

The New Perspective on Paul and the Reformation on Justification: Calvin and N. T. Wright

Introduction

Despite the fact that Qohelet tells us that there is nothing new under the sun (Eccl. 1.9), in recent years a school of Pauline interpreters have raised their banner declaring they have a new perspective on Paul. What exactly is the nature of this new perspective? One of the earliest proponents of the new perspective, E. P. Sanders, argues that the historic Protestant interpretation of Paul is incorrect. Paul did not face opposition from pharisaical legalism; rather, the Judaism of Paul's day was a religion of grace, not works. Sanders describes the overall pattern of Judaism in Paul's day as:

(1) God has chosen Israel and (2) given the law. The law implies both (3) God's promise to maintain election and (4) the requirements to obey. (5) God rewards obedience and punishes transgression. (6) The law provides for means of atonement, and atonement results in (7) maintenance or re-establishment of the covenantal relationship. (8) All those who are maintained in the covenant by obedience, atonement and God's mercy belong to the group which will be saved.

Sanders emphasizes the fact that "election and ultimately salvation are considered to be by God's mercy rather than human achievement."¹ It is this description of first century Judaism that Sanders has called *covenantal nomism*. It is this pattern of salvation by grace, argues Sanders, that dominates the Judaism of Paul's day—not rank legalism as is commonly argued. A simple description of Sanders' case is that Jews in Paul's day entered the covenant by God's grace but they maintained their position in covenant by their

¹ E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), p. 422.

obedience.² Sanders' initial work in this area of Pauline scholarship, however, was only an opening volley.

Subsequent to the publication of Sanders' work James D. G. Dunn carried the case for the new perspective several steps further. While Sanders' work focused upon the literature of Second Temple Judaism, Dunn's own work focused on the writings of Paul himself—most notably his epistles to the Romans and Galatians.³ Dunn follows Sanders' trajectory by arguing that when Paul refutes the Judaizers in Galatians he is not writing against crass legalism. Rather, Dunn argues that Paul's "denial that justification is from works of law is, more precisely, a denial that justification depends on circumcision or on observation of the Jewish purity and food taboos. We may justifiably deduce, therefore, that by 'works of law' Paul intended his readers to think of *particular observances of the law like circumcision and the food laws.*"⁴ The problem, then, in the churches of Rome and Galatia, is not one of soteriology but rather of ecclesiology and sociology. The 'works of the law,' argues Dunn, have to do with maintaining Jewish identity and not legalism. Paul's mission in both epistles is to break down the cultural elitism and help the Jews understand that Gentiles are equal partners in God's covenant.⁵ Though this is a brief thumb-nail sketch of the new perspective, this nonetheless gives us a rough frame-

² D. A. Carson, "Introduction," in *Justification and Variegated Nomism: A Fresh Appraisal of Paul and Second Temple Judaism*, eds. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien, and Mark and Seifrid, vol. 1, *The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002), p. 2.

³ James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, Black's New Testament Commentary (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993); idem, *Romans*, Word Biblical Commentary, vols. 38 a & b (Dallas: Word Books, 1988).

⁴ James D. G. Dunn, "The New Perspective on Paul," *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 65 (1983), pp. 95-122; idem, *Jesus, Paul, and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville: Westminster / John Knox, 1990), p. 191.

work out of which we can introduce the writings of one of the most prolific new perspective writers.

In recent years N. T. Wright, Canon Theologian at Westminster Abbey, has written numerous works from the new perspective. His works have echoed the same charge as Sanders and Dunn, namely the Protestant reading of Paul has been influenced by alien theological issues. Along similar lines to Sanders and Dunn, Wright argues:

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. Most Protestant exegetes had read Paul and Judaism as if Judaism was a form of the old heresy Pelagianism, according to which humans must pull themselves up by their moral bootstraps and thereby earn justification, righteousness, and salvation. No, said Sanders. Keeping the law within Judaism always functioned within a covenantal scheme. God took the initiative, when he made a covenant with Judaism; God's grace thus precedes everything that people (specifically, Jews) do in response. 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.⁶

One can easily see the approbation of the general theses of the new perspective in Wright's statement. Elsewhere, in commenting about the significance of the ministry of Christ, Wright contends that traditional interpretations miss the mark. Wright states:

Those who heeded Jesus' call to audition for the kingdom-play that God was staging through him found themselves facing a challenge. Christians from quite early in the church's life have allowed themselves to see this challenge as a new rule book, as though his intention was simply to offer a new code of morality. This has become problematic within the Reformation in particular, where people have been sensitive about the danger of putting one's human 'good works' logically prior to the faith by which one is justified. But that was not the point.⁷

⁵ Carson, "Introduction," p. 4.

⁶ N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 19; also see idem, *The Climax of the Covenant* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), p. 173; and idem, *Who Was Jesus?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), p. 59.

⁷ N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1999), p. 45; also see idem, *Covenant*, pp. 17, 122.

Now, this is not to say that Wright agrees with Sanders and Dunn on every point; the overall agreement on the major premises, however, is evident.

These accusations and affirmations obviously raise several questions. Is the Reformation reading of Paul colored by the ancient Pelagian controversy? Have Protestant exegetes since the Reformation misunderstood first century Judaism and what Paul means by ‘works of the law’? What does this mean for the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone? In an effort to answer these questions, we will first survey N. T. Wright’s views on Paul’s doctrine of justification. Second, we will then compare and contrast them with the views of John Calvin, one of the chief second-generation reformers. By this comparison, we will be able to evaluate whether the claims of the new perspective, at least as they come from the pen of N. T. Wright, are valid. Lastly, we will conclude with some general observations about the new perspective on Paul and its growing influence in the Reformed community.

N. T. Wright on Justification

The righteousness of God

When we come to the new perspective from the pen of N. T. Wright, one does not find himself on familiar terrain. This is due to the fact that Wright does not take anything for granted in his formulation of justification. He writes that the “popular view of ‘justification by faith’, though not entirely misleading, does not do justice to the richness and precision of Paul’s doctrine, and indeed distorts it at various points.”⁸ We can begin the survey of Wright’s understanding of justification by an examination of his concept of the

⁸ Wright, *Paul*, p. 113.

righteousness of God. When one reads the phrase the ‘righteousness of God’ (δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ, *dikaiosune theou*) Wright argues that it must be read as a subjective or possessive genitive.⁹ In other words, the righteousness of God is not something that He imputes to the Christian believer but rather it is a quality that belongs to God. In Wright’s analysis of Romans 3, he argues:

God is himself righteous, as the covenant God who has made promises and kept them. In terms of the law-court metaphor, he has been true to his word, he has been impartial (note the way in which Paul goes on at once to speak of God’s even-handed dealing with Jew and Gentile alike), and he has dealt with sin. He has also thereby vindicated the helpless: he is the ‘justifier of the one who has faith.’ This theme of God’s own righteousness, understood as his covenant faithfulness, and seen in terms of the law-court metaphor, is the key to this vital passage.”¹⁰

Now, this understanding of the righteousness of God is significant to Wright’s concept of justification.

