



Justification: God's Plan & Paul's Vision

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Few issues are more central to the Christian faith than the nature, scope and means of salvation. Many have thought it to be largely a transaction that gets one to heaven. In this riveting book, N. T. Wright explains that God's salvation is radically more than this. At the heart of much vigorous debate on this topic is the term the apostle Paul uses in several of his letters to describe what happens to those in Christ--justification. Paul uses this dramatic image from the law court to declare that Christians are acquitted of the cosmic accusations against them. But justification goes beyond this in Paul's writings to offer a vision of God's future for the whole world as well as for his people. Here in one place Wright now offers a comprehensive account and defense of his perspective on this crucial doctrine. He provides a sweeping overview of the central points in the debate before launching into a thorough explanation of the key texts in Paul's writings. While fully cognizant of tradition and controversy, the final authority for his conclusions is the letters of Paul themselves. Along the way Wright responds to critics, such as John Piper, who have challenged what has come to be called the New Perspective. For Wright, what Paul means by justification is nothing less than God's unswerving commitment to the covenant promise he made to bless the whole world through Abraham and his family. This irenic response is an important contribution for those on both sides of the debate--and those still in between--to consider. Whether you're a fan of Wright's work or have read his critics and would like to know the other side of the story, here is a chance to interact with Wright's views on the issues at stake and form your own conclusions.

Justification: God's Plan & Paul's Vision Details

Date : Published April 16th 2009 by IVP Academic (first published February 19th 2009)

ISBN : 9780830838639

Author : Tom Wright , N.T. Wright

Format : Hardcover 279 pages

Genre : Religion, Theology, Christianity, Nonfiction, Christian

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Nick says

While reading Wright's book *What St. Paul Really Said*, I thought I understood where he was coming from in terms of "justification" and its implications. This book proved to me that I did not fully grasp his understanding of covenant community, the marks of those in that community, and how this tied into works. I found this book to be very enjoyable and informative, pushing me time and again to go back to the Scriptures to read with fresh eyes.

The title constitutes a double entendre in which Wright attempts to justify himself after being challenged (attacked?) by John Piper on Wright's teaching on the doctrine of the same name. The first half of the book introduces the topic and some preliminary thoughts, then the second half of the book is dedicated to exegesis covering Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Corinthians, and finally Romans.

Though I am not finished looking into this topic for myself, I would highly recommend it for anyone interested in Justification issues or Pauline writings in general.

Matthew Colvin says

Full disclosure: I read this book very much hoping to see Wright demonstrate how wrong and distorting Piper's and other Reformed OPP approaches are. I spent 9 years teaching Bible and theology to the children of John Piper fans. His theology completely prevented them from grasping certain arguments in Paul and James. But Wright is here to make them notice the cracks in the edifice that they have been plastering over. His method is stated on p. 213: "As often happens, the passage which was initially puzzling turns out to contain the clues to everything else as well."

The biggest benefit to be derived from this book is a reading of Romans and other letters of Paul that is thoroughly convincing in its coherence and deeply rooted in the covenant with Abraham. Again and again, Wright shows that the covenant with Abraham forms the conceptual context within which Paul's arguments make sense, and that OPP exegetes have utterly failed to deal with this context -- especially Piper, with his bizarre misdefinition of "God's righteousness" as "His concern for His own glory". Wright puts paid to this nonsense and shows that the correct definition is "God's faithfulness to His single plan to save the world through Israel." The exegetical payoff from this correct definition is huge, and Wright teases it out in passage after passage until he has an overwhelming number of "solved" passages to set over against the puzzlements generated by OPP readings.

The second biggest benefit to the book is Wright's vindication of the role of the Holy Spirit in the Christian life, and the fact -- taught everywhere in the Bible, yet denied by so many otherwise well-meaning Reformed and Evangelical churches -- that the final judgment of all human beings will be "according to works." His critics, including Michael Horton, cannot abide this. They think that "since justification is by faith, there simply cannot be a final 'judgment according to works'." Wright replies that "I am frequently challenged on this point in public, after lectures and seminars, and my normal reply is that I did not write Romans 2; Paul did." Bravo.

In sum, this was a very satisfying book, and the general impression is that Piper simply isn't a good enough exegete, nor well enough grounded in a knowledge of the Bible's Jewish background, to go toe-to-toe with Wright. But of course, sometime later this year, the other 1,700-page shoe will drop, with the publication of Paul and the Faithfulness of God. And that huge pair of tomes will no doubt shore up the main deficiency of this present book: namely, the fact that it must sometimes move quickly through Paul's arguments without taking the time to sift and read slowly. Wright is perhaps more talented at painting a convincing big picture, but he also knows how to zoom in and do careful exegesis. This volume is mostly about the former, with the helicopter dipping down in many places to show how Wright's reading offers more coherence and better exegetical fruit than the readings of Piper, Westerholm, et al. But PFG will be the hiking tour of the same landscape, and will offer the sort of detail that this book, by its hurried timetable and polemical nature, simply cannot.

Some of Wright's readers fault him for the error that has been alleged by S. Wedgeworth and Doug Wilson, namely, that Wright makes exaggerated claims about the mistakenness of the Reformed tradition and the newness of the NPP and his own work. Now, obviously, Wright is not engaged in historical theology, nor ought he to get down in the mud and wrestle with those whose teaching is "as the scribes" (Protestant Talmudism, I call it -- teaching nothing but what may be found in the Reformation fathers, just as the Talmud is filled with "Rabbi X said in the name of Rabbi Y"). Wright's project is to bring forth what Scripture says and thereby correct this tradition. The two points on which he does so are that it has not noticed that the covenant with Abraham is the sun around which Paul's heliocentric system moves, and that it has failed to understand justification in terms of Christology, Jewish eschatology, and ecclesiology, choosing instead to parse Paul's statements through the anachronistic grid of medieval theologians' ideas about "iustitia" and "merit". I do not think that the Evangelical Amora'im can deny that these two charges are true: certainly the Reformed and Lutheran confessions have almost nothing to say about Israel in connection with justification! But if these charges are true, then the whole project has been carried on in the most anachronistic and implausible way for hundreds of years. So Wright is not overselling the importance of what he has to say.

