining membership badge, then this means that Gentiles could now be a part of the covenant people apart from the traditional Jewish identity badges. It is the issue of how one defines the people of God that is the central issue of justification, argues Wright. Are the people of God, those who receive God's righteousness, his covenant faithfulness, marked by the badges of membership—circumcision, food laws, and Sabbath—or by faith in Jesus Christ? This was the nature of the debate at Galatia and the substance of Paul's epistle to the Romans, not crass works-righteousness or legalism (Wright, *People of God*, 241). There is a twofold division of justification that Wright stresses: (1) present justification—namely the vindication that people possess presently, which is marked out by their faith in Christ and indicates who will be vindicated in

9. N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 203.

the end; and (2) final or future justification—the actual declaration of being “in the right” before the world. The idea of justification as vindication, then, is the primary thrust of Wright’s understanding of the doctrine. What specific evidence does Wright marshal in support of his view of justification?

*Wright on Romans 4:1-8*

Though not comprehensive in nature, examining Wright’s understanding of Romans 4:1-8 will help the investigator see how he arrives at his conclusions regarding justification. Wright begins his analysis of Romans 4 by explaining that this chapter is about Abraham’s family, not the traditional reformed view of justification by faith. He contends that the chapter hinges on the question of whether Jews and Gentiles can point to Abraham as their father (Wright, *Romans*, 489). Wright then goes on to analyze 4:2: “For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.” Wright states that Paul is not dealing with self-help legalism but that Paul is saying that Abraham was not justified, vindicated or reckoned within the covenant, by the works of the Torah, circumcision, food laws, and Sabbath. The works of Torah were the identity markers of Jews, not Gentiles. In this verse, according to Wright, Paul is saying that Abraham is not reckoned as a member of the covenant, by the Jewish identity markers. Paul’s point is to deny the Jews a point of boasting because of their Jewish identity and possession of Torah (Rom 2:17-20; 3:27-30; Wright, *Romans*, 490). Wright goes on to explain the following verse.

Paul writes: “For what does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness’” (4:3). Here Wright explains that the phrase “it was counted to him” (ἐλογίσθη) is a bookkeeping metaphor, though the phrase is rare. He argues that the meaning of the phrase must therefore be sought in the Genesis account and the rest of Romans 4; the idea is also restated in Psalm 106:31 and *Misqat Ma’ase Ha Torah* (MMT) C. Wright enters first upon the meaning of the phrase within its original context in Genesis 15. Genesis 15 opens with Abraham’s puzzlement because God has made great promises to him, but has yet to see them fulfilled. God promised him children, yet Abraham has none. Wright identifies the promise as, that Abraham would have a family as numerous as the stars in heaven. Because Abraham believed this promise, God reckoned his belief in the promise, argues Wright, as righteousness. Righteousness, one must remember, is

not a moral quality but covenant membership. Wright paraphrases the quotation from Genesis 15 as, “God counted Abraham’s faith as constituting covenant membership,” or “Abraham’s believing the promise was seen by God as the sign that Abraham was ‘in the right’” (Wright, *Romans*, 490-491).

Wright then explains that Paul briefly uses a book-keeping metaphor in vv. 4-5 to explain the significance of v. 3: “Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. <sup>5</sup>And to the one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.” Wright argues that Paul uses v. 4 to suggest the hypothetical situation that had Abraham obtained his status by works, then his place within the covenant would not have been by God’s grace. Wright stipulates that this is the only time that Paul “uses this metaphorical field in all his discussion of justification, and we should not allow this unique and brief sidelight to become the dominant note, as it has in much post-Reformation discussion” (Wright, *Romans*, 491). The main point is that (492):

one who believes in this God, therefore, will discover that this ‘faith’ will be regarded, not as a meritorious spiritual act (how could that be, for the ‘ungodly’?), but as the badge of covenant membership given by God in sheer grace. And already the answer to the opening question of v. 1 is starting to emerge: We (Jewish and Gentile Christians alike) have not found Abraham to be our father according to the flesh, but according to God’s promise.

In support of this conclusion, Wright explains that Paul calls upon a second witness beyond Abraham, king David.

In v. 6 Paul explains that “David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works.” He then goes on to quote Psalm 32: 2 (31:2 LXX): “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; <sup>8</sup>blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin” (vv. 7-8). Here Wright argues that Paul uses this quotation to show what it means to be counted as righteous, or as a member of the covenant. To be counted as righteous means to be forgiven of sin, not that one has moral perfection. This means, then, that according to Wright Romans 4:1-8 explains how Abraham’s family can have both Jew and Gentile, that the sign of covenant membership is faith, not the works of Torah, and that those who are righteous, covenant members, receive the forgiveness of sins. This is what it means,

according to Wright's understanding of Paul, to be justified by faith, or vindicated and reckoned as a member of the covenant. Before we proceed to a critical analysis of Wright's understanding of justification, it will be helpful to summarize his views.

### SUMMARY

To understand Wright's views on justification one must recognize that justification is rooted in redemptive history, the outworking of the covenant promise of God. Justification is a manifestation of the covenant faithfulness of God, his righteousness, in sending Jesus to put the world to rights. Those who place their faith in Christ, the new sign of the covenant, are vindicated in the present, present justification, and identified as those who will be vindicated in the future, final justification. Justification is covenantal, because Jesus is the one who brings about the vindication of the people of God, the fulfillment of God's covenant promises. Justification is a law-court metaphor, which manifests itself in the declaration of vindication for those who place their faith in Jesus. And, justification is eschatological, in that it is the in-breaking of the age to come in the middle of history—the in-breaking of the lordship of Jesus, the one who will vindicate his people and put the world to rights. Wright's overview statement of Romans 3:21-4:25 does well to summarize his beliefs concerning justification (Wright, *Romans*, 468):

Faith then becomes the badge that identifies, in the present time, the members of the people of God. This is the meaning of Paul's doctrine of 'justification by faith.' The

verdict of the last day has been brought forward into the present in Jesus the Messiah; in raising him from the dead, God declared that in him had been constituted the true, forgiven worldwide family. Justification, in Paul, is not the process or event whereby someone becomes, or grows as, a Christian; it is the declaration that someone is, in the present, a member of the people of God. This is inevitably controversial, but is I believe borne out by careful study of the relevant texts. We may remind ourselves of the triple layer of meaning in Paul's 'righteousness' language: The covenantal declaration, seen through the metaphorical and vital lens of the law-court, is put into operation eschatologically. The verdict to be announced in the future has been brought forward into the present. Those who believe the gospel are declared to be 'in the right.'

