

N. T. WRIGHT



Justification

GOD'S PLAN & PAUL'S VISION

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## Preface

WHEN I HEARD ABOUT John Piper's book *The Future of Justification: A Response to N. T. Wright*, I was torn between two reflections. On the one hand, as they say, the actor doesn't mind whether he's playing the hero or the villain as long as it's his name on the board outside the theater. On the other hand, there is a danger that if people typecast you as the villain the image may stick and you won't get any other parts. So, despite my initial reluctance to get drawn into the details of debate when I am really far too busy with other things, I eventually decided that an initial response was called for.

I say "initial response," because I do not suppose that this book is in any way complete. Piper is one of an increasing number who, supposing the great Reformation tradition of reading and preaching Paul to be under attack, has leapt to its defense, and every passing week brings a further batch of worried and anxious ripostes to the "new perspective on Paul" and to myself as one of its exponents. I cannot begin to enter into debate with all of this, and indeed there are many important writers with whom I simply cannot engage here in any detail. I hope, as I say in the first chapter, to sketch something which is more like an outflanking exercise than a direct challenge on all the possible fronts. The latter exercise would result in hand-to-hand fighting, not only on every line in Paul but also on what everyone else has said about every line in Paul. There is a place for that sort of book, but this is a different sort.

But what's it all about? One cheerful English reviewer, from a part of the church that has not usually worried overmuch about the details of "the doctrine of justification," spoke in terms of text-trading and theological arm-wrestling, implying that this was a curious indoor sport for those who might like that sort of thing but not enormously relevant to wider concerns facing the church. It will come as no surprise that I do not share that view. Justification is hugely important. The debates which have gone on around the doctrine in a variety of contexts are actually the focal points of several other issues we all face.

What is so contentious about it, then? This is of course what the book is all about. But it may help if I set out very briefly where some at least of the main pressure points lie.

In part, to begin with, the question is about *the nature and scope of salvation*. Many Christians in the Western world, for many centuries now, have seen "salvation" as meaning "going to heaven when you die." I and others have argued that that is inadequate. In the Bible, salvation is not God's rescue of people *from* the world but the rescue of the world itself. The whole creation is to be liberated from its slavery to decay (Romans 8:21). I have written about this at length elsewhere, notably in *Surprised by Hope* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2008). Many in the Reformed tradition represented by John Piper would agree with this point. But I do not think they have yet allowed it to affect the way they think about the questions that follow.

Second, the question is about the *means* of salvation, how it is accomplished. Here John Piper, and the tradition he represents, have said that salvation is accomplished by the sovereign grace of God, operating through the death of Jesus Christ in our place and on our behalf, and appropriated through faith alone. Absolutely. I agree a hundred percent. There is not one syllable of that summary that I would complain about. But there is something missing—or rather, *someone* missing. Where is the Holy Spirit? In some of the great Reformed theologians, not least John Calvin himself, the work of the Spirit is every bit as important as the work of the Son. But you can't simply add the Spirit on at the end of the equation and hope it will still have the same shape. Part of my plea in this book is for the

Spirit's work to be taken seriously in relation both to Christian faith itself and to the way in which that faith is "active through love" (Galatians 5:6). And the way in which that Spirit-driven active faith, at work through love and all that flows from it, explains how God's final rescue of his people from death itself has been accomplished (Romans 8:1-11).

Third, the question is about *the meaning of justification*, what the term and its cognates actually refer to. Some Christians have used terms like *justification* and *salvation* as though they were almost interchangeable, but this is clearly untrue to Scripture itself. Justification is the act of God by which people are "declared to be in the right" before him: so say the great Reformation theologians, John Piper included. Yes, indeed. Of course. But what does that declaration involve? How does it come about? Piper insists that justification means the "imputation" of the "righteousness"—the perfect obedience of Jesus Christ—to the sinner, clothing him or her with that status from the first moment of faith to the final arrival in heaven (Piper, *Future of Justification*, p. 9). I understand the force of that proposal, and the sense of assurance which it gives. What's more, I agree that this sense of assurance is indeed offered by the doctrine of justification as Paul expounds it. But, as I argue in this book, Paul's way of doing it is not Piper's. Paul's doctrine of justification is the place where four themes meet, which Piper, and others like him, have managed to ignore or sideline.

