

Faith Pulpit

The “New Perspective” and Justification, Part 1

In the past few years some men have begun rethinking major issues of the Christian faith. Their thoughts and conclusions on a variety of subjects have been commonly called the “New Perspective.” In Part 1 of his article, Dr. Paul Hartog of Faith Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary carefully compares two facets of the “New Perspective” on justification with a Dispensational point of view. He will complete his analysis in the September/October issue of Faith Pulpit.

In his 1982 Manson Memorial Lecture at the University of Manchester, J. D. G. Dunn famously referred to the “New Perspective on Paul.”¹ Within the last quarter century, this “New Perspective” has swept through evangelical institutions and publications. Simplified surveys of the “New Perspective” tend to highlight 1) E. P. Sanders’ interpretations of Second Temple Judaism and “covenantal nomism,”² 2) Dunn’s emphasis upon “the works of the Law” as especially “ethnic boundary markers” between Jews and Gentiles, and 3) N. T. Wright’s exegetical labors.

When one delves more deeply into the field, however, one recognizes that these (and other) “New Perspective” scholars do not agree among themselves, and there are in fact various “New Perspectives.” Wright himself refers to “the complexity of the so-called New Perspective” (245), and he admits his frustration at “the refusal of the traditionalists” to distinguish “the quite separate types” of variations.³ “I say all this,” explains Wright, “to make it clear that there are probably almost as many New Perspective positions as there are writers espousing it. . . . I disagree with most of them” (247).

Sanders, Dunn, and Wright may share familial traits, but they are not identical triplets. In Wright’s opinion, Sanders’ nonlegalistic portrayal of Second Temple Judaism is “more or less established” (247).⁴ Yet Wright insists, “I have never embraced either Sanders’ picture of Paul or the relativistic

agendas that seemed to be driving it” (246). According to Wright, Sanders seems “muddled and imprecise” in his interpretation of Paul, “not least because his proposals lacked the exegetical clarity and rootedness that I regarded and still regard as indispensable” (246).

Wright expresses “both agreement and disagreement” with Dunn as well, resulting in twenty years of “implicit dialogue” with him (246). On the one hand, Wright finds Dunn’s “exposition of justification itself less than satisfying” (246). On the other hand, Wright regards as “exactly right” Dunn’s emphasis upon “works of the Law” as Jewish ethnic badges rather than “the moral works through which one gains merit” (246).⁵ Wright concurs that Paul’s rebuttal of “seeking to establish their own righteousness” refers to boasting in an ethnic status based on the possession of the Torah, rather than the attempt to attain a moral status through performance of the Torah (245). Traditional Dispensationalists and historic Reformed theologians have formed a united front against this changed emphasis, since it seems to crack open the door, ambiguously allowing human works to enter into salvation. “I am aware,” concedes Wright, “that fresh interpretations of Paul, including my own, have caused controversy in evangelical circles, and particularly Reformed circles” (243).

The purpose of this short (and therefore limited) essay is to place “Dispensational” alongside “Reformed” and “New Perspective” theologies in a descriptive fashion. I am using the term “Reformed” for those communions that hold to such standards as the “Three Forms of Unity” (Heidelberg Catechism, Belgic Confession, Canons of Dort) and the Westminster Confession.

Concerning the “New Perspective,” Wright protests that “it would take a whole book” to unpack and sort it out (244), and so this essay will reduce the Herculean task by concentrating on only one author (Wright) as found in only one article (“New Perspectives on Paul”).⁶ Wright’s article condenses matters to five points, which we will discuss according to his arrangement: the gospel, the righteousness of God, the final judgment according to works, the *ordo salutis*, and justification.

The Gospel

According to Wright, the gospel is not “referring to a system of salvation, although certainly the gospel implies and contains this, nor even to the good news that there now is a way of salvation open to all but, rather, to the proclamation that the crucified Jesus of Nazareth has been raised from the dead and thereby demonstrated to be both Israel’s Messiah and the world’s true Lord” (248, 249).