Justification

When we come to the doctrine of justification Wright contends that it is not the central theme of Paul’s epistle to the Romans. He believes that “this way of reading Romans has systematically done violence to the text for hundreds of years, and that it is time for the text to be heard again.”¹¹ Wright contends that the idea of justification must not be read in the light of the Augustine-Pelagius debate but instead in the context of first-

⁹ Wright, *Paul*, p. 101; also see idem, *Covenant*, p. 216.

¹⁰ Wright, *Paul*, p. 105.

¹¹ Wright, *Paul*, p. 117.

century Judaism.¹² It is this first-century context, after all, out of which the apostle writes. Wright argues that 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. In Sanders' terms, it 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.¹³

This, of course, means that justification is not, according to Wright, about imputing the righteousness of God, or more specifically Jesus Christ, to the individual believer. In fact, with allusions to the Reformed tradition, Wright essentially rejects the concept of imputed righteousness. Wright states that "if we leave the notion of 'righteousness as a law-court metaphor only, as so many have done in the past, this gives the impression of a legal transaction, a cold piece of business, almost a trick of thought performed by a God who is logical and correct but hardly one we would want to worship."¹⁴

Rather than imputation, justification is about the righteousness of God, or His covenant faithfulness, to vindicate and mark those people who belong to Him. Along these lines Wright contends:

But supposing, says Paul in [Romans] 2.25-29—supposing there exist some true Jews, in whom the new covenant has been inaugurated? Supposing there are some in whom the new covenant promises of Jeremiah and Ezekiel are coming true? Whether they are racially Jews or not, whether they are circumcised or not, they will be regarded by God as his true covenant people. This is the doctrine of justification, or rather its first key move: there will come a time, a great day, on which God will vindicate his true people.¹⁵

¹² Wright repeats this charge multiple times, see *Paul*, pp. 19, 32, 35, 116, 120, 124, 129.

¹³ Wright, *Paul*, p. 119.

¹⁴ Wright, *Paul*, p. 110.

¹⁵ Wright, *Paul*, p. 127.

Again, along similar lines, Wright contends that “‘justification’, as seen in [Romans] 3.24-26, means that those who believe in Jesus Christ are declared to be members of the true covenant family; which of course means that their sins are forgiven, since that was the purpose of the covenant.” He goes on to conclude that “the gospel—not ‘justification by faith’, but the message about Jesus—thus reveals the righteousness, that is, the covenant faithfulness, of God.”¹⁶ This, as one can see, is very different from the traditional Reformation reading of Paul on the subject of justification. Wright is clear to point out his disapprobation for the traditional reading at various points, especially as justification relates to the works of the law and the debate between Roman Catholicism and the reformers.

The works of the law

Though not in every detail, Wright follows Dunn in his analysis regarding the meaning of the phrase, ‘the works of the law.’ Wright does not believe that Paul refers to crass legalism but instead to the cultural markers of the Jews—circumcision and Sabbath observance. In Wright’s examination of the *sitz in leben* in Galatia, he writes that the problem Paul addresses is whether

his ex-pagan converts be circumcised or not? Now this question is by no means obviously to do with the questions faced by Augustine and Pelagius, or by Luther and Erasmus. On anyone’s reading, but especially within its first-century context, it has to do quite obviously with the question of how you *define the people of God*: are they to be defined by the badges of Jewish race, or in some other way? Circumcision is not a ‘moral’ issue; it does not have to do with moral effort, or earning salvation by good deeds. Nor can we simply treat it as a religious ritual, then designate all religious ritual as crypto-Pelagian good works, and so smuggle Pelagius into Galatia as the arch-opponent after all.¹⁷

¹⁶ Wright, *Paul*, p. 129; see also *idem*, *Covenant*, pp. 148, 214.

Wright's contention parallels Dunn's belief that the works of the law were not the attempt of the Jewish people with whom Paul dealt to earn their salvation. Once again, Wright's analysis is replete with the allegation that Protestant exegetes have imported the Augustine-Pelagius debate into Paul's writings. Moreover, by contaminating Paul with these alien issues, argues Wright, both Protestants and Catholics have used the doctrine of justification as a weapon of polemics rather than ecumenism. Wright states that

Galatians 2 offers the first great exposition of justification in Paul. In that chapter, the nub of the issue was the question, who are Christians allowed to sit down and eat with? For Paul, that was the question of whether Jewish Christians were allowed to eat with Gentile Christians. Many Christians, both in the Reformation and the counter-Reformation traditions, have done themselves and the church a great disservice by treating the doctrine of 'justification' as central to their debates, and by supposing that it described the system by which people attained salvation. They have turned the doctrine into its opposite. Justification declares that all who believe in Jesus Christ belong at the same table, no matter what their cultural or racial differences (and, let's face it, a good many denominational distinctions, and indeed distinctions within a single denomination, boil down more to culture than to doctrine. Because what matters is believing in Jesus, detailed agreement on justification itself, properly conceived, isn't the thing which should determine eucharistic fellowship.¹⁸

So, then, let us move to summarize Wright's views on justification.

Summary

The Reformation reading of Paul has essentially missed the proverbial boat, according to Wright. Protestant exegetes going back to the Reformation have imported the Augustine-Pelagius debate into the *sitz in leben* in Galatia and Rome. Rather than expounding works righteousness vs. faith in Christ, Paul sets forth the doctrine of justification which demonstrates the righteousness, or covenant faithfulness of God, and the iden-

¹⁷ Wright, *Paul*, pp. 120-21; see also idem, *Covenant*, p. 240.

¹⁸ Wright, *Paul*, pp. 158-59.

tity of His covenant people. Now, let us proceed to the next stage of our investigation and survey the writings of John Calvin on the doctrine of justification.

