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THE "NEW PERSPECTIVE ON PAUL" AND JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

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The Talbot journal, *Sundoulos*, is designed to serve those who have graduated from Talbot and are in full-time ministry. *Sundoulos* grew out of an influx of requests for some kind of continued support for alumni as they finished their coursework at Talbot. In 1993 it joined with the Alumni newsletter and received a new format. Dr. Bob Saucy was instrumental in the creation of the journal and describes it as “a way we could bring the fruit of the faculty to alumni.”

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- Is the righteousness of God His covenant faithfulness as claimed by Wright and others? Or is it God's moral purity, an aspect of His holiness, as affirmed by the church for many centuries?
- Has the church been wrongheaded about the nature of salvation through the centuries since the Reformers?
- Has Paul truly been misread as the New Perspective claims?

Why is this controversy important for ministry? Rather than serving to clarify what it means to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ, the new perspectives make less transparent Jesus' expectations for His followers. Scripture seems clear: Christ provided what is required by God. Salvation depends on what Christ has accomplished, not our own inadequate good works⁴ (Rom. 3:20, 28; Gal. 2:16).

¹John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (InterVarsity Press, 1986), p. 111.

²N. T. Wright, *Justification: God's Plan & Paul's Vision* (InterVarsity Press, 2009).

³Carl Trueman, essay read to the Tyndale Fellowship, Cambridge University, 2000; published by Ligonier Ministries and R.C. Sproul. © Tabletalk magazine. Website: www.ligonier.org/tabletalk.

⁴John Piper, *The Future of Justification: A Response to N.T. Wright* (Crossway Books, 2007).

FROM THE EDITOR

It happens, now and then, that novel ideas, born in arid academic circles, percolate into the wider culture, bringing both promising insights and disquieting revisions to cherished doctrine. Debate ensues. So it is with the "New Perspective on Paul."

New Perspective scholarship, in its focus on Judaism at the time of Christ and the birth of the church, has provided significant insights which can aid our interpretation of the NT. But these contributions have been overshadowed in the minds of many by the revisionist understanding of the doctrine of justification.

Thanks to the wide popular influence of N. T. Wright and John Piper, a scholarly debate, demanding skills in exegesis, historical and systematic theology, and historical/cultural/sociological study of Second Temple Judaism, has filtered into popular publications, pulpits and pews—and blogs, where often the nuances of the debate are lost.

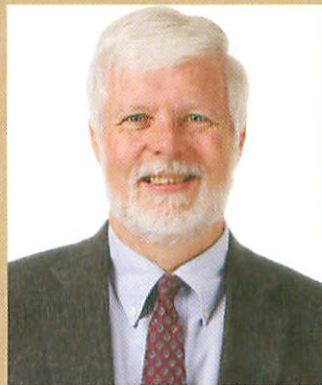
In this issue, Matt Williams offers a historical overview of the New Perspective and notes some of the positive contributions it has made. The New Perspective brings some keen scholarship and needed insights to our understanding of the NT, and Matt helpfully guides us through the territory.

But many evangelicals have found the New Perspective disturbing, largely because of its reinterpretation of the doctrine of justification. In a second article, Bob Saucy and Alan Gomes team to critique the New Perspective's reinterpretation of justification.

The importance of this discussion, we think, justifies (no pun intended) the added length of the articles in this issue.

We trust that the Lord will spark your interest and guide your thinking about these important matters.

Fellow-servants of the Lord,
Garry DeWeese



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JUSTIFICATION AND THE NEW PERSPECTIVE

The great reformer Martin Luther once declared that the biblical teaching of justification by faith alone “is the doctrine by which the church stands or falls.” Historically, Protestants have understood justification to mean that God declares us “not guilty” for our sins because Christ bore them in our place, and also that God declares us as being positively righteous in his sight because of Christ’s righteousness imputed to us, i.e., credited to our accounts.