In a nutshell, Wright’s gospel is “Jesus Christ is Lord” (249). In this brief proclamation, Paul not only declared that Israel’s history had come to its climax, but also that Jesus and not Caesar was the Lord of the whole world. Thus “a subversive political dimension” resides in the heart of the gospel proclamation, “not as an add-on to Paul’s theology but as part of the inner meaning of gospel, righteousness, and so on” (249). This political element lies “at the heart” of Wright’s “fresh

perspective on Paul” (249).

According to Wright, when one responds in “believing obedience to the call of the Gospel,” one “believes that Jesus is Lord and that God raised him from the dead” (256, 257, 260, 261, 264). This reduction of the gospel message to “Jesus is the risen Lord” obviously carries ecumenical ramifications (261). Wright explains that his view carries “a powerful incentive to work together across denominational barriers” (261). Wright stresses, echoing 1 Corinthians 12:3, that “No one can say, Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit” (249). For example, according to Wright, “justification by faith tells me that if my Roman [Catholic] neighbor believes that Jesus is Lord and that God raised him from the dead, then he or she is a brother or sister, however much I believe my neighbor muddled, even dangerously so, on other matters” (262). Wright lists some of these other “muddled” doctrines to be purgatory, the papacy, and the role of “saints” (261).

In comparison with Wright’s abbreviation of the gospel to “Jesus is the risen Lord,” one is reminded of Paul’s own delineation of “the gospel” in 1 Corinthians 15:1–11. The gospel certainly does include the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, but it also includes His death “for our sins.” Wright, in principle, would not deny this specific truth of Christ’s death for sins. Notwithstanding, the full unpacking of this short phrase will eventually highlight important theological differences with Rome concerning the gospel itself as well as the Biblical application of the gospel.

The Righteousness of God

Wright insists that “Paul always uses this phrase to denote not the status that God’s people have from God or in God’s presence but the righteousness of God himself” (250). Wright ties this insight into his covenant-structured theology: “This righteousness is a form of justice; God has bound himself to the covenant, or perhaps we should say that God’s covenant is binding upon God, and through this covenant God has promised not only to save Israel but also thereby to renew creation itself” (250). Wright laments how this covenantal nature of “the righteousness of God” as covenant-fidelity has been “screened out” since the Reformation, especially in Lutheran exegesis (251).

Moreover, Wright employs his discussion of “the righteousness of God” in order to question traditional notions of imputed righteousness.⁷ “What God’s righteousness never becomes in the Jewish background that Paul is so richly summing up is an attribute that is passed on to, reckoned to, or imputed to God’s people” (250). According to Wright, God does indeed “reckon righteousness” to those who respond to the gospel with “the obedience of faith . . . but this is not God’s own righteousness or Christ’s own righteousness that is reckoned to God’s redeemed people, but rather the fresh status of covenant member,’ and/or justified sinner” (252, 253). The individual is “vindicated” as a covenant member of God’s people (251).

Various scholars with Wright-like affinities have argued that since Scripture nowhere speaks of Christ's "active obedience" being imputed to believers, therefore the doctrine of imputed righteousness itself has no Biblical warrant. Nevertheless, this logical leap is a non sequitur, since it falsely implies that the only doctrinal form of imputed righteousness is the "imputed active obedience" of Jesus Christ. Wayne Grudem describes the "imputation of Christ's active obedience" in this manner: "Christ had to live a life of perfect obedience to God in order to earn righteousness for us. He had to obey the law for his whole life on our behalf so that the positive merits of his perfect obedience would be counted for us."⁸

A few Westminster divines dissented from the imputation of Christ's "active obedience" in justification, and the wording of the Westminster Confession of Faith remained slightly ambiguous. A significant minority of the German Reformed actually denied the imputation of Christ's "active obedience." While the Second London Baptist Confession of 1689 specifically referred to the imputation of Christ's "active" as well as "passive" obedience ("imputing Christ's active obedience unto the whole law, and passive obedience in his death"), the Baptist New Hampshire Confession did not explicitly use the language of "active obedience" ("his perfect righteousness is freely imputed to us of God"). The "active obedience" does not appear in such dispensational statements as the GARBC articles of faith: "We believe that justification is the judicial act of God whereby He declares the believer righteous upon the basis of the imputed righteousness of Christ."

