

## JUSTIFICATION: THE SAVING RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD IN CHRIST

THOMAS R. SCHREINER\*

### I. INTRODUCTION

It is understandable that Tom Wright provokes strong reactions, for he is a groundbreaking and innovative thinker and one of the premier NT scholars of our generation. Two dangers exist in considering his scholarship. Some incline to an uncritical adulation of his scholarship, others to an uncritical denigration. I, for one, am very thankful for his work and stand in debt to his scholarship. Certainly he is a friend of the Evangelical Theological Society. His work on the historical Jesus is creative yet faithful, provocative yet conservative.<sup>1</sup> In my opinion, his book *The Resurrection of the Son of God* is the best and most compelling book on the topic.<sup>2</sup> Wright has also taught us that we should look at the big picture. How common it is to look at the individual exegetical trees and not to see the forest. Wright has reminded us of the larger story, of the narrative that is told in the scriptural account. Obviously there is a danger of imposing one's own story onto the biblical text, but there is also the danger of focusing on so many details that we end up with sound and fury signifying nothing. Scholars may end up adjusting Wright's narrative account of Scripture here and there, or perhaps even radically, but we as evangelicals rejoice that there is a voice out there proclaiming the unity of the biblical story. Those of us who know the history of critical study of the Bible appreciate how radical and refreshing it is to conceive of the Bible as a unified message.

I also want to say that I think Wright is fundamentally right in what he says about the exile. Jesus came proclaiming the end of exile and the restoration of the people of God. Perhaps exile is not the right word to use (I do not have any great quarrel with it), but the idea is on target in any case. Israel was under the thumb of the Romans in Jesus' day because of its sin and had not yet experienced the fulfillment of the great promises found in Isaiah and

\* Thomas Schreiner is James Buchanan Harrison professor of New Testament interpretation at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2825 Lexington Road, Louisville, KY 40280. This paper was originally presented as a plenary address at the annual meeting of the ETS on November 17, 2010 in Atlanta, GA. I have not revised the paper significantly but I have added a few footnotes and remarked upon a change in Wright's view in note 8.

<sup>1</sup> But see the recent critique of Richard B. Hays at the Wheaton Theology Conference. The lecture of Hays can be accessed at <http://wetn.stratumvideo.com/TheoCon10Media/mp3/100416Hays.mp3> as of May 20, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Christian Origins and the Question of God 3; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003).

the prophets. God's kingdom dawned in the life, ministry, and death of Jesus Christ. If Wright had merely said that God's kingdom was fulfilled or his saving promises had become a reality in Jesus, it would have been easy to ignore what he wrote. Rhetorically, by speaking of exile, he calls attention to the newness and the fulfillment that arrived in the ministry, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

I have some problems with what is called the "New Perspective" (more on that later), but I think we can learn from it as well. Wright and others have reminded us that the boundary markers separating Jews and Gentiles were hot-button issues in the first century. The unity of Jews and Gentiles in Christ is a crucial part of Paul's gospel, and Wright rightly trumpets that theme. Paul's theology can be communicated in an abstract, individualistic way so that his teaching on the church as the people of God and the promise of a new creation are forgotten. History is going somewhere, and Wright corrects the notion that life in this world is meaningless. The created world matters, and we joyfully await a new creation where righteousness dwells.<sup>3</sup>

Most members of the Evangelical Theological Society would concur with Wright that justification has to do with a divine declaration—it is forensic, not transformative.<sup>4</sup> He also says that perfect obedience is required to be right with God,<sup>5</sup> and sees God's wrath as propitiated in Jesus' death,<sup>6</sup> though he may not emphasize these truths sufficiently. Wright is also on target in claiming that justification is eschatological (the end-time verdict has been announced in advance) and has a covenantal dimension, though I would argue that justification is not the same as God's covenant faithfulness but fulfills God's covenant promises.

I think what Wright says about justification by works or judgment according to works could be explained in a more satisfactory way since he occasionally describes good works as the final basis of justification.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand,

<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, Wright overemphasizes this theme by failing to point out the discontinuity between the present creation and the new creation, for the latter will only become a reality by the unilateral work of God.

<sup>4</sup> He argues, contrary to Augustine, that justification means to declare righteous instead of to make righteous. See N. T. Wright, *Justification: God's Plan & Paul's Vision* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2010) 91.

<sup>5</sup> He says that "works of law" will never justify, because what the law does is to reveal sin. Nobody can keep it perfectly" (ibid. 118). Cf. also pp. 119, 195.

<sup>6</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Letter to the Romans: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections in The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 10 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002) 476.

<sup>7</sup> He says that "future justification" is "on the basis of the entire life" (N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said. Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997] 129). Wright comments in an article on Romans 2, "Future justification, acquittal at the last great Assize, always takes place on the basis of the totality of the life lived" (N. T. Wright, "The Law in Romans 2," in *Paul and the Mosaic Law* [ed. J. D. G. Dunn; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001] 144). Wright seems to separate present justification by faith from future justification based on works. He says in his commentary on Romans, "it is present justification, not future, that is closely correlated with faith," but "future" justification "always takes place on the basis of the totality of the life lived" (*Letter to the Romans* 440). And in another essay he remarks, "This declaration, this vindication, occurs twice. It occurs in the future, as we have seen, on the basis of the entire life a person has led in the power of the Spirit—that is, it occurs on the basis of 'works' in Paul's redefined sense" ("New Perspectives on Paul," in *Justification in Perspective: Historical Developments and Contemporary*

Wright reminds us of a critical theme that is often ignored in evangelical circles.<sup>8</sup> Paul does teach that good works are necessary for justification and for salvation, and Wright rightly says that those texts are not just about rewards. He reminds us that those who are righteous are also transformed by the Holy Spirit. Only those who are led by the Spirit and walk in the Spirit and march in step with the Spirit and sow to the Spirit will experience eternal life (Gal 5:16, 28, 25; 6:8–9). Those who practice the works of the flesh and sow to the flesh will face eschatological judgment (Gal 5:21; 6:8). Wright is careful to say that he is not talking here about perfection but of God’s transforming grace in the lives of believers. He rightly sees that we have too often bracketed out the necessity of good works in evangelicalism. Wright recalls us to what Paul himself teaches on the role of good works, but his formulation would be even more helpful if he avoided the word “basis” in speaking of the necessity of works. The word “basis” lacks clarity, for it suggests that our works are part of the foundation for our right standing with God.