In the end, I loved this book because I had the same reaction to Wright that I had when I first heard his lectures opposite Richard Gaffin at the 2005 Auburn Avenue Pastors' Conference: "Wow, Dr. Gaffin is a clever man, and his system is a marvel of sophistication. But Wright is talking about what the apostle Paul is talking about." That will never be acceptable to those who only want to do their theology through the traditions of the fathers, or through a celebrity pastor like Piper or Doug Wilson. And so they will give it bad reviews, because Wright isn't shy about goring their golden calves. But if you're tired of passing your eyes over the problem passages and tracing the ridiculous epicycles that "geocentric" exegesis requires; if you want to know what the apostle Paul is talking about, read this book.

Chris says

N. T. Wright has written a lot about Paul and the things Paul said, and he has attracted a bit of criticism from some quarters. Most notably he has been criticized by pastor and author John Piper, who wrote a book against Wright's viewpoint. Wright, along with others of the "new perspective on Paul" (with whom he sometimes agrees and often differs) have argued that the post-reformation west has had a simplified and even incorrect/tainted view of Paul's understanding of justification, righteousness, law, and other important concepts. Personally, I think Wright brings excellent textual interpretation and historical context to bear, and his points definitely merit consideration. But if you're curious to hear what he has to say, don't read THIS book. Try his book *What Paul Really Said*, or one of his other works, where he lays out his thoughts in a

more straightforward manner. It was against those books that Piper issued his critique, and now, in *Justification*, Wright painstakingly and very thoroughly makes his defense. Much of this book is a section by section walk-through of Paul's writings (Galatians, Philippians, Corinthians, Ephesians, and then a long look at Romans). It can probably only best be read with a Bible open to follow Wright's interpretive logic. I definitely bogged down a few times reading the book, despite Wright's typically accessible writing style. What is clear, though, is that Wright's argument is VERY supportable by the Biblical texts, and frequently makes better sense of them than typical post-reformation readings. For example, Wright demonstrates how the book of Romans can be treated as one cohesive argument only if Paul is addressing God's "plan-for-the-world-through-Israel" and its fulfillment in Jesus. He shows how the post-reformation viewpoint that Paul is primarily interested in salvation as justification by faith and not works does not make as much sense in context, and how it requires breaking Paul's argument into unrelated sections. (He also goes through great pains to point out that salvation by faith remains critical, but that it does not grasp the heart of Paul's premise.) If nothing else, Wright (gently) shames his critics, who have accused him of being unbiblical but have done little to demonstrate textually why their interpretations are stronger than his, and have far more often referred to post-reformation tradition to support their arguments. As Wright himself points out, it's much more in the spirit of the Reformation to go back to the original texts and ask what they were trying to say rather than to insist on interpreting them in light of modern questions and presuppositions. Personally, I've been very helped by Wright on this. Having spent a bit of time working through Galatians, and having often felt somewhat confused by Romans, I found Wright's explanation to be logical, cohesive, exciting, and very theologically motivating. God's plan for the world and its fulfillment in Christ makes more sense to me now than ever.

Ben De Bono says

A couple years back, John Piper wrote *The Future of Justification: A Response to N.T. Wright* as a response to N.T. Wright's view on Justification (read my review [here](#)). *Justification* is Wright's counter primarily to Piper but also to his other Reformed minded critics.

It's obvious throughout this book that Wright is somewhat frustrated at needing to write a response such as this. He feels his position has not been understood properly by his critics. I empathize with his position and agree with his assessment of his critics (Despite the mostly gracious tone of Piper's book, it's clear that he doesn't even come close to understanding what Wright is trying to say). That said, I'm thankful for his critics. If it wasn't for them forcing Wright's hand we wouldn't have this book, which would surely be a major loss. This book is the clearest, and most biblically faithful, articulation of the doctrine of Justification that I've ever encountered. Wright's work needs to be read, pondered and studied by anyone interested in understanding Pauline theology.

Obviously I come down squarely in Wright's camp on this debate. I don't find the arguments of the Old Perspective convincing in the least. Neither do I believe their absurd charges against Wright (he's preaching a different Gospel, he's undermining core truth, he's advocating faith in something other than Jesus, etc.) to hold any water whatsoever. What Wright has done, in his work as a whole but especially in this volume, is made biblical truth come alive. Reading this book has not only furthered my understanding of the Bible, it's made me excited about Scripture in entirely new ways. It's as though I'm reading Paul for the first time. Passages that were muddled and confusing are coming into focus like never before.

I'm not going to attempt to sum up Wright's entire argument. This really is the sort of topic where you need to read the arguments (on both sides) and wrestle with them for yourself. I don't think I'm close to fully

comprehending everything Wright has to say, but, that said, let me highlight a few thoughts that stand out at this point in my study of Wright and the doctrine of justification.

First, and most foundational, we need to stop treating salvation and justification as synonyms. They are not. Salvation is obviously an important concept, but it is not what Paul is talking about when he brings up justification. Salvation is about how we are rescued by sin and death. Justification is the means by which we are granted the status of belonging to God's family; it is the badge of covenant membership. Wright explains in detail how justification is part of the law court metaphor used by Paul. We are all on trial before God and he declares us justified ("in the right"), which grants us membership into the covenant. There is much more going on in justification than just forgiveness of sins.

Second, and building on the first point, justification can only be understood through a proper understanding of the covenant. In Genesis 15 God establishes the covenant with Abraham and promises him that all the nations of the earth will be blessed. God intends to deal with the problem of evil through Abraham and Israel, his covenant people. They fail to uphold their side of the bargain, but God is still faithful. He sends Jesus to uphold Israel's side of the covenant, to be a faithful Israelite who will do what Israel was always meant to do: make God's covenant blessing available to all the world.

Justification then is about God being faithful to his covenant promises. (Wright argues, convincingly, that the phrase used throughout the early chapters of Romans that is usually translated as "God's righteousness" would be better translated as "God's covenant faithfulness") Because justification is about being given membership into the covenant family, it is about God being faithful to do what he promised he would do back in Genesis 15: make membership in the covenant, and the related blessings, available to all nations. This is why Paul brings up Abraham both in Galatians and in Romans 4. He isn't just using Abraham as a neat illustration of how justification works; he's retelling the story of how God established the covenant in the past so that we can understand God's covenant faithfulness in the present!