However, a recent teaching called the “New Perspective on Paul” (hereafter NP) has called into question the traditional Protestant understanding of justification. Adherents of the NP claim that the church, both Catholic and Protestant, has misunderstood the biblical teaching of justification for most of its history,¹ primarily due to a failure to apprehend the underlying problem that Paul was addressing in his epistles to the Galatians and to the Romans.² Thus, before we can understand the NP’s revision of the doctrine of justification it is necessary first to identify what they claim is the real issue that Paul was confronting in these epistles.



THE CONTEXT OF PAUL'S POLEMIC ACCORDING TO THE NP

According to the NP, Paul was not countering legalistic Jewish individuals who were attempting to earn their salvation through works-righteousness. Indeed, these Jews believed that they were already members of God's covenant people by grace alone. Rather, their sin was one of ethnocentric pride. These Jews had erected barriers between themselves and their Gentile brothers and sisters by insisting that, along with faith in Jesus, the Gentiles must also follow such specifically Jewish ceremonial practices as circumcision, the kosher dietary laws, and

regarded as morally virtuous (whether through an inherent or an imputed righteousness), but is simply declared to be in the covenant.³

In the NP, justification is not central to salvation or to the gospel as such. That is because justification is not about a person "getting in" to the family of God, or "staying in," but rather is about "how you could tell who was [already] in."⁴ Therefore, justification is not the gospel itself, nor even a part of the gospel message, but is merely the pronouncement of who is or is not already in the covenant community through faith. Instead, the gospel refers only to the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. It is by faith in the gospel, and not through justification, that we receive forgiveness of sins and are made members of God's covenant people. By the time the declaration

“According to the NP, justification is the declaration that a person is in the covenant family. Accordingly, “righteousness” is simply a statement of that person’s status. He or she is not regarded as morally virtuous (whether through an inherent or an imputed righteousness), but is simply declared to be in the covenant.”

Sabbath observance, which were to serve as “identity markers” that they too belonged to God's covenant community. Thus, the sin of these “Judaizers” was that they were alienating themselves from their fellow believers in a spirit of ethnic exclusivism and pride, not that they were attempting to earn salvation in relation to God through moral effort.

With this as background we can now look at the NP's retooling of the doctrine of justification.

THE NP UNDERSTANDING OF JUSTIFICATION

According to the NP, justification is the declaration that a person is in the covenant family. Accordingly, “righteousness” is simply a statement of that person's status. He or she is not

known as justification happens, our covenant membership is already a “done deal,” as it were.

According to Wright, our present justification, which is on the basis of faith, anticipates our future justification that will take place on the day of judgment, which is “on the basis of the entire life.”⁵ In other words, while our present justification is by faith, our future justification is, in some sense, by works.⁶ Wright eschews the idea that this final justification by works means that the Christian “earns” his or her final salvation, since the works in question are produced in the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:4).⁷

We believe that the NP take on justification is fatally defective because it has failed to grasp justification's true essence. And we believe that the problems with the NP view are not merely theoretical but have serious practical consequences as well.

THE BIBLICAL MEANING OF JUSTIFICATION

The word “justify” normally translates verb forms based on the Hebrew root *sdq* and the Greek *dik* that also are used in forming the adjective “righteous” and noun “righteousness.” “Justify” in the Old Testament normally translates the causative form (Hiphil) of *sdq* with the forensic (judicial) meaning, “to declare righteous” (e.g., “I will not acquit [declare righteous] the guilty,” Ex 23:7).⁸ The forensic sense is evident especially when it is contrasted with condemnation (e.g., Deut 25:1; Prov 17:15).⁹

Where the Old Testament Hebrew word for “justify” clearly has a forensic sense, the Greek translation in the Septuagint is always the verb, *dikaioō*, which is also used for “justify” in the New Testament. Again, the declarative meaning is evident when Paul refers to those “justified” as “just before God” (Rom 2:13; cf. 3:20), and where he contrasts justification with condemnation (Rom 5:16; 8:33-34). While *dikaioō* can occasionally have a demonstrative sense, i.e., “to show someone as righteous,” it is generally agreed that in Paul’s letters the word always has the forensic sense, “to declare righteous” or “acquit.”¹⁰