Calvin on Justification

The righteousness of God

To see a good comparison between N. T. Wright and Calvin let us proceed to examine Calvin's doctrine of justification along the same issues that we examined Wright's understanding.¹⁹ This examination will facilitate the task of comparison and contrast between the two theologians. Let us therefore turn our attention, first, to Calvin's understanding of the phrase, the righteousness of God. In Calvin's treatment of Romans 1.17 where we find this well-known phrase he writes:

By the *righteousness of God* I understand that which is approved at His tribunal, as on the other hand that which is reckoned and counted as righteousness in the opinion of men, even though it is a mere triviality, is generally referred to as the 'righteousness of men'. Paul, however, is without doubt alluding to the many prophecies in which the Spirit is throughout setting forth the righteousness of God in the future kingdom of Christ. Some commentators explain the meaning to be 'what is given to us by God'. I certainly grant that the words will bear this meaning, because God justifies us by His Gospel, and thus saves us. And yet the former sense seems to me more suitable, although I would not spend much time on the question. It is of more importance that some scholars think that this *righteousness* consists not only in the free remission of sins, but in part also the grace of regeneration. I hold, however, that we are restored to life because God freely reconciles us to Himself, as we shall later show at greater length in the proper place.²⁰

Now, it is important that we note not only what Calvin says about this important phrase but also the contrast with Wright's own analysis. Unlike Wright, who reads the 'right-

¹⁹ For a general survey of Calvin's doctrine of justification as it specifically relates to faith, see Barbara Pitkin, *What Pure Eyes Could See: Calvin's Doctrine of Faith in Its Exegetical Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 41-69.

eousness of God' as a subjective or possessive genitive, i.e. a quality that belongs to God, Calvin reads it as either an objective or genitive of origin. In other words, the righteousness of God is something that is given to man. Calvin notes that the righteousness of God brings the remission of sins and the grace of regeneration. This, just as with Wright, has important implications for Calvin's understanding of justification.

When Calvin defines justification he writes that it is "the acceptance with which God receives us into his favor as righteous men. And we say that it consists in the remission of sins and the imputation of Christ's righteousness."²¹ We see in Calvin's definition of justification the repeated theme of the remission of sins. We also see that when Calvin explained that the righteousness of God brings the grace of regeneration that he specifies the means of obtaining that grace—namely, imputation. The idea of imputation is a concept that Wright rejects. In contradistinction to Wright, Calvin argues that

if God does not justify us by acquittal and pardon, what does Paul's statement mean: 'God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, not imputing men's trespasses against them'? 'For our sake he made him to be sin who had done no sin so that we might be the righteousness of God in him.' First, I conclude that they are accounted righteous who are reconciled to God. Included is the means: that God justifies by pardoning, just as in another passage justification is contrasted with accusation. This antithesis clearly shows that the expression was taken from legal usage. Anyone moderately versed in the Hebrew language, provided he has a sober brain, is not ignorant of the fact that the phrase arose from this source, and drew from it its tendency and implication. Where Paul says that righteousness without works is described by David in these words, 'Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven.'²²

²⁰ John Calvin, *Romans and Thessalonians*, trans. Ross Mackenzie, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, vol. 8, eds., David W. Torrance and T. F. Torrance (1960; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 28.

²¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill, *The Library of Christian Classics*, vols. 20-21, ed. John Baillie, et al. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 3.11.2, p. 727.

²² Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.11, pp. 738-39.

Once again we should notice the distinctions between Wright and Calvin. For Wright, God does make a forensic declaration in justification—namely, God eschatologically defines who belongs to His covenant people. Wright says that this includes the forgiveness of sins, but he does not specify the way in which this is accomplished. By contrast, Calvin argues that justification is a forensic declaration where God declares a sinner pure and righteous. He bases his argument on 2 Corinthians 5.19-21 and the parallel that exists between the declaration of a guilty or innocent verdict in a court room. The contrast between Calvin and Wright is evident. This leaves one other issue to be explored. Namely, what understanding does Calvin give to the phrase ‘the works of the law.’

The works of the law

In Calvin’s treatment of Romans 3.27-28 he excludes the possibility that man can in anyway earn or merit salvation. In contrast to Wright, yes, Calvin does invoke a debate that was current in his day—the debate over *condign* and *congruent merit*. This is, of course, a distinction that Calvin rejects. He only briefly mentions this issue and then moves forward in his analysis. Calvin writes that

if the law delivers us all over to death, what glory shall we get out of it? Does it not rather deprive us of all glorying, and cover us with shame? He showed then that our sin is laid open by the judgment of the law, because we have all ceased to observe it. He means here that if righteousness consisted in the law of works, our boasting would not be excluded; but since it is by faith alone, there is nothing that we can claim for ourselves, for faith receive all from God, and brings nothing except a humble confession of want. This contrast between faith and works should be carefully noticed, for works are mentioned here universally without any addition. He is therefore speaking not of ceremonial observances alone, nor specifically of external works, but includes all the merits of works which can possibly be imagined.²³

²³ Calvin, *Romans*, pp. 78-79.

Now, the contrast between Wright and Calvin on this point is again evident. Wright believes that the works of the law refer to those cultural boundary markers such as circumcision and Sabbath observance whereas Calvin believes that it is a general reference to human effort. Now that we have set forth both Calvin and Wright on these points, while noting the contrasts between the two positions, we can analyze the differences and determine whether there is any weight to Wright's claims regarding the Reformation reading of Paul.

Analysis of Wright's Claims

Even to the untrained eye, one can notice that there is a great degree of divergence between Wright and Calvin on the doctrine of justification. Moreover, the fact that Calvin does mention the debate with Catholicism over *condign* and *congruent merit* appears to lend some credence to Wright's claim that the reformers, at least Calvin, imported foreign ideas into their exegesis of Paul. Rather than exegete Paul with the first-century context in mind they had their own sixteenth-century issues by way of the Augustine-Pelagius debate informing their exegesis. A careful analysis of Wright's claims as well as delving more deeply into Calvin's treatment of Paul, however, will reveal that Wright's critique is incorrect. Moreover, it will reveal the shortcomings of Wright's own interpretation of Paul on justification. We will begin the analysis of Wright's claims with some general observations and then delve into the specifics of Calvin's exegesis of Paul.

