

On Piper

Guardians of the Baby

Topic: N.T. Wrights and Wrongs

I just got my published version of John Piper's new book *The Future of Justification* this last week. I had seen an earlier incarnation of the book in manuscript form, but according to the acknowledgments, this book is now twice the size it was when I saw it last.

I really appreciate how careful John Piper has sought to be in the process of writing this book. I was asked to give feedback on the earlier draft as someone who likes a lot of what Wright is doing, but also as a sometime critic of Wright's. In the acknowledgments, I am listed as one of eleven people who were asked to give their feedback, which I was glad to do. N.T. Wright was also asked to respond, which he did in 11,000 words. Piper says, "The book is twice the size it was before all that criticism arrived. If it is not a better book now, it is my fault, not theirs" (p. 10).

I provided a blurb for the earlier version in part because I was so struck by how *honest* the process was -- a process we could afford to have a lot more of these days. Another reason is that I believe that Piper is articulating an important concern for evangelicals which is, in my mind, the *sine qua non* of evangelicalism. We have many great theological minds in our ranks today who are capable of distinguishing the various shades of gray in the bathwater, and they make many good points, but at the same time we ought never to resent those who are guardians of the baby.

A quick word about my use of *evangelicalism* here. Speaking as an evangelical, I do not hold that the boundaries of evangelicalism are co-terminous with faithful orthodoxy. At the same time, I believe that historic evangelicals have articulated and defended certain truths which are our great contribution to the health of the broader Church -- they are evangelicalism's gift to the Church. We of course have our pathologies, just as other wings of the Church do, and we also have our gifts. This issue of "the Lord our righteousness" is one of those gifts. And by "gift" I do not mean we give the righteousness -- I mean that we have testified faithfully to this aspect of the gospel as recorded in Scripture.

There are two approaches to this kind of issue. If evangelicals say that affirmation of our distinctives mark the boundaries of who is going to heaven and who to hell, this is simply sectarianism. But if we say that this is a glorious truth of Scripture, and we are going to continue to press the point because we want to exercise our gifts for the sake of the larger body, this is catholic. It is body life on a larger scale.

John Piper writes as a catholic evangelical, not a sectarian evangelical. He notes his fathers in the faith, those who have shaped his doctrine of justification. "Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Owen, Jonathan Edwards, Daniel Fuller, George Ladd, John Murray, Leon Morris -- not so much that I have agreed with them all on every point, but I have learned so much from them" (p. 11). If you were to draw a circle around all these men -- and note especially the presence of Daniel Fuller and John Murray -- such a circle could *not* be used to justify the cannibalism that is currently going on in Reformed circles.

As I read through this book again, I intend to blog on it chapter by chapter, as I have done with other books. If the final product is anything like the draft, I am sure I am going to have my differences, and I will note them as we go. But I am also confident that there will be much to appreciate and applaud.

Posted by Douglas Wilson - 12/15/2007

The Problem of the Timeless Jew

Topic: N.T. Wrights and Wrongs

John Piper begins and ends his Introduction with the observation that he has been too long in the service of the gospel to amuse himself by playing games of disputation. He graciously assumes the same for N.T. Wright, and then makes the central appeal that we should always make -- to the law and to the testimony.

He outlines eight concerns that he has with Wright's doctrine, merely introducing them. Detailed treatment is to come in the subsequent pages. Out of the eight my initial sympathies are with Piper on six of them, and with Wright on two of them. I say "initial sympathies" because there well may be points requiring adjustment as we go through the book.

Piper is just giving an introductory overview, and I will also make just a few comments about each point as well, saving the detailed exposition for later.

First, Wright maintains "the gospel is not about how to get saved" (p. 18). Piper cites Wright in multiple places making precisely this claim. "'The gospel' is not an account of how people get saved. It is . . . the proclamation of the lordship of Jesus Christ." Right. Which, when believed, gets people saved. Now Wright is correct if he is saying that the gospel concerns the objective realities of the death, burial and resurrection of Christ, which is quite different from the subjective realities of transformation that occur when someone believes the objective gospel. But to say that the gospel is "not about how to get saved" on the basis of this is like saying that years of medical training and sharp knives are "not about" removing tumors. It is a curiously blinkered view.

Second, "justification is not how you become a Christian" (p. 19). Wright says, "Justification is not how someone becomes a Christian. It is the declaration that they have become a Christian." This is one of Wright's more exasperating points, and exhibits the mentality of an illegal alien who does not want to talk about how and when he crossed the border into America, but rather wants to emphasize that he *is* in America. If God makes a declaration that someone has become a Christian, presumably there is a point before which He was not making that declaration, and after which He was. Asking about the border crossing is not an irrelevancy.

Third, "justification is not the gospel" (p. 19). This is one that will require more detailed treatment later. Wright is technically correct if all he means is that the gospel is objective and outside of us, while justification is an important teleological *result* of believing that gospel. But Piper appropriately quotes Acts 13:38-39 -- the objective gospel clearly aims at the justification of individuals as one of its central goals. The difference here appears to be that Wright holds that individual justification is a downstream result of the proclamation of the gospel, while Piper points to places like Acts 13 that indicate that it is an immediate and *intended* result of preaching the gospel.

Fourth, "we are not justified by believing in justification" (p. 20). I am with Wright on this one, but curiously, so is Piper. Just a few pages later, Piper quotes Jonathan Edwards and John Owen, both of them to the effect that men can be justified by a grace which they misunderstand and misrepresent. Piper makes this point in order to show that while he holds that Wright is muddled on the subject of justification, it does not follow from this that he is not himself justified. But earlier, Piper says this, "If we hear that part of the gospel and cast ourselves on God *for this divine gift*, we are saved. If we hear that part of the gospel and reject it, while trying to embrace Christ on other terms, we will not be saved" (pp. 20-21). But I am justified, not by my perfections or achievements in anything, but by Christ's. *He* understands justification perfectly, and we can rest in that because His perfections are ours -- by faith alone. There will be more on this later, but for now I see a real tension in what Piper is arguing for here.

Fifth, "the imputation of God's own righteousness makes no sense at all" (p. 21). This is an area where Wright is frankly muddled about what imputation is. He acts like it is some form of infusion, as though righteousness can be passed substantively "across the courtroom" as though it were a substance, object or gas, and he rightly rejects that. But he also affirms that the "accomplishment of Jesus Christ is *reckoned* to all those who are 'in him.'" But the accomplishments of Jesus are not a substance, object or gas either. Why can I have the accomplishments of Jesus reckoned as mine, but I can't have the *righteous* accomplishments of Jesus imputed to me? This is an area where Wright is really confused.

Sixth, "justification is on the basis of the complete life lived" (p. 22). Here, if I understand him, I am in sympathy with Wright. *This is not the same thing as affirming justification by works*, and is fully consistent with *sola fide*. Wright is here attempting to do justice to Romans 1 and 2. Remember, Paul says some remarkable things in the introduction of his great treatise on the subject.

"But after thy hardness and impenitent heart treasurest up unto thyself wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God; Who will render to every man *according to his deeds*: To them who by patient continuance *in well doing* seek for glory and honour and immortality, *eternal life*" (Rom. 2:5-7)

This is consistent with *sola fide* because we receive everything God gives by faith from first to last. The righteousness of God is revealed *from faith to faith* (Rom. 1:17), and the just shall *live* by faith (Rom. 1:17), not the "just shall make a good start by faith." Nobody jump to conclusions here -- there will be more on this later.

Seventh, "first-century Judaism had nothing of the alleged self-righteous and boastful legalism" (p. 22). Although Wright is his own man on many New Perspective issues, on this one he regards the point as settled. But it is not settled at all, and I regard it as beyond curious that someone like Wright, who consistently argues against decontextualized "timeless truths," has somehow found in Second Temple Judaism a timeless Jew. Wright says "the Jew keeps the law of out gratitude." Oh, he does, does "he?" What is this timeless Jew's name? Caiphas? Zechariah? Mary? Joseph? Judas? Annas? Saul? Wright is just flat wrong on this point, and the problem is that he is functioning as a scholar here, not as a pastor. The legalistic heart can manufacture a point of personal pride out of absolutely *anything*. I have known Calvinists who wrapped themselves three times around with the doctrines of free grace -- but who were still unable to keep the legalism from sloshing out their ears.

Eight, "God's righteousness is the same as His covenant faithfulness" (p. 23). As Piper notes, the central text that Wright has to deal with on this point would 2 Cor. 5:21. And he attempts it, in what Piper describes as "one of the most eccentric articles in all his work" (p. 24).

That should do for now.

Posted by Douglas Wilson - 12/17/2007

Better Christians Than Logicians

Topic: N.T. Wrights and Wrongs

After his Introduction, but before his first chapter, John Piper includes a short chapter on the necessity of -- given the state of the world -- controversy and polemics. He writes this as a pastor. "I am a pastor first. Polemics are secondary and serve that" (p. 27). In short, shepherds are to fight because they love the sheep, not because they love fighting.

At the same time, Piper contextualizes his controversy with Wright -- he treats him as a brother in Christ, one who "loves the apostle Paul and reverences the Christian Scriptures" (p. 27). But if Wright is a brother, then why have a controversy at all? Piper points out that the apostle Paul does not limit himself in controversy to "first-order doctrines." Everything is connected, and a genuine Christian brother may be advancing certain doctrines which will cause enormous trouble for the Church down the road. There is no obligation to wait until the error is all grown up, and is only held by the damned. In fact, there is an obligation *not* to do this. "But for all his love of harmony and unity and peace, it is remarkable how many of Paul's letters were written to correct fellow Christians" (p. 30).

Piper quotes Machen to the effect that the New Testament is a "polemical book almost from beginning to end." And it is. But he also warns us through the wise words of John Owen -- because there is a real propensity among sinners to merely "contend for notions" (p. 28) -- that every polemicist should take care to "have communion with God in the doctrine we contend for" (p. 28).

A few days ago, Justin Taylor remarked on his blog that I was going to be working through Piper's book like this, and an anonymous commenter on his blog said this:

"So affirmation of *sola fide* and *sola gratia* do NOT mark the boundaries of who is going to heaven and who is going to hell? Really?! Somebody should alert Paul, the apostle."

Now I can't let this pass without first saying something about my old friend Anonymous, king of the mood swings. Just this morning, Google informs me that one of my anonymous critics is attacking my lack of accountability. Heh.

But secondly, this illustrates the point exactly. In the Introduction, Piper demonstrated that he (and Jonathan Edwards and John Owen) understood this point. To make any kind of work a precondition for personal salvation, even if it is a tiny cerebral work, is to introduce semi-Pelagianism into the gospel. And well-intentioned brothers in Christ can do this, and do it all the time actually. It is a good thing we are saved by *grace*, apart from works of the law.

We are saved by the grace of God in Christ, plus nothing. The more clearly that grace is preached in its purity, the more potent it is -- how shall they hear without a preacher? -- but to make a certain accomplishment in the sinner a precondition for his justification is the work of Old Slewfoot.

Think of this way. Which work must a man do *before* he can be truly justified?

1. Walk to the Vatican on his knees;
2. Obey the Ten Commandments for a year;
3. Stay faithful to his wife;
4. Deny semi-Pelagianism;
5. None of the above.

The answer is obviously the last one. A man must believe in Jesus, but his faith -- provided it is a genuine and God-given faith, a living faith, the only kind God gives -- can have all kinds of screwed up features. A man must believe in Jesus, which is not the same thing as affirming what believing in Jesus means, with the right level of doctrinal precision. To quote Piper, quoting Edwards and Owen respectively . . .

"How far a wonderful and mysterious agency of God's Spirit may so influence some men's hearts, that their practice in this regard may be contrary to their own principles, so that they shall not trust in their own righteousness, though they profess that men are justified by their own righteousness" (p. 24).

"Men may be really saved by that grace which *doctrinally they do deny*, and they may be justified by the imputation of that righteousness which *in opinion they deny to be imputed*."

Piper points out, rightly, that this should not "make us cavalier" about guarding the purity of the gospel, but rather it is simply the recognition "that men's hearts are often better than their heads" (pp. 24-25). Men are *often* better Christians than they are logicians. There is a vast chasm between maintaining, as I do, that semi-Pelagians (and Pelagians too, for that matter) can be saved, and maintaining, which I do *not*, that semi-Pelagianism saves.

Piper believes that Wright is a Christian brother who is engaged in confusing things that ought not be confused. He challenges this, as he rightly should. He has taken care not to engage with a straw man. He has taken care to represent Wright's positions accurately, and to warn of confusions ahead if we don't clarify certain things. I agree with Piper that this is necessary, and this book is a welcome step in that process of clarification.

At the same time, one of Wright's great points, listed by Piper in the Introduction, is that justification is not brought about by believing in justification. To maintain that it is really a functional denial of the Protestant doctrine of *sola fide*. The anonymous comment on Justin Taylor's blog illustrates that Wright is not engaging with a straw man when he makes this point either. There are numerous "solafideists" out there who are maintaining, with great sincerity of heart, that they are defenders of a gospel of free grace. Why? Because they insist on tiny doctrinal works before a man can go to heaven.

Because confusions on this subject are apparent -- in both directions -- we need the right kind of controversy to clear the air. So far as it depends on him, Piper's basic approach to this is just what we need.

Posted by Douglas Wilson - 12/18/2007

All Systems Are Go

Topic: N.T. Wrights and Wrongs

The first official chapter in Piper's book is a caution against a facile adoption of biblical theology over systematic theology as though it were necessarily more "biblical." A systematic theology can be biblical or unbiblical, depending. And biblical theology can also be biblical or unbiblical, depending.

"Most scholars are aware that methods and categories of thought taken from *historical* and *systematic* theology may control and distort the way one reads the Bible. But we don't hear as often the caution that the methods and categories of *biblical* theology can do the same" (p. 33).

This is really just another way of saying (although Piper doesn't put it this way) that biblical theologies are systematic theologies, simply organized according to a different system. Traditional systematics go through the topics of God, man, sin, salvation, and so on. This does not make it bad, but it does create limitations -- limitations that ought to be recognized by every practitioner. Biblical theology opts for a different set of themes, organized in a different way. But the point is that the organization is from the theologian, and not directly from the revelation itself.

Biblical theology is named from the high ground. *I* am into biblical theology. What kind are *you* into? But it is really just looking at another facet of the jewel of revelation from another angle. This is quite appropriate, nothing wrong with it, but at the end of the day, the practitioner should recognize that he is working the revelation God has given through the grid of another system. This is appropriate, so long as we recognize that all our different systems and approaches have to balance one another, with the central check coming from the Bible as it was given to us.

And more is involved in this balancing act than what is called systematic theology and biblical theology. There are also demands from historical theology, ethical theology, and creedal theology. And what about typological theology?

There are also important differences between various approaches to biblical theology. Piper's cautions in this chapter are directed at those who want to place a great deal of weight on the extra-biblical context of the biblical writings. But we should be able to see at a glance that this insistence is not necessary to what we call a biblical theology. A biblical theologian could be a strict biblicist, largely limiting himself to what is revealed, and spending all his energy developing the redemptive/historical themes within the canon only. This could easily lead to other problems, but the only point being made here is that heavy dependence on extra-biblical context -- which is what Wright is doing -- is not *necessary* to biblical theology.

Piper offers three cautions with regard to this dependence on extra-biblical sources. The first is that the extra-biblical sources can be misread and misunderstood. The second is that of assuming that a particular source found in the first century is representative in ways that it is not representative. The third is the error of misapplying the meaning of a source. In other words, to use Piper's example, "Paul may agree that one important meaning for *gospel* (*euangelion*) is the announcement that God is king over all the universe (*Isa. 52:7*) but not intend for this meaning to govern or dominate what he means by *the gospel* in every context" (p. 36).

All these cautions (and more, in my view) are most necessary. One of the besetting sins of scholarship is that of assuming the limited material at hand (which is the only thing the scholar has to work with) is sufficient to work with. This is why paleontologists with a fist full of bone fragments can presume to tell us what east Africa was like three million years ago. This is why the Dead Sea scroll community is made so much of. But how would we like it if scholars three thousand years from now made sweeping statements about the state of evangelical theology in our generation because someone dug up the library of the Watchtower Society?

But because the task of scholarship is *necessarily* limited to what he has to work with, there can be no objection to him working with it. What is necessary is a scholarly humility that recognizes that what we have in hand is a tiny *fraction* of the actual first century context. Take for example, the New Testament uses of *nomos*. Compare them to the uses of *nomos* in the Septuagint. Then take all recorded uses of that word which we still have in our possession somehow -- and which uses are therefore recorded in our lexicons. Now what percentage of the *actual* contextual use of that word do we have? How many people spoke or wrote that word between the years 100 B.C.E. (Before Christ's Empire) and 50 A.D.? In short, we plainly are in possession of a fraction of one percent of the real context, which is another way of saying that we don't really have the context.

This is another way of saying that we cannot get the broader context really, and work from that broad context to a proper understanding of the New Testament. It is a task beyond our competence. God has structured things in such a way that we *have* to start with the meanings of such things in Scripture, and supplement our understanding as appropriate from the outside context, to the extent we might have it.

Think of it this way. What would happen to New Testament scholarship if we discovered three more "Qumran" libraries, representing different sects entirely? And let us assume that two of these groups were groups we had never even heard of before. So we not only have the JW library, but a Scientology one, a Mormon one, and Gamaliel's personal library. Now what? What does this do to our ability to read the book of Romans? Well, maybe it shouldn't do *anything*. I'm just saying.

Posted by Douglas Wilson - 12/19/2007

Gripping the Sides of His Coracle

Topic: N.T. Wrights and Wrongs

In the second chapter, John Piper starts to get down to brass tacks, and he begins with the definition of justification. N.T. Wright defines justification as God's (legal and forensic) declaration that someone is already within the covenant family. Quoting Wright, Piper writes, "'Justification' in the first century was not about how someone might establish a relationship with God. It was about God's eschatological definition, both future and present, of who was, in fact, a member of his people" (p. 40).

Piper is right to note that this statement is made "sweepingly." I cannot imagine how a word as far-reaching as *justification* could be taken as meaning just one thing throughout the course of a century. That might be possible (*barely*) with words like bootlace, or beer, or bratwurst. But justification? Piper begins his response by citing just a couple examples where God or Christ are said to be justified, which cannot mean that they are declared to already be within God's covenant people (pp. 40-41).

Wright rejects the idea that justification is about *becoming* a Christian, saying that it is not to be understood as "the event in which a person is brought by grace from unbelief, idolatry and sin into faith" (p. 41). Piper is right to wonder who has ever taught that. If faith is the instrument by which we are justified, justification cannot bring us into faith. Faith brings justification, not the other way around. But Wright sticks to his guns.

"But Wright seems to want to limit the meaning of justification to a declaration that a covenant membership has already come into being because of *something else*, namely, God's call" (p. 42).

There is a logical problem with this as well. If justification is God's declaration that someone is a member of God's covenant people, then that declaration would have to be made as soon as it became true, which is to say that God begins declaring someone righteous -- a member of the righteous people -- the moment he becomes a member of that righteous people. Even on Wright's terms, the whole thing has to be backed right up to the beginning of the Christian life. The way Wright talks, this declaration is made of those who are living somewhere in the middle of God's covenant people. But by definition the declaration has to be made from the border. To illustrate, if "justification" is God's declaration that a man is *now* in Scotland, that declaration would not start when his car eventually got to Glasgow. It would start the instant he drove over the border.

A better illustration is that of being naturalized as a citizen. It is all very well to say that naturalization is the declaration that one is an American, and is not about becoming an American. But if that declaration about someone was false at some point in time, and was true later, then the point where it shifts from being false to being true is what we call *becoming*. And this means that the declaration that Wright is talking about cannot be separated from what we call becoming a Christian. If justification is the declared state of being "in," and those who are in have to *get* in from a previous state of being "out," then justification is necessarily about *becoming* a Christian. Piper notes, correctly, that "the divine act of justification . . . is, *along with the call*, determinative and constitutive of the new relation to God" (p. 41). In other words, not only is Wright splitting hairs, but it is really an odd hair.

It is like saying that the adoption of an orphan is not so much a matter of *becoming* a member of a new family as it is a question of *being* a member of that family. Quite. But when did I start *being* that member? It was when I *became* that member. The only way this kind of distinction that Wright is pushing makes any kind of sense would be if there were no transition -- no border crossings from one condition to the other. So long as there is a transition from unjustified to justified, the whole matter is logically tied up with the moment one becomes a Christian, and trying to separate it from that moment is an exercise in futility.

And of course, once we are backed up to the time of conversion, this would mean that Wright would then have to take into account the many scriptural statements that we are justified *by faith*. The instrumentality of faith would then have to be taken into account from the first moment of justification on -- but which Wright appears reluctant to do.

But none of this means that Wright is opposed to personal conversion, or somehow thinks it irrelevant.

"Wright does not deny that God uses the gospel of Christ's death and resurrection and lordship over the world to save people. He wants to stress that there is a difference between one of the *effects* of the gospel -- namely, personal salvation -- and the proclamation of the gospel itself" (p. 46).

Again, as with the word justification, this is an oddly univocal use of the phrase "preaching the gospel." It is odd because Wright wants the preaching of the gospel to be the declaration that Jesus is Lord of the cosmos -- and it is that. This is actually one of the most bracing things about Wright's work. He gives an important place to this facet of gospel proclamation, a facet that many of Wright's critics overlook almost entirely. And when it is drawn to their attention, more than a few of them regard this glorious truth with suspicion, if not open hostility. This is one of the many reasons we need Wright around.

But when Wright limits the preaching of the gospel to such a statement (however expansive that statement might seem), he is actually doing what evangelicals have done so often -- truncating the gospel so that it is excluded from certain realms. But an important ramification of the universality of the objective gospel is that it cannot be excluded from *any* realm of human sin or need. These are all, therefore, statements of the gospel: 1. Jesus is Lord; 2. Jesus went to Capernaum; 3. Through Abraham all the nations of the earth will be blessed; 4. Jesus died on the cross and rose again; 5. God brought Israel out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage; 6. Christ is the savior of all men, especially those who believe; 7. The Lamb of God takes away the sin of the world; and 8. if you repent of being such a pig-headed husband, and ask Jesus to save you, Susan might come back.

The gospel is good news, and the good news is intended by God for every nook and cranny. He comes to make His blessing flow far as the curse is found. Wherever there is curse, *Christ brings gospel*. To nations, to businesses, to individual sinners, to marriage, and to the garden full of thistles in the back yard. By means of the gospel, God brings his saving lordship to everything. To drop the promise of personal salvation out of the proclamation of the good news, leaving just the declaration of lordship, seems to me to be confusing at best, and counterproductive at worst. The saving lordship of Christ is to be preached at every level -- He is Jesus Christ, our Lord *and* Savior, and we present Him in these offices to the great empires and to Smith next door. God's saving grace in this dark world is all gospel, objective gospel, straight across.

Think of it this way -- the doctrine of God's omnipresence is not that a portion of God is everywhere, as though He were extended in space. The doctrine is that *all* of God is in *every* place.

In the same way, the entire gospel presents itself at every sinful place. The *effect* of the gospel is when there is repentance and faith at that place, at that level. But salvation does not come to Smith because he found a fruitful line of argument and ramifications somewhere down in the syllogism.

In the latter part of this chapter, Piper demonstrates conclusively -- or rather shows Wright demonstrating conclusively -- that Wright holds to the doctrine of penal substitution in his teaching about the atonement. Now in the cross, at last, Wright says, "God has punished sins as they deserve" (p. 47).

But the clarity with which Wright defends this doctrine made the dust-up this last year over Steve Chalke all the more curious, and this chapter of Piper's has an extended excursus on that whole odd business. The short form is that Wright provided a blurb for Steve Chalke's book *The Lost Message of Jesus*, a book in which that doctrine, at *best*, is stated murkily, and, at its worst, is rejected outright. A few years after Chalke's book came out, the boys at Oak Hill took Chalke to task for his infamous "cosmic child abuse" statement in their book, *Pierced for Our Transgressions*. After this book came out, Wright emptied both chambers of his episcopal revolvers in the direction of Oak Hill. And now Piper is writing about the whole affair -- as am I, actually, but that doesn't count because I am being the transparent narrator. Well, until just then I was.

