

## Justification, Ecclesiology and the New Perspective<sup>1</sup>

*Tim Chester*

In many quarters the so-called *New Perspective* on Paul has become the accepted norm. This reading of Pauline theology involves a radical reassessment of the Reformed doctrine of justification. The response of proponents of the traditional understanding has often been disappointing as they frequently resort to a simple restatement of the traditional view without directly interacting with the arguments of the New Perspective.

The Reformed doctrine of justification was characterised by the following features:

- Justification is a forensic act in which the image of a law court is central – justification is an act of divine acquittal.
- In justification the alien righteousness of Christ is reckoned or imputed to us. We are counted righteous with a righteousness that comes from outside us – that is from Christ. So justification is not based on having righteousness imparted or infused within us and then living a righteous life.
- Imputation means that justification is by faith alone. Justification does not involve a beginning by faith and then depend on a continuation by faith and works in co-operation.
- We are justified now on the basis of Christ's finished work in anticipation of the divine verdict on the final day. As a result we can have an assured future.

This understanding of justification was founded on Luther's rediscovery of Pauline soteriology so that Paul's thought is at the heart of the Reformed soteriology. But it is this understanding of Paul that has been challenged in recent years by the New Perspective.

### **Krister Stendahl**

In a famous essay entitled 'The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West' (1960, ET 1963), Stendahl argued that Luther's understanding of justification was borne out of his struggle with existential guilt. Luther's view was shaped by his opposition to Medieval Catholicism which he read back into Paul's opposition to first century Judaism, interpreting them as parallel phenomena. Whereas in fact, argued Stendahl, Paul shows little sign of a struggle with existential guilt. He is proud of his past (Phil. 3:6–9). Of Paul's 'conversion' experience, he writes: 'There is not – as we usually think – first a conversion, and then a call to apostleship; there is only the call to the work among the Gentiles'.<sup>2</sup> In other words, Paul did not convert to a new faith – he received a commission to take the gospel beyond the Jewish confines. So the Protestant view of justification is based on an anachronistic misreading of Paul. 'The West for centuries has

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<sup>1</sup> First published as Tim Chester, 'Justification, Ecclesiology and the New Perspective,' *Themelios* 30:2 (Winter 2005), 5–20.

<sup>2</sup> Krister Stendahl, 'The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West', *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays* (Fortress/SCM, 1976/1977), 84–85.

wrongly surmised that the biblical writers were grappling with problems which no doubt are ours, but which never entered their consciousness'.<sup>3</sup>

### **E. P. Sanders**

In 1977 E.P. Sanders published *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (SCM, 1977). It is probably the most influential book on Pauline theology in recent years. The majority of the book is a detailed examination of first century Judaism. The remainder is a reappraisal of Paul in the light of Sanders' findings. Sanders argues that first century Judaism has been grossly misrepresented in Protestant theology. It was not a religion of legalistic works-righteousness, but a religion of grace and forgiveness. Sanders describes it as what he calls 'covenantal nomism' (from *nomos* the Greek word for 'law'). 'Covenantal nomism' is a way of looking at the law which is in contrast to legalism. In 'covenantal nomism' you become part of the covenant by grace and remain part of the covenant by keeping the law or you are identified as a member of the covenant by the law. Even if you break the law you can find forgiveness within the covenant through repentance. It is a gracious system.

Covenantal nomism is the view that one's place in God's plan is established on the basis of the covenant and that the covenant requires as the proper response of man, his obedience to its commandments, while providing means of atonement for transgression ... Obedience maintains one's position in the covenant, but it does not earn God's grace as such ... Righteousness in Judaism is a term which implies the maintenance of status among the group of the elect.<sup>4</sup>

When it comes to Paul, Sanders says that Paul rejected covenantal nomism in favour of what Sanders calls 'participationist eschatology' – we are united with Christ in his death and resurrection and will remain so unless we form another participatory union. The problem with Judaism is that it is unenlightened. Sanders says Paul argued from solution to plight. Paul saw nothing wrong with the works of the law until he realised that salvation was found in Christ. Having found the solution (Christ), Paul realised that the Law could not be crucial to salvation. 'In short, this is what Paul finds wrong with Judaism: it is not Christianity'.<sup>5</sup> In fact, for Sanders, when Paul is seen against the backdrop of first century Judaism he appears somewhat incoherent in his thinking.

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But the important contribution of Sanders is not his work on Paul, but his work on first century Judaism. His view of Judaism has become the accepted view among scholars. I will move on to assessment later. First I want to make two interim points:

- It is true that there is not much evidence of a subjective experience of existential anguish in Paul. It is clear, however, that Paul views guilt as an objective reality leading to judgement and death (Rom. 1–3). The guilt of sin plays a central role in defining the problem for which

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>4</sup> E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (SCM, 1977), 75, 420, 544.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 552.