All of that leads to the third main point I want to highlight: justification is about eschatology. When God establishes the covenant with Abraham he does so (as mentioned above) to deal with the problem of evil. What went wrong with Adam God seeks to correct through his covenant family. Israel failed at that, but now, through Jesus, the covenant has been fulfilled making God's original intentions for his covenant family possible again. The point of being justified is not just that you avoid hell. It is that you now have a role in partnering with God to put this world right. Justification propels us to mission and causes us to look forward, eschatologically, to God's goal of "making all things new."

This third point is, in many ways, the most important. Without it we fall into the trap that the majority of Western Christianity finds itself in. We believe that Christianity is simply about how God forgives us of our sin. The grand narrative of Scripture is nothing more than humans sin so God sends Jesus to die so he can forgive them. Again, forgiveness of sins is important but it's not the whole story. Not even close.

The true Scriptural goes something like this: The world is fallen and evil. God is determined to put it right. His plan to do so is by establishing a covenant with his people. They fail to keep the covenant so God sends Jesus to fulfill the covenant for them. By doing so, God's covenant family is established in the way God always intended and they are able to begin their eschatological task of partnering with God to set the world right.

The difference between those two narrative is not small or unimportant. The former puts the focus on ourselves, the latter on God and his plan. The former has a goal of escaping the world, the latter of renewing it. Understanding justification in the way that Piper and the other Old Perspective proponents do will leave

you stuck on the first narrative. Understanding justification the way Wright does compels you to embrace the second.

In other words, this isn't a minor issue. This isn't just a point of interesting theological debate. This is an essential doctrine that will impact how we view and live out our faith. If we lose the true meaning of justification we lose a whole bunch more along the way.

I'm not arguing that Wright's work is perfect. He'd eagerly agree that it's not. But the church needs to move forward, not backward, when it comes to critiquing Wright. We need to embrace this new (or, more accurately, ancient) understanding of justification and then build upon it. Wright has laid the foundation for the next generation of Christians to live out their faith in a new way. We need to follow his lead, study this doctrine, read Paul like never before and then live out the implications of what we learn.

Jacob Aitken says

This is Tom Wright's response to John Piper's recent work on justification, and we can think Piper for writing that work: without his work Wright would not have written this one. As most know, Wright has been accused in the past fifteen years of denying justification by faith, attacking the Reformed tradition, and probably microwaving kittens. Granted, most accusations that Wright has "denied the gospel" are meaningless (for when is the gospel not at stake for Reformed bloggers?). However, there are some serious "old perspective" rebuttals to Wright, and Piper's is one of them.

While I have not read Piper's actual work, I've read most of his other works, including his major work on "God's Righteousness," which is a prominent theme in this debate (Piper, 1993). What many do not realize, however, is that Wright considers himself a Calvinist (!), advancing and improving Reformed themes. In this review we will outline Wright's major arguments, see whether he is indeed faithful to the Reformed traditions, and offer some tentative ways through the current debate.

Wright agrees with the truths behind traditional Reformed claims about soteriology, but he notes that Reformed have been unable (or even reluctant!) to apply these in a broader cosmic vision. His main problem with Reformed formulations is that they simply dead-end.

Wright gives a brief summary of his project, seeing the 1st century Jews, per Josephus, as living in a continuous narrative, which stretched back to earliest times and would have a climactic moment of fulfillment (Wright 2009: 59). He points the reader to Daniel 9, where the "righteous" God is said to "keep covenant" (Daniel 9:4). Further, God is righteous in terms of this covenant (vv. 11-14, echoing Deuteronomy 27-30). Therefore—and this is something the reader familiar with the debate should see coming—God's righteousness is his covenant faithfulness.

Contra Piper, God's righteousness is not "God's concern for his own glory." Hardly anyone in any tradition takes this view, and even J. I. Packer comes to a different view (65).

Supposing one accepts Wright's denotation, can we assume that Paul even worked with a covenant theology? For Reformed people, this should not even be up for debate. Granted, Piper is a Baptist and probably does not have too sharp a covenant theology (at least by Reformed standards), but it is a question worth considering: did Paul structure his theology around the covenant(s)? The main argument to the contrary is that Paul (and the New Testament) rarely uses the word *diatheke*, or any of its cognates. True, but

can we still see a covenant theology at structure?

The Jews saw themselves living in a continuous narrative, as noted before. The focus of this narrative was Abraham (Gen. 15, 17, and Deuteronomy 27-30). Given Second Temple Judaism (hereafter 2TJ), this story is seen moving forward. Paul rethinks this whole framework around the person of Christ (95-96). We see specific examples of this in Galatians 3. Verse 17 makes it clear that Paul is referring to the Abrahamic covenant. Galatians 3 and Romans 4 are similar; in both cases Paul is appealing to God's covenantal actions with Abraham.

If Paul is using covenantal theology, then this provides the best context to interpret the arguments concerning God's righteousness, and ultimately justification. Further, covenant is social in character, which means justification will also have a social dimension.

Interesting, the first time Paul uses the word "justification" he is not using it in a law-court context, but at a dinner table. Justification does concern who is a member of God's covenant, Ligon Duncan notwithstanding. Justification primarily means we are members of God's family and have a right to table fellowship.

Further, "works of the law" means "living like a Jew" (Galatians 2:14-15). It does not mean abstract good deeds through which one gains merit, only to see that we are justified by not-merit. Galatians 2:16 must be read in the context of Galatians 2:11-15 (117).

Summary of the review so far (cf. Wright, 133-136):

The promises God made to Abraham were a covenant (Gen 15 = Gal. 3:15, 17). The Abrahamic covenant had in view the liberation of man from the plight of Gen. 3-11. This overall context compels us to understand Paul's use of *dikaios* in terms of membership in God's family. One's covenant status, therefore, is "righteousness." God creates a status of "having been declared in the right." It does not mean God infuses virtue or imputes the righteousness of the judge onto the defendant(!).