To his credit, Wright doesn't defend Chalke by saying that its okay to deny penal substitution, but rather by saying that Chalke, some appearances notwithstanding, actually holds to the doctrine. Wright says "the reality that I and others refer to when we use the phrase 'penal substitution' is not in doubt, for Steve any more than for me" (p. 51). But Piper says with good reason that this appears to him to be grounded on not very much ground. "It seems to me to be wishful thinking to construe Chalke's own words in a way that would portray him as comfortable thinking of the personal God making his own personal Son bear the Father's own legal retribution for my sin" (p. 52).

And this brings me to a criticism I have made of Wright before. He is a great scholar, but in certain areas, he appears to be tone deaf -- not concerning what *he* is saying necessarily, but what others are trying to say in the Wrightian spirit. Put bluntly, Chalke's book does repeat many of Wright's themes, but it is also a small vat of zeitgeistian goo and very much *unlike* Wright. To change the metaphor, Wright is affected by the gusts of the zeitgeist the way a great first-rate man-of-war might be -- more than he ought to be, but not enough disturb the sailors on board. But Chalke is holding on to the sides of his coracle and skimming across the surface at a goodly rate. He lost his hat two miles ago.

Wright is saying certain things that seem troublesome to tempered, orthodox types -- to men like Piper. They respect Wright, *as they ought to*. But they wonder if, down the road, in a generation or so, this way of putting things mightn't be misapplied by certain unstable souls, and made to say things "that Wright himself is not necessarily saying, but all the same . . ." In worrying this way, the orthodox types are perhaps way underestimating the quickness and readiness of men like Chalke, McLaren, Middleton, Walsh, et al. to cluster around someone like Wright. We live in a fallen world, and this can't be helped, but it would be good if Wright were more attuned to this problem than he appears to be. But of course, if he can make it for three days running in the Church of England without punching a number of his fellow clerics (excepting the ladies, of course), and he obviously can, his tolerance levels have been adjusted to places where my knobs don't even turn. His must go all the way to eleven.

Posted by Douglas Wilson - 12/21/2007

The Judge in the Dock

Topic: N.T. Wrights and Wrongs

In chapter three, John Piper continues to interact with N.T. Wright's take on the law-court aspect of justification. At the center of the discussion is this now famous section from *What Saint Paul Really Said*, which needs to be quoted at length.

"The result of all this should be obvious, but is enormously important for understanding Paul. If we use the language of the law-court, it makes no sense whatever to say that the judge imputes, imparts, bequeaths, conveys or otherwise transfers his righteousness to either the plaintiff or the defendant. Righteousness is not an object, a substance or a gas which can be passed across the courtroom. For the judge to be righteous does not mean that the court has found in his favour. For the plaintiff or defendant to be righteous does not mean that he or she has tried the case partially or impartially. To imagine the defendant somehow receiving the judge's righteousness is simply a category mistake. That is not how the language works . . . If an when God does act to vindicate his people, his people will then, metaphorically speaking, have the status of 'righteousness' . . . But the righteousness they have will not be God's own righteousness. that makes no sense at all" (p. 60).

There are three things to be said about this. The first has to do with the line of argument that Piper takes in this chapter, which is quite effective. He argues that Wright's definition of righteousness does not go deep enough (p. 62), being limited to what God does and not being concerned with why God does it.

If God's righteousness is defined as keeping covenant, judging impartially, dealing properly with sin, and being an advocate for the helpless (p. 62), then how might we answer the question whether God was righteous before the world was created? As Piper says, "He was righteous before there was any covenant to keep" (p. 64).

Piper argues (and shows from Scripture) that God's righteousness is to be understood as God's zeal for His own glory. Because God is zealous for His own glory, He does of course act in the world in the ways that Wright outlines. But to say that a righteous God acts in this world in a particular way is not to explain why He acts this way. He was righteous, everlastingly and eternally righteous, before there were any covenants with man, before there were any cases to judge impartially, before there was any sin that had to be dealt with, and before there were any widows and orphans to defend. Piper is exactly right when he locates the standard of right within the character of God Himself. "What we find therefore in the Old Testament and in Paul is that God defines 'right' in terms of *himself*" (p. 64). God *does* righteously because He *is* righteous, and the former flows from the latter. "The righteousness of God consists most basically in God's unswerving commitment to preserve the honor of his name and display his glory" (p. 66).

I agree completely with Piper here, and believe that defining righteousness this way creates problems for Wright's entire approach to justification. In short, I believe this argument works very effectively as a critique of Wright's project. The only thing I would want to add to what Piper has done here is to urge him to develop this concept of God's zeal for His own glory in more explicitly Trinitarian terms -- without that, God allegiance to His own name and glory can easily be represented or misunderstood as a form of divine megalomania. This is a slander of course,, and I am confident that Piper could answer it, but to speak of divine triune glory prevents the whole thing from coming off like transcendental selfishness. For what it's worth.

While the line of argument Piper has taken here is an important one, there is another critique of Wright's position stated above which I believe is equally potent. Wright has said that to say that righteousness can be imparted across a courtroom from judge to defendant is a category mistake, but I believe his entire illustration is dependant upon a much larger category mistake.

This is the second point. In a previous installment in this series, a comment posted stated that both Piper and I had missed the fact that Wright was talking about the righteousness of the *judge*. The righteousness of the judge cannot be wafted across the room and settle on the defendant. This is quite right -- that is what Wright is saying, but to whom is he saying it? In the Old Perspective on Paul, whoever thought that the righteousness of the *judge* was imputed directly to us? Wright's argument here is directed against something which no one believes. But this mistake is what highlights the Wright's problem.

The Old Perspective on Paul *does* envision a scenario in which the sinful defendant comes into the courtroom, and because the judge is entirely righteous and uncorruptible, the sinner is damned. He is damned precisely *because* righteousness does not float from judges to defendants. The more righteous the judge, the worse it is for me.

But this is where the gospel enters with a glorious paradox. The righteousness of the judge does not float across the courtroom where the sinner stands accused. What happened goes far beyond that and staggers the imagination. The righteousness of the judge actually grows and develops in the womb of a virgin for nine months, and is born among us *so that the judge might become the principal defendant*. When Wright says that the righteousness of the judge means that He keeps His covenant promises, we must never forget that one of those covenant promises is that the judge promised to become the defendant -- Immanuel, God with us. And so when he acts righteously, as Wright points out, He does something that makes Christ our representative, and when He becomes our representative He does so *in the dock*. The Lord is our righteousness, not because of some legal language, but because the Lord was born of a woman, born under the law.

The imputation that occurs is not from the judge to the human defendants. Imputation is what happens when the sins of Christ's people are laid on Him, and His righteousness is laid on us. But this is not a movement from Christ as judge to defendants as toast. It is from the lead defendant (Christ) to all His co-defendants (those who are in Him by faith). The movement from judge to defendants (and there is one) is not called imputation, but rather happened earlier and is called the Incarnation. Once Christ is incarnate as the heavenly man, the last Adam, the new humanity, the last and ultimate way of being human, everyone who is found in Him is the recipient of His imputed righteousness, just as He was the recipient of all their imputed sins, filth, rebellion and disobedience.

In the divine courtroom, how did it come about that Jesus Christ is standing in my place, answering the questions that I should be answering? If Wright wants to say that there is no imputation of the judge's righteousness directly to me, he is quite right. But this is a hollow theological victory, because nobody thinks that is what happens. But if Wright wants to say that there is no legal device whereby the lead innocent defendant can successfully stand in for all His co-defendants, who are as guilty as they look, because such a stand-in is a "category mistake" and "makes no sense," then things are worse in Durham than I thought. But I don't believe this latter option is at all likely because Wright has elsewhere argued clearly for penal substitution, which is precisely what this doctrine is.

So at best, it looks as though Wright is debating with a straw man. Righteousness does get from the judge to the defendants, and in just a couple days we will be celebrating how that was accomplished.

Posted by Douglas Wilson - 12/23/2007

Divine and Human Righteousness

Topic: N.T. Wrights and Wrongs

In chapter four of Piper's book, I suspect there is a little bit of Piper and Wright talking past one another. In this chapter, Piper is arguing for the "necessity of real moral righteousness" in justification.

"Wright stresses that for the defendant, righteousness is not a character quality (i.e. not a moral righteousness) but a status, namely, that the court has found in the defendant's favor. The defendant may or may not have committed the crime with which he was charged. Regardless, if the court finds in his favor, he is 'righteous.' He has that *status*" (p. 73).

All this is quite true, and reinforces the judicial nature of justification. If a court declares a guilty man to be "not guilty," then that man is justified, regardless of whether or not he did it. Of course, if the court passes this sentence *knowing* the man to be guilty, then that makes the *court* unrighteous, even as the defendant is now righteous. This is a point that Piper emphasizes in this chapter -- when it comes to our justification, the court is an omniscient court, and therefore knows that we are actually guilty. What now?

The entire question of the atonement revolves around this question -- how can God be just *and* the one who justifies? Piper recognizes that Wright holds to the substitutionary atonement of Christ, and this means that ultimately both men resolve the dilemma in a similar way. But it appears that they are appealing to the death of Christ to achieve a different good result. According to Piper, Wright wants to say that because of the death of Christ, the just verdict is "guilty, sentence commuted." Piper wants to say that the just sentence is "not guilty." Piper argues that clemency or forgiveness are not the same thing as justification (when justification is understood as the imputation of an alien righteousness). Piper wants to insist, and I think rightly, that the two concepts are interdependent.

At the conclusion of this chapter, Piper returns to the theme of the previous chapter - the claim that Wright makes that "the righteousness [we] will have will not be God's own righteousness" (p. 79). Piper responds that "because of the work of Jesus Christ, it is not in fact nonsense to speak of the defendant in some sense sharing in the righteousness of the judge" (p. 79).

"The question is: When the Judge finds in our favor, does he count us as having the required moral righteousness -- not in ourselves, but because of the divine righteousness imputed to us in Christ. My answer is yes . . . Wright's answer is no. To review, he thinks that the whole discussion of imputing divine righteousness to humans is muddle-headed" (p. 80).

Now in this discussion so far, my sympathies have clearly been with Piper. As far as I understand the discussion, I find myself agreeing with Piper. But let me tweak his language here just a tad, and I think it might help some of those who find it easier to sympathize with Wright in this discussion. Two points.

First, in his discussion of imputation, Piper uses the language of "alien" righteousness, to which we have to reply yes and no. It is an alien righteousness, in that it does not originate in any way, shape or form from us. It is important to emphasize the alien nature of this righteousness lest any man should boast. But in another sense, it is no more alien to us than the disobedience of the first Adam was alien to us. Christ's actions are imputed to us because He is our last Adam.

A second point is related to this, and reveals something (perhaps) of what Wright was trying to get at. Note that Piper describes the whole thing as an issue of whether "*divine* righteousness" is imputed "*to humans*" (p. 80, emphasis added). But this is not what happens at all. The righteousness that is imputed to us is *human* righteousness, the obedience of the man Christ Jesus. Jesus was the first complete human being and, as such, His obedience is the possession of all who are reckoned as His descendants. Jesus is, of course, fully God, but His divinity is not imputed to us, nor is the righteousness that is characteristic of that divinity. Christ lived a perfect sinless life *as a man*, and that truly human obedience is what is credited to us.

But even with that qualification, I am still more in sympathy with Piper here than with Wright. When Wright rejects the idea of righteousness floating across the courtroom, the absurdity he rejects is not rendered less absurd by switching around who the righteousness is floating from. Wright rejects this idea because of how he conceives of the nature of righteousness ("not an object, substance or a gas which can be passed across the courtroom"), and not because some traditional expressions had the righteousness coming directly from the judge and not from the lead co-defendant. If this last expression were his reason for rejecting it, then Piper's slip of divine righteousness > humans might be used to reinforce this point. But if righteousness (not being an object, substance or gas) cannot be passed around the courtroom without making "no sense at all," then I cannot be represented in that court by my new father, the last Adam. And that means that things are going to go badly for Wilson when they get to my name on the docket.

But one last comment. I do believe that Wright is guilty of confusion here in his systematic sorting out of these issues, but not of rejecting something crucial.

In other words, I don't believe he denies this important point -- in fact, in much of his work, he actually reinforces it in powerful ways. Wright has taught repeatedly that Jesus came to live out a "new way of being Israel," or, more expansively, a "new way of being human." But how do we get a piece of that? We are badly stuck in the old way of being human. By faith, Wright would say, which is exactly right. But as we exercise faith, in order for this new way of being human to become true of us, God has to justly impute the obedience of Jesus to us. Jesus did not just model for us the important lesson of how not to be human. He did not just "stay out of sin" for thirty three years. He also served God faithfully and completely, and His righteous story is now the new and complete story of the new Israel, the new humanity, and is therefore the story of everyone who is in Him.

How could His obedience not be ours? He is an *Adam*.

Posted by Douglas Wilson - 12/26/2007

Good News, Lord Caiphas!

Topic: N.T. Wrights and Wrongs

N.T. Wright sometimes overstates his case. By this I mean that he says things like "X is not Y" when it would perhaps be more helpful to say "in addition to Y we must also be careful to say X." For example, he maintains that the gospel is not about how to get saved, but is rather the proclamation that Jesus is Lord and King of the cosmos.

John Piper responds to this with two lines of argument, both of which are quite effective critiques. But before getting to that, it is important to note that he does *not* have a problem with the expansiveness of Wright's vision, but rather is concerned that Wright has gone "big" in a way that neglects some important factors in the details of the gospel. "But Wright's way of highlighting the global sweep of the gospel has the effect of marginalizing, and perhaps even negating, some aspects of the gospel that are precious, and without which all talk of rescuing the world from chaos is hollow" (p. 81).

Piper's first reponse to the claim that the gospel is not primarily about personal justification or salvation is to appeal to a passage where the apostle Paul is doing precisely what Wright says we should not do in our preaching. But before developing this, it is important to emphasize here that Wright does believe that personal transformation occurs as a result of preaching the gospel -- which is that Jesus is now Lord -- but he maintains that drawing that element of personal transformation into the proclamation of the gospel itself is misguided.

The text that Piper points to is in Acts 13:

"Then Paul stood up, and beckoning with his hand said, Men of Israel, and ye that fear God, give audience . . . Be it known unto you therefore, men and brethren, that through this man is *preached unto you the forgiveness of sins*: And by him *all that believe are justified from all things*, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses" (Acts 13:16, 38-39).

If Wright were simply saying that we should be preaching much more than personal forgiveness of sin, this is undeniable. We in evangelicalism have taken a narrow slice of the gospel and have acted for more than a century as though it were the whole pie. Somebody should call us on it, and having an Anglican bishop be the one to do it is just the sort of thing that God would do. But when the good bishop goes on to say that this narrow slice of the pie is not part of the pie at all, really, but just the result of having eaten the pie, and that result should be discussed at some other time, he has badly overstated his case. And all that is necessary to reject his claim is to produce a passage like this (and there are others). Paul preached forgiveness of sins as a clear part of his gospel message, and Paul preached personal justification as a clear part of his gospel message. Case closed.

The discussion would *not* be over if Wright were willing to say that "in addition to personal forgiveness, evangelicals must learn to go on to place that message in the context of the universal lordship of Christ . . ." The discussion would not be over because there are countless evangelicals who need to hear Wright on that point. I say this because on *that* aspect of the scriptural description of the gospel, he has a much better grasp of the gospel than they do. But when it comes to the personal come-to-Jesus message, the average fundamentalist hedge preacher has a better grasp of *that* aspect than Wright does.

Piper's second argument is a theological one. Unless personal forgiveness is entailed by the message of the lordship of Jesus, and is necessarily part of that message, there is no way that the triumph of Christ over death can be considered as *good news* by any sinner. Imagine the first of the tomb guards getting to Caiphas to tell him what happened. Angels coming down, the Lord rising, the great earthquake, the blinding light, the whole deal. When the guard first burst through the door, did he begin with "Good news, Lord Caiphas!?" No possible way.

Unless forgiveness, cleansing, and justification for sinners are bound up in the passion event, and included in a comparable way in the proclamation of that event, the preaching of Christ's resurrection is deadly, terrible news. This is because the one returning from the grave has been vindicated as ultimately holy, and here I am, still unholy and sinking deeper. Unless God has accomplished some deep magic for sinners in that death and resurrection, and unless I am told about it, there is no way that the proclamation would make any sense to me as good news.

Having said all this, Wright still has an important point to make when he says that we are not justified by believing in justification by faith, but rather by believing in Jesus. Piper responds to this by saying that, of course, we must believe in Jesus, but we should believe in Him with a particular end in view. Everything else being equal, this response is quite correct, but everything is frequently not equal. All kinds of people get justified and saved under dubious circumstances, and they never even *hear* the word justification until five years after they were saved. This isn't the way it should be, but thanks to the grace of God, He isn't too particular about us as we come through His door. Good thing.

This is actually something Piper understands clearly, as was seen by his treatment of Edwards and Owen earlier in this book. But if someone can be justified by faith alone even when they are all tangled up in their minds about what it means, then this means that we should take Wright's point on this as a given. The demand for tiny doctrinal perfection in us before a man can be the recipient of Christ's perfections (from men who claim to understand Reformed soteriology) is one of the most amazing features of the recent doctrinal controversies roiling the Reformed world.

So Piper is correct that to speak of personal forgiveness, personal justification, and personal salvation in the midst of gospel proclamation is part and parcel of a faithful New Testament declaration of the gospel. And Wright is correct that even if this is all left out (or mangled) by a poor preacher, God can still use the fact of Christ's kingship and a declaration of Christ's dying and rising to bring a person to genuine faith.

Posted by Douglas Wilson - 12/27/2007

Declaration and Doing

Topic: N.T. Wrights and Wrongs

Chapter Six of Piper's book is about whether or not justification determines our standing with God, or whether, as Wright argues, it is God's formal declaration that this standing has already been established. According to Wright, the declaration of the gospel of Christ's kingship is "very much the means" that God uses to transform individuals, but at the same time justification is "not part of becoming a Christian. It is the declaration that one *has become* a Christian" (p. 94).

I sympathize with the reaction that says a dispute over all this is splitting hairs, and that to get all worked up over it is to get worked up over a split hair. I sympathize with this reaction, but I don't agree with it. It seems that more is going on than it might appear at first.

And I bring this up simply to note that Wright was the one who split this hair first, and did so declaring it to be a crucial point.

As Wright put it, "The word 'justification', *despite centuries of Christian misuse*, is used by Paul to denote that which happens immediately after the 'call'." (p. 94, emphasis mine).

Wright insists on this while recognizing a point I made earlier in this series, which is that God makes the declaration that one has become a Christian just as soon as one *has* become one, that is, a nano-second after one has crossed the border. Faith is awakened instantaneously after the call. So Piper asks a reasonable question. "What is driving this peculiar vigilance to make such a fine distinction between the temporally and causally inseparable events of divine calling/faith/justification? . . . Something unusual seems to be at stake here" (p. 95). The apostle Paul clearly distinguishes between the effectual call, and justification, and salvation, and so on, but all of them are plainly part of the cluster of events at one's conversion, and Christ is clearly preached as the salvation of man, as the justification of man, and so on.

It is important to note that this difference is *not* over the objective/subjective issues of gospel proclamation and personal response to that proclamation. "Jesus died so that you might repent" is an objective statement of a portion of the gospel. "Repentance" is an appropriate response to the gospel, but this repentance is not part of the gospel itself. Everyone agrees with this. As Piper puts it on a related point, "Agreed - justification does not consist in the changes of the human heart in conversion" (p. 97).

It is worth noting in passing that Piper remarks in a footnote that he does not know how to reconcile Wright's insistence that justification is the declaration that all the converting work has already been done, on the one hand, and his statement in his commentary on Romans that "justification results in peace with God," on the other. If justification results in peace with God, then how can justification be the declaration that I already had peace with God?

This chapter concludes with a brief discussion of how Wright might reconcile his insistence that present justification is declarative *only* while our future justification is more than declarative. At the same time, our present justification is anticipatory of our future justification. This means the present justification does nothing, but is rather a declaration that something has been done, and at the same time present justification anticipates the final resurrection, which is our ultimate justification, but this final justification consists of something which remains to be done. For Wright, "the final declaration will consist not in words so much as in an event, namely, the resurrection of the person concerned into a glorious body like that of the risen Jesus" (p. 100).

This chapter of Piper's is not so much an extended argument against Wright's position as it is an identification of certain tensions in Wright's position, and a raising of questions that will presumably be addressed later.

Posted by Douglas Wilson - 12/31/2007

The Just Shall Live By Faith

Topic: N.T. Wrights and Wrongs

Okay. Faith and works. We will have to roll up our sleeves on this one.

In this chapter Piper interacts with Wright's assertion that our final justification is on the basis of the "complete life lived." Wright says, *and Piper agrees*, that "the attempt to shore up justification by faith by saying that the life we now live will be irrelevant at the final judgment is unPauline, unpastoral and ultimately dishonouring to God himself" (p. 116). The difference is that Wright wants to use the word *basis* -- final justification is *on the basis of* the complete life lived, while Piper (together with Richard Gaffin) wants to say that our final justification, dealing with "the function of works in the final judgment" (p. 116), is *in accordance with* the complete life lived.

There are several things to note right at the outset. The first is the Piper appears to agree that there actually *is* a final justification (pp. 115-116). This puts him at odds with some of the more strident disputants in the Federal Vision uproar. And remember that Richard Gaffin provided an encouraging blurb for Norman Shepherd's book *The Call of Grace*, and *while* you remember that, keep what Shepherd calls *obedient faith* in our discussion of this next point.

Second, Piper goes out of his way to assert the absolute necessity of good works in salvation. "Let me declare myself clearly here; I believe in the *necessity* of a transformed life of obedience to Jesus by the power of the Spirit through faith as a public evidence and confirmation of faith at the Last Day for all who will finally be saved" (p. 110). He believes it is *actually* true, and not just *hypothetically* true, that God will render to each one in accordance with his works. He cites the Augsburg Confession as showing that good works do not just exist alongside saving faith, but arise from it (p. 112). He cites the First Helvetic Confession as showing that "faith does not simply exist alongside the fruit of obedience, but itself 'performs innumerable good works'" (p. 113). Piper emphasizes what The Thirty-Nine Articles teach, which is that good works are "the fruits of Faith," and that they spring out of "a true and lively Faith" (p. 113).

In other words, saving faith is a *lively* faith. He cites the Westminster Confession as follows: "Faith, thus receiving and resting on Christ and his righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification; *yet is not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is not dead faith, but worketh by love*" (p. 114, emphasis from Piper). He goes on to say, "The Confession makes explicit (by its footnotes) that the words 'work[s] by love' are a reference to Galatians 5:6 . . . It thus establishes a *necessary* connection between the faith that justifies and the obedient life of love" (p. 114).

In short, this is not a discussion between Scott Clark and N.T. Wright, but between John Piper and N.T. Wright. And without trying to paint Piper into a corner, I *can* say that what Piper affirms here about the necessary relationship of faith and works, I have no trouble affirming as an FV guy. And Richard Gaffin provided a blurb for *this* book, just as he did for Norman Shepherd. I am not taking shots at Gaffin here; I believe that this close tie between faith and obedience is the historic Reformed position.

Piper is trying to work out exactly what Wright means by "basis," and that is the subject of his next chapter. But before we get there, let me just throw out a few observations on this convoluted subject.

A great deal of difficulty, in my view, has been created by the desire of every sinful heart to separate *deed* from *motive*. The sinner always wants to keep his thoughts and motives to himself, and to present the outside shell, suitably shined up, for God to look at. This separation of the deed and the motive for the deed is what the schizophrenia of sin always seeks to do.

Whenever Paul is attacking works-righteousness, he does so by granting the split (for the sake of the argument), and he then attacks the capacity of that polished shell to do or accomplish anything. Judged in that setting, autonomous works will always be inadequate, insufficient, and ultimately impudent. So it is always false to say that works can somehow meet a standard of perfection that will somehow impress God. God will always be unimpressed.

We are justified by faith alone. But as Westminster puts it, it is by a faith that is never alone. But *why* is this faith never alone? The reason is found in The Thirty Nine Articles. It is a lively faith, a *fertile* faith. It cannot be a raw faith, an "alone faith," because saving faith is always necessarily pregnant with good deeds. To postulate an alone faith is to think like a schizophrenic sinner who wants motives over *here* (and irrelevant in the judgment) and deeds over *there*.

