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*Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without
wavering. — Hebrews 10:4*

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A Critical Review of N.T. Wright's Theology and Perspective on Justification

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Every generation produces a small number of gifted scholars, a select few men who gain widespread popularity and exert their influence in Biblical studies. Nicholas Thomas (N.T.) Wright is one of those men. Over the last few decades Wright has garnered widespread acclaim and acceptance for his work in New Testament Biblical theology, especially for his work on the Apostle Paul. His influence, in Pauline studies and Biblical studies as whole, stretches across Christendom, traversing denominational divides and attracting Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Evangelicals alike. Wright's lucid, lively writing style no doubt contributes to his popularity, but the content of his writings¹ also appeals to many people. As a self-admitted proponent of several aspects from the New Perspective(s) on Paul, Wright shares many commonalities with fellow New Perspective advocates E.P. Sanders and James D.G. Dunn, but to be fair, Wright's theology carries its own distinct tone and flavor. Recently Professor Wright has received a great deal of criticism for his theology, particularly with regard to the doctrine of justification. That is the issue at hand in this discussion, and it will be addressed in three ways. (1) What men have influenced Wright's theology? (2) What are the primary elements of Wright's theology, and how do those things affect Wright's perspective on justification? And (3) what implications do Wright's views have for other Biblical doctrines and for the Church? By the end of this discussion, the reader will see that Wright's revolutionary influence in Biblical theology is, at the very least, dangerous, and, at the very worst, heretical.

Justification Defined

¹ See "N.T. Wright: Publications and Broadcasts," *N.T. Wright Page - An Unofficial Website Dedicated to Professor N.T. Wright*, accessed December 2, 2012, http://ntwrightpage.com/NTW_Publications.htm, for a lengthy list of these publications. The homepage, <http://ntwrightpage.com>, also contains many helpful links.

Before elaborating on Wright's view, a clear definition of justification is necessary. The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides four English usages, all of which will prove useful for the current discussion:

1. Administration of justice or the law; execution of the sentence; capital punishment...
3. The action of justifying or showing something to be just, right, or proper; vindication of oneself or another; exculpation; verification proof...
4. The action whereby man is justified, or freed from the penalty of sin, and accounted or made righteous by God; the fact or condition of being so justified...
5. *Law*...The showing or maintaining in court that one had sufficient reason for doing that which he is called to answer; a circumstance affording grounds for such a plea;²

In Christian theology and dogmatics, the historical usage has been restricted to the *OED*'s third and fourth definitions,³ and Christians have held one of two primary views regarding justification. Protestants (Lutheran, Anglican, and Reformed) have held to justification on the basis of the imputed righteousness of Christ. "Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in His sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone."⁴ The early church fathers, including Athanasius and Augustine, also held this view, as did the Roman Catholic Church for nearly a thousand years.

² *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary: A-O*, vol. 1, 2 vols., 8th Printing (Oxford University Press, 1974), s.v. "Justification."

³ For a helpful overview of the historical-theological use of "justification," see F. L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, "Justification," in *Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Peabody, MA; Edinburgh: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), 914-15.

⁴ *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, #33. See also the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter XI, "Of Justification"; the *Belgic Confession*, Article XXIII, "The Justification of Sinners"; and the *Canons of Dort*, the "First Main Point of Doctrine," Article 7 and Rejection of Errors, and the "Second Main Point of Doctrine," Article 8 and Rejection of Errors." For historic Lutheranism, Article IV of the *Augsburg Confession of Faith*: "(1) Also they teach that men cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works, but are freely justified for (2) Christ's sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor, and that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake, who, by His death, has made satisfaction for our sins. (3) This faith God imputes for righteousness in His sight.[Romans 3-4]."