Now, if God’s justification of us means that he declares us righteous, the important question is, what does “righteous” mean in this declaration? Far more profound than NP’s concept of the non-moral status of membership in God’s people, scriptural righteousness refers to a moral quality that is in radical contrast to all sin, lawlessness, and uncleanness—e.g., “all are under sin . . . there are none righteous” (Rom 3:9-10); one will hardly die for a righteous man, but Christ died for us “while we were sinners” (Rom 5:7-8); “what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness” (2 Cor 6:14); believers are no longer to present themselves as “slaves to impurity and to lawlessness,” but “to righteousness” (Rom 6:19). Righteousness thus entails doing what is right or what conforms to God’s laws, i.e., his moral and spiritual order for human life. This order is the expression of his own person and word, or of his own righteousness, which Piper aptly defines as “his unwavering commitment to preserve the honor of his name and display his glory.”¹¹

The meaning of “righteous” in our justification by God is thus similar in that it is a declarative act that we are in conformity with God’s righteous order for human moral, ethical, and spiritual life—we conform to what people ought to do in relation to God and to our fellow humans. In human courts, the declaration of being righteous is based on the person’s own righteousness. But God in abounding love and grace “justifies the ungodly” (Rom 4:5) and “sinners” (5:8-9) by giving them “the gift of righteousness” in Christ (5:17). For this reason, while our justification is ultimately God’s declaration of our righteousness, the saving work in Christ, or “the justice enacted in Christ” on our behalf, is rightly seen as an aspect of that justification.¹²

Scripture’s longest exposition on justification in Romans 3:21-5:21 is preceded (1:18-3:20) by the apostle’s strong demonstration that “both Jews [under the Law] and Greeks [Gentiles] are all under sin” (3:9) and “accountable to God” (v. 19). Biblical justification thus goes beyond the surface problem of Jews in the church demanding that Gentiles take on certain non-moral “badges” of the ceremonial law. Rather, Paul recognized that they were joining law keeping—“by which no flesh will be justified” (Gal 2:16)—with the work of Christ in order to be right with God. In other words, they were attempting to mix the old Mosaic covenant with the new covenant wrought by the work of Christ. The apostle declared this a distortion of the gospel (Gal 1:7) and in fact a “different gospel” (v. 6). He branded the purveyors of such a gospel “false brethren” (Gal 2:4).

The demand for Gentile circumcision no doubt revealed a certain Jewish ethnocentric pride in the Law on which the NP focuses. But the apostle saw something much more fundamental: they were denying the gospel of grace. The emphasis on justification by faith apart from any works demonstrates that for Paul the gospel rests on the doctrine of God’s gracious justification of believers solely through the work of Christ. Because justification levels all humans as sinners and debtors to God’s gracious salvation, the doctrine obviously has ramifications for any self-aggrandizing behavior among God’s people. But for the apostle it is first and foremost a part of the gospel of our salvation from sin.

THE NEED OF RIGHTEOUSNESS FOR LIFE

The doctrine of justification is central to the biblical story of salvation. Scripture repeatedly connects life with righteousness. “Those who receive . . . the gift of righteousness will reign in life” (Rom 5:7). “Through one act of righteousness [the obedience of Jesus] there resulted justification of life” (Rom 5:18). Grace reigns “through righteousness to eternal life” (Rom 5:21). “Being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life” (Tit 3:7; cf. also Gal 3:21).