Even though we have much to learn from Wright and give thanks to God for his scholarship, I think his theology of justification veers off course at certain junctures. Wright himself throws down the gauntlet. He says, “The discussions of justification in much of the history of the church, certainly since Augustine, got off on the wrong foot—at least in terms of understanding Paul—and they have stayed there ever since.”<sup>9</sup> And, “Briefly and baldly put, if you start with the popular view of justification, you may actually lose sight of the heart of the Pauline gospel.”<sup>10</sup> Wright often emphasizes that he follows the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura*. Therefore, the theology of the Reformers must be subject to criticism in light of the scriptures. I think Wright is right in making this point. As evangelicals we do not grant final authority to tradition. We do not casually or lightly dismiss long-held traditional interpretations, but our traditional beliefs, even our view of justification, must be assessed by the Scriptures.

We can be grateful to Wright, therefore, for raising fresh questions about justification. I would argue, however, that his interpretation of justification, though it has some elements that are correct, also stands in need of correction. If I could sum up the problem at the outset, Wright tends to introduce false dichotomies, presenting an either-or when there is both-and instead. To put it more sharply, even when he sees both-and, he at times puts the em-

---

*Challenges* [ed. Bruce L. McCormack; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006] 260). My thanks to Jason Meyer and Denny Burk for calling to my attention these citations. The italics in the citations are mine.

<sup>8</sup> The issue of what Wright means by “basis” became the subject of intense discussion in the blogosphere after the panel discussion at the Evangelical Theological Society on November 19, 2010. Wright’s use of the word “basis” confuses people precisely because he rejects the imputation of Christ’s righteousness. I think subsequent discussion has demonstrated that in using the word Wright does not mean that human works are the ultimate basis of one’s right standing with God. Hence, it would be clearer if he continued to speak of justification *according to* our works instead of *on the basis of* works.

<sup>9</sup> *What Saint Paul Really Said* 115.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 113. He also says, “this popular view of ‘justification by faith’, though not entirely misleading, does not do justice to the richness and precision of Paul’s doctrine, and indeed distorts it at various points” (*ibid.*).

phasis in the wrong place, seeing the secondary as primary and the primary as secondary. Time and space are lacking to delve into these matters in detail here, so my purpose tonight is to fly over the top quickly to engender further discussion. I see three false polarities in Wright's thought. First, he wrongly says that justification is primarily about ecclesiology instead of soteriology. Second, he often introduces a false polarity when referring to the mission of Israel by saying that Israel's fundamental problem was its failure to bless the world whereas Paul focuses on Israel's inherent sinfulness. Third, he insists that justification is a declaration of God's righteousness but does not include the imputation of God's righteousness.

## II. ECCLESIOLOGY VERSUS SOTERIOLOGY?

Let's begin with the first point. Wright mistakenly claims that justification is fundamentally about ecclesiology instead of soteriology. Let's hear it in his own words: "Justification is not how someone *becomes* a Christian. It is the declaration that they *have become* a Christian."<sup>11</sup> And, "What Paul means by justification, in this context, should therefore be clear. It is not 'how you become a Christian', as much as 'how you can tell who is a member of the covenant family.'<sup>12</sup> I am not quarreling with the idea that there are ecclesiological dimensions and implications to justification, nor am I saying that the words σώζω and δικαιόω mean the same thing. The word σώζω has to do with being delivered or rescued, whereas δικαιόω and δικαιοσύνη with whether one is declared to be in the right. The issue here should not be narrowed to the issue of word studies. The debate is not over whether σώζω and δικαιόω have the same definition. I am addressing the question of soteriology more broadly by asking whether justification belongs primarily in a soteriological or ecclesiological orbit, and I would argue that justification is fundamentally soteriological. Justification has to do with whether one is right before God, whether one is acquitted or condemned, whether one is pardoned or found guilty, and that is a soteriological matter.

In other words, if we use "soteriology" in this broader sense, justification *does* explain how one gets saved. The soteriological character of justification is supported by the frequent Pauline claim that we are righteous or justified by faith (Rom 3:22, 26, 28, 30; 5:1; 9:30; 10:6; Gal 2:16; 3:8, 11, 24; Phil 3:9; cf. Rom 4:11, 13; 10:4, 10; Gal 5:5) or that faith is counted to one as righteousness (Rom 4:3, 5, 9, 22, 24; Gal 3:6). Now I am not addressing here whether Paul thinks of faith in Jesus Christ or the faithfulness of Jesus Christ in these texts, though I think "faith in Christ" is the right reading. But even if you take Paul to be speaking of the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, he addresses the issue of *how* one becomes right with God. If one sees a reference to the faithfulness

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 125.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. He reiterates this theme in his most recent work (*Justification: God's Plan & Paul's Vision* 116, 131–32). Wright says that we ought not to detach ecclesiology from soteriology (ibid. 132–33), but he continues to define justification fundamentally in terms of ecclesiology, not soteriology (ibid. 132–34). In actuality, he enforces a division between soteriology and ecclesiology, despite his protestation here.

of Jesus Christ, then we become right with God through Christ's faithfulness. If one thinks Paul refers to faith in Jesus Christ, as I do, Paul still addresses *how we* become right with God: through faith in Christ. I conclude that Paul does speak to how we become Christians in using the language of justification. He says we become right through faith in (or through the faithfulness of) Jesus Christ.