This chapter had a great deal of discussion of what Paul means in Romans 2, when he says that "the doers of the law" are those "who will be justified." This is an important discussion, but I would like to see it connected to Romans 1 -- "the just shall live by faith." Who lives by faith? The *just*. What does he do? He *lives*. How does he do that? By *faith*. Put those three together, and I believe we have the solution to our conundrum. In other words, justifying faith, lively faith, is the animating principle of the whole life lived, and not just the animating principle of one second during a man's conversion. This does not mean that God separates the deeds from the motives (why would He do that?) in order to make our works the basis of His judgment. That would be appalling, and disastrous for us.

This is where I agree with Piper (and perhaps with Wright, depending). In the final justification, God's determination is *in accordance with* the whole life lived. He looks at our faith alone, and He also see *whatever* it was that this kind of faith did. What does that kind of faith do? It always looks to Christ and His righteousness alone, and consequently does good works out of natural and lively gratitude.

Posted by Douglas Wilson - 1/1/2008

Then Learn from the Baptist

Topic: N.T. Wrights and Wrongs

Let me begin my discussion of this next chapter in Piper with a caution for any defenders of Wright who think that Piper is "missing it," or "not understanding," or anything along those lines.

This chapter is discussing issues right at the heart of the Reformed understanding of how the gospel works. Piper is arguing diligently for that traditional understanding. He is a Baptist pastor, steeped in the Reformation tradition, and he is engaging an Anglican scholar of the first rank, who is, at the very least, putting these things in a different way. There are countless places for this discussion to go off the rails, but Piper doesn't allow that. He raises all the concerns that you would expect him to raise. But he does it carefully, with all sorts of qualifications. He asks Wright to tighten up his definitions, or to make something more clear, or to qualify something else. He is very clearly not in a "rush to judgment" mode. He is not flinging charges of heresy about. He is not demagoguing this, not even remotely.

I make this observation as someone who has been in the receiving end of many reckless charges on this very same subject, and I say this as a Presbyterian who has been catching it from fellow Presbyterians.

And to these critics on their "the gospel is at stake" jag, which apparently means that all deliberation and care can be thrown to the winds, I have this to say. If you want to know how a Presbyterian theologian should approach this subject in critiquing others, *then learn from the Baptist*. This is not to agree with Piper at every point, but it is to say that his interaction is helpful, not destructive, and it is just the kind of thing we should be trying to encourage. So, for the Wright fan base, yes, I think there are some things Piper is missing here, some of which will come up in this post. But this is *how* it ought to be done. There are "inflammatory" lines from Wright that Piper cites, but then goes on to show why they need to be taken in a more contextual and nuanced way.

"Taken as a whole, his position concerning the final basis of justification is ambiguous" (p. 117).

"The aim is to sort out fairly how close we are, and yet, perhaps, how different" (p. 125).

"Again, I use the word *seem* as an invitation to Wright to express himself with more precision if he wants us to understand clearly where he stands" (p. 130).

"As much as I try to see Wright's construction of Pauline theology as saying the same thing as the Reformed tradition, I don't think he is" (p. 131).

The locus of discussion in this chapter is whether or not Wright is saying the same thing about imputation as the Reformed are, only in different language. By the end of this chapter, it seems clear that he is not. It is also equally clear that he is not applauding the efforts of the "unaided works of the self-help moralist" (p. 119). Wright is trying to function with different categories entirely -- the *merit* of good works for the individual doing them is not in view for him at all. Whether this works is a separate question, but it is clear what Wright intends to reject.

Piper says that the main difference between them here is the fact that Wright denies that the (active) obedience of Jesus is imputed to the believer. He provides a diagram that contrasts them this way:

1. Faith/baptism > Union with Christ > Imputation of Christ's death, obedience, and resurrection > Assurance of final vindication;
2. Faith/baptism > Union with Christ > Imputation of Christ's death and resurrection > Assurance of final vindication.

The first is the traditional Reformed view, and the second is Wright's. The reason Wright rejects the imputation of Christ's obedience has been discussed earlier -- obedience of one person not being a gas that can float across the courtroom to another. The problem here is that death and resurrection are not gasses either.

The central question is this: how can *anything* pertaining to one person be credited to another? The answer is found in covenantal headship, but once Christ is our federal head, there is *nothing* of His that is not ours also, and that would include His obedience. But this leads to another point, which is actually the central one. When I say "ours also," what do I mean *ours*? Who is that talking about?

At one point Piper alludes to this, the issue that I believe is the nub of this particular discussion. "Wright does not come to terms with the fact that Paul threatens baptized professing Christians not just with *barely* being saved, with *not* being saved at all in the last judgment (Gal. 5:21; 6:7-9; 1 Cor. 6:9)" (p. 118). He mentions it, but doesn't develop it as I believe it needs to be developed.

In other words, we have to keep in mind that there are two kinds of people within the Christian church -- the saved and the damned. Among the sons of Isaac were a host of Ishmaelites. Among the sons of Jacob were a host of Edomites. And yet, in another sense, all the Ishmaelites were descended from Isaac. What profit is there in being a Jew? Much in every way. Spiritual wisdom on this subject is absolutely dependent upon holding both these truths. The death, obedience, and resurrection of Christ is "ours also." When I say "ours also," and then look around the church, who is included? Who excluded? Are all baptized individuals included in one way, with some of them excluded in another? Yes.

Wright is correct that different views of baptism have contributed to the confusion.

"The central passage is in fact Romans 6, and I think it is because much post-reformation theology has tended to fight shy of taking seriously Paul's realistic theology of baptism that it has sought to achieve what Paul describes in that chapter and elsewhere by another route" (p. 126).

Now here is the interesting deal. I agree with Wright, over against Piper, that Paul is expressing a realist theology of baptism in Romans 6. Paul is talking about water baptism, and he presses the force of this in his argument -- "how can we who died to sin (in our baptism) still live in it? What are you guys *doing*? Weren't you baptized?" But I agree with Piper (and with Paul) that lots of people in possession of this baptism (concerning which I advance a realist theology, although I would use the word *objective* instead of *realist*) are living like the devil, and that something must be done about it. Paul insists upon the objective understanding in the first part of Romans 6, and he starts attacking sin in the Romans by verse 12.

I have heard Wright describe Marcus Borg as a "confused Christian." In other words, Wright looks to Borg's baptism to make this charitable assessment. Piper would look at Borg's denial of pretty much everything, and say, "If he's a Christian, then I'm a Hottentot." My point is that if we are to take the teaching of the New Testament seriously, there is a sense in which they are both right.

A Pauline (and realist) view of baptism has to be held in tension with Paul's view of sin within the covenant people, *and right next to it*. In other words, it is "your baptism was into Christ's death, therefore abandon every form of death." It is not "your baptism was into Christ's death, and so we will hope the best for you regardless of what you say or do." In other words, Wright needs to do more than have amicable debates with a friend who is a "confused Christian." He needs to recognize that the New Testament takes an extremely dim view of such false teachers, and that Borg is presenting himself as a slave to sin, "which leads to death" (Rom. 6:16), and is active in leading others into that death.

In other words, Paul uses his objective view of baptism to assail sin and unbelief, *not to make room for it*.

This is the reason historic evangelicals are nervous about realist views of the sacraments. Carnal people like to think that taking the covenant sign on is the same thing as being faithful to that covenant, or is somehow getting them "part way there." But let me return to my old standby illustration of marriage. An adulterer is a husband, and we can say that he is guilty of adultery precisely *because* he is married. If he were not married, it wouldn't be adultery -- he couldn't be sinning against his wife if he didn't have one. But if I have a friend who let me know that he was off to see his mistress, and I let him go without confronting him because "at least he's married," I would be guilty of the most fundamental covenantal confusion possible. His marriage vows should be used as the basis of the confrontation (as Paul does in Romans 6), not as an excuse for doing nothing. But of course, if I went the baptistic route, that would not be any more helpful. "He is clearly being unfaithful to his wife. That must mean he is not really married, at least not in God's sight." The former problem assumes that marriage vows destroy the possibility of adultery; the latter assumes that adultery destroys the possibility of marriage.

So I believe that Wright is correct about Romans 6:3 and that Piper is wrong. I believe that Piper is right about Romans 6:16, and that Wright is wrong. *Now what are we going to do?*

Posted by Douglas Wilson - 1/5/2008

Really Married

Topic: N.T. Wrights and Wrongs

Since I used my stand-by marriage analogy in the previous post, let me modify it slightly before Frank Turk says something about it. I do this because I know the illustration is not exact. Let me modify it so that it is exact.

Suppose that marriage exists, just as it does today, but with this difference. Everyone who is married is objectively married, just like now. But suppose there is a subset of these married folks who know (as a gift of God, lest anyone boast) what marriage was really all about. These people enjoy what might be called a marital election, and were promised continued marriage in the resurrection, forever and ever. Right, I know that's not true. This is an illustration.

If this were the case, and were known to be the case, we would have all the same wrangles about what it means to be "really married" that we do now about what it means "to be really a Christian." There would be people who would argue that adultery now is all right, just so long as you weren't married in the ultimate sense. "I mean, if God hasn't elected me to marital bliss, what difference does it make?"

The issue is this: this status of ultimate marital happiness would be God's secret and mysterious work. It would not alter the nature of the marriage vows here and now. All married couples here would be married in exactly the same way, and with exactly the same obligations. Some of them would have God's mysterious blessing that would enable them to understand this. But whether they understood it or not, they would all have exactly the same obligations, until death parted them.

Posted by Douglas Wilson - 1/5/2008

If That's Grace, Then We Don't Want Any

Topic: N.T. Wrights and Wrongs

In the ninth chapter of Piper's book, he starts to get into the issues that make Wright's project really vulnerable -- if we take Wright's offerings in the "take it or leave it" way he offers them. For my part, I intend to continue to learn from Wright, but that can't be done on Wright's terms. In other words, for the life of me I don't see why many of Wright's readings are not fully consistent with the traditional readings of Paul. But Wright insists on a fundamental division of some sort. Here is Wright, making that point.

Sanders' "major point, to which all else is subservient, can be quite simply stated. Judaism in Paul's day was not, as has regularly been supposed, a religion of legalistic works-righteousness. If we imagine that it was, and that Paul was attacking it as if it was, we will do great violence to it and to him. The Jew keeps the law out of gratitude . . ." (p. 141).

There's that timeless Jew again. Given Wright's bias against timeless, contextless abstractions (and he has a point), I do not know how Wright can say things like this. Who is "the Jew"? Caiphas? Judas? Peter? Mary? Zecharias? This was certainly true of a Jew who was converted to God and who received God's Word as it was written. He, whoever he was, kept the law out of gratitude. It was *not* true of those who crucified Jesus. Were they keeping the law when they murdered Jesus? Were they doing it out of gratitude? Of course not.

But the point here is that Wright makes this quite an important issue for him. He regards this particular contribution of Sanders as quite settled. According to Wright, if I believe that Judaism in Paul's day (the governing, covenant-breaking part of it) was legalistic and self-righteous, then according to Wright I am doing *great violence* to that Judaism and to Saul of Tarsus, as well as to that same man as Paul the apostle. I don't believe I am, and I believe this can be demonstrated quite simply.

Piper is right to say in this chapter "that one of the most integral threads holding the system together is Wright's assessment of first-century Jewish experience as a life built on God's grace" (p. 143). He is also correct to say that this "understanding of first-century Judaism is an integral part of Wright's system" (p. 141). This chapter in Piper simply sets up this particular problem, stating it, and a more detailed examination of it will come in the following pages.

Sanders' mistake -- and Wright's in making so much out of this point of his -- is that they are treating "Judaism" as a term in a syllogism, as in "all P are Q." But "all Jews were legalistic" and "all Jews were recipients of grace" are both equally false, if we are taking the term as distributed. But if we take it as a prophetic generalization, the impact and meaning is quite different, and the way we handle it must be different.

"Cretans are evil beasts, lazy gluttons and liars" is a true *generalization*. "Pharisees are whited tombs" is true as a generalization, and it is an *authoritative* generalization made by the Lord Himself. Before we set out to rehabilitate the reputation of the Pharisees, we need to remember who it was that trashed their reputation in the first place. And it simply won't do to say that the Pharisees were grateful observers of God's law, fully conscious of their need for grace, with their one teensy-weensy problem being a tetch of ethnocentrism. *No*. They devoured widow's houses. They loved money. They hated the attention Jesus got. They were full of self-indulgence. They were full of *all* uncleanness. And they didn't do these wicked things "out of gratitude, a proper response to grace." Not even close. Plenty of Jews *did* obey God, and kept the law out of the gratitude that Wright describes, but they still didn't have the necessary votes at Sanhedrin. And the Lord did not see fit to use these loyal, faithful Jews as the representatives of "Judaism." He picked the other lot. So the Bible names Judaism, and describes its characteristics for us.

These generalizations are not falsified if we point out that it was a Cretan who made the first observation, or that many Pharisees came to believe in Jesus. The generalization is not falsified by the exception. The exception, the faithful remnant, was only maintained by God's grace. Otherwise all Israel would have been like Sodom. *All* Israel would have been like Gomorrah. And speaking of these cities, it is worth pointing out that Capernaum will fare *worse* in the judgement than these ancient cities of the plain.

This failing case for Pharisaic dependence on grace is made on the basis of documents, and scholarly analysis of those documents, with all the ancient sin carefully hidden away from the modern scholar. But Jesus was actually there in the synagogue watching these men puff themselves up like a jay bird in order to pray. He saw their arrogance, and knew that their eyes were fat like grease. He pointed this out, and we who are Christians need to follow Him in this. Read through Matthew 23 again. If that is grace, we shouldn't want any.

Posted by Douglas Wilson - 1/9/2008

Speaking of Second Temple Judaism . . .

Topic: N.T. Wrights and Wrongs

There are a couple of things to be drawn out of chapter ten, in which Piper argues (and in my view, demonstrates) that there is a single self-righteous root for both "self-help moralism" and prideful "ethnic badges." That is the first point. But the second, and the one where I want to spend some attention, is in a discussion of a distinction Piper makes between hard and soft legalism which I think is troublesome.

The first thing is to simply reinforce the point I have been making, which is that Paul's opponents, the Judaizers, were evil men, not misguided men. The central reason for saying this is that the New Testament says this in multiple places and in multiple ways. Wright acknowledges that their pride in their ethnic identity was a sin, but he does not put it in the same category of sin and rebellion as self-help moralism. The fact that they were clinging to ethnic boundary markers was a failing, and it was a failing that caused them to miss who the Messiah was, but he still wants to say that they were somehow still trusting in God's grace as their central motivation. We have covered this ground before.

There are a couple of additional observations on this point. Wright wants to say that the "works of the law" (apart from which we are saved) are referring to ethnic boundary markers like circumcision and sabbath keeping, and not to works of the law with the moral law in view. But is this not dualism? Why would we think that a first-century Jew would carefully winnow out the duties of morality (which fill the Torah) from the ethnic badges of the Torah? Of course, sinners always *do* this with their external systems of religion, *but they never admit it*. The necessary integration of morality and ethnicity is pointed out by Simon Gathercole, who notes that in Romans 4:1-8 David (although he had all the boundary markers) was nevertheless described as "without works" because of his moral disobedience (p. 148).

Piper points out that if it is not from God, then it must be from man. If it is from God, then God will accept it. And if it is from man, then it *has* to be self-righteousness. Different examples of conceit, hubris, and arrogance can proceed from man, but self-will, self-righteousness, is the foundation of all sin. Being proud of ethnicity is not morally different than being proud of not drinking too much. Being proud of being a Jew is no different than being proud of being a Gentile. It's all one. And because it was all one, the Judaizers -- evil dogs, false brothers -- were not living a life of gratitude for God's grace. They were *proud* that they understood that God's grace had been given to them as keepers of the law. They thanked *God* that they were not like other men. They missed the point utterly. As Piper put it, "their pursuit of Torah was not out of gratitude to God, but out of craving for human glory" (p. 154). In short, I believe that in this chapter a centerpiece of Wright's argument is completely refuted.

That being the case, let me take issue with a point that Piper makes a couple times in his footnotes. His argument doesn't depend on it, but I believe the ramifications of this mistake could be a big deal down the road. He quotes Stephen Westerholm with approval in one place (p.158), as Westerholm was making a distinction between hard and soft legalism. If I am understanding him correctly (and I admit that I might not be), Westerholm appears to be saying that hard legalism is motivated by hypocrisy, self-seeking and merit-mongering while soft legalism can be motivated by fear of punishment or love of God. He *appears* to be saying that the religion of Psalm 119 is an example of soft legalism, and that Deuteronomy 30:16 commands it. This may be a law/gospel thing, and I would be happy to stand corrected on what Westerholm is saying, but it really strikes me as odd. Piper pursues a discussion of soft legalism on the next page (p. 159) -- and includes in it any who depend on their works even if they acknowledge that *all* of their good works are a gift from God. Now I would differ with such a position, and would think it a serious mistake, but I would have a hard time characterizing a view that was dependent entirely on the grace of God as formally legalistic.

I believe a distinction between hard and soft legalism could be a helpful one, but whether the legalism on paper is hard (no help from God) or soft (lots of help from God), the legalist's heart, whatever kind he is, is always hard. A legalist is someone who trusts in the wrong thing, or in the right thing the wrong way. He is an idolater. As such, since he is not trusting in the living God, his heart is always hard. The soft semi-Pelagian who trusts in his contribution is just as hard-hearted as the hard Pelagian. That's why they are both lost.

At the same time, the Christian world has plenty of soft legalists on *paper*, but who trust in Jesus alone for salvation, despite their theology. And we have lots of hard-grace types who trust in their understanding of hard grace instead of in Jesus. The world is an odd place.

I would like to conclude my post here by making an observation about how the controversy on the New Perspective on Paul has made its way through the Reformed and evangelical world. When Wright showed up to make his enormous contributions to New Testament scholarship (which he has certainly done), certain guardians of the flock in the Reformed world decided to discharge their office by soaking their hair with lighter fluid, setting it off, and running in place. They mushed all *kinds* of things together -- NPP, FV, Norman Shepherd, and so on -- and set off a general clamor. "The gospel is at stake, don't ask me why! But run!" But others set about the task of engaging with the arguments, carefully, without hysterics, and where the arguments held, acknowledging the justice of them, and where they didn't, demonstrating that. This can be done without rushing to accusations of *heresy*. On this particular point, I think that Wright is badly mistaken, and Piper is right. On other issues, noted before, I believe that Piper is badly mistaken (he won't baptize *babies*, for example, no matter how cute they are), and Wright is correct.

But if either of these gracious Christian gentlemen were to come to Moscow, they would both be most welcome to sit down at the Lord's Table together with us. Even if they came on the same Sunday. I may be a fundamentalist, but I am a catholic fundamentalist.

The first duty of the minister in this kind of situation is to *refute* error. If he does so, and the error is a serious one, striking at the vitals of our religion, and the mistaken one won't abandon his error, then it is time to consider whether discipline in one form or another might be necessary. But in this case, I believe that Wright is mistaken on some stuff, just like I think C.S. Lewis was. But I don't believe the errors rise to a level where they justify charges of heresy. They should simply be answered, in the knowledge that if they are refuted (and not just denounced with dog whistles), the fad will pass. And in the meantime, the people of God will have been spared the spectacle of watching their shepherds in hysterics. "I can't debate, I can't answer, I can't confute, but I *can* blog!"

I agree with James Hamilton's observation that Wright's dependence on Sanders's "reconstruction of Palestinian Judaism is sagging" (p. 145). In fact, I think "sagging" is an understatement. So let the cycle of debate work its way through. Since we are speaking of Second Temple Judaism, let's do the Gamaliel thing.

Posted by Douglas Wilson - 1/10/2008

Whatever We Call It

Topic: N.T. Wrights and Wrongs

The next to last chapter of Piper's book (not counting appendices) returns to the question of imputed righteousness.

"Wright regards the imputation of God's righteousness as something that can be imputed to us or counted as ours as at best a category mistake" (p. 163).

And of course, we need to return to a distinction made earlier in this discussion. Wright sees the "righteousness of God" as that which describes His keeping His covenant promises, and, since we are the recipients of that faithfulness, it makes no sense to speak of His covenant faithfulness becoming our covenant faithfulness to us. But there is another aspect of this. In other words, we see the righteousness of God in Christ, and when we speak of imputation, we are speaking of the imputation of Christ's righteousness. I am aware of no one who believes that the Father's heavenly righteousness is imputed to us directly. Christ is the new Israel, and because I have faith in Him, His obedience as that new Israel is my obedience.

I have been enabled to become a new Israelite, and this new Israel is not a loser like the old one. And every new Israelite is righteous by virtue of his union with Jesus Christ by faith. What is this but imputation? What is this but the imputation of Christ's righteousness, which was lived out and made available to us by God's righteousness. In other words, what we get from God is by virtue of the Incarnation, Cross and Resurrection.

The righteousness of God's (His covenant faithfulness) caused Him to send Christ. But He didn't just send Him, He also reckoned that His righteousness was ours in the same way that He reckoned that our unrighteousness was His on the cross.

Piper quotes Wright (referring to 1 Thess. 2:18-20) as saying this:

"This is why, when Paul looks ahead to the future and asks, as well one might, what God will say on the last day, he holds up as his joy and crown, *not the merits and death of Jesus*, but the churches he has planted who remain faithful to the gospel" (pp. 165-166).

Piper rightly takes him to task for this by citing 1 Thess. 5:9-10: "God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, *who died for us* so that . . ." Paul *does* appeal to the death of Jesus when contemplating the final judgment. But of course, if this is not understood in either/or terms, both men are right. It is false to say that Paul has no thought of the churches he planted when he contemplates the last day. It is equally false to say that he has no thought of the death of Jesus Christ for him. Think of Galatians 2:20 -- why would that cease to be his basis for living the closer he gets to the day of judgment? Is he going to live his life by faith in the Son of God who loved him and gave Himself up for him, and then quit trusting in that as he approaches the judgment? But the death of Jesus does not displace other aspects of our life -- rightly understood, it is foundational to everything else. There is no inconsistency between resting on Christ alone and His death on the cross and resurrection on the day of judgment, and *also* saying, "Here am I, and the children you have given me."

I am on the road, and just got back from a wonderful lunch with a group of very sharp seminary students from RTS in Jackson. We spent a good bit of time talking about these issues of imputation, and the active and passive obedience of Christ. If Wright is arguing with the merit paradigm, and he is rejecting it while using the language of imputation, I am sympathetic. If I may speak in a cryptic fashion, merit bad. Merit no good. So to speak. But the *obedience* of Jesus, all of it, is ours. Christ recapitulated the history of Israel in His life, and He did not do this as a type of typological doodling. There was a point -- there was a need for it. Israel needed to do it right, and Christ as the new Israel did it right. This is nothing other than the good news of imputation. I needed to have that obedience, and now, by faith in Jesus who did have it, I do have that obedience.

But if Wright is rejecting more than the brownie points system, and is rejecting the idea of imputation itself, then I am with Piper. But I don't know how Wright could be rejecting imputation itself -- provided we define our terms carefully. Wright knows that Jesus recapitulates the history of Israel, only doing so in obedience instead of the old Israel's disobedience. Since He was not simply amusing Himself, that recapitulation is *ours*. And if it is ours, it has to be ours by imputation, whether righteousness floats across a courtroom or not, and whatever you call it.

Why am I a sinner? It is because my covenant representative, my covenant head, disobeyed in the Garden. How did that unrighteousness get to me? It did so by covenant representation. The whole federal vision controversy boils down to this -- the Latin word *foedus* means covenant. The original meaning of the word *federal* means covenantal. The federal vision constitutes an attempt to get Reformed Christians to see life (that's the vision part) more covenantally. But covenant theology does not refer to God making countless covenants with countless individuals. He made *one* new testament, in which we all participate by faith. And when we participate in the covenant, we are united to the head of that covenant. When we are united to Him, all that He is, all that He has, and all that He has done, becomes ours. That is imputation, however we dance around, or whatever we call it.

Now, one of you will say, what about the reprobate covenant member? Is he united to Christ in the same way, in such a way that he enjoys the benefits of this imputation. No, of course not. The elect covenant member and the reprobate covenant member are not united to Christ in the same way, with duration being the only difference. There is a qualitative difference between them all along.

