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THE FUTURE  
*of* JUSTIFICATION



*A Response to N. T. Wright*

JOHN PIPER

CROSSWAY BOOKS  
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

*The Future of Justification*

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Published by Crossway Books

a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers  
1300 Crescent Street  
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Cover design: Josh Dennis

Cover photo: Bridgeman Art Library

First printing, 2007

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**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Piper, John, 1946–

*The Future of Justification* : a response to N.T. Wright / John Piper.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 978-1-58134-964-1 (tpb)

1. Justification (Christian theology)—History of doctrines—20th century.

2. Wright, N. T. (Nicholas Thomas) II. Title.

BT764.3.P57 2007

234'.7—dc22

2007029481

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| BP | 17 | 16 | 15 | 14 | 13 | 12 | 11 | 10 | 09 | 08 | 07 |   |   |   |
| 15 | 14 | 13 | 12 | 11 | 10 | 9  | 8  | 7  | 6  | 5  | 4  | 3 | 2 | 1 |

In memory of my father

WILLIAM SOLOMON HOTTLE PIPER

*who preached the gospel of Jesus Christ  
for seventy years*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THIS IS THE YEAR (2007) that my father died. Who can estimate the debt we owe our fathers? Bill Piper preached the gospel of grace for over seventy years, if you count the songs and testimonies at the nursing home. He was an evangelist—the old southern, independent, fundamentalist sort, without the attitude. He remains in my memory the happiest man I ever knew.

In the last chapter of his ministry one of his favorite and most fruitful sermons was titled “Grace for the Guilty.” As I read it even today I realize again why, under God, my father must be acknowledged first at the beginning of this book. That great sermon comes toward its end with these simple words, “God clothes you with his righteousness when you believe, giving you a garment that makes you fit for heaven.” We all knew what he meant. He was a lover of the great, deep, power-laden old truths. He wielded them in the might of the Spirit to see thousands—I dare say tens of thousands—of people profoundly converted. For my father, the gospel of Christ included the news that there is a righteousness—a perfect obedience of Jesus Christ—that is offered freely to all through faith alone. And when faith is given, that righteousness is imputed to the believer once and for all. Together with the sin-forgiving blood of Jesus, this is our hope. From the moment we believed until the last day of eternity God is 100 percent for us on this basis alone—the sin-bearing punishment of Christ, and the righteousness-providing obedience of Christ. This my father preached and sang, and I believed with joy.

*O let the dead now hear Thy voice;  
Now bid Thy banished ones rejoice;  
Their beauty this, their glorious dress,  
Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness.*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>John Wesley, “Jesu, Thy Blood and Righteousness.”

This book took its origin from the countless conversations and e-mails with those who are losing their grip on this great gospel. This has proved to be a tremendous burden for my soul over the past ten years. But I thank God for it. And I acknowledge him for any clarity and faith and worship and obedience that might flow from this effort.

The book began to take shape while I was on sabbatical in the spring and summer of 2006 at Tyndale House in Cambridge, England. This is a very fruitful place to study, write, and interact with thoughtful scholars. The book was put in its final form during a month-long writing leave in May, 2007. Without the support of the Council of Elders of Bethlehem Baptist Church I could not have done this work. I am writing these acknowledgments on the first day of my twenty-eighth year as pastor of Bethlehem, and my heart is full of thanks for a people that love the great truths of the gospel and commission me to study and write and preach these truths.

Also indispensable were my assistants David Mathis and Nathan Miller. Reading the manuscript repeatedly, and making suggestions, and finding resources, and tracking down citations, and certifying references, and lifting dozens of practical burdens from my shoulders, they made this work possible.

More than any other book that I have written, this one was critiqued in the process by very serious scholars. I received detailed critical feedback to the first draft from Michael Bird, Ardel Caneday, Andrew Cowan, James Hamilton, Burk Parsons, Matt Perman, Joseph Rigney, Thomas Schreiner, Justin Taylor, Brian Vickers, and Doug Wilson. Most significant of all was the feedback I received from N. T. Wright. He wrote an 11,000-word response to my first draft that was very helpful in clarifying issues and (I hope) preventing distortions. The book is twice the size it was before all of that criticism arrived. If it is not a better book now, it is my fault, not theirs.

Thanks again to Carol Steinbach and her team for providing the indexes. The only other person who has touched more of my books more closely than Carol is my wife, Noël. Nothing of this nature would happen without her support.

As usual it has been a deeply satisfying partnership to work

with Justin Taylor, Ted Griffin, Lane Dennis, and the entire team at Crossway Books.

It should not go unmentioned that besides my father there are other “fathers” who have shaped my understanding of the doctrine of justification. Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Owen, Jonathan Edwards, Daniel Fuller, George Ladd, John Murray, Leon Morris—not that I have agreed with them all on every point, but I have learned so much from them. I would be happy if it was said of this book what John Erskine said in 1792 of Solomon Stoddard’s book, *The Safety of Appearing at the Day of Judgment, in the Righteousness of Christ*: “The general tendency of this book is to show that our claim to the pardon of sin and acceptance with God is not founded on any thing wrought in us, or acted by us, but only on the righteousness of Christ.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Solomon Stoddard, *The Safety of Appearing at the Day of Judgment, in the Righteousness of Christ* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1995, orig. 1687), vii.