During the High Middle Ages, Scholastic philosophy and theology challenged the traditional view that in justification the righteousness of Christ is imputed to sinners. Rather than an imputed righteousness received by grace through faith, the Scholastics proposed that man cooperates with God in justification, receiving an infused or inherent righteousness. Furthermore, the Scholastics defined justification as a continual process of being made righteous (sanctification), not as a once-and-for-all act of God's free grace. The Roman Catholic Church officially adopted this position at the Council of Trent in the mid-16th century.⁵

The doctrine of justification was, and continues to be, a primary source of disagreement between Roman Catholics and Protestants. "It was, according to Martin Luther, 'the article by which the church stands or falls'; to Calvin, it was 'the hinge of the Reformation,' 'the principal article of the Christian religion,' 'the principle of the whole doctrine of salvation and the foundation of all religion.'"⁶ Within the last two to three centuries, however, Lutheran and Anglican leaders have allied themselves more closely with the Roman Catholic Church and have compromised on (accepted) this doctrine. Wright and other proponents of the New Perspective have also challenged the Reformers' understanding of justification and represent another serious threat to the doctrine. Consequently justification by grace through faith, in which Christ's righteousness is imputed to the believer, is being threatened in ways not seen since the times of Luther and Calvin.

The New Perspective and its Influence on N.T. Wright

⁵ See the *Council of Trent*, Ch. IV-VIII, X-XI, and XIV-XVI, for the Roman Catholic Church's declarations regarding justification.

⁶ Crampton, W. Gary, *What Calvin Says : An Introduction to the Theology of John Calvin* (Jefferson, Md.: Trinity Foundation, 1992), 76.

The New Perspective on Paul is a relatively new development in the history of Biblical theology, originating in the mid-20th century. German liberalism of the 19th century certainly set the stage for a radical shift in Pauline theology, but the foundation for the New Perspective was most directly established through the works Albert Schweitzer, Rudolf Bultmann, William David Davies, and Ernst Käsemann.⁷ Despite the varied theologies and conclusions of these men, each significantly contributed to what would become the New Perspective, and their ideas culminated in the New Perspective's first true disciple, Krister Stendahl. Stendahl's six fundamental assumptions about Paul may be summarized as follows:

1. Paul opposed Judaism because of its ethno-centricity, not because of its soteriology.
2. Paul never endured the "crisis of conscience" described by Augustine and Luther but had a healthy, "robust conscience, even to the point of believing that his apostolic labors made up for his persecutions in Judaism."
3. Paul was more concerned with the "Jew/Gentile question" than he was with individual salvation. (Stendahl bases this argument on the structure of Rom. 1-8 and 9-11, stating that Paul "does not deal with the question of how man is to be saved – be it by works or law or by something else.")
4. Paul used justification by faith alone for polemical purposes; it was not central to his thought or theology.
5. For Paul, justification was an *ecclesiastical* doctrine, not a *soteriological* doctrine. Justification did not have moral implications for sin but was concerned with the inclusion of the Gentiles into God's people. "The doctrine also is tied to a unique system of ethics focused on the cohesion of the community (not transcendent and objective moral standards)."
6. The moral language used by Paul in Rom. 1-3 argues "from solution to plight" and is "a consequence of his Jewish heritage"; the Messiah has come because the world is sinful.⁸

For anyone who has read and digested Wright's work, Stendahl's influence should be glaringly obvious. Admittedly, Wright's views are not exactly the same as Stendahl's, but the similarities are striking.⁹

⁷ See Guy Prentiss Waters, *Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul: A Review and Response* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2004), 1-13, for an overview of German theology "From Luther to Schweitzer," and pp. 15-22 for the influences of Bultmann, Davies, and Käsemann.

⁸ These points are a brief summary from Ibid, 32-33, with reference to Krister Stendahl, "Paul Among Jews and Gentiles," in *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 29.

The other two key figures who advocate the New Perspective and who have influenced Wright are E.P. Sanders and James D.G. Dunn. Both men have employed most, if not all, of Stendahl's assertions about Paul, but each has also made unique contributions to the New Perspective. Sanders generated a groundswell of enthusiasm and support for the movement with his publication of *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, in which he introduced the idea of *covenantal nomism*.¹⁰ Simply stated, covenantal nomism presents Second Temple Judaism as a religion of grace, not a legalistic religion of works-righteousness (contra the classic Protestant position).¹¹ Based on this assumption, Sanders argues that Paul's true problem was not with Judaism in and of itself, but that Paul's problem with Judaism was its rejection of Jesus as the Christ. "In short, *this is what Paul finds wrong in Judaism: it is not Christianity*."¹² Although Wright clearly disagrees with Sanders in other areas, he wholeheartedly embraces *covenantal nomism*:

[Sanders]...dominates the landscape, and, until a major refutation of his central thesis is produced, honesty compels one to do business with him. I do not myself believe such a refutation can or will be offered; serious modifications are required, but I regard his basic point as established.¹³

⁹ Wright highly praises the contributions of all these men in his introduction, and despite his propensity to adopt the views of Stendahl, he offers the highest praise to Käsemann. See N. T Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cincinnati, OH: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; Forward Movement Publications, 1997), 11-20.