To summarize, anyone who believes that Jesus is a covenant head, anyone who believes that Jesus is the new humanity, anyone who believes that Jesus is the new Israel, believes in the imputation of Christ's obedience, all kinds. And I am glad, because otherwise we should worry.

Posted by Douglas Wilson - 1/12/2008

The Complete Life Lived, Graven Images and All

Topic: N.T. Wrights and Wrongs

Okay then. I have finished Piper's book, and I still like it. It is well worth reading, and should be taken seriously. He emphasizes a number of things that I believe that Wright should incorporate into his broader insights, without giving up those broader insights. There are any number of places where the sweep of Wright's vision of a global gospel, and Piper's interest in applying the gospel to the recesses of every sinful heart, are fully consistent with one another.

But in those places where there is a true inconsistency I abandon the both/and approach, and, forced to choose in an either/or fashion, go with Piper. As Wright teaches, the penal substitution of Christ on the cross for the sins of His people is a central meaning of Christ's death. But the imputation of Christ's obedience to His people is also part of that gospel. The recapitulation of Israel's history in the life of Christ -- with Israel doing it right this time -- is a glorious manifestation of this truth. Unless the full obedience of Christ as the new Israel is mine as a new Israelite, then I am still stuck with my old record of disobedience. I am still stuck in the old way of being Israel, or worse, the old way of being a Gentile.

At the same time, there *are* quite a few places where I prefer Wright over Piper (although they were not in the forefront in this book). Because Piper is a Baptist and Wright and I are both paedobaptists, that would be one obvious place to look. But it is not just the *practice* of baptizing infants -- there are plenty of folks around these parts who observe wet dedications, not covenantal *baptisms*. It is also necessary to understand the radical, civilization-building nature of infant baptism. And, as I understand it, Piper doesn't share my postmill outlook, and Wright, though he doesn't use the eschatological buzzwords, does. Both of these differences will cause any number of texts to cast a completely different kind of shadow.

One final thought. As I read this conclusion, one additional thought occurred to me. Wright believes the whole Protestant/Catholic debate over justification has been misconstrued, and he believes that the doctrine of justification, far from being an article of division, should be an article of ecumenical union. As Wright puts it:

"Justification by faith tells me that if my Roman neighbor believes that Jesus is Lord and that God raised him from the dead then he or she is brother or sister, however much I believe them muddled, even dangerously so, on other matters" (pp. 181-182).

What might some of those other matters be? Wright says:

"I am horrified at some of the recent Anglican/Roman statements, for instance, and on things like the Papacy, purgatory, and the cult of the saints (especially Mary), I am as protestant as the next person, for (I take it) good Pauline reasons" (p. 181).

This is all good, and I am quite gratified by it, as was Piper. But Piper goes on to argue for the crucial distinction between imputation and impartation in discussions of justification. While agreeing with Piper, I would like to raise a different question that arises out of this.

In the examples that follow, I am not trying to be snarky, taking cheap shots at anybody. If we are going to talk about this, we have to talk about this.

Wright believes that his formulation of imputation and justification is a. biblical and b. the basis for ecumenical reconciliation. Piper addressed the former, but let me raise a question about the latter.

I want to argue that Wright's approach, taken as a whole, if it were really adopted, would *not* cause ecumenical harmony to bust out between Protestants and Catholics. There are several ways to state this. The reason I have no problem affirming that many Catholics truly know the Lord, and have been genuinely justified, is precisely because I believe justification by faith alone is *true*, whatever they might think about it. They are justified by their faith in Jesus, and their misplaced faith in Trent doesn't necessarily undo that. But what if I accepted what Wright says? Then what?

Wright says that people are justified on the basis of the "complete life lived." He says that future justification will be on "the basis of the entire life" (p. 183). Now what am I -- staunch Puritan that I am -- to do about the question of a Roman Catholic's future justification? Set aside my personal worries about *my* "complete life lived," what am I going to say about my Roman Catholic friend who is going to face the Lord at judgment on the basis of the complete life lived, and *he* has been bowing down to those graven images for forty years? Not only that, but he has been completely devoted to the Blessed Virgin. And a good half of the good things he did were to minimize the pains of purgatory. If justification is simply free grace, independent of any and all of my screw-ups on our part, it is far easier to be charitable about the sins, foibles, and doctrinal errors of others. But if I believe that he is going to have to answer for all that stuff (with justification in view) on the last day, then I and he and everybody else will become increasingly skittish -- about ourselves, and others, and both. Wright himself says that these beliefs are dangerous. You bet they are. They are really dangerous if they show to testify at the day of judgment. In short, I think this ecumenical move is going to backfire.

Posted by Douglas Wilson - 1/13/200

On Wright

The Hinge Upon Which All Turns

Topic: N.T. Wrights and Wrongs

In this book, N.T. Wright hopes to accomplish an "outflanking" maneuver (p. vii) in order to make much of the ongoing controversy over Paul irrelevant. And that is a great idea, if he can pull it off. Outflanking, when it works, can result in a decisive settlement. Outflanking, when it does not work, can be just another exercise in missing the point. Jeb Stuart outflanked the Union army at Gettysburg, which consisted of him riding completely around them -- while the battle was being settled elsewhere.

I should say that at the outset that Wright is vigorous in his response to Piper, but he nevertheless treats him with courtesy and respect. I have some hopes that this will wind up being a fruitful exchange at the end of the day.

What are the main "pressure points" (p. viii) according to Wright? The first has to do with the "nature and scope of salvation" (p. viii). According to Wright, the sweep of God's redemptive plan is much larger than we have a tendency to think. Wright suspects that Piper would agree with this on paper (p. viii), and I know that I do. But while there would seem to be agreement here, Wright suspects that we in the Reformed tradition have not given this insight the free rein it ought to have. "But I do not think they have yet allowed it to affect the way they think about the questions that follow" (p. viii).

The second pressure point has to do with the *means* of salvation. Wright states what Piper would say about this, which is 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" (p. viii). Wright agrees with this entirely, but objects with what was left out. "But there is something missing -- or rather, *someone* missing. Where is the holy spirit?" (p. viii). And, "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)" (p. viii).

The third pressure point has to do with what the word *justification* actually means in Scripture. Wright and Piper agree that justification is a forensic declaration that God's people are "in the right." But "what does that declaration involve? How does it come about" (p. ix)?

"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" (p. ix).

Wright understands the force of this proposal, and why it gives such assurance to believers. He wants to get to that same kind of assurance. But he says "Paul's way of doing it is not Piper's," and Wright gives four reasons why Paul's doctrine of justification is much richer and more layered than Piper's. First, justification is about the "work of Jesus the Messiah," second, it is about the climax of the covenant made with Abraham (p. ix), third, he says it has a different lawcourt application than Piper wants to give it (p. x), and last, justification is in Paul all bound up with eschatology.

Thus far the preface. What are we to make of all this? Returning to the top, let me say how much I appreciate Wright taking the time to respond in detail to Piper. I believe it will prove to be enormously helpful. I also believe that both men are conducting a model theological disputation, over issues which they know to be of great importance to the gospel, and yet they are doing it without descending into the anathemistic distractions of ecclesiastical fighting words. If for no other reason, a *well done* to both.

Second, I believe that on a number of the broader contextual points Wright raises, I will be more in agreement with him, and *sometimes* less so with Piper. And third, notwithstanding this second point, I believe that Piper has correctly identified the hinge upon which all turns, and that Wright has somehow missed it. I will come back to this in my conclusion.

But it should be added that in places where I agree enthusiastically with Wright, it does not follow that he understands how much Piper would agree with him also. It already appears that Wright is going to be long on words that point to "emphases, omissions, appearances, and seemings." In some of these caricatures, I recognize some real people that actually do resemble them -- people who could read the Westminster Confession through a keyhole and use both eyes -- but Piper is not one of them, and there are a host of biblical, theological Reformed scholars who would agree with Piper on this "hinge," and yet who would be prepared to cheerfully grant all the broader contextual issues that Wright has brought up here.

That said, let me cycle quickly through Wright's points. The first pressure point has to do with the nature and scope of God's plan of salvation. On this point, I guess I would chide Piper with FTBP (Failure to be Postmill), but at the same time, it really appears that Wright is unfamiliar with the scope of Piper's passion for missions, and his call to "let the *nations* be glad." And then there are the many postmill Reformed types who agree with Piper on imputation, and with Wright on the glories to come, and so it appears that this outflanking move is really a Jeb Stuart gallop on a sunny day. I mean, I am a stand-on-the-chair-and-wave-my-hat-over-my-head postmillennialist, to use the technical phrase for it, and although this is currently a minority report, I am not uncommon in the Reformed world.

And because Wright is also engaging with the Reformed tradition throughout its history, he should recognize that for most of that history, the majority of the Reformed world held to Piper's view of imputation *and* Wright's view of the "nature and scope of salvation." Shoot, I am such a postmillennialist that I believe the day is coming when Anglican bishops will understand economics.

His second point was the missing Holy Spirit. First, when Wright gloriously summarizes what *he* is arguing for (pp. 18-19), he leaves the Holy Spirit out too. You can't say everything every time. Second, Piper and the tradition he represents left the Holy Spirit out in *Wright's* summary of their position. They didn't leave Him out, Wright did on their behalf. Third, does Wright seriously think that the Spirit is ignored in Reformed soteriology, ecclesiology, and eschatology? On what basis does he say this? And last, I have to say that it *really* undercut his point to ask "Where is the holy spirit?" Where I come from, when you want to emphasize the personality of *someone*, a common courtesy that you extend is to capitalize their name. To be fair, I am informed by someone over here in the UK that this might have been the result of an editorial policy over at SPCK, but then it seems to me that Wright should be taking on the SPCK instead of Piper, who wouldn't dream of doing something as disrespectful as that. I mean, for pity's sake, if you want to urge us all to take "the spirit's work . . . seriously" then by all means do more for Him than you would for the word *electricity*, and don't do less for Him than you would for *Ohm's Law*.

The third pressure point has to do with the actual meaning of the word *justification*, and we will be spending a great deal of time on this in our passage through this book. But this is what is happening . . . or at least this is what it looks like to me here in the cheap seats. Wright wants to emphasize the sweep of the grand story from Abraham on. He wants, rightly, to see the history of Israel integrally involved in all of this. He wants to see the unfolding covenant. He wants the gospels to have an honored place in our telling of the gospel -- he doesn't want us to skip from Malachi to Romans. He wants to ask why (according to him) Piper and his tradition don't really get this grand sweep. This attribution of failure is not exactly accurate as I have pointed out before -- think of Fuller's *The Unity of the Bible*, and of Piper's relationship to Fuller.

So the hinge that I mentioned earlier is not really "why do Reformed types not see this"? The hinge is "why did Saul of Tarsus not see it?" In order for us moderns to understand the story of Israel rightly, we must understand the biography of Saul rightly. This is what Piper sees, and what Wright does not. This is the hinge upon which everything turns. And so we will return to this theme again and again.

Posted by Douglas Wilson - 2/9/2009

Festooned With Ribbons

Topic: N.T. Wrights and Wrongs

Wright begins chapter one by telling a parable against his interlocuters, acknowledging that to do so might be dicey. "Now I can well imagine that, as with the Pharisees listening to Jesus' Parable of the Wicked Tenants, there may be some readers who will at once be angry, realizing that I have told this story against them" (p. 4). The story is about a poor sap who believes that the sun goes around the earth, and he happens to visit a more knowledgeable fellow, one who knows the truth. They spend the evening discussing, debating, making models on the coffee table, and so on. The evening ends in a stalemate, and first thing in the morning, the educated protagonist is awakened by his tenacious friend, taken out for a walk, and shown the true facts of the case, viz. the sun coming up. "Better to stay with tried and tested truth, with the ground firm beneath our feet. Aren't you happy we came on this walk?" (p. 5).

Since I am clearly a guy who can fit right into that parable, allow me to take this opportunity to set the record straight. I was not saying that the sun goes around the earth, but was rather maintaining, till I was blue in the face, that the sun rises in the east. And every time I tried to explain that fact, my friend, who *can* be patronizing it must be admitted, would again say that my education had sadly let me down, and then he would make the coke can go around the coffee cup again. Exasperated, I took him out there that morning to settle the thing once for all, which it didn't. My ancestors, who were geocentric, knew that the sun rose in the east, and I, heliocentric to the bone, also know that it rises in the east. Some things don't change, being timeless truths. Now it is not that my friend denies that it rises in the east, but rather that he will never say so outright, and always regards vigorous defenses of this orientalism as some form of closet geocentrism. I don't follow it either, but there it is.

Once past the egregious parable, Wright starts to say a number of wonderful things. First, as to method, he wanted to soak himself in the Bible, and get it into his bloodstream "by every means possible" (p. 6). He scores a strong *sola Scriptura* point when responding to Piper's statement that according to Wright, the church had been on "the wrong foot for fifteen hundred years" (p. 6).

He also says, gloriously, that the Christian faith is not "all about me and my salvation" (p. 7). "*We are not the centre of the universe. God is not circling around us. We are circling around him*" (p. 7, emphasis his). Of course, Piper would agree with this, given *his* emphasis on the glory of God over all things.

And this brings us to the problem with many of Wright's wonderful observations -- he has a tendency to level these pungent criticisms at those who have been in the forefront of resisting these very same errors.

For Wright, "geocentric theology and piety" are all about me and my salvation (p. 9). Or, as Tom T. Hall put it on various country music stations a decade or three back, "Me and Jesus got our own thing going, me and Jesus got it all worked out."

"And with that sometimes wilful ignorance there has crept back into theology, even into good, no-nonsense, copper-bottomed Reformation theology, the snake's whisper that actually it *is* all about us, that 'my relationship with God' and 'my salvation' is the still point in the centre of the universe" (p. 9).

Here is the difficulty. There *is* a stream of pietistic thought that is all about getting our sorry little hinder parts into heaven, and that's the end of the story. But Piper, and others like him, have been the principals leading the charge *against* this kind of "pietistic geocentrism."

Wright is like a wonderful three-point shooter in American basketball, but one who can't be troubled to find out who is wearing what uniform, or which team is supposed to be going in what direction, so when he takes to the floor, he scores a dazzling series of points -- sixteen for the home team, and twenty-four for the visitors. One can be simultaneously impressed *and* wish that he would just stop it.

The copper-bottomed Reformed theology that I am familiar with is the kind that asks, repeatedly, "what would the truth be if *you* had never been born?" So I do not take issue with Wright's point at all, but protest its misapplication.

At the same time, I don't want to be too hard on Wright here because he does sense, at *some* level, a kindred spirit of this nature in Piper. "It is because I sense that picture in John Piper's work, and because, unlike some of my critics (including some of those whose words are quoted on the back cover of his book!), he has been scrupulously fair, courteous and generous in all our exchanges" (p. 11).

I make this point nonetheless because the Copernican revolution for which Wright is pleading is in robust health in the Reformed world of North America, and is found both in critics of Wright and fans of his. Piper is not the odd-man-out anomaly that Wright thinks he is. There are narrow Reformed pietists out there, but Wright really ought to *quote* them, and cite the chapter and verse. I could suggest some names for him if he would like. If you are painting miniatures, don't use the ten-inch roller like you were working on the side of a barn or something. And secondly, I am glad to see that Wright noticed who blurbed Piper's book, and I would refer you back to my comments about Wright's blurbers, some of whom wouldn't recognize the Pauline gospel if we left it on their front lawn festooned with pink ribbons.

And now to Wright's main point, a glorious one, and again misapplied. Two quotes will suffice.

"Paul does indeed think of history as a continuous line, and of God's purpose in history sweeping forwards unbroken from Abraham to Jesus and on through himself and his work, in the mission of the church" (p. 18).

It is central to Paul, but almost entirely ignored in perspectives old, new and otherwise, that *God had a single plan all along through which he intended to rescue the world and the human race, and that this single plan was centred upon the call of Israel, a call which Paul saw coming to fruition in Israel's representative, the Messiah*" (pp. 18-19, emphasis his).

This is great stuff, but it is hardly Columbus planting the flag on a virgin continent. Find me one word in that summary that would not bring forth a chorus of amens from B.B. Warfield, Jonathan Edwards, or any Reformed stalwart between the years, say, 1550 and 1900. Take that phrase "almost entirely ignored" and hold it up to the light in wonderment. So where did I obtain the tall stack of books that I read that persuaded me of this view long before I had ever heard of N.T. Wright? Wright really needs to get out more, and stop acting like he has discovered things that many Christians have known and taught over the course of generations.

I have read a lot of Wright, and I don't recall ever reading the word *postmillennial* anywhere. There is probably some instance of it somewhere, but the comparative absence is telling. The postmill vision is a first cousin (at least) to what Wright is talking about, and it is either a cousin to whom he needs to be introduced, or it is a cousin that Wright needs to stop ignoring. This question really needs to be asked of him and soon. In what way is this not a strong variant of postmillennial eschatology?

This is not to dispute that Wright is saying a number of these things in a fresh voice, and in a fresh way. He certainly is, and I love reading him on the subject. But I love reading him on this stuff because it resonates so wonderfully *with scores of other writers* I have read. And when he says things that make it sound like he is the first one to have this grand vista open up before him, it simply clanks.

Perhaps this is because his insights have emerged in a fresh place -- *his* environment of mainstream Anglicanism -- which has perhaps been misleading to him. Anglicans are surprised when they discover that their bishop believes in God, and when they go on to discover a published faith in the resurrection, they begin to teeter. Is nothing stable anymore? So then when Wright surfaces in their midst as a kinder, gentler Rushdoony, nobody quite knows where to look. If you are treated like a green space alien for years, it is perhaps excusable to begin thinking you are one.

Another factor that has may have thrown him off is that his other native realm is that of academia, yet another insulated community, one cut off from the outside world. Those guys only stay alive in there because we shove food under the door.

So Wright certainly may be an anomaly where he lives, but he needs to recognize that he doesn't live everywhere. He really needs to start doing a *bit* of opposition research before getting into this kind of debate.

One last thing, because I said I would come back to it again and again. What was it that enabled Abraham to see the vision that Wright sets before us? The Bible tells us that it was his *faith*. God told Abraham that he would inherit the nations, and Abraham believed that promise (Rom. 4:13). Abraham was a man of faith, and we know this through *what* he believed . . . and not just the fact *that* he believed. Now I said in the previous post that the real issue is why Saul of Tarsus didn't get it. Wright acknowledges this earlier Saul in this chapter -- "despite Paul's own earlier expectations" (p. 18). But what hindered him? Why did Abraham get it, and Saul did not get it? It was because Saul, even though he was up to his neck in covenant boundary markers, *did not have faith*. If he had had Abraham's faith, he would have seen what Abraham saw, and would have rejoiced just as Abraham did. *When he was eventually converted*, it was then that he came to see. Saul of Tarsus did not believe in Jesus for the same reason that Edmund hated the name of Aslan the first time he heard of it. He was unconverted, and a man of the flesh.

And here is the vital intersection between the grand story and each individual story. Wright is very clear that personal faith and piety are good things, and are most necessary. He says, "Salvation is hugely important" (p. 7). But what he does not seem to see is that personal faith and piety are a *hermeneutical* necessity also. Of course, if we fail to have these things, *one* result is that we will be personally lost, and from that truth (in isolation) has come the misplaced focus on "geocentric piety" that Wright rightly rejects.

But what Wright needs to recognize is that men cannot see what he is pointing to -- the city whose maker and builder is God -- if they don't have eyes. Jesus did say that unless a man is born again he will not enter the kingdom (John 3:5). But He also said that unless a man is born again he cannot even see it (John 3:3). And all the pointing in the world won't help.

Posted by Douglas Wilson - 2/10/2009

Remember that Paul Hops from Foot to Foot

Topic: N.T. Wrights and Wrongs

Chapter two is a helpful and revealing chapter called rules of engagement. Much of what Wright says here is prudent and wise, and it is clear that he and Piper are not really disagreeing at those points, but rather just leaning against one another -- trying to guard against abuse in the opposite direction. A good way to tip the canoe, in my opinion, but no real disagreement at those places.

At the same time, not surprisingly, there are a number of points that require a response, the last of which will result in our first forays into the text.

The first is an odd objection that Wright raises to an observation by Clowney, when Clowney said that "the Old Testament provides the revelation from which the salvation in Christ must be understood" (p. 24). To this, Wright responds by saying, "We know, it seems ahead of time, that 'the salvation in Christ' is the topic to be discussed" (p. 24). Well, of course we do. We are baptized, and so we should see Christ everywhere in the Old Testament. We must not be "slow of heart" to believe.

Wright here is being an academic neutralist, a foundationalist of sorts who wants to build up the meanings of phrases like *the righteousness of God* painstakingly from original contexts. There is a place for that work, obviously, but not if you are going to chide people like Clowney for cutting to the chase. The Old Testament is a Christ-saturated book, and in what he is doing, Clowney is much more Pauline who, after all, saw Christ as the Rock that accompanied the Israelites in the wilderness. A good corrective here would be du Lubac's treatment of medieval exegesis -- not that they didn't have their problems too.

Secondly, Wright makes it clear that the boundaries of his Pauline corpus are narrower than they ought to be (p. 26). In his list there, he leaves out the pastorals, while recognizing that many of the old perspectivalists accept the authenticity of Paul's letters because of their view of Scripture. Wright's point here was to emphasize his *inclusion* of Ephesians and Colossians, but the omission of the pastorals was still telling. It is also convenient for him because a good bit of the autobiographical evidence for Saul's unconverted state prior to the Damascus road comes from the pastorals.

Neither is this incidental as a matter of method -- Wright has said earlier that he wanted to be *steeped* in Scripture, letting it settle in his bones. But then what? We must then *submit* to it, which means that when Paul tells Timothy and Titus that he wrote those books, our choice is either to believe him and submit to it, or maintain that somebody was telling a pious and edifying lie. This is crucial, because Wright says later that "proper evangelicalism is rooted in scripture, and above all in the Jesus Christ to whom scripture witnesses, and nowhere else" (p. 34).

Yes, and amen. But why do we need a proper evangelicalism rooted in Scripture, if goodly portions of that Scripture are telling me pious lies, and if they feel free to make up details of Paul's life that were not true? And further, if a late first century Christian can tell me edifying lies about Paul, then what could possibly be wrong with sixteenth century Christians telling me edifying lies about Paul? Just following a long and honored tradition. If it is good enough for the canon of Scripture, then why should it not be good enough for the canon of our confessions?

Wright's larger point in listing the books of the Pauline corpus was to say that our controversies would have been completely different if we had read Galatians and Romans in the light of Ephesians and Colossians instead of the other way around. But, as it happens, that is what happened to me. I came into Paul through the Ephesians portal, and a fat lot of good that apparently did.

Wright then quotes J.I. Packer (approvingly) when he notes that Packer acknowledged that the phrase *imputation of Christ's righteousness* is not in Paul, "but its meaning is" (p. 30). I am with Packer on this, but with this proviso. This meaning is not something that has to be teased out of what Paul actually does say, but is rather a meaning that is capering all over the text of Romans, waving its arms and beckoning to sinners. In this way it is like the phrase *faith alone*. The meaning is *flagrantly* there, while the actual phrase is not (except in James, to be in *that* sense denied). God's covenant righteousness is seen in His provision of an Adam who did it right, an Adam who obeyed *on our behalf* the way the first Adam did not. That obedience is mine because God considered or reckoned it to be mine. Take this away and the architectural structure of Romans collapses in a heap. Much more on this later.

This chapter does reveal a contrast in paradigms.

"The rules of engagement for any debate about Paul must be, therefore: exegesis first and foremost, with all historical tools in full play, not to dominate or to squeeze the text out of the shape into which it naturally forms itself, but to support and illuminate a text-sensitive, argument-sensitive, nuance-sensitive reading" (p. 34).

No -- it is not exegesis first, but *Christ* first. Christ is preached and proclaimed from the Scriptures first. Then comes faith and baptism. Then after that comes the exegesis. Now I agree completely with Wright that this exegesis, when it comes, is not authorized to pound the text into unnatural shapes, but I deny the Enlightenment's definition of what constitutes an unnatural shape. Was Christ the Rock in the wilderness? Was he the true bread from heaven? Was Noah's deliverance an exemplar of Christian baptism? Were Hagar and Sarah really two covenants? Could I have discovered any of those things in the Old Testament by bare bones *exegesis*?