Per Romans 1:17 Wright argues that "righteousness" refers to God's own and reflects his faithfulness to the covenant (180). To understand Romans Wright suggests that Paul's theology of justification hinges on two poles: eschatology and spirit (189). The judgment in Romans 2:1-16 is a future judgment. The future verdict will correspond to the present one, which (per 3:21-26) is issued on the basis of faith. This happens via the Spirit (Rom. 8:1; 2-27). "Doing the law" in 2:13 should refer to 8:5-8. This points to 10:5-13, where doing the Torah spoken of in Leviticus is explained in terms of Deuteronomy 30, and further in terms of Joel 2:32, the passage about the outpoured spirit (190).

Justification is an act of God that brings about the new situation in terms of the law court. This act of justification enables God to deal with the problem of relationship, reconciliation (225-226).

Wright offers a few other conclusions as well. If one wants to maintain the "imputation" language, then it is fair to say that Christ's death and resurrection is reckoned to the believer (Wright, 233. Cf. Romans 6:6-11). Further, given the law-court scenario of Judaism, it is quite bizarre to speak of "imputed righteousness." That's not the way the lawcourt metaphor works. The judge does not impute his own moral character to the defendant (especially in America, where the judges are usually the most corrupt ones in the room!). The judge simply declares "this one is in the right."

Conclusion:

Wright makes a persuasive case. And though he clearly wins the debate, he is gentle about it. He really wants to maintain what the Reformed tradition sought contra Rome. He is offering exegesis that steers clear of many dead-ends, and contra to being a novelty, he shows how his view incorporates the best of other traditions as well.

On the other hand, I'm not sure why Wright wants to claim he is in the Reformed tradition. He rejects most of the key distinctive. His chapter on Romans 9 is one of the most thorough arguments against unconditional election. But that's his call. I think he pulled punches as well. There are a lot of problems with imputed righteousness, and Wright only touched on a few: merit theology, created grace, etc.

It is Wright's best work so far, and while we are grateful for the attempt, we hope he focuses more on his magnum opus on Paul.

References

Piper, John. *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9: 1-23*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1993.

Chauncey Lattimer says

A recurring part of my theological training was an emphasis upon interpreting Scripture by means of Scripture. Difficult/vague passages were to be interpreted by those that were more easily understood. And, in keeping with Wright's quoting of Kasemann, there was to be "an inner logic" to the text. I say all of this because N.T. Wright's book, *Justification: God's Plan & Paul's Vision*, is a work that approaches an understandably difficult topic (justification) from the perspective of God's overall mission / salvation history. I highly recommend not only the book, but especially the 7th chapter (71 pages) that focuses on Romans. It brought clarity to some of my previously unresolved questions.

Though the book is admittedly a response to John Piper's book, *The Future of Justification: A Response to N.T. Wright*, this quickly becomes a minor focus with only occasional and pointed comments. What I appreciate about the book is how Wright establishes 'First-Century Judaism' as the context for understanding what Paul meant – not the Reformation. Noting that there is always more 'light' to be received from God (quoting the Puritan John Robinson), Wright returns the focus to the Word of God: "...if the light comes, and can be shown to come, from the Word, from Scripture itself, there is no tradition so strong, venerable or previously fruitful that it should not be prepared to learn from it." (249) Another great work by N.T. Wright.

Adam Ross says

Really, really good. Occasionally Wright will overstate his case, and I agree with Rev. Wilson that there are a number of problems with Wright's rejection of imputation, especially since Wright has to then provide his own form of imputation. We can't escape the concept of imputation (properly understood) because there is no hope for the sinner except that Christ takes on our sin and we are given the crucified and risen Christ.

It was nice, however, to hear Wright criticize a number of other folks in his own camp, and to hear him say a number of good things about the "old perspective," not to mention his appreciation for Calvin and the best of Reformed Theology in general. I trust and hope that when he completes his huge book on Paul he will include more interaction with men who would agree with him on covenant and eschatology, like Calvin, Owen, Edwards, and so forth.

But for the most part, as usual, Wright's emphases are simply glorious. Written technically as a response to John Piper and his other Reformed critics, there really is not much detailed interaction with Piper and he spends most of his time pointing out that Piper misinterprets this or that verse because he does not take Paul's whole argument into account. A valid point, of course, but it would have been nice for some more specific critiques. Nevertheless, Wright won this round hands down.

Michael Philliber says

Around a decade back, while working on my doctorate, I attended a public discussion between N.T. Wright and Richard Gaffin. During one of the breaks I approached Bishop Wright to ask him to sign my copy of his commentary on Romans. He asked the reason for my coming to the event and I explained that I needed an elective course and had convinced my director to allow me to craft a self-directed class on "N.T. Wright's doctrine of Justification". He chuckled and said, "There's not much mystery about it." A few years after that meeting, in 2009, he published "Justification: God's Plan & Paul's Vision" which has been recently repackaged with a new introduction penned by Wright. This book shows "that there's not much mystery about it."

The material of the 2016 "Justification" is exactly the same as the 2009 edition, even down to the pagination. As Wright asserted then he affirms now, "Any preaching of justification which focuses solely or even mainly on Jesus' death and its results is only doing half the job. Justification is not just about "how I get my sins forgiven." It is about how God creates, in the Messiah Jesus and in the power of his Spirit, a single family, celebrating their once-for-all forgiveness and their assured "no condemnation: in Christ, through whom his purposes can now be extended into the wider world" (248). Everything in the book shores up this explanation and fills it out with thought-provoking exegesis on Galatians, Philippians, Corinthians, and Ephesians; and a stimulatingly extended chapter on Romans. Throughout the work the author takes away from the normal Reformed and Lutheran classifications of justification with one hand, and then gives most of them back with the other. His biggest beef, so to speak, seems to be with the imputed righteousness of Christ which he, somewhat reluctantly maybe, comes around to attach (in modified form) to Christian baptism (231-3).

For a person who may be unfamiliar with Wright and why all the hullabaloo over his characterization of justification, this book is a good entry point. In the first part of the book he carefully works out how eschatology, Christology, Covenant and the law court are all packed into the term and filtering into Paul's understanding of the doctrine (101-108). The author gives background and back-up for his understanding of Paul, working the reader along, step-by-step, building brick-by-brick until he has made his case. Then in the second segment he works over several of Paul's to show how his reading of justification is consistent with the Apostle.