Deficiencies in Wright's methodology

When we survey Wright's critical statements of the Reformation interpretation of Paul there is a striking absence of any reference to primary sources. For example, in his

What Saint Paul Really Said, we find Wright approvingly cite Alister McGrath in his survey of the doctrine of justification: McGrath writes:

The doctrine of justification has come to develop a meaning quite independent of its biblical origins, and concerns the means by which man's relationship to God is established. The church has chosen to subsume its discussion of the reconciliation of man to God under the aegis of justification, thereby giving the concept an emphasis quite absent from the New Testament. The 'doctrine of justification' has come to bear a meaning within dogmatic theology which is quite independent of its Pauline origins.²⁴

Whether McGrath is correct is beside the point; he has based his statement upon primary source evidence, whereas Wright has not. Wright does not cite any primary source material to demonstrate where the traditional exegesis of Paul is wrong or where the reformers have eisegeted the Augustine-Pelagius debate into the text.²⁵ This is not uncommon among advocates of the new perspective. In Dunn's critique of Martin Luther, for example, he does not cite primary sources to substantiate the claim that Luther eisegeted his own conversion anxieties into his interpretation of Romans 7. To substantiate this charge, Dunn cites Roland Bainton's biography of Luther, not Luther's writings directly.²⁶ This, to say the least, is defective methodology. To disagree with a position is

²⁴ Wright, *Paul*, p. 115. Cf. Alister McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian doctrine of Justification*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 2.

²⁵ See, e.g., one of Wright's most academic works, which we might think would be the most annotated (N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996], pp. 14, 123-24, 280, and 380). In these places he invokes the names of Luther, Calvin, Melancthon, and "the reformers" but has only one primary source reference to Melancthon's *Loci Communes*. In one reference to Luther he only cites a secondary source, Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press, 1986).

²⁶ Carl R. Trueman, "The Portrait of Martin Luther in Contemporary New Testament Scholarship: Some Casual Observations," Lecture delivered at Tyndale Fellowship in Christian Doctrine, 2001; cf. James D. G. Dunn and Alan M. Suggate, *The Justice of God: A Fresh Look at the Old Doctrine of Justification by Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 6; Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1950). The same criticism can be said about Sanders' own knowledge of his-

certainly within the realm of responsible scholarship, but to critique apart from evidence is unacceptable. Because Wright does not examine primary sources and their historical setting, his claims of distortion lack cogency; they are suspended in mid-air apart from any factual foundation. Let us turn to the historical context of Calvin's exegetical work on Romans, for example, so that we may see that he was not simply eisegeting Scripture.

When we survey the sixteenth-century milieu in which Calvin wrote his commentary on Romans, there are many factors to consider that mitigate Wright's claims. David Steinmetz notes that in the sixteenth century there were over seventy Lutheran, Reformed, Catholic, and Radical theologians who published commentaries on Romans. In addition to this, there were partial or complete commentaries by Patristic authors from Origen to Ambrosiaster as well as a handful of medieval works. While Calvin did not consult all of the available commentaries on Romans, his work certainly reflects interaction with this body of literature.²⁷ For example, Calvin mentions Phinehas (Rom. 4.6) and the Virgin Mary (Rom. 4.20) in his analysis of Abraham in Romans 4 because he is repeating "exegetical traditions of which he is not the author and which he shares with interpreters who represent in all other respects fiercely competing confessional loyalties. Paul himself mentions neither Phinehas nor the Virgin Mary."²⁸ In other words, Calvin was participating in an exegetical discussion that went back some fifteen-hundred years to exegetes that ante-dated the famous theological debate between Augustine and Pel-

torical theology (see Moisés Silva, "The Law and Christianity: Dunn's New Synthesis," *Westminster Theological Journal* 53/2 (1991), p. 348.

²⁷ David Steinmetz, "Calvin and Abraham: The Interpretation of Romans 4 in the Sixteenth Century," *Church History* 57 (1988), pp. 443-55; also in idem, *Calvin in Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 65.

²⁸ Steinmetz, "Calvin and Abraham," p. 66; cf. Calvin, *Romans*, pp. 86, 98.

gaius. Calvin was not simply eisegeting the Augustine-Pelagius debate into Paul. This is not the only historical-contextual issue that Wright fails to factor in his analysis.

The advocates of the new perspective make a large part of their case on the literature of first-century Judaism. With the documents of first-century Judaism illuminating the nature of the theological milieu, new perspective advocates argue that this literature reveals a totally different picture than is traditionally held. The Jews of Paul's day were not crass legalists but were advocates of grace; they were simply out to protect their cultural identity. Sanders, for example, surveys the Tannaitic literature, the Dead Sea Scrolls, Apocrypha, and Pseudepigrapha to reach his conclusions—conclusions with which Wright generally agrees.²⁹ Yes, it is true that the reformers, Calvin included, did not survey this vast body of literature; indeed, they could not have explored some of the literature seeing that the Dead Sea Scrolls would not be discovered for hundreds of years. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the reformers were nescient of the rhythms of first-century Judaism. The advocates of the new perspective do not take into consideration that the reformers were familiar with the writings of the apocrypha—the writings of intertestamental Judaism. For example, Calvin interacted with the apocrypha in response to its use in support of various Roman Catholic doctrines. For example, Calvin writes:

The piety of Judas is praised for no other distinction than that he had a firm hope of the final resurrection. When he sent an offering for the dead to Jerusalem. Nor did the writer of that history set down Judas' act to the price of redemption, but regarded it as done in order that they might share in eternal life with the remaining believers who had died for country and religion. This deed was not without superstition and wrongheaded zeal, but utterly foolish are those who extend the sacrifice of the law even down to us, when we know that by the advent of Christ what was then in use ceased.³⁰

²⁹ Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, *passim*; Wright, *Paul*, pp. 18-20.

Calvin recognizes that first century Judaism, at least as it comes through the apocrypha, contained superstitious practices. Yet, regarding the following words from the apocrypha, “For it is not because of any righteous deeds of our ancestors or our kings that we bring before you our prayer for mercy, O Lord our God” (Bar. 2.18; NRSV), Calvin can write that they are “very true and holy words.”³¹ Calvin, therefore, recognized, at least implicitly, that there were strands of orthodox theology in first century Judaism, what the new perspective advocates would perhaps call ‘proponents of grace.’ Yet, these strands were not the only ones with which Calvin was familiar. He was also familiar with those strands that were, dare one say, ‘Pelagian,’ in nature.

We read the following in from the apocrypha: “If you choose, you can keep the commandments, and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice. He has placed before you fire and water; stretch out your hand for whichever you choose. Before each person are life and death, and whichever one chooses will be given” (Sir. 15.14-17, NRSV; Vg. 14-18). To this passage Calvin responds:

Granted that man received at his creation the capacity to obtain life or death. What if we reply on the other side that he has lost this capacity? Surely it is not my intention to contradict Solomon who declares ‘that God made man upright, but he has sought out many devices for himself.’ But because man, in his degeneration, caused the shipwreck both of himself and of all his possessions, whatever is attributed to the original creation does not necessarily apply forthwith to his corrupt and degenerate nature. Therefore I am answering not only my opponents but also Ecclesiasticus himself, whoever he may be: If you wish to teach man to seek in himself the capacity to acquire salvation, we do not esteem your authority so highly that it may in the slightest degree raise any prejudice against the undoubted Word of God.³²

³⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.5.8, p. 679.

³¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.20.8, p. 860.

Calvin rejects this passage from the apocrypha not only because Ecclesiasticus, or Sirach, is not canonical but also because it contradicts the witness of Scripture, such as Romans 3. What is interesting is that this passage from the apocrypha goes untreated by the advocates of the new perspective, yet it does not pass by the attention of either Pelgairus or Erasmus.³³ So, while sixteenth-century exegetes were not as knowledgeable of first century Jewish literature, they were not totally unaware of its rhythms. On the contrary, because of the different theories of canon between the Roman Catholic Church and the Reformation, sixteenth-century theological debate had a taproot straight into the literature of first century Judaism, namely the apocrypha. Now that we have covered these general historical-contextual issues, we can turn our attention to specific exegetical and theological matters.

Specific Exegetical Observations

In our previous exposition of the views of Wright and Calvin, we were able to detect some differences between the two theologians. We brought out three major areas of comparison to give us a framework in which to work: (1) the interpretation of the phrase

³² Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.5.18, p. 338. In addition to contradicting Scripture, Sirach contradicts itself; cf. Sir. 33.12 (Donald E. Gowan, "Wisdom," in *Justification and Variegated Nomism: A Fresh Appraisal of Paul and Second Temple Judaism*, eds. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien, and Mark and Seifrid, vol. 1, *The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002), p. 216.

³³ Neither Sanders, Dunn, or Wright treat this passage. Nor does Sanders treat this passage in his follow-up work, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1983). See Pelagius, *Pelagius's Commentary on St Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Theodore de Bruyn (1993; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 126; and Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1957), pp. 143ff. This is not the only example of lacunae in the new perspective treatment of the apocrypha. For example, regarding Sirach 3.2, "Those who honor their father atone for sins," Sanders, Dunn, and Wright are silent. Cf. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, p. 338; Silva, "The Law and Christianity," p. 348. It is important to note, though, that new perspective theologians would reject appeals to the Mishnah and Talmud as evidence of legalism in first-century Judaism. They argue that these documents are well after the first century and do not accurately represent first century thought (Wright, *Who Was Jesus?*, p. 55).

‘the righteousness of God;’ (2) the nature of justification; and (3) and the meaning of the phrase ‘the works of the law.’ Now, while we do not want to enter a full-fledged dissection and refutation of each issue, as others have done this elsewhere, we can make some observations about Calvin’s exegetical method in contrast to that of Wright.³⁴

Regarding the issue of the phrase ‘the righteousness of God,’ we must ask whether Paul means to convey a moral quality that God possesses, i.e., Wright’s covenant faithfulness of God, or whether it is something that God imparts to His people, i.e. Calvin’s forensic righteousness. This phrase, of course, is found in Romans 1.17 and is one of the most debated phrases in New Testament exegesis.³⁵ While we can not enter into a detailed exegesis of this phrase we should note that Calvin echoes Paul where Wright is silent. Wright conveys that the ‘righteousness of God’ is exclusively a category that belongs to God. Calvin, on the other hand, notes that it is not only a category that belongs to God but that it is also something that God communicates to the believer. Note Calvin’s comments on Romans 3.26:

This is a definition of that righteousness which he said had been revealed when Christ was given, and which, as he has taught us in the first chapter, is made known in the Gospel. He affirms that it consists of two parts. The first is that God is just, not indeed as one among many, but as one who contains in Himself alone all the fullness of righteousness. He receives the full and complete praise which is His due only as He alone obtains the name and honor of being just, while the whole human race is condemned of unrighteousness. The other part refers to the communication of righteousness, for God does not by any means shut His riches within Himself, but pours them forth upon mankind. The righteousness of

³⁴ See Richard B. Gaffin, “Paul the Theologian,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 62/1 (2000), pp. 121-41; Thomas R. Schreiner, *The Law and Its Fulfillment: A Pauline Theology of Law* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993); Peter Stuhlmacher, *Revisiting Paul’s Doctrine of Justification: A Challenge to the New Perspective* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 2001); Stephen Westerholm, *Israel’s Law and the Church’s Faith* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1998).

³⁵ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), p. 63.

God, therefore, shines in us in so far as He justifies us by faith in Christ, for Christ was given in vain for our righteousness, if there were no enjoyment of Him by faith. It follows from this that in themselves all men are unrighteous and lost, until a remedy from heaven was offered to them.³⁶

So, then, to argue that the phrase ‘the righteousness of God’ is exclusively a moral quality of God, i.e. His covenant faithfulness, does not take into account Paul’s statement that with the righteousness of God (δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ, *dikaiousune theou*) He is not only the just and the justifier (δίκαιον καὶ δικαιοῦντα, *dikaion kai dikaiounta*) but that this righteousness is communicated through faith. This brings us, however, to the second issue between Calvin and Wright, namely the nature of justification.

It is important that we note that Wright would agree that Romans 3.26 does state that God is both the just and the justifier. Where Calvin and Wright, however, would disagree is on the nature of the justification in relation to the believer. We have already seen that Wright believes that justification is God’s declaration that a person is part of His covenant people and that this is primarily tied in with the ultimate eschatological vindication of the people of God at the consummation of the age. Calvin, on the other hand believes that justification is the actual imputation of the righteousness of Christ to the believer through faith. In the cursory exposition of the views of both theologians several factors emerge that demand our attention—namely the greater doctrinal issues that are connected with justification. It was B. B. Warfield who observed that the doctrines of the Bible are part of an organic whole; yes, they can be discussed individually but ultimately they can not be divorced from one another.³⁷ This is something that is a marked contrast

³⁶ Calvin, *Romans*, pp. 77-78.

between the positions of Wright and Calvin. For example, let us compare their respective definitions of justification; first, Wright defines justification in the following manner:

“‘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.”³⁸ Calvin, on the other hand, defines it as

“the acceptance with which God receives us into his favor as righteous men. And we say that it consists in the remission of sins and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness.”³⁹

The divergence between the two men is evident. Wright’s definition speaks of identity—who belongs to the covenant—or in other words, Wright speaks from ecclesiology. Calvin, on the other hand, speaks about sin, the need for righteousness—or in other words, Calvin speaks from soteriology. What makes the critical difference between the two is that Wright virtually by-passes all discussions that pertain to soteriology effectively divorcing it from other doctrinal considerations. Calvin, on the other hand, makes the connection between soteriology and ecclesiology knowing that the two are interconnected. We can see this point by several examples from each writer.