Life requires righteousness because life is found only in God (cf. Ps 36:9, “For with you is the fountain of life”; Prov 8:35, “For he who finds me finds life”). If we would have fullness of life, therefore, we must live in full communion with God, which entails conformity with his own righteousness and life. As Scripture says, “You shall be holy, for I am Holy” (1 Pet 1:15); “For what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness” (2 Cor 6:14; cf. Ps 15:1-2; 24:3-4). Thus, the justification that brings life must be grounded in a perfect righteousness.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE FALL AND ITS REMEDY

Sadly, Scripture tells us that human beings did not maintain their original integrity but defected from God in an act of willful rebellion. And this rebellion brought with it horrific consequences.

First of all, humans became subject to death as the wages of their sin (Rom 3:23). As early as Genesis 2:17, God warned Adam that if he disobeyed and ate of the forbidden fruit he would “surely die.” God, the righteous judge, thus made it clear that his commandments must be obeyed. This death, both spiritual and physical, is the penalty for sin and must be exacted because God, being just, will in no wise let sin go unpunished (Ex 34:7; Nah 1:3). It was therefore necessary for Jesus to propitiate (i.e., satisfy) the wrath of God in our place if we are to be saved (Rom 3:25-26). Christ bore our sins in our place, i.e., as our substitute (Isa 53:6, 10; Matt 20:28; 1 Pet 2:24, etc.), tasting death for every man (Heb 2:9). Another way of expressing this same truth is to say that our

sins were *imputed* to him, i.e., our sins were *reckoned* to him as if he himself had committed them.

But Christ’s work for us does not stop there. As we observed previously, we need more than mere exemption from punishment: we also need to have perfect moral righteousness as a condition for life. Jesus furnishes this perfect moral righteousness through his own immaculately holy life, just as he furnishes the required payment for our sins through his death on the cross.

It is at this latter point in particular that the NP runs afoul of the biblical (and classic Protestant) position. According to Wright, it is nonsensical to speak of moral righteousness as something that can be “imputed” or otherwise bestowed as a gift. Wright states:

If we use the language of the law court, it makes no sense whatever to say that the judge imputes, imparts, bequeaths, conveys or otherwise transfers his righteousness to either the plaintiff or the defendant. Righteousness is not an object, a substance or a gas which can be passed across the courtroom.¹³

According to Wright, when God vindicates his people they have a righteous status, i.e., of the court having found in their favor. But this verdict is not based either on the defendant’s own moral righteousness or on the righteousness of another imputed to him.¹⁴ It is merely the judge’s decision to vindicate the defendant on the basis of faith in Christ.

However, if, as we have seen, a perfect moral righteousness is needed, the question becomes, from where must this righteousness come? It must either be (1) our own inherent righteousness—whether wrought in us purely through our own moral exertions, or through the Spirit working in us, or through some combination of these—or (2) imputed to us as a gift from a source outside of ourselves, i.e., what the reformers called an “alien righteousness” (*iustitia aliena*). These are the only two possibilities, logically speaking.

The first possibility—attaining life through our own inherent moral righteousness—is a non-starter. It is clear from Scripture that even the holiest and most spiritual of Christians attain only an imperfect moral righteousness (1 Jn 1:8).¹⁵

What about the second option, i.e., that of a moral righteousness reckoned to us from without? Although Wright regards this as nonsense, Scripture teaches otherwise.

THE SCRIPTURAL TEACHING ON THE IMPUTATION OF CHRIST'S RIGHTEOUSNESS

While Scripture does not state in so many words that Christ's righteousness is imputed to us, we are not contending here for the specific wording but for the thing itself. The Bible does not say directly that our sins were imputed to Christ, either, but this is certainly the meaning of passages that say that Christ was made a curse for us (Gal 3:13; cf. 2 Cor 5:21), that our iniquities were laid on him (Isa 53:6), and the myriad of texts that teach that he made satisfaction for our sins as a substitute (e.g., Matt 20:28; 1 Pet 2:24, etc.).

fication of Christ; and the imputed redemption of Christ...."¹⁶ But as John Piper counters, Wright's reasoning is fallacious. "There is no reason to think," Piper states, "that Christ must 'become' for us righteousness exactly the same way he becomes wisdom and sanctification and redemption. This is not said or implied....He may become each of these things for us as each reality requires."¹⁷ For example, Christ "becomes sanctification to us"—"Christ is formed in you" (Gal 4:19)—not by imputation but through the Holy Spirit working in and with us "both to will and to do his good pleasure" (Phil 2:12-13).