Or did somebody have to declare Christ to me first in order for me to see it? In other words, is *true faith* necessary to *true exegesis*? Yes, of course it is. The thoughtful reader should see my overarching point about Saul of Tarsus, and the things that he could not see in the law and in the prophets.

Wright makes a good point against textual cherry picking.

"I respond: Yes, absolutely: and that means taking Romans 3:21-4:25 seriously *as a whole argument*, and discovering the meaning of its key terms within that. It means taking Romans 9:30-10:13 seriously *as a whole argument* . . . it means as well and behind those two, taking Romans 2:17-3:3.8 seriously *as part of a single train of thought* and discovering the meaning of its key terms within that" (pp. 32-33).

In the course of these reviews, we will deal with all those passages, walking through them in due course. But let me make just one point about them now. Wright refers to "discovering *the* meaning of its key terms within that." But Paul is famous for jumping around between meanings in the course of a single sentence without even stopping to breathe. For example, *nomos* or law means both the Torah *and* the moral code that even Gentiles can see in their hearts and in the sky. In some verses, Paul delights in hopping from one foot to the other and back again (Rom. 2:14). And a true Jew is an internal Jew (Rom. 2: 28-29), while in the next breath he is talking about the great value in being a not-really Jew (Rom. 3:1-2), and he is back to using that word in the conventional way. So we have no *a priori* reason to believe that Paul is going to start behaving himself with the *dikai-* word group.

But there was one thing Wright revealed in this chapter that I thoroughly approved of, and that was his disdain for the NIV. I myself have been tested, and am entirely NIV-negative.

Posted by Douglas Wilson - 2/11/2009

So Bildad is a Skunk

Topic: N.T. Wrights and Wrongs

The third chapter is on the context of first-century Judaism, and the necessity of understanding Paul in his context. As is so often the case, I enthusiastically endorse Wright's points, and am mystified by his applications. I particularly appreciated his contrast of historic Lutheranism, with due apologies to my Lutheran friends, and historic Calvinism. I think his observations were right on the money, so far as they went.

His main points were three. First, many first-century Jews thought of themselves as living in a continuous narrative that began in ancient times, and which would culminate with God's deliverance which could come at any moment (p. 41). Second, they tended to think of themselves as still living in a state of exile, from which God would deliver them (pp. 41-42). And third, they were in this sad condition because they were in covenant with God, and they were in the covenantal wrong and God was in the covenantal right. But this was also the basis for their hope because God had promised to deliver them under such circumstances (pp. 43-44).

Now I happen to agree with Wright on all three of these, and I agree wholeheartedly. But I am left scratching my head at his applications. I simply do not see how his strange views of imputation follow from these observations. I feel like Wright bounds up the stairs three at a time, and this is one reason why others cannot keep up with him. But then Wright confuses things enormously by denying that the steps he missed are actually in the staircase. But when I go up the stairs in my laborious way, the creaky noise they make sounds to me like

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The central place where he and Piper differ is on this matter of the imputation of Christ's righteousness. Wright's view is this:

"Here we meet, not for the last time, the confusion that arises inevitably when we try to think of the judge transferring, by imputation or any other way, his own attributes to the defendant" (p. 47).

He even says this, failing to open the door while holding the key to it in his own right hand.

"God's righteousness' here is his faithfulness to the covenant, specifically to the covenant with Abraham made in Genesis 15, and that it is because of this covenant that God deals with our sins through the faithful, obedient death of Jesus the Messiah" (p. 48).

Okay, then. God "deals with" our sins through the death of the Messiah. How is that? What does "deal with" mean? How does it work? Why does the death of Jesus have anything to do with me? What is the connection? And the answer is that, *apart from imputation*, there can be no connection. Whoever Jesus was, He died and rose on the other side of the world from me, and He did that two thousand years ago. So *how does that get to be mine?*

"What is now required, if the world's sin is to be dealt with and a worldwide family created for Abraham, is a faithful Israelite. That is what God has now provided" (p. 49).

Well said, but there that phrase is again. "Dealt with." *How* is anything dealt with? And what does that newly created family for Abraham have to do with me? How do I get into it? Sure, by faith, but how do the virtues of the head of the family extend to me? Why do I get a piece of this action?

In Paul's argumentation, this kind of covenant family is created by imputation. The sin of Adam was imputed to all his descendants, an ungodly family. So the obedience of the last Adam was . . . what? His obedience is either mine or not mine. If not mine, then what good is it to me? If mine, then how?

I would go so far as to say that a covenant family is impossible without a covenant head. And another way of saying covenant head is imputation head. What my federal head says or does is mine, somehow, someway. How? *What way?*

Wright states something here that is very true, but which is only half of what Paul is arguing for. He says the righteousness of an acquitted defendant is "simply not the same thing as the 'righteousness of the judge who tries the case" (p. 50). That is entirely true -- unless the judge does something *remarkable*, about which more in a minute.

Wright tells a fictitious story to illustrate his point -- Azariah and Bildad go before the judge Gamaliel. "Azariah accuses Bildad of stealing a sheep" (p. 50). Gamaliel hears the evidence, and decides in favor of Bildad. Bildad is now judicially righteous or vindicated. But this does not mean that Gamaliel's righteousness as a judge wafted over to him. "But that status, though it is *received from* the judge, was not the judge's own status" (p. 50).

"He creates the status the vindicated defendant now possesses by an act of declaration, a 'speech-act' in our contemporary jargon" (p. 50).

This is very true -- but it is only half the picture. Let us expand the illustration. Suppose that Bildad really *did* steal the sheep, and suppose that Gamaliel knows that fact perfectly well. Let us fix it in our minds that Bildad is a skunk. Bildad is guilty, Gamaliel knows it, and yet for some reason Gamaliel wants to acquit Bildad, declaring him to be judicially "not guilty." *Now what do we do?*

If Gamaliel simply declares it to be so, then far from his righteousness floating across the courtroom, what actually happens is that unrighteousness goes the other way. The judge is now conniving with the guilty defendant, and comes to share in his guilt. But Gamaliel really is righteous, so this option is out. Suppose he wants, to use the language of Romans, to be just *and* the one who justifies. What can he do?

Gamaliel has to figure out a way to become *identified* with Bildad in some way, take his penalty on himself, fully satisfy the penalty due, return to the bench and *then* declare sentence. In Romans, the judge who declares us "not guilty" is the same one who died and rose. Why did He do that? He did that so that *His* payment of the penalty might become *our* payment of the penalty, and imputation is the way this happens. When God declares us *not guilty* He is just and the one who justifies.

Wright says that his understanding of the judge's righteousness "works completely, satisfyingly, and thoroughly across the entire range of Pauline exegesis and theology" (p. 51), which it most emphatically does not. Wright acknowledges (in the quotes above) that Jesus died for His people, and that Israel finally did it right, but he utterly fails to connect this with the all-important question of imputation. Jesus died "for" His people, and that word cannot really function at all without imputation. Israel in Jesus finally did it right, but that's no good to us unless His obedience is ours. And how can that be, apart from imputation?

All this indicates that it is Wright who is seeing Romans in bits and pieces.

"Piper suggests that 'it may be that when the defendant lacks moral righteousness' (where did moral righteousness come from all of a sudden?)" (p. 51).

Well, maybe it came from the first three chapters of Romans, where Paul indicts the Gentiles for their moral rebellion (chapter one), and then accuses the Jews of hypocritical double-dealing (chapter two), before lumping both groups together as one great big bag of snakes, hissing out their hatred of God all together. *There is no fear of God before their eyes (Rom. 3:18)*. The list of moral failings listed on the threshold of his argument in Romans is broad, far-reaching, and extensive. And the problem is foundationally *moral*.

One last related point. Piper had in one place warned against an undue reliance on extra-biblical sources, and so Wright asks him, "how does he know from these sources that second Temple Judaism was after all a legalistic, works-righteousness sort of religion" (p. 55). And the answer here is that Piper, and I, and anybody else, can learn about rebellious works-righteousness Judaism from Jesus and from Paul. These are the people who rejected Jesus, nailing Him to a cross, and that was not exactly what I would call an honest mistake. There was a category of Jew living in that time described for us as consisting of "dogs," "evil workers," "mutilators of the flesh," "whited sepulchres," "blind guides," not to mention "fools and blind." Just for starters. None of this needs to be teased out of the second Temple literature.

And it all goes right back to the heart of what Paul is arguing in Romans. Let us say that the sum of all these corruptions is found in our man Bildad. Bildad is this corrupt and evil man, and yet the *righteous* judge is somehow going to find him "not guilty." But *how*?

Posted by Douglas Wilson - 2/11/2009

That Glorious Word Imputation

Topic: N.T. Wrights and Wrongs

Thanks to everyone for the good discussion in the previous Wright post. This will be an attempt to clean up a few details there (due no doubt to my infelicities of expression), and so my review of the next chapter will have to wait.

I believe that some of our difficulty here is semantics. I quite agree that the form of Pharisaical works-righteousness was not the same particular form that it took in a medieval monastery. Mark Horne suggested that the essential problem for the Pharisees was arrogance in their election, as seen by Paul's warnings to the Christians in Romans 11. I quite agree with this, but what exactly is wrong with arrogance? At the end of the day, what *is* it?

Since God is not that way at all, and to be that way is a rejection of His character and related standards, it is always a substitution of man's works for God's, of man's standards of righteousness for God's. This results in a contempt for others, which the Pharisees of Jesus' day most certainly had. "And he spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised other" (Luke 18:9). Notice that phrase *in themselves*.

The standards vary, but the sinful heart is always Pelagian. The central standard is the same -- the way that seems right unto a man, but which leads to death. Men differ on how they define righteousness, but the essential thing is always that *they* get to define it. Whenever they do so in rebellion against the way God defines it, the result is legalism. The various legalisms on the market can *look* quite different . . . but they all smell the same.

Some Christians are legalistic about make-up and movies. Others are legalistic about baptism and Bible-reading. Among the Reformed, we have people who trust in themselves that they are righteous, despising others, because they alone among men smoke cigars and believe in free grace. In fact this can be the most pernicious form of legalism -- the human race is so screwed up that we can turn *anything* into a form of works-righteousness. We can be proud of our doctrinal understanding that we musn't take doctrinal pride in anything. So the fact that NPP writers have shown a first-century acknowledgment of the grace of God is utterly beside the point.

The Jews killed Jesus because they thought their notion of righteousness was better than His, and God left their house to them desolate because He judged their standard of righteousness actually to have been a moral inversion. That is what I understand works-righteousness to be.

On the question of imputation, I don't think this is an example of me talking past Wright. I think it is an instance of Wright talking past Wright. He clearly believes in penal substitution, but rejects what he calls imputation of righteousness. But unlike a financial fine or debt, the only way to take on the *guilt* of another is through imputation . . . either that, or another process that is virtually identical to imputation called by another name. It is clear that Wright believes in the imputation of the passive obedience of Christ, to use our vocabulary. Christ paid the penalty for my rebellion, and I am invited to act as though I had paid that penalty . . . which I have done, in Him. I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live (Gal. 2:20).

Wright even believes in the imputation of the active obedience of Christ . . . although he says that he is rejecting it. God's plan was to put the world to rights through Israel (p. 46). The way He was going to do this was through Israel *finally doing it right*. Now Israel finally did it right through the perfect, sinless life of Jesus. Jesus in His baptism was Israel. Jesus in His forty days in the wilderness was Israel. Jesus in His conquest of the land, driving out demons, was Israel. Now, how do I get to be in that Israel? How do I get to glory in what He did? Why does the credit of Israel finally "doing it right" accrue to me? The answer to that question is found in the glorious word *imputation*.

Which leads to my last point. Although he doesn't say so explicitly here, I believe that Wright is actually kicking against a particular form of the imputation calculus -- the idea that somewhere there is a reservoir of merit, and that withdrawals are made from it from time to time in order that we may pay our debts. But let's forget about merit. Suppose for a moment that we are not talking about the imputation of merit, but rather the imputation of *obedience*. The former is medieval; the latter is Hebraic and covenantal. Not only do I believe it is fully consistent with what Wright is saying, I believe that it *is* what he (in essence) is saying.

Posted by Douglas Wilson - 2/12/2009

Just a Skosh More on Imputation

Topic: N.T. Wrights and Wrongs

If we have courtroom imagery, and any kind of stand-in representative for the defendants, then there is no way for the thing to work without imputation.

Wright confuses things enormously when he rejects the idea that righteousness can float across the courtroom from the judge to the defendant. Of course it cannot, and defenders of imputation never claimed that it could. Because it cannot float from the judge to the defendant, in order for us to be justified, it was necessary for the Incarnation to happen. The judge needed to figure out a way to become a legitimate representative of the accused. He did not, as the judge, shoot righteousness rays across the courtroom. Rather He was born of a woman, born under the law.

And so contra Wright, the picture is more like this. Adam is in the dock, and lined up behind him (in the billions) are all his descendants, condemned because of his disobedience. He was a federal, covenantal head of the human race, and so his sin was reckoned to all of us, considered as ours, *imputed* to us. And so Jesus was born into our race as the last Adam, and the same kind of thing happened. Jesus stood in the dock, received the penalty that was due to Adam, rose from the dead, and was vindicated or justified by God. And so everyone who lines up behind Him is therefore justified as well. His payment of the penalty, and His perfect obedience in its own right, are now credited to us who believe in Jesus. The obedience of Jesus is imputed to us in just the same way that the disobedience of Adam was.

So the dots that have to be connected are not the dots between God as judge and Adam, or God as judge and Jesus. The dots that have to be connected, and can only be connected by means of imputation, are between Adam and his descendants, the elect descendants of Adam and Jesus, and the last Adam and His descendants. In short, there are three things that must be imputed -- Adam's disobedience to us, the penalty for Adam's disobedience to Christ, and Christ's obedience to us. Otherwise, however righteous Jesus is being, it is just someone else, over *there*, being righteous. It can only come to *us* by imputation.

So Wright says that he rejects imputation, and if he means judge-to-defendant transactions, I don't blame him. But the kind of imputation that connects a perfect Adam to an imperfect people is the hope of the world, about which Wright writes so eloquently.

Posted by Douglas Wilson - 2/12/2009

Thought Forms to the Rescue!

Topic: N.T. Wrights and Wrongs

I enjoyed the next chapter by Wright immensely, and want to offer just a few fundamental quibbles. By this I mean that I want to present an alternative story to the one he is assuming about the history of the development of the doctrine of justification, and see if we can't make our way to some sort of reasonable consensus. There are places where I feel like I have stepped into the middle of a vigorous argument over whether Henry is taller than a pig is fat (p. 71). Stimulating, entertaining, all of that. And yet, and yet . . .

Wright, following McGrath, says that we must distinguish between the concept of justification and the doctrine of justification. This doctrine of justification need not be *false* in order to achieve the status of having nothing to do with what Paul was talking about. In other words, if the Pauline corpus were planet earth, the *doctrine* of justification has achieved liftoff, and is flying quite nicely all by itself. Wright is not opposing it; he is opposing it as established by direct exegesis. I recall listening to a recorded lecture by Wright where he referred to Luther's great *theological* insight. The idea appeared to be that it was true in Luther's head, but not true in the text.

Wright has three objections to theological insights using biblical language though. First, the Scriptures get a novel reading imported at such points. Second, whatever Scripture was talking about is missed. And third, proponents will think they have biblical warrant for their views, when all they have are "'biblical' echoes of their own voice" (p. 61).

But there is an alternative story. Perhaps our Reformed fathers did not dash after a brilliant theological insight misleadingly decked out in biblical language. Our Reformed fathers were steeped in a recovery of Hebraic thought forms; they returned to a *covenantal* understanding of the faith, with Abraham included and everything. Just yesterday I was in the Bodleian library, looking at a first edition of Calvin's commentary on the Psalms. On one of the first pages was a full page printer's logo, an olive tree with branches cut off, and others grafted in -- Gentiles brought into the *ancient* tree. Ben Merkle, my son-in-law, is doing his doctoral work here on the Hebraic influences at Heidelberg, and the major factor that was in the Trinitarian controversies there. In short, the Reformers did *not* invent an a-historical way for individuals to get themselves saved and safely ensconced in heaven.

So they did not just parrot the words of Paul, they understood them. They understood his argument, and the ramifications of it. But the same thing cannot be said of all their heirs and assigns, some of whom appear to have clustered around Wright in order to mislead him as to the true nature of the Reformed tradition.

And this is how it comes about that Wright formally rejects as exegetically unfounded a concept which *he* demonstrates (in the same chapter, no less) as exegetically grounded on bedrock. Wright says:

"This faithful obedience of the Messiah, culminating in his death 'for sins, in accordance with the scriptures' as in one of Paul's summaries of the gospel (1 Corinthians 15.3), is regularly understood in terms of the Messiah, precisely because he *represents* his people, now appropriately *standing in for them*, taking upon himself the death which they deserved, so that they might not suffer themselves" (p. 84, emphasis his).

Wright is gloriously right here, but there is a catch. If I were speaking to Wright in Greek, and I were to undertake the task of repeating his thought back to him in my own words, one of the words I would use with abandon would be *logidzomai*. I would do the same thing in summarizing Paul. The reason I would do so is that these few sentences are *saturated* in imputation realities, and I don't know any way of making sense of them apart from talking about imputation. What is meant by *represent*? How does that work? How can one person *stand in for* others? Why is that allowed? On what basis? How can the death that one deserves be assigned to another without gross injustice? There is no way to answer these questions in Greek without using that great Pauline *covenantal* word for reckon, consider, *impute*.

Wright has urged us repeatedly in this book to follow the argument. Don't just catch at isolated words; *follow the sustained argument*. That is precisely what I believe we need to do. I agree with him wholeheartedly at that point. But if this is the case, there is absolutely no reason why the phrase *the imputed obedience of Christ* needs to be present in order for the idea to be *manifestly* there. This is Packer's point, I believe. How could Adam and Abraham be there, and imputation not be there? How can fathers of races be present and imputation not be present?

Now back to my alternative story. Where Wright is magnificent is in getting us to look up, look around, take in the big picture. God is in the process of saving the entire world, and He is doing so because He is in the process of fulfilling a promise He made to Abraham many thousands of years ago. I believe that this magnificent story was recovered in the Reformation, and gloriously proclaimed to the world. Three generations or so into the Reformation, good little boys started to aspire to the study of divinity (once the fires of martyrdom start to burn low, it is quite a *respectable* move, one that all the pious aunts approve of), and when they came into the picture, they started to tidy up, fuss around, and generally make things cleaner and smaller. Once the memorials to the prophets are built, the Christian world is greatly in need of curators, and the men who apply are generally the kind of men who make good curators. Thus it was that, in certain pietist quarters, imputation became a narrow bookkeeping transaction, surgically applied to the individual soul. But that is not how it started, and that is not how our confessions and best theologians have dealt with it.

So I quite agree with Wright that *that* is not what Paul is talking about. But I disagree with Wright at this point -- in Romans, Paul is talking about imputation *almost all the time*. I see the concept of imputation even when the word is not there, because I have followed the argument when the word *is* there.

Wright has elsewhere called imputation a "cold piece of business." Given how he thinks it is being applied, that is understandable. Rather than hold to imputation in that truncated sense, I would rather run a mile in tight shoes. But return to the story of the restoration of the human race, fallen in Adam and restored in the second Adam. Return to the story of all the promises made to Abraham and his seed. Return to the story of how Jesus Christ represents us to the Father. Return to that moment on the cross when Jesus took on Himself all the sins of all His people. Return to the moment when God declares that in Jesus Israel has finally been faithful, and that all Israel may now enter the promised land, which is the entire earth. Imputation is the thread upon which all those pearls are strung. And without imputation, those pearls will be all over the floor, and some will be horribly lost.

Without imputation, Adam, and Jesus, and Abraham, and Douglas Wilson, and [put your name here] are all isolated and separate individuals, with distinct lives (all but one being wretched and miserable), and that have nothing to do with one another. Adam disobeyed, and what is that to me exactly? Abraham believed, and so what? Jesus died and rose, and how is that mine again? Wright wants us to tell the grand story, leaving imputation behind. But the reason Wright doesn't see imputation is that he thinks in order to exist, it needs to be a character in the novel he is reading. But it is not so much a distinct character, as it is the paper the whole thing is printed on.

Posted by Douglas Wilson - 2/13/2009

Walk According to this Rule

Topic: N.T. Wrights and Wrongs

So we are halfway through Wright's book, and are on the threshold of his exegetical section. Given the way these posts have gone, and the give and take of the conversation following them, I thought it would be good to give a quick summary of my take thus far.

"For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature. And as many as walk according to this rule, peace be on them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God" (Gal. 6:15-16).

When God first created the world, the Spirit brooded over the face of the waters. When God determined to recreate the world, He decided to do so by giving Himself.

He first did this by sending His Son to die, bearing in His body the penalty that was due to the rebellious house of Israel, but also to do the same thing for all the nations of men. After the death and resurrection of Jesus, God then poured out His Spirit upon the world, bringing His great salvation.

The first flood was an inchoate, unshaped deep. The second flood was a fierce judgment upon sin. The third flood was a flood of grace -- the Spirit was poured out at Pentecost, not in order to brood on the face of the deep, but rather to *be* the deep. And the Holy Spirit who does this is no impersonal force, no holy spirit of vague pious influence. Rather, He is the Spirit of God, the personal Spirit of Christ Himself, and Himself an infinite Person.

He is therefore the maker, shaper, and necessary context of the entire new creation. In Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision gets you anywhere. Following Paul's argument and spirit both, neither baptism nor the lack of it, neither singing in the choir nor failure to do so, neither mastering big fat books of theology nor inexplicable neglect of them, neither Baptist nor Presbyterian, neither new perspective nor old, but rather walking in accordance with the rule of the new creation.

This new creation is not a narrow-gauge affair, but rather is the on-going inundation of the world. Our evangelistic efforts to help the flood along should not therefore consist of getting little bottles of gospel and spritzing people in the face. Rather, evangelism is more like going around in coast guard boats with long poles, knocking people out of trees.

Now Wright is very good on the big picture. He sees magnitude of the flood. I believe he is shortsighted on the devices that men will seek out in order to stay dry and comfy in their sins. Piper is outstanding when it comes to identifying what it looks like when an individual gets really wet. He's a Baptist, and Baptists are good at getting people wet. Used to do it myself.

That's all I have time for at the moment. In the posts to come, I will be interacting much more closely with the text, following Wright.

Posted by Douglas Wilson - 2/14/2009

Torah Torah Torah

Topic: N.T. Wrights and Wrongs

Now that we are into the exegetical portion of Wright's book, I am not going to try to get through the chapters at one go. I am just going to work in each chapter until I have enough to write about, which will not be the whole thing, and we will see when we get done. The first exegetical chapter is on Galatians.

Wright begins by mentioning the solemn anathemas that have been hurled against him on the basis of Gal. 1:8-9, and not, he hastens to add, "by John Piper" (p. 92). This is a good qualification, and a good way to begin this section. Piper believes Wright to be confused on some significant points, but does not accuse him as lightly as some apparently have felt free to do. It might go without saying, but I need to make a point of saying the same thing again. "The gospel is at stake" is too often an invitation to stop thinking, and start behaving as though it were not the gospel at stake at all, but rather the honor of Diana of the Ephesians.

At the same time, these issues *are* gospel issues, and preachers of the gospel need to work through them and get it right. But in reply to the question, "what must I do to be saved," the answer ought to be the apostolic one of telling people to believe in the risen Christ, as Wright plainly does. The answer ought not to be to hand them a list of study questions to help them prepare for an ordination exam. And of course, this is not to disparage ordination exams in their place -- those who are ordained to the gospel do need to get these things right.

And, that said, here are what I see as some significant errors in Wright's overstatement of his case. As with most of what he writes, there is much of value here. So before getting off to the interesting parts that have my readers captivated, let me note my sympathy with his treatment of *pistis Iesou Christou*. I might also state that, as far as it goes, I roundly agree with his insistence that *justification* refers to a status, and not to a moral condition. Good show.

However, comma . . .

"Or rather, the first statement of the its negative pole, that one cannot be justified by works of 'the law' -- which, by the way, for Paul, *always* means 'the Jewish Law, the Torah" (p. 95, emphasis his).

This is what I mean by "overstated." This is simply wrong, and for someone who knows Paul like Wright does, it is bewilderingly wrong. Examples could be multiplied, but in some places it is just wrong in passing, in others it is significantly wrong, and elsewhere it is wrong in thesis-shattering ways.