The only difference with the 2016 publication is the cover design and the new introduction which reflects more thoughtfully on the discussion of justification after his researching and writing "Paul and the Faithfulness of God," "Pauline Perspectives," "Paul and His Recent Interpreters," and "The Paul Debate."

Now Wright sees with clearer precision that the issue underlying the debate over his understanding of justification is the category known among Reformed theologians as the Covenant of Works. Therefore he asserts that, “The work of Jesus, (. . .), cannot be captured by the works-related ideas of active and passive obedience. It is better summed up (. . .) in terms of Jesus’ own unique “royal priesthood” winning the decisive victory over the powers of evil by bearing human sins and their deadly result in his own body, and through his life-blood, purifying his people from every impurity – that is, from everything that reeks of death, or invokes and courts it by idolatry and sin” (8).

The 2016 issue of “Justification: God’s Plan & Paul’s Vision” is a good entryway into N.T. Wright’s understanding of Paul, eschatology, ecclesiology, Christology, and Covenant. Even if a reader disagrees with some of his conclusions, they will have benefited from the rich insights and perceptions. And the new introduction will help settle what many long-term readers may have suspected for some time. I highly recommend the book.

Thanks to IVP Academic for providing, upon my request, the free copy of “Justification” used for this review. The assessments are mine given without restrictions or requirements (as per Federal Trade Commission’s 16 CFR, Part 255).

David says

Wright's book is a response to John Piper's critique of his views on justification. Unlike Piper's book, this is not a point by point rebuttal to Piper as his was to Wright. Instead it is an attempt by Wright to be as clear as possible on his understanding of the issue. Like Piper, he writes with humility and respect.

This book is an enjoyable treat. Wright firmly sets his interpretation of Paul's letters in the context of the bible's grand narrative. He works to clear away tradition and to put Paul in his Jewish context. What I appreciate most about this book is that it tears away the impression of a great difference between Jesus (the Gospels) and Paul (the letters). At first glance, these two portions of the New Testament appear to have different themes and concerns. Wright manages to place Paul's arguments in the same Jewish context in which Jesus lives and thus to show both of them in context with all of Scripture. Part two of the book, chapters on Galatians, Corinthians, Philippians, Ephesians and Romans, sets Wright's argument deeply in the context of Paul's letters. He shows that justification is not a separate doctrine but has profound connections to Christology and life in the Spirit. Too often theology and the Christian life is fragmented; Wright's work connects the dots.

Overall, a highly recommended read (for those who like such books).

Dave Courtney says

N.T. Wright represents himself as somewhat of a misunderstood and polarizing figure. Having spent a substantial amount of time studying the apostle Paul, he speaks in his preface of how the Church at large has tended to interpret Paul’s view of justification wrongly. He challenges the concept of imputed righteousness, which Lutherans and the Reformers tend to see as synonymous with justification, and his book, aptly titled Justification, is a polemic and response to Piper’s vocal protest, even as it stands as a concise summary of the trajectory of his former works. In this sense his words have a timely feel, while also reaching past Piper to

what he feels is a more faithful historical/critical perspective.

The second half of the book is devoted to an exegesis of Paul's letters, while the first half sets up the primary issues and his central argument. He argues that the Church at large has confused Paul's understanding of justification in both form and meaning, and that Paul's view of justification is simply one of many terms that he utilizes to explore the larger concept of Christ's saving work. He champions what he refers to as the single plan of God for the salvation of the world, and anchors this in the Abrahamic covenant through which Paul interprets Christ. The covenant promise was intended for Israel to be an extension of God's grace beyond their ethnic boundaries and in to a multi-ethnic world, but in their failure to live in to this covenant Christ became necessary as a single, faithful Israelite who could bring its fulfillment. Dealing with this single plan of God for the world, Wright presents his central thought process through a number of ideas and questions related to the act of justification. This review will interact with three of these ideas in specific, concluding with some personal thoughts as to how Wright's view of justification impacts my own ministry and theological understanding. These ideas are:

1. The relevance of first century law court language
2. Righteousness as status vs. moral standing
3. The problem of works and grace in justification

The relevance of first century law court language

Where Wright begins his discourse is in addressing the nature of tradition. He argues that where the Church has taken the thought patterns of the reformers is far beyond where they first intended. This leads him to recognize a difference between tradition and scripture, suggesting that when we raise tradition above good exegesis we tend to lose sight of faithful perspective. Piper has criticized him for attempting to do away with an entire history of traditional reformed theology. Here Wright distances himself both from more liberal segments of the new perspective and the conservative components of old perspective thinkers, arguing instead for an orthodox view of scripture that is free to challenge our traditions. To be fair, at first glance this can be seen as arrogant or pious, and even dangerous, but I think Wright takes careful steps to ensure that his primary motivation is simply to let "scripture be scripture."

In order to set our theological understanding of justification in its appropriate context, Wright suggests that we must see it through the lens of Paul's first century perspective, which is familiar with Jewish custom and practice. He writes, "the debates we have look much different than those of first century Jews", as we tend to focus instead on our personal relationship, personal salvation or our 'getting' to Heaven. The Jews understood that they were a part of the Abrahamic covenant in which God would bring salvation both to them and to the world, and they expected this to happen in their time. Paul understood this, and he also understood the resistance to seeing God's grace reach beyond his own ethnic background. This becomes his motivation for interpreting Christ in light of this resistance to the single plan of God.

The concept of justification explains how Christ stands as the fulfillment of the covenant. Pertinent to this is Paul's use of law court language and imagery. Wright believes that for Paul, covenant and law court language belong together. Justification (*diakiosis*) is "the word Paul uses less frequently to sum up words he uses more frequently," and it essentially has to do with acquittal, or the granting of a status of righteousness rather than moral character. Righteousness then, refers not to the imputed righteousness that Piper holds so close, but to a given status in which the judge (God) finds favor. "The idea that what sinners need is for someone else's righteousness to be credited to their account simply muddles up the categories." The suggestion is that the terms 'justification' and 'righteousness' do not have to do with our moral response or character or sinless nature. It is simply being granted right status as a final verdict. In his exegetical work on Romans in the latter half of the book, Wright suggests that it is not about who gets justified, but rather about who belongs to the family of Abraham.