Christ (and the justification which comes through faith in him) is the answer.

- One of the motives behind the New Perspective is the desire to correct prejudiced caricatures of Judaism. This is post-holocaust theology. Anti-Semitism has clearly been a problem that has plagued the church down the centuries. We, however, need to recognise that, just as the New Perspective believes Luther's theology of justification was shaped by his context, so the view of proponents of the New Perspective is shaped by their context.

### James Dunn

It is James Dunn who is usually credited with coining the phrase 'the New Perspective on Paul' in an essay by that name first published in 1983<sup>6</sup> (although Stendahl talked about 'a new perspective' back in 1960<sup>7</sup>). Dunn acknowledges the role of Stendahl and particularly Sanders in revitalising Pauline scholarship. But, while Sander's new perspective on Judaism makes Paul seem less comprehensible to Sanders (according to Dunn, Sanders makes Paul 'idiosyncratic'), Dunn believes this new perspective on Judaism can in fact be shown to make Paul more comprehensible. Dunn focuses his argument on Galatians 2:16.

We who are Jews by birth and not 'Gentile sinners' know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no-one will be justified (Gal. 2:15–16).

Galatians 2:15–16, Dunn argues, appeals to the shared background understood by Jewish Christians (We who are Jews ... know that). So justification is defined in OT terms. In other words:

God's righteousness is precisely God's covenant faithfulness, his saving power and love for his people Israel. God's justification is God's recognition of Israel as his people, his verdict in favour of Israel on grounds of his covenant with Israel.<sup>8</sup>

Elsewhere Dunn calls on us to set aside our Western notions (influenced by Greek thought) of abstract justice – justice as an ethical absolute by which claims could be measured (the notion of 'blind justice'). In Hebrew thought justice (righteousness) was a relational term expressing fidelity to relational obligations.<sup>9</sup> As a result:

In talking of 'being justified' here Paul is not thinking of a distinctly initiatory act of God. God's justification is not his act in first making his covenant with Israel, or in initially accepting someone into the covenant people. God's justification is rather God's acknowledgment that someone is in the covenant – whether that is an initial acknowledgment, or a repeated action of God (God's saving acts), or his final vindication of his people.<sup>10</sup>

### *Works of the law*

In Galatians these, according to Dunn, are covenant works; that is, circumcision, food laws and festivals. These were widely regarded as marking Jewish distinctiveness. They were 'identity markers'.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Published in James D.G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (SPCK, 1990), 183–214.

<sup>7</sup> Stendahl, 'The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West', 95.

<sup>8</sup> Dunn, 'The New Perspective on Paul', 190.

<sup>9</sup> James D.G. Dunn and Alan M. Suggate, *The Justice of God: A Fresh Look at the Old Doctrine of Justification of Faith* (Paternoster, 1993), 32–33.

<sup>10</sup> Dunn, 'The New Perspective on Paul', 190.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

The devout Jew of Paul's day would regard observance of the laws on clean and unclean foods as a basic expression of covenant loyalty ... It is not exaggeration to say that for the typical Jew of the first century ad, particularly the Palestinian Jews, it would be virtually impossible to conceive of participation in God's covenant, and so in God's covenant righteousness, apart from these observances, these works of the law.<sup>12</sup>

Therefore:

When Paul denied the possibility of 'being justified by works of the law' it is precisely this basic Jewish self-understanding which Paul is attacking – the idea that God's acknowledgement of covenant status is bound up with, even dependent upon, observance of these particular regulations – the idea that God's verdict of acquittal hangs to any extent on the individual's having declared his membership of the covenant people by embracing these distinctly Jewish rites.<sup>13</sup>

What [Paul] denies is that God's justification depends on 'covenant nomism', that God's grace extends only to those who wear the badge of the covenant.<sup>14</sup>

So works of the law are not good works in general. Nor do they earn favour. They are instead 'badges' of covenant membership.<sup>15</sup> The boasting of Romans 3:27 is boasting in Jewish identity – not in good works in general.

*Righteousness is through faith in Christ and this renders the covenant works redundant*  
In Galatians 2:16a Paul begins by stating the position of Peter: justification is 'not by works of the law except through faith in Christ'. Some translations have 'but' instead of 'except' – 'but' implies contrast while 'except' implies a narrowing of focus: you are justified by works of the law provided you also have faith in Jesus as Messiah. This makes faith in Christ complementary or additional to the covenant works of the law. It is essentially Jewish faith that has come to expression in belief in Jesus as the Messiah.

