

An Essay and Review

The Future of Justification: A Response to N. T. Wright

Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2007

Reviewed by Rev. Mark R. Kreitzer, D. Miss., Ph. D.

Director of M.Div. (English Track), School of World Mission and Ministry

Kosin University, Busan, South Korea

Published in *Global Missiology, Review & Preview*, April 2010,

www.globalmissiology.net

My conviction concerning N. T. Wright is . . . that his portrayal of the gospel—and of the doctrine of justification in particular—is so disfigured that it becomes difficult to recognize as biblically faithful. . . . In my judgment, what he has written will lead to a kind of preaching that will not announce clearly what makes the Lordship of Christ good news for guilty sinners or show those who are overwhelmed with sin how they may stand righteous in the sight of God. (15).

To this I can only say, Amen. Piper's zeal is for the classic life changing portrayal of the Gospel that moves from Paul through Augustine of Hippo to Luther and Calvin, and then on to us. N.T. Wright, an Anglican Bishop of Durham with an Oxford Ph.D. in New Testament is an ecclesial leader, spokesman for the poor and oppressed, and advocate of many solid evangelical position. He certainly seems an utterly intimidating opponent for the Pastor of the Bethlehem Baptist mega-Church in the Twin Cities of Minnesota. However, Piper is no neophyte. He has an earned doctorate from the University of Munich, Germany (1971-74) in New Testament under Leonhard Goppelt. He is the author of many scholarly and pastoral oriented volumes and articles. Hence this is the struggle over the meaning and application of the Gospel between two giant pastor-scholars. The discussion between these two men is at time quite intense on both sides, yet always fascinating. Piper is very irenic and exceedingly fair, which I appreciate greatly, yet the seriousness and gravity of the issues comes out continually in his approach. In this essay, I will both review Piper's book and analyze N.T. Wright's approach to justification.

N.T. Wright's tack on justification begins with Abraham and God's covenant to bless all peoples of earth through him. He correctly places Paul's Gospel within the complete narrative story of redemptive history and within the comprehensive, missional understanding of the Abrahamic covenant. Wright correctly focuses on the big picture in his works. Piper as a New Testament scholar, on the other hand, does not begin with Abraham or the big picture. Instead, he deals with each specific issue almost solely from a New Testament perspective, exegeting each disputed NT passage without addressing the total narrative context of redemptive history. So far, in my opinion, Wright's perspective is superior.

Unfortunately, however, Wright's big picture does not go all the way back to the Garden with a proper understanding of God's justice. This Piper does mentions but does not develop as much as he ought in this volume. In the Garden, Piper affirms, God's just and holy character—that is his righteousness—requires 100% obedience because one sin brought the death penalty for disobedience. Theologians term this just demand flowing from God's character the “covenant of works”—a term Piper does not use in his volume.

Paul, on the other hand, terms it simply being “under law” (see e.g., Rom 6:14, 15; Gal 4:4, 21). Gladly, Wright emphatically affirms the death penalty for sin and that it was carried out upon Christ for the sins of his people. Piper, however, clearly affirms that God’s justice demands both death and a perfect obedience in order to stand with all the other brothers and sister accepted in Christ. The second of the two aspects of justice, N.T. Wright denies.

N.T. Wright affirms with James Dunn that the “works of the law” are boundary markers, which the Jews possess and the Gentiles do not. Hence, the circumcision, dietary laws, the festival cycle and Sabbath days distinguish Jews from gentiles and exclude the latter from full fellowship with God’s people and their God. N.T. Wright’s reading of the literature from Second Temple Judaism (ending in 70 A.D.) have convinced him that the real problem that Paul was addressing was not Jewish self-righteousness that caused them to enforce upon Gentiles the totality of their law, but merely exclusivism versus inclusivism. The Gospel is about inclusivism that is free entrance into the people of God (the universal Church) by faith in the Lordship of Christ. The Pauline Gospel, according to Wright, is not about a righteous standing before God worked out by obedience to the total Mosaic Law. The real issue thus was the ceremonial wall that excluded Gentiles. In other words, the Gospel fits within the doctrine of the Church (ecclesiology) not the doctrine of salvation (Soteriology). John Piper passionately disagrees with this redefinition of the Gospel rediscovered by Luther.