The soteriological nature of justification is supported if we look at the same matter from another perspective. Paul also often teaches that we are not justified by works or by works of law or via the law (Rom 3:20, 21, 28; 4:6, 13; 9:31; 10:3–5; Gal 2:16, 21; 3:11, 21; 5:4; Phil 3:6, 9; cf. Titus 3:5). Once again, the point I am making here is not affected by the definition of works of law, whether one takes it to refer to the whole law or to boundary markers. In either case, Paul explains *how* one is not right with God. We do not stand in the right before God by means of the law, by means of works, or by means of works of law. To say that we are not righteous by works or works of law fundamentally addresses the question of soteriology. Paul insists that we are not acquitted before God by means of the law or by means of our works.

The soteriological thrust of justification is also borne out by the contexts in which justification appears, for justification language is regularly linked with other soteriological terms and expressions. Paul uses a variety of words to describe God's saving work in Christ, for the richness of what God has accomplished in Christ cannot be exhausted by a single term or metaphor. Justification is not the same thing as salvation or redemption or sanctification, etc., but justification regularly appears in soteriological contexts and therefore focuses on how one is saved. For instance, in Rom 1:17 God's saving righteousness is collated with the promise that the righteous one will live by faith, and the word "live" here refers to eschatological life—to soteriology.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, in Rom 2:12–13 justification is contrasted with perishing and the final judgment, showing that those who are justified will receive the verdict "not guilty" and escape from eschatological ruin.

Redemption in Pauline thinking is surely soteriological, for it features the truth that God has liberated believers from the slavery of sin. In Rom 3:24, justification is closely related to redemption, for we are "justified . . . *through* the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." Believers are right with God by means of the redeeming and liberating work of Christ. Romans 4:6–8 is particularly important, for justification is linked closely with the forgiveness of his sins: "David speaks of the blessing of the person to whom God counts *righteousness* apart from works. Blessed are those whose lawless acts are *forgiven* and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord does not take into account."<sup>14</sup> Forgiveness of sins and justification are not identical here, but they are closely related and are both fundamentally soteriological. So too, in Rom 4:25 justification is explicated in terms of the forgiveness of our trespasses. Or consider Rom 5:9 where those who are justified will be saved from God's wrath on the final day. It seems clear that justification here has to

<sup>13</sup> Paul argues the same way in Gal 3:11.

<sup>14</sup> Italics mine to show the close relationship between righteousness and forgiveness.

do with soteriology since it is tied to being delivered from God's wrath on the final day. The close link between justification and reconciliation in the next verse confirms the point (Rom 5:10).

In Rom 5:18, Paul refers to the "justification of life." The genitive ζωῆς can be construed in various ways. Is it appositional: justification which is life? Or is it a genitive of source? Justification which comes from life? I think it is a genitive of result: justification leads to or results in life. But however one takes it justification has to do with eschatological life. Consider also Rom 8:33, "Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies." The final great courtroom scene is envisioned here, and justification clearly focuses on salvation, on the great declaration that those who belong to Christ will be cleared of all charges of guilt when the final judgment day arrives.

Salvation and righteousness do not mean the same thing, but they are closely related and they both have to do with soteriology in the broad sense. Paul says in Rom 10:10, "For with the heart one believes resulting in *righteousness*, and with the mouth one confesses resulting in *salvation*."<sup>15</sup> Again, salvation and righteousness should not be equated here, but the parallelism of the phrases shows they are in the same soteriological orbit. The focus in context is not on ecclesiology but soteriology.

Another important text is 1 Cor 1:30. Christ is our "righteousness and sanctification and redemption." The specific contours and meaning of each word must be determined, but all these words are soteriological, focusing on the saving work of Jesus Christ on behalf of his people. Second Corinthians 3:9 points in the same direction, where "the ministry of condemnation" is contrasted with "the ministry of righteousness." The two terms function as antonyms. The Mosaic covenant brings condemnation, but those who belong to Christ are declared to be in the right before God. In 2 Cor 5:21, those who enjoy the gift of "the righteousness of God" are those who are reconciled to God (2 Cor 5:18–20), whose trespasses have not been counted against them (2 Cor 5:19). Titus 3:5–7 confirms this reading. Human beings are not saved according to works done in righteousness. It is those who are justified who enjoy the hope of eternal life.

I have been flying over the top quickly here referring to many texts, for the thesis defended is not complex. We have seen that justification speaks to *how* we are saved. We are saved *by means of* faith instead of *by means of* works. In addition, justification in the many texts just cited has to do fundamentally with salvation.

Wright makes a similar mistake when it comes to Galatians. He says, "the problem Paul addresses in Galatians is not the question of how precisely someone becomes a Christian, or attains to a relationship with God. . . . The problem he addresses is: should his ex-pagan converts be circumcised or not?"<sup>16</sup> So,

<sup>15</sup> Italics mine.