Many noteworthy Dispensationalists (including Darby, Kelly, Newell, and Lightner) questioned or denied the imputation of Christ's "active obedience" while still retaining a doctrine of "imputed righteousness."⁹ Some New Covenant theologians (who are neither dispensational nor fully covenantal) have also questioned the imputation of Christ's "active obedience" while still retaining His "imputed righteousness," asserting that the former doctrine seems tied systematically to a "Covenant of Works."¹⁰

Dispensationalists readily agree that Christ's sinless life qualified him to be the perfect sacrifice for sins, but they do not necessarily contend that his incarnational Law-keeping is subsequently reckoned to the believer's account. Michael Stallard, a dispensational theologian, explains, "I would disagree with the emphasis on the obedience of Christ, often called the active obedience' of Christ. This is the view that Christ earned righteousness in his incarnational life (ministry life before resurrection) which is then imputed to believers. I see Jesus as demonstrating that he was already righteous. He did not have to earn anything which then was to be imputed to believers."¹¹

Although many Reformed theologians have interpreted Romans 5:10 as referring to Christ's "life" of Law-keeping obedience while on earth, many Dispensationalists have referred this text to Christ's "resurrection life" (cf. Rom. 4:25; 6:5–11). While many Reformed theologians have interpreted the "obedience" of Christ in Romans 5:18 and 19 as His "active obedience" during the whole course of his

life, dispensational theologians have maintained that it refers to Christ's "righteous act" (from the Greek of Romans 5:18), and therefore to His obedience in the act of death (cf. Phil. 2:8; Heb. 10:14). In sum, Dispensationalists historically have often questioned (or even denied) the imputation of Christ's "active obedience" of keeping the Law, while still firmly insisting upon the "imputed righteousness" of Christ.

Works Cited

1. Dunn was not the first to use the phrase. See J. D. G. Dunn, "The New Perspective: Whence, What and Whither?" in *The New Perspective on Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 7 n. 24.
2. Sanders preferred the term "covenantal nomism," insisting that one was graciously brought into the covenant by birth but maintained that status by observing the Law. One kept the law to "stay in" God's people but not to "get in."
3. Paginations refer to the article being reviewed: N. T. Wright, "New Perspectives on Paul," in *Justification in Perspective: Historical Developments and Contemporary Challenges* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 243-264.
4. See, however, "Not the New Perspective," by Francis Watson (a former "New Perspective" advocate), available at <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/divinity/staff/watsonart.shtml> (accessed August 21, 2008).
5. But see Galatians 5:3 and 4 and Romans 3:20 in the context of Romans 3.
6. For bibliographical details, see endnote 3.
7. Wright does add, "What, then, about imputed righteousness? This is fine as it stands; God does indeed reckon righteousness to those who believe. But this is not, for Paul, the righteousness either of God or of Christ except in a very specialized sense" (252).
8. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 570.
9. See <http://www.middletownbiblechurch.org/reformed/vicarlaw.htm> (accessed August 21, 2008); cf. Robert P. Lightner, *Handbook of Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1995), 93, 94.
10. Steve Lehrer and Geoff Volker, "Examining the Imputation of the Active Obedience of Christ: A Study in Calvinistic Sacred Cow-ism," <http://idsaudio.org/ids/pdf/classic/imputation.pdf> (accessed August 21, 2008).
11. Michael Stallard, "Justification by Faith or Justification by Faith Alone," *Conservative Theological Journal* (1999), n. 11. Stallard's article highlights the theological role of propitiation.

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