Justification in Light of Recent Scholarship

Does the Bible Teach the Imputation of Christ's Righteousness?

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Abstract

Justification has been a central doctrine for the entire history of the church. Until recent years there has been an overall consensus on what the doctrine entails and how it is applied to the believer. This doctrine has been reexamined by a number of scholars who have developed an entirely different perspective on what Paul meant when he wrote about justification. N. T. Wright's understanding of this new perspective is examined with the purpose of establishing its validity. Other scholarship is brought into focus in order to achieve this goal. This paper concludes that N. T. Wright's perspective is incomplete. However, also examined is his emphasis on certain intricacies from which church leaders today might benefit.

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Justified In Christ

Introduction

The idea of Christ's righteousness has been the critical foundation for the Christian doctrine of justification since the Reformation. Past saints have held to this cherished doctrine in complete humility and devotion. The belief of Christ's righteousness as possessed by the believer was common in Protestant circles and writings. However, in recent study of Second Temple Judaism and its literature, there have been new attempts to understand what Paul intended to teach in his epistles, which our spiritual fathers would have misunderstood for so long.

While the parameters of the new perspectives on Paul permeate many other doctrines, the focus to be addressed is how it relates to justification, particularly the imputation of Christ's righteousness. One leading candidate from the many proponents of this new perspective will be selected to examine in order to promote foundational consistency and clarity. Although E. P. Sanders could be credited as to direct attention to a non-traditional interpretation of Paul in light of Second Temple Judaism, N. T. Wright and his "Fresh Perspective" will be selected to examine. There are several reasons for this selection. First and foremost, Wright's scholarship among the academic community is well-known and respected. Second, he believes in the inspiration of Scriptures, thus providing common ground for other Evangelical Christians for understanding and workability. Finally, Wright has published many books and articles concerning various topics, making him widely known in academic and Christian literature. Since he might

be better known than other proponents of the new perspectives then this would allow for at least some fundamental understanding of his views when being addressed in this paper.

This paper will begin by examining Wright's Fresh Perspective and the various proposals concerning justification therein. In addition to this, other works have been examined which critique Wright while some attempt to refute him. The main goal for this paper is to answer the question: is the imputation of Christ's righteousness the correct interpretation or should it be abandoned? The foundational issues pertaining to this paper will be addressed first, and with this accomplished, the more intricate pieces of Wright's theology will be examined.

While Wright appears to have erred in his new understanding of the Apostle Paul, one might glean from his work certain ideas that have been neglected in recent years. One particular issue Wright presents in his understanding of the doctrine is a future justification that will be a public judicial announcement on the basis of the believer's resurrection. Much attention will be given to this particular intricacy in how it functions within Wright's framework of justification, which will lead to a greater understanding of Wright's Fresh Perspective. Following the presentation of future justification, the idea itself will be examined to see if it is a faithful interpretation of the Scriptures, and if so, how its understanding impacts the traditional understanding of justification.

The understanding of the correct doctrine of justification, as addressed in this paper, may not be essential for the salvation; however it is critical for the Christian's proper knowledge about God. God the Father has brought his people back into a relationship with himself through his Son. Within this concept of relationship, believers are called to know God and worship him. Their worship hinges on proper knowledge of

God; with incorrect knowledge, imperfect worship is offered to God. As Christians endeavor to worship God in purity, they seek evermore to know him with clarity and in truth.

Chapter One

Understanding N. T. Wright

Within the traditional view, justification lies at the heart of the Gospel.[1] Justification allows the Gospel to be called what it is, "good news." What better news could there be other than Paul's teaching,

> you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience . . . and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved. (Eph 2:1–5)[2]

Before this passage is left, the deviation of Wright's work is underway. It might be beneficial to define traditional views of the Gospel as consisting of a couple foundational truths:

1. The debt of the believer's sin is paid for in the death of Jesus Christ resulting in the dismissal of God's wrath.
2. God imputes the righteousness of Christ to the believer, a perfect righteousness that could never be attained by the believer's efforts.

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[1] What is meant by "traditional view" is the post-Reformation understanding. This view consists primarily of the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer, thus making the righteous requirements of God fulfilled in him in Christ. There is no addition and/or requirements on the believer's part, save faith, and nothing lacking on the part of Christ's righteousness. An excellent study of the historical-theological formulation of union with Christ and justification as distinct, inseparable, and simultaneous can be found in: Lane G. Tipton, "Union with Christ and Justification," in *Justified in Christ: God's Plan for Us in Justification*, 39-40.

[2] All passages quoted from the Bible are taken from the English Standard Version.

3. This is all accomplished by the means of faith.[3]

These points are similar to how justification is defined in the ninetieth question of the *Westminster Confession of Faith,* asking, "What is justification?" "Justification is an act of God's free grace unto sinners, in which he pardoneth all their sins, accepteth and accounteth their persons righteous in his sight; not for any thing wrought in them, or done by them, but only for the perfect obedience and full satisfaction of Christ, by God imputed to them, and received by faith alone." Justification lies at the heart of the Gospel and is the good news that is proclaimed to all from the traditional pulpit.

Wright disagrees. He is quick to separate the Gospel from salvation or a message of how one "gets saved" i.e. the traditional view of justification. Wright argues: "Paul's Gospel to the pagans was not a philosophy of life. Nor was it, even, a doctrine about how to get saved."[4] However, Wright is satisfied to propose that the Gospel is an imperial message proclaiming the kingship of the resurrected Messiah, Jesus Christ: "that the crucified Jesus of Nazareth had been raised from the dead; that he was thereby proved to be Israel's Messiah; that he was thereby installed as Lord of the world."[5] Non-traditional concepts like this are often received without much consideration and dismissed rather abruptly and inadequately. To guard against this error, and before the implications are

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[3] The aim here is not to limit the Gospel in every aspect to just these three points, but to convey what is at the heart of the Gospel, and its foundational truths, would be agreed upon by most if not all evangelical conservatives.

[4] N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 90.

[5] Ibid., 46.

discussed of how Wright has understood the term Gospel, it would be beneficial to examine what has brought Wright to this understanding.[6]

Wright lays the foundation of his work on the idea of covenants throughout the Bible. He explains that the reason for the covenant in the first place is to undo what has happened as a result of the fall of Adam: "First, the covenant is there to solve the problems within creation. God called Abraham to solve the problem of evil, the problem of Adam, the problem of the world."[7] Unfortunately for humanity, Abraham and his descendents were part of the problem. Abraham, like every other human being born of a man and woman, contained the same sinful nature, which hindered him from fulfilling humanity's side of the covenant and bring evil to an end while restoring man's relationship with God. Wright reasons,

> Israel is no better than the nations, as is proved by biblical texts which speak of exile. This creates a crisis for God himself, a crisis exactly parallel to the crisis which 4 Ezra saw so painfully: how is God to be both faithful to the covenant and just in his dealings with the whole creation?[8]

The answer to the previous question presented by Wright is what he calls the "righteousness of God." The righteousness of God is put into question in this crisis: whether this creator and covenant making God can be relied upon to put the world to rights. Therefore, to solve this crisis God must do what man could not do through the

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[6] Wright's full argument will not be summarized here on the account of space. Instead an overview will be given to establish a basis from which his concepts can be grasped and discussed. Wright argues extensively using much biblical data that is not able to incorporated here. For parts of his argument, it is recommended to read *Paul in Fresh Perspective*, chap. 2–4.

[7] Ibid., 24.

[8] Ibid., 29.