Righteousness as status vs. moral character

Understanding justification in this light should lead us to further distinguish between righteousness and the concept of imputed moral righteousness. If God's righteousness is first and foremost found in His "faithfulness to the covenant," then what is offered to us is not God's own righteousness but rather a right standing. For Wright, "the gift always precedes the obligation. That is how Israel's covenant theology worked," and it is how Christ's saving work can be declared in confidence. Where Wright moves from here then is to suggest, "The challenge to the believer- indeed, one might almost say the challenge of learning to believe at all- is to reckon that this is true, that one has indeed left behind the state of slavery, that one really has come now to stand on resurrection ground (Romans 6:6-11)." Here we can see how terms such as salvation, justification and righteousness can become blurred, and questions of moral behavior can become positioned precariously within the tension of works and grace.

Works vs. grace

How can we claim our right standing in the present in terms of a confident assurance in the final status in the fullness of time if that same status is a measure of the works we have done? Wright acknowledges that there is a great problem in moving from grace to works under imputed righteousness, and he believes that under the old perspective we inevitably end up back at an idea of salvation that depends on moral works or agency. If we are to understand Jesus' accomplishment correctly, we can say that, "the task of the Messiah was to offer to God the obedience which Israel could not offer." Given this, he believes it is vital to distinguish between two things: "the status of God's people, prior to anything they do, and the life they are called to lead which points forward to the eventual judgment." He goes on to say that the question is not "what must I do to get to heaven, but how can you tell in the present who will be vindicated in the future."

Wright believes that we have been legally set in the right, and that this action does not require or necessitate a sinless nature in order to be declared as a verdict. Wright indicates that for Paul, "These works of Torah were neither an attempt to earn the covenant membership he already had by God's grace, nor an attempt to add his own merit to the grace that had been given. They were an attempt to do, out of love and obedience to Israel's God, the works which would function as a sign in the present that he was part of the people who would be vindicated in the future." Wright believes that understanding it any other way leads to a tricky and dangerous road in which we inevitably fall one way or another in our struggle with grace and law. Here he does a careful dance with the eschatological nature of the resurrection, merging the future and final accomplishment of Christ with the present action of the cross. Christ has both come and yet death still remains, and therefore in justification our future verdict is declared even as we are left to work it out.

This is where Wright would insist that "the works of the law were not the moral deeds done to earn justification or salvation, but the particular commandments and ordinance which kept Jew and Gentile separate from one another," an important distinction in connecting moral obligation to a discussion of Christ's saving work. He writes, "The things the Christian is commanded to do are not meant to be a grudging duty, nor are they meant merely to bring us back in to a zero balance before an unsmiling Judge. What the Christian is to do is to please God." Wright I believe would say that it is not the law itself that is convoluted or wrong, rather we, and our attempts to apply the law to justification in less than appropriate ways, are the problem. "When the spirit comes the result is human freedom rather than human slavery." He also goes on to say that "Habits of death are not freely chosen, however hard on habits of life are freely chosen. We are released from slavery into responsibility." We must continue to make the same distinctions that Paul did, which is that the working out of our salvation does not demand moral perfection, instead "it looks toward it, seeks for it. Romans 2:7. It partakes of it in advance". In truth, Wright would firmly and confidently declare that "the more the spirit is at work, the less we think about hard moral effort."

Conclusion

Wright indicates that where the Gospel is preached God's power goes to work and people are saved. He

believes that Paul's representation of the Gospel through the legal language of justification allows us to preach this Gospel with confidence to a multi-ethnic world. He understands that justification is but one term out of many that Paul reaches for to describe the saving work of Christ, and that our ability to separate status from moral representation allows us to face the tension of grace and works appropriately. God is made right in His commitment to His covenant promise, and if our own righteousness is the firm declaration of this promise fulfilled and the strong assurance of our future status declared, we are free to move towards the good works that indicates our right status, however imperfectly and incompletely in the present age. Understanding these central themes, I now want to move to explore some of the ways these assertions affect my own theological and ministry context.

Wright takes a critical look at Lutheran theology in a portion of his writing, and there is a point where he acknowledges that if he is forced to choose between Lutheran or Calvinist association, he would lean towards a Calvinist approach. Wright does not agree with Luther's view that "we are justified in Christ, but still sinners simply in the sense of committing actual sin," and views the accomplishment of Christ from a more communal perspective rather than personal. I know that for me it is easy to recognize the frustration of moral failure and the inability to live up to what I feel I should be. And of course, the more I try the more the failure becomes visible. To this end I appreciate the freedom of Luther's own theological process. However, I also resonate with Wright's sense that "the danger with a doctrine which says, you can't do anything and you mustn't try is that it ends up with the servant who, knowing his master to be strict, hid his money in the ground." Wright expresses exasperation over why Paul would include works in his theology if they were unnecessary, and having served in a Lutheran congregation for 4 years, the question of why good works matter is a necessary one in this context. There is equal frustration, certainly in a communal setting, with a Christianity which is freed from the notion of works altogether. Perhaps the concept of imputed righteousness becomes an appropriate way of tending to this issue, claiming works to be the work of Christ and Christ alone, but if Wright is correct, even imputed righteousness fails to tend to the question of works in terms of the implication of its presence or absence. To this end, even if Wright fails to fully answer the dilemma, I think it is appropriate to keep the moral will of the person intact. What I appreciate about Wright's approach is in how he applies works and moral will distinctly to a communal response and movement. It may be that our struggle with works is born out of our individualism and our tendency to view the law in the same way the Jews viewed the Torah, as a long list of rules that distance us from God's plan. Is it possible that Christ in fact freed us for His good works? And is it possible that the only way to truly recognize these works is in the community through which they can be enacted as a part of God's single plan to reach the world?

Another concept that stood out for me in Wright's discourse was the concept of exile. In seeing God's single plan represented through the Abrahamic covenant and extended to us through Christ as a part of His mission to the world, it allowed me to connect my own story to this larger historical narrative. It is striking that all throughout the history of Israel and Judea that God deals with His covenanted people in exile. It is this theme of exile that permeates the stories of the prophets, priests, judges and kings, and the early Church remains equally indebted to this same theme. In the book of Jeremiah God continually calls those who are in exile the good figs and those who remain in the land as the bad figs. There is something about God's saving grace that demands this sort of misplaced setting and complete dependence. Having recently gone through an incredibly tough ministry experience, my wife and I have found ourselves not only on the outside of our Church community, but also separated from our family and friends and what we once called home. Being unable to sell our house, we have come to understand this as a sort of exile. What Wright has done is allowed me to place this journey in the context of Christ's saving grace and work.