First, Paul's doctrine of justification is about the *work of Jesus the Messiah of Israel*. You cannot understand what Paul says about Jesus, and about the significance of his death for our justification and salvation, unless you see Jesus as the one in whom "all the promises of God find their 'Yes'" (2 Corinthians 1:20). For many writers, of whom Piper is not untypical, the long story of Israel seems to function merely as a backdrop, a source of prooftexts and types, rather than as itself the story of God's saving purposes. Piper and others like him have accused me of downplaying the significance of the saving, indeed substitutionary, death of Jesus within Paul's doctrine of justification. I hope this book will put such suggestions to rest—while reminding my critics of how that part of Paul's theology actually works.

Second, Paul's doctrine of justification is therefore about what we may call *the covenant*—the covenant God made with Abraham, the covenant whose purpose was from the beginning the saving call of a worldwide family through whom God's saving purposes for the world were to be realized. For Piper, and many like him, the very idea of a covenant of this kind remains strangely foreign and alien. He and others have accused me of inventing the idea of Israel's story as an ongoing narrative in which the exile in Babylon was extended by hundreds of years so that Jews in Paul's day were still waiting for the "end of exile," the true fulfillment of the covenant promises. Despite the strong covenantal theology of John Calvin himself, and his positive reading of the story of Israel as fulfilled in Jesus Christ, many who claim Calvinist or Reformed heritage today resist applying it in the way that, as I argue in this book, Paul himself does, in line with the solid biblical foundations for the "continuing exile" theme.

Third, Paul's doctrine of justification is focused on the divine *law-court*. God, as judge, "finds in favor of," and hence acquits from their sin, those who believe in Jesus Christ. The word *justify* has this law-court as its metaphorical home base. For John Piper and others who share his perspective, the lawcourt imagery is read differently, with attention shifting rather to the supposed moral achievement of Jesus in gaining, through his perfect obedience, a righteousness which can then be passed across to his faithful people. Piper and others have accused me of superimposing this lawcourt framework on Paul; I argue that it is Paul himself who insists on it.

Fourth, Paul's doctrine of justification is bound up with *eschatology*, that is, his vision of God's future for the whole world and for his people. Right through Paul's writings, but once more especially in Romans, he envisages two moments, the *final* justification when God puts the whole world right and raises his people from the dead, and the *present* justification in which that moment is anticipated. For John Piper and the school of thought he represents, present justification appears to take the full weight. Piper and others have then accused me of encouraging people to think of their own moral effort as contributing to their final justification, and hence of compromising

the gospel itself. I insist that I am simply trying to do justice to what Paul actually says, and that when we factor in the Spirit to the whole picture we see that the charge is groundless.

All these debates rest on one foundation: the text of Paul's letters. Piper claims to be faithful to Scripture; so, of course, do I. Some critics of the so-called new perspective write as if they are the ones who know "what the Bible says" while others of us play fast and loose with it. Well, they appeal to exegesis, and to exegesis we shall go, particularly in the second half of the present book. Though the treatment of key passages is necessarily brief, it is a lot fuller—and deals with the whole texts, not simply a few verses snatched from them—than those offered by most of my critics.

These advance summaries of much more complex arguments must serve to alert the reader, not indeed to the full sweep of what can be said on either side, but to the general areas of agreement and disagreement.

I regret very much that pressure of other duties, and the urgency of publisher's deadlines, have meant that I have not been able to share initial drafts of this book either with the various friends who had offered to help, or with John Piper himself (as he so graciously did with me). However, though I hope to have presented things in a new light and with fresh clarity, I do not suppose I am actually saying very much that I have not already said elsewhere, in the various works listed in the bibliography. No doubt kind people would have made comments that would have improved the book, but the mistakes and unclarity are as usual, and this time unavoidably, all my own. I am still hoping before too long to complete the fourth volume (which deals with Paul) in my series *Christian Origins and the Question of God*. That, I trust, will help to clarify things further.

I am delighted to dedicate this book to my old friend and sparring-partner, Jimmy Dunn. The fact that he will disagree with some of it is neither here nor there. I am enormously grateful for his friendship and fellowship in the work of the gospel here in the northeast of England and in Durham in particular. I must also express my gratitude to the many friends and colleagues who have encouraged me to write, however briefly, in response to John Piper, and to those who share my heavy

load in Durham, and in the Church of England, for encouraging me to see the ministry of expounding Scripture in person and in print as a vital part of that vocation.

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