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law" (Gal 5:22-23).

Does Wright really want us to think that Paul is arguing that the Torah does not prohibit love, joy and peace?

"And the law is not of faith: but, The man that doeth them shall live in them" (Gal. 3:12).

The Torah is not of faith? The Bible says that the Torah is *all* of faith. Or perhaps this would be better stated as the Torah as misread by the sons of Hagar.

But then there are places where the word simply *cannot* mean Torah, and which demonstrate the apostle's delight in jumping from one meaning of a word to another. Further, it is used in ways that cause Wright's thesis to fail.

". . . for not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified. For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another . . ."(Rom. 2:13-15).

This *cannot* be referring to the Torah throughout. Paul is jumping back and forth between Torah and natural law. The Gentiles here are doing the essence of the law, keeping the heart of the law, which they learned from nature and not from revelation, and Paul explicitly says that they "have not the law," meaning that they have not Torah. Nevertheless, they have a law which is consistent with the heart of Torah. Wright here has at best overstated his case by a long shot, and at worst his case is simply wrong.

Another problem is a related one. Wright tends to see Torah *simply* in terms of its external boundary markers. For example:

"What, then, are the 'works of the law', by which one cannot be 'justified' in this sense" Again, the context is pretty clear. They are 'living like a Jew' of 2.14, the separation from 'Gentile sinners' of 2.15. They are not, in other words, the moral 'good works' which the Reformation tradition loves to hate. They are the things that divide Jew from Gentile" (p. 96).

The problem here is that the Torah divided Jew from Gentile in more ways than simply giving them circumcision and the sabbath. The Torah also prohibited sleeping with your aunt, for example.

The sexual licence of the Gentile world was notorious, and (despite the hypocrisies among the Jews noted by Tacitus) the Torah established more of a difference between Jew and Gentile than simply giving the Jews the equivalent of a differently colored T-shirt. When a particularly gross form of fornication showed up at Corinth, Paul expressed his disgust by saying that even the Gentiles, the people without the Torah, don't do that kind of thing (1 Cor. 5:1): *The Torah was as much a moral code as it was a system of ritual distinction*. The Torah, when followed, was intended to make Israel the object of a moral admiration (Dt. 4:7). It was as morally distinctive as it was external badge-distinctive.

Wright makes a strong point that this was simply a matter of ethnic boundaries being overcome, but it is also pretty clear that he does not have a clear conception of how ethnic hostility actually works. In an ethnically charged situation (of a kind which I have lived in), the hostility which may originate in simple ethnic prejudice based on the simple visible differences very rarely stays put. A racial bigot does not just assume that the other skin color, let us say, is somehow "dirty" or "different." That bigot is also an easy sell for the proposition that the other group is deeply and profoundly *immoral*. It is the most natural move in the world. Ethnic hatreds that have lasted centuries are based on a conviction that the other group is *wicked*, and are not based on the trivial liberal wish to have them based on a paper-thin distinction . . . "the star-bellied Sneetches" view of prejudice.

Now when you have a situation as existed in the New Testament with Jew and Gentile, where the Gentile world really *was* deeply and profoundly immoral, you had a recipe for a really deep antipathy. The apostle Paul was not just trying to get Brooklyn boys to take off their yarmulkes for a minute.

Posted by Douglas Wilson - 2/15/2009

And Lots Have

Topic: N.T. Wrights and Wrongs

The more I read Wright interacting with Piper, the less I want to say "new perspective" and "old perspective," and the more I want to say macro perspective and micro perspective. This is an unnecessary quarrel between the astronomer and the microbiologist. But, though it may be an unnecessary quarrel, it remains a necessary debate. When it comes to the "perspective" of the astronomer, Wright is gloriously edifying. When it comes to his denial of the glories under the microscope, he is simply wrong. But given the obvious correctness of what he is saying over all, there is really no *reason* for him to be wrong, if you follow what I mean.

This next section of his chapter on Galatians (pp. 101-114) is crammed full of good stuff, with a quirky, odd blunder here and there. One of the good things -- aside from his great overarching description of God's single-purpose for the world through Abraham -- is Wright's repeated acknowledgement in this chapter that at places the new perspective has deserved to be misunderstood, and that at other places the old perspective was hanging on to something important. It would have been far better to *begin* the book this way rather than with parables about myopic geocentrists, but still (while continuing to urge his perspective upon us) he does say some pretty balanced things throughout this section. Just one example:

"Resistance to the 'new perspective', though utterly understandable granted some of its expressions and some of the spiritual riches that looked for a moment as though they were being jettisoned, is always in danger of putting up resistance to the glorious plan of God *for the rescue of the entire human race* from its fractured, divided, Babel-like existence" (p. 109).

I think this is entirely fair. Just as the astronomer might be too grand to stoop to glance at the microscopic level, so might a microbiologist falter when invited to look at the sweep of the heavens. But it still takes a special kind of mind to see a *contradiction* between them.

And this is the place where I think Wright is simply wrong. He believes that Paul is not talking about certain things in Galatians that he is in fact manifestly including. Paul is capable of presenting the grand, historical sweep from Abraham on down *without* losing sight of what this means in particular to individuals in every church. He always has *both* in mind -- justification and forgiveness for the people of God in Christ as *well as* justification and forgiveness for Demetrius. He is in fact talking about the new humanity, the new people of God, the new Israel reconstituted in Jesus, and he is very mindful of the historical stream and the corporate realities involved. At the same time, the apostle is very specific at the individual level, talking about who is included and who is excluded. More on this in a moment.

Speaking of the death of Christ, Wright says:

"The basis for all this, in theology and eschatology, is the faithful, loving, self-giving death of the Messiah. This is the theological point of reading *pistis Christou* and its cognates in terms of the Messiah's own faithfulness; and this brings us as close as Galatians will let us come to what the Reformed tradition always wanted to say through the language of 'imputed righteousness' (pp. 113-114).

What Wright goes on to say shows that he is mostly critical of merit-crunching, the idea of a treasury of merit somewhere, "which can then be 'reckoned' to his people" (p. 114).

But this really is exasperating because Wright is as dependent on this "reckoning" as anybody in the room. The fact that the reckoning is made from certain great moments in history, instead of from a medieval merit room, *does not keep it from being imputation*. Imputation does *not* depend upon reservoirs of merit in order to be a coherent and thoroughly Pauline idea.

Now here is the rub, and here is why the macrotheology *has* to translate into microtheology. It has to be spread into the corners. If we have forgiveness of sins in the new Israel, then / have forgiveness of sins. If we have deliverance and pardon in Jesus, then / have deliverance and pardon. If we have been baptized into His death, then / have been baptized into His death. If we have been raised to life unto justification, then / have been raised to life unto justification.

And this is where Wright consistently shrinks back, declining to look through the microscope. He will use Pauline expressions like "forgiveness of sins" at the individual level, but he won't do that with "justification," denying that the idea is found in Paul. But as soon as we pick it up to examine it, it falls apart in our hands.

The apostle Paul gives us the robust, mountaintop view from the top of Pisgah. *There* is the promised land, all of it. But the apostle Paul is also a good and pious Israelite, and he knows that the blood from the Pascal lamb has to go on *each* doorway. Wright will use the Pauline vocabulary on the mountain top, but when it comes to individuals, he gives us something generic, and uses washed out vocabulary. Israel is justified, let no man withstand. But this particular individual can rest assured that sin has been, in some undefined way, "dealt with."

"Remember, throughout, that 'membership in God's eschatological people' *includes as its central element* the notion of having one's sins dealt with" (p. 112, emphasis his).

Wright goes on in the next breath to equate this with individual "forgiveness of sins," so why not individual justification? What is the heart of the old perspective but the acknowledgment that Paul has individual justification very much in view as he writes?

So here is the problem.

"He is now, on the basis of that assumption, arguing that all those of whom this is true form a single family over which God has already pronounced the verdict 'righteous' . . . *That verdict, issued in those rich terms, is the fuller meaning of 'justification by faith'* (p. 113).

Wright has been very clear about all of this. He says Paul uses the language of justification at the macro-level, and if we "belong to" that justified body, our sins have been "dealt with." Fine. So what does it mean -- for Paul -- to belong to Christ? Wright (in numerous places) says that the marker of the new covenant is faith. Those who believe in Jesus belong to Jesus. This is so true as to be almost a truism, but it still doesn't get us anywhere. The problem is that faith is invisible and doesn't mark anything. Someone walks up and says they have true evangelical faith in Jesus, and who are you to say they don't? When you make your determination (which, in this world of liars and false teachers, is a necessity), you will not be able to do it because you have examined their faith directly. You will have examined their teaching, their lifestyle, or their works. Paul is in the highest degree confident that certain men who consistently troubled him were false brothers. But he didn't say that because their faith, when held up to the sun, became translucent, or that when you bit it, you could see the teethmarks. True faith is a matter of the heart, and is therefore an internal matter, not an external sign.

Not only so, but he is very careful, near the conclusion of Galatians, to describe the kind of individual who is in the justified body that Wright describes, and who nevertheless will miss out himself, individually. He lists a bundle of sins, and says, as he has said before, that "they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God" (Gal. 5:21). And then he says, again, to *Christians*, "And they that are [really] Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts" (v. 24).

The problem is a perennial pastoral problem. Not everyone who says he belongs really does. Not all Israel are Israel. The Christians were charged to look at the branches cut out of the olive tree, *and they were to take the warning*. And the conclusion of the matter is this. The corporate body is everything Wright says. The flow of history is just as he describes. The new humanity *is* being restored in Jesus. And we can identify the real work of the Spirit, real Christianity, the true deal, at the level of individual lives. And each individual in whom that work is an ongoing affair needs to be able to say that he is washed, that he is justified, that he is sanctified. It is not enough to stand in the middle of a baptized throng. Anybody can do that, and lots have.

Posted by Douglas Wilson - 2/16/2009

Other Related Vaudeville Acts

Topic: N.T. Wrights and Wrongs

In his book, John Piper states that he writes as a pastor. And in his, Wright retorts that he does as well. And, as coincidence would have it, so do I, making it a hat trick.

But given the subject under discussion, it is not surprising that as many practical differences have arisen over the nature of the pastoral calling as have arisen over the nature of justification and imputation. I was at a luncheon once with N.T. Wright and a number of other men, and I recall that in the course of discussion, Wright described his friend Marcus Borg as a very confused Christian, one who passionately loves Jesus in his own way. Now Wright is in the *forefront* of those who are showing up the follies of the Jesus Seminar, and other related vaudeville acts. But he does it as a British gentleman, and will not bring (negative) implications of the argument down to individual persons. But this means that there are things that Paul routinely says that I cannot imagine coming out of Wright's mouth. There are objections thrown at the apostle Paul that I cannot imagine being thrown at Wright.

In my days as an Arminian, before I went into the ministry, and also after, no one ever said to me, "Well, if what you are saying is true, then why does God still find fault? For who resists his will?" After I became a Calvinist, they started saying that to me *all the time*. I had a conversation once with an older, wiser "Arminian" pastor, and he saw someone do it to me right in front of him. He told me later that he thought I was tricking people into saying that because it was so obviously unbiblical. But there is no trick, really. Just say that God hardens whom He wants to harden and has mercy on whom He wants to have mercy, and watch the games begin.

But this rule also applies to what we say about those who are claiming to be among Abraham's seed, but who are not. If we are of Paul, we will do the works of Paul. This means that we will identify some as "false brethren," others as "dogs and evil workers," and say of others that "their condemnation is just." Now, here is the question -- of what group in the Church today would Wright be willing to speak this way? Of what teachers would he say that they are false teachers, come in to spy out our liberty? My point here is not that Wright needs to draw the line in the same place that I would. The point is that (given the condition of the modern Church) if he never draws such a line, never fights the wolves within the fold, *calling them wolves as he does so*, then he is not being Pauline. And my point is not that Wright is not resisting false teaching -- he most certainly is, and in a number of quarters, more effectively than a number of conservative defenders of the faith who eat broken up shards of truth for breakfast. But Wright still resists drawing appropriate Pauline conclusions about his adversaries. He does not have the bar set too low on what constitutes a legitimate matter for debate. He does seem to have the bar set too low on how to understand his discussion partners. And this means that I don't think he can quite have his mind completely around Paul's worldview yet.

Now when conservative pastors like Piper think of pastoral ministry, they frequently include the necessity of discipline in this, and when they do, *they are being thoroughly Pauline*. Discipline is not the whole of it, obviously, but it is an important part of it. A church that won't discipline has AIDS -- no way of fighting off infections.

This is Paul applied, not to the grand vista of redemptive-historical thinking, but rather Paul applied to a baptized church member who wants to ditch his wife of twenty years for some little twinkie, and for reasons that have little to do with what God said to Abraham in Genesis. How would Paul apply his grand vision to an ordained minister who denied that the resurrection actually had to happen? Supposedly Jesus could still be in the grave, and we could all still be drawing inspiring thoughts from it. When this kind of thing happens, as it does with saddening regularity, it is necessary for pastors to bring the discipline of the gospel to bear. When you come down off the Mount of Transfiguration, you frequently have to deal with a demon-possessed boy in the valley.

Now my question is this. Does the apostle talk about individual discipline? And when he does, is he *applying* or *ignoring* what he and Wright have taught us about God's plan of salvation of the whole world through Abraham?

Posted by Douglas Wilson - 2/17/2009

Like Scarsdale

Topic: N.T. Wrights and Wrongs

The final section of Wright's chapter on Galatians is pretty good (pp. 114-118), and the observations I have already made would remain. There are just two things that deserve a brief comment.

"The Christian looks *back* and celebrates the verdict already issued over faith: 'righteous', 'my child'. The Christian looks *forward* and waits, in faith and hope, for that verdict to be announced once more on the last day. And in between the Christian knows that he or she is not defined by ethnic membership, in Abraham's family or anywhere else, but precisely by the faith *which works through love*" (p. 117).

And it is precisely here that it is necessary to have a doctrine of decisive conversion. It is not necessary to know *when* that conversion was, but it is necessary to know *that* that conversion was. You don't need to know what time the sun rose to know that it is up. At the same time, it is important to know that the sun does in fact rise.

If my inclusion in Abraham's family in the present is *defined* by "the faith which works through love," three questions occur to me straight off. And they are, how much faith, how much work, and how much love? Because when I look at those days when my faith is raggedy, my work slipshod, and my love in tatters, is Abraham still my father?

My point here is not that Wright is threatening to undo justification, but that he has obscured it on the individual level to an extent that is going to do some significant damage to the individual assurance of many. I am not saying that Wright is teaching salvation by works, but I am saying that when free grace is clumsily expressed to God's people, some of them will figure out a way to get a works principle into the affair in about fifteen minutes. C.S. Lewis once made a comment about writing that applies to pastoral care -- he said that when driving sheep down a lane, if there is any open gate along the side of the path for them to go through, they *will* go through it. So close those gates.

My second comment is on a subject I have already noted, but I really want to say something about it again.

"To make this good, to tell the story of the 'Christian exodus', he reaches for the categories, not of justification by faith, but of what we call Trinity (4:1-7). This was the purpose of the father; this is worked out in you through the spirit of the son, sent likewise from the father" (p. 115).

I have a confession to make. I don't offend easily, and in fact I think that trait is a factor in some of my more glaring faults. But, having said that, this just offends me. We call this "Trinity," and note with a capital T. That must be a remaining vestige, awaiting the next new developments in theology. After we have worshipped father, son, and spirit for a long enough time we might come to realize that we can start speaking of the trinity too. Why do I have the feeling that learned theologians always keep their copies of the Creed in vats of paint thinner?

But I bet you ten dollars that when that day comes, everybody will still be capitalizing the Archbishop of Canterbury properly. Wonder why. The late Fulton Sheen had an exchange with an editor who kept reducing his upper case H in Hell to lower case. They went back and forth a few times, and then the editor asked Sheen why he kept capitalizing Hell. And Sheen said, "Because it's a place. You know, like Scarsdale."

Posted by Douglas Wilson - 2/17/2009

Chief of Sinners, Really

Topic: N.T. Wrights and Wrongs

In the next chapter, Wright addresses Philippians, Corinthians, and Ephesians. As before, I am going to tackle this piecemeal, starting with Philippians. But before getting into the text, I need to address a couple of things that have come up in the comments which, if we don't deal with, will continue to be gum on our shoe.

The first was the question of how "merit" got to be so bad all of a sudden. Isn't the song of the Revelation centered on the fact that the Lamb is *worthy*? Yes, and I don't have any problem using merit in this sense. We are saved by the merits of Jesus Christ, plus nothing. Whenever we sing a hymn that refers to the merits of Christ, it is poetically glorious, and just like the song of the myriads of angels.

The problem is over a particular theological mechanism that was devised to help people understand how that merit does any good for us. Merit was depersonalized and stored in fifty-gallon drums in a celestial warehouse, and then was shipped out to us as we had need of it. This got so bad that it began to be thought that various saints who had done works of "above and beyond" supererogation could even *contribute* to the stores in the warehouse. Some Protestants kept this mechanism, while insisting that only Christ's merit could be transferred in that way. And of course, I prefer that to the other option, but still think the mechanism leaves much to be desired. Wright's problem is that he believes that to believe in the imputation of Christ's righteousness to believers is to believe in this particular mechanism. But that is not true at all. The celestial warehouse may have burned down, for all I know, and Christ was still obedient throughout His life, on the cross, and in His resurrection, and that obedience is still *reckoned* as mine.

The second question is related. I said earlier that I believed in a non-caricatured version of the "transfer" view. So what would that look like? In the first place, I agree emphatically with Wright that justification is a *status*, not a quality. So what is transferred is the status of vindicated, not the quality of being a good fellow. It comes about as the result of God's forensic declaration that we, the people of God, are in the right. We are vindicated. God can do this and not become unrighteous Himself because He is doing on the basis of the obedience of the Messiah, the true representative of true Israel. Now mark it -- representation is a form of imputation, and Wright is as dependent on it as I am.

Moreover, God makes the same declaration of those individuals within the justified people that are also *genuinely* in the right. Individuals are justified as well as the nation. These are the elect, and they at some point in their lives are converted to God. When they are converted to God, God makes the same kind of declaration over them -- because Jesus Christ was obedient, went to the cross and rose again, He will consider or reckon me to have been equally obedient, equally dead to sin, and equally raised to life. He does all this because I am represented by a federal head, the final Adam. And I cannot be represented by someone in this way without being blessed by imputation.

Now to Philippians. This passage really is a difficult one for Wright's thesis because it deals overtly with Saul in his pre-converted state, and it becomes obvious that Wright has to engage in some special pleading. And because of this, his conclusion is kind of stark -- having decided that the best defense is a good offense.

"Paul describes a rich, complex Christian reality, and even the most venerable traditions are capable of forcing the jigsaw of what he says into composite patterns that do not do justice either to the pieces themselves or to the larger picture they are supposed to form" (p. 130).

Indeed. This can be done by venerable traditions. It can also be done by venerable bishops.

There are three problems in this section. First, Wright believes that he can present alternatives by saying something over again in a different way.

"The conclusion is not 'so that he may be my saviour', but 'so that I may be found in *him*' (p. 127).

Yes, and when I am found in Him, He becomes my savior.

Secondly, Wright persists in battling with a straw man in his insistence that Paul is not talking about an infusion of righteousness straight from God on the judgment seat.

"'Righteousness' here is not, *despite a multitude of attempts to assert such a thing*, the status which God himself possesses, and somehow grants or reckons or passes over to the believer" (p. 127, emphasis mine).

Multitudes of attempts? How about naming a couple? Honestly, the only place I have even *heard* of this view is from Wright. If righteousness could be transferred straight from God to the sinner, then the Incarnation was superfluous, and the death and resurrection of Jesus was unnecessary. No orthodox Protestant believes that -- it is always about Jesus. The righteousness of the Father does come to me, but the mechanism for bringing it is through perfect obedience of the one who is the visible image of the invisible God. It is the righteousness of Jesus which is imputed to us, not the righteousness of the Father. Despite Wright's throwaway acknowledgement of this view's existence in one sentence (p. 128), he simply is not dealing with the view that Piper and *multitudes of others* actually hold.

And last, let me make a couple brief observations about Philippians 3:1-7 that will simply collide with what Wright argues in this section.

"Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you, to me indeed is not grievous, but for you it is safe. Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the concision. For we are the circumcision, which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh. Though I might also have confidence in the flesh.

If any other man thinketh that he hath whereof he might trust in the flesh, I more: Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; Concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ" (Phil. 3:1-7).

First, the dogs and mutilators of the flesh in v. 2 are blameless in the same way that Paul was blameless in v. 6. They still were doing what Paul was doing, and to the extent that there was a difference between them, it was because Saul would have been the worst jackel of the pack, ahead of all the others. This means that Saul was *not* blameless in the same way that Zacharias and Elizabeth were (Luke 1:6). He was the kind of man who would not have minded voting to hand Jesus over to death, provided that minutes were properly kept, and that the returned betrayal money was placed in the proper account. He was a wicked man, but it was not the kind of wickedness you find in a back alley of a major city. He was respectably wicked, a favorite option of a particular kind of man. I don't know why this is so hard to grasp -- we have no shortage of such men in our day.

Second, as he describes it here, he was not a man of faith. This means that he was not like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Samuel, or anyone in Hebrews 11. He believed in the Torah in a way that enabled him *to believe in himself*, wanting to have confidence in the flesh, and that is what every unconverted sinner is always after. Gideon was not like that, and neither was David. Anna was not like that, and neither was Simeon. He claimed Abraham as his father, but did it in such a manner as established beyond all doubt that his actual father was the devil.

As I have said before, and will say many times again, everything comes down to the biography of Saul. Was he really the chief of sinners? Or was he (or some other lying scribe) just saying that?

Posted by Douglas Wilson - 2/18/2009

He Doesn't Just Take the Dirty One Away

Topic: N.T. Wrights and Wrongs

The middle portion of chapter 6 in Wright's book is on Corinthians or, to be more precise, on two particular passages in both extant letters to the Corinthians. Not a great deal rides on the first passage, but it is worth a few comments.

"But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption: that, according as it is written, He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord" (1 Cor. 1:30-31).

Wright's basic approach to this passage is to take what he understands the meaning of those four words to be (wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption) and simply plug in those definitions.

Given how Paul is simply referring to this in passing, such an approach is difficult to argue with either way. Wright says that "Paul is not here trying to make a precise theological statement about what exactly it means that the Messiah has 'become for them' any of these things" (p. 133). My only rejoinder to that would be why does it have to be *precise*? Could it not be general, and still be substantive? The obvious issue is that we are not the point of origin for any of these things, and Jesus is. And He is "made unto us" all of those things. I glory in the wisdom of another, the righteousness of another, the sanctification of another, and the redemption of another. In that glorying, which is an act of faith, they all become mine.

The other passage is this famous one:

"Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God. For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him" (2 Cor. 5:20-21).

Wright's take on this is one which he says "has pulled down all kinds of scorn" on his head (p. 131). In brief, Wright argues that Paul is not here summarizing a particular "atonement theology," but is rather describing the true nature of apostolic ministry. He does a fine job arguing for this, actually, backing up earlier in the letter to show that the first part of 2 Corinthians is all about Paul's defense of his apostolic ministry. *"This entire section is about Paul's servant-ministry, and the way it works out in practice"* (p. 136, emphasis his).

This portion is the climax of that line of reasoning, and is the place where Paul says, in effect, "We are made ambassadors -- we do the work of ambassadors by pleading with men to be reconciled. He did this so that we could become the embodied covenant-faithfulness of God as we preach the gospel." He takes it as a clear parallel of v. 18: "And all things *are* of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation" (v. 18).

The problem is not with Wright's description of Paul's defense of his ministry -- that description is very astute, and right on the money. But why does the climax of this have to be a restatement of Paul as the minister of covenant faithfulness? The content of his message is very much in the discussion as well.

Paul has just finished saying that he pleads with the world to be reconciled to God. *But on what basis?* The traditional reading of v. 21 fits with Paul's defense of his ministry *and* with this glorious statement of the message right at the heart of that ministry. This fits neatly with the beginning of chapter six as well, contra Wright's assumption that a traditional reading would represent an abrupt change of subject before going right back to his defense of his ministry.