In a way Wright appears to be on a journey, one he has taken together with the apostle Paul over the last while. I have come to understand that a healthy journey needs a clear foundation. One of the most painful

parts of ministry for me personally is seeing youth personally destroyed in their own spirits as they journey through questions without an understanding or awareness of a Christian foundation. Wright addresses this saying, “from the secure base of justification, Paul sets out on a journey which, though its end is in fact secure, always seems like something that has to be struggled for, namely the resurrection itself.” In relation to how we make sense of grace and works in our context, feelings of guilt, shame and hurt over issues and actions related to theological confusion are far too common in our Churches. I think that Wright would share a similar view with those like Luther and Piper in suggesting that this is an unfortunate reality in our Churches. God’s grace was clearly meant to be a freeing enterprise, not destructive and divisive. What I appreciate about Wright’s perspective is that if scripture holds power, it is found in a shared spirit that allows us to stand on the same foundation that people like Paul experienced long before us. It allows us to freely engage with questions of personal failure, assurance, acceptance and love without losing sight of the saving work and grace of Christ.

A big focus of the book *Justification* is contrasting private and communal faith expression. For Wright, it is about the Church being the place where the spirit operates, and he insists that the Church operates in the public spectrum. Wright asks, “Can it be that part of the old perspectives reaction to the new is the tacit sense that once we associate ecclesiology with the very center of the Gospel we will have to go all the way and rethink the political role and task of the church?” If Wright is speaking appropriately, our tendency to think of our faith in terms of individual experience moves us away from God’s single plan for the sake of the world. The sacrifice was not just so that sins could be forgiven, it was to bring the same grace that saved Israel to the gentile world. Wright declares passionately, “How can God act in such a way, declaring Abraham and all other believers in the right, acquitted, even though they are ungodly and sinful? Answer: Jesus.” And yet, at the same time there is a strange sense that God’s love for us as an individual becomes entirely visible and present in community. Wright recognizes how God’s concern for God’s own glory, a statement familiar to Piper, is not the same thing as that which is imputed. “God is not simply concerned for His glory in scripture. “He is also concerned for us.” If this is true, then the challenge looks tall and daunting for our modern Western approach. If the Church must necessarily be political, and if the Church must necessarily be public, then justification must play out primarily in community in a way that speaks to every individual. And perhaps Wright is most correct in saying that the more we recognize this, the less importance our own moral works become. The more we put ourselves out in the world the greater the mission of God becomes, and the more we see his covenant promise fulfilled and being fulfilled in an already/not yet dichotomy, the more God becomes alive and true and real to us personally as well. And there is something magical about this process, that the more we see God’s saving work in community and in light of His single plan for the world, the less important the tension of works and grace becomes. And I think that just might be a shared goal that old and new perspective can share together.

Tori Samar says

Where to begin? I believe it's a healthy exercise for discerning Christian readers to pick up books written from an opposing theological viewpoint. For myself at least, this was a good book choice because it was my first in-depth exposure to the 'New Perspective on Paul.' I'm glad that I've now read the arguments of someone who actually holds to the new perspective. Furthermore, I appreciate the ways in which this book forced me to consider whether traditional Protestantism is teaching, well, tradition or whether it is teaching what Scripture actually teaches. Though my rating of this book makes it clear that I still heavily disagree with Wright, I thank him for pushing me to think.

In spite of my low rating, this book still has good points. Here's where I can give credit where credit is due:

#1 - Wright is critical of the Western world's tendency to read Scripture and view salvation through the lens of individualism.

This is a fair criticism. I know that I have been guilty of this problem (such as in my tendency to interpret all the *you* pronouns in Scripture as singular when many of them are actually plural). Western Christians would certainly do well to dig deeper into the community- and world-based ideas of Scripture. And since we are so prone to pride, it is also good to be on guard lest we fall into the trap that "the whole of Christian truth is all about me and my salvation."

#2 - Wright puts particular emphasis on reading Scripture in light of a single, overarching narrative.

Though I disagree with Wright on much of what this narrative actually looks like, he is correct to insist that good exegesis necessarily involves understanding the "big picture" of Scripture.

#3 - Wright directs us to figuring out the author's original, intended meaning when interpreting Scripture.

"If we are to give primary attention to Scripture itself, it is vital to pay attention to the actual flow of [Paul's] letters, to their context (to the extent that we can discern it) and to the specific arguments that are being mounted at any one time." So says Wright. I think we all ought to be able to agree with this statement as it is, even if we don't agree with Wright's presuppositions behind and/or application of such a statement.

Having affirmed the good of this book, I find myself stuck with my original problem: where to begin? For the purposes of this review, I've opted to discuss a few of my strongest disagreements with what Wright has written. Here we go!

#1 - Wright rejects the doctrine of the imputed righteousness of Christ because Paul never explicitly states the doctrine anywhere.

On this issue, Wright actually says the following: "if 'imputed righteousness' is so utterly central, so nerve-janglingly vital, so standing-and-falling-church important as John Piper makes out, isn't it strange that Paul never actually came straight out and said it?" The second I read this statement, another term immediately came to mind: the *Trinity*. Wright clearly, undeniably believes in the Trinity. And yet the Scripture has no 'chapter and verse' that come straight out and say, "the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three Persons yet one God" (1 John 5:7-8 doesn't count - the history behind how those verses read in the KJV is sufficiently dubious). So we can see that Wright doesn't even adhere to his own logic on this point. And I just have to say - "The Bible didn't come right out and say it" is a terrible hermeneutical principle anyway.

#2 - Wright misunderstands and mischaracterizes his critics' view of justification.