# INTRODUCTION

THE FINAL JUDGMENT feels too close for me to care much about scoring points in debate. Into my seventh decade, the clouds of time are clearing, and the prospect of wasting my remaining life on gamesmanship or one-upmanship is increasingly unthinkable. The ego-need to be right has lost its dominion, and the quiet desire to be a faithful steward of the grace of truth increases. N. T. Wright is about three years younger than I am, and I assume he feels the same.

The risen Lord Jesus sees through all our clever turns of phrase—I am preaching to myself. He knows perfectly when we have chosen words to win, but not to clarify. He has planted a banner on the pulpit of every preacher and on the desk of every scholar: “No man can give the impression that he himself is clever and that Christ is mighty to save.”<sup>1</sup> We will give an account to the all-knowing, all-ruling Lord of the universe in a very few years—or days. And when we do, what will matter is that we have not peddled God’s word but “as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ” (2 Cor. 2:17).

## THE FRAGRANCE FROM DEATH TO DEATH AND FROM LIFE TO LIFE

Those of us who are ordained by the church to the Christian ministry have a special responsibility to feed the sheep (John 21:17). We have been made “overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20:28, NASB). We bear the burden of being not only teachers, who “will be judged with greater strictness” (James 3:1), but also examples in the way we live, so that our people may “consider the outcome of [our] way of life, and imitate [our] faith” (Heb. 13:7). The apostle Paul charges us: “Keep a close watch on your-

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<sup>1</sup>These are the words of James Denney, quoted in John Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 325.

self and on the teaching” (1 Tim. 4:16). We are “servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy” (1 Cor. 4:1–2)—trustworthy in *life*, “in step with the truth of the gospel” (Gal. 2:14), and trustworthy in *teaching*, “rightly handling the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15).

The seriousness of our calling comes from the magnitude of what is at stake. If we do not feed the sheep in our charge with “the whole counsel of God,” their blood is on our hands. “I am innocent of the blood of all of you, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:26–27). If we do not equip the saints by living in a way that exalts Christ, and by teaching what accords with the gospel, it will be laid to our account if our people are like “children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine” (Eph. 4:12, 14).

More importantly, eternal life hangs in the balance: “We are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things?” (2 Cor. 2:15–16). How we live and what we teach will make a difference in whether people obey the gospel or meet Jesus in the fire of judgment, “when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus” (2 Thess. 1:7–8).

This is why Paul was so provoked at the false teaching in Galatia. It was another gospel and would bring eternal ruin to those who embraced it. This accounts for his unparalleled words: “Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed” (Gal. 1:8). Getting the good news about Jesus right is a matter of life and death. It is the message “by which you are being saved” (1 Cor. 15:2).

## IF RIGHTEOUSNESS WERE THROUGH THE LAW, THEN CHRIST DIED FOR NO PURPOSE

Therefore, the subject matter of this book—justification by faith apart from works of the law—is serious. There is as much riding on this truth as could ride on any truth in the Bible. “If righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose” (Gal. 2:21). And if Christ

died for no purpose, we are still in our sins, and those who have died in Christ have perished. Paul called down a curse on those who bring a different gospel because “all who rely on works of the law are under a curse” (Gal. 3:10), and he would spare us this curse. “You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law” (Gal. 5:4). And if we are severed from Christ, there is no one to bear our curse, because “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” (Gal. 3:13). I hope that the mere existence of this book will raise the stakes in the minds of many and promote serious study and faithful preaching of the gospel, which includes the good news of justification by faith apart from works of the law (Rom. 3:28; Gal. 2:16).

### N. T. WRIGHT

My conviction concerning N. T. Wright is not that he is under the curse of Galatians 1:8–9, but 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. It may be that in his own mind and heart Wright has a clear and firm grasp on the gospel of Christ and the biblical meaning of justification. But 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 presence of God.

Nicholas Thomas Wright is a British New Testament scholar and the Anglican Bishop of Durham, England. He is a remarkable blend of weighty academic scholarship, ecclesiastical leadership, ecumenical involvement, prophetic social engagement, popular Christian advocacy, musical talent, and family commitment.<sup>2</sup> As critical as this book is of Wright’s understanding of the gospel and justification, the seriousness and scope of the book is a testimony to the stature of his scholarship and the extent of his influence. I am thankful for his strong commitment to Scripture as his final authority, his defense and celebration of the resurrection of the Son of God, his vindication of the deity of Christ, his belief in the virgin birth of Jesus, his biblical disapproval of homosexual conduct, and the consistent way he presses us to see the big picture of God’s

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<sup>2</sup>An abundance of information about Dr. Wright—as well as written, audio, and video materials by him—are available at <http://www.ntwrightpage.com>.

universal purpose for all peoples through the covenant with Abraham—and more. In this book, my hope, most remotely, is that Wright might be influenced to change some of what he thinks concerning justification and the gospel. Less remotely, I hope that he might clarify, in future writings, some things that I have stumbled over. But most optimistically, I hope that those who consider this book and read N. T. Wright will read him with greater care, deeper understanding, and less inclination to find Wright’s retelling of the story of justification compelling.

### “THIS WHOLE THING IS GOING TO FLY”

For the last thirty years, Wright has been rethinking and retelling the theology of the New Testament. He recalls an experience in the mid-seventies when Romans 10:3<sup>3</sup> became the fulcrum of a profoundly new way of looking at Paul’s theology. He was trying to make sense of Paul on the basis of the inherited views of the Reformation but could not.