Dunn, however, argues that Paul himself goes further. Paul's position is that justification is 'by faith in Christ and not by works of the law' (v. 16b). The two are seen not as complimentary, but as antitheses. Faith in Christ is not a narrowing of the definition of the elect (the covenant plus faith in Jesus as the Messiah). Faith in Christ is an alternative definition of the elect which renders all other identity markers superfluous. 'What [Paul] is concerned to exclude is the racial not the ritual expression of faith; it is nationalism which he denies not activism'.<sup>16</sup>

This is how Paul continues in Galatians 3. The covenant is no longer racially defined, but has come to its fulfilment in the blessing of the nations. The history of salvation has reached a new stage with the coming of Christ. Now 'the more fundamental identity marker of God's people (i.e. Abraham's faith) reasserts its primacy over against the too narrowly nationalistic identity markers of circumcision, food laws and sabbath'.<sup>17</sup>

### **N.T. Wright**

Tom Wright is the most conservative of the leading proponents of the New Perspective. He himself prefers to talk about 'new perspectives' (plural) because he is highly critical of some formulations of it.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 194; see also Gal. 5:6.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 198.

Like Dunn, Wright sees Paul's doctrine of justification by faith as worked out in opposition to Jewish national superiority and exclusivity. The works of the law are the distinctive features of Judaism that not only demonstrate membership of the covenant, but also divide Jews from Gentiles.

The distinctive contribution of Wright is his contention that the majority of people in first century Judaism saw Israel as still being in exile. While it had come back from Babylon, the nation remained in subjugation and the land in defilement by Gentile occupiers. Underlying this was a spiritual exile from God. The underlying problems of the exile – sin and judgement – had not been dealt with. The restoration promised by the prophets had not happened in the terms in which they had spoken of. This new stage in the history of salvation was an era in which the blessing to the nations promised to Abraham would be realised. The purpose of the covenant with Israel was to deal with the universal problem of sin and bring salvation.<sup>18</sup>

What Paul realised was that this restoration had happened in the middle of time in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

When Paul was faced with the fact of Jesus' resurrection, he concluded that the return from exile had in fact happened. Exile had reached its height in Jesus' death; now he had come through death, through the ultimate exile, and was set free not just from Greece and Rome, from Herod, Pilate and Caiaphas, but from sin and death, the ultimate enemies (1 Cor. 15:25–26). This meant that the Age to Come, the Eschaton of Jewish expectation, had already arrived, even though it didn't look like Paul had expected. It meant that Israel had in principle been redeemed, in the person of her anointed representative. It meant that the Gentiles were now to be summoned to join Israel in celebrating the new day, the day of deliverance.<sup>19</sup>

An example of this is Wright's exegesis of Galatians 3:13–14:

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.' He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit (Gal. 3:13–14).<sup>20</sup>

Paul quotes from Deuteronomy where the curse is the curse of those who break the covenant. These curses are fulfilled when Israel's faithlessness is judged in the exile. The exile is the outworking of the Deuteronomic curse. But now Christ has taken that curse on himself, redeeming Israel from exile. So when Paul says 'Christ redeemed us', he is not talking people in general, but about Israel in particular. Israel has been redeemed from the exile so that as a result she can once again realise the vocation promised to Abraham – that of bringing blessing to the nations (= Gentiles).

Wright, I believe, is correct to see the exile coming to an end in the work of Jesus. The return from exile under Ezra and Nehemiah is portrayed in the OT as incomplete (in Neh. 9:36 the people are still in slavery). The NT sees Jesus as the fulfilment of the promises of restoration and return from exile (Mark 1:2–3 citing Is. 40:1–3). Jesus deals with the underlying problems of the exile – sin and judgement.

Wright, however, goes too far when he sees it as the dominant idea by which NT theology should be understood. Wright's thesis is only

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<sup>18</sup> Tom Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, (Lion, 1997), 118.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 51. See also N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, (SPCK, 1992), 458.

<sup>20</sup> See N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (T&T Clark, 1991), 137–74.

sustainable because he adopts a fairly broad and fluid definition of exile.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, in Romans 10:18–19 Paul quotes the warnings of exile in Deuteronomy (32:21) to suggest that by rejecting the Messiah and through the inclusion of the Gentiles Israel is in fact beginning its true exile. The exile was a picture of humanity’s plight (this is Ezekiel’s message as he addresses the nations in 25–32 – Israel’s fate will be their fate). The cross of Christ represents the end of exile to those who accept him. To those who reject him, though, it is the beginning of an eternal exile from God – the curses of Deuteronomy fall irrevocably.