Moreover I totally agree with most of the rest of N.T. Wright’s understanding of the whole non-dualist biblical worldview. This discussion between Piper and Wright is not for me an issue of dualism with its individualistic Gospel versus a full orbbed biblical wholism such as Wright may claim to possess. I too reject dualism and individualism. Wright correctly combats the individualist and escapist dualism of much of the Reformed and Evangelical world that sees justification merely as a message to individuals about how to get “saved” and go to heaven. However, I don’t believe John Piper falls into this escapist camp.

I also appreciate Wright setting the whole debate in the light of an optimistic, creedally faithful preterism on the Olivet Discourse (Mt 24-25; Lk 21; Mk 13) and Revelation. I greatly appreciate it that he distances himself from a platonic eschatology that emphasizes heaven as our final destination and neglects or denies both this earth and the new heavens and new earth. I greatly appreciate his emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit and eschatology that has been neglected by many Reformed thinkers though not all.

Having said this, I agree with John Piper’s sentiments in the first paragraph above. Justification—discovering how to stand righteous before God—through the imputation of Christ’s obedience (both active and passive) is what Paul proclaimed with passion and taught with verve. Imputed righteousness in the classic Reformational sense is essential to the Pauline Gospel and is not merely a product of Martin Luther’s over-heated conscience as Krister Stendahl claims.¹ Piper demonstrates this with careful exegesis especially from Romans, Galatians, 2 Corinthians, and Philippians. I agree both existentially and exegetically with John Piper. Existentially, his exegetical explanation of the Gospel was what delivered me from a deep dark tunnel of depression during four years in my college years. The classic Reformational understanding of the Pauline

¹Krister Stendahl. 1976. *Paul among Jews and Gentile*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress.

Gospel was and is the power of God for my deliverance. It teaches the total sinfulness of man, the legal covenant begun in the Garden, demanding perfect obedience, and faith in Christ's perfect obedience to the law. On the other hand, the concept of Christ as my "covenant faithfulness," as Wright defines the "righteousness of God," is certainly virtually unintelligible. It is not and cannot provide the Gospel's healing balm to an obligation-chained spirit and condemnation-slain conscience as it did mine (see Piper 1997, 23; see e.g., Rom 8:15-16).

The Spirit, thus, through this message of the Good News taught me to rejoice and rest only in Christ as my righteousness. He disciplined me to rest in his obedience because that alone caused me to be "accepted in the Beloved," constituting me a "righteous one" before the throne. He instructed me so patiently through all my stubbornness that every bit of God's judicial wrath has been once and for all poured out upon Lord Jesus on the cross. I bear it no more. Through reading the careful exegesis of Reformational commentators, I slowly learned to rest upon the gracious truth that he who knew no sin became sin on my behalf through the process of imputation. Luther and myriads of commentators after him including John Piper correctly show that only because Jesus was perfectly obedient could I relax my spirit upon the righteousness of God in him. This rest upon his positive righteousness, I learned, solely comes because by the imputation of Christ's obedience into my account. God, thus, reckons me the sinner as one who is totally obedient in Christ through faith in him alone. That for me was and remains wonderful and psychologically healing Good News. During this whole time of my existential struggle I was a believer. I didn't "get saved" through appropriating these comforting Spirit-taught words of Good News. I wasn't trying to escape into a disembodied heaven. I was learning to live and engage life within myself, my culture, and my people with the Gospel of justification.

So certainly this word is personal, salvific, and individual good news, but it certainly is not only that. Piper is most correct to put the whole controversy within a strong pastoral context of healing grace for guilt-burdened rebels. I know Piper does interact with the whole redemptive-historical narrative elsewhere and that he mentions it briefly in this volume.² I am sad he didn't expand his brief mention in this response to Wright. Wright gains many points among wavering evangelicals because of his wholistic vision of seeing the "righteousness of God" in a whole, redemptive-historical context. Piper lacks at this point is a huge but not a fatal weakness in this otherwise brilliant volume. I believe Dr. Piper ought to address this in a second edition.