For example, when it comes to the ministry of Christ, argues Wright, Jesus did not come to deal primarily with issues of soteriology. Rather, Christ presents ecclesiological and eschatological issues—namely, how to bring about the final vindication of God’s covenant people. Wright contends that Christ’s “first aim, therefore, was to summon Israel to ‘repent’—not so much of petty individual sins, but of the great national re-

³⁷ B. B. Warfield, “The Task and Method of Systematic Theology,” in *The Works of B. B. Warfield*, vol. 9, eds. Ethelbert D. Warfield, et al. (1932; Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1981), pp. 94-95.

³⁸ Wright, *Paul*, p. 119.

bellion, against the creator, the covenant God.”⁴⁰ According to Wright, first century Judaism offered three main options for bringing about the ultimate justification, or vindication and victory, of the people of God: (1) the separatism of the Qumran community, (2) political compromise like Herod’s with Roman, and (3) the militaristic approach of the zealots.⁴¹ These options were all specious interpretations of bringing about the promised kingdom of God’s covenant. Wright argues that

what mattered, then, was not religion but eschatology, not morality but the coming of the kingdom. And the coming of the kingdom, as Jesus announced it, put before his contemporaries a challenge, an agenda: give up your interpretation of your tradition, which is driving you toward ruin. Embrace instead a very different interpretation of the tradition, one which, though it looks like the way of loss, is in fact the way to true victory. It was a challenge, I suggest, which when backed up by symbolic actions generated the heated exchanges between Jesus and the Pharisees and resulted in plots against Jesus’ life.⁴²

Wright continues to elaborate the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees and argues that the disagreement

came about not because he was an antinomian or because he believed in justification by faith while they believed in justification by works but because *his kingdom-agenda for Israel demanded that Israel leave off her frantic paranoid self-defense, reinforced as it now was by the ancestral codes, and embrace instead the vocation to be the light of the world, the salt of the earth.*⁴³

Now, notice how Wright by-passes discussion of sin and soteriology and makes reference only to ecclesiology and eschatology. Repentance simply constitutes abandonment of misinterpretation of the tradition as it relates to covenant and eschatology. Absent are the

³⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.9.2, p. 727.

⁴⁰ Wright, *Who Was Jesus?*, p. 101.

⁴¹ Wright, *Challenge of Jesus*, p. 37.

⁴² Wright, *Challenge of Jesus*, p. 58.

⁴³ Wright, *Challenge of Jesus*, p. 58.

concepts of personal morality, sin, and soteriology, which are inextricably linked with justification, ecclesiology, and eschatology.

When we turn to Calvin, on the other hand, we see a full-orbed and organic treatment of justification in contrast to Wright's analysis. For example, Calvin argues that justification is intermeshed with a host of other doctrines. He writes that "Christ justifies no one whom he does not at the same time sanctify. These benefits are joined together by an everlasting and indissoluble bond, so that those whom he illumines by his wisdom, he redeems; those whom he redeems, he justifies; those whom he justifies, he sanctifies."⁴⁴

Along similar lines Calvin lays out the order of justification when he says that God first

deigns to embrace the sinner with his pure and freely given goodness, finding nothing in him except his miserable condition to prompt Him to mercy, since he sees man utterly void and bare of good works; and so he seeks in himself the reason to benefit man. Then God touches the sinner with a sense of his goodness in order that he, despairing of his own works, may ground the whole of his salvation in God's mercy. This is the experience of faith through which the sinner comes into possession of his salvation when from the teaching of the gospel he acknowledges that he has been reconciled to God: that with Christ's righteousness interceding and forgiveness of sins accomplished he is justified.⁴⁵

It is important that we notice that Calvin's treatment of justification rotates on an entirely different axis than that of Wright. Notice how Calvin connects matters of soteriology, regeneration, faith, guilt, repentance, and sanctification, to justification. Moreover, Calvin emphasizes the individual believer whereas Wright does not. Does Calvin, however, over-emphasize the individual at the expense of the corporate body?

First, Calvin does not emphasize the individual at the expense of the corporate body in his doctrine of justification. As previously stated, Calvin recognizes that doctrine

⁴⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.16.1, p. 798.

as a whole is organic. All one must do is see the connections Calvin makes, for example, with his definition of the invisible church as “all God’s elect,” which are those who receive justification.⁴⁶ This idea can be further illustrated when we recall that far from the radically individualistic age in which we now live, Calvin lived in a time that was marked by corporate solidarity. Corporate solidarity was maintained by creeds, confessions, and catechisms. Calvin, for example, established the practice of requiring all the inhabitants of Geneva to subscribe to a common confession. This was done to maintain the corporate unity of the city.⁴⁷ Calvin’s *Instruction in Faith*, the city’s catechism, for example, states the following regarding baptism: “Baptism . . . is a mark by which we publicly declare that we wish to be numbered among the people of God, to the end that we, together with all believers, may serve and honor, with one same religion, one God.”⁴⁸ Calvin stresses the idea that the individual is baptized into a corporate body. So, we see that Calvin does not miss the importance of the corporate nature of the church and its connection with justification.

Second, is Calvin in error for emphasizing the concept of individual salvation? Wright argues, for example, that Paul’s epistle to the Romans is not “a detached statement of how people get saved, how they enter a relationship with God as individuals, but as an exposition of the covenant purposes of the creator God.”⁴⁹ Yet, Calvin simply ech-

⁴⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.16, p. 746.

⁴⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.2, p. 1013.

⁴⁷ François Wendel, *Calvin: Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, trans. Philip Mairet (1950; Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), p. 51.

⁴⁸ John Calvin, *Instruction in Faith (1537)*, trans. and ed., Paul T. Fuhrmann (1977; Louisville: Westminster / John Knox, 1992), §28, p. 67.

oes one of the major themes in Scripture—how a person has peace with God. For example, Calvin comments on the cry of the Philippian jailer who cried out to Paul and Silas, “What must I do to be saved” (Acts 16.30) that “he was truly humbled to present himself as a pupil to His ministers.”⁵⁰ Here Calvin’s comment is certainly not out of line. The Philippian jailer asked the question of how he, an individual, could be saved. We have to wonder at this point if Wright, and the advocates of the new perspective are attributing a (post)modernist reading of Paul to the Reformation, which is highly anachronistic.⁵¹ Would Calvin, for example, say with Rudolf Bultmann that “man’s death has its cause in the fact that man in his striving to live out of his own resources loses his self,” but on the other hand, “life arises out of surrendering one’s self to God, thereby gaining one’s self”?⁵² It is hard to imagine Calvin affirming a Heideggerian existentialist reading of Paul on justification. With these issues addressed, this leads us to examine the third and final issue, namely the meaning of the phrase ‘the works of the Law.’