When it comes to justification, Wright believes that the righteousness of God should be understood in two inter-related ways. First and essentially, God’s righteousness is his faithfulness to the covenant on account of which he intervenes in history to vindicate his people. God’s righteous acts are his saving acts on behalf of his people – and specifically his intervention to end the exile. In this respect his position is similar to Dunn’s, but Wright adds a second dimension which Dunn avoids. The language of righteousness and justification also evokes the law court. It is forensic. The judge is righteous when he is impartial. A plaintiff is righteous when he or she is vindicated or justified by judge’s decision. Israel and the nations stand as two sides of a legal dispute before God the Judge. Because of his righteousness, God declares in favour of Israel. He declares Israel to be righteous, justified, vindicated. Wright stresses that in this legal scenario the declaration of justification is a statement that a person is already righteous. It is not the declaration itself that confers a righteous or justified status. Like justification in Judaism (as defined by Sanders), it is not about getting in, but about staying in. Justification is essentially an eschatological reality. It is acquittal or vindication on the day of Israel’s restoration. But it can be a present reality to those who maintain their status within the covenant community.

How, then, do people come into a relationship with God? Wright answers: as the gospel of Christ’s death and resurrection is proclaimed, God’s Spirit brings people to faith. They join the Christian community through baptism and begin to share its common life. ‘That is how people come into relationship with the living God’.<sup>22</sup> Paul, argues Wright, does not use justification language to denote this. Justification is not how one joins the covenant community.

So justification is based on two things: (1) the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus, and (2) the regenerating work of the Spirit. Justification is the recognition that our sins have been dealt with through the cross and that we are new people through the Spirit. It does not affect a change of status. It is the recognition of what has happened. Although Wright can be somewhat unclear at this point, justification is also on the basis of sanctification: ‘Present justification declares on the basis of faith, what future justification will affirm publicly on the basis of the entire life’.<sup>23</sup>

Wright argues that justification is not the gospel – it is an implication of the gospel. The gospel is the message of the death and resurrection of the Messiah. The doctrine of justification is an ecclesiological doctrine. Justification is about who is part of Christ’s covenant community (the church). ‘The dikai-language is best rendered in terms of “membership within the covenant”’.<sup>24</sup>

[Justification] wasn’t so much about soteriology as about ecclesiology; not so much about salvation as about the church ... ‘The gospel’ is the announcement of Jesus’ lordship, which works with power to bring people into the family of Abraham, now redefined around Jesus Christ and characterised solely by faith in him. ‘Justification’ is the doctrine which

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<sup>21</sup> Mark Seifrid, *Christ, Our Righteousness: Paul’s Theology of Justification* (Apollos, 2000), 24.

<sup>22</sup> Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 117.

<sup>23</sup> Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 129, (my emphasis).

<sup>24</sup> Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant*, 148.

insists that all those who have this faith belong as full members of this family, on this basis and no other.<sup>25</sup>

## Assessment

### Justification and works

First century Judaism was a complex phenomenon about which we have few direct sources. Most of the sources are pre-first century (the Apocrypha) or post-first century (Rabbinic writings). Sanders for example depends heavily on Rabbinic sources from 200 AD and beyond. In fact one of the best sources we have from the period itself is the NT. Therefore we should be careful to suppose we know better what first century Judaism was like than the writers of the NT – especially someone like Paul who was schooled deeply in it.

A major study of the case for covenantal nomism produced by scholars from a variety of theological backgrounds has been published recently under the title *Justification and Variegated Nomism: The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism* (Baker, 2001). It examines in detail different Jewish genres. Don Carson provides a summarising chapter. He writes: ‘Several of the scholars found that at least parts of their representative corpora could be usefully described as reflecting covenantal nomism’. But, he goes on, ‘there is strong agreement that covenantal nomism is at best a reductionist category ... covenantal nomism is not only reductionistic, it is misleading’.<sup>26</sup>

While the New Perspective has corrected the caricature of first century Judaism as uniformly consisting of a harsh legalism, it actually involved a spectrum of attitudes to the law. These ranged from an emphasis on grace to an emphasis on the necessity of adherence to the law. Legalism was a reality in the first century.<sup>27</sup> There are some sources (Josephus, the Books of Maccabees, the Additions of Daniel, Tobit and Judith) which Sanders does not deal with and which present a more legalistic outlook.<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, popular expressions of religion are often more legalistic than official teaching – a phenomenon to which many Christians can relate!