¹⁰ "The 'pattern' or 'structure' of covenantal nomism is this: (1) God has chosen Israel and (2) given the law. The law implies both (3) God's promise to maintain the election and (4) the requirement to obey. (5) God rewards obedience and punishes transgression. (6) The law provides for means of atonement, and atonement results in (7) maintenance or re-establishment of the covenantal relationship. (8) All those who are maintained in the covenant by obedience, atonement and God's mercy belong to the group which will be saved. An important interpretation of the first and last points is that election and ultimately salvation are considered to be by God mercy rather than human achievement." E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 422.

¹¹ Sanders oversimplifies the theological climate of Second Temple Judaism, presenting *covenantal nomism* as its dominant, if not exclusive, theological perspective, and fails to account for the theological diversity of Judaism at the time of Christ and the Apostles.

¹² Emphasis in original; Ibid, 552.

¹³ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 20.

The final major contributor to the New Perspective is James D.G. Dunn.¹⁴ Building upon the earlier premises of Stendahl and Sanders, Dunn takes *covenantal nomism* a step further than his predecessors by defining Judaism's "works of the law" (to which Paul refers frequently) as *ethnic boundary markers*. Venema clarifies:

Paul was objecting to *Jewish exclusivism* and not legalism. The problem with the use of the law among the Judaizers...was not their attempt to find favor with God on the basis of their obedience to the law, but their use of the works of the law [e.g. circumcision] to exclude Gentiles from membership in the covenant community. The Judaizers were insisting upon certain works of the law that served as boundary markers for inclusion or exclusion from the number of God's people.¹⁵

Again, Wright disagrees with a number of Dunn's other conclusions, but there is unquestionable solidarity between the two men on this issue.

The *exact* degree to which these men, including Wright, disagree is a moot point. All of them have loosely allied themselves under the banner of the New Perspective. As a result, the New Perspective extends its influence and gains new ground with each passing year. These new disciples of the New Perspective, like their mentors, continue to add their nuanced variations to the New Perspective, and what at one time may have been an opportunity to formulate a true systematic treatment of the issues has since devolved into an amorphous revolt against established Protestant doctrine. Still, the ever-changing nature of this amorphous revolt remains a threat and cannot be ignored.

N.T. Wright's Theology

¹⁴ Dunn has numerous well-known and influential works, but his main ideas are adequately treated in James D. G. Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*, Revised ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008).

¹⁵ Emphasis in original; Cornelis P. Venema, "What Did Saint Paul Really Say? N.T. Wright and the New Perspective(s) on Paul," in *By Faith Alone: Answering the Challenges to the Doctrine of Justification*, ed. Gary L.W. Johnson and Guy Prentiss Waters (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006), 39.

Many scholars have attempted to wrap their minds around Wright's theology, but few, if any, have succeeded. There are several reasons for this. First, Wright tampers with the proper order of interpreting Scripture: he utilizes Biblical theology in order to develop a systematic understanding of Paul. Thus he over-emphasizes the value of literary themes, authorial intent, theological development, historical setting, psychology, sociology, rhetorical style, etc., while largely de-emphasizing a holistic approach to Scripture and a systematic arrangement of its principle doctrines.¹⁶ The most common results of Wright's hermeneutic are vague and elusive systematic formulations and supercilious criticisms. In other words, Wright may not have worked the kinks out of his ever-developing Pauline theology, but he derisively shows his opponents their mistakes.¹⁷ The second difficulty in understanding Wright's theology results from his use of familiar theological terminology in unfamiliar ways (e.g. Messiah, Torah, election, idolatry, pagan nations, and true humanity, among others). This difficulty further exacerbates the reader's attempt to understand the larger doctrinal matter that Wright redefines (e.g. faith, justification, righteousness, Gospel, and works of the law). With reckless abandon he jettisons well-established theological language, replacing it with his own inventive phraseology.