With this summary of Wright's teaching on justification, we may now move forward to a critical examination of his doctrine.

### A Critical Examination of N. T. Wright's Doctrine of Justification

While there is much that must be examined within Wright's explanation of justification, such as questions surrounding the nature of the righteousness of God or the interpretation of the phrase, the works of the law, the investigation will focus on two primary questions: (1) does the term *righteousness* mean "a member of the covenant"; and (2) does Scripture speak of justification in terms of vindication or being "in the right"?<sup>10</sup> Is the declaration of righteousness for one who enters the covenant a declaration of membership, as Wright contends, or is it that God "accepts us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us," as the Westminster shorter catechism states (q. 33)? Also, is Wright's explanation of Romans 4:1-8 accurate? We may turn to the first issue, namely, Is the term *righteousness* best understood as "covenant membership?"

#### RIGHTEOUSNESS

As we saw above, a key element to Wright's understanding of justification is that when the Scriptures speak of a person's righteousness, it is a reference to his status of covenant membership. We will examine several passages of Scripture to demonstrate that Wright's definition is wanting. There are places in Scripture where Wright's proposed understanding might be a possibility; how-

10. On the question of the nature of the righteousness of God, see Wright, *Saint Paul*, 97-111; idem, *People of God*, 271, 336-337, 458; cf. C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans*, ICC, vol. 1 (1975; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001) 91-106; Mark A. Seifrid, "Righteousness Language in the Hebrew Scriptures and Early Judaism," in *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, vol. 1, *The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism*, eds. D. A. Carson, et al. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001) 415-42. On the question of, the works of the law, Wright relies upon the previous work of Dunn, see James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul, and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville: Westminster / John Knox, 1990) 183-241; cf. Simon J. Gathercole, *Where is Boasting?: Early Jewish Soteriology and Paul's Response in Romans 1-5* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 37-111; Andrew T. Lincoln, "Ephesians 2.8-10: A Summary of Paul's Gospel," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 45/4 (1983) 628-629; idem, *Ephesians*, WBC, vol. 42 (Dallas: Word, 1990) 112-13; idem, "The Theology of Ephesians," in *The Theology of the Later Pauline Letters*, eds. Andrew T. Lincoln and Al J. M. Wedderburn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 135-136; A. Andrew Das, *Paul, the Law, and the Covenant* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2001) 188-191.

ever, upon closer scrutiny there are other passages that simply do not fit Wright's definition. One such passage is Job 29:11-17. In Job's speech he defends his life and character from the accusations of Eliphaz:

For you have exacted pledges of your brothers for nothing and stripped the naked of their clothing.<sup>7</sup> You have given no water to the weary to drink, and you have withheld bread from the hungry.<sup>8</sup> The man with power possessed the land, and the favored man lived in it.<sup>9</sup> You have sent widows away empty, and the arms of the fatherless were crushed (Job 22:6-9).

Note that Eliphaz's accusations describe Job as morally deficient. Job responds to these accusations:

I put on righteousness, and it clothed me; my justice was like a robe and a turban.<sup>15</sup> I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame.<sup>16</sup> I was a father to the needy, and I searched out the cause of him whom I did not know.<sup>17</sup> I broke the fangs of the unrighteous and made him drop his prey from his teeth" (Job 29:14-17).

One must note that Job clothed himself in righteousness (צדקה), and righteousness clothed him, what the second half of the synonymous parallelism in v. 14b explains as Job's justice (צדקו) (cf. Psa 132:9; Isa 6:5, 59:17, 61:10). Job's righteousness is not characterized as covenant membership, as Wright contends, but as justice: vv. 15-17 describe Job as assisting the blind, poor, and opposing the unrighteous.<sup>11</sup> These verses, then, represent "a strong claim to both right behavior and right status, the assertion of which is the whole point of Job's closing speech."<sup>12</sup> There are other passages of Scripture that confirm that righteousness is not covenant membership but both right behavior and the status of innocent of wrongdoing.

For example, in Psalm 7 David asks whether he has repaid a friend with evil or plundered an enemy without cause (v. 4). To the possibility of being guilty of this wrongdoing, David responds, "Judge me, O LORD, according to my righteousness and according to the integrity that is in me" (v. 8).<sup>13</sup> David's plea to have God judge him according to his righteousness is not the claim of moral self-qualification, or self-righteousness, but the request that God declare him innocent of wrongdoing, to render a "guilty" or "not guilty" verdict.<sup>14</sup> Again, covenant membership is not in view but status, namely David's innocence. This understanding of righteousness as innocent status comes forth in Psalm 18:20: "The LORD dealt with me according to my right-

eousness; according to the cleanness of my hands he rewarded me." This verse is a declaration of status, or innocence, clearly evident again by the second half of the synonymous parallelism (Briggs, *Psalms*, 146). In Psalm 18:20 righteousness is equivalent to having clean hands, or possessing the status of innocence. But, in the following verses, the status of innocence is indexed by obedience to the Torah—the declaration of loyalty on the part of the one who worships: "For I have kept the ways of the LORD, and have not wickedly departed from my God."<sup>22</sup> For all his rules were before me, and his statutes I did not put away from me" (Psa 18:21-22; cf. Deut 8:6, 10:12, 11:22, 19:9, 26:17, 28:9, 30:16; Josh 22:5; Kraus, *Psalms 1-59*, 262; Briggs, *Psalms*, 146). One finds this same connection between righteousness and obedience to the Torah in the gate liturgy psalms.

With the pre-exilic temple those who sought admission would stand in the forecourt at what the psalmist calls the gates of righteousness (Psa 118:19ff) and were met with the question: "Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place" (Psa 24:3)? To this question the cultic officials would answer from within the inner court: "He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully" (Psa 24:4). Von Rad explains the significance of this question and answer between the people and the cultic officials:<sup>15</sup>

This means that a selection of Jahweh's commandments was put before those who entered. Admittedly, we do not have to conclude from this that in ancient Israel the fulfilling of the commandments was in principle antecedent to the reception of salvation in the cult, since those seeking admission were certainly not coming before Jahweh for the first time—they had been members of the community of Jahweh from the beginning. But this much becomes clear: those who came to worship were asked for something like a declaration of loyalty to Jahweh's will for justice. These commandments were

11. John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 391.

12. David J. Reimer, "צדק", in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, vol. 3, ed. Willem A Van-Gemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) 760; Norman C. Habel, *The Book of Job*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985) 410.

13. Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, TOTC (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973) 64; Charles A. Briggs, *Psalms*, vol. 1, ICC (1909; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1969) 55.

14. Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1-59*, trans. Hilton C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 172-173.

15. Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1 (1962; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001) 377-378.

regarded as perfectly capable of being fulfilled, and indeed was easy to fulfill. The question whether those who sought entrance avowed themselves to be loyal to them now, and had been so in the past, was therefore nothing but the question of their צַדִּיקִים. Hence, 'the gates of righteousness' are שְׂפוּקוֹת, through which only 'righteous people' enter.

Once again, Wright's definition of righteousness as covenant membership does not fit the context of this gate liturgy psalm. As von Rad points out, those who approach the gates were already members of the covenant. The covenant members are asked whether they are righteous, or innocent of wrong doing.<sup>16</sup> Can their behavior be categorized as loyal to the covenant, to the commandments of God?

16. Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1983) 213.

17. There is no lexical evidence in either the OT or NT to support the claim that righteousness means "covenant membership." See Francis Brown, et al., *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. Edward Robinson (1907; Oxford: Clarendon, 1976) 841-842; R. Laird Harris, et al., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1980) 751-755; G. Johannes Botterweck, et al., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 12, trans. Douglas W. Scott (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) 239-264; Walter Bauer, et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979) 196-197; H. G. Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996) 429; Gerhard Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1964) 192-210.

18. So Harris, *Wordbook of the OT*, 753. Cf. Botterweck, *Dictionary of the OT*, 250; Kittel, *Dictionary of the NT*, 190-91, 198-199; Mark A. Seifrid, *Christ, our Righteousness: Paul's theology of justification* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity, 2000) 41.

19. Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 25-48*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 252.

20. Though, one should stipulate that Wright identifies the formal nature of the promise, i.e., many offspring. He does not identify the substance of the promise, i.e., that it refers to Christ (Gal 3:16; cf. John 8:56). Wright states: "We might suggest that the singularity of the 'seed' in v. 16 is not the singularity of an individual person contrasted with the plurality of many human beings, but the singularity of one family contrasted with the plurality of families which would result if the Torah were to be regarded the way Paul's opponents apparently regard it" (*Covenant*, 163; see also 164-165).

21. O. Palmer Robertson, "Genesis 15:6: New Covenant Expositions of an Old Covenant Text," *Westminster Theological Journal* 42 (1980) 264. Also see Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 423-427, 439; Brevard S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in its Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 219-220; Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, JPSTC (New York: JPS, 1989) 113; Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (Dallas: Word, 1987) 330. Cranfield notes "that to Rabbinic Judaism Gen 15:6 was no proof at all that Abraham was not justified on the ground of works is absolutely clear." For citations from rab-

Throughout the OT, righteousness is not a term that means covenant membership, contra Wright.<sup>17</sup> Rather, righteousness, when spoken of people, is usually the status of innocence demonstrated by loyalty to Torah.<sup>18</sup> Those who are righteous, innocent of wrong doing and demonstrate their loyalty to the covenant by obedience to the Torah, will live; the unrighteous, those who are not innocent and disobey Torah, die: "When the righteous turns from his righteousness and does injustice, he shall die for it."<sup>19</sup> And when the wicked turns from his wickedness and does what is just and right, he shall live by them" (Ezek 33:18-19; cf. Dan 4:27; Matt 6:1; 1 John 3:7, 10, 12).<sup>19</sup> With this definition of righteousness we may move forward and examine Wright's exegesis of Romans 4:1-8.

#### ROMANS 4:1-8

Romans 4:1-8 centers upon an important statement, one upon which a proper understanding of justification hinges. Paul quotes Genesis 15:6: "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness" (Rom 4:3). Wright is correct to explain that "it was counted to him" is a bookkeeping metaphor. He is also correct that the meaning of this phrase must be sought in the original context and the rest of Romans 4. Yes, Genesis 15 opens with Abraham's puzzlement because God has made promises to him, but he has yet to see the fulfillment of these promises. God promised Abraham children, yet he has none. Wright is correct to identify the promise as having offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven.<sup>20</sup> Yet, Wright is incorrect to say that God counted Abraham's belief in the promise as covenant membership. Rather, given the OT's use of righteousness as innocence and obedience to Torah, one must read Genesis 15:6 as, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as innocence and covenant loyalty, or obedience." What Genesis 15:6 states, therefore, is that Abraham believed God's promise, and God counted that belief, or faith, in the stead of righteousness, or obedience.<sup>21</sup> Paul then goes on to clarify why he quotes Genesis 15:6 in the following verse.

Wright is correct to state that verses 4-5 are epexegetically related to v. 3: "Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due." Contra Wright, these verses do not contain the only place where Paul juxtaposes faith against works. A real problem within first century Judaism was the idea that one could obey Torah. This attitude is certainly present in the rich young ruler who told Christ that he had obeyed

the Torah (Matt 19:16-22).<sup>22</sup> While there were certainly exceptions to the rule, second temple Judaism had misread the OT, particularly the means by which a person obtained righteousness. Many thought that they could obtain their righteousness, the innocent status, through obedience to the Torah. This is why Paul contrasts works and faith, or human effort with trust in Christ. This is why Paul uses the metaphor of wages earned. One does not obtain righteousness by human effort but by faith, trusting in the covenant promise of God: "And to the one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness" (Rom 4: 5).<sup>23</sup> What about a person's sin? How does sin figure into the question of justification?

Verses 6-8 answer the question of what God does with the sin of those whom he justifies: "Just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works: <sup>7</sup>Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; <sup>8</sup>blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin." Wright contends that being counted as righteous, or a covenant member, means that one's sins are forgiven. True enough, those whom God justifies certainly receive the forgiveness of sins, but one must not equate the forgiveness of sins with the status of being righteous, or innocent and obedient to the Torah. The forgiveness of sin is only one half of the justification equation. The one who is justified looks to Christ in faith, his faith is counted as innocence and obedience to the Torah, and his sins are also not counted against him. Who is the source of righteousness, or obedience to Torah? Paul explains that it is Christ (Rom 5:12-19). There are hence two parts of justification: the communication of righteousness through faith and the forgiveness of sins. This interpretation is confirmed when we examine Psalm 106:31 and MMT C, the two places where Wright states that the matters Paul deals with in Romans 4:1-8 are restated.