I was reading C.E.B. Cranfield on Romans and trying to see how it would work with Galatians, and it simply doesn’t work. Interestingly, Cranfield hasn’t done a commentary on Galatians. It’s very difficult. But I found then, and this was the mid-seventies before E. P. Sanders was published, before there was such a thing as a “new perspective,” that I came out with this reading of Romans 10:3 which is really the fulcrum for me around which everything else moved: “Being ignorant of the righteousness of God and seeking to establish their own.”

In other words, what we have here is a covenant status which is for Jews and Jews only. I have a vivid memory of going home that night, sitting up in bed, reading Galatians through in Greek and thinking, “It works. It really works. This whole thing is going to fly.” And then all sorts of things just followed on from that.<sup>4</sup>

What he means by “this whole thing” is a top-to-bottom rethinking of Paul’s theology in categories largely different from the way most people have read their New Testament in the last fifteen hundred years (see chapter 1, note 6). When someone engages in such a thorough reconstruction of New Testament theology, critics must be extremely

<sup>3</sup>“For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness.”

<sup>4</sup>Travis Tamerius, “An Interview with N. T. Wright,” *Reformation & Revival Journal* 11, Nos. 1 and 2 (Winter and Spring 2003). Available online at [http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/travis\\_tamerius/interview\\_with\\_n\\_t\\_wright.htm](http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/travis_tamerius/interview_with_n_t_wright.htm).

careful. Their job is almost impossible. The temptation is to hear a claim about justification or about the gospel that sounds so wrong-headed that a quick critical essay contrasting the “wrongheaded” claim with the traditional view seems like a sufficient response. Wright is understandably wearied with such rejoinders.

## WHEN GLOBAL PARADIGMS COLLIDE

However, in Wright’s reconstruction, he has recast the old definitions and the old connections. This may or may not mean that the old reality is lost. It may or may not mean that the new way of saying things is more faithful to the apostles’ intentions. It may or may not mean that the church will be helped by this new construction. But what is clear is that criticism of such global reconstructions requires a great deal of effort to get inside the globe and see things from there. Whether I have succeeded at this or not, I have tried.

We all wear colored glasses—most wear glasses colored by tradition; some wear glasses colored by anti-tradition; and some wear glasses colored by our emerging, new reconstruction of reality. Which of these ways of seeing the world is more seductive, I don’t know. Since they exist in differing degrees, from one time to the next, probably any of them can be overpowering at a given moment. I love the gospel and justification that I have seen in my study and preaching over the last forty years. N. T. Wright loves the gospel and justification he has seen in that same time. My temptation is to defend a view because it has been believed for centuries. His temptation is to defend a view because it fits so well into his new way of seeing the world. Public traditions and private systems are both very powerful. We are agreed, however, that neither conformity to an old tradition nor conformity to a new system is the final arbiter of truth. Scripture is. And we both take courage from the fact that Scripture has the power to force its own color through any human lens.

## WHAT IS BEHIND THIS BOOK?

For those who wonder what Wright has written that causes a response as long and as serious as this book, it may be helpful to mention a few of the issues that I will try to deal with in the book. These are some of those head-turners that tempt the critic to say, “He can’t be serious.”

But remember, the shock may only be because we are, as he would say, looking at things in the old way and not in the way he has redefined them. On the other hand, there may be real problems.

*The Gospel Is Not about How to Get Saved?*

First, it is striking to read not just what Wright says the gospel is, but what he says it *isn't*. He writes, “‘The gospel’ itself refers to the proclamation that Jesus, the crucified and risen Messiah, is the one, true and only Lord of the world.”<sup>5</sup> For Paul, this imperial announcement was “that the crucified Jesus of Nazareth had been raised from the dead; that he was thereby proved to be Israel’s Messiah; that he was thereby installed as Lord of the world.”<sup>6</sup> Yes. That is an essential announcement of the gospel. But Wright also says, “‘The gospel’ is not an account of how people get saved.”<sup>7</sup> “Paul’s gospel to the pagans was not a philosophy of life. Nor was it, even, a doctrine about how to get saved.”<sup>8</sup> “My proposal has been that ‘the gospel’ is not, for Paul, a message about ‘how one gets saved.’”<sup>9</sup> “The gospel is not . . . a set of techniques for making people Christians.”<sup>10</sup> “‘The gospel’ is not an account of how people get saved. It is . . . the proclamation of the lordship of Jesus Christ.”<sup>11</sup>

These are striking denials in view of 1 Corinthians 15:1–2, “Now I would remind you, brothers, of *the gospel* I preached to you . . . by which you are being *saved*.” But be careful. Perhaps this only means that salvation *results* from believing the gospel, not that the gospel message tells how to be saved. Perhaps. But one wonders how the death and resurrection of Jesus could be heard as good news if one had spent his life committing treason against the risen King. It seems as though one would have to be told how the death and resurrection of Christ actually saves sinners, if sinners are to hear them as good news and not as a death sentence. There is so much more to say (see especially chapter 5). I am only illustrating the flash points.