While first century Judaism may have taught that, in principle, inclusion among the people of God depended upon God’s election and grace and not upon the observance of the law, in practice that teaching often degenerated into something else.<sup>29</sup>

It is not just first century Judaism that the New Perspective is in danger of over-simplifying. The New Perspective begins with the accusation that Luther misread Paul because he viewed Paul from the perspective of his own conflict with medieval Catholicism. Luther opposed works-righteousness, we are told, and he mistakenly supposed that Paul likewise opposed works-righteousness in Judaism.<sup>30</sup> But, says the New Perspective, Paul is not in fact opposing works-righteousness, but faith plus works (however those might be defined).

In fact faith plus works sounds much more like medieval Catholicism than some crass version of works-righteousness. Rather than Luther misreading Paul’s conflict with first century Judaism, it is the proponents of the New Perspective who have misread Luther’s conflict with medieval Catholicism. Works-righteousness may be a Protestant Sunday School caricature of medieval Catholicism, but it is doubtful whether Luther viewed Catholicism in these terms. Luther and Catholicism both agreed

<sup>25</sup> Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 119, 133.

<sup>26</sup> Carson et al, *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, 543–44.

<sup>27</sup> See Seifrid, Christ, Our Righteousness, 15–16 and D.A. Carson, Peter T. O’Brien and Mark Seifrid (eds.), *Justification and Variegated Nomism: The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism* (Baker, 2001).

<sup>28</sup> Rob Smith, ‘Wright Up Close’, *The Briefing*, Issue No. 220 (16 June 1999), 7.

<sup>29</sup> Colin G. Kruse, *Paul, the Law and Justification* (Apollos, 1996), 296.

<sup>30</sup> Dunn and Suggate, *The Justice of God*, 14.

that salvation was by faith. The distinctive of Luther was the claim that it was by faith alone. In medieval Catholicism God graciously imparted righteousness to the believer through faith. Justification then became a process which involved both divine grace and human effort. For Luther salvation was by faith alone – it is not a co-operation between God and man.

Both Catholicism and Judaism root salvation in God’s grace. With a beginning in grace (in the form of election or regeneration), the help of the believing community, the guidance of the law and the possibility of repentance, people can live a righteous life. Both Paul and Luther, however, saw the human problem as much more intractable. ‘This human inability to meet the demands of God is what lies at the heart of Romans 3. On this point, at least, the Reformers understood Paul correctly.’<sup>31</sup> Medieval Catholicism saw human sin as a weakness that could be healed by grace. One of the decisive moves in Luther’s rediscovery of justification is his return to Augustine’s (and Paul’s) understanding of sin as rebellion – as a fundamental opposition to, and rejection of, God. A case can be made for saying that Reformed soteriology begins with a rediscovery of biblical anthropology. It is not just that we have tendency to commit sinful acts. We are God’s enemies. This is the problem which justification must address if we are ever to enjoy peace with God (Rom. 5:1).

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instrumental place within salvation.*

This is not just a question of historical accuracy. To say that we get in by grace and stay in by grace plus works still gives works an instrumental place within salvation.

When we consider the matter from the perspective of the final judgement – which we must in Jewish theology – it is clear that ‘works’, even in Sanders’ view, play a necessary and instrumental role in ‘salvation’. But this is what Paul denies, by equating ‘initial’ justification with the final verdict of salvation and by stressing faith alone as the necessary corollary to the grace of God. In effect, then, while not denying the role of faith, Jews were insisting on works as a means of justification. But this is just what Paul denies in 3:20, and why he distinguishes in principle between faith and works (see 3:27–28; 4:1–5).<sup>32</sup>

In other words, covenantal nomism is a form of legalism or works-righteousness. It may be a form that has a place for grace, but grace is all or nothing. If Paul was opposing legalism and works-righteousness – or something that tended towards legalism and works-righteousness – then we should accept his response to be soteriological, rather than simply ecclesiological as the New Perspective claims.

### **Justification and salvation**

‘The righteousness of God’ has variously been understood as:

<b>1. A quality of God</b>	1a. God’s moral purity and judicial impartiality	What Luther originally thought and feared: God’s justice by which he will condemn us
	1b. God’s covenant faithfulness	God’s righteous acts = his saving acts for his people (Dunn and Wright)

<sup>31</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NIGCT (Eerdmans, 1996), 217.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 215–16.

<b>2. A gift from God</b>	2a. Imputed righteousness	The position of later Luther and Protestant orthodoxy
	2b. Imparted righteousness	The position of Catholicism.

Dunn argues that righteousness is a relational term (covenant faithfulness), not a judicial term. Wright likewise believes it is covenant faithfulness, but he also believes that this covenant faithfulness is expressed through the picture of the courtroom in which God must act with impartiality.