#### PSALM 106:31

Psalm 106:31 comments upon the events of Numbers 25:1-3, when the Israelites "began to whore with the daughters of Moab," and the people yoked themselves to Baal Peor. Phinehas, a priest and grandson of Aaron, made a swift intervention against the Israelite idolatry and sin by spearing an Israelite and Moabite woman while in the middle of an act of fornication. Why did Phinehas slay this couple? Phinehas offered a sacrifice to stop God's judgment from destroying the Israelites;

this was his function as a Levite: "To make atonement for the people of Israel, that there may be no plague among the people of Israel when the people of Israel come near the sanctuary" (Num 8:19). Sacrifices could stop a plague dead in its tracks.<sup>24</sup> This interpretation thus far is confirmed by Psalm 106:30: "They provoked the LORD to anger with their deeds, and a plague broke out among them. <sup>30</sup> Then Phinehas stood up and intervened, and the plague was stayed." Hence, Phinehas made atonement and stood between the living and dead (Num 25:13).<sup>25</sup> When Israel was heading towards idolatry Phinehas acted faithfully and zealously for God's covenant and especially the Torah. Phinehas is therefore declared righteous: "And that was counted to him as righteousness from generation to generation forever" (Psa 106:31).

At first glance, this event appears to contradict Paul's stated principle, namely that a person is reckoned righteous by faith alone.<sup>26</sup> In Psalm 106:31 it appears that Phinehas is counted as righteous because of his action, not his faith. Yet, one must recognize the overall picture and all of the constituent elements at work: (1) the motivating source of Phinehas' action, (2) the contrast between the faithful and faithless, (3) what reward Phinehas receives, and (4) the typological connection to Christ. First, what motivates Phinehas' action is faith in his covenant Lord. What, for example, was the difference between those Israelites who wanted to enter the land of promise and those who did not? The author of Hebrews states that it was the presence or absence of faith: "For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened" (Heb 4:2). Hence faith in God motivates Phinehas' actions.<sup>27</sup>

Second, the Israelites were acting unfaithfully, dis-

binic literature that saw Abraham meriting his righteous status see Cranfield, *Romans*, 229.

22. Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992) 489-491; W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, vol. 3, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997) 45.

23. Cranfield, *Romans*, p. 231; Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 265.

24. Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers*, JPSTC (Philadelphia, PA: JPS, 1990) 478-479.

25. Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, TOTC (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity, 1973) 381; Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers*, TOTC (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1981) 188.

26. So John Calvin, *Psalms 93-150*, CTS, trans. James Anderson (rpt; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979) 232-233.

27. Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms*, volume 2, translated by Francis Bolton (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1901) 156.

obediently; they were unrighteous, whereas Phinehas was acting righteously, demonstrating obedience and loyalty to the Torah. Third, one must not miss what reward Phinehas receives. He receives a perpetual priesthood, not justification: “Behold, I give to him my covenant of peace,<sup>13</sup> and it shall be to him and to his descendants after him the covenant of a perpetual priesthood” (Num 25:12-13).<sup>28</sup> Last, and fourth, the typological connection to Christ is one where the priest acts righteously and his act of obedience is imputed to his offspring. This, of course, points to Christ, whose obedience is imputed to his offspring, the Church. Ultimately, therefore, Phinehas’ faith motivates his action, or obedience or righteousness, which secures a perpetual priesthood. So, while Wright is correct to say that Psalm 106:30-31 restates the problem of Romans 4:1-3, it actually works against his overall case. Psalm 106:30-31 is an instance where righteousness is imputed to others. One should note, however, that Paul does not appeal to Psalm 106:30-31 but to Genesis 15:6. The reason for his appeal to Genesis 15:6 will be evident in our examination of MMT C.

### MMT C

Wright draws attention to the connection between Paul’s arguments in Romans 4:1-8 and the literature of second temple Judaism. MMT C, as in Romans 4:1-8, discusses the reckoning of righteousness, and like Paul, also uses king David as an example: “Remember David, that he was a man of piety, and that he was also saved from many troubles and pardoned.”<sup>29</sup> Wright argues beyond this parallel that Paul and Qumran have parallel understandings concerning eschatology (Wright, “Paul and Qumran,” 18):

MMT expounds Deuteronomy 30 and 31 as a prophetic text envisaging future blessings and curses, culminating in the curse of exile, after which Israel will turn to God, and God will restore her ‘at the end of the days.’ This, says the writer of MMT, is now coming to pass, and the

works of the law are the sign of the people to whom ‘it will be reckoned as righteousness’ in the future. In other words, the works of the law function within an inaugurated eschatology—an understanding that the end time has already begun—to mark out those who will be restored, who will be the true Israel. At this point MMT’s theology runs parallel to Paul’s. He too has an inaugurated eschatology—in which the true Israel is marked out by faith.

Wright is correct that there are some parallels between Paul and Qumran. Yet, there are some significant differences.

The most significant difference comes in MMT’s explanation of how a person is reckoned as righteous: “And it will be reckoned for you as righteousness when you perform what is right and good before Him, for your own good and for that of Israel.”<sup>30</sup> This statement stands in stark contrast to what Paul writes in Romans 4:1-8. MMT C states that a person has righteousness reckoned to him for performing what is right and good, whereas Paul states that Abraham believed God and his faith was reckoned as righteousness. In MMT C the person is counted righteous because of his right and good deeds whereas Abraham is counted righteous because of his faith. Wright maintains that this statement, however, is not contradictory to Paul and that though similar, MMT speaks of different types of requirements, or works, than Paul refutes in Romans and Galatians, namely the works of the law, or circumcision, food-laws, and Sabbath observance.

Wright argues that one must understand the difference between the Jewish works of the law, circumcision, food-laws, and Sabbath observance, and the requirements of the Qumran community. Qumran, according to Wright, was a sect within first century Judaism and defined themselves in relationship to the temple. Wright gives several reasons as to why MMT is not in Paul’s crosshairs (Wright, “Paul and Qumran,” 18):

- 1) The laws that MMT commands are designed to mark out the scroll community against other groups within the wider Jewish world. The works that Paul opposes define all Jews and proselytes over against the gentile, pagan world.
- 2) MMT insists on post-biblical laws whereas Paul battles those who insist upon biblical laws. Qumran is concerned about codes regarding animal fetuses, banning the blind and lame from the temple, observing certain purity laws relating to streams of liquid,

28. Wenham, *Numbers*, p. 188; A. F. Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms* (Cambridge: CUP, 1902) 631; A. A. Anderson, *The Book of Psalms*, vol. 2 (London: Marshall, Morgan, and Scott, 1972) 745; cf. Calvin, *Psalms 93-150*, 232.