<sup>5</sup>N. T. Wright, “Paul in Different Perspectives: Lecture 1: Starting Points and Opening Reflections,” at the Pastors Conference of Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church, Monroe, Louisiana (January 3, 2005). Accessed 5-11-07 at [http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright\\_Auburn\\_Paul.htm](http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Auburn_Paul.htm).

<sup>6</sup>N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 46.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 133.

*Justification Is Not How You Become a Christian?*

Second, Wright says, “Justification is not how someone becomes a Christian. It is the declaration that they have become a Christian.”<sup>12</sup> Or again, “‘Justification’ in the first century was not about how someone might establish a relationship with God. It was about God’s eschatological definition, both future and present, of who was, in fact, a member of his people.”<sup>13</sup> “[Justification] was not so much about ‘getting in’, or indeed about ‘staying in’, as about ‘how you could tell who was in’. In standard Christian theological language, it wasn’t so much about soteriology as about ecclesiology; not so much about salvation as about the church.”<sup>14</sup> So the divine act of justification does not constitute us as Christians or establish our relationship with God. It informs or announces. “The word *dikaioō* [justify] is, after all, a declarative word, declaring that something is the case, rather than a word for making something happen or changing the way something is.”<sup>15</sup>

This is startling because we are used to reading Romans 5:1 as if justification had in fact altered our relationship with God. “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” We thought that justification had brought about this fundamentally new and reconciled relationship with God. (For further discussion, see especially chapter 6.)

*Justification Is Not the Gospel?*

Third, it follows then that Wright would say that the message of justification is not the gospel. “I must stress again that the doctrine of justification by faith is not what Paul means by ‘the gospel.’”<sup>16</sup> “If we come to Paul with these questions in mind—the questions about how human beings come into a living and saving relationship with the living and saving God—it is not justification that springs to his lips or pen. The message about Jesus and his cross and resurrection—‘the gospel’ . . . is announced to them; through this means, God works by his Spirit upon their hearts.”<sup>17</sup>

<sup>12</sup>N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 125.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup>N. T. Wright, “New Perspectives on Paul,” in *Justification in Perspective: Historical Developments and Contemporary Challenges*, ed. Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 258.

<sup>16</sup>Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 132.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 116.

This is astonishing in view of the fact that Paul brought his sermon in Pisidian Antioch to a gospel climax by saying, “Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone who believes is *justified* [δικαιοῦται] from everything from which you could not be *justified* [δικαιωθῆναι] by the law of Moses” (Acts 13:38–39, my translation). And again it is difficult to know how a sinner could hear the announcement of the cross and resurrection as good news without some explanation that by faith it makes a person forgiven and righteous before God. (See more on this in chapter 6.)

*We Are Not Justified by Believing in Justification?*

Fourth, part of the implication of what Wright has said so far is that we are not justified by believing in justification by faith but by believing in Jesus: “We are not justified by faith by believing in justification by faith. We are justified by faith by believing in the gospel itself—in other words, that Jesus is Lord and that God raised him from the dead.”<sup>18</sup> This sounds right. Of course, we are not saved by doctrine. We are saved by Christ. But it is misleading, because it leaves the meaning of “believing in the gospel” undefined. Believing in the gospel *for what?* Prosperity? Healing? A new job? If we are going to help people believe the gospel in a saving way (not the way the demons believe, and not the way Simon the magician believed, James 2:19; Acts 8:13, 21–23), we will have to announce the good news that Christ died *for them*; that is, we will have to announce why this death and resurrection are good news *for them*.

There is more than one way to say it. Many people have been saved without hearing the language of justification. The same is true with regard to the words and realities of “regeneration” and “propitiation” and “redemption” and “reconciliation” and “forgiveness.” A baby believer does not have to understand all of the glorious things that have happened to him in order to be saved. But these things do all have to happen to him. And if he comes to the settled conviction, when he hears about them, that he will not trust Christ for any one of them, there is a serious question mark over his salvation. Therefore, it is misleading to say that we are not saved by believing in justification by faith. If we

<sup>18</sup>Wright, “New Perspectives on Paul,” 261.

hear that part of the gospel and cast ourselves on God *for this divine gift*, we are saved. If we hear that part of the gospel and reject it, while trying to embrace Christ on other terms, we will not be saved. (There is more on this in chapter 5.)

*The Imputation of God's Own Righteousness Makes No Sense At All?*

Fifth, Wright's construction of Paul's theology appears to have no place for the imputation of divine righteousness to sinners.

If we use the language of the law-court, it makes no sense whatever to say that the judge imputes, imparts, bequeaths, conveys or otherwise transfers his righteousness to either the plaintiff or the defendant. Righteousness is not an object, a substance or a gas which can be passed across the courtroom. . . . If and when God does act to vindicate his people, his people will then, metaphorically speaking, have the status of 'righteousness' . . . . But the righteousness they have will not be God's own righteousness. That makes no sense at all.<sup>19</sup>

But Wright would protest that if we leave it there, we quibble with words and miss the substance. With his new definitions and connections, he believes he has preserved the substance of what the Reformation theologians meant by imputation:

[Jesus'] role precisely *as* Messiah is not least to draw together the identity of the whole of God's people so that what is true of him is true of them and vice versa. Here we arrive at one of the great truths of the gospel, which is that the accomplishment of Jesus Christ is *reckoned* to all those who are "in him". This is the truth which has been expressed within the Reformed tradition in terms of "imputed righteousness", often stated in terms of Jesus Christ having fulfilled the moral law and thus having accumulated a "righteous" status which can be shared with all his people. As with some other theological problems, I regard this as saying a substantially right thing in a substantially wrong way, and the trouble when you do that is that things on both sides of the equation, and the passages which are invoked to support them, become distorted.<sup>20</sup>

I doubt that this is the case. But we will save the argument for chapter 8.