Torah. This is accomplished through his Son, Jesus Christ, in which creation (i.e. his humanity) and covenant (i.e. his perfect obedience) come together. Wright expounds:

> one of the most striking innovations, completely consistent with all of Paul's thought is that this coming together has taken the form of an actual event, an event which has already happened, an event which consisted, surprisingly and shockingly, of the shameful and cruel death by crucifixion of the one who has thus fulfilled the double divine purpose.[9]

In the person of Jesus Christ, God's plan for Israel has been fulfilled, including God's salvation plan for the world. This plan, always intended by God, includes the salvation of Gentiles, in whose commissioning Israel had been unfaithful. Abraham could now have his worldwide family, Jew and Gentile, as it was always intended to be, and this by faith in the fidelity of the Messiah.[10]

This recognition of Jesus as the Messiah, the one in whom the covenant has been upheld both on the part of God, in Christ's divinity, and on the part of man, in Christ's humanity, is the good news of the Gospel Wright is advocating. He explains: "For Paul, the reason why there is good news at all is that in and through the cross of King Jesus the one true God has dealt decisively with evil . . . He is announcing that the messianic promises of salvation have come true in Jesus."[11] In other words, this Gospel does not contain a message of how one gets saved, but is the proclamation of Jesus the Messiah as King, and it is through believing this good news that results in people being saved.[12]

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[9] Ibid., 27–28.

[10] Ibid., 47.

[11] Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said,* 52–53.

[12] Ibid., 45.

Now with Wright's definition of Gospel understood, the focus can be turned back on Eph 2:1–5. As previously observed, the traditional understanding of Gospel is very similar to the traditional view of justification, nevertheless Wright's view of the Gospel and what is entailed in Eph 2:1–5 is quite dissimilar. If Wright's understanding of the Gospel is not a call to "get saved," what would he consider Ephesians 2 or the traditional understanding of the Gospel to be? Within the scheme of Rom 8:30 Wright would conclude that everything necessary for salvation is included in the step of the "Call." He explains:

> The word 'justification', despite centuries of Christian misuse, is used by Paul to denote that which happens immediately after the 'call': 'those God called, he also justified (Romans 8.30). In other words, those who hear the Gospel and respond to it in faith are *then* declared by God to be his people, his elect, 'the circumcision,' 'the Jews', 'the Israel of God'. They are given the status *dikaios*, 'righteous', 'within the covenant'.[13]

Wright insists to keep justification a declarative term without any effectual significance. For emphasis, Wright again notes justification is "a declarative word, declaring that something is the case, rather than a word for making something happen or changing the way something is."[14]

However, if this is the case, Paul seems as if he is much too concerned about justification if it is merely a "second-order doctrine" as Wright believes.[15] The topic of

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[13] Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective,* 121–122.

[14] N. T. Wright, "New Perspectives on Paul," 258.

[15] N. T. Wright, "The Shape of Justification."

justification permeates much of Paul's work to the point that it must have a greater significance; this to be discussed anon. Wright would direct his reader's attention to see this "call" in the conversion of Saul. Saul was zealous that God would vindicate Israel from pagan control and bring it back into the benevolent graces of God, but instead there was a "great reversal." The most important thing on the Damascus road was the recognition of Jesus resurrected from the dead, vindicating him and establishing him as the true Messiah. Wright explains,

> Instead, the great reversal, the great resurrection, had happened to one man [instead of Israel], all by himself . . . The resurrection demarcated Jesus as the true Messiah, the true bearer of Israel's God-sent destiny.[16]

Elsewhere,

> The critique [of Saul and the Jewish doctrine] is, rather, the cutting edge of that doctrine, seen from the point of view of the Jew who believes that the crucified and risen Jesus is the Messiah around whom Israel is now defined . . . That is, Israel as a whole has failed; Israel's representative, the Messiah, Jesus, has succeeded . . . deep at the heart of what Paul believes about Jesus is that he was the true, representative Israelite.[17]

Just as Paul changed his understanding about Jesus from a mere man making false claims to the true Messiah, it is the recognition of Jesus as the Messiah that saves an individual. Recall the previous discussion of Wright's understanding of the Gospel, the proclamation of Jesus as the true Messiah. He defines it as: "The announcement of the Gospel results

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[16] Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said,* 36–37.

[17] Ibid., 84.

in people being saved . . . But 'the Gospel' itself, strictly speaking, is the narrative proclamation of King Jesus."[18] That is, for those who were seeking salvation,

> the message about Jesus and his cross and resurrection . . . is announced to them; through this means, God works by his Spirit upon their hearts; as a result, they come to believe the message; they join the Christian community through baptism, and begin to share in its common life and its common way of life. That is how people come into relationship with the living God.[19]

Where does justification fall into the scheme of Wright's understanding? As previously mentioned, it is a secondary doctrine. It has in no sense any power to save or change the believer, but is a declarative judgment of the believer's status as righteous. To this point, it has been observed what justification is not, according to Wright. Perhaps the clearest definition Wright gives to explain how he views justification is as follows:

> Justification in this setting [covenant, law-court, and eschatological language], then, is not a matter of *how someone enters the community of the true people of God*, but of *how you tell who belongs to that community*, not least in the period of time before the eschatological event itself, when the matter will become public knowledge.[20]

Therefore with this understanding, justification is not so concerned with soteriology as the traditional view understands it, rather about ecclesiology, how one believer knows who belongs to the people of God in order for fellowship.[21]

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[18] Ibid., 45.

[19] Ibid., 116–117.

[20] Ibid., 119.

[21] Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective,* 121.

It is now obvious why Wright calls this doctrine of justification as second order, for it has nothing to do with one's conversion. He asserts that one is converted by the recognition and belief in Jesus as the true Messiah, the world's rightful King. This Gospel, with justification excluded, is at the center of all Paul's writings according to Wright. The justification that Paul writes about so often is for the Gentile inclusion, not how sinners are put right with God.[22] It is true that Paul writes to believing communities and that the Jewish inclusion of the Gentiles lies at the heart of the Gospel. This, in either understanding of justification, is a crucial point to emphasize. For being made right with God, whether by the covenant faithfulness of Christ on man's part or the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer, is not based on ethnicity or an outward badge such as circumcision, but on faith.

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[22] Ibid., 36.

Chapter Two

Second Temple Judaism Literature

A major source for Wright's work and his fresh understanding of Paul, as well as the other advocates of the New Perspective, is early Second Temple Judaism literature. From reading these texts Wright claims to grasp a more accurate mindset of that time when Paul wrote his epistles. In addition to this, Paul himself was a Jew and a Pharisee, zealous for the Law. He too would have a common mindset with these Jewish writers, although Paul's writings would differ in the Messianic fulfillment in Jesus.

Throughout his work, Wright presents these early Jewish works as fairly consistent and portraying a common, little disputed, message. However illuminating these texts may or may not be, it is imperative that one approach these extra-biblical writings with caution. This is not meant to call into question Wright's scholarship, for he has proven to be vigilant in his methods and other studies. Nevertheless, intentional or not, Wright does not call into account the inconsistency of these Second Temple works on soteriology. These works are not as securely established as the readers of Wright might assume.[23]

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[23] D. A. Carson, Peter O'Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid, ed., *Justification and Variegated Nomism: The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism,* vol. 1. John Piper also gives an extensive list in his work, *The Future of Justification: A Response to N. T. Wright*, 35. This list includes: Simon Gathercole, *Where Then is Boasting? Early Jewish Soteriology and Paul's Response in Romans 1–5* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002); Mark Elliott, *The Survivors of Israel: A Reconsideration of the Theology of Pre-Christian Judaism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000); A. Andrew Das, *Paul, the Law and the Covenant* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001); Friedrich Avemarie, *Tora und Leben: Untersuchungen zur Heilsbedeutung der Tora in der fruhen rabbinischen Literatur* (Tubingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1996); Timo Laato, *Paul and Judaism: An Anthropological Approach* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1996).

For example, Wright, with the help of these extra-biblical texts, denies that the common notion of many sects of Judaism was works-righteousness.[24] Wright has argued that obedience is not how one gets in to the covenant but how one stays in it. However, some of these texts communicate, "Salvation, although it comes from God alone, is found in obedience to God's requirements."[25] Further, with respect to the inconsistency of grace-then-obedience, "it is still not entirely clear how 'salvation' can be by grace but 'staying saved' is a matter of strict obedience. If salvation can be lost by disobedience—i.e., if obedience is necessary to 'preserve' salvation—in what sense can we say . . . that 'salvation depends on the grace of God?'"[26] And finally, some of these texts communicate: "covenantal forgiveness is found in the doing of God-given deeds of righteousness, not apart from them."[27] Wright has also argued that the righteousness of God is his covenantal faithfulness, yet other scholars when examining these same documents conclude, "It is misleading, therefore, to speak of 'God's righteousness' as his 'covenantal-faithfulness.'"[28]

Because of their inconsistency, these writings would be fragile sources to advocate any system of understanding, let alone a whole new understanding of the entire works of one of the greatest authors of the New Testament. In addition to this, what plagues today's New Testament interpreters would also serve to be the same stumbling

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[24] Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said,* 113–114. However, to get the thrust of Wright's use of Second Temple literature, a thorough reading of this text is required.