The third and final difficulty in understanding Wright's theology is his adoption of a narrative-based hermeneutic, a tactic which explains the previous difficulties. Few authors

¹⁶ This is not to say that Biblical theology and systematic theology are incompatible, or even at odds with each other. Both disciplines complement each other but must be kept in proper balance. However Wright, despite his self-asserted high view of Scripture, frequently undermines Scripture's authoritative nature either by ignoring the doctrine of inspiration or by placing inspiration on equal footing with the aforementioned items (literary themes, authorial intent, etc.). In doing so, he squarely situates himself in the tradition of his liberal predecessors.

¹⁷ Instances of this appear throughout Wright's works. For example: "The current situation in Pauline studies is pleasantly confused. I suspect, actually, that it always has been; it is only with hindsight that one can observe major trends and significant shifts of opinion. Now, as probably in most periods, there are large numbers of people doing bewilderingly different things with Paul." Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 20.

emphasize this point,¹⁸ but Wright's hermeneutic is the key to unlocking his enigmatic theology. Ironically he denounces this approach at certain times¹⁹ and adopts it at others. According to Wright's comments, he rejects the use of a story-based hermeneutic in the immediate context of Pauline literature but applies that same hermeneutic to the history of redemption. Waters' comments on this topic, though lengthy, are the most insightful:

Wright begins with an interest in blazing past the impasse caused by "post-Enlightenment rationalism" and anti-Enlightenment supernaturalism," that is by reading the New Testament as "story" and not as "declaring unstoried ideas." Epistemologically, he advances a "critical-realist theory of knowledge and verification," one that "acknowledges the essentially 'storied' nature of human knowing, thinking and living, within the larger model of worldviews and their component parts." Such an approach, Wright is confident, will bypass both naïve objectivism and skeptical phenomenism... [At this point, Waters inserts a lengthy quote from Wright's work, *The New Testament and the People of God*, which offers the philosophical basis for a story-based hermeneutic.²⁰]

For Wright, then, "story" lies back of theological propositions, which are the expression of that particular narrative. Consequently, when, for example, we speak of monotheism and election, we "summon into the mind's eye and entire worldview," which is fundamentally storied... "[Paul's] statements and arguments are in fact expressions of the essentially Jewish story now redrawn around Jesus." We have, then, in Wright's thought, an inherent bias against doctrinal formulation and linear, logical reasoning, a predisposition against conceiving of the relationship of God and man in *vertical* terms. Rather, Wright is inclined to understand that relationship in essentially *horizontal* categories.²¹

¹⁸ The noticeable exceptions are Cornelis P. Venema, *Getting the Gospel Right: Assessing the Reformation and New Perspectives on Paul* (Edinburgh; Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2006), and Waters, *Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul*.

¹⁹ "The currently fashionable category of 'story' or 'narrative' has been employed as a way into [Paul's] theology, though there is currently no agreement on how to use the category, or what might happen if we did." Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 21.

²⁰ "Stories are a basic constituent of human life; they are, in fact, one key element within the total construction of a worldview... All worldviews contain an irreducible element, which stands alongside the other worldview elements (symbol, praxis, and basic questions and answers), none of which can be simply "reduced" to terms of the others... Worldviews, the grid through which humans perceive reality, emerge into explicit consciousness in terms of human *beliefs* and *aims*, which function as in principle debatable expressions of the worldviews. The stories which characterize the worldview itself are thus located, on the map of human knowing, at a more fundamental level than explicitly formulated beliefs, including theological beliefs." Waters, *Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul*., 121, with reference to N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God: Christian Origins and the Question of God*, vol. vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1996), 38.

²¹ All emphases in original; Waters, *Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul*, 121-22, with reference to Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 5, 6, 45, 77-78, 79.

Wrapping one's head around Wright's theology will be nearly impossible without first grasping his hermeneutical method. Note especially the last two sentences of the previous citation, which strike at the crux of the matter.

For Wright, every part of reality, particularly redemptive history, is part of a great story, an unfolding drama on a cosmic scale. He “outlined in [*The New Testament and the People of God*] a hermeneutical model, a way of understanding how the Bible is authoritative. It involves understanding the great story, the metanarrative, of the Bible itself, as a five-act play, still unfinished.”²² The five acts of the play are as follows: (1) “God’s good and unspoiled creation”; (2) “the Fall”; (3) “the story of Israel BC”; (4) the days of Jesus... “we are not walking around Palestine in the shadow of Jesus of Nazareth as he tells subversive stories, heals cripples, feasts with outcasts, and plans a last dangerous trip to Jerusalem”; and (5) “[the act in which we live] begins at Easter; its opening scenes include Pentecost; [its task is] to tell and write the story of Jesus, [guiding the church] by the written as well as the spoken word, as to form basic and non-negotiable parameters for how we today...are to improvise our way from where this act began to where it is supposed to end.”²³ Once an act concludes, it is finished. A previous act (e.g. Creation or the Fall) is not significant because it still affects people today, but because it was a necessary part of the larger drama and provided a historical stepping-stone to the current act.