29. Wright sees other parallels between MMT and Paul, for example, in his instructions concerning children in a mixed marriage (see N. T. Wright, “Paul and Qumran,” *Bible Review* 14/5 [1998], 18).

30. Geza Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (1962; NY: Penguin Books, 1998), 4Q398 14-17 ii with 4Q399, 228.

where as Paul deals with the Jewish identity markers, circumcision, food laws, and Sabbath.

3) Qumran was concerned with the purity of the temple, whereas Paul mentions nothing regarding the temple.

It is on the basis of these differences that Wright rejects the idea that Paul has MMT in mind when he opposes those who seek righteousness on the basis of the works of the law. What is problematic with Wright's position is that he focuses attention upon several particulars that appear to support his position without taking note of the general scope of MMT. In other words, Wright misses the forest for the trees. There are several reasons why Wright's dismissal of the Paul-MMT connection is wanting.

First, one must take into account the title of MMT. Wright translates the title, *misqat ma'ase ha-torah*, as "selection of the works of the law" (Wright, "Paul and Qumran," 18). By translating the word as a "selection," one must not think that it is a random sampling but rather those laws that are important to the author. Abegg notes that the title should therefore be translated as "some important" or "pertinent" laws.<sup>31</sup> Second, *ma'ase ha-torah* should be translated as "the works of the law," as Wright correctly does. Abegg points out, however, that a few minutes with a concordance of the Septuagint leaves little doubt that the Greek equivalent of *ma'ase ha-torah* is likely *ergon nomou*. It is this Greek phrase, of course, that Paul argues against (Rom 3:20, 28; Gal 2:16; 3:2, 5, 10). What is more interesting is that the phrase only appears in Paul and in MMT; it does not at all appear in rabbinic literature in the first or second century (Abegg, "Paul," 53).

Third, while Wright is correct to state that MMT is concerned with temple purity, one must remember that Qumran was a conservative reaction against lax views towards the law. In other words, it is not that Qumran only observed the minor aspects of the law but rather the law in its entirety, including what many first century Jews might consider minor aspects of the law. That Qumran observed the whole of Torah is evident from the Community Rule: "This is the rule for the men of the community who have freely pledged themselves to be converted from all evil and to cling to all his commandments according to his will" (1QS5). The members of the community had to "undertake by a binding oath to return with all his heart and soul to every commandment of the Law of Moses in accordance with all that has been revealed" (1QS5.10).

Fourth, one must consider again the statement, "And it will be reckoned for you as righteousness when you perform what is right and good before Him, for your own good and for that of Israel."<sup>32</sup> Abegg notes that this statement contradicts what Paul states in Romans 4:3.<sup>33</sup> He speculates as to the source of the contradiction and supposes that the author of MMT could have read Genesis 22:16, but believes that the more likely scenario is that the author relies upon Psalm 106:30-31.<sup>34</sup> Abegg writes that,<sup>35</sup>

Upon examination of the Hebrew text of MMT, it becomes clear that MMT echoes this passage from Psalm 106. The same passive verb—"it was reckoned" in Psalm 106 and "you shall be reckoned" in MMT—is one clear reflection of this dependence. The only difference is that the past tense of the verb in Psalm 106 is changed to the future tense in MMT to convert it into a promise for the addressee.

There are other considerations in addition to the verbal parallels, namely the concern for holiness and the connection to the priesthood. Psalm 106 celebrates what Phinehas did, zealously pursuing the law. In this connection the Qumran community called themselves "sons of Zadok," who was the high priest during the reigns of David and Solomon, the direct descendant of Phinehas. It is a likely possibility that the author of MMT reads Psalm 106:30-31 and draws the incorrect conclusion that the people of God are reckoned righteous because of their performance of the law, failing to see that Phinehas did not receive justification but only a perpetual priesthood. In this regard, it is telling that Paul appeals to Genesis 15:6 and not Psalm 106:30-31.

Fifth, Wright correctly states that MMT expounds Deuteronomy 30-31. Yet, what is the subject under consideration in these two chapters? Deuteronomy 30-31 explain the curses and blessings of the covenant. To receive the blessings Israel must "return to the LORD your God, you and your children, and obey his voice in all

31. Martin Abegg, "Paul, 'Works of the Law' and MMT," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 20/6 (1994) 52; idem, "4QMMT, Paul, and 'Works of the Law,'" in *The Bible at Qumran: Text, Shape, and Interpretation*, ed. Peter W. Flint (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) 205.

32. Geza Vermes, *Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, 4Q398 14-17 ii with 4Q399, 228.

33. Robert Eisenman and Michael Wise, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Uncovered* (New York: Penguin, 1992) 183-184.

34. So Carolyn J. Sharp, "Phinehas Zeal and Rhetorical Strategy in 4QMMT," *Revue de Qumran* 18/2 (1997) 210.

35. Abegg, "Paul," 55; idem, "4QMMT," 208; Eisenman and Wise, *Dead Sea Scrolls*, 184, 198.

that I command you today, with all your heart and with all your soul" (Deut 30:2). For example, MMT C states: "We have written to you that you should understand the Book of Moses and the Books of the Prophets and David and all the events of every age."<sup>36</sup> Here reference is made to the importance of the entirety of the OT, not just some portions of it. Qumran had a strictness towards the entirety of the law.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, Israel was to return to the commandments of Torah. The Qumran community certainly observed the Torah, as is evident from their entrance requirements—namely their pledge of loyalty to all the commandments. MMT, however, wrongly understood the purpose of the law—it was not to usher in the eschatological age but to bring death (Rom 7:5; 1 Cor 15:56).<sup>38</sup> The law was supposed to cause Israel to seek Christ, the source of righteousness (Gal 3:24-26).

For these five reasons, therefore, while one cannot be absolutely certain, Paul possibly included the work-wages metaphor to counter MMT C, and it is MMT C that lies behind statements such as, "For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith" (Rom 4:13), and, "Not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith" (Phil 3:9). The evidence examined thus far is not consonant with Wright's explanation of Romans 4:1-8. Verses 5-6 are not a one-time occurrence of the works-wages metaphor but a specific refutation of a common misconception, namely that one could be righteous by obedience to the Torah. Instead, Paul states that one is righteous, innocent and obedient to the Torah, by faith in Christ, not by human effort. With this data, we may move forward to a critical engagement of Wright's understanding of justification.