<sup>16</sup> *What Saint Paul Really Said* 120. Wright remarks, "the gospel' is not an account of how people get saved. It is, as we saw in an earlier chapter, the proclamation of the lordship of Jesus Christ" (ibid. 133). And, "Let us be quite clear. 'The gospel' is the announcement of Jesus' lordship, which works with power to bring people into the family of Abraham, now redefined around Jesus Christ and characterized solely by faith in him. 'Justification' is the doctrine which insists that all those who have this faith belong as full members of this family, on this basis and no other." (ibid.).

justification “has to do quite obviously with the question of how you *define the people of God*: are they to be defined by the badges of Jewish race, or in some other way?”<sup>17</sup> Similarly, “The question at issue in the church at Antioch, to which Paul refers in chapter 2, is not how people came to a relationship with God, but who one is allowed to eat with.”<sup>18</sup>

Wright poses a false dichotomy here, failing to see the soteriological import of the text. According to the OT, circumcision was mandatory to be in covenant with God (e.g. Gen 17:9–14; Lev 12:3). In the Second Temple period the majority Jewish view, as John Nolland and Shaye Cohen rightly argue, is that circumcision was required to enter the people of God.<sup>19</sup> Gentiles who were interested in Judaism were considered to be God-fearers, not proselytes. The Jewish teachers who came to Galatia almost certainly argued that one must be circumcised to enter into the people of God. Wright says that there was no question about the Galatian Gentiles being Christians since they were baptized and believed in Jesus.<sup>20</sup> But this confuses what *Paul believed* from what the *Jewish false teachers thought*. Paul was convinced that they were Christians, but the false teachers propounded another view, maintaining that circumcision was necessary for the Galatians to enter the people of God. An illustration might help here. When I was young, I remember running into a person who held to baptismal regeneration and who insisted that baptism was only effective if it took place in his church. He told me I was not a Christian but a seeker since I was not baptized in his church. I think the false teachers in Galatia said something quite similar regarding circumcision. They believed the Galatians were seekers but not yet members of the people of God since they had not submitted to circumcision. Paul assures the Galatians, on the contrary, that they truly belong to God since they had received the end-time promise of the Holy Spirit (Gal 3:1–5) and warns them that if they submit to circumcision that they will be cut off from Christ forever (Gal 5:2–4).

Yes, the issue in Gal 2:11–21 is sociological and ecclesiological—who Christians can eat with, but the sociological issue also relates fundamentally to soteriology. Paul uses the same verb in rebuking Peter that he uses to describe the false brothers and false teachers who required circumcision for salvation. The verb is ἀναγκάζω which means “compel.” Both the false brothers in Jerusalem and the false teachers in Galatia were trying to compel Gentiles to get circumcised to obtain salvation (Gal 2:3–5; 6:12–13). Paul shocks Peter by saying that his refusal to eat with the Gentiles, whether intended or not, is having the same effect (Gal 2:11–14). By not having lunch with the Gentiles Peter communicated to them inadvertently that they did not belong to the people of God. So, Wright rightly sees ecclesiological dimensions to what happened at Antioch, but the ecclesiology is tied to and dependent upon soteriology. Peter’s actions unintentionally sent the message to the Gentiles in Antioch that they were not saved through faith but had to keep the Mosaic law to be

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 120.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 121. Cf. *Justification: God’s Plan & Paul’s Vision* 114.

<sup>19</sup> John Nolland, “Uncircumcised Proselytes?” *JSJ* 12 (1981) 173–94; Shaye J. D. Cohen, “Crossing the Boundary and Becoming a Jew,” *HTR* 82 (1989) 26–30.

<sup>20</sup> *Justification: God’s Plan & Paul’s Vision* 114.

members of the people of God. That explains why Paul immediately plunges into a defense of justification by faith.

Here is where Wright's understanding of "works of law" comes in. Like other new perspective advocates he sees a focus on the boundary markers that divide Jews from Gentiles.<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, the Reformers and Catholic interpreters disputed this issue as well. Roman Catholic interpreters argued that works of law refers to the ceremonial law, while the Reformers emphasized that it encompasses the entire law. The topic is too large to pursue in detail here, but there are good reasons to conclude that "works of law" refers to the whole law.<sup>22</sup> If Wright is incorrect on works of law, the idea that justification has to do primarily with covenant membership is ruled out. If works of law refers to all the deeds commanded by the law, then it follows that Paul teaches that right standing with God is not attained by what one does. In my view, it makes the most sense to say that works of law refers to the entire law. A reference to the entire law seems to be confirmed by Gal 4:21 because Paul upbraids the Galatians for wanting to be under the law as a whole, not just boundary markers. In Gal 3:10 "works of law" is defined as doing *all* the things commanded in the law, which shows that a general critique of the law is intended.

The fundamental sin of the Jews was not the exclusion of the Gentiles from the people of God. The root sin was the failure to obey God and keep his law. When Paul draws his conclusion about the universality of sin in Rom 3:19–20, he argues that no one is justified by works of law. The Jews are not charged with guilt in Romans 2 for excluding Gentiles from the people of God. Paul argues instead that they are guilty before God because they failed to do his will. Indeed, the sins he focuses on are moral infractions: stealing, adultery, and robbing temples (Rom 2:21–22). Even when Paul brings up circumcision (Rom 2:25–29), his complaint is not that the Jews are excluding Gentiles from God's people but that they do not keep the rest of the law. They are condemned for being transgressors of the law, not for having bad attitudes toward Gentiles.