I still unequivocally agree with Piper's sentiments that N.T. Wright twists the Gospel. After all, the Gospel does indeed deal foundationally but not exclusively with eternal souls. From multitudes of individuals and families, who are resting solely upon Christ, flows societal justice, shalom, social harmony, collective joy, and social wisdom. The Gospel is the source. If we don't get the Gospel right, Wright's wholistic and missional vision for peace and justice becomes an empty illusion. If we get the Gospel right, then personal, familial, inter-ethnic, and intra-social sanctification are able to take hold within a culture.

²For example, Piper writes in his introduction: "I am thankful . . . for his [Wright's] consistent way he presses us to see the big picture of God's universal for all peoples through the covenant with Abraham" (15-16)

Piper is thus passionately clear in his exposition of grace and faith. The very same grace and faith that rest solely upon Christ are the same grace and faith that sanctifies. Social transformation, that Wright so rightly desires, springs out of the fountain of the Gospel of faith alone. Citing the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Dr. Piper writes:

Thus the Confession boldly declares that the faith that is the ‘alone instrument of justification’ also ‘work[s] by love.’ It affirms therefore, that justifying faith is also sanctifying faith. . . . It thus establishes a *necessary* connection between the faith that justifies and the obedient life of love. (Piper 2007, 114, emphasis in original)

Therefore, Bishop Wright’s rejection of the just demands of God’s character as expressed in the “under law” covenantal relationship is a fatal weakness. He substitutes in its place a Spirit-wrought righteousness that logically must become partial grounds for a believer’s justification at the last judgment. In effect, Piper demonstrates, this means that Christ’s work plus my work with the Spirit’s power becomes a dual ground of assurance at the last day. Justification, then, ultimately comes from two sources: Christ’s death and our worked out deeds of righteousness done in love by the Spirit in faith. Consequently, a little bit of boasting, it seems, is allowed in Wright’s understanding of the Gospel but is anathema to Paul’s. Is it any wonder that some Roman Catholic spokesmen suggest that Wright’s understanding of justification is just what they have been saying all along? Is this aspect of the Reformation over? Has the Council of Trent ultimately emerged victorious?

Since for Wright justification comes through Christ by faith and by my works done through faith and love, this leaves open the possibility of apostasy. What happens if I stop being covenantally faithful? Wright is now claiming—I am glad—that the salvation and forgiveness of the initial act of surrendering to the Lordship of Christ alone guarantees that one will be justified by the inwrought works of righteousness done in faith by the Spirit. He thus affirms some sort of perseverance. Yet for some of his disciples this does not logically flow from what Wright has been teaching. Instead, if there are twin grounds for justification, then there is a potential for rejection at the judgment. Thus some are teaching that the initial forgiveness does not preclude apostasy on the way to being justified at the final judgment (e.g., Methodist theologian Ben Witherington). Hence one can cease working by faith and hence become lost after being forgiven. A New Testament professor at a relatively conservative Presbyterian based College where I formally taught, came to just this conclusion, under the influence of N. T. Wright and other teachers. The Council of Trent, he claimed, was correct and balanced. This professor also believes in apostasy after becoming “born-again,” rejects forgiveness of all sins (past, present, and future), has adopted baptismal regeneration, and has rejected other cardinal Reformational teaching, yet still claims to be orthodox and Reformed.

To substantiate his perspective, Wright claims that Romans 2:1-14 is speaking to Spirit-filled and Spirit-regenerated Christians instead of to every person. Hence, the phrase, “it is not the hearers of the law that are justified but the doers” (Rom 1:14) must be understood differently than the Reformation. The vast Reformational consensus

taught that only through perfect perseverance in seeking righteousness, God's glory and honor will lead one to be justified. Only Christ did that. Wright thus lowers God's standard from perfection to something less than a total trust and obedience to the commands of God. N.T. Wright teaches that Christ paid the penalty for sin, but I must cooperate with God's Spirit by faith to possess a genuine righteousness in order to be justified on the last day. This Piper demonstrates with clear quotations from Wright's works. Paul curses this New Perspective as a bewitchment: "If [any] righteousness comes through the law, Christ dies in vain" (Gal 2:21, see 3:1-2).³