The problem for Wright's approach is the internal structure of the verse itself. Before discussing that, let me use an illustration of the same kind of thing from another part of Scripture. I was once discussing with a non-Calvinist God's foreordination of all things in the first chapter of Ephesians, and he argued that only the apostles were involved in that predestination (vv. 5,11). The pronoun throughout is *we*, not *you*. But then such special pleading vanishes in verses like v. 7. "In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace." Of course, *everybody* gets forgiveness because that is a happy thing and not an icky thing like predestination.

In a similar way, if we wanted to follow Wright's suggestion in 2 Cor. 5:21, what do we do with the first part of the verse?

"For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him" (2 Cor. 5:20-21).

If the *we* in the second part is Paul's apostolic entourage, then wouldn't that have to be the same in the first part of the verse? But that would find us saying that God made Christ, who knew no sin, to become sin on behalf of Paul and the apostles, so that the apostles could preach about it to everybody. The reason that is strained is because Paul has at this point gone cosmic. He is talking about the glory of the message that was entrusted to him as an ambassador, and he is talking about the basis he has for making the appeal of reconciliation to any and every man.

Now Wright acknowledges the force of this interpretation. Even though he rejects it, he sees the power of its appeal.

He calls it a powerful and appealing tradition (p. 135). But he wants to reject the exegesis while keeping what he deems to be the real truth beneath this claim.

But let's pretend for a moment that this verse is saying exactly what it looks like it is saying (to me at least). Christ the sinless one was made or reckoned to be sin so that anyone who hears the apostolic preaching might receive the righteousness of Christ in this best of all possible transactions. Christ was not made to be a sinner; He remained sinless throughout. But He was deemed to be, treated as if He were, reckoned to be responsible for all the evil that we have ever done. Our sin was *imputed* to Him, and not to us.

If this were the case, would it have any relevance to Paul's previous discussion? Would it inform his commendation to every man's conscience in the sight of God (4:2)? Would such a truth help to shine the light into darkened minds (4:3-4)? Is the message of this great transaction a light that shines in the darkness of our hearts (4:6)? Would this help to persuade men in the fear of the Lord (5:11)? To ask such questions is to answer them.

This understanding also helps to reveal the nature of the double blessing in v. 14. "For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead." If one died for Smith, then Smith also died in his representative. *This is imputation*. And if one rose for Smith, then it is *still* imputation. And if a sinless one had to die for other sinners, this is because imputation is going the other way. In short, the great transaction does not just pop up for the first time in v. 21. It is one of the themes that Paul is weaving into this particular tapestry.

It is quite striking that Wright does not discuss God's merciful refusal to impute (*logizomai*) trespasses to sinners (v. 19), and has instead committed the message of reconciliation to the apostles. And what is that message? The first half is that God is not imputing our sins to us, but rather has imputed them to Christ. And then -- and I am utterly inadequate to make this sound as glorious as it actually is -- God doubles back on us, and *imputes something other than our trespasses to us instead*. And what is that? It is the righteousness of God manifested in the full obedience of Jesus Christ. I am not saved simply because God neglects to impute my sins to me, leaving me naked and shivering. No, He clothes me in a clean garment -- He doesn't just take the dirty one away.

Posted by Douglas Wilson - 2/19/2009

A Jedi-Knight Mastery of Pauline Theology

Topic: N.T. Wrights and Wrongs

The last part of Wright's chapter 6 is his section on Ephesians. My comments here will be more scattered than extensive, for reasons that will probably become obvious.

First, we are to page 151 and it has been striking just how little interaction with John Piper there has been. This book has been a good overview or summary of Wright's views on this general subject, but it has not really been much of a specific response to Piper.

Second, as the book goes on it becomes more and more apparent that Wright is detaching himself from the constraints established by categories like "old perspective" and "new perspective," and appears to be heading off to a simpler-to-maintain "Wright perspective."

"Ephesians 2.1-10 is the 'old perspective': sinners saved by grace through faith. Ephesians 2.11-22 us the 'new perspective': Jews and Gentiles coming together in Christ" (p. 144).

"Ephesians leaves us, breathless perhaps, with a sense that there are indeed properly Pauline perspectives out beyond the antithesis of the old and the new. It isn't just a matter of getting the two of them in proper balance. Rather, when they are allowed to come together and knock sparks off one another, or perhaps when they are allowed to grow together within their full exegetical context, they belong within a larger vision of Paul's gospel and theology than much of the discipline of Pauline studies, and much of the preaching of Paul in a variety of churches, had ever envisaged" (pp. 150-151).

All of which strikes me as an indication that Wright is packing his boxes in preparation for a move and no, not from Durham. It was a metaphor.

Wright believes that Paul wrote Ephesians, but he also believes that it doesn't matter all that much. "Thus, whether it be by Paul or someone writing in his name does not particularly concern me at the moment (though my instincts and judgment, like those of my teacher George Caird, incline me in the former direction" (p. 144). The reason it doesn't matter is because if the letter were by an imposter, it was an imposter who had a perfect eye -- like someone who could make a living knocking off Rembrandts because he was just as good.

"Even if this text is secondary, it was written by someone who knew Paul's mind very well and stood close to him in many important respects" (p. 144).

Well, except for the respect that Paul had a dogged loyalty to honesty and the truth. The Paul I read would rather die than write a letter that he signed someone else's name to. But apparently *this* character knew Paul's theology inside and out, and he had this Jedi-knight mastery of Pauline theology even though he was a skunk and a liar. Moreover, he pulled off this astounding forgery (is there another name for it?) under the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit, if indeed the 66 books of the canon are inspired. But of course, once we set down this road, it might turn out not to be inspired at all. On that one, we will have to await the judgment of our Enlightenment masters in the academy -- after all, they were the ones who exposed this pious fraud in the first place. Wright doesn't agree with them that it was a fraud, but he does grant the academy the right to conduct such investigations, as can be seen in *his* treatment of the pastorals.

The principle appears to be that old fashioned lying is okay just so long as an academic thousands of years later attaches the word *deutero-* to the sham. And if you can get Christians to accept that kind of reasoning, you clearly have your academic mojo going, and your scholarly chops are hotter than a two-dollar pistol. So to speak.

Other than that, I don't have a lot to say about Wright on Ephesians -- other than to say that I agree that the book powerfully addresses the salvation of individual sinners, that it powerfully addresses the reconciliation between Jew and Gentile, and that it powerfully invites us to an astoundingly higher cosmic perspective of God's purposes for humanity in His plan of salvation. Here is a "perspective" for you, but I don't know what to call it exactly. The day is coming when all the saints will have this perspective, and we will be able "to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God" (Eph. 3:18-19).

Posted by Douglas Wilson - 2/21/2009

At Least Not in Paul

Topic: N.T. Wrights and Wrongs

As his section on Romans begins, Wright continues to reason beside the point. He begins, not surprisingly, with Romans 1:16-17 and with a discussion of what is meant by the "righteousness of God." He says that, in effect, if we just read this verse without all the blinkers created by seventeenth century debates, we could see quite plainly that the "righteousness" involved here couldn't be "anything other than God's own 'righteousness', unveiled, as in a great apocalypse, before the watching world" (p. 154).

"But -- still remembering Piper's own statement about how Paul's terms must ultimately be understood with reference to the actual contexts in which he uses them -- the best argument for taking *dikaiosyne theou* in 1.17, 3.21, and 10.3 as 'God's faithfulness to the covenant with Abraham, to the single-plan-through-Israel-for-the-world', is the massive sense it makes of passage after passage" (pp. 154-155).

So here is an expanded version, my summary of what Wright believes these verses to be saying.

"For I am not ashamed of the good message of what the Messiah has done, for it is God's power for salvation, the fulfillment of His promise to Abraham, to all who believe, to the Jew first and also the Greek.

For God's faithfulness to His covenant promises is unveiled in it, from the Messiah's faithfulness to our response of faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith' (Rom. 1:16-17).

I began by saying that Wright was reasoning beside the point. Everyone agrees that this verse is compressed, and that if we want to understand it in the context of the rest of Romans, we have to pull it out, and watch it telescope outwards in our hands. There is no other way, for example, to deal with the cryptic phrase "from faith to faith." But when Wright is done telescoping it his way, we are still left with all the same questions, and the same need to answer those questions the way the old perspective (and Paul in the rest of Romans) does. Wright is like the evolutionist who, pressed on the question of how life could have arisen on earth, takes refuge in the thesis that aliens planted the seeds of life here. Well, okay. Where did the aliens come from then?

I quite agree with Wright's point that God in heaven does not have a righteousness that is directly imputed to us. I also agree that when God sent the Messiah He was displaying His covenantal faithfulness. So, does that make me new perspective? No, because we still have to answer the question of what God, in His expression of that covenant faithfulness, actually sent this Messiah to do. More on this in a moment.

This debate is like two boys arguing about a promise that their father had made them -- say, that if they made the honor roll that semester, he would take them on a hunting trip. One boy is excited because they have both made the honor roll, and so he says, "this means that Dad is going to take us hunting." And the other boy replies, "No, it simply means that Dad is faithful to his promise." There is not really room for a debate here. There is no contradiction between saying that the father is faithful and saying that the father is faithful because he did what he said he was going to do. Wright persists in detaching "God's covenantal faithfulness" from the obedience of the Messiah, who was the Incarnation and full embodiment of that covenantal faithfulness. Here is how I would pull on Romans 1:17-18, telescoping it outward.

"For I am not ashamed of the good message of what the Messiah has done, for it is God's power for salvation, the fulfillment of His promise to Abraham, to all who believe, to the Jew first and also the Greek. For God's faithfulness to His covenant promises is unveiled in it, *a faithfulness revealed in the obedience of the Messiah on our behalf*, which we appropriate by faith from first to last, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith' (Rom. 1:16-17).

Yes, God's righteousness is seen in His covenantal faithfulness. But that covenantal faithfulness is an incoherent concept without a Messiah who lived a perfect, righteous life that could be *gifted* to us. Without that gift of the Messiah's righteousness, God would *not* have been covenantally faithful. Paul is already stretching, looking forward to this point.

"And not as it was by one that sinned, so is *the gift*: for the judgment was by one to condemnation, but *the free gift* is of many offences *unto justification*. For if by one man's offence death reigned by one; much more they which receive abundance of grace *and of the gift of righteousness* shall reign in life by one, Jesus Christ.) Therefore as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one *the free gift* came upon all men *unto justification* of life" (Rom. 5:16-18).

I get righteousness from Jesus the same way I got unrighteousness from Adam -- by imputation. My representative, my federal head, acted on my behalf, and what he did was credited to me.

So why was the righteousness of Jesus given to me as a gift? Because God is righteous and fulfills His covenant promises. It makes no sense for Wright to argue that because the father is "covenantally faithful," he does not have to take his boys on that hunting trip. If he broke his promise, then he *wouldn't* be faithful. If God didn't send a Messiah whose obedience could then be reckoned or imputed as ours, then He wouldn't have been faithful.

This is why, if the "righteousness of God" in chapter 1 means what Wright says it does, it *still* needs to telescoped outward as "the faithfulness of God in sending a Messiah whose righteousness would be imputed to us." If someone else were shown to exist and was telescoping it out to be saying "the righteousness of God Himself imputed to us, oh yeah, through Jesus, I guess" then God bless him too in spite of the muddle. I don't know who would say that, but any way you cut it, we are put right with God because someone else has obeyed Him on our behalf. No getting away from it, at least not in Paul.

Posted by Douglas Wilson - 2/23/2009

Excursus on Union with Christ

Topic: N.T. Wrights and Wrongs

I used the word *excursus* in the title so that people would know that I was going to be scholarly in this one. Or maybe try to be scholarly. Or, better yet, try to *act* scholarly. You know, I think I am off to a bad start.

In the comments on this series of posts on Wright, and in some of the debates/discussions in the Federal Vision thing, a recurring question has arisen, a question about what kind of metaphor to use in describing imputation. As Katecho a few posts back put it:

"I presented two basic models: 1) the transfer model, where righteousness is viewed as an entity which exists in a freestanding fashion (50-gallon drums) and itself is moved across an implied distance to us, and 2) the union model where righteousness is a Person, and we must be united to Christ to be imputed (reckoned/ascribed) righteous."

Before proceeding, please file this post under "thinking out loud." I am still working through some of the questions involved in this, which should become obvious.

In his book *What St. Paul Really Said*, Wright described the "transfer" model as though righteousness could float across the courtroom, like it was a gas or something. When you are trying to deal with distance, as this comment above points out, the temptation will be to try to cross it in some kind of substantive way like that. But this is to take the metaphor the wrong way, and this is why I think that using the word "transfer" helps contribute to the confusion. I don't think that imputation *transfers* anything really. It is more accurate to say that imputation declares or announces a new status.

I was the foreman on a jury once, and when we returned the verdict, it was given to the clerk who read it aloud. We in the jury were sitting on the right side of the courtroom, the clerk was on the left side, and the defendant was in the middle at his table. So there was distance involved, but our finding of guilt didn't transfer guilt from one side of the room to the other, and then back again to the middle. The defendant's *status* changed from legally innocent to legally guilty, but not because he was united to anything, or because anything substantive moved from us to him.

But in our courtroom appearance, the declaration that God makes is "not guilty," and a problem is created here because we in fact *are* guilty. I believe that God, who wants to be just *and* the one who justifies, deals with this problem by means of our union with Christ. Because we are united to Him *by imputation*, resulting in Him being our covenantal head, it is just for God to reckon our sins to Him, and to reckon His righteousness to us. But here the language is more like a wedding than it is like a courtroom, although powerful elements of both are still present. Imputation (a legal pronouncement that alters someone's status) is present in a court trial, and it is present in a wedding. Let's see if thinking through this in wedding terms helps.

When I perform a wedding ceremony, there comes a point in every wedding where I say something that alters the status of the couple. That declaration unites them, and that declaration also makes it possible for them lawfully to unite later on with their clothes off. They may now unite that way because they have been united this way. If they had sex twelve hours before the ceremony, they would both have been sinning. If they have sex twelve hours after the ceremony, they are both being virtuous by doing what every witness in the church expected of them. A ministerial declaration was made, altering their status, making the other person's body fair game.

Before that, no dice. So there is a declaration of union in the ceremony, and then later that evening there is the experienced union. I don't want to say that the declaration is unreal "legal fiction" union and the sexual union is the real one, because they are *both* real, although real in different ways. The declaration is real enough to be necessary to keep the physical union from being a real sin. So the declaration of union is necessary to keep the physical union from being sinful. And the declaration of union does not involved transfer of anything, while the physical union does.

But more is involved than just the sexual union -- there are also issues of property, name, inheritance, and so on. And the status of all these things is altered *by words* that are merely spoken, and spoken across a distance.

With this ring, I thee bind,

with my body I thee worship,

and with all my worldly goods I thee endow:

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Something *is* transferred -- a ring -- but this is a symbolic action. All the stuff at home stays right where it was, with its *status* changed from bachelor property to community property. And some of his rattier shirts in the closet have been changed to Goodwill-bound status, although no one need tell him that yet. The status of the stereo and car and house and so on is changed by a legal declaration.

Now to make this more like our situation when we are united to Christ, let us suppose that the bridegroom is incredibly wealthy and the bride owes money beyond all hope of repayment. When the minister declares that they are husband and wife, *at that moment* his wealth becomes hers, and her debts become his. This is very much a kind of double imputation.

Now I believe this kind of illustration works fairly well when we are talking about the justification of an elect covenant member. But unfortunately that is not the only kind of covenant member there is, and this is why I have been reluctant to simply attribute all the work of imputation and justification to "union with Christ." If reprobate covenant members have *some* kind of connection with Christ (as John 15 and Romans 11 require) then, unless we make some clear and easy-to-follow distinctions between this kind of union and that kind, we will find ourselves trying to answer awkward questions about reprobate covenant members who are supposedly in full possession of the imputed righteousness of Christ.

Now in the Federal Vision debates, when I am accused of (say) holding to various crazy and heterodox positions, one of the best ways I have found of defending myself is by having the charges be false. It's a little trick I have.

Because of that, I really want to be careful here. If we try to get to "imputed righteousness" as a possession of ours via our union with Christ *simpliciter* (and nothing else), I don't believe we have a developed theological vocabulary (of different kinds of union) capable of keeping us out of bad doctrinal ju-ju.

Elect covenant members need to be individually justified and reprobate covenant members cannot be justified. In the older model, this part of the problem was relatively simple. It created other problems, particularly in the area of ecclesiology, but I don't want to treat this thing like the toddler's toy, where you whack down one part of the toy, and another part pops right up.

Enough thinking out loud for now.

Posted by Douglas Wilson - 2/23/2009

Part of the Temple Belonged to Them

Topic: N.T. Wrights and Wrongs

I don't really have a lot to say about Wright's next section (pp. 158-168), a section focused largely on Romans 2. Just a few things.

Wright makes some worthy points about the general neglect of Paul's eschatology of justification. The doers of the law will be justified (Rom. 2:13). Might not mean what it appears to mean. Okay, so what *does* it mean? Wright rejects every form of merit and earning of salvation, and yet he at least tries to do justice to Romans 2, Romans 14:10-12, 2 Cor. 5:10, and others. I am not persuaded by his harmonization here, but it is a worthy attempt and really worth discussing. I really appreciated Wright's emphasis on Paul's teaching that we are called to live lives that are pleasing to God (pp. 162-163).

The one significant place where I took issue with Wright in this section was his riff on the Gentiles in Romans 2:26-29. He takes them to be the Christian Gentiles. While acknowledging that there are good reasons for taking this as a reference to the "moral pagan," Wright rejects this in favor of the judgment that they are Christians, a judgment that must be "regarded as decisive." "These people are Christians, on whose hearts the spirit has written the law" (p. 167).

Two quick points. First, there is more than one alternative to Christian Gentile than "moral pagan." I wouldn't call Melchizedek, or Jethro, or Naaman, or Job, moral pagans. They were God-fearing Gentiles. The Temple had a court *dedicated* to them. When Jesus drove the clean animals out of that court (because the animals representing the Jews didn't belong there), He said, "My house shall be called a house of prayer *for all nations*. But you have made it a den of thieves" (Mark 11:17).

The reason I believe this cannot be referring to Christian Gentiles is three-fold. First, these Gentiles are described as knowing what they know about morality *from nature* (Rom. 2:14). This could be true of Gentiles from chapter 1, but not of Christians who had more special revelation in their hands than the Jews did. Second, the thoughts of these Gentiles usually accuses them and occasionally (*perhaps*) excuses them. This is not a description of Christians who are no longer under condemnation (Rom. 8:1). And this leads to the last point. It would be truly odd for Christian Gentiles to be described as carrying within them "a Torah unto themselves." But it would not be odd to describe Gentiles in the time of the old covenant grasping the essence of the Torah as they prayed to the God of Israel from a distance -- just as Solomon had made provision for them to do.

Just in passing, this passage is, I believe, an outstanding example of how a thoughtful Gentile could extract from nature the essential teachings of Torah, what we would call the moral law. This is Pauline natural law. Almost as though the Torah were distinct from the timeless truths it was carrying. Wright wants the Torah to be radically situated, all of it, but I think Paul is more nuanced than that.

Posted by Douglas Wilson - 2/25/2009

No Need to Replace the Furniture

Topic: N.T. Wrights and Wrongs

The next section of Wright's book (pp. 169-176) was glorious in what it affirmed, and weirdly disappointing in what it denied. He does a fantastic job in situating the point of the discussion that swirls around "let God be true, and every man a liar." As Wright puts it, the problem with Israel's sin is not that they are sinful and therefore cannot go to heaven when they die. The problem is that Israel is sinful and therefore cannot be the instrument of blessing for the nations that God had *promised* they would be. And this is the point of Paul's exultation -- that the promise to bless the world through Israel will be fulfilled (indeed, *has* been fulfilled) despite the hypocrisy of every last Israelite. God will be true. I believe that Wright has it dead on here.

But he persists in acting like this is somehow inconsistent with the old perspective at the point of individuals receiving a gift of righteousness, while at the same time tipping his hat (in an odd backhanded way) to the old perspective.

"We in our turn may well have ignored elements (not non-Jewish elements, of course, but elements of Paul's inner dialectic) that the 'old perspective' was right to highlight and which it has been right stubbornly to insist on, even if sometimes feeling like Canute with the waves of the sea washing around his throne" (p. 171).

Wright's summary of Paul's argument at this point on pp. 175-176 is enormously helpful. And not one thing in it is inconsistent with the obedience of Jesus Christ being imputed to the individual believer. Moreover, not one thing in it is inconsistent with Paul maintaining that this obedience is imputed to the individual believer.

"But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference" (Rom. 3:21-22).

Wright wants the two instances of *the righteousness of God* here to refer simply and solely to God's grounded intention to be true to His covenant, even though every man is a liar. He is treating the righteousness of God in this sense as something like an incommunicable attribute. But let's try this out with a test drive of the language, first with an incommunicable attribute, and then with a communicable attribute of God.

Suppose Paul referred in passing to the "omnipresence of God without the law," or the "omnipresence of God which is by the obedience of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe." That would be just plain weird. God is omnipresent period. Why bring in the phrase "without the law" unless it is somehow coming to us? And in the second phrase, the statement asserts that the omnipresence is unto all and upon all them that believe. And that is weird also, because omnipresence cannot be.

Now make it the love of God. The "love of God is manifested without the law." Now it is clear that an attribute of God is being communicated to us in some fashion. The same when we say "the love of God which is by the obedience of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe." The love of God is clearly coming to us, becoming a possession of ours in some sense, and the instrument for bringing this about is faith. And there it is -- put the righteousness of God back in there, and it is upon all and unto all who believe.

Put all this together, and you have Paul asserting, in the middle of his argument that God is going to be righteous and true even though all Israel is false, that this covenant righteousness of God is embodied in the faithful obedience of Jesus, and this faithful obedience of Jesus (which manifests the righteousness of God) is to be a possession of ours *by faith*.

Wright wants to give some place to the old perspective. "We begin to realize at last how the emphases of the old and new perspective belong so intimately together" (p. 175). Amen. But I want to say it more strongly than Wright does. The beating heart of the old perspective -- the imputation of the obedience of Jesus Christ -- is something that Paul plainly and explicitly taught. I say this, not resenting *additional* perspectives that Wright offers. If I hire someone to come paint my house I don't expect them to replace all the furniture.

Posted by Douglas Wilson - 2/28/2009

Tea Kettle Charges of Heresy

Topic: N.T. Wrights and Wrongs

One of the things I appreciated about John Piper's critique of Wright was that he didn't go straight to tea-kettle charges of heresy just because he encountered something in Wright on the subject of justification that he thought was unclear, for whatever reason. And after looking at it closely, Piper concluded that Wright was a Christian brother who was dangerously muddled on certain specified topics. Fair enough.

As I have been working through Wright's reponse to Piper (which contains very little *response* to Piper's arguments, as it turns out), I have had the nagging feeling, increasing as the pages go by, that Wright does not really have a clear conception of the view that he is trying to answer. But in this section it became astonishingly clear that Wright does not even have a clear take on his *own* view. Muddle really is the word for it.

Ancient rhetoricians used to use *stasis* theory to find the point at issue, as they sought to identify the point upon which everything turned. Their goal was to be able to echo Bertie Wooster (not that they knew about him), when he would say *rem acu tetigisti*. "You have touched the thing with a needle." Suffice it to say that is not going on here.

In this section, I want to interact with one quotation from Wright, simply because it reveals pretty much the whole muddle in one place. So here it is.

"But, as we noted earlier, the thing that is made is not a moral character, not an infused virtue, but a *status*. God really does, by virtue of his declaration, create this status for all those who belong to the Messiah . . . Notice what has *not* happened, within this lawcourt scene. The judge has not clothed the defendant with his own 'righteousness'. That doesn't come into it. Nor has he given the defendant something called 'the righteousness of the Messiah' -- or, if he has, Paul has not even hinted at it" (p. 180, emphasis his).

There is more to interact with in the surrounding pages, if one wanted to, but there is plenty of material right here to keep me busy. Two points to make about this, one briefly, and the other I will treat at a little more length.