That works and works of law refer to the law as a whole is supported by other texts as well. For instance, in Rom 4:6–8 David speaks of the forgiveness granted to those who have transgressed God's will. The sins of David that are in view are almost certainly his adultery with Bathsheba and his murder of Uriah. Nary a word is said about the exclusion of the Gentiles. I am not denying that boundary markers are important to Paul. They are the subject of the next paragraph (Rom 4:9–12), but one must not import that issue into Rom 4:1–8. Wright argues that Romans 4 is not about how Abraham was justified but about God's promise to bless the world,<sup>23</sup> rejecting the idea that Abraham is an example of justification by faith.<sup>24</sup> It seems much more likely, however, that we do not have an either-or here. Abraham's faith is an example of how blessing will come to the whole world. That is why Paul speaks of David's

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 116–18.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, "Works of Law' in Paul," *NovT* 33 (1991) 217–44; Stephen Westerholm, *Israel's Law and the Church's Faith: Paul and His Recent Interpreters* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 106–21; Douglas J. Moo, "Law, 'Works of the Law,' and Legalism in Paul," *WTJ* (1983) 73–100.

<sup>23</sup> *Justification: God's Plan & Paul's Vision* 222.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 216.

forgiveness of sins, and why he emphasizes that righteousness is not given as a debt to one who works for it (Rom 4:4). We see in verses 4–5 a clear polemic against works-righteousness. God’s gift of righteousness is given to the ungodly, to those who put their trust in God (Rom 4:5) even though they are sinners. Righteousness is not given to those who work to achieve God’s favor, to those who expect God to reward them with eschatological life on the basis of their obedience.

Wright contests this view, arguing that Rom 4:1 is not about what Abraham had found before God but instead answers the question “*in what sense we have found Abraham to be our father.*”<sup>25</sup> Even if this translation is correct, and I am doubtful that it is, a contrast between faith and works cannot be washed out of Rom 4:2–8. In other words, even if we accept Wright’s translation of Rom 4:1, which builds upon Richard Hays’s reading, Abraham is only the father of those who trust in God for their righteousness. Those who attempt to secure their righteousness by their works, that is, those who try to put God in their debt on the basis of their deeds, are not the children of Abraham. Romans 4:1–8 powerfully supports the idea that Paul refers to works in general, teaching that justification comes from believing instead of doing.

We see the same thing when Paul addresses the issue of justification in Rom 9:30–10:13. He does not breathe a word about boundary markers in this context. Nothing is said about circumcision, Sabbath, or food laws. He refers to works in general and argues that one is justified by faith instead of works. If Paul is concerned with boundary markers here, it seems odd that he does not mention them at all.

A later Pauline text confirms the idea that “works” in Paul does not highlight boundary markers. Titus 3:5 says that “works done in righteousness” do not save us.<sup>26</sup> Note the addition of the words “in righteousness.” The addition of these words points away from a boundary marker interpretation, focusing on whether the works done are righteous. If Wright is mistaken on works of law and works in Paul—and I think he is—then his claim that justification does not have to do with becoming a Christian is severely undermined. Instead, the old perspective has it right. What Paul explicitly teaches is that right standing with God does not come via what we do.

Wright makes the same mistake in Gal 3:13. When it comes to Gal 3:13, he remarks that “Jesus became a curse not so that we could live with God eternally but so the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles.”<sup>27</sup> Why the either-or here? Paul even uses the term “life” to denote eschatological life twice

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 218 (italics his). “Grammatically this works very well indeed, a great deal better than the normal translations which have to insert extra words.” The point is a technical one, but it is Wright who has added the extra word to make the translation work. He inserts “we” as the subject of the infinitive “found,” but the term “we” (ἡμεῖς) is not present in the Greek text. It makes better sense to see “Abraham” functioning as the subject of the infinitive, and no extra word has to be inserted to support this reading. Both Dunn and Jewett rightly reject the suggestion that “we” is the subject of the infinitive “found.” See J. D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8* (WBC; Dallas: Word, 1988) 199; Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007) 307–8.

<sup>26</sup> Even if one thinks this text is post-Pauline, it represents the standpoint of one of Paul’s earliest disciples, and would indicate that this early disciple understood Paul’s polemic against works in a way that accords with the old perspective.

<sup>27</sup> *Justification: God’s Plan & Paul’s Vision* 124.

in the two verses that immediately precede verse 13. Does not the blessing of Abraham include, and even focus on, the promise of salvation? Galatians 3:14 sums up the whole of Gal 3:1–14 and summons the reader back to Gal 3:1–5. The Galatian believers know that they belong to the people of God apart from circumcision because they have received the Spirit.

To sum up, Wright helpfully reminds us of the ecclesiological implications of justification, but in the process he wrongly downplays the essential and fundamental soteriological dimension of justification which Paul emphasizes in these key texts. Furthermore, it seems clear that Paul often uses justification language to explain *how* we become right with God, so that it is not wrong to say that justification addresses how we become Christians.

### III. ISRAEL: INSTRUMENTAL VERSUS ONTOLOGICAL?

Wright has powerfully reminded us that we must read the Bible in terms of the overall narrative, but I think his discussion about the sin of Israel is also askew. He says Romans 2 does not teach “that all Jews are sinful. He [Paul] is demonstrating that the boast of Israel, to be the answer to the world’s problem, cannot be made good. If the mirror is cracked, it is cracked; for Israel’s commission to work, Israel would have to be perfect. It is not. It is pretty much like the other nations.”<sup>28</sup> And, “Here we meet exactly the same problem which Paul was addressing in Galatians 3:10–14: not that ‘Israel is guilty and so cannot be saved,’ but ‘Israel is guilty and so cannot bring blessing to the nations, as Abraham’s family ought to be doing.’”<sup>29</sup> I agree that the text subverts Israel’s claim to be the answer to the world’s problem. It is not as clear, however, that the OT itself or Paul emphasize that Israel was *supposed to be* the answer to the world’s problem. The OT does not focus on Israel’s call to bless the whole world. Yes, God promises to Abraham that he would bless the world through him and Israel is called to be a kingdom of priests, but when the prophets upbraid Israel for its sin, they do not concentrate on their failure to bless the world or the pagan nations. Instead, they criticize Israel for its violation of covenant stipulations, its failure to be consecrated to the Lord. It seems to me that the main point of the story in the OT is not: Israel failed to bless the nations. That is only occasionally emphasized in the OT. The focus is on Israel’s idolatry and concomitant failure to do the will of the Lord.<sup>30</sup>