[25] Mark A. Seifrid, "Righteousness Language in the Hebrew Scriptures and Early Judaism," in Carson, 434–435. This is based on 1QS 3.9b–12.

[26] Enns, Peter. "Expansions of Scripture," in Carson, 97.

[27] Seifrid, "Righteousness Language in the Hebrew Scriptures and Early Judaism," 438. This understanding came from 1QS 11.3.

[28]Ibid., 424.

block to interpreting these early Jewish writings. The same two thousand years of mindset that theologians are removed from the time of Paul's epistles serve as a hindrance to interpreting these extra-biblical works. In addition to this, it could be argued even more so, in that Christians have the Holy Spirit's help to interpret the inspired Word of God, so that through the Spirit's guidance they might know the mind of God.[29]

Theologians must be careful, when lacking confidence in God's Word, to call extra-biblical literature into account as a primary source to reinterpret the Word. This is not stated to advocate a position that takes no extra-biblical work into account; rather the intentions are to implore the proponents of the New Perspectives and their readers to exercise even more caution with their sources considering their inconsistencies. Extra-biblical literature should be taken into account; however, the strength of its contribution should be measured according to its consistency and accuracy. Responsible theologians must consider these sources; but, on the basis of the listed works, these sources provide a *possible* misconception on Wright's part.[30]

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[29] For discussion on this see Piper, *The Future of Justification: A Response to N. T. Wright,* 33–36.

[30] D. A. Carson, Peter O'Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid, ed., *Justification and Variegated Nomism: The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism,* vol. 1; Simon Gathercole, *Where Then is Boasting? Early Jewish Soteriology and Paul's Response in Romans 1–5* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002); Mark Elliott, *The Survivors of Israel: A Reconsideration of the Theology of Pre–Christian Judaism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000); A. Andrew Das, *Paul, the Law and the Covenant* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001); Friedrich Avemarie, *Tora und Leben: Untersuchungen zur Heilsbedeutung der Tora in der fruhen rabbinischen Literatur* (Tubingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1996); Timo Laato, *Paul and Judaism: An Anthropological Approach* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1996).

Chapter Three

Paul's Emphasis on Justification

According to Wright's understanding, Paul would emphasize justification in order to promote unity in the new body of Christ and also for assurance on the individual believer's part.[31] It is true, when speaking of justification in his epistles, that Paul is often concerned with believers who have already been saved. In addition to this, Luke does not portray Paul's explicit emphasis on justification in Acts, where Paul is largely dealing with unconverted Gentiles, the setting where the Gospel is to be preached. This might lead to the understanding that justification is applicable to already saved persons only, as Wright would describe it to be. However, there are two passages within Acts whereby this may be questioned.

In Acts 13 Paul, on the Sabbath, read from the Law and the Prophets. After this the rulers of the synagogue urged him to give a word of exhortation "for the people." At first glance Paul's audience seemed to be pious men, and one might disregard any reference to justification contained here as applicable to salvation.[32] A closer examination of Paul's speech reveals a different understanding. After giving a short narrative of some parts of Israel's history, Paul mentioned, "Brothers, sons of the family of Abraham, and those among you who fear God, to us has been sent this message of *this salvation*" (v. 26, emphasis mine). After speaking of how Jesus has fulfilled the Prophets and was raised from the dead, Paul made this statement in vv. 38–39, "gnwstoVn ou\n e[stw

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[31] Wright, *What Said Paul Really Said,* 94.

[32] In synagogues there were two classes of people: Jews (including proselytes) and "God-fearers" who were Gentiles that revered God but who were not yet circumcised. Paul probably is specifying these two groups.

uJmi'n, a[ndre" ajdelfoiv, o{ti diaV touvtou uJmi'n a[fesi" aJmartiw'n kataggevlletai, (kaiV) ajpoV pavntwn w|n oujk hjdunhvqhte ejn novmw/ Mwu>sevw" dikaiwqh'nai, ejn touvtw/ pa'" oJ pisteuvwn dikaiou'tai." ("Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses").

The Greek is provided to show what the ESV translates "freed" comes from the δικ- root. From this same root derives our words "righteousness" and "justification." They are, "indeed, two sides of the same coin."[33] All δικ- words "have to do with justice, with righteousness."[34] Therefore, perhaps Paul's quote could be read ". . . and by him everyone who believes is justified from everything from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses," as the HNV, KJV, and LITV (just to name a few) render dikaiwqh'nai and dikaiou'tai.

Although "this salvation" refers to what comes directly after, concerning the discussion of Jesus as the Messiah, and not so much vv. 38–39, they at least describe what the salvation entails: that sins are forgiven (as the overwhelming consensus would agree) and coupled with it is the justification that could not come by the Law of Moses. This is a message of salvation, the good news that resulted in that "many Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas" (v. 43). Therefore, Paul's Gospel preaching entails justification and not just the theme of "Jesus as King."[35] Wright is correct that justification has ecclesiological implications, "but justification in Paul is

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[33] Douglas J. Moo, 82.

[34] D. A. Carson, "The Vindication of Imputation: On Fields of Discourse and Semantic Fields, in Husbands, 51.

[35] Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective,* 9, 70, 154–161.

essentially, primarily soteriological. It is a *transfer* term describing what takes place in an individual's transition from wrath to grace," and not merely a *declarative* term.[36]

A second passage in Acts, namely 24:22–25, sheds light on what is entailed in Paul's Gospel to the unsaved. It deals precisely with what Wright denies. When Paul was in custody, he spoke of this righteousness to Felix. Perhaps since Felix had "a rather accurate knowledge of the Way" (v. 22), Paul was able to discuss more of what his Gospel entailed and accomplished. The text provides that Felix and his Jewish wife "heard him [Paul] speak about faith in Christ Jesus. And *as he reasoned about righteousness* and self-control and the coming judgment" (v. 25, emphasis mine). These two sentences are joined by the conjunction δε, and should not be read as two separate ideas. However, δε is used as a coordinate, connective, conjunction which functions as to add an additional element to the train of thought.[37] In other words, "righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment" (v. 25a) are continuing the same train of thought as "faith in Christ Jesus" (v. 24b) thus providing another example of righteousness contained in Paul's Gospel.[38]

Therefore, contrary to what Wright suggests, there have been instances in which Paul did include justification in his preaching to unsaved individuals. It is unfortunate that these instances were not written by Luke in Acts more often to solidify these claims.

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[36] Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *By Faith, Not by Sight: Paul and the Order of Salvation,* 45.

[37] Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar: Beyond the Basics,* 667–671. Wallace does not comment directly concerning this verse, however he gives different uses of the conjunction. Within his text, this usage of δε has been determined as such.

[38] Paul is explaining the Gospel to Felix, for what else would he explain to him? Paul is obsessed with preaching the Gospel and will do so in any opportunity that presents itself to him. There is no reason to believe this explanation to Felix would be any different than Paul's Defense before Agrippa in Acts 26. This is the Gospel, and Luke's summary of it in Acts 24:25 entails righteousness. This passage is presented to disprove Wright's statements that justification and/or righteousness has no play in his Gospel. However, it does not prove or disprove imputation nor define the righteousness as to specify whose it is.

Nevertheless, the given passages contain Paul speaking to some unbelievers and in one case “many Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas” (v. 43).