If we use the language of the law court, it makes no sense whatever to say that the judge imputes, imparts, bequeaths, conveys or otherwise transfers his righteousness to either the plaintiff or the defendant. Righteousness is not an object, a substance or a gas which can be passed across the courtroom ... to imagine the defendant somehow receiving the judge's righteousness is simply a category mistake. That is not how the language works ... There is of course a 'righteous' standing, a status, which human beings have as a result of God's gracious verdict in Christ ... but Paul does not use the phrase 'God's righteousness' to denote it.<sup>33</sup>

But the language of God's righteousness is more fluid than either Dunn or Wright allow.<sup>34</sup> It is used by Paul of:

*1. God's saving intervention on the basis of his covenant faithfulness.*

This is, I think, how Romans 1:17 should be understood: 'For in the gospel a righteousness (*dikaioynē*) from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."' The revelation of God's righteousness is juxtaposed with the revelation of his wrath in the following verse (Rom. 1:18). Just as God acts in wrath against sin so he acts in righteousness in the gospel.

*2. God's impartial quality of justice which must be upheld or vindicated in salvation*

'He did it to demonstrate his justice (*dikaioynēs*) at the present time, so as to be just (*dikaion*) and the one who justifies (*dikaionta*) those who have faith in Jesus.' (Rom. 3:26) This is expressed in God's righteous wrath against sin.<sup>35</sup>

*3. God's gift of righteousness in Christ which is imputed to believers*

'For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness (*dikaioynēs*) reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.' (Rom. 5:17) Righteousness, here, is a gift. Just as the trespass of Adam brings death to humanity so the righteousness of Jesus is given to all who believe that they might have life.

The same Greek word is used in all these examples and it is a mistake to make all of these uses precisely synonymous.

Psalm 143 is alluded to by Paul in two of the key passages on justification (Rom. 3:20 and Gal. 2:16) so we can reasonably assume it is formative in his understanding of the righteousness of God. The Psalmist says:

O Lord, hear my prayer, listen to my cry for mercy; in your faithfulness and righteousness come to my relief ... For your name's sake, O Lord, preserve my life; in your righteousness, bring me out of trouble. In your unfailing love,

<sup>33</sup> Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 98, 107.

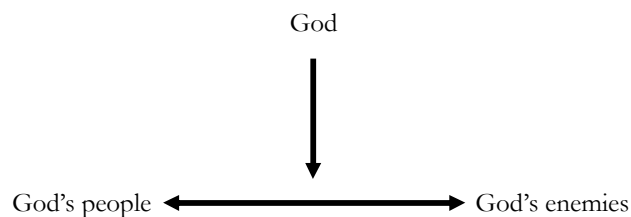
<sup>34</sup> On the OT usage see Seifrid, *Christ, Our Righteousness*, 44.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 171–72.

silence my enemies; destroy all my foes, for I am your servant (Ps. 143:1, 11–12).

The Psalmist cries out to God for justice – for God to act in righteousness – and that means delivering him from his enemies. To cry to God for justice and to appeal to God’s righteousness is to ask God to intervene to rescue his people, to vindicate them and to judge their enemies (see also Ps. 98:1–5). God intervenes on the side of Israel not because Israel is more righteous or more deserving, but because of his faithfulness to his covenant promises. So in this sense God’s righteousness is closely connected to his covenant faithfulness (see also Neh. 9:8).

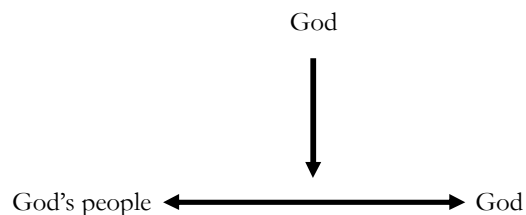
In a Hebrew court there was no state prosecuting council. There were just the two parties in the dispute and judge (or the elders) to preside. So the verdict was not so much guilty or not guilty, as the vindication of one side of the debate. You had two versions of truth or two sides of an argument and the judge found in favour of one side – the judge vindicated one side. And so that side was declared justified or righteous.



The Psalmist calls upon God to intervene in the dispute between God’s people and God’s enemies, and to vindicate his people. This will be God acting in saving righteousness.

But what the image of the law court reveals is that in the act that justifies one party, the other party is inevitably, and at the same time, declared to be in the wrong. They come under judgement. There can be no justification without judgement. One party cannot be vindicated without the other being condemned.

Returning to Psalm 143, consider verse 2: ‘Do not bring your servant into judgement, for no-one living is righteous before you’. There is another reality, another dispute, another conflict, another court case.