Wright’s reading of the role of Israel puts us on a false path. Yes, the point of the narrative is that Israel as a mirror is cracked. But the problem with

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 195. See also idem, *Letter to the Romans* 445. Wright also says, “The problem with the single-plan-through-Israel-for-the-world was that Israel had failed to deliver. There was nothing wrong with the plan, or with the Torah on which it was based. The problem was in Israel itself. As we shall see later, the problem was that Israel, too, was ‘in Adam’” (*Justification: God’s Plan & Paul’s Vision* 196).

<sup>29</sup> *Justification: God’s Plan & Paul’s Vision* 195. He says, “God has promised to bless the world through Israel, and Israel has been faithless to that commission” (ibid. 67).

<sup>30</sup> Notice that the point being made here is quite nuanced. I am not trying to resolve here whether or not Israel had a mission to the world. The issue I am addressing is whether in Paul or in the OT the *fundamental* and *main* complaint against Israel is that they failed to bless the Gentiles. I am arguing that Wright’s contention that Israel’s primary defect was in terms of its mission is not borne out by the textual evidence.

Israel, according to Paul, is not fundamentally instrumental, that they failed to bless the nations, that they failed to fulfill their commission. The complaint against Israel is primarily ontological. Something is inherently wrong with Israel. The people of the Lord are themselves radically evil.<sup>31</sup> They need the same salvation that the Gentiles need, and hence stand under the wrath of God (Rom 1:18; 2:5).

Contrary to Wright, I think part of God's plan in giving the law to Israel was to reveal to them and to the whole world that the law could not be kept. Wright says that such a reading is "bad theology" and "bad exegesis," for it suggests that God had a plan A (salvation through the law) and then shifted to plan B (salvation through Christ).<sup>32</sup> But Wright misstates the position. It was always God's plan to show that salvation could not come through obedience to the law, and he designed history (particularly the history of Israel) to illustrate that truth. There is no notion here at all of plan A and a shift to plan B. God's plan all along was to show through Israel's history that the law could not bring salvation. Indeed, Wright's reading could be accused of having a plan A and plan B as well. Plan A: God intended to bless the world through Israel. But plan A did not work, and so God accomplished his purposes through Jesus in plan B.<sup>33</sup>

The story of Israel, then, is not only or even primarily that they did not bless the Gentiles. The narrative instead indicates that Israel is as captivated by sin as the Gentiles, that they need salvation just as much as the Gentiles do. There is something profoundly wrong with Israel. They are rotten trees just like the Gentiles. Like the Gentiles they need to be rescued from sin and the wrath of God. Wright seems to acknowledge this truth to some extent, but he puts the emphasis on Israel's failure to bless the nations.<sup>34</sup> To sum up, the revelation of Israel's sinfulness was not primarily intended to show that it failed in its mission. We learn from Israel's history that they needed the righteousness of another, that their own righteousness would not do. That naturally brings us to the third false dichotomy.

<sup>31</sup> Wright's reading in some instances sounds close to what I am saying, but he puts the emphasis on Israel's failure to bless the world. "The point here is that Israel *should* have been—had been called to be—the divine answer to the world's problem; and that, instead, Israel is itself fatally compromised with the very same problem. Israel's sinfulness is at the heart of the charge, but the charge itself is that the doctor, instead of healing the sick, has become infected with the disease" (*Letter to the Romans* 445; italics his). But later he says, "Paul's is not so interested in demonstrating that 'all Jews are sinners' (as we have seen, his argument scarcely proves this point as in showing up Israel's failure to be the light of the world" (447).

<sup>32</sup> *Justification: God's Plan & Paul's Vision* 129.

<sup>33</sup> I understand that Wright would not agree with this restatement of his view, but I think the same criticism applies to his formulation of the view from which he dissents.

<sup>34</sup> "But Israel, too, is part of the original problem, which has a double-effect: . . . Israel itself needs the same rescue-from-sin-and-death that everyone else needs" (*Justification: God's Plan & Paul's Vision* 201; cf. pp. 126–27). But he also says in the same book, "This prophetic judgment, echoed by Paul, is thus not about 'proving that all Jews are sinful.' . . . The point is that the Old Testament itself declares that things hadn't worked out, that the single-plan-through-Israel-for-the-world had run in the sand" (*ibid.* 197).

## IV. DECLARATION VERSUS IMPUTATION?

Wright's rejection of imputation is vigorous and strong. He says, "If Paul uses 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 either to the plaintiff or the defendant."<sup>35</sup> And, "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."<sup>36</sup> And, "When the judge in the lawcourt justifies someone, he does not give that person his own particular 'righteousness.' He *creates* the status the vindicated defendant now possesses, by an act of *declaration*, a 'speech-act' in our contemporary jargon."<sup>37</sup>

What are we talking about when we talk about imputation?<sup>38</sup> The fundamental issue is not the language of active and passive obedience or whether Paul accords with sixteenth- or seventeenth-century expressions of the doctrine. Many misunderstand what is meant by active and passive obedience in any case.<sup>39</sup> The issue is whether God's righteousness is given to believers in and through Jesus Christ. In other words, does our righteousness ultimately rest in our works (even if Spirit-produced) or in the work of Jesus Christ?

<sup>35</sup> *What Saint Paul Really Said* 98. He goes on to say, "To imagine the defendant somehow receiving the judge's righteousness is simply a category mistake. That is not how language works" (ibid.).