Perhaps I've been running in (for lack of a better term) the "wrong" circles, but I don't know anyone in my immediate Protestant circle—or the ones that men like John Piper, D.A. Carson, John MacArthur, etc., are in—who thinks that justification means what Wright claims his opponents say it means. First, Wright insists that Protestants use the term *justification* to cover everything from grace to glory. Second, he insists that Protestants think the term justification means "to make righteous." Like I said, in the Protestant circles I follow, I have never heard *justification* used in these ways. Never. In fact, it's quite the opposite. *Justification* is carefully distinguished from *sanctification* and *glorification*, and *justification* is consistently defined as *declaring* someone to be righteous. Are there Protestant groups who use *justification* the ways Wright says we do? Likely there are. But I know for a fact that there are many who don't.

#3 - Wright's definition of righteousness in terms of covenant theology is too limiting.

Wright is so determined to couch *righteousness* within the context of fidelity to the covenant (i.e., the

covenant God made with Abraham in Genesis 15) that he basically ignores the role of righteousness in Genesis 1-14. If righteousness relates to the Abrahamic covenant, why does Genesis 1-14 even matter? How could people who sinned prior to the covenant be in the wrong? What covenant have they failed to uphold? Are people who lived prior to the covenant righteous, unrighteous, or something completely different? The "single narrative" of Scripture doesn't start at Genesis 15, yet Wright treats his whole argument as if it does. And because of that, he provides no sufficient explanation for how righteousness does or does not fit into Genesis 1-14.

#4 - Wright holds a troubling view of the primacy of God's glory.

To understand my statement above, some context is needed: Wright dislikes John Piper's definition of *God's righteousness* as "God's concern for God's own glory." Whether Piper's definition is a good one is not my concern here. Rather, my concern relates to one of the reasons why Wright opposes Piper's definition. Here's Wright's argument: "[God's concern for God's own glory] implies that God's primary concern returns, as it were, to himself. There is always of course a sense in which that is true. But the great story of Scripture, from creation and covenant right on through to the New Jerusalem, is constantly about God's overflowing, generous, creative love-God's concern, if you like, for the flourishing and well-being of everything else. . . . God's concern for God's glory is precisely rescued from the appearance of divine narcissism because God, not least God as Trinity, is always giving out, pouring out, lavishing generous love on undeserving people, undeserving Israel and an undeserving world." I don't think I can sufficiently express how much Wright's view here bothers me. Are we reading the same Bible? I'm sorry, but it is not "divine narcissism" for God to be most concerned with His own glory. God would cease to be God if His own glory took a backseat to something else. I completely disagree with the idea that "the great story of Scripture" is God's concern for everything else. On the contrary, Scripture puts God—and only God—front and center in the story. How has Wright seemed to miss how worship-oriented and God-centered the Scripture is?

#5 - Wright makes Israel, not Jesus Christ, the center of God's plan of redemption.

If you read Wright's book, here's a hyphenated phrase you'll see many, many times: "the single-plan-through-Israel-for-the-world." And once again, here I must drop a long quote from Wright to make my point clearly: "Israel is guilty and so cannot bring blessing to the nations, as Abraham's family ought to be doing.' This is not simply a problem for Israel; it is not simply a problem for the world (though it is of course both of those as well). It is a problem for God, as Romans 3:1-8 makes clear. God's single saving plan has apparently been thwarted. How is he then going to be faithful not only to the promises made to Israel but to the promises made through Israel? . . . [T]he problem with which God is faced, if he is to be faithful to his own character and plan in both creation and covenant, is [that] he must nevertheless put his single plan into operation, somehow accomplishing what Israel was called to do but, through faithlessness to his commission, failed to do." My short response is this: No. Just no. How does Wright's explanation here not make Israel God's first choice for redeemer? How does it not make Jesus Christ "Plan B," the one God sent to do the job because it turns out that Israel couldn't do it, as He originally intended? This is a blatant misreading of Scripture. Israel was never the linchpin for God's great redemptive plan. Jesus Christ has been, is currently, and will always be the one God chose to fulfill His plan. Only Christ, always Christ!

#6 - Wright's view of justification is misleading at best and heretical at worst.

I really don't know where to begin with this one because Wright's explanations are so convoluted. Over and over again, he insists that he is not muddying the gospel or preaching a false gospel or taking away from Christ's saving work. Over and over again, he insists that we enter into God's covenant family because of faith and grace. But then he goes and says things like this: "initial membership [in the covenant] is by grace, but final judgment is according to works." Or this: "The present verdict [of justification by faith alone] gives the assurance that the future verdict [of justification] will match it; the Spirit gives the power through which that future verdict, when given, will be seen to be in accordance with the life that the believer has then

lived." How do statements like these not sully the gospel? How do they not introduce the idea that our good works (even if they are empowered by the Holy Spirit Himself) ultimately contribute to our salvation? But as I already mentioned, Wright's explanation of justification is so convoluted and full of semantic parsing that I honestly don't know what to say he actually believes. I can only say that what he seems to say alarms me greatly.

There is more, much more, that I could write. But I will stop myself here. May the Holy Spirit illumine each one of us to understand and teach the Word rightly. And may we never be guilty of preaching anything but the true gospel.

(Read for the 2017 Tim Challies Christian Reading Challenge: A book from a theological viewpoint you disagree with)

Joel Warnock says

More than a bit confusing. I like NT Wright, but I don't really know where he stands with justification and that really should have been more clear in a book with this title. Most of the book was a rebuttal of John Piper's ideas on the new perspective of Paul.

Paul says

How many PhDs does it take to get to the point where you think "justice" and "justification" are words that belong to radically different theological categories? So many amazing observations in this book, but they do not add up to a case for the redefinition of "righteousness" and against the doctrine of imputation as taught by the Reformers and their heirs. At the end of the 250 pages, it is still unclear how God forgives our sin. Dr. Wright repeatedly affirms that God "deals with our sin" in the death of Christ; okay, how? "How else, except by imputation?" is the answer of the Reformation. If Christ's righteousness is not imputed to me, then my sin cannot be imputed to him; it's that simple.

Anthony Derosse says

Thought provoking. Very different perspective of Pauline terms such as justification, works of the law, righteousness, etc. Wright's views make sense within his web of belief and seem to have a coherence about them.

Douglas Wilson says

Parts were magnificent, and parts were atrocious. Wright is just like that.