36. Vermes, *Dead Sea Scrolls*, 227; also Eisenman and Wise, *Dead Sea Scrolls*, 199.

37. Sharp, "Phinehan Zeal," 215; also Gary A. Anderson, "Intentional and Unintentional Sin in the Dead Sea Scrolls," in *Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Biblical, Jewish, and Near Eastern Ritual, Law, and Literature in Honor of Jacob Migrom*, eds., David P. Wright, et al. (Winona: Eisenbrauns, 1995) 49-64.

38. See E. E. Ellis, *Gospel of Luke*, NCB (London: Thomas Nelson, 1966) 215-216.

39. J. Gresham Machen, *The Origin of Paul's Religion* (1925; Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2002) 180.

40. There has been criticism against the monolithic picture of first century Judaism that Wright portrays. See Richard B. Hays, "Adam, Israel, Christ: The Question of Covenant in the Theology of Romans: A Response to Leander E. Keck and N. T. Wright," in *Pauline Theology*, vol. 3, ed. David M. Hay and E. Elizabeth Johnson (Minneapolis:

## JUSTIFICATION

Wright is correct about his three presuppositions regarding justification: it is covenantal, law-court language, and eschatological. Though he correctly identifies these three key presuppositions, his use of these categories require some redirection. First, Wright is correct, justification is covenantal. Though, he argues that one must not understand *covenantal* to mean the covenant theology of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. The problem with this claim is that Wright does not explain how or in what way classic covenant reformed theology is at odds with Scripture. He cites no evidence to support his claim. The assertion of error is something that requires reexamination and the presentation of specific evidence on Wright's part. Though, he moves on to say that what one must understand by *covenantal* is that worldview and understanding of the OT embodied in second-temple Judaism. Wright claims that God made a covenant with Abraham, calling Israel to be his people, and that it is this covenant to which the Israelites look for their vindication, or justification, before the Gentile world. The Jews living in the first century under Roman rule were looking to be vindicated against their Roman oppressors.

Wright is correct in that one must be sensitive to the surrounding cultural and historical context of the NT, however, he gives second-temple Judaism too great a role in defining the covenantal nature of justification. At various points Wright invokes the literature of second-temple Judaism to explain what lies behind Paul's thought. What is problematic about this methodology is that Paul never directly cites the literature of the second-temple. In contradistinction to Wright, Machen explains, "It is significant that when, after the conversion, Paul seeks testimonies to the universal sinfulness of man, he looks not to contemporary Judaism, but to the Old Testament. At this point, as elsewhere, Paulinism is based not upon later developments but upon the religion of the Prophets and the Psalms."<sup>39</sup> Wright assumes that second-temple Judaism has authoritatively interpreted the OT and that Paul builds upon this understanding. Machen notes, for example, the great divergence on a number of subjects concerning the doctrine of the messiah as it is presented in the OT and in the literature of the second temple (Machen, *Paul's Religion*, 182-200). While Wright may be correct in his sketch of the worldview of second-temple Judaism, though there is some doubt as to the accuracy of his explanation, he has not demonstrated that it is consonant with the view of the OT.<sup>40</sup> Is justification in Paul covenantal in the sense of

the vindication of the people of God over against their oppressors, as Wright maintains, informed by second-temple Judaism? Or, is justification covenantal in the sense that God has provided deliverance from sin and death through his covenant dealings with his people in Adam, Noah, Abraham, and Israel?

The answer lies in Paul's explanation of justification in Romans 4. If Wright is correct, what is noticeably absent is any direct connection to the literature of second-temple Judaism and any of the themes Wright claims are connected to justification. In this regard Wright contends that "in the NT Israel's expectation is radically redefined." Wright states that in Christ's "welcome for outcasts and sinners, Jesus enacts God's vindication of (apparently) the wrong group in Israel—the poor, the humble. 'This man [the tax collector], rather than the other [the Pharisee], went home justified before God' (Luke 18:14)."<sup>41</sup> Wright, however, cannot posit a radical redefinition of Israel's expectation for two reasons. If the NT redefined Israel's expectation, then first century Judaism has correctly interpreted the OT, but Christ and the apostles have redefined it. In other words, Christ and the apostles correct the view of the OT. Or, first century Judaism has misinterpreted the OT and it was first century opinion that required correction. If it is the latter, then there has been no redefinition of Israel's hope. Instead, as Machen argues, Paul appeals to the OT, to Abraham, not to the erroneous positions of first century Judaism. And, as classic reformed covenant theology has argued, the Abrahamic covenant, which Paul calls the gospel (Gal 3:8), is built ultimately upon the protoevangelium, not the hopes of first century Jews of being delivered from their Roman overlords. The protoevangelium, of course, was the promise to deliver Adam and Eve out from under the dominion of sin, death, and to conquer the serpent and his seed (Gen 3:15). Justification, then, is covenantal in the sense that God has provided deliverance from sin and death through his covenant dealings with his people in Adam, Noah, Abraham, Israel, the ultimate fulfillment of these covenant dealings comes through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. What about the law-court aspect of justification?

Wright maintains, and correctly so, that justification is law-court language. Wright explains that:<sup>42</sup>

the covenant was there to deal with the sin, and bring about the salvation, of the world. It was therefore utterly appropriate, as I said earlier, that this great event should be described in terms drawn from the setting in which evil was regularly dealt with, namely that of the law

court.... God himself was seen as the judge; evildoers (i.e. the Gentiles, and renegade Jews) would finally be judged and punished; God's faithful people (i.e., Israel, or at least the true Israelites) would be vindicated.

Wright correctly states that justification is explained in terms of a law-court metaphor but what is problematic is the orientation of the court. According to Wright the people of God look for vindication before the world. Yet, once again, while this may be the view of second-temple Judaism, it is not how Paul explains justification. In the context surrounding Romans 4, Paul's great concern is seeking justification before the tribunal of God, not the world: "For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin" (Rom 3:20). According to Paul the one who has been justified has peace with God: "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom 5:1). Paul shows no concern for what the enemies of the people of God might or might not think; Paul shows concern only for what God will say concerning the one who stands before his throne. Justification, therefore, is not about the vindication of the people of God before the world as Wright maintains. Rather it is about the verdict that God passes upon the person who stands in his presence, the verdict of guilty or innocent. This theme of standing before the tribunal of God is found in the OT: "Keep far from a false charge, and do not kill the innocent and righteous, for I will not acquit the wicked" (Exo 23:7; Deut 25:1; Pro 17:15).<sup>43</sup> God will not acquit the wicked, which is why Paul explains that Abraham receives his righteousness, or innocent status, by faith. Moreover, God imputes the obedience, or righteousness, of Christ to Abraham. This interpretation is also confirmed by Christ's use of the term, justification.