2 Corinthians 5:21 – "He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." The juxtaposition of Christ being "made sin" on our behalf clarifies what it means for us to have "become the

"The Bible does not say directly that our sins were imputed to Christ, either, but this is certainly the meaning of passages that say that Christ was made a curse for us (Gal 3:13; cf. 2 Cor 5:21), that our iniquities were laid on him (Isa 53:6), and the myriad of texts that teach that he made satisfaction for our sins as a substitute (e.g., Matt 20:28; 1 Pet 2:24, etc.)"

So let us now examine just three of the many biblical passages that teach the fact of imputation: that Christ's righteousness is our own.

1 Corinthians 1:30 – "But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption." Though this verse does not use the language of imputation it does state that Christ "became to us...righteousness." From this we conclude that because we are "in Christ Jesus" (more on that later), he *is* our righteousness, which is as much as to say that his righteousness is imputed to us.

Wright disputes this conclusion, stating that such an interpretation proves too much. He avers that if we are to take this verse as teaching imputed righteousness then "we must also be prepared to talk of the imputed wisdom of Christ; the imputed sancti-

righteousness of God in him." Certainly the part of the verse that says that he was "made sin on our behalf" can only mean that our sins were reckoned to Christ, who had no sin of his own. Accordingly, when the text says that we have become the righteousness of God in him, the meaning is that the righteousness which is inherent to him and not to us becomes ours by being reckoned to us. As Charles Hodge succinctly put it, "His being made sin is consistent with his being in himself free from sin; and our being made righteous is consistent with our being in ourselves ungodly."¹⁸

This text is one of the clearest passages teaching the imputed righteousness of Christ. Therefore, it is quite illuminating to see what Wright does with it. Repeatedly insisting that "the righteousness of God" means "covenant faithfulness" rather than something like Piper's more fundamental definition mentioned earlier (i.e., "his unwavering commitment to preserve the honor

and display of his glory”), Wright concludes that *Paul himself* becomes the “covenant faithfulness” of God in the sense that he is “the covenant ambassador, who represents the one for whom he speaks in such a full and thorough way that he actually *becomes* the living embodiment of his sovereign.”¹⁹ We are not surprised that this idiosyncratic interpretation is altogether novel in the history of the exegesis of this passage.

Philippians 3:9 – This text reads, “[that I] may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith.” Here Paul speaks explicitly about having a righteousness that comes to us through faith in Christ. What we have here is clearly, by definition, an *alien* righteousness (i.e., a righteousness “not of my own”).

confounds what righteousness *is* with what righteousness *does*.²³

Now, adherents of the NP might object that it is unfair to characterize their understanding of justification as lacking a real, substantive basis in actual moral righteousness. After all, the recognition of our covenant membership in the present (as indicated by our faith) points forward to “the outworking of actual holiness and then in final vindication, of the status already given.”²⁴ To such an argument we would reply that such a basis, whether present or future, would be wholly inadequate. The point is not whether the holiness in us is actuated through the power of the Holy Spirit (as Wright stresses) or whether it arises purely through Pelagian self-effort. No, the point is that our inherent righteousness is *imperfect*, as we have already shown, and this is not good enough.

“The reality is, we really are righteous, and that righteousness is due to the fact that we are truly in Christ. It is a union so intimate that there is an actual sharing with Christ of all that he is and does for us.”