<sup>19</sup>Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 98–99.

<sup>20</sup>Wright, "Paul in Different Perspectives: Lecture 1." Emphasis in original.

*Future Justification Is on the Basis of the Complete Life Lived?*

Sixth, Wright makes startling statements to the effect that our future justification will be on the basis of works. “The Spirit is the path by which Paul traces the route from justification by faith in the present to justification, *by the complete life lived*, in the future.”<sup>21</sup> “Paul has . . . spoken in Romans 2 about the final justification of God’s people *on the basis of their whole life*.”<sup>22</sup> “Present justification declares, on the basis of faith, what future justification will affirm publicly (according to [Rom.] 2:14–16 and 8:9–11) *on the basis of the entire life*.”<sup>23</sup> That he means future “justification by works” is seen in the following quote:

This declaration, this vindication, occurs twice. It occurs in the future, as we have seen, *on the basis of the entire life a person has led in the power of the Spirit*—that is, it occurs *on the basis of “works”* in Paul’s redefined sense. And near the heart of Paul’s theology, it occurs in the present as *an anticipation of that future verdict*, when someone, responding in believing obedience to the call of the gospel, believes that Jesus is Lord and that God raised him from the dead.<sup>24</sup>

Again, beware of thinking this means what you might think it means. Remember that Wright has redefined “justification.” It is not what makes you a Christian or saves you. Therefore, it may be that Wright means nothing more here than what I might mean when I say that our good works are the necessary evidence of faith in Christ at the last day. Perhaps. But it is not so simple. (I return to this topic in chapter 7.)

*First-century Judaism Had Nothing of the Alleged Self-Righteous and Boastful Legalism?*

Seventh, Wright follows the New Perspective watchword that Paul was not facing “legalistic works-righteousness” in his churches. The warnings against depending on the law are not against legalism but ethnocentrism. Wright is by no means a stereotypical New Perspective scholar and goes his own way on many fronts. But he does embrace the fundamental claim of the New Perspective on Paul as articulated by E. P. Sanders:

<sup>21</sup>Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective*, 148. Emphasis added.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 121. Emphasis added.

<sup>23</sup>Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 129. Emphasis added.

<sup>24</sup>Wright, “New Perspectives on Paul,” 260. First two emphases added.

[Sanders's] major point, to which all else is subservient, can be quite simply stated. Judaism in Paul's day was not, as has regularly been supposed, a religion of legalistic works-righteousness. If we imagine that it was, and that Paul was attacking it as if it was, we will do great violence to it and to him. . . . The Jew keeps the law out of gratitude, as the proper response to grace—not, in other words, in order to *get* into the covenant people, but to *stay* in. Being “in” in the first place was God's gift. This scheme Sanders famously labeled as “covenantal nomism” (from the Greek *nomos*, law).<sup>25</sup>

When Wright did his own research, for example, into the mind of the Qumran sect represented in 4QMMT, he concluded that these documents “reveal nothing of the self-righteous and boastful ‘legalism’ which used to be thought characteristic of Jews in Paul's day.”<sup>26</sup> In chapters 9 and 10, I will examine whether 4QMMT sustains this judgment. More importantly, I will try to dig out the implications of the fact that a common root of self-righteousness lives beneath both overt legalism and Jewish ethnocentrism. Something was *damnable* in the Galatian controversy (Gal. 1:8–9). If it was ethnocentrism, it is hard to believe that the hell-bound ethnocentrists were “keeping the law out of gratitude, as a proper response to grace.” But again, I will have much more to say on this in chapters 9 and 10.

*God's Righteousness Is the Same as His Covenant Faithfulness?*

Eighth, I will mention one more thing that I think *should* be startling but no longer *is*. Wright understands “the righteousness of God” generally as meaning God's “covenant faithfulness.” It does include “his impartiality, his proper dealing with sin and his helping of the helpless.”<sup>27</sup> But chiefly it is “his faithfulness to his covenant promises to Abraham.”<sup>28</sup> I am going to argue in chapter 3 that these descriptions stay too much on the surface. They denote some of the things righteousness *does*, but do not press down to the common root beneath these behaviors as to what God's righteousness *is*. When Paul says,

<sup>25</sup>Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 18–19.

<sup>26</sup>N. T. Wright, “4QMMT and Paul: Justification, ‘Works,’ and Eschatology,” in *History and Exegesis: New Testament Essays in Honor of Dr. E. Earle Ellis for His 80th Birthday*, ed. Aang-Won (Aaron) Son (New York and London: T&T Clark, 2006), 106.

<sup>27</sup>N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 36.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*

“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become *the righteousness of God*” (2 Cor. 5:21), one must break the back of exegesis to make this mean, “We become *the covenant faithfulness of God*.” This is exactly what Wright does—in one of the most eccentric articles in all his work.<sup>29</sup> Chapter 11 is my effort to show that this unprecedented reinterpretation of 2 Corinthians 5:21 does not stand.

