

Faith Pulpit

The “New Perspective” and Justification, Part 2

In the July/August edition of the Faith Pulpit, Dr. Paul Hartog of Faith Baptist Theological Seminary compared two facets of the “New Perspective” on justification with a Dispensational point of view. He focused on N. T. Wright’s treatment of the gospel and the righteousness of God. (You may access that issue at faith.edu/seminary.) In this issue he analyzes three additional facets of Wright’s “new perspective”—the final judgment according to works, the *ordo salutis*, and justification.

The Final Judgment according to Works

Wright maintains that “Paul, in company with mainstream Second Temple Judaism, affirms that God’s final judgment will be in accordance with the entirety of a life led—in accordance, in other words, with works” (253).¹ Wright’s primary evidence for a general judgment based upon works is found in Romans 2:1-16, although he also argues from Romans 14:10-12, 1 Corinthians 3, and 2 Corinthians 5:10 (253). These “works” that form the basis of final judgment are neither “the unaided works of the self-help moralist” nor “ethnically distinctive Jewish boundary markers (Sabbath, food laws, and circumcision)” (254). Rather, these “works” are “the things that show that one is in Christ; the things that are produced in one’s life as a result of the Spirit’s indwelling and operation” (254). “I am fascinated,” admits Wright, “by the way in which some of those most conscious of their Reformation heritage shy away from Paul’s clear statements about future judgment according to works” (254, 255).

Wright and many of his Reformed opponents adopt a general resurrection followed by a general judgment. If the basis of this final judgment is works, then it follows that believers and unbelievers will be eschatologically distinguished based upon their (faith-inspired) works or lack thereof.² Wright therefore contends that while “initial justification” is based upon faith alone, “final justification” will

be based upon works. Wright's specific words do raise perplexing questions, such as how a death bed convert can be judged "on the basis of the entire life a person has led in the power of the Spirit" (260).³ Many Reformed theologians have critiqued Wright's understanding of a present justification by faith that "gains its meaning" through anticipation of a future judgment based upon works (255).

Dispensationalism, however, has traditionally separated the Judgment Seat of Christ (for Christians) from the Great White Throne Judgment (for unbelievers). Therefore, Dispensationalists may consistently maintain that both of these judgments are based upon works (2 Cor. 5:10 and Rev. 20:12) with the Judgment Seat of Christ leading to rewards (or loss of rewards) and the Great White Throne Judgment leading to the vindication of God's justice and possibly to degrees of final punishment.

At the same time, Dispensationalists deny that the final status of individuals (whether enjoying God's abode or eternal damnation) will be based upon a judgment of works as meted out at a general judgment faced by all believers and unbelievers alike. To put this in visual terms, Dispensationalists do not hold to a Michelangelo-like "Last Judgment" scene at which all believers and unbelievers will be simultaneously ushered to their final destinies.

The Ordo Salutis

Wright recognizes that the debate concerning the ordo salutis (the chronological or logical order of salvation) "played an important role in Protestant discussions of soteriology, and it lies at the heart of today's controversies about justification" (255). Justification, for Wright, is not coterminous with conversion. Wright associates conversion with the Pauline category of the call, as in the "effectual call of the gospel applied by the Spirit to the individual heart and life" (256). Wright notes how this "calling" precedes "justification" in Romans 8:30. From this text, Wright surmises that justification is not "the initial moment of the Christian life" (256).

Wright's conclusion does not necessarily follow, however, since a true Christian is, by definition, a believer, and the effectual call leads to faith but justification itself comes through faith (Rom. 5:1). Therefore, justification can indeed occur at the commencement of the Christian life and yet still proceed from God's "effectual calling."

Reformed theologians have naturally responded to the New Perspective by emphasizing their customary ordo salutis, including regeneration preceding faith. Dispensationalists recognize that they have not necessarily been bound by the Reformed ordo salutis (which became hardened after Calvin's own time), as demonstrated by a lack of Dispensational uniformity concerning the chronological (or logical) relationship between regeneration and faith.⁴

Moreover, the developed Lutheran *ordo salutis* also differs from the Reformed, which belies simplistic generalizations of “the” Reformation soteriology. Wright himself comments on the irony he has found in “specifically Reformed circles” that do not recognize the differences between Lutheran and Reformed soteriologies (263).

In any case, one might insist that God efficaciously draws by means of the Spirit and the Word. In this case, God sovereignly works through his effectual call in which the Holy Spirit uses the general proclamation of the Word—the universal promises of the gospel. Such a stress upon God’s sovereign use of means (both the particularity of the Spirit’s “effectual call” and the universality of the gospel promises) circumvents problematic corollaries of an unmediated regeneration as they sometimes appear in Reformed theologies.⁵ Moreover, this dual emphasis relates the Spirit’s internal, individualized work (effectual call) to the objective, universal gospel provision of Christ *extra nos* (“outside of us”).

Justification

Wright insists that justification does not describe the moment of conversion, but “the verdict that God pronounces consequent upon this event” (258). According to Wright, this declaration is twofold: (a) “that the person’s sins have been forgiven” and (b) “that he or she is part of the single covenant family promised to Abraham” (260; cf. 258). “God’s declaring that sinners are now in a right relation to himself and God’s declaring that believing Jews and believing Gentiles belong in the same family are inextricably bound up with one another” (259).

Wright later insists that justification is not how one “gets in” God’s people, but God’s declaration that someone is in (261). The declaration is thereby subsumed into the identity of God’s true covenant people, so that justification no longer highlights one’s relationship to God primarily but rather one’s relationship to God’s “covenant people.” Based upon present faith, God “declares in advance what God will declare on the last day when he raises that person from the dead: this person is in the right, his or her sins have been forgiven, this person is part of the single, true, worldwide covenant family promised to Abraham” (264).