Wright takes the expression “righteousness *from* God” (Greek: *ek theou dikaiosune*) in this verse as different in meaning from the expression “righteousness *of* God” (*dikaiousune theou*). The latter he says refers to God’s “covenant faithfulness,” whereas the former is strictly a status that God bestows on the believer through justification.²⁰ This present status, granted on the basis of faith,²¹ looks forward to the final day when we will see “the outworking of actual holiness and then in final vindication, of the status already given.”²²

In response, it seems to us that there is no biblical warrant for shifting the meaning of “righteousness” in these various expressions. That is, righteousness means the same thing whether we are applying it *to* God, or *from* God and to ourselves; in either case it refers to true moral uprightness and conformity to a moral norm. To see it in the first instance as merely a status without an underlying basis for that status is to distort seriously the meaning of righteousness in Scripture. And even to understand righteousness as God’s “covenant faithfulness,” as in the second instance, still fails to do justice to the concept of righteousness, because it

Verses that speak of us as being “in Christ,” “joined to Christ,” etc.

There are many verses in the Bible that speak of us being “in Christ,” including all three of the verses listed above. The same idea is also expressed through such language as having “put on” or being “clothed” with Christ (Gal 3:27), being “joined to Christ” (1 Cor 6:17), etc. We believe that the relationship of this truth in connection with justification merits special attention.

Long before the NP arose, some assailed the traditional doctrine of justification by faith as “a legal fiction.” That is because, its detractors say, God has to pretend, contrary to all reality, that we are something we are not: morally righteous. But this is to misunderstand the historic doctrine. The reality is, *we really are righteous*, and that righteousness is due to the fact that we are *truly in Christ*. It is a union so intimate that there is an actual sharing with Christ of all that he is and does for us. Luther, a favorite target of NP adherents, stated it as well as anyone. According to Luther, justifying faith is “a certain sure confidence in the heart, and a firm consent by which Christ is apprehended; so that Christ is the object of faith, yea, rather even in faith Christ

himself is present.”²⁵ The believer is “cemented” to Christ on the basis of faith, so that the two are made, as it were, one person. The believer can say, “I am now one with Christ, that is to say, Christ’s righteousness, victory, and life are mine. And again, Christ may say, I am that sinner, that is, his sins and his death are mine, because he is united and joined unto me, and I unto him. For by faith we are so joined together, ‘that we are become one flesh and one bone’ (Eph 5:30).”²⁶

If anything, it is the NP reformulation of the doctrine that involves a legal fiction. Piper pinpoints this defect when he states that

it leaves the gift of the status of vindication without foundation in real perfect imputed obedience. We have no perfect obedience to offer, and, Wright would say, Christ’s obedience is not imputed to me, nor does it need to be....So we have no perfect obedience as the foundation of our status of vindication (i.e., justification).²⁷

JUSTIFICATION ALL OF GOD THROUGH CHRIST AND THEREFORE BY FAITH ALONE

From the foregoing discussion it should be evident that our justification, and in fact every facet of salvation, is all of Christ. There is nothing we can add. We are “justified as a gift by His grace” (Rom 3:24). “In Christ” we are free from the condemnation due our sins—future as well as past (Rom 8:1). Our “life is hidden with Christ in God” (Col 3:3). In fact, Christ is our life (Col 4; cf. Gal 2:20). Attempting to add to God’s grace by keeping regulations of the law (or any other work) is to make Christ of “no benefit to us” and to leave us “severed from Christ” (Gal 5:2, 4). In the words of J. Gresham Machen, “Christ has done nothing for us or He has done everything; to depend even in smallest measure upon our own merit is the very essence of unbelief; we must trust Christ for nothing or we must trust Him for all. Such is the teaching of the Epistle to the Galatians.”²⁸