Chapter Four

The Believer's Righteousness

It is without dispute that the believer has a righteousness that is required by God for his acceptance. This seems to be a major concern for the salvation of believers throughout the New Testament epistles. The question at hand concerns this righteousness: What is it? Of what does it consist? How does the believer obtain it? Perhaps all of this can be asked accordingly: How does a holy God make unholy sinners fit for his presence?

Prior to the fall, man was in right relationship with God, and it can be understood that since the fall, history's main theme is the attempt to reconcile this relationship. Wright proposes that "the covenant is there to solve the problems within creation. God called Abraham to solve the problem of evil, the problem of Adam, the problem of the world."[39] This is an accurate observation. It still remains to be answered by what means is man reconciled within the parameters of this covenant. This is a major point of divergence within the traditional view and the view held by Wright. Both views turn to Christ for the answer, yet again in different ways.

Man, within this covenant, is unable to fulfill his part according to the Law. Wright clarifies that God called Abraham to this; however, he was part of the problem. Abraham, like all of humanity, had an indwelling sin nature, with which no one can please God. Romans 3:23 is clear in that "all have sinned" and as a result, "fall short of the glory of God;" they have failed to keep their side of the covenant. All flesh, having

[39] Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective,* 24.

the sinful nature, is bound to sin, resulting in a failure to keep the covenant.[40] However, through Christ, who is God in flesh, man's requirement within the covenant (perfect obedience to God) has been fulfilled.

To clarify and understand exactly man's part within the covenant, and God's requirements for humanity, one has only to turn to the Old Testament to realize the effort given to make people and things holy in order to be acceptable and of service to God. Anything that becomes unholy is either discarded or steps are taken to bring it back into holy status.[41] Throughout Leviticus and other Old Testament books, God demands holiness from his people for he himself is holy.[42] This same theme is contained in both Paul's and Peter's message.[43] This is the glory of God, his holiness. Holiness is what Adam and all humanity has fallen short of in their sin (Rom 3:23). This is what God requires of believers in his covenant, "without which no one will see the Lord" (Heb 12:14). One passage that might illuminate this discussion is Num 15:40, "So you shall remember and do all my commandments, and be holy to your God." Therefore, holiness consists of obedience to God's commandments.

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[40] For a discussion of immediate imputation of Adam's sin verses mediate imputation, see John Murray, *The Imputation of Adam's Sin*.

[41] Many of these examples can be observed when Moses gives initial instructions to Israel, especially in the post-Exodus account and all throughout Leviticus. For one example, Ex 31:14 "You shall keep the Sabbath, because it is holy for you. Everyone who profanes it shall be put to death. Whoever does any work on it, that soul shall be cut off from among his people."

[42] For more examples of this see Lev 11:44–45, 19:2, 20:7, 26, 21:8, 22:32; Num 15:40; Deut 14:2, 23:14.

[43] Paul writes in Eph 1:4 and 5:27 as the goal for the body of believers is that they might be holy. Peter echoes exactly the Old Testament theme in 1 Pet 1:15–16 and in 2:5. Peter presents the body of believers as to be a "holy priesthood."

D. A. Carson agrees. In an essay to prove his point, Carson cites a fellow scholar's unpublished letter. Mark A. Seifrid writes in response to an idea that the Old Testament does not demand utter righteousness and holiness:

> I shall not here pursue his dilution of the demands of the mosaic covenant by appeal to a certain understanding of "perfection" except to note that he stands at odds with Paul, James, the author of Hebrews, Jesus, the prophets of Israel and Moses himself. Other than that, he is in perfect agreement with Scripture. He doesn't understand that our acts of sin are expressions of unbelief and the desire to annihilate God. This desire resides in all our hearts . . . The Law merely exposes us for what we are.[44]

Perhaps it might be easier to identify man's failures in order to put into light what he was supposed to do. Romans 1–3 gives the explanation of how man has diverged from God. In summary, Paul proclaims, "For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written, 'None is righteous, no not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one'" (Rom 3:9b–12). Paul has quoted parts of Psalms 14 and 53 in order to show man's depravity. What is regarded by the statement, "None is righteous," is the following: "No one understands," "no one seeks for God," and "no one does good." From this it can be concluded that there is a failure to understand God and/or what he requires, a failure to seek after God (possibly for this understanding), and finally a moral failure.[45] Perhaps the reversal of these three noted failures

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[44] Carson, "The Vindication of Imputation: On Fields of Discourse and Semantic Fields," 71.

[45] It is important to note that the believer's righteousness consisting of any moral quality is denied by Wright. *Paul in Fresh Perspective,* 119. These verses do not show the only failures of humanity

summarizes, at least partly, what it means to uphold the covenant and to be righteous. The reversal of these three failures would be accomplished in a perfect relationship with God, that is the knowledge of God, the pursuit of God, and the moral obedience to what he commands.

It can now be concluded that man's part within the covenant is perfect obedience to what God commands. This will achieve a status of holiness that God had commanded for his people all throughout the Old Testament and is still the desired goal in Peter and Paul. The New Testament is clear: "For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it" (Jas 2:10). Also, "For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God but the does of the law who will be justified" (Rom 2:12–13). This failure to keep the law is also emphasized elsewhere throughout the New Testament.[46] The problem intensifies in that what God commands of believers is contained within the law; yet, no one is righteous by the law's standards, except for one, Jesus, who himself said that he has come to fulfill the Law (Matt 5:17).

Does God require the Law, or does the Law embody something greater? The Law was given to God's already chosen people. It was to show his people how they are to relate to God, not how they are to become chosen. Certainly, the purpose of the Law is summed up in what is found six times alone in the book of Deuteronomy, "You shall love

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encompassed in their unrighteousness, however, they are of utmost importance in that they summarize Paul's discussion on man's depravity and provides a bridge to the "righteousness of God" in v. 21.

[46] See Rom 3:20, 28; Gal 2:16, 21, 3:11, 5:4.

the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might."[47] For Jesus himself said it is the greatest commandment, and on this, along with loving your neighbor as yourself, "depend all the Law and the Prophets" (Matt 22:40). Therefore, God requires man in the covenant to relate with him in holiness. For the Law is relational, and every sin against it is a sin against the purpose for which God created man, that is to be in perfect relationship with him, consisting in obedient love. Gaffin clarifies: "Accordingly sin is *relational*, or better yet anti-relational."[48] This is how Paul can speak of the Law as showing man's sin and how he has fallen in Adam (Rom 3:20, 5:12–21, 7:7). Furthermore, "The Law merely exposes us for what we are;" that man has fallen from a right relationship with God.[49] Therefore, the righteousness believers now have, which comes from Christ, consists of perfect obedience to God, which embodies a right relationship God created man to have with himself.

It seems as if the paramount difference between Wright's perspective and the traditional view is the need of this righteousness on an individual level or only in a representative figure on behalf of God's people. Wright's Fresh Perspective has Christ fulfilling man's part of the covenant as a representative for humanity, which suffices it to conclude that no imputation of Christ's righteousness is needed for the believer's righteousness, that the believer's righteousness *from* God, "is not to be confused with the righteousness *of* God."[50] The faith in the fact that Christ has accomplished this on behalf of humanity constitutes in and of itself the righteousness God requires. Because Christ

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[47] See Deut 6:5, 10:12, 11:1, 11:13, 13:3, 30:6.

[48] Gaffin, *By Faith, Not by Sight,* 30.

[49] Carson, "The Vindication of Imputation: On Fields of Discourse and Semantic Fields," 71.

[50] Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said,* 124; emphasis mine.

has accomplished this on behalf of humanity, covenant membership is opened up to those who believe in him. The gift of righteousness God gives to the believer can be understood as covenantal membership.[51]

Of course this does not satisfy the righteousness that God requires according to the definition previously given. Covenant membership regarded as righteousness, and righteousness consisting in perfect obedience to the Law are two different things. This is a distinction Wright intends to make, a distinction between Christ's righteousness—his perfect obedience and his covenantal faithfulness, and man's righteousness—his covenantal membership. According to the scheme of Wright's understanding, this works perfectly; however, there is an objection to be raised.