Christ explains in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector the nature of justification and how it relates to righteousness:

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Fortress, 1995) 79; Alister E. McGrath, "Reality, Symbol and History: Theological Reflections on N. T. Wright's Portrayal of Jesus," in *Jesus and the Restoration of Israel: A Critical Reassessment of N. T. Wright's Jesus and the Victory of God*, ed. Carey C. Newman (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1999) 170; Seifrid, *Christ*, 21-25.

41. N. T. Wright, "Justification," in *New Dictionary of Theology*, eds. Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright, and J. I. Packer (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1988) 359.

42. Wright, *Saint Paul*, 118; idem, "Justification," 359.

43. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, vol. 1, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1994), 16.1.4, 633.

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: <sup>10</sup>“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup>The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup>I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ <sup>13</sup>But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ <sup>14</sup>I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other (Luke 18:9-14).

Notice that Christ uses the parable against those who trusted in themselves, who thought they were righteous, or innocent before God and loyal to the Torah.<sup>44</sup> In this parable Christ describes the Pharisee, not in Wright’s terms of loyalty to the covenant badges, circumcision, food laws, and Sabbath observance, but in the general commands of Torah: thievery, injustice, adultery, fasting, and tithing (Green, *Luke*, 647-648). It is in these terms of Torah observance that some of the Jews thought they were righteous, or innocent. Fitzmyer observes that this parable shows that Christ<sup>45</sup>

recognized that righteousness in God’s sight was not to be achieved by boasting or even by self-confident activity (either the avoidance of evil or the striving for good in the observance of Mosaic and Pharisaic regulations). This saying about justification is important for it may reveal that the NT teaching about the matter is somehow rooted in Jesus’ own attitude and teaching: One achieves uprightness before God not by one’s own activity but by a contrite recognition of one’s own sinfulness before him. Hence, ‘the Pauline doctrine of justification has its roots in the teaching of Jesus.’

And, for these reasons Paul makes statements like, “a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ” (Gal 2:16), to counter the idea that a person is righteous, innocent before God, by being obedient to the Torah. By contrast, the tax collector who sought the mercy of God and the forgive-

ness of sins, was justified, or declared innocent before the tribunal of God. Hence, justification is a law-court metaphor, but the court is oriented in a God-ward not world-ward direction.

What about the last of the presuppositions, namely that justification is eschatological?

Again, Wright is correct in explaining that justification is eschatological. Wright argues that the justification, or vindication, of the people of God is a long-awaited hope. Hence, according to Wright, the fulfillment of this long-expected hope is eschatological. Wright explains that:<sup>46</sup>

‘Justification’ in the first century was not about how someone might establish a relationship with God. 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.’ In standard Christian theological language, it wasn’t so much about soteriology as about ecclesiology; not so much about salvation as about the church.

So, then, according to Wright justification is eschatological in that it is the long-awaited fulfillment of the covenant promises as well as the final and ultimate definition of who belongs to the people of God (Wright, “Justification,” 359). While Wright is correct to say that justification is eschatological, he is incorrect to divorce justification from soteriology. As Gaffin notes, “All soteriologic experience derives from solidarity in Christ’s resurrection and involves existence in the new creation age, inaugurated by his resurrection.”<sup>47</sup> In other words, all soteriology, including justification, is eschatological because of its connection to the resurrection of Christ, the in-breaking of the eschaton.

One finds the connection between justification, eschatology, and soteriology, prominently in Romans 4:25 where Paul states that Christ was “delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.” Paul makes explicit connection between the resurrection of Christ and the justification of the people of God. Now, Wright correctly argues that the resurrection is an eschatological event (Wright, *Saint Paul*, 36). He also correctly explains that the resurrection of Jesus was his vindication, though it is preferable to say that it was his justification, the Father’s declaration of his Son’s innocence and loyalty to the Torah (Wright, “Justification,” 359):

Christ was innocent of the charges for which he was crucified. But Wright goes on to explain that (Wright, *Romans*, 504), Thus, if faithful Jesus is demonstrated to

44. So Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 646.

45. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke: 10-24*, AB, vol. 28a (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985) 1184-1185; Ellis, *Luke*, 215-216.

46. Wright, *Saint Paul*, 119; idem, *Victory of God*, 203, 288, 513.

47. Richard B. Gaffin, *Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Paul’s Soteriology* (1978; Phillipsburg: P & R, 1987) 138.

be Messiah by the resurrection, the resurrection also declares in principle that all those who belong to Jesus, all those who respond in faith to God's faithfulness revealed in him, are themselves part of the true covenant family promised to Abraham. In other words, the resurrection of Jesus can at this level be seen as the declaration of justification.

Paul, however, does not draw the connection between the resurrection and ecclesiology as Wright contends, when Wright describes the resurrection as a declaration of those who belong to Jesus.

Rather, Paul connects the resurrection to soteriology: "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins" (1 Cor 15:17).<sup>48</sup> Paul ties the resurrection to the conquest of sin and death: "To Paul's way of thinking, as long as Christ remains dead, Satan and sin are triumphant, or more broadly, the dominion of the old aeon remains unbroken" (Gaffin, *Resurrection*, 116). If there is no resurrection, then the protoevangelium and the covenant promises to the patriarchs, Israel, and the people of God are empty. If there is no resurrection, then looking to Christ in faith cannot be counted as righteousness, or innocent before the tribunal of God. There is no deliverance from their sins; they can no longer say, "And such were some of you" (1 Cor 6:11).<sup>49</sup> If there is no resurrection, then there has been no sacrifice to redeem the people of God from the curse of the law (Gal 3:13). In this regard Vos notes that:<sup>50</sup>

resurrection thus comes out of justification, and justification comes, after a manner most carefully to be defined, out of the resurrection; not, be it noted, out of the spiritual resurrection of the believer himself, but out of the resurrection of Christ. On the basis of merit this is so. Christ's resurrection was the *de facto* declaration of God in regard to his being just. His quickening bears in itself the testimony of his justification. God, through suspending the forces of death operating on Him, declared that the ultimate, the supreme consequence of sin had reached its termination. In other words, resurrection had annulled the sentence of condemnation.