In the court case between God and humanity ‘no-one living is righteous’ – no-one can be vindicated before God. When this dispute is brought to the point of judgement, it is God who will be vindicated. He will be declared righteous, and so we will be condemned. It is in this way that God can be declared righteous through the defeat of Israel (see, for example, Neh. 9:33). In the case of Psalm 143, the Psalmist realises that the only way that God can intervene to save his people from their enemies is for God to suspend judgement in the other case – the case that God himself brings against his people. But God will not suspend that judgement forever.

In the court case between God and humanity ‘no-one living is righteous’ – no-one can be vindicated before God. When this dispute is brought to the point of judgement, it is God who will be vindicated. He will be declared righteous, and so we will be condemned. It is in this way that God can be declared righteous through the defeat of Israel (see, for

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This is a saving act. Justification belongs at the heart of salvation. It is not something that comes only as a recognition of a prior event as Wright argues. It is not simply about ecclesiology. In Romans 4:6–8 God counting someone righteous is synonymous with God *not* counting their sins against them.

David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits (*logizētai*) righteousness apart from works:

‘Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven,  
whose sins are covered.  
Blessed is the man whose sin  
the Lord will never count (*logisētai*) against him.’

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*According to Wright ...*

*justification follows reconciliation with God.*

*In Romans 5:1, however, Paul’s logic is quite explicit:  
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In Romans 5:16 justification is the opposite of condemnation: ‘The judgement followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification.’ Paul’s discussion of justification in Romans is set against the background of God’s wrath against humanity (Rom. 1:18). Justification is God’s solution to universal sin and guilt. Justification does have implications for ecclesiology, but it is a transaction between people and God (not just between people and people). The fruit of justification is peace with God (Rom. 5:1) and escape from his wrath (Rom. 5:9). According to Wright justification is an ecclesiological reality that flows from salvation through participation with Christ and regeneration by the Spirit. In other words, justification follows reconciliation with God. In Romans 5:1, however, Paul’s logic is quite explicit: justification is the *precondition* for reconciliation with God: ‘Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.’

### **Justification and assurance**

If justification in the present is a recognition of covenant membership rather than the act by which we are reckoned righteous, then we cannot have assurance. If justification in the future is our vindication at the final judgement, based on the work of Christ *plus* the life we live in the power of the Spirit, then we cannot have assurance. Assurance is grounded in justification as the divine declaration of acquittal on the basis of the finished work of Christ.

Wright is more ambiguous on this than some of his critics recognise. Although he avoids the term ‘imputed’, he does talk of righteousness being ‘reckoned’ to us. He strongly refutes the charge of making justification a process like that in traditional Catholicism. ‘I do not “interpose” extraneous elements between the effectual call and God’s declaration “righteous”. I never have, never would, never (please God) will.’<sup>36</sup> Yet he also says: ‘present justification declares on the basis of faith, what future

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<sup>36</sup> N.T. Wright, ‘The Shape of Justification’ (2001, [www.angelfire.com/mi2/paulpage/shape.html](http://www.angelfire.com/mi2/paulpage/shape.html))

justification will affirm publicly on the basis of the entire life'.<sup>37</sup> Wright surely knows the issues too well for this to be an unconsidered statement.

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If justification is, even in some secondary sense, 'on the basis of the entire life' then we cannot know complete assurance. We cannot speak of our justification with the confidence that Paul does: 'since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!' (Rom. 5:9). Justification, according to Wright, is grounded in Christ's work for us and the Spirit's work in us. But Paul argues that the verdict has already decisively been given (Rom. 5:1) because Christ has already died and risen (Rom. 4:25; 5:9). 'God ... justifies the wicked' (Rom. 4:5).

Wright says justification is not about either 'getting in' or 'staying in', but about how you identify 'those who are in'. But people are 'in' because they 'got in' and because they 'stay in'. The distinctions are false, and that is Paul's point in Galatians. The Gentile Christians have 'got into' the covenant community by faith in Jesus and because of this they should be identified as being in and afforded the status of covenant members (which, in the case of the Galatian church, means an invitation to the meal table). It is the link back to their becoming Christians by faith (their justification) that provides the basis for their current recognition as full members of the community.