In lowering the standard Wright consequently not only contradicts Christ's authorized Apostle, but he also contradicts Moses. That great prophet states that it will be "righteousness for us if we are careful to observe all this commandment . . . just as He commanded" (Dt 6:25, see 24:13; Eze 18:9, 19-20). Righteousness is totally and flawlessly worked out faith-in-obedience. Again, only Jesus our righteousness did this. He doesn't become to us God's "covenant faithfulness" but a robe of covering righteousness that keeps us from ever coming under condemnation or legal accusation before the throne of God or in our own conscience (see Rom 1:29-35; Heb 9-10). Piper demonstrates this classic teaching from 1 Cor 1:30 (Piper 2007, 172-174) and the *locus classicus*, 2 Cor 5:21 (Piper 2007, 174-180). The only way Christ becomes "sin on our behalf" is by imputation because he was sinless. Hence the only way we can become the "righteousness of God" in him is by imputation. What good is it—and what does it mean anyway—that I become the "covenant faithfulness" of God in him?

Furthermore, Piper demonstrates that Rom 5:12-19 clearly states that the totally completed obedience of Jesus, finished at the cross, is the grounds by which all (in Christ) are "constituted" righteous ones. This act of imputation of obedience and righteousness in Christ is parallel to the first imputation of Adam's sin to all mankind. Adam's first act of sin broke every one of God's laws (see Jas 2:10-11), causing all mankind to be "constituted sinners" through and in Adam (Piper 2007, 169-171, 215-218).⁴ Christ's perfected obedience, finished at the cross is the sole grounds for our justification. "My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus blood and righteousness. I dare not trust the sweetest frame"—even taught and empowered by the indwelling Spirit—"but wholly lean on Jesus name."

God's purity, holiness, and justice of character, therefore, demand that any person approach his throne while being perfectly righteous. Wright does not accept this biblical principle, it seems. The Lord God cannot look upon any sin (Hab 1:10: "You cannot look upon wickedness *with favor*" NAU). That perfect righteousness is always a righteousness that is worked out in life by the Spirit though faith according to the standards of God's law. God's law, in turn, is a reflection of his righteous and just character: "You are righteous and upright are your judgments" (Ps 119:137, see 142, 164, 172, see also Ps 145:17) hence "Be holy, for I am holy" (Lev 11:44-45, 19:2, 20:7, 1 Pet

³This interpretation is borne out in the immediate context. Paul calls the Galatians immediately "foolish ones" because, by implication, they have receive the Spirit only through faith in Christ's promise-word but then turn around and say some righteousness in practical life must come through my external works out of my flesh and faith (Gal 3:1-4). This destroys the message of the cross by which God declares all man's righteousness worthless.

⁴For this interpretation of Rom 5:19 see e.g., Francis Turretin, Jr. work *Justification* (James T. Dennison, ed. Translated by George Musgrave Giger. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004).

1:16). Only the Lord Messiah could and did accomplish that righteousness and holiness. Yet at the same time Piper clearly shows that a person justified in Christ must work out love and good works in order to stand before God. But those works play no role whatsoever in one's justification (Eph 2:8-10; Piper 2007, 103-116)

In my opinion, Piper weakens his case somewhat by not more strongly emphasizing the perfect standard of the "under law" relationship that God's just character demands. He attempts to refute Wright's view that "the righteousness of God" always means "covenant faithfulness" by correctly—but incompletely—emphasizing that beneath God's righteousness is his "allegiance to his own glory": "The essence of the righteousness of God is his unwavering faithfulness to uphold the glory of his name. And human righteousness is the same: the unwavering faithfulness to uphold the glory of God" (Piper 2007, 64, see 64-71).

Now certainly Piper's observation is true yet still inadequate because it does not go far enough. Righteousness is very practical and not merely an abstract principle. A human king exercises justice and righteousness when he impartially upholds the righteous decrees of God in a merciful and pro-active manner (1 Kgs 10:9; Ps 72:1-4, 82:1ff). A lesser magistrate must do the same (Dt 1:16-17). An individual or society's righteousness is his or their conformity by faith and love to the standard of God's Torah and Prophets (Dt 4:6-8, 6:25, see 24:13; Mt 5:19-21). A person who is "quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger" because he is acting in faith does indeed work out the "righteousness of God" (Jas 1:20). This is the exact same phrase that Wright claims always connotes "the covenant faithfulness of God." His definition makes little sense in James but the classical sense fits perfectly with the context.