Romans 8:4 stands in the way of the distinction between Christ's "covenant righteousness," and man's righteousness as "covenant members." This passage does not fit in Wright's scheme of Christ fulfilling the covenant on humanity's behalf, opening up the possibility of membership to humanity. There is more that is required on man's part to be in perfect relationship with God. Holiness is required for the believer to be brought back into fellowship, "Be holy for I am holy" (Lev 11:44–45). So how can this be done? The passage states: "the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled *in us"* (emphasis mine), but by whom? This was written after God condemned sin in the flesh by sending his Son. Therefore, since all flesh is sinful (except that of Jesus), then it cannot be the active ingredient of this statement. Instead, we walk "not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (Rom 8:4b).

This discussion must be paused to see the disconnect between this passage and Wright's perspective. According to Wright, only Christ fulfills the "righteous

[51] Ibid.

requirement of the law" and the righteousness of believers is merely, might it be said for contrast sake, covenantal membership.[52] Romans 8:4 seems to portray the law being fulfilled in the believer (i{na toV dikaivwma tou' novmou plhrwqh'/ ejn hJmi'n). The Greek behind "righteous requirement" is a single word. This encompasses the totality of the law's demands which are fulfilled in the believer in Christ.[53] Not only would this consist of covenantal membership *but also covenantal faithfulness*, which is exactly what Wright describes Jesus as having on the basis of his covenant faithfulness, his perfect obedience to the same demands of the law.

Romans 8:4 contributes that: "the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us." Romans 1-3 establishes that man's flesh cannot fulfill these righteous requirements, and Christ has said himself that he was to fulfill the law (Matt 5:17). There is a contrast in man and the law, and, man in Christ and the law. Romans 10:5–8 captures this contrast. Paul has replaced what Deuteronomy originally has as the Torah (Rom 10:5: "Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law"), with Christ (Rom 10:6: "righteousness based on faith").

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[52] Ibid.

[53] Moo, *Encountering the Book of Romans,* 133.

Deut 30:11–14	Rom 10:6–8
For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven that you should say, "Who will ascend into heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?" Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should Say, "Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?" But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it.	Do not say in your heart, "Who will ascend into heaven?" (that is to bring Christ down) or "Who will descend into the abyss?" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart (that is the word of faith that we proclaim).

The parallel is strikingly profound. The "command that I command you" in Deuteronomy is replaced with "Christ" in Romans.[54] But what is most profound is that this "command that I command you" might be summed up to the prior Deut 30:2b "obey his voice with all your heart and with all your soul," with the result being,

> then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you . . . and will circumcise your hearts and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you

[54] Murray briefly addresses this as well. See *The Epistle to the Romans,* vol. 2, 54.

> may live . . . And you shall again obey the voice of the LORD and keep all his commandments that I command you today. (Deut 30:3, 6, 8)

Christ is the fulfillment of this "command" whereby it is also fulfilled in the believer so that he might partake of the benefiting result. And notice the result, "so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul" (Deut 30:6). With the "command that I commanded you" fulfilled, believers themselves will experience what is the aim of the law found throughout Deuteronomy, which is a right relationship with God. Therefore, it is necessary that in order for believers to experience these benefits of salvation they must obey completely "the command that I commanded you," and this through the obedience of Christ by faith.[55]

[55] Please observe, however, as Murray notes, that the intention of Deuteronomy was not to produce legalism (Deut 7:7ff., 9:6ff., 10:15ff., 14:2ff., 15:15f., 29:9f., 29, 32:9, 33:29). This can be found in *The Epistle to the Romans,* 52.

Chapter Five

Imputation Explained

Perhaps in dealing with Wright, who relies heavily on Second Temple Judaism and the Old Testament, the most relevant passage is Romans 4. For this discussion, D. A. Carson's work will be relied upon. The focal point in this discussion is the "faith counted as righteousness" contained in this passage. Is the faith itself considered the righteousness or does it also incorporate the imputation of some alien righteousness? Gundry's statement clarifies the position of most New Perspective advocates: Abraham's righteousness "consists of faith even though faith is not itself a work."[56] What is to be examined here is whether this interpretation of the faith itself consists of Abraham's righteousness, or if a different interpretation of Genesis 15 is more accurate.

Within Romans 4, Carson notes that neither the verb nor the grammatical form will permit a decision regarding the question concerning whether this faith itself is viewed as righteousness or if this faith is better viewed as an instance in which "*something* is imputed to another *as something else.*"[57] Romans 4:5 is vital to the understanding of this chapter in that the God whom Abraham had faith in is a God who justifies the ungodly. In Abraham's case his faith consisted in trusting in the promise that God graciously gave to him. Carson notes that 4:3 is clarified by 4:4 in that the faith that is imputed to Abraham as righteousness is unmerited, and this same understanding is

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[56] Robert H. Gundry, "The Nonimputation of Christ's Righteousness," in Husbands, 8.

[57] Carson, "The Vindication of Imputation: On Fields of Discourse and Semantic Fields," 58.

applied to 4:5.[58] However, when applied to Abraham, he would be considered under the same label, "ungodly." Therefore Carson concludes,

> In Paul's understanding, then, God's imputation of Abraham's faith to Abraham as righteousness *cannot* be grounded in the assumption that that faith is itself intrinsically righteous, so that God's "imputing" of it to Abraham is no more than a recognition of what it intrinsically is. If God is counting faith to Abraham as righteousness, *he is counting him righteous*—not because Abraham *is* righteous in some inherent way (How can he be? He is ajsebh"'!), but simply because Abraham trusts God and his gracious promise. In that sense, then, we are dealing with what systematicians call an alien righteousness.[59]

So it has been established that Abraham has a righteousness that is not his own, but it is left to be determined if that righteousness is Christ's own as traditional Christianity holds. Paul moves on to discuss how David speaks of the same unmerited, alien, righteousness by quoting part of Psalm 32 (Rom 4:6) in which a parallel can be observed with the preceding verse:

4:5	God	justifies	the ungodly
4:6	God	credits righteousness	apart from works[60]

Since the righteousness is alien and unmerited, and "justifies" is parallel to "credits [or for this discussion, imputes] righteousness," then justification is alien to the believer as well. Carson also notes a parallel in chapter 4 with the preceding chapter which extends the previous parallel:

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[58] Ibid., 60.

[59] Ibid.

[60] Ibid., 61.

4:5	God	justifies	the ungodly
4:6	God	credits righteousness	apart from works
3:28	[a person]	is justified	apart from the works of the law[61]

The parallel turns to a passive voice and it can be seen again that the "justification of the ungodly *means* the imputation of righteousness," but something additional can be noted.[62] This same theme lends itself to the following section, namely 4:9–11. Paul makes a statement in 4:11 explaining that just as Abraham was righteous before circumcision making him "the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well" (Rom 4:11b).[63] Therefore, the text declares believers have righteousness imputed *to* them instead of faith imputed *as* righteousness. Paul is going to great lengths within this chapter to show that faith (ejk pivstew") is being used as an instrument. The purpose of this instrumental nature is to receive this righteousness, and the object of this faith is God:

> Faith in such a God is faith that is imputed as righteousness, not because the faith is itself meritorious but because it focuses absolutely on the God who justifies the ungodly by the means he has promised.[64]

Let attention now be turned to another critical passage for this understanding, Phil 3:8–9. Here again the instrumentality of faith can be observed, "which comes through faith in Christ . . . righteousness from God that depends on faith." But in addition to this,

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[61] Ibid, 63. The parallel noted (on p. 63) is that such faith excludes boasting (3:27– 4:1–2), faith is necessary to preserve grace (3:28- 4:3–8), faith is necessary if Jews and Gentiles alike are to be saved (3:29–30- 4:9–17), Christian faith, then, far from overturning the OT, fulfills the OT anticipation (3:31- 4:18–25).

[62] Carson, "The Vindication of Imputation: On Fields of Discourse and Semantic Fields," 63.

[63] Ibid.

[64] Ibid., 67.

it can be further noted that the potential trouble of interpreting Romans 4 is resolved—this righteousness the believer has does not consist of faith.