James’s statement that “a man is justified by works and not by faith alone” (2:24) does not contradict this. Scripture says again

and again that at the end we will be adjudicated “according to” our works (e.g., Matt 12:36-37; 25:31-46; Rom 2:5-8; 1 Cor 4:5; 2 Cor 5:9). This is because our works will reveal the gracious work of God in our lives (Phil 2:13). They are thus the *evidence* of God’s genuine saving faith that works in our life, or what the apostle calls a “faith working through love” (Gal 5:6). As Stott cogently explains, “Works are never the ground or means of salvation, but they are the evidence of it, and therefore they constitute an excellent basis for judgment.”²⁹ To use Jesus’ illustration of recognizing the tree by its fruit (Matt.7:17-18), our works are the fruit, but the source of that fruit is the life of Christ in us through faith alone. Ultimately, “the ground of our justification lies not in works, nor in faith, but ‘in the revelation of God’s grace in Christ embraced by faith.’”³⁰

JUSTIFICATION AND SALVATION

Contrary to Wright, we have seen that the doctrine of justification is a vital aspect of our salvation and of the gospel. Paul clearly connects the three as follows: “with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness [justification], and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation” (Rom 10:10). This message is the “good news” or gospel (vv. 15, 16). But where does justification stand in relation to other aspects of our salvation, e.g. sanctification, adoption, glorification, etc.?

Concluding his indictment of all humans before salvation, Paul sets up our situation. All are “under sin,” “there is no one righteous,” “no fear of God [is] before their eyes,” and “no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law” (Rom 3:9-20, NIV). Enter justification: “But now a righteousness from God, apart from the Law, has been made known” (3:21). J. I. Packer rightly calls the doctrine of justification by faith the “backbone” of Paul’s gospel, “God’s fundamental act of blessing, for it both saves from the past and secures for the future.”³¹ It is the foundation from which other blessings of salvation flow because it sets us in a right relationship with God. As the order of both Romans and Galatians demonstrates, the truth of justification not only precedes, but lays the basis for instruction on living the Christian life.

“Having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also *we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand*” (Rom 5:1-2, emphasis added; cf. Gal 5:4). Justification by faith apart from works places us in the realm of grace for all of life. Without a justification that places one absolutely righteous before God through faith alone we will never know the peace of security. Moreover, only a constant awareness of our right relationship with God through justification by faith alone guards against our ever present temptation to insert our own works as a condition or contribution to our salvation. And when our works become part of our justification they easily become a source of boasting (cf. Eph 2:9).

We are designed by our Creator to live a life of love—motivated by love in response to his love. Only a justification by grace through faith alone apart from our works provides the foundation for such life.

CONCLUSION

The doctrine of justification by faith alone is both the foundation of life for God’s people and the heart of the gospel proclamation to a dying and sin-ravaged world. God’s justification of sinners is indeed the reality by which the church stands or falls, for it is only through the gospel, with justification by faith as its core, that Christ through his Spirit forms his church and communicates his vital presence in and through it.

If we are to discharge our office as ministers of the gospel we must not be trumpets that blow an indistinct sound. As his ambassadors we must powerfully convey this glorious truth with all of the clarity and cogency that God may grant us. May we see the precious reality of justification by faith as the dynamic living reality captured so well in Charles Wesley’s great hymn *And Can It Be?*

*No condemnation now I dread;
Jesus, and all in Him is mine!
Alive in Him, my living Head,
And clothed in righteousness divine,
Bold I approach the eternal throne,
And claim the crown, through Christ my own
Amazing love! how can it be
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me.*

¹ “The church has indeed taken off at an oblique angle from what Paul had said, so that, yes, ever since the time of Augustine, the discussions about *what has been called* ‘justification’ have borne a tangled, but ultimately only tangential, relation to what Paul was talking about.” N. T. Wright, *Justification* (InterVarsity Press, 2009), p. 80 (emphasis in the original). See also pp. 83, 91, and 102.

² In what follows we shall quote Anglican scholar N. T. Wright as a representative and well-known advocate of the NP.