## THE FUTURE OF JUSTIFICATION

For these eight reasons, and more that will emerge along the way, I am not optimistic that the biblical doctrine of justification will flourish where N. T. Wright’s portrayal holds sway. I do not see his vision as a compelling retelling of what Saint Paul really said. And I think, as it stands now, it will bring great confusion to the church at a point where she desperately needs clarity. I don’t think this confusion is the necessary dust that must settle when great new discoveries have been made. Instead, if I read the situation correctly, the confusion is owing to the ambiguities in Wright’s own expressions, and to the fact that, unlike his treatment of some subjects, his paradigm for justification does not fit well with the ordinary reading of many texts and leaves many ordinary folk not with the rewarding “ah-ha” experience of illumination, but with a paralyzing sense of perplexity.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup>N. T. Wright, “On Becoming the Righteousness of God,” in *Pauline Theology*, Vol. II: 1 & 2 *Corinthians*, ed. David M. Hay (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 203.

<sup>30</sup>I do not infer Wright’s defective view of justification to mean that he is not himself justified. Jonathan Edwards and John Owen give good counsel on this point even if the debates then were not identical to ours. Edwards wrote during one of his controversies:

How far a wonderful and mysterious agency of God’s Spirit may so influence some men’s hearts, that their practice in this regard may be contrary to their own principles, so that they shall not trust in their own righteousness, though they profess that men are justified by their own righteousness—or how far they may believe the doctrine of justification by men’s own righteousness in general, and yet not believe it in a particular application of it to themselves—or how far that error which they may have been led into by education, or cunning sophistry of others, may yet be indeed contrary to the prevailing disposition of their hearts, and contrary to their practice—or how far some may seem to maintain a doctrine contrary to this gospel-doctrine of justification, that really do not, but only express themselves differently from others; or seem to oppose it through their misunderstanding of our expressions, or we of theirs, when indeed our real sentiments are the same in the main—or may seem to differ more than they do, by using terms that are without a precisely fixed and determinate meaning—or to be wide in their sentiments from this doctrine, for want of a distinct understanding of it; whose hearts, at the same time, entirely agree with it, and if once it was clearly explained to their understandings, would immediately close with it, and embrace it: — how far these things may be, I will not determine; but am fully persuaded that great allowances are to be made on these and such like accounts, in innumerable instances; though it is manifest, from what has been said, that the teaching and propagating [of] contrary doctrines and schemes, is of a pernicious and fatal tendency. (Jonathan Edwards, “Justification by Faith Alone,” in

The future of justification will be better served, I think, with older guides rather than the new ones.<sup>31</sup> When it comes to the deeper issues of how justification really works both in Scripture and in the human soul, I don't think N. T. Wright is as illuminating as Martin Luther or John Owen or Leon Morris. But that remains to be shown.

I end the Introduction where I began. My little earthly life is too far spent to care much about the ego gratification of scoring points in debate. I am still a sinner depending on Christ for my righteousness before God. So I am quite capable of fear and pride. But I do hope that, where I have made mistakes, I will be willing to admit it. There are far greater things at stake than my fickle sense of gratification or regret. Among these greater things are the faithful preaching of the gospel, the care of guilt-ridden souls, the spiritual power of sacrificial deeds of love, the root of humble Christian political and social engagement, and the courage of Christian missions to confront all the religions of the world with the supremacy of Christ as the only way to escape the wrath to come. When the gospel itself is distorted or blurred, everything else is eventually affected. May the Lord give us help in these days to see the word of his grace with clarity, and savor it with humble and holy zeal, and spread it without partiality so that millions may believe and be saved, to the praise of the glory of God's grace.

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*Sermons and Discourses, 1734-1738*, The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Vol. 19 [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001], 242)

Owen wrote: "Men may be really saved by that grace which *doctrinally they do deny*; and they may be justified by the imputation of that righteousness which *in opinion they deny to be imputed*." But I would add: the clearer the knowledge of the truth and the more deep the denial, the less assurance one can have that the God of truth will save him. Owen's words are not meant to make us cavalier about the content of the gospel, but to hold out hope that men's hearts are often better than their heads. John Owen, *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith*, chapter VII, "Imputation, and the Nature of It," Banner of Truth, *Works*, Vol. 5, 163-164.

<sup>31</sup>In a sobering review of Mark A. Noll and Carolyn Nystrom, *Is the Reformation Over? An Evangelical Assessment of Contemporary Roman Catholicism*, Scott Manetsch wisely writes, "Now more than ever, there is urgent need for evangelical Protestants in North America to 'protest' against theological superficiality, to eschew cultural faddishness and myopic presentism, and recover *their* historic roots, not only in the religious awakenings of colonial America, but in the Christian renewal movements of sixteenth-century Europe. Evangelicals who make this journey to Wittenberg and Geneva, to Zurich and Edinburgh and London will discover a world of profound biblical and theological insight, a rich deposit of practical wisdom, a gift given by God to his church for life and ministry in the twenty-first century." Scott Manetsch, "Discerning the Divide: A Review Article," in *Trinity Journal*, 28NS (2007): 62-63.

# ON CONTROVERSY

I AM A PASTOR FIRST. Polemics are secondary and serve that. Part of our pastoral responsibility is what Paul calls “the defense and confirmation of the gospel” (Phil. 1:7). Virtually all of Paul’s letters serve the church by clarifying and defending doctrinal truth and its practical implications.