### **Justification and ecclesiology**

I want to argue that the New Perspective is correct to see 'the works of the law' as a definition of Jewish distinctiveness. This may be law as a whole (Rom. 3:20), but often it is focused on the emblems of distinctiveness, especially circumcision (Galatians). Dunn says the works of the law are those works 'by which a member of the covenant people identified himself as a Jew and maintained his status within the covenant'.<sup>38</sup>

In Galatians 5:3 Paul says: 'I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is required to obey the whole law.' This does not mean Paul's opponents advocated keeping the whole of the law. Rather, Paul is making the logical step that his opponents were not making. If they are going to make part of the law a requirement for community membership then logically they should make the whole law a requirement. In other words, to make identity markers based on the law a definition of inclusion in the covenant community is works-righteousness even if Paul's opponents will not admit this (especially since the law was used by the Pharisees and Essenes to distinguish themselves not only from Gentiles, but from some of their fellow Jews). Part of Paul's argument in Galatians is to take the view of his opponents to its inevitable conclusion and then contrast it with justification through faith in Christ. The opponents want Gentiles to adopt Jewish identity markers. Paul takes this to its logical conclusion: justification by works. Then he contrasts this with justification by faith alone.

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<sup>37</sup> Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 129 (my emphasis).

<sup>38</sup> James D.G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, WBC (Word Books, 1988), 158.

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*The New Perspective is right to say that Galatians is about the identity of the Christian community. It is ... however, wrong to see this as antithetical to a soteriological view of justification. It is, instead, the practical out-working of a soteriological view of justification.*

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So the New Perspective is right to say that Galatians is about the identity of the Christian community. It is about ecclesiology. The New Perspective, however, is wrong to see this as antithetical to a soteriological view of justification. It is, instead, the practical out-working of a soteriological view of justification.

Paul's opponents in Galatia are not people advocating justification by works (the traditional reading). They are those who demanded that Gentiles adopt the markers of the Mosaic law (circumcision, food laws, Sabbath) not as a condition of salvation per se, but as a condition of membership of the church (the reading of the New Perspective). Paul's point, however, is that if you make works of the law a condition of membership of the church (an ecclesiological issue) you in fact will fatally undermine justification by faith (a soteriological issue). You might say, 'You are saved by faith alone, but now you need to practise the works of the law to be a full member of the Christian community.' But the result, argues Paul, will be that salvation itself comes to be viewed as being dependent on the works of the law.

The traditional reading of Galatians starts with Paul's reassertion of justification by faith and assumes the opponents advocated justification by works (or faith plus works). The New Perspective believes that the opponents advocated covenantal nomism and believes Paul simply advocated covenantal fideism. I want to suggest that the issues in Galatia are ecclesiological, but Paul's responds by a proper outworking of soteriology.

	<b>Paul's opponents advocated:</b>	<b>Paul opposed them by pointing to:</b>
<b>Traditional Reading</b>	salvation by works	salvation by faith
<b>The New Perspective</b>	community membership by works	community membership by faith
<b>Galatians</b>	community membership by works	salvation by faith

In fact the situation is a more complicated because in Galatians 6:12 Paul tells us why his opponents advocated circumcision. 'Those who want to make a good impression outwardly are trying to compel you to be circumcised. The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ.' Their motive is not theological, but sociological. They want to be accepted by the Jewish community and so avoid persecution – this is a theme running through the book.

## Summary

The New Perspective, especially as expounded by Tom Wright, helps us see:

- That salvation (including justification) is set in a covenantal context in the NT. It is the fulfilment of God's promises to Abraham. Wright's covenantal exposition of Romans is a joy to read.<sup>39</sup>
- The righteousness of God refers to his saving acts in faithfulness to his covenant promises to Israel and, through Israel, for the world.
- 'The works of the law' are a definition of Jewish distinctiveness.
- Justification is eschatological – the declaration on the final day of our righteousness (Gal. 5:5) – which is anticipated now by faith (Rom. 5:1).
- Justification has major ecclesiological implications which are a central concern in Galatians and a significant concern in Romans.

We have argued, however, that the New Perspective is unsatisfactory in the following ways:

- The New Perspective makes justification simply the recognition of salvation rather than an act by which God declares us righteous through faith in Christ. The New Perspective separates justification from salvation whereas Paul sees justification as the basis of reconciliation with God (Rom. 5:1).
- The New Perspective makes assurance, and ultimately salvation, dependant on continuing in the covenant community. Justification is eschatological, but it is decisively anticipated in the present (Rom. 5:9).
- By making justification an ecclesiological reality, the New Perspective actually weakens its ecclesiological impact. The ecclesiological implications of justification are rooted in its soteriological nature – in the gospel.

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### Northern Training Institute

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<sup>39</sup> N. T. Wright, 'The Letter to the Romans' in *The New Interpreter's Bible Vol. X* (Abingdon, 2002), 393–770 and Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Romans Part 1 Chapter 1-8* (SPCK, 2004).