In Wright’s view, this corporate/ecclesiological aspect has been diminished or overlooked in the Reformation tradition (259). Reformed opponents (as well as Dispensational opponents) have criticized Wright’s de-emphasis upon soteriology for the sake of ecclesiology, and they have maintained that Wright’s definition of justification is deficient.⁶ Since the gospel addresses the bad news of the wrath of God (Rom. 1:16-18), the opposite of justification is condemnation not “lack of covenant membership” (Rom. 5:1; 8:1). But Dispensationalists, unlike Reformed theologians, will also critique Wright’s subsuming of the church into “the single covenant family promised to Abraham, . . .

the true covenant people.”

Dispensationalists have not denied future aspects of salvation (compare future adoption and future redemption as found in Rom. 8:23), but they have tended to emphasize justification by faith as God’s declaration of the believing sinner as righteous upon faith in Christ (Rom. 5:1, 9; 8:1). A secondary result of this “vertical” declaration is the “horizontal” unity of Gentile and Jew in the church (Eph. 2). This unity within the church is indeed a great truth, in fact, a wondrous “mystery” in Ephesians 3. Nevertheless, Dispensationalists will insist upon the newness of this church as the body of Christ (Eph. 2:15), thereby highlighting distinctions between the church and Israel (unlike both Wright and the Reformed).

In an intriguing paragraph, Wright argues that “justification is not Ôhow someone becomes a Christian.’ It is God’s declaration about the person who has just become a Christian. . . . The present declaration consists not so much in words, though words there may be, but in an event, the event in which one dies with the Messiah and rises to new life with him, anticipating the final resurrection. In other words, baptism” (260). Elsewhere, Wright states, “Paul regards it as a fixed point that those who belong to the Messiah by faith and baptism already share his glorious life” (257). Wright muses that “the medieval over-concentration on righteousness . . . caused the Protestant Reformers to push for imputed righteousness to do the job they rightly saw was needed. But in my view, they have thereby distorted what Paul himself was saying” (261). According to Wright, the believer is united to Christ in water baptism (Rom. 6), and by this union “that which imputed righteousness was trying to insist upon” is “fully taken care of” (261).

By contrast, Lewis Sperry Chafer (a famous Dispensational theologian) asserted, “The legal basis for the imputing of God’s righteousness to the believer is . . . being placed in union with Christ through the working of the Holy Spirit,” and it “is applied by the Holy Spirit through His baptism of the believer into Christ.”⁷ Chafer maintained a forensic doctrine of imputed righteousness, which he based upon union with Christ resulting from Spirit baptism (but not water baptism). On the one hand, the particulars of Chafer’s theology are not (nor necessarily should be) binding upon all Dispensationalists.

⁸ On the other hand, due to limited space, I simply refer readers to God’s “justification” of “the ungodly,” the “forgiveness of sins,” and the “reckoning” of “righteousness” in Romans 4 (the example of Abraham).

For his part, Wright reprimands “the knee-jerk Protestant antisacramentalism” that reacts to his emphasis upon water baptism. It is fitting, therefore, to conclude this essay by returning to our original premise. Proponents of the “New Perspective” undeniably and self-confessedly differ among themselves. More specifically, N. T. Wright critiques J. D. G. Dunn’s understanding of justification on two fronts (adding that he could “go on” as well) (246). First, Wright protests that Dunn “never

understands what I take to be Paul’s fundamental covenant theology” (246). Second, Wright complains of Dunn’s “typically Protestant antisacramentalism” (246).

If these proponents of the “New Perspective” on Paul differ between themselves, then it only seems fitting that opponents may differ among themselves as well. In fact, in these two very issues—covenant theology and sacramentalism—a Dispensational critique may naturally differ from a Reformed critique. Above all, Paul’s emphases upon the gospel, the unmerited grace of God, the righteousness of Christ, and the justification of the ungodly by faith apart from works must be gloriously upheld.

Works Cited

1. Paginations throughout this essay come from N. T. Wright, “New Perspectives on Paul,” in *Justification in Perspective: Historical Developments and Contemporary Challenges*, ed. Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 243–264.
2. “Justification at the last will be on the basis of performance, not possession” (N. T. Wright, *The Letter to the Romans* [Nashville: Abingdon, 2002], 440).
3. “Present justification declares, on the basis of faith, what future justification will affirm publicly . . . on the basis of the entire life” (N. T. Wright, *What St. Paul Really Said* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997], 129).
4. See Calvin’s complex explanations in his commentary on John 1:13. Calvin could speak of faith preceding regeneration, while speaking of regeneration as renewal of life (cf. Calvin’s *Institutes* 3.3.1; the *Belgic Confession*, article 24).
5. “We believe that it is the usual mode of God’s working to regenerate little children from their infancy in the church of Christ” (Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* [Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1966], 696). Contrast William Young, “Historic Calvinism and Neo-Calvinism,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 36 (1973/1974): 48-64; 156-173.
6. “It is simply not true,” Wright protests, “that I deny or downplay the place of the individual in favor of a corporate ecclesiology” (257). But critics often cite Wright’s earlier explanation: “In standard Christian theological language, it [Pauline justification] wasn’t so much about soteriology as about ecclesiology; not so much about salvation as about the church” (Wright, *What St. Paul Really Said*, 119).
7. Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 7 (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), 193, 194. Chafer refers readers to 2 Corinthians 5:21 and Philippians 3:9.
8. Internal Reformed debates have centered upon Richard Gaffin and others who maintain that Calvin himself based imputation upon spiritual union with Christ (cf. Calvin’s *Institutes* 3.1.1; 3.11.10; commentary on Romans 3:22).

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