Furthermore, 2 Cor 5:19–21 must be considered, "that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them . . . For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Several things can be noted here. Although the text does not explicitly say that the believer's trespasses are imputed to Christ, but only "not counting their trespasses against them" (v. 19), it still can be concluded that since "he made him to be sin who knew no sin" (v. 21), then the sin in focus here is imputed to Christ from the believer. With the imputation of the believer's sin to Christ concluded, it is logically consistent to understand the righteousness of God is imputed to the believer. In light of Romans 4 this understanding is consistent, in that the righteousness is not the believer's since he is not righteous, but ungodly. When this is examined alongside Philippians 3, the believing/faith does not itself consist of righteousness. Therefore, it can be concluded that the imputed righteousness the believer has is the righteousness of God.

A problem may arise in that these texts have concluded that the believer has the righteousness of God, which may lead to a false distinction from the righteousness of Christ, of who traditional Reformed Protestants believe their righteousness consists. Carson, again, may be of help. Second Corinthians 5 cannot be overlooked, "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself," or better put, "God was reconciling the world to himself *in Christ*."[65] The Father and the Son can sometimes be understood as distinct; "these sorts of distinctions, then, pertain to the respective roles that the Father and the

[65] Ibid., 70.

Son enjoy *relative to each other*."[66] Nevertheless, the New Testament affirms that all the Father does, the Son also does.[67] The New Testament also takes Old Testament terms reserved for *Yahweh* and makes them refer to Jesus Christ.[68] Carson concludes,

> The New Testament writers should take pains to say that Jesus does all that God does, and refrain from saying that the Father does all that Jesus does [with respect to their roles, ex. dying on the cross . . .]. Yet once the point is observed, one cannot leap from our careful avoidance of patripassianism to the conclusion that although God imputes (his) righteousness to us, Christ does not impute (his) righteousness to us. For in the case of patripassianism, we are denying that the Father does everything the Son does, if what the Son does is conditioned by the incarnation while in the case of imputation the action is fundamentally God's, and everything the Father does the Son also does.[69]

This is why these biblical texts stress the importance of "in Christ."[70] Therefore, since God has accomplished this in Christ, when God imputes his righteousness, the righteousness also imputed is Christ's as well.[71]

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[66] Ibid.

[67] This can be observed especially in John 5:16–30.

[68] Ibid.

[69] Ibid.

[70] Phil 3:8–9: "be found in him [Christ] . . . through faith in Christ . . .;" 2 Cor 5:19–21: "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself . . . so that in him [Christ] we might become the righteousness of God."

[71] Also agreed by Carson, "The Vindication of Imputation: On Fields of Discourse and Semantic Fields," 71.

Chapter Six

The Object of the Believer's Faith

What is required for a convert to believe? In what must he or she have faith? Within this discussion of the possibility of the imputation of Christ's righteousness, theologians might blur or cast shadows on what faith encompasses. There is a tendency to forget Christians, young in the faith, and those who do not have the privilege and/or resources to look into such things as imputation and covenant theology. Surely this understanding is not necessary for salvation.

So what is necessary? With the implications of Romans 4 discussed in chapter five, this chapter will set out to determine what is necessary for faith. Romans 4:5 seems to define faith: "And to the one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith . . . ." Perhaps it can be deduced from this statement that faith is defined as "trusting God to justify oneself, being ungodly." This contains a vital criterion: acknowledging that one's self is ungodly, that one has fallen short of the holiness, the glory of God. Therefore the trusting of God is believing that he will do a work, whatever it may be, to enable the ungodly's justification.

Most Christians most likely do not know of the current discussion that is underway and may have no knowledge of imputation. Furthermore, they may have many misconceptions about Christianity and God. Nevertheless they are still saved. What Christians believe is that God justifies/makes them right apart from themselves (the ungodly). This is saving faith. However in the context of Romans 4, this faith that is counted as righteousness encompasses whatever is needed to achieve this righteousness. It is the instrument. If the previous discussion on God requiring holiness on behalf of

every believer is accurate, then this faith that is counted as righteousness includes the imputation of holiness (righteousness). If God does not require holiness, then the faith does not include its imputation. The faith achieves what God requires.

Now Wright would point out the disconnect between this and what Paul preaches in Acts, that is the Kingship of Christ Jesus and his resurrection. These themes are in fact true and vital, and it is by them that the believer has faith that God will justify him. For the resurrection of Jesus proves that he is the true King and Messiah of the World. To be more precise, the believer has faith that since Jesus is the risen King, the true Messiah of the World, he has the authority and power to justify the ungodly, and will by the believer's faith.

The language of Romans 4 can become difficult especially when considering the Old Testament elect and their means of salvation. Faith must be in Christ and his ability to supply the righteousness the believer lacks. How, then, was Israel to know of an alien righteousness that was achieved by the second Adam and available to them by faith? How were Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, and all the other spiritual pioneers and giants to place their faith in a Messiah who would not come until hundreds of years after their own deaths? Hebrews 11 leaves no possible doubt that they were saved by faith. The fact of the matter is that there was no way they knew about salvation through Jesus Christ of Nazareth, nor is it the least bit logical to argue such.

Perhaps Leon Wood can aid this discussion concerning the salvation of Old Testament saints. He explains, "since the Fall, man has been spiritually dead, and he must be made alive with new life by regeneration, if he is to become spiritually alive."[72]

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[72] Leon J. Wood, *The Holy Spirit in the Old Testament*, 84.

The depravity of man was the same then as it is now. Man is spiritually dead and is in need of some outside power to bring new life to him (Eph 2:1–4). The coming of Christ did not bring about a change in man's depravity. Wood further explains, "Since this is the only way of salvation possible for man, and since man has been in need of this salvation since the time of Adam, it must be that Old Testament people had to be, and were, saved, or regenerated, in the same way as New Testament people."[73]

Wood unpacks this statement to explain that this "same way" is not faith in the person of Jesus Christ, but the way of salvation for every believer has always been through and by the Spirit. This is one of his major points that he wishes to accomplish in his work, that the Spirit indwelt Old Testament believers. This is based on the reasoning that the believers in the Old Testament could not keep the Law just as believers today cannot keep the Law in and of themselves. Furthermore, because of Adam's sin, man is born with a corrupt, sinful nature. There has never been one, save Jesus, who has had the ability to do so. Therefore, it must be concluded that if this is so, then "they must have been kept by God, and this means, surely, the Spirit of God."[74]

This is the same Spirit of God today who saves the believer by giving him faith. The faith that the believer today has is in Christ, but it is still left to be said in what the Old Testament believer had faith. Wood answers,

> The Old Testament person was counted righteous simply on the basis of believing God. By the time of Abraham, God had revealed a certain amount of information, and Abraham's responsibility was to believe that amount. By David's time, more had been revealed, and it was necessary for a person to

[73] Ibid., 66.

[74] Ibid., 70.

> believe that additional amount. To Isaiah was revealed definite information even regarding Christ, and by his time people could, and had to, believe this also. People simply had to believe God and what He had said by their time, and, when they did, they were judged as righteous by God, which is another way of saying they were regenerated.[75]

Not all of Wood's quotation is to be advocated and explained here. Nevertheless, the intention of providing his explanation is to arrive at the point that the Old Testament person was counted righteous simply on the basis of believing God in the capacity he presents himself.

The Old Testament believer's faith consists in an object provided by God. Is it not noticeable in the list of the men and women of faith in Hebrews 11 that there was a promise or at least an object of faith? Abraham's object of faith was the command from God to move to a new land. Noah believed God's warning of the coming flood. These explanations could continue to show that there was always a promise to believe or faith to obey; however the point is made. The object of faith from one Old Testament believer to another is not always the same, nor does it need to be. The only criterion is that the believer has faith in the one who makes the promise or gives the command. This, however, changes with the coming of Jesus Christ who is the only way and the truth (John 14:6). In other words, the object of faith, with his coming, is now and forevermore Jesus Christ. The faith placed in Christ not only believes he to be the true Son of God, as Wright advocates, but also that he possesses the ability and will make the sinner right. This is the good news of the Gospel.

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[75] Ibid., 66.