²² N. T. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 170-71.

²³ *Ibid*, 171-72. Hoping to justify his words (“to improvise our way from where this act began to where it is supposed to end”), Wright presents the analogy of a musician: “[N]o musician would ever suppose that improvising means playing out of tune or time. On the contrary, it means knowing extremely well where one is in the implicit structure, and listening intently to the other players so that what we all do together, however spontaneously, makes sense as a whole.” This analogy not only begs the question; it begs many questions. How does one know what instrument to play? How does one learn how to play that instrument? To tune that instrument? To read music? To determine what notes harmonize with each other? And so on... The major point here is that Wright continues to make sweeping theological assertions without offering any logical foundation upon which they may rest. This will be seen even more vividly in the discussion regarding justification.

If redemption is a play that has unfolded through many acts, it must necessarily have actors. This is the final aspect of understanding Wright's theology. Recall the earlier quote from Waters: Wright views the relationship between God and man in *horizontal*, not *vertical*, terms. By means of comparison, this, in principle, is no different than Plato's "Chain of Being." All actors in Wright's drama of redemption are subjected to the overarching storyline. Men, angels, powers, principalities, and even God Himself are held captive by the narrative. The results of this hermeneutic are catastrophic. For Wright, God may be Creator and may be transcendent from His creation, but He is not transcendent from the redemptive drama; thus the Creator-creature distinction is ultimately erased. Likewise, the actors in the drama have been cast; the "chess pieces" of the game are already in play, so no new elements may be introduced without the intervening or creative activity of an external, transcendent power. Wright, however, has already divested God of His transcendence by casting Him as an actor in the drama. In the end, the story is what it is; the actors are who they are; and the show must go on.

N.T. Wright's Perspective on Justification

Finally, then, one has the necessary foundation for understanding Wright's perspective on justification. Wright, like Stendahl, asserts that justification is a matter of *ecclesiology*, not *soteriology*, (i.e. about the church, not about salvation) and attacks the traditional Protestant doctrine of justification by grace through faith.²⁴ Justification is about the church, not about salvation. According to Wright's most well-known statement on this issue: "Justification in this setting,^[25] then, is not a matter of *how someone enters the community of the true people of God*,

²⁴ Interestingly, Wright's attacks upon the Roman Catholic doctrine are not severe, a position which, ironically (or perhaps even appropriately), has several similarities to his own doctrine. His attacks upon established Protestant doctrine vary significantly, sometimes vehement and sometimes moderate.

but of *how you tell who belongs to that community*”.²⁶ Furthermore, justification, at least in Paul’s theology, “is a subset of election, that is, it belongs as part of his doctrine of the people of God.”²⁷ Wright offers many other “one-liners” such as these, but in the end it is clear that he makes a radical break from all accepted theological understandings of justification (Protestant and Roman Catholic alike).

Wright derives his new understanding of justification from three fundamental assumptions: (1) Paul uses covenant language; (2) Paul uses law-court language; and (3) Paul has an eschatological understanding of justification. First, Paul uses covenant language because he is a Jew living during Second Temple Judaism. The Jews of Paul’s day were anxiously awaiting God’s fulfillment of His promises to Abraham²⁸, so Paul used terms that were familiar to them. Second, Paul uses law-court language because he wants his readers and hearers to understand justification in terms of a Jewish courtroom.²⁹

First, within the law-court setting, the “righteousness” which someone has when court has found in their favour is not a moral quality which they bring into court with them; it is the legal status which they carry out of court with them. Second, we saw that this legal status, the “righteousness” of the person who has won the case, is not to be confused with the judge’s “righteousness”.³⁰

²⁵ Wright refers to the historical setting of the 1st century A.D., including the circumstances of both Paul and Second Temple Judaism.

²⁶ Emphasis in original; Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 119.