Furthermore, the "righteousness of God" must be defined by understanding how Scripture itself defines righteousness. Since in Christ are hidden all treasures of wisdom and understanding, we ought to start with his definition. "You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of men, but God knows your hearts; for that which is highly esteemed among men is detestable in the sight of God" (Lk 16:15). Pharisees were not merely declaring themselves neutrally "innocent" (as Bishop Wright would define the term "justify"), but were trying to declare by their works that they were positively righteous. Hence believers must have a righteousness much higher than that of the Pharisees (see also Mt 5:20, 23:1-5a). They trusted in themselves as righteous men, law-keepers, and hence in the favor of God (Lk 18:9).

Notice, as Piper points out when discussing this theme, that the Pharisee in the Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican actually thanks God for his righteous standing above the tax-collector (Piper 2007, 157-159). He thought that he was in a state of grace! Hence Pharisaical righteousness does not measure up to the righteousness that God's gives in Christ out of zeal for his own character. Thus in supporting his classic Pauline perspective, Piper correctly starts with Scripture as the source of his definitions of key terms. He specifically starts with the personal teachings of Christ, who is the interpreter of revelation par excellence as the Father's incarnate Word.

Wright on the other hand, as mentioned above, defines "righteousness" as God's "covenant faithfulness" based on two sources of authority. The first is internal exegesis through the lexical ploy of squeezing the Hebrew and Greek words connoting God's righteousness into a singular meaning. Second, as Piper also demonstrates, Wright misunderstands the tenor of the meaning of texts from 2nd Temple Judaism. Bishop

Wright claims the Reformational principle of sola Scriptura, yet in actual fact he adds a second source of authority—his understanding of grace and faith found in the 2nd Temple Jewish tradition. Thus Scripture alone is not the final source of wisdom leading to a comprehensive salvation. In this, Wright is parallel to Roman Catholicism though not teaching precisely what they teach. For Rome the source of authority is Scripture and the consensus of Church tradition, as interpreted by the Magisteria lead by the Pope. For Wright, it seems, it is Scripture and 2nd Temple Jewish tradition. Hence Scripture is not sufficient in itself to define its own terms. External authority must only substantiate what is discovered in the text, according to biblical hermeneutics. Unfortunately, Piper does not discuss this aspect of Wright's approach much. I hope he addresses it in a second edition.

Wright's formulations, accordingly, are contrary to the Reformational consensus, which taught that the meaning of Scriptural terms and doctrines must be gained from within the Scriptural context itself. In other words, Scripture is sufficient within itself to interpret itself under guidance of the Holy Spirit. The clear passages of Scripture must interpret the less clear thus keeping authority within Scripture itself and hence outside of man's autonomous sense of meaning gained outside of and apart from Scripture. This Reformational principle, of course, presupposes the unity of the meaning of Scripture as "breathed out" by one Father through the Spirit in the Word incarnate. External literary sources, therefore, are beneficial only as resources to illustrate and further confirm the meaning a researcher has already discovered by contextual exegesis within Scripture.

Last, Wright makes a fatal lexical error in his definitions. A word or phrase has meaning only within a context. Context is always determinative. The term "righteousness" as applied to God may connote "covenant faithfulness" in some OT contexts (e.g., Pss 31:1, 71:2, 143:1,11, Is 46:13, 51:5,8; etc.). For N.T. Wright, "justification" is a mere declarative word that carries no concept of "imputation" of a positive righteousness as in the classic Reformational sense. Behind the word, he explains, is a courtroom scene, a background with which Piper following the Reformers agrees (e.g., Dt 25:1; Rom 2:5, 6, 13). However, Wright claims that the verb "to justify" in a courtroom always means a judge's declaration that an accused person is "not guilty as charged" and merely "innocent of the accusation." There is never any concept that the judge donates to the person's charge sheet his own righteousness in order for the guilty person to be declared fully in compliance with the law. However, this goes beyond the mere lexical meaning of the word in OT and NT contexts. Paul adds to the lexical meaning a theological explanation of how the Father can declare a sinner "righteous." In union with Christ, the Father donates his very righteousness worked on by Christ in his life span and in his death. Piper, on the other hand, correctly demonstrates that "to justify" can also imply to declare a person in positive conformity to the law and not merely a neutrally to declare a person "innocent" (see, e.g., Piper 2007, 76).