The reason I take up controversy with N. T. Wright and not, say, J. D. G. Dunn or E. P. Sanders (all notable for their relationship to the so-called New Perspective on Paul) is that none of my parishioners has ever brought me a thick copy of a book by Dunn or Sanders, wondering what I thought about them. But Wright is a popular and compelling writer as well as a rigorous scholar. Therefore, he exerts significant influence both in the academic guild and among the wider public. If he is mistaken on the matter of justification, he may do more harm than others. In addition, Wright loves the apostle Paul and reverences the Christian Scriptures. That gives me hope that engaging with him will be fruitful. I know I have learned from him, and I hope that our common ground in Scripture will enable some progress in understanding and agreement.

## HOW THEN SHALL WE CONDUCT THE CONTROVERSY?

In his essay called “Polemic Theology: How to Deal with Those Who Differ from Us,” Roger Nicole begins,

We are called upon by the Lord to contend earnestly for the faith (Jude 3). That does not necessarily involve being contentious; but it involves avoiding compromise, standing forth for what we believe, standing forth for the truth of God—without welching at any particular moment.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Roger Nicole, “Polemic Theology: How to Deal with Those Who Differ from Us,” <http://www.founders.org/FJ33/article3.html>.

When we are arguing about the meaning of the gospel, it is important to do it “in step with the truth of the gospel” (Gal. 2:14). If Bible-believers are going to disagree about the meaning of the Bible, we should try to do so biblically. To that end, I offer the following encouragements.<sup>2</sup>

### WISE WORDS FROM OLD TIMES

In 1655 John Owen published *The Mystery of the Gospel Vindicated and Socinianism Examined*. It contains one of my favorite exhortations, namely, that “we have communion with God in the doctrine we contend for.” In other words, arguing for the truth of God should never replace enjoyment of the God of truth.

[More important than all is] *a diligent endeavor to have the power of the truths professed and contended for abiding upon our hearts*, that we may not contend for notions, but that we have a practical acquaintance within our own souls. When the heart is cast indeed into the mould of the doctrine that the mind embraceth—when the evidence and necessity of the truth abides in us—when not the sense of the words only is in our heads, but the sense of the thing abides in our hearts—when we have communion with God in the doctrine we contend for—then shall we be garrisoned by the grace of God against all the assaults of men.<sup>3</sup>

But is it really necessary? Must we contend? Cannot we not simply be positive, rather than trying to show that others are wrong? On June 17, 1932, J. Gresham Machen delivered an address before the Bible League of Great Britain in London titled “Christian Scholarship and the Defense of the Faith.” In it he said,

Men tell us that our preaching should be positive and not negative, that we can preach the truth without attacking error. But if we follow that advice we shall have to close our Bible and desert its teachings. The New Testament is a polemic book almost from beginning to end.

<sup>2</sup>What follows is not new. The fullest statements I have made about controversy among Christians are found in “Charity, Clarity, and Hope: The Controversy and the Cause of Christ,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1991; 2006), 403–422, and *Contending for Our All: Defending Truth and Treasuring Christ in the Lives of Athanasius, John Owen, and J. Gresham Machen* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006), especially the Introduction and Conclusion.

<sup>3</sup>John Owen, *Vindiciae Evangelicae*; or, *The Mystery of the Gospel Vindicated and Socinianism Examined*, Vol. 12, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William Goold (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1966), 52.

Some years ago I was in a company of teachers of the Bible in the colleges and other educational institutions of America. One of the most eminent theological professors in the country made an address. In it he admitted that there are unfortunate controversies about doctrine in the Epistles of Paul; but, said he in effect, the real essence of Paul's teaching is found in the hymn to Christian love in the thirteenth chapter of I Corinthians; and we can avoid controversy today, if we will only devote the chief attention to that inspiring hymn.

In reply, I am bound to say that the example was singularly ill-chosen. That hymn to Christian love is in the midst of a great polemic passage; it would never have been written if Paul had been opposed to controversy with error in the Church. It was because his soul was stirred within him by a wrong use of the spiritual gifts that he was able to write that glorious hymn. So it is always in the Church. Every really great Christian utterance, it may almost be said, is born in controversy. It is when men have felt compelled to take a stand against error that they have risen to the really great heights in the celebration of truth.<sup>4</sup>

Machen also reminds us that not just the heights of celebration in the truth but also the salvation of souls may well come through controversy for the cause of the gospel:

During the academic year, 1924–25, there has been something like an awakening. Youth has begun to think for itself; the evil of compromising associations has been discovered; Christian heroism in the face of opposition has come again to its rights; a new interest has been aroused in the historical and philosophical questions that underlie the Christian religion; true and independent convictions have been formed. Controversy, in other words, has resulted in a striking intellectual and spiritual advance. Some of us discern in all this the work of the Spirit of God. . . . Controversy of the right sort is good; for out of such controversy, as Church history and Scripture alike teach, there comes the salvation of souls.<sup>5</sup>

## LONGING FOR THE DAY OF UNITY IN THE TRUTH

The heart-wrenching truth of our day, and every day, is that Christians often disagree with each other—sometimes about serious matters.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup>J. Gresham Machen, "Christian Scholarship and the Defense of the Faith," in *J. Gresham Machen: Selected Shorter Writings*, ed. D. G. Hart (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004), 148–149.