So, yes, justification is eschatological, but not in the way that Wright explains. It is not an eschatological definition of the people of God but the in-breaking of the eschatological age, the out-pouring of the power of the age to come, the Holy Spirit, manifest in the resurrection of Christ, bringing about the victory over sin and death, ensuring the justification of the people of God.

Christ has been raised and therefore his people are no longer in their sin because God the Father has accepted the sacrifice on their behalf. Like Phinehas, Christ has stood between the living and the dead and his obedience, his righteousness, has been credited to those who place their faith in him and his work. Hence, Wright is correct to say that justification is covenantal, law-court language, and eschatological. Though, these categories require reorientation because Paul does not discuss justification in the terms that Wright does. Wright bases these categories in the worldview of second-temple Judaism and the longing for deliverance from Rome. Paul, on the other hand, bases these categories in the protoevangelium, the longing for deliverance from sin and death. We may now move forward to some concluding observations.

#### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In this essay we have examined key aspects of Wright's understanding of justification and found it wanting. While there are broad aspects with which one can agree, there is much in the specific details that is problematic. Wright argues that justification is about the vindication of the people of God before her enemies. Justification, according to Wright, is a declaration that a person is "in the right" and righteous, a member of the covenant. Justification is about the fulfillment of God's covenant promises to give Abraham a family that includes both Jews and Gentiles and the ultimate eschatological fulfillment of that long-awaited hope. While all of Wright's claims may be true, Paul presents an entirely different picture. For Paul justification is not vindication before the world but a declaration of innocence before the tribunal of God. It is the long-awaited fulfillment of the covenantal promises of God, first promised to Adam and Eve, then Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and then Israel, to deliver the people of God out from under the dominion of sin and death. Justification is an eschatological reality, in that the new creation has burst forth in the middle of this present evil age, and through the resurrection of Christ has declared the victory of Christ over sin and death, which means that his people are

*Continued on Page 183.*

48. A. C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 1219-1220.

49. Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 743-744.

50. Geerhardus Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (1930; Phillipsburg: P & R, 1994) 151.

**Editorial, Continued from Page 2.**

pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Rowlett, Texas, presents a setting for Psalm 109:1-10, and briefly defends singing from even the most imprecatory portions of the Psalter.

We trust *In Translatiōne* will provide some space for new translation work of material of interest to Confessional Presbyterians. The importance of the piece presented in this first issue is that it supports the theory as stated by James T. Dennison, that the spread of the Puritan view of the Sabbath in the mid to latter part of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, was due at least in part to “the underground development of Puritanism via prophesyings, lecturings and the universities.” In this preface to Nicholas Bownd’s work on the Christian Sabbath, translated here as far as we know for the first time, Andrew Willet states that his introduction to Sabbatarian views came while at the university at Cambridge.

*Antiquary* is anticipated to be a forum for articles of an historical, biographical or bibliographical significance, concerning the ruins and relics as it were of Presbyterianism, reminiscent of the contributions of the historian and antiquary David Hay Fleming. In this installment, the editor traces the development of what would become and still remains the traditional form of The Westminster Standards, indicating when the various portions began to be commonly printed with the Confession and Catechisms. In the Appendices, bibliographical details are given for key editions which introduced changes or first included new material, and a very rare 1710 James Watson edition is described in some detail (the only known copy of which resides at the Presbyterian Historical Society in Philadelphia).

Finally, it is intended that each issue will be completed with a *Bibliography* covering all the material presented, which we trust will be useful to the general reader as well as the bibliophile.

With this introductory editorial to the format out of the way, we leave the reader to the contents of this first issue of *The Confessional Presbyterian, a Journal for Discussion of Presbyterian Doctrine & Practice*.

CHRIS COLDWELL ■

**Fesko on N. T. Wright, Continued from Page 115.**

justified, innocent before God because of the intercessory work of Christ. Moreover, for those who place their faith in Christ, in his work—life, death, and resurrection—God reckons, or credits them with righteousness, innocence and loyalty to the Torah. It appears, therefore, that the classic reformed view of justification as it comes through the Westminster Standards is correct. Justification is indeed an act of God’s free grace, wherein he pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone. ■

**Review by J. Ligon Duncan III, Ph.D, of *The Auburn Avenue Theology*, Continued from Page 163.**

The fourth and final section of the book relates to the Federal Vision teaching on the sacraments, and Douglas Wilson’s and Steve Wilkins’ chapters are not to be missed. Indeed, reading these pieces will give the reader a feel for how much of the theological project of the Federal Vision is juxtaposed with baptist ecclesiology and sacramentology. Indeed, though the Federal Vision casts its conversation partner as the degenerated reformed tradition under the influence of two centuries of revivalism, the real dialogue is with their own personal story—in both baptist and reconstructionist aspects and phases. Cal Beisner’s concluding comments in chapter twenty-three provide a superb summary of the problems of the Federal Vision, all the more valuable because they come from the pen and heart of a man who has tried valiantly to think the very best of his friends involved in this theological revision movement.

One question that ought to be asked is who should read this book, or anything else for that matter on the Federal Vision? Well, obviously ministers and professors need at least some passing acquaintance with the issue if they are to be of help to folks struggling with these topics. This volume provides, for that purpose, a good one-stop resource. When Guy Waters’ *Covenant Theology Improved?* (P&R, forthcoming) appears later this year it will furnish a nice companion to this compilation. Ministerial students too will benefit from hearing both sides in their own words. However, material on the Federal Vision is not something that I would recommend to congregants (unless there is some special circumstance). Better that the laity feed upon healthy food and more edifying subjects. For as Cal Beisner observes: “Extensive study of [Federal Vision proponents’] oral and written teachings on the special concerns of the Federal Vision convinces me that they have taught, alongside some wonderful truths, some serious errors about covenant theology and its implications for salvation, personal and corporate spirituality and piety, the use and understanding of the sacraments and the conduct of theology and biblical studies in general. Sadly, their mistakes undermine their very laudable goals. Their attempt to assure tender souls who doubt their salvation while they trust in Christ collapses and the poor souls are left more confused than before, because the objectivity of the covenant is inadequate to the task—while the presumptuous, who hear that aspect of their message may be led, inadvertently, to the false assurance of formalism. At the same time, their attempt to destroy the complacency of the presumptuous is in profound danger of promoting a false legalistic notion of works righteousness.” ■