As previously noted, Wright and advocates of the new perspective argue that the phrase ‘the works of the Law’ has nothing to do with legalism. Rather, this phrase refers to the Jewish cultural badges or boundary markers, such as circumcision. We must ask whether Calvin has misunderstood this key phrase. The answer to this question is, No. How can we determine that Calvin has not misinterpreted this phrase? The answer comes

⁴⁹ Wright, *Paul*, p. 131.

⁵⁰ John Calvin, *The Acts of the Apostles: Acts 14-28*, trans. John W. Fraser, *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries*, eds. David W. Torrance and T. F. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), p. 86.

⁵¹ Mark A. Seifrid, “The Pauline Gospel in a Postmodern Age,” in *The Challenge of Postmodernity: An Evangelical Engagement*, ed. David S. Dockery (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1995), p. 191.

⁵² Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament: Complete in One Volume*, trans. Kendrick Grobel (New York: Charles Scribners’ Sons, 1951-55), vol. 1, p. 270.

on two fronts. First, ‘works of the law’ (ἔργων νόμου, *ergon nomou*) is not the only phrase juxtaposed with the idea of salvation by grace. For example, in Calvin’s analysis of Romans 9.11 he argues that God does not consider the merit of works because neither Jacob nor Esau had performed any works that God could weigh in the scales. He argues that Paul “sets in opposition to works the purpose of God, which is contained in His own good pleasure alone.” He adds that Jacob was chosen over Esau “before the brothers were born and had done either good or evil.”⁵³ Now it is important that we note that Calvin does not import the Augustine-Pelagius debate here; rather, he simply echoes Paul who defines works as either ‘good or evil.’ This understanding is not the highly nuanced definition that is set forth by Wright. Romans 9.11 is not the only place that Paul sets up the antithesis between works in general and the grace of God.

Commenting on Ephesians 2.8-9 Calvin writes that Paul “embraces the substance of his long argument in the Epistle to the Romans and to the Galatians, that righteousness comes to us from the mercy of God alone, is offered to us in Christ and by the Gospel, and is received by faith alone, without the merit of works.” He goes on to write, in a telling analysis that virtually parallels the new perspective understanding of the term *works*, that the Roman Catholic understanding of the term is defective. Calvin writes that the Roman Catholics, and we might add Wright and those of the new perspective, tell us that Paul

is speaking about ceremonies when he tells us we are justified without works. But it is quite certain that he is not dealing with one sort of works, but rejects the whole righteousness of man, which consists in works—nay, the whole man, and everything that he has of his own. We must observe the contrast between God

⁵³ Calvin, *Romans*, p. 201.

and man, between grace and works. Why should God be contrasted with man, if the controversy only concerned ceremonies?⁵⁴

The new perspective on Paul is not quite so new; advocates such as Wright are not the first exegetes who have tried to narrow the meaning of the phrase ‘the works of the law,’ or in this case the term ‘works,’ to something less than general actions of merit.⁵⁵ Calvin rules out that the term *works* refers only to ceremonies, which would include circumcision. Moreover, it is important that we see that Calvin is using the *analogia Scripturae* to arrive at his conclusions. He argues that Ephesians 2.8-9 is a distillation of what Paul argues throughout Romans and Galatians. Calvin has not, as is commonly charged by Wright, eiseged the Augustine-Pelagius debate into Paul. What is of interesting note, however, is that advocates of the new perspective, including Wright, would not agree with Calvin’s exegesis of this key passage.

Advocates of the new perspective would most likely disagree with Calvin’s conclusions, not because he has misinterpreted the passage, but because they reject the Pauline authorship of Ephesians. Though Wright does not explicitly deny Pauline authorship of Ephesians, he makes no reference to Ephesians 2.8-9. Dunn, for example, does not believe in the Pauline authorship of Ephesians.⁵⁶ For the sake of argument, let

⁵⁴ John Calvin, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, & Colossians*, trans. T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries*, vol. 11, eds. David W. Torrance and T. F. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), pp. 144-45.

⁵⁵ Seifrid remarks that “Sanders’ ‘covenantal nomism’ is at root quite similar to the medieval understanding of *facienti quod in se est Deus non denegat gratiam*, particularly in the *via moderna*” (Seifrid, “Pauline Gospel,” p. 202). Cf. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, pp. 70-91.

⁵⁶ James D. G. Dunn, “Works of the Law and the Curse of the Law (Galatians 3.10-14),” in *New Testament Studies*, 31 (1985), pp. 523-42; idem, *Paul and the Law*, p. 230; idem, *Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 13, n. 13: “There is roughly even split among critical commentators on Colossians and 2 Thessalonians (I regard the latter as written by Paul and the former probably written by Timothy before Paul’s death...), while the majority regard Ephesians and the Pastorals as defi-

us assume that Paul did not write Ephesians. Even so, a thorough examination and exposition of the doctrine of justification should exegete this passage. To ignore this passage and Calvin's exegesis of it, and then accuse the Reformed tradition of eisegesis is once again defective scholarship, to say the least. Now that we have surveyed these critical issues between Calvin and Wright, we may now summarize our results and draw some important conclusions.

Summary and Conclusions

In our comparison and contrast of the analyses of N. T. Wright and Calvin on justification we see great divergence between the two theologians. The new perspective argues that Paul largely deals with matters of ecclesiology and sociology, how Jews and Gentiles can co-exist in the first-century church. Justification is a declaration that God, who is faithful to His covenant promises, which is a display of His righteousness, makes at the consummation of the age to vindicate His people. The Reformation, on the other hand, argues that Paul largely deals with matters of soteriology, which are intermeshed with ecclesiology and eschatology. Consequently, justification is when God declares a person as righteous based upon the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ. If anything, this essay has demonstrated that justification rotates on entirely different axes for Wright and Calvin. "To put it bluntly," writes Trueman,

it seems to me that the current revision of the doctrine of justification as formulated by the advocates of the so-called New Perspective on Paul is nothing less

nately post-Pauline (I side with the majority)." Cf. Silva, "The Law and Christianity," pp. 351-52. For general coverage of the debate over Pauline authorship of Ephesians cf. Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 42 (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), pp. lix-lxiii; and Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 37-45. In addition to issues of canon, Dunn also rejects the doctrine of inerrancy (see Roger Nicole, "The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture: J. D. G. Dunn versus B. B. Warfield," *Churchman* 97/3, 98/1, 98/3 [1983], also in *Standing Forth: Collected Writings of Roger Nicole* [Fearn: Christian Focus, 2002], pp. 159-222).