<sup>5</sup>J. Gresham Machen, *What Is Faith?* (1925; reprint Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991), 42–43.

<sup>6</sup>This sentence and the remainder of this note on controversy are adapted from the Conclusion of *Contending for Our All* (cited in note 2).

Therefore, we rejoice that it is God himself who will fulfill his plan for the church: “My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose” (Isa. 46:10). We take heart that, in spite of all our blind spots and bungling and disobedience, God will triumph in the earth: “All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations shall worship before you. For kingship belongs to the LORD, and he rules over the nations” (Ps. 22:27–28).

Yet one of the groanings of this fallen age is controversy, and most painful of all, controversy with brothers and sisters in Christ. We resonate with the apostle Paul—our joy would be full if we could all be “of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind” (Phil. 2:2). But for all his love of harmony and unity and peace, it is remarkable how many of Paul’s letters were written to correct fellow Christians. One thinks of 1 Corinthians. It begins with Paul’s thanks (1:4) and ends with his love (16:24). But between those verses he labors to set the Corinthians straight in their thinking and behavior.<sup>7</sup>

The assumption of the entire New Testament is that we should strive for peace. Peace and unity in the body of Christ are exceedingly precious. “Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!” (Ps. 133:1). “Seek peace and pursue it” (1 Pet. 3:11). “So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding” (Rom. 14:19). But just as clear is that we are to pursue peace by striving to come to agreement in the truth. “The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable” (James 3:17). It is *first* pure. Peace is not a first thing. It is derivative. It comes from hearty agreement in truth.

For example, Paul tells us to set our minds on what is true, and honorable, and just; and the God of peace will be with us (Phil. 4:8–9). Peace is a wonderful by-product of heartfelt commitments to what is true and right. Hebrews speaks of the “peaceful fruit of righteousness” (12:11). Paul tells Timothy to “pursue *righteousness* . . . and peace” (2 Tim. 2:22). The unity we strive for in the church is a unity in knowledge and truth and righteousness. We grow up into the one body “joined and held together” as we “attain to the unity of the faith and of *the knowledge of the Son of God*” (Eph. 4:13, 16). “Grace and peace”

<sup>7</sup>He addresses the danger of boasting in leaders (1:10–3:23), the limits of sexual freedom (5:1–8), the extent of true separation (5:9–13), the proper handling of lawsuits (6:1–8), the goodness of sexual relations in marriage (7:1–16), the nature of Christian freedom (8:1–13), the proper demeanor for men and women in worship (11:2–16), how to behave at the Lord’s Supper (11:17–34), the use of spiritual gifts (chaps. 12–14), and the nature and the reality of the resurrection (chap. 15).

are multiplied to us “*in the knowledge of God* and of Jesus our Lord” (2 Pet. 1:2). And paradoxically, the weaponry with which we wage war for “the gospel of peace” begins with “the belt of *truth*” (Eph. 6:14–15) and ends with “the sword of the Spirit,” the *Word of God* (6:17).

## WHY TRUE UNITY FLOWS FROM TRUTH

The reason for this is that truth frees us from the control of Satan, the great deceiver and destroyer of unity: “you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32; cf. 2 Tim. 2:24–26). Truth serves love, the bond of perfection. Paul prays for the Philippians that their “love [may] abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment” (Phil. 1:9). Truth sanctifies, and so yields the righteousness whose fruit is peace: “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:17; cf. 2 Pet. 1:3, 5, 12).

For the sake of unity and peace, therefore, Paul labors to set the churches straight on numerous issues—including quite a few that do not in themselves involve heresy. He does not exclude controversy from his pastoral writing. And he does not limit his engagement in controversy to first-order doctrines, where heresy threatens. He is like a parent to his churches. Parents do not correct and discipline their children only for felonies. Good parents long for their children to grow up into all the kindness and courtesy of mature adulthood. And since the fabric of truth is seamless, Paul knows that letting minor strands continue to unravel can eventually rend the whole garment.

Thus Paul teaches that elders serve the church, on the one hand, by caring for the church without being pugnacious (1 Tim. 3:3, 5), and, on the other hand, by rebuking and correcting false teaching. “He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it” (Titus 1:9; cf. 1:13; 2:15; 1 Tim. 5:20). This is one of the main reasons we have the Scriptures: they are “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16).

## “BY THE OPEN STATEMENT OF THE TRUTH WE COMMEND OURSELVES”

Faithful Christians do not love controversy; they love peace. They love their brothers and sisters who disagree with them. They long for a

common mind for the cause of Christ. But for this very reason they are bound by their conscience and by the Word of God to try to persuade the church concerning the fullness of the truth and beauty of God's word.

We live in a day of politicized discourse that puts no premium on clear assertions. Some use language to conceal where they stand rather than to make clear where they stand. One reason this happens is that clear and open statements usually result in more criticism than ambiguous statements do. Vagueness will win more approval in a hostile atmosphere than forthrightness will.

But we want nothing to do with that attitude. Jesus refused to converse with religious leaders who crafted their answers so as to conceal what they thought (Mark 11:33). Our aim (if not our achievement) is always to be like Paul when he said, "But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God" (2 Cor. 4:2).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>These final paragraphs are based on what I wrote earlier in "Clarity, Charity, and Hope," 404–406.