Chapter Seven

Benefiting from N. T. Wright's Theology

Wright does well to emphasize often overlooked victories the believer has in Christ, that is, a "great victory over sin and death, the real enemies of the people of God and of the whole world" rather than a defeat of physical, worldly enemies.[76] This victory is true of God and is part of the good news of the Gospel; yet, it is often left to be taught and understood in traditional circles. Included in this is the teaching of future justification, one of the many beneficial results of Wright's theology, which will be the focus of the remainder of the paper.

Wright's emphasis on justification is to show who belongs to God—that it does not deal with salvation, but rather ecclesiology. It is consistent to observe his emphasis on future justification, since just as present justification shows who belongs to God for the sake of fellowship in the present, future justification will be that final open, public declaration of who truly belongs to God. Wright explains: "The whole point about 'justification by faith' is that it is something which happens *in the present time* (Romans 3.26) as a proper anticipation of the eventual judgment which will be announced on the basis of the whole life led in the future (Romans 2.1–16)."[77] Again Wright notes, "Faith is the badge of covenant membership, not something someone 'performs' as a kind of initiation test,"[78] and again, "On the last day the final judgment will be made on the evidence on the complete life that someone has led."[79]

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[76] Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said,* 93.

[77] Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective,* 57.

[78] Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 125.

There seems to be a lack of consistency in Wright's understanding. If by faith alone believers are justified now, how is it that they will be justified "on the last day" by the "evidence on the complete life that someone has led?" Piper notes,

> Thus, it could appear that Wright is falling right in line with the historic Protestant view that the role of our works at the last judgment will be to *show* that we are in Christ, and thus function as *evidences* and *signs* that "the Spirit of the living Christ has been at work in" us, so that justification is *not*, in the traditionally negative sense, "based on" our works, but rather is "in accordance with" our works.[80]

Wright does note elsewhere that "the Spirit is at work to do, within believers, what the Law could not do—ultimately to give life . . . "[81] However, he is not as insistent on the Spirit as the source of the power to provide these works as proofs of one's belonging to God as it might be wished. Quotes like this need to permeate Wright's work on these topics, but unfortunately this is not always the case.

Future justification is not a new doctrine. It is a rediscovered doctrine that is usually only discussed in more academic circles. The realization of its importance must be understood as it is a vital component that is lacking in the pulpit and the church's teaching. The future justification of the believer is something that is to be highly anticipated with great hope and joy. In addition to this, it provides deeper understanding

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[79] N. T. Wright, "Paul in Different Perspectives," Lecture 1.

[80] Piper, *The Future of Justification: A Response to N. T. Wright,* 120. However Piper rejects this appearance and proposes a contradiction in Wright's theology where by faith, believers are justified now leaving the future justification by works alone.

[81] Wright, "New Perspectives on Paul," 254.

of how Christ has achieved this victory over sin and evil, providing believers more accurate knowledge in which they can worship him.

There is indeed a future justification. A few passages that are normally cited for its validity are:

Rom 2:13—For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified.

Rom 5:19—For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

Gal 5:5—For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness.

2 Tim 4:8—Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.

It might be beneficial to first consider the ramifications of Jesus' resurrection and understand how it relates to the believer's resurrection. Jesus' resurrection from the dead proves him to be the true Messiah. This is what Wright speaks of when he is quick to emphasize:

> the crucified Jesus of Nazareth had been raised from the dead; that he was thereby proved to be Israel's Messiah; that he was thereby installed as Lord of the world.[82]

The significance of Saul's Damascus Road experience was that he was forced to accept the crucial fact: "the Way" that he was persecuting was indeed the truth, that Jesus was raised from the dead and is the true Messiah. The resurrection shows that although Jesus

[82] Ibid., 46.

was a substitutionary sacrifice and bore the judicial penalty of sin in his death, he was without sin.[83] The act of raising him from the dead was a public declaration by God that Jesus is his Son (Rom 1:4).[84]

In the same way it is logically consistent to conclude that the believer's resurrection is the public declaration of his or her identity as a true child of God. The judicial significance of Christ's resurrection for the believer is made plain in Rom 4:25, "who was delivered up for our trespasses and was raised for our justification." Because of his/her resurrection the believer can be assured in two ways. First and foremost, the believer can be assured that Jesus is the true Messiah and his claims to be God are true. Since he is God, what he claimed in the flesh will be true; the believer's salvation is secure. Secondly, since Christ was raised from the dead, believers will be raised as well. This can be argued negatively too as Paul does to explain that the denial of Christ's resurrection is the denial of the believer's resurrection (1 Cor 15:17).[85]

The union of the believer with Christ is crucial for this understanding. "The resurrection is exponential of Christ's justification based on his righteousness, and the believer's justification is a function or manifestation of union with Christ in his resurrection."[86] Within this union the believer experiences his death to the sinful nature in the death of Jesus. Believers also experience the resurrection of Christ and in this

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[83] Richard B. Gaffin Jr., "Justification and Eschatology," in Oliphint, 30. Gaffin also notes on p. 37 that "it is insufficient merely for Jesus to shed his blood for the justification of believers (Rom 5:9), because Jesus' eschatological acquittal is tethered to his resurrection from the dead (1 Tim 3:16)."

[84] Gaffin notes that Christ's resurrection was not so much a display of divine power, but rather the vindication of Christ's divinity. Gaffin, *By Faith, Not by Sight,* 66.

[85] Ibid., 61.

[86] Gaffin, "Justification and Eschatology," 7.

sense are already justified, but in the sense that they are not resurrected yet, they are still to be justified.[87] This is why Paul can speak in 2 Cor 4:16 of "our outer nature is wasting away . . ." while also speaking elsewhere that we have been "raised with Christ" and because of this, to "seek things that are above" (Col 3:1–2).

Within this scheme of the believer's resurrection as already–not yet, the Pauline phenomenon of indicative-imperative can be explained.[88] Often in Pauline epistles there is a stated fact (for example, Eph 5:8a: "now you are light in the Lord") followed by an imperative (v. 8b: "Walk as children of light"). Every indicative part of the formula is founded and made possible by the union with Christ; that is, it is a fact on the basis of the resurrection that the believer has experienced in Christ's own resurrection. In other words, the believer is justified in the indicative according to Christ's resurrection. The imperative, "not yet," side of this reasoning comes on the basis that the believer is not resurrected and the reality of the flesh is still at hand. Therefore it can be concluded "for Christians, then, Christ's justification, given with his resurrection, becomes theirs, when united to the resurrected, that is, justified Christ, by faith, his righteousness is reckoned as theirs or imputed to them."[89] Paul's appeal to the believers is, "become what you are."[90]

Christ experienced victory over death in his physical resurrection and his justification is complete. However, this victory for the believer has not been completed just yet. Paul speaks of this in 1 Cor 15:25–26. Gaffin notes,

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[87] Ibid., 8.

[88] See Rom 6:2; 1 Cor 5:7; Gal 3:27, 5:1, 25; Eph 5:8; Col 3:1–4, 9–10 This list, however, is not intended to be exhaustive of Pauline indicative-imperative examples.

[89] Gaffin, *By Faith, Not by Sight,* 84.

[90] Carson, "The Vindication of Imputation: On Fields of Discourse and Semantic Fields," 48.

> By his own bodily resurrection, as the "firstfruits," death's final and complete destruction has already occurred for Christ personally and so is assured for the rest of the harvest. But for them their actual, bodily participation in that destruction has yet to occur.[91]

With the death of the believer's physical flesh comes the complete mortification and death of the sinful nature. That is why when Paul urges believers to "become what you are," he is insistent that they identify with the resurrected Christ, where their final victory will be complete and so he can proclaim, "consider yourselves dead to sin . . . Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies . . ." (Rom 6:11–12). The sinful nature is still present and submission to it is still possible, but Paul's appeal is for believers to submit, rather, to the new nature, the nature according to the Spirit. For the believer has indeed died to sin, but the effects of the death will not be complete until the believer is free from this physical body (Col 3:3).

There still remains a problem to be addressed. The New Testament, including Paul, tends to promote works as having a great deal to do with this future justification.