²⁷ Wright, *Paul*, 121.

²⁸ This topic will be addressed later, but at this point, note that Wright equates God’s righteousness with God’s faithfulness (to fulfill His covenant with Abraham).

²⁹ “[I]t is *law-court* language, functioning within the covenantal setting as a strong explanatory metaphor. Two things must be said about this. First, this metaphor is necessary for understanding what the covenant was all about. The covenant was there to put the world to rights, to deal with evil and to restore God’s justice and order to the cosmos. Second, it is never independent of the covenant setting. It cannot be made into an absolute and free-standing concept without doing violence both to itself and to the fundamental meaning of the covenant.” Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 117.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 119.

Wright, who has already rejected the soteriological meaning of justification, now completes his attack upon the doctrine: the righteousness of God, Christ's righteousness, is not imputed to believers saved by faith. "Is there, then, no 'reckoning of righteousness' in...Romans 5:14-21? Yes, there is; but this is not God's own righteousness or Christ's own righteousness...but, rather, the fresh status of 'covenant member' and/or 'justified sinner,' which is accredited to those who are in Christ, who have heard the gospel and responded with 'the obedience of faith.'"³¹

Likewise, Christ does not offer Himself up to God as a penal substitutionary atonement for sin.

Third, Paul uses the "language" of justification in terms of future vindication (eschatology), not present salvation (soteriology). "The 'works' in accordance with which the Christian will be vindicated on the last day are not the unaided works of the self-help moralist. Nor are they the performance of the ethnically distinctive Jewish boundary markers... They are, rather, the things that show that one is in Christ...produced in one's life as a result of the Spirit's indwelling and operation."³² Those things a believer "does in the present by moral and physical effort will count to his credit on the last day" as signs of Christ's work in him, ultimately providing the basis on which God will justify him and offering assurance that God, in the end, will vindicate His people.³³

What, then, is to be said about faith? For Wright, faith is not the means by which one receives salvation; faith is the "badge of membership" for God's people.

The place of faith in this picture has long been problematic within post-Reformation dogmatics. Is faith something I "do" to earn God's favour, and, if not, what role does it play? Once we release Paul's justification-language from the burden of having to describe "how someone *becomes* a Christian", however, this is simply no longer a

³¹ N. T. Wright and Bruce L. McCormack, "New Perspectives on Paul," in *Justification in Perspective: Historical Developments and Contemporary Challenges* (Grand Rapids, MI; Edinburgh: Baker Academic; Rutherford House, 2006), 253.

³² *Ibid*, 254.

³³ *Ibid*, 254-55.

problem. There is no danger of imagining that Christian faith is after all a surrogate “work”, let alone a substitute form of moral righteousness. Faith is the badge of covenant membership, not something someone “performs” as a kind of initiation test.³⁴

Wright’s seismic shift in his understanding of justification has generated a seismic shift in another doctrine, namely that of faith. The looseness of his language, however, leaves one somewhat befuddled with regard to what Wright actually means. Is faith a one-time gift that a believer receives and bears, and no longer a continual practice (i.e. strengthening one’s faith)? And if salvation is not received through faith, how exactly does one receive it? In response to these questions, Wright shifts three more doctrines: the Gospel, calling, and regeneration. For Wright, the pronouncement that “Jesus is Lord” is the central message of the Gospel, and the pronouncement of this message is the primary means by which men are converted (i.e. called and regenerated).

Implications of Wright’s Theology

As already seen, one cannot simply adjust a single doctrine without affecting other doctrine, and the doctrine of justification cannot be isolated from all other areas of theology. A shift in soteriology inevitably triggers a shift in eschatology; a shift in Christology triggers a shift in ecclesiology; and so on. For this reason, Wright’s new perspective on justification produces shockwaves that reverberate throughout all areas of his theology, and in order to make his scheme work, Wright redefines not only one, but several, well-established doctrines.

Thus the dangers of Wright’s theology are blatantly obvious. Justification becomes a semi-Pelagian, works-based righteousness. The Gospel becomes the generic statement, “Jesus is Lord.” Faith becomes an ambiguous “badge of membership.” Story-based theology erases the Creator-creature distinction. And there are countless other problems that result from the New

³⁴ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 125.

Perspective on Paul. This theology is dangerous, if not outright heretical, and should be avoided at all costs.

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