Therefore, the two terms "justify" and the "righteousness of God" do not always mean what Wright wants them to mean in every context. For example, some OT and NT contexts imply that to justify means to vindicate by public declaration of both innocence and compliance with the actual positive demands of the law.⁵ A second example is

⁵The connotation of "to justify" in Lk 16:15 is clearly to "declare oneself righteous" not merely innocent. See also Lk 18:9 and 14, where Christ is contrasting the self-righteous with the repentant man with a declaration of righteous from God by grace. Piper shows that Romans 10:3-5 is much better

Romans 3:5. There the “righteousness of God”⁶ is his inherent hatred of sin that must bring impartial judgment to every person irrespective of ethnicity. A person is righteous because he positively does the righteous things that the righteous law, based on God’s righteous character demands (e.g., Eze 3:20, 18:5, 9, 24; 1 Jn 3:7). Hence God is righteous not merely because he is faithful to his covenant but because his character in itself is righteous, holy, just, and upright, and that his righteous character always leads him to do and possess righteous and upright attitudes and actions (e.g., Dt 32:4; Jdg 5:11).

Consequently, even granting N. T. Wright’s contention that “righteousness of God” sometimes means a salvific or even condemning “covenant faithfulness,” this in no way obviates the Reformation’s classic understanding. Justification can and must mean in many NT contexts the imputation of the Father’s very righteousness through the Mediator’s complete and practically worked out trust and obedience when sinners trust alone in Christ saving Lordship. This is Piper trump card in his volume. Theologian Michael Horton (Westminster Seminary in California) sees this clearly in his review of Wright’s volume, *Justification: God’s Plan and Paul’s Vision.*, which Wright wrote partially to reply to Piper and partially to clearly state his teaching on the subject.

As in his other books, Wright mistakenly assumes that the Reformation view argues that God’s essential righteousness—in other words, his own attribute of righteousness—is somehow given to believers. But this overlooks the crucial role of Jesus Christ as mediator in the traditional view: It is not God’s attribute of righteousness, but the right-standing that results from a complete fulfillment of God’s law, that is imputed to believers. It is Christ’s obedience, not his.⁷

In conclusion, Piper’s flaw in neglecting to emphasize the larger redemptive historical picture is thus much smaller in comparison than Wright’s egregious error of redefining the Pauline Gospel. Mixing Christ’s righteousness with my righteousness (albeit wrought by the Spirit) as the foundation of my justification before the throne at the Last Judgment brings Paul’s curse. None of the Reformers neglected the biblical teaching about a final judgment of works for believers, though possibly they minimized it more than does Paul. By for the Reformers, the final judgment of works had nothing to do with a person’s justification. When Christ was justified by the Father in his resurrection (Rom 4:25), every person in him was justified. When Christ is vindicated at the White Throne, those in him are vindicated. When believer’s works are analyzed and tested with fire, there must be a lasting “holiness without which no one will see God.” But that Spirit-wrought holiness and righteousness merely demonstrates that my justification in Christ is indeed secure.

Piper’s work is excellent and missiologically faithful. With the caveats mentioned above, I highly recommend it as a faithful exposition of the Good News,

understood as defining righteousness a free gift of perfect righteousness in Christ than how Wright defines the term.

⁶Every incidence of the term in the NT: Rom 1:17, 3:5, 21-22, 10:3; 2 Cor 5:21; Jas 1:20 [key]; 2 Pet 1:1; explained in Php 3:9 *th.n evk qeou/ dikaiosunhn*.

⁷http://www.reformationtheology.com/2009/11/michael_horton_reviews_nt_wrig.php, accessed Mar 14, 2010.

which is the only Word bringing personal and social salvation from sin, the kingdom of darkness, and its evil lord. For those who doubt, try living Wright's view of justification and see if it leads to rest for weary and exhausted souls, see if it produces the true fruit of a gracious and compassionate spirit, and discern by the hermeneutical cycle that it is devastating for true purity, missional passion, and Gospel graces.