<sup>36</sup> *Justification: God's Plan & Paul's Vision* 66. Wright declares, "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. What the judge has done is to pass judicial sentence on sin, in the faithful death of the Messiah, so that those who belong to the Messiah, though in themselves 'ungodly' and without virtue or merit, now find themselves hearing the lawcourt verdict, 'in the right'" (ibid. 206).

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 69. "*But the righteousness they have will not be God's own righteousness.* That makes no sense at all. God's own righteousness is his covenant faithfulness. . . . But God's righteousness remains his own property" (*What Saint Paul Really Said* 99).

<sup>38</sup> For important works supporting imputation, see Brian Vickers, *Jesus' Blood and Righteousness: Paul's Theology of Imputation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006); John Piper, *Counted Righteousness in Christ: Should We Abandon the Imputed Righteousness of Christ?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2002); D. A. Carson, "The Vindication of Imputation: On Fields of Discourse and Semantic Fields," in *Justification: What's at Stake in the Current Debates?* (ed. Mark A. Husbands and Daniel J. Treier; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004) 46–78.

<sup>39</sup> John Murray says, "Neither are we to suppose that we can allocate certain phases or acts of our Lord's life on the earth to the act of obedience and certain other phases and acts to the passive obedience. The distinction between the active and passive obedience is not a distinction of periods. It is our Lord's whole work of obedience in every phase and period that is described as active and passive, and we must avoid the mistake of thinking that the active obedience applies to the obedience of his life and the passive obedience to the obedience of his final sufferings and death."

"The real use and purpose of the formula is to emphasize the two distinct aspects of our Lord's vicarious obedience. The truth expressed rests upon the recognition that the law of God has both penal sanctions and positive demands. It demands not only the full discharge of its precepts but also the infliction of penalty for all infractions and shortcomings. It is this twofold demand of the law of God which is taken into account when we speak of the active and passive obedience of Christ. Christ as the vicar of his people came under the curse and condemnation due to sin and he also fulfilled the law of God in all its positive requirements. In other words, he took care of the guilt of sin and perfectly fulfilled the demands of righteousness. He perfectly met both the penal and the preceptive requirements of God's law. The passive obedience refers to the former and the active obedience to the latter" (*Redemption Accomplished and Applied* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955] 21–22).

Calvin rightly argued that we enjoy the righteousness of Christ through union with Christ, and Luther similarly maintained that we are married to Christ, and therefore, all that Christ is belongs to us.<sup>40</sup> According to Wright, there is no sense in which God gives us his own righteousness.<sup>41</sup> So, the issue is not sixteenth- or seventeenth-formulations of the doctrine. Whatever one thinks of those formulations, my purpose here is to address Wright's contention that God does not give us his righteousness in and through Jesus Christ.

Why is imputation important? Why is it vital that we receive God's gift of righteousness? Because it is our only hope of standing in the right before God on the final day. As noted earlier, Wright correctly says that believers must do good works to be justified, but such works are not the basis of our right standing with God since our righteousness is always partial and imperfect. Our right-standing with God finally depends upon Christ's righteousness. That is why J. Gresham Machen found such comfort in imputation as he lay dying.<sup>42</sup> It is curious that Wright fails to see this since he agrees that God demands perfect obedience. If perfect obedience is required for justification, it seems to follow that we need God's righteousness in Christ to be justified.

I think it is legitimate to read 1 Cor 1:30 as a righteousness from God that is ours through union with Christ: "But of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption." Wright thinks this verse cannot possibly refer to imputation because we do not speak of imputed wisdom, redemption, or sanctification.<sup>43</sup> On the one hand, I agree that we cannot read a full doctrine of imputation out of this verse. On the other hand, I do not think it can be waved out of the verse too quickly either. Wright's reading seems to suggest that all the benefits described here must apply to us in exactly the same way, but that does not necessarily follow, for the words do not mean the same thing. It seems fair to consider other texts to construe what Paul means by righteousness. In any case, Paul seems to be arguing that we do not find *in ourselves* wisdom, redemption, sanctification, or righteousness. God's saving work fundamentally stands outside us, and we enjoy what he has done for us as we are united to Christ by faith. Surprisingly, Wright thinks sanctification here refers to "a process."<sup>44</sup> Time and space are lacking, but I think Paul has in mind definitive sanctification here, what is sometimes called positional sanctification.<sup>45</sup> The evidence of the letter shows that the Corinthians had a long way to go in actual holiness, but they were already sanctified in Christ. If the sanctification

<sup>40</sup> For Calvin's view, see Craig B. Carpenter, "A Question of Union with Christ? Calvin and Trent on Justification," *WTJ* 64 (2002) 363–86. For Luther, see Martin Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian" (trans. W. A. Lambert; rev. Harold J. Grimm, in *Three Treatises*, rev. ed.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970) 286–87.

<sup>41</sup> He specifically says in the quote above that there is no way in which God gives us his own righteousness (*Justification: God's Plan & Paul's Vision* 66).

<sup>42</sup> See Ned Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen: A Biographical Memoir* (1954; repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 508.

<sup>43</sup> *What Saint Paul Really Said* 123.

<sup>44</sup> *Justification: God's Plan & Paul's Vision* 156

<sup>45</sup> See especially David Peterson, *Possessed by God: A New Testament Theology of Sanctification and Holiness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

of the Corinthians was theirs in Christ, it seems that righteousness could be understood along the same lines. It would seem to fit the argument well if Paul were claiming that their righteousness is not their own. It is theirs by virtue of their incorporation into Christ.