Matt—16:27 For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done.

John—5:28–29 Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.

Rom 2:6—He will render to each one according to his works.

Gal 6:7–9—Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap

[91] Gaffin, "Justification and Eschatology," 11.

> corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.

Rev 20:13—And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they have done.

Rev 22:12—Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay everyone for what he as done.

On the one hand, Wright emphasizes man's responsibility in this matter. On the other, some might declare that since it is by Christ's righteousness that the believer is saved, then by that same righteousness will he or she be judged concerning the above passages. If in fact this is true, then Wright's reasoning is not false, but underdeveloped.

This emphasis is to be taken, not figuratively, that it is Christ's righteousness that is being judged, rather literal works done by man. Gaffin explains it:

> For Christians, future judgment according to works does not operate according to a different principle than their already having been justified by faith. The difference is that the final judgment will be the open manifestation of that present justification, their being "openly acquitted" as we have seen. And in that future judgment their obedience, their works, are not the ground or basis. Nor are they (co-)instrumental, a coordinate instrument for appropriating divine approbation as they supplement faith. Rather, they are the essential and manifest criterion of that faith.[92]

[92] Gaffin, *By Faith, Not by Sight,* 98.

In other words, a proper equation is not works = salvation as the legalist would hold, nor is it faith + works = salvation as Catholics might believe. It is not even faith = salvation which is antinomianism. The correct equation is faith = salvation + works. It is as the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (11:2) states "Faith . . . is the alone instrument of justification: yet is it not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but works by love."

The Holy Spirit, who is powerful enough to raise the dead and impute righteousness to the believer, is also powerful enough to enable the believer to do such works. That is why in Rom 2:6, every man will be rendered "according [kataV] to his works." It is not "on the basis of his works" but according to, that is, corresponding to his deeds. The deeds correspond to what the reality of its owner's spiritual condition. If by the Spirit the man is alive, the Spirit's manifestation must and will produce its fruit, evident in works. If the man is still dead in his sins, then his works will provide the evidence; even the apparent good works will be tainted by sin. Thus Jesus' statement will always be true, "A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit" (Matt 7:18).

The order of the resurrection and final judgment must be noted. According to 1 Cor 15:44 believers are raised in their spiritual bodies. This in and of itself is the future justification. By the believers' resurrection, God is publicly declaring them to be his sons and daughters when what is raised is imperishable, raised in glory and in power (vv. 42, 43). Therefore the judgment by works will be a further testament of what was declared by the believers' resurrection, that the Spirit of God is in them, and they are his children.

To summarize what has been stated, as Gaffin has taught, "believers are already justified—by faith. But they are yet to be justified—by sight."[93]

[93] Ibid., 88.

Conclusion

Thus far the logic of Wright and why he teaches what he does has been examined. He is consistent in declaring that he believes the Gospel to be the proclamation of Jesus' death and resurrection, declaring him to be the true Messiah. The omission of justification and/or imputation from this Gospel message is in accordance with his stance on justification being ecclesiological rather than soteriological; it shows who is a believer for the benefit of fellowship. Furthermore, Wright asserts that the believer's righteousness consists of covenant membership on the basis of Christ's fulfilling humanity's part of the covenant, what it has failed to do since the fall. This is the display of the righteousness of God, how God can "be both faithful to the covenant and just in his dealings with the whole creation."[94] In Christ's act of fulfilling this righteousness, God has acted decisively to solve the problem of evil, the problem of sin.

Some serious issues have been raised that call into question the accuracy of Wright's proposal. In chapter two several scholars were provided who question the conclusions Wright and other New Perspective advocates make on Second Temple Judaism literature. Chapter three explored the Pauline usage of justification and finds that it indeed is contained within his speeches to unbelievers in the book of Acts. Chapter four explored what is required on behalf of man to be in the presence of God and examine what the believer's righteousness must be. It was concluded that the believer's need is more than Wright's covenantal membership. It must be the holiness and perfect righteousness of Christ. In defense of imputation, much of Carson's work was incorporated, along with other scholars, in chapter five. Finally, the distinction between

[94] Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective,* 29.

the content of Old Testament and New Testament faith has been addressed. If the reader does not find these evidences conclusive, he or she must be cautious of what is chosen to accept otherwise.

One can appreciate Wright's teaching on Jesus' Kingship as Messiah, an uncommon emphasis today in which much can be learned. In addition to taking a different perspective than he does, there should be a fear of where Wright's teachings might lead if followed to their ultimate conclusions. Wright's understanding of the Gospel and idea of justification take away from the glory of Christ and what is the believer's in his union with him. The believer's righteousness is indeed Christ's righteousness through imputation. The ramification of Wright's omission of this cherished belief takes away this avenue of glorifying the Redeemer. It is not intended to advocate this position on the mere basis that it makes the Savior look more glorious. May it never be that any believer worship God for something he knows is not true. Believers are to worship God in truth. Not only has it been asserted that Wright's definition of Gospel is incomplete, but evangelical theologians must see a problem with tolerating it and be motivated by the fact that it robs Christ of this glory.

The motivation for this paper derives from the same concern that Wright himself has about correct theology. With this said, the final chapter was written to show what we *can* learn from him. It is consistent with Wright's theology to observe his emphasis on future justification. This doctrine can still be reconciled with the traditional view of justification even though it fits into Wright's theology. Certain intricacies between the traditional understanding and Wright's will vary. A proper understanding of this doctrine will lead the believer to cherish future justification. Unfortunately, its teaching and

preaching is often absent in the church today. Future justification adds to the hope of the believer's victory in God and manifests itself in joy inexpressible. All of this made is possible through the imputation of Christ's righteousness.

With a better understanding of this doctrine, Christians will see Paul's joy expressed as a model for theirs. Paul speaks of an adoption that will also be made manifest at the believer's resurrection:

> For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience . . . And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those who he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. (Rom 8:23–30)

Paul writes that "we ourselves . . . groan inwardly . . . for the redemption of our bodies" that will take place *at the resurrection* when "creation will be set free from its bondage to decay" (Rom 8:21–23). Paul continues, "For in this hope we are saved." What is hope? Hebrews 11:1 defines it as ". . . the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." "But if we hope for what we do not see [i.e. the redemption of our bodies complete at the resurrection], we wait for it with patience" (Rom 8:25). Paul

proceeds to show in great detail the sure fact that this will come about, and it is secure in God.

Hope in what one does not see is not of the flesh but can only be by the Spirit, as Paul explains that the Spirit "helps us in our weakness" (v. 26). What would our weakness be if it were not our lack of faith in which the Spirit supplies? Because of his confidence in the resurrection Paul can proclaim what he wrote in Rom 8:28. *All things will work for our good because there is a resurrection that will only lead to glorification.*

In another passage Paul's hope and joy are made even more evident. He reminds the Corinthians of the Gospel in which they "stand, and by which [they] are being saved," consisting of Christ having died for the believer's sins and raised from the dead, followed by a long list of people *to whom Christ appeared* (1 Cor 15:1–8). This was to prove without a doubt that Christ indeed has risen from the dead. Paul goes on to defend the resurrection declaring:

> if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. (1 Cor 15:13–19)

Wright could not be more accurate in stating that Paul's Gospel stands on the resurrection of Christ, for Paul immediately corrects those who deny the resurrection and exclaims

> But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. (1 Cor 15:20–21)

In another place he states, "For some have no knowledge of God" (15:34); this is obviously referring to those who were denying the resurrection.

If only the modern audience could hear Paul preach on the resurrection they could see how passionate he was about it. Today, Christianity lacks this passion. Paul lives and dies by the resurrection of Christ. Now it is often treated as a second order doctrine. The Christian faith rests on the resurrection; the justification of Christ *is* the resurrection. Theologians along with Wright must exhort all to consider the resurrection and its importance in their faith. It is the completion of the imputed righteousness begun by the Holy Spirit. The believer's victory in God is in the resurrection. His final open declaration of belonging to God is the resurrection. Let us, by the grace of God, with Paul, live and die, by the resurrection.

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