than a fundamental repudiation not just of that Protestantism which seeks to stand within the creedal and doctrinal trajectories of the Reformation but also of virtually the entire Western tradition on justification from at least as far back as Augustine.⁵⁷

To borrow language from the history of science, the proponents of the new perspective are beckoning us to look through their telescopes to see that the universe does not revolve around soteriology but rather ecclesiology. Are we at a nexus in church history where a Copernican revolution is underway and the advocates of the old perspective on Paul will soon wear the red faces of chagrin because they have refused to peer into the telescope and see the truth? Quiet frankly, the answer to this question is, No. When we actually peer into the telescope of the new perspective we have found that it is not aimed at cosmos but instead a planetarium of their own making. The case for the new perspective sounds quite ominous until we see that it lacks any reference to Reformation primary sources despite their repeated mantra of distortion, and that it is built upon an incomplete canon. So, far from a revolution, the new perspective is simply a small band of peaceful protestors burning effigies of Luther and Calvin. This does not mean, however, that the new perspective on Paul is a harmless theological movement. On the contrary, the new perspective is quite lethal to the church. What makes this school of thought lethal? Is this not overstated rhetoric? Quite simply stated, no, it is not an exaggeration.

What makes the new perspective lethal is that it is presented as a variant of evangelical theology. Yet, the proponents of the new perspective reject the very evangelical understanding of justification that goes as far back as Augustine. Not only do new perspective advocates reject the historic understanding of justification but they also reject the

⁵⁷ Trueman, "Martin Luther," p. 1.

historic evangelical understanding of canon.⁵⁸ Yet, Dunn’s commentary on Romans, for example, is included in the Word Biblical Commentary series that is supposedly “firmly committed to the authority of Scripture as divine revelation.” Rather than a firm commitment to divine revelation, the exegesis of the new perspective reflects the interpretation of mediocrity on many points. Søren Kierkegaard once observed that the “biblical interpretation of mediocrity goes on interpreting and interpreting Christ’s words until it gets out of them its own spiritless meaning—and then, after having removed all difficulties, it is tranquilized, and appeals confidently to Christ’s word!”⁵⁹ The same may be said of appeals to Paul. Wright confidently appeals to Romans and Galatians to make his case, but he conveniently ignores Ephesians. This, however, is not the most menacing threat.

What makes the new perspective most harmful to the church is its use of terminology. Advocates of the new perspective use terms such as Scripture, sin, justification, works, faith, and gospel, but have given them entirely different meanings. J. Gresham Machen’s words, though written some eighty years ago, still apply to this very issue. “A terrible crisis,” writes Machen,

unquestionably has arisen in the Church. In the ministry of evangelical churches are to be found hosts of those who reject the gospel of Christ. By the equivocal

⁵⁸ These are not the only questionable areas in the theology of new perspective advocates. Wright, for example, does not come out and say *he* believes in the virgin birth of Christ but that it is a possibility and that the New Testament authors believed it: “What if we find that, very early within the movement that grew up around [Christ], there arose two independent sources claiming that he had been conceived without a human father? Faced with all of this, a belief in this God, and this Jesus, may compel us to hold open the possibility that this account of his conception might just be true” (Wright, *Who Was Jesus?*, p. 83). He also states, “One of the best possible answers is that [Matthew and Luke] very firmly believed it to be true” (Wright, *Who Was Jesus?*, p. 84).

⁵⁹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Attack Upon ‘Christendom,’* trans. Walter Lowrie (1944; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 57.

use of traditional phrases, by the representation of differences of opinion as though they were only differences about the interpretation of the Bible, entrance into the Church was secured for those who are hostile to the very foundations of the faith.⁶⁰

It is this use of orthodox nomenclature that makes the new perspective seemingly harmless and has some within Reformed circles thinking that Wright is no foe of the Reformation. For example, in a recent review of Wright's book *What Saint Paul Really Said*, George Grant states that Wright "weighs the evidence and finds that only historic biblical orthodoxy has sufficiently answered the thorny questions of the apostle's contribution to the faith.... Mr. Wright pores over the New Testament data with forensic precision to add new weight to a conservative theological interpretation."⁶¹

Similarly, Douglas Wilson writes that "while Wright's emphasis on corporate justification is important and necessary, the way he stresses it is a cause for concern. But in a taped lecture of his, I heard him explicitly say that he was *not* denying the Protestant doctrine of *individual* justification. Given his overall approach, this is consistent."⁶² Yet, one must ask, Does Wright mean justification in the sense of imputed righteousness or as eschatological definition? If it is the former, then he is inconsistent; if it is the latter, then this is precisely the danger of which Machen speaks—orthodox nomenclature that veils liberalism. It appears that it is the latter because Wilson calls Wright "an outstanding exegete," who "does not shy away from showing how the text conflicts with 'standard'

⁶⁰ J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 177.

⁶¹ George Grant, "Books: Revisiting the Apostle," *World Magazine*, 1 Nov 1997.

⁶² Douglas Wilson, "N. T. Wright and All That," *Credenda Agenda* 13/3 (2002), p. 10.

interpretations.”⁶³ The trained theologian or New Testament scholar will readily identify this shift in nomenclature, but the person in the pew who reads Grant’s review or Wilson’s general approbation may not. Likewise, Peter Enns, professor of Old Testament at Westminster Theological Seminary (Philadelphia) recently positively reviewed two volumes of sermons by Wright. Enns writes, “I recommend these volumes without reservation to all who wish to know better the biblical Christ and bring the challenge of this Christ to those around them.”⁶⁴ Yet, if Wright’s views on gospel, sin, justification, and faith stand behind his preaching, then we must wonder if Wright’s Jesus truly is “the biblical Christ.”

The advocates of the new perspective on Paul give us no reason to abandon the old perspective. Their case lacks evidence from primary sources and has fundamental presuppositions that conflict with Scripture itself. Those who drink at the fountain of the new perspective must drink with great discernment because hiding behind orthodox nomenclature lies liberalism, and the heart of liberalism is unbelief. In the end, it looks like Qohelet was right after all—there is nothing new under the sun.

⁶³ Wilson, *loc. cit.*

⁶⁴ Peter Enns, “Book Review of N. T. Wright’s *Crown of Fire and Following Jesus*,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 58/2 (1996), p. 328.