³ Wright states, “Justification ... is not a matter of *how someone enters the community of the true people of God*, but of *how you tell who belongs to that community*....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....Within the law-court setting, the ‘righteousness’ which someone has when the court has found in their favor is not a moral quality which they bring into the court with them; it is the legal status which they carry out of court with them.” *What St. Paul Really Said* (Lion, 1997), p. 119 (emphasis in the original). And again, “First, it [justification] is *membership* language....the covenant status Paul now enjoys is the gift of God: it is a *dikaiousune ek theou*, a ‘righteousness from God’....Paul is here referring to the status of covenant *membership*; it is the gift of God...bestowed upon faith” (pp. 124-5 [emphasis in the original]).

⁴ Wright, *What St. Paul Really Said*, p. 119.

⁵ Wright, *What St. Paul Really Said*, p. 129.

⁶ We say “in some sense” because Wright is not altogether clear about the relationship between these works and our final justification. Are they literally the *basis* of our final justification in a causative sense? Are they the *evidence* but not the cause of it? See the discussion in John Piper, *The Future of Justification* (Crossway, 2007), pp. 118-120.

⁷ Wright, *Justification*, pp. 236-7.

⁸ The Piel form of the verb can also have a declarative sense, cf. Job 32:2; 33:32.

⁹ See also 1 Kings 8:32; 2 Chron 23:3; Isa. 5:23; and Job 27:5.

¹⁰ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Eerdmans, 1996), p. 86.

¹¹ Piper, p. 66.

¹² Mark A. Seifrid, “Paul’s Use of Righteousness Language against Its Hellenistic Background,” in *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, vol. 2 (Baker, 2004), p. 63. This thought is also supported by the concept of God’s “righteousness” which is given to us as entailing his righteous character and his vindicating actions (setting right) that flow from that character (Seifrid, pp. 40-41). According to Moo, “God’s *dikaiousyne* (righteousness) can denote God’s character as that of a God who will always do what is right, God’s activity of establishing right, and even, as a product of this activity,

the state of those who have been, or hope to be, put right" (Moo, p. 84).

¹³Wright, *What St. Paul Really Said*, p. 98.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 119.

¹⁵Some have wrongly suggested that our faith *is* our righteousness, rather than faith being merely the instrument by which we receive the righteousness of Christ. But since our faith is also imperfect, such "faith righteousness" would likewise be imperfect.

¹⁶Wright, *What St. Paul Really Said*, p. 123.

¹⁷Piper, p. 173.

¹⁸Charles Hodge, *An Exposition of the Second Letter to the Corinthians*; cited in Piper, p. 174.

¹⁹N. T. Wright, "On Becoming the Righteousness of God," chapter in *Pauline Theology*, Vol. 2: *1 & 2 Corinthians*, ed. David M. Hay (Fortress, 1993), p. 206. See Piper's discussion, pp. 174-180.

²⁰Wright, *Justification*, pp. 150-151; *What St. Paul Really Said*, p. 124.

²¹Ibid.

²²Wright, *Justification*, p. 152.

²³Piper, pp. 23, 62.

²⁴Wright, *Justification*, p. 152.

²⁵Luther, *Commentary on Galatians*, 2:15.

²⁶Luther, *Commentary on Galatians*, 2:20.

²⁷Piper, p. 128.

²⁸J. Gresham Machen, *What is Faith?* (Eerdmans, 1925), p. 202.

²⁹J. R. W. Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church* (Eerdmans, 1972), p. 80.

³⁰P. T. O'Brien, "Justification in Paul and Some Crucial issues of the Last Two Decades," in *Right With God: Justification in the Bible and the World*, ed. D. A. Carson (Baker, 1992), p. 94; citing Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Eerdmans, 1975), p. 180.

³¹J. I. Packer, "Justification," *The New Bible Dictionary*, ed. J. D. Douglas (Eerdmans, 1962), p. 684.

“The doctrine of justification by faith alone is both the foundation of life for God’s people and the heart of the gospel proclamation to a dying and sin-ravaged world. God’s justification of sinners is indeed the reality by which the church stands or falls, for it is only through the gospel, with justification by faith as its core, that Christ through his Spirit forms his church and communicates his vital presence in and through it.”



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