The brief point is one I have made before. I really wish that Wright would cite the people who think that the righteousness of God the Father as judge gets imputed to the sinner. I don't know who these people are, and I would like to have a list of their names -- if I had their names I could write limericks about them. "There once was a priestling of Nunce . . ." *Who* is Wright talking about here? He keeps saying that "the judge does not give his own righteousness to the defendant, and oh yeah, there is this other quaint view that thinks that the righteousness of Jesus is the way it happens, but that's not true either." But in orthodox circles, it has always been about the righteousness of Jesus Christ. We maintain that it is the righteousness of Jesus that is credited to us, *giving us a new judicial status*. Whoever has thought it was the righteousness of the Judge, instead of the righteousness of the Advocate? I mean, really? *Who?*

But the second point is where the muddle really comes to the front of the stage and takes a bow. Wright maintains that because of the righteousness of the Messiah, God declares that all who belong to Him have a new status, that of being "in the right." Wright then, without taking a breath, *denies* that God has given us something called "the righteousness of the Messiah." Now, for pity's sake . . .

There are two ways this could go. If Wright is simply denying that justification is God *infusing* the righteousness of the Messiah into us, then he is quite right, and in educated Reformed circles, he would get nothing but resounding applause. Let me say it again. If by "given," Wright is referring here to some kind of *infusion*, then there is nothing for us to say but, "Go, fight, win! Push 'em back, push 'em back, waaay back! Go, Bish!" But if *that* is what he is saying then why does he persist in acting like he is bringing a fresh new perspective to the old perspective? This *is* the old perspective. Imputation is not infusion, and nobody here in Reformedville thinks otherwise. This scenario would be as though Wright had taken up writing letters to Robert E. Lee, inviting him to check out the doctrine of states' rights.

So here is the second way this statement could go. Wright could be saying that he affirms "all x are y," but that he also feels that it is important to deny that "all x are y."

But you can't really do that. According to the old perspective, what exactly is *given* in justification? Justification occurs when God declares, on the basis of the righteous obedience of the Messiah, that we who belong to Him are "in the right." But this is just what *Wright* is saying. When we say that the righteousness of Jesus Christ is given (or imputed) to us, we are saying that we receive the *status* of that righteousness. We don't get it in buckets. To say the "righteousness of the Messiah is imputed . . ." is exactly the same thing as saying that "we receive the status of the righteous Messiah."

Wright affirms: "On the basis of the faithfulness of the Messiah, God by His declaration *creates* a righteous status for those who belong to the Messiah."

But Wright repudiates: "On the basis of the faithfulness of the Messiah, God by His declaration *imputes* a righteous status to those who belong to the Messiah."

I don't get it either, and it is pretty clear that Wright doesn't really know how to fight in the clinch. Give him space to stand and a full auditorium, and he can describe the grand sweep of God's redemptive design like nobody else. I really wish he would stick to that, instead of misunderstanding, misrepresenting, misconstruing, and misinterpreting the positions of numerous non-existent theologians.

Posted by Douglas Wilson - 3/1/2009

A Little Theological Stir Fry

Topic: N.T. Wrights and Wrongs

I got some questions on this N.T. Wright business last night that made me think of a couple things, things that should be tossed into the theological hopper. So here goes.

The first is that the *theological* criticisms I have made of the "union with Christ" model as a stand-alone model for imputation are criticisms that don't work nearly as well in a baptistic context. My criticisms have assumed that there is a kind of scriptural union with Christ that is not ultimately salvific -- i.e. the union that the reprobate member of the covenant has. The baptist, for whom union with Christ is just plain old union with Christ, can just shrug at my counterexamples, and say, "That's *your* problem, Wilson, which you fully deserve for deciding to baptize babies in the first place."

This is just an observation, followed up by two more. The fact that my theological argument doesn't rattle the baptistic advocate of the union-model is okay, because he is still left with the exegetical problem of John 15, Romans 11, and a number of my other happy verses. But second, the union-with-Christ advocates who are paedobaptist should sit up and take note. It may well be that there is an internal logic to this position that will drive one to a baptistic solution. Note that I am not saying that all baptists need adopt the union-with-Christ model instead of the classic imputation model (what is being called in this discussion the "transfer" model) -- it is just that the baptist position provides a plausible answer to one of the objections that can be raised against it.

All that said, I need to clarify something about my position. I believe that the *status* that results from the declaration of justification and the imputation involved in justification are distinct but inseparable. One is the act of declaring, the other is the result of the declaration. The former says that the obedience of Jesus Christ, your federal head, is now *reckoned* to be your obedience. The latter is that you now have the *status* of one who was obedient. A man and wife have to be declared husband and wife before they have the status of husband and wife, and before that status can be lawfully consummated.

A side note. Richard Gaffin has a place of honor in the OPC so he can talk about these things with impunity, but the rest of us peons have to be careful. I recognize what he says about the *ordo salutis* being the kind of thing that we cannot time with a stopwatch -- we are talking about logical order, not necessarily chronological order. And theologians do sometimes have to talk this way, although wise theologians never like it. As Paul would say, I am out of my mind to talk like this . . . but, like Joe Walsh, sometimes I still do.

The problem with union being the logical basis of the imputation is that a just Christ would have to be united with an unjust people. It happens, and as a result God speaks to fix the remaining problems. But I think the order has to be scripturally different. God speaks, and then it happens. Let there be light, and then there is light. Let there be a just union, because I have reckoned my Son's obedience as theirs, and so it came to pass that there was a just union.

One last comment. Just as we don't have stopwatches that are up to nano-second justification timing, so we don't have minds that can follow all the logical issues involved. So discussion of these issues should always be characterized by us walking through these discussions in all humility. Do justice, love mercy, and walk gingerly.

Posted by Douglas Wilson - 3/2/2009

Paul Right Off the Grill and Still Hot

Topic: N.T. Wrights and Wrongs

In the next section (pp. 185-190), I continue to be edified by what Wright affirms, and mystified by what he denies. This is the section where he discusses the surrounding context of Romans 3:28, which says, "Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law."

Describing the run-up to this statement in the first chapters of Romans, Wright says, "Clearly *nomos* means 'Torah' throughout" (p. 185). But, as we have seen, this is not true. There are places prior to this where *nomos* clearly does *not* mean Torah. The law speaks to those who are under the law (Rom. 3:19), and the *nomos* speaks in the form of a grim litany from Psalms and Isaiah. In that list Paul doesn't quote Moses once, which should be relevant, depending on where Wright sets the boundaries of Torah. I generally use the word *Torah* to describe the law of Moses. But however elastic the Torah might be, it certainly does not stretch to include the "law unto themselves" (Rom. 2:14) that Gentiles could glean from the stars and from their hearts. I believe that Wright has clearly overstated his exegetical point here.

At the same time, he clearly wants to get past the current wrangles, a point he has made more than once.

"In other words, let's go beyond the new perspective/old perspective divide: both are necessary parts of what Paul is actually saying" (p. 186).

The problem is that Wright considers the old perspective (that is a necessary part of what Paul is teaching) to be an old perspective that has to abandon the idea of imputed righteousness. But that guts the old perspective, while trying to keep the name. I am not exactly sure what Wright could mean by "old perspective" here, given what he goes on to say.

"The idea that what sinners need is for someone else's 'righteousness' to be credited to their account simply muddles up the categories" (p. 187).

"'Imputed righteousness' is a Reformation answer to a mediaeval question, in the mediaeval terms which were themselves part of the problem" (p. 187).

Speaking of muddle, here is where more muddle comes in. *Logidzomai* and the *dikai*-word group are not medieval terms; they are Pauline. Concepts that are medieval are expressed by words like *merit* and *account*. Putting the merit of Christ's obedience in my account is the kind of extra-biblical extension that Wright is objecting to, and *I share that objection*. But for God to impute the disobedience of Adam to his descendants is *Paul*, straight out of the can.

For God to consider all of us righteous because one was righteous (Rom. 5: 17-18) is Paul right off the grill and still hot.

The reason I think Wright is confused about all this (and not in the position of one who denies imputation straight out) is because he consistently affirms in tangled backhanded ways what he thinks he must be rejecting.

"Justification by faith on the basis of Jesus' faithful death and triumphant resurrection, revealing the 'righteousness' of the creator God" (p. 189).

Okay, fine. What does "on the basis of" mean exactly? I hear the proclamation that Jesus died and rose. What does that have to do with me? God promised that a Messiah would come, and He did, and so God is "righteous." So what? God can be righteous all day long that way, and I am still going to Hell. Christ ascended into Heaven. Great. Good to see that *somebody* gets to go there. When I look at that message, and I believe it, *on what basis* does God declare *me* to be "in the right?" On what basis does God drop the charges against me? Because I believed something in my head? Good for me, but how does God remain just by declaring a wretch like me to be "in the right," just because that wretch (like me) thought something?

Wright affirms that in His death, Christ was dying as a substitute. What does the word *substitute* mean? How does the substitution work? In a game of basketball, when one player substitutes for another, he goes in and the other one comes out. If Christ substituted for me that way, then I do not understand how His playing in the game counts as my playing in the game. But there is another kind of substitution, that of covenantal representation. I have a representative in Congress who votes there on my behalf. He represents me, substitutes for me. What he does, I am considered to have done. Paul teaches in chapter five that this kind of federal representation is the basis of Christ's substitution for all who believe.

Adam was my representative in the Garden of Eden, and in that situation I did poorly, as it happens. But the last Adam came to another tree four thousand years later. I did a lot better that time.

Posted by Douglas Wilson - 3/3/2009

Hans Brinker and the Text

Topic: N.T. Wrights and Wrongs

I am listening through a series of lectures by N.T. Wright on Jesus, and am enjoying them very much. I am working through this book of his on justification, and am frequently bewildered at how someone as astute as Wright could be missing the kinds of things he is missing. I have said something like this before, but I find Wright to be provocative, extremely helpful, and indispensable on Jesus, and dodgy, confused, and unhelpful on Paul.

In this section (pp. 190-197), Wright takes up the question of Romans 4, and I feel like I have walked into a roaring debate between those who believe that George Washington was the first president of the United States and those who, on the other hand, believe that Washington had a mother. Wright persistently, and quite embarrassingly, sets things at odds with one another that simply don't belong at odds.

"The tragedy of much Reformation reading of Paul is that, by using up the language of 'God's righteousness' on the unnecessary project of 'finding someone's righteousness to impute to the believer' as though 'righteousness' was that sort of thing in the first place, and as though the theological point were not already taken care of 'in Christ' . . . (p. 191).

First, it is not so much a question of finding somebody's righteousness to impute to the believer for the sake of theological tidiness as it is a pressing need to *obtain* a righteousness that I do not in fact have, along with the underlying need to *get rid of* an imputed unrighteousness that I do in fact have plenty of. This is not a theological puzzle. It is the kind of problem that needs to be solved to keep me and others like me from going to Hell. Second, the theological point is not taken care of simply by saying that phrase *in Christ*. How does being "in Christ" work? When I am in Christ, is Christ's righteousness *then* considered or reckoned to be mine? But I thought that righteousness was not that sort of thing.

Wright wants to set this question of imputation (was GW the first president?) over against the question of whether Abraham was the founder of a new race of people made up of Jew and Gentile (did GW have a mother?). It seems to me, though I am but a novice in these things, that both can be true. I think that both could be true for the underlying reason that both are.

But Wright wants a false either/or.

"Again, the point of this whole chapter is not about how Abraham got saved, or justified, but about *the single promise through Abraham for the world*" (p. 195).

"The best translation of the normally puzzling first verse is a question, not about something that Abraham (who happens to be our father) had 'found', but about *in what sense we have found Abraham to be our father*" (p. 192).

Now I happen to believe that Abraham is our father, and I also know that Paul makes quite a big deal of it. I am with Wright on that point. What I cannot quite fathom is why Wright is so adamant about denying certain descriptions of that family line. For example, he emphatically does not want Abraham getting the righteousness of another imputed to him, but, as it happens, this is a distinctive trait of all Abraham's line. When Abraham was told the glorious truth about all his descendants (Gen. 15:6), he looked forward in faith to the day of *Christ* (John 8:56). He was looking forward to the arrival of a *righteous* one, one who could be righteous *on behalf of* those who are not.

We could grant Wright's distinctive translation of the first verse, and if we did, it would give us an undeniable biblical truth -- Abraham is the father of all who believe, both Jew and Gentile. But why on earth would that exclude what Paul says elsewhere in this chapter? And why do we need to prove that he says in verse 1 something that he undeniably argues for throughout the whole chapter? But what makes us think that a chapter like this can only carry one strand in the argument? This is *Paul*, remember.

"What follows in 4:4-8 makes it crystal clear that 'reckoned it as righteousness' means that although Abraham was 'ungodly', a 'sinner', God did not count this against him" (p. 193).

But this is to play Hans Brinker with the text. Paul does talk about the non-imputation of sin, but he does so right alongside his discussion of the imputation of righteousness. In resisting this, Wright fights hard for the retranslation of a verse that has nothing to do with the essential points at issue. Okay. Let's go with that rendering of verse 1, and so we now grant that Abraham our father did not "find" out that we are saved by grace apart from works, but rather that we Jews and Gentiles have "found" Abraham to be our joint father. We are still in the possession of Paul's teaching throughout the rest of the chapter that: Justification by works was a logical option for Abraham, even though he lived before the Torah was given (v. 2). Since Abraham is the father of both Jew and Gentile believers, this means that his rejection of works was a paradigmatic rejection of Pelagianism, among other things. The alternative to faith is always works (Rom. 4:2-3), regardless of what era you are living in, and regardless of whether you have ever heard of Torah.

Abraham believing God was imputed to him as righteousness (v. 3). Any ungodly person can have faith imputed as righteousness the same way (v. 5).

David distinguishes the blessing of an imputation of righteousness apart from works from the gracious non-imputation of sin (vv. 6-7). There is grace both in *covering* sin, and grace in *not reckoning* sin.

Faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness (v. 9, 22). This characteristic of Abraham's, which we are invited to share, *is what makes him our father*. This is the family resemblance we are commanded to have, and which Jesus said the Jewish leaders of His day did not have (Jn. 8:39).

And this leads to a crucial matter, one that I think Wright is overlooking. Throughout this chapter, Paul does not talk about "the righteousness of Jesus being imputed as righteousness," but rather about "*faith* imputed as righteousness." That is the language at any rate. The question is whether this is yet another position (God counts a believing stance as though it were obedience), or whether Paul is using a form of theological shorthand, to be unpacked later. It has to be the latter, and the unpacking begins by the end of the chapter. This unpacking is what brings the Reformed confessional stance into line with Paul.

"Now it was not written for his sake alone, that it was imputed to him; but for us also, to whom it shall be imputed, if we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead; who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification" (Rom. 4:23-25).

Faith is not a stand alone attitude for Paul; faith is shorthand for *faith in the risen Jesus with whom I am now identified*. He says faith earlier, but this is shorthand for faith together with its object, faith not understood apart from its object. Here he tells us what that faith is, when we have the true faith that imitates the faith of Abraham. When Jesus died, we died. When Jesus rose, we rose in Him. *That* is what I am believing in, and that is why the object of my faith, the Lord Jesus and all that He is and did, is being imputed to me -- the heart of this being the death, burial and resurrection of the representative, federal head of this new race of humanity.

Someone might say, "But aha! Even on this reckoning, don't you have to say that faith is at least part of what is reckoned to you?" No, because the confessions have simply isolated the direct object. Abraham didn't believe in God *plus* Abraham believing in God. He believed in God, and God is the one who fulfilled His word. We believe in the obedient life and death of the Lord Jesus, which means that we don't believe in that along with our believing in it. We have faith in Jesus, not faith in our faith. And although Paul uses the shorthand earlier, by the time it is all unpacked, we see that it had to have been the object of faith that was imputed to Abraham. Why would we believe that it was Abraham's faith in faith, when Abraham didn't have *any* faith in his faith?

Posted by Douglas Wilson - 3/7/2009

An Adam is Never Off the Clock

Topic: N.T. Wrights and Wrongs

Almost done with Wright's book. Just one more installment after this.

One of Wright's arguments is that righteousness is not imputed to us because righteousness "is not that kind of thing." But this is just modernist reductionism. And because Wright is an orthodox Christian, he refuses to give way to that kind of reductionism elsewhere. And here is a place where he capitulates and does not capitulate in the brief compass of two sentences.

"It is not the 'righteousness' of Jesus Christ which is 'reckoned' to the believer. It is his death and resurrection" (p. 205).

The problem is that a death and resurrection is not "that kind of thing" either. Wright talks about righteousness not being able to "float" across the courtroom. But Jesus died and rose two thousand years ago. How does that death and resurrection "float" across history to me? And if God can credit the death of Jesus to me as though it were mine, and He can credit the resurrection of Jesus to me as though it were mine, then why on earth can He not credit to me the obedience of Jesus Christ throughout His life when He was the one true Israelite? For the life of me, I cannot see the point of Wright's rejection of one half of this, unless it is because he cannot separate the imputation of Christ's obedience from the medieval scheme of moralistic merit-points. *But forget the merit points!* Did Jesus live as faithful Israel, and is that faithful life something that *I* can glory in as mine? Yes or no?

In another confusion, Wright believes that the classic Protestant position *opposes* the active obedience of Christ to His passive obedience on the cross. He says that John Piper, for example, in line with some (not all) of the Protestant Reformers, grounds the truth that God sees us in Christ in "the perfect obedience of Jesus Christ." But the problem for Wright is that this is "his 'active obedience' as opposed to the 'passive obedience' of his death on the cross" (p. 204). Now (without even asking) I know that Piper would say that without the cross and resurrection, we are all of us still in our sins. So how can he be *opposing* the active obedience of Christ to his passion on the cross and His subsequent resurrection?

In the course of this section, Wright says something that is quite a sound principle.

"I cannot stress too strongly the point of principle. We must read scripture in its own way and through its own lenses, instead of imposing on it a framework of doctrine, however pastorally helpful it may appear, which is derived from somewhere else" (p. 206).

Yes, and amen. But Wright doesn't *do* what he urges upon us. In this same section Wright mentions a *critical* passage for this discussion in Romans 5, but he just breezes right past it, without discussing the ramifications of Paul's larger argument at all. Paul is talking about the impact of two Adams. He is talking about how the disobedience of the first Adam in the Garden plunged all his descendants into sin. How is this possible? So is *unrighteousness* something that can float from one person to another?

Wright places Romans 5:15-21 in the context of his own argument, not in the context of Paul's. Anything I say here will be inadequate because volumes could and should be written about this. Paul is talking about two races of humanity, with the federal actions of these respective *Adams* each establishing the spiritual realities for their descendants. This being the case, you *cannot* take the life of Christ and say that one small slice of that life (covering about three days total) is what gets imputed to us. He was not an Adam for three days, and on His own for the rest of the time. Sure, when Adam took the fruit he was disobeying for us all (Rom. 5:17). But he was also obeying for us all when he took a wife (Matt. 19:4-6). He was an *Adam*, and an Adam is never off the clock.

Posted by Douglas Wilson - 3/9/2009

tom, bishop of durham

Topic: N.T. Wrights and Wrongs

In his discussion of the last part of Romans, Wright returns to his great theme. The gospel is all about the vindication of God's righteousness in that the Messiah finally came, as promised, and fulfilled God's-plan-for-the-world-through Israel. That's Wright's drum, and I have to say that he is consistent in how he lays down the beat. And it is a good beat, one that the Church should dance to. What I don't get is why he leaves out the lead guitar and bass. No matter how good the beat is, the jazz is still impoverished.

"In the same way we might declare: if you fail rightly to understand God's-single-plan-through-Israel-for-the-world, neither will you understand the place of Romans 9-11" (p. 212).

In this section, Wright focuses on Romans 9:30 through Romans 10:15. He is not one who can't see the forest for the trees. He flips it, and cannot see the trees because of the forest. But nobody sees the forest like he does.

"Within this context I have no hesitation in saying that *dikaiosyne* in 9.30 and 9.31 must be understood in terms of *membership within the covenant*. Gentiles were not looking for such membership, but have found it; Israel, hunting for it, did not attain it" (pp. 214-215).

The problem here is that Israel already had membership within the covenant, as Wright acknowledges in another context a half a page later (p. 215). Later in chapter 11 we have the language of Israel being cut out of that covenant. The difficulty is that here the language is that of *not attaining*. The Gentiles have attained this righteousness, and the Jews have not. The reason they did not attain to it is that they were ignorant of God's righteousness, and they went about to establish their own righteousness (Rom. 10:3).

Now when God has declared He will do something, it is the essence of unbelief to get in there and try to do it yourself. This is what the Pelagians were doing, this is what medieval merit-mongers were doing, and this is what these first-century Jews were doing. They differed, certainly, in what they believed the standard of righteousness was actually supposed to be, but they shared the autonomous push to run the show. *Whatever* righteousness was, they wanted to be in charge of it. That autonomous push has one name throughout all Scripture, throughout all generations, throughout all eras. It is unbelief, and it is the necessary fruit of an unconverted and unregenerate heart. Regardless of what the standard of righteousness is assumed to be, there is always an insistence that the unbeliever be allowed to go about to establish his own form of it.

Now Wright argues that Israel could not have been attempting works-righteousness "in the old Reformational sense," and the reason he gives is that the "law was their way of life for a people *already redeemed*" (p. 215, emphasis mine).

But according to Wright (and I think he is right about this), Israel was in exile, and because they had been in exile for centuries, they were desperately in need of another Exodus, desperately in need of *redemption*. What is exile but a type of being in Egypt again? What is it but a confession of helplessness and slavery? And because they were in this experienced condition of exile (as Wright has ably demonstrated elsewhere), it is not possible to say that Israel could not have been attempting works-righteousness "because they were already redeemed." This is a major tension within Wright's approach, and he really needs to fix it.

Wright is more comfortable with Calvinism than with Lutheranism. He believes that the Lutheran idea of the law as negative is wrong, and he believes the Calvinist view of the law as positive is correct but far too limited. He wants his broader proposal to take everybody in the Reformation tradition up to the next level.

"Nothing that the Reformation traditions at their best were anxious to stress has been lost" (p. 219).

"Do we then overthrow the Reformation tradition by this theology? On the contrary, we establish it. Everything Luther and Calvin wanted to achieve is within this glorious Pauline framework of thought" (p. 224).

Two things here. First, Wright persistently writes as though his broader sweep concerns -- God's-single-plan-for-the-world-through-Israel -- displaces the more focused concerns found in traditional Reformed theology as the *ordo* gets applied to Smith, Jones, and Murphy. He tries to represent this as a helio-centric/geo-centric issue (both of which cannot be right), when it is actually the difference between a man who says, "Look! a forest!" and the man next to him who points out one of the oaks. Wright has not even begun to show that his broader vision is in any way inconsistent with the imputed righteousness of the Messiah to every man who believes. Further, he fails to deal adequately with numerous passages in Paul that explicitly apply this gospel to the individual in exactly the way that traditional Reformed theology does. *It is not a refutation of those particular applications to show that other passages in the near vicinity are talking about something bigger.*

Now, at the same time, to be fair to Wright, when he talks about Calvinists with a truncated vision, men who are so focused on the minutiae of the *ordo* that they cannot see the panorama that Wright points to -- I confess that they do exist. I have tangled with them, and he is not making them up. They not only have screwed down the lid of the Westminster Confession, but they then put screws in it, wrapped it with duct tape, and buried it in the ground. They have precious truth in there that will *never* get lost now. They do this because they have a harsh master who doesn't put up with much.

Moreover, some of these guardians of orthodoxy are so blinkered that not only do they refuse to look at the grand view, but they also accuse of heresy anyone who dares to look up at the view. They are so busy analyzing the gravel in the pull-out by the highway that looks across at the Grand Tetons that they are suspicious of anyone who gathers by the rail to *oooh* and *aaah*, even for a minute. Of course, Wright doesn't help matters when he then announces, "Gravel? What gravel? There's no gravel in Paul." And I am tempted to say, "For pity's sake, Tom, look at what you are *standing* on for a minute. Stop exasperating them." Now I don't feel right calling a bishop *Tom*, but what can you do in these egalitarian days? And that's what they put on the cover of the book.

One last major irritation, mentioned before.

"Nor is the spirit absent from this exposition, even though unmentioned" (p. 218).

". . . what Jesus Christ continues to do and teach by the gift of his holy spirit . . ."
." (p. 222).

A lot of people should drop him a note about this kind of *disrespectful* foolishness.
Address it to tom, bishop of durham.

Posted by Douglas Wilson - 3/10/2009