Against Wright, I think it is clear that 2 Cor 5:21 supports the imputation of Christ's righteousness.<sup>46</sup> The verse says, "The one who knew no sin, he made to be sin for our sake, so that we should become the righteousness of God in him." Notice again the emphasis on incorporation into Christ in the verse. We enjoy God's righteousness by virtue of our union with Jesus, because we are in him. Furthermore, the verse emphasizes Jesus' sinlessness. Partial righteousness will not do. We need Jesus' perfect righteousness to stand in the right before God. Believers are righteous because all of who Jesus is and what he has accomplished, both in his life and his death, belong to us.

Contrary to Wright, I do not think that the first-person pronouns in 2 Cor 5:21 restrict what is said here to Paul as an apostle. This is a complex subject, but I would suggest that Paul uses pronouns much more loosely and not in such a technical way. Sometimes in these verses Paul uses the first-person plural pronoun to refer to himself, while other times it refers to the Corinthians.<sup>47</sup> Nor does the word γενόμεθα ("we become") in verse 21 rule out imputation, for the word does not necessarily designate the infusion of righteousness.<sup>48</sup> The verb γινώμαι is quite flexible and doesn't necessarily refer to a process or to the infusion of righteousness. Murray Harris argues that "γινώμαι may be given its most common meaning ('become,' 'be') and points to the change of status that accrues to believers who are 'in Christ.'"<sup>49</sup> Here it signifies that one who was formerly not righteous is now counted as righteous in Christ. Harris concludes that "it is not inappropriate to perceive in this verse a double imputation: sin was reckoned to Christ's account (v. 21a), so that righteousness is reckoned to our account (v. 21b)."<sup>50</sup> He goes on to say, "As a result of God imputing to Christ something extrinsic to him, namely sin, believers have something imputed to them that was extrinsic to them, namely righteousness."<sup>51</sup>

Wright leads us astray when he says that because justification is a legal declaration it is not based on one's moral character.<sup>52</sup> A couple of things need to be untangled here. In one sense, of course, justification is not based on

<sup>46</sup> *What Saint Paul Really Said* 104–5; *Justification: God's Plan & Paul's Vision* 159–64. See here David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians* (NAC; Nashville: Broadman, 1999) 300–302; Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) 454–56, and esp. n. 207 on pp. 455–56.

<sup>47</sup> Harris, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians* 437.

<sup>48</sup> Contra Wright, *Justification: God's Plan & Paul's Vision* 165. Cf. his comments elsewhere on righteousness, "it denotes a *status*, not a moral quality" (ibid. 121).

<sup>49</sup> Harris, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians* 455.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Wright remarks, "Righteousness,' within the lawcourt setting—and this is something that no good Lutheran or Reformed theologian ought ever to object to—denotes *the status that someone has when the court has found in their favor*. Notice, that it does not *denote*, with that all-important lawcourt context, 'the moral character they are then assumed to have,' or 'the moral behavior they have demonstrated which has earned them the verdict'" (*Justification: God's Plan & Paul's Vision* 90).

our moral character, for God justifies the ungodly (Rom 4:5). If justification depended on our moral worth, then no one would be justified. But Wright fails to state clearly the role that moral character plays in justification, and because he separates moral character from the law court he fails to see the role that Christ's righteousness plays in imputation. When a judge in Israel declared a person to be innocent or guilty, he did so on the basis of the moral innocence or guilt of the defendant. The biblical text insists that judges render a verdict on the basis of the moral behavior of the defendant. This is evident from Deut 25:1, "If there is a dispute between men and they come into court and the judges decide between them, acquitting the innocent and condemning the guilty." For Wright to say, then, that one's moral behavior has nothing to do with the judge's declaration flies in the face of the biblical evidence. Indeed, the only basis for the legal declaration was one's moral behavior—whether one was innocent or guilty.

What does all of this have to do with imputation? The fundamental question is how God can declare sinners to be righteous. How can a verdict of "not guilty" be pronounced over those who are ungodly and sinners? For a judge to declare that the wicked are righteous is contrary to the way judges should behave. As Prov 17:15 says, "He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous are both alike an abomination to the LORD." So how can God be righteous in declaring the wicked to be righteous? The answer of Scripture is that the Father because of his great love sent his Son, who willingly and gladly gave himself for sinners, so that the wrath that sinners deserved was poured out upon the Son (cf. Rom 3:24–26). God can declare sinners to be in the right because they are forgiven by Christ's sacrifice. God vindicates his *moral righteousness* in the justification of sinners since Christ takes upon himself the punishment and wrath sinners deserve. It is clear, then, that moral character plays a vital role in justification, for God's own holiness must be satisfied in the cross of Christ for forgiveness to be granted.

Wright insists that no judge in the courtroom can give his righteousness to the defendant. The mistake Wright makes here is quite surprising, for the significance of the law court or any other metaphor in Scripture cannot be exhausted by its cultural background. In other words, it is true that in human courtrooms the judge does not and cannot give his righteousness to the defendant. But we see the distinctiveness of the biblical text and the wonder and the glory of the gospel precisely here. God is not restricted by the rules of human courtrooms. This is a most unusual courtroom indeed, for the judge delivers up his own Son to pay the penalty. That does not happen in human courtrooms! And the judge gives us his own righteousness. It is a "righteousness from God" (Phil 3:9). The biblical text, then, specifically teaches that God, as the divine judge, both vindicates us and gives us his righteousness. When we are united to Christ by faith, all that Christ is belongs to us. Hence, we stand in the right before God because we are in Christ. Our righteousness, then, is not in ourselves. We exult because we enjoy the righteousness of God in Jesus Christ. Once again moral character enters the picture, contrary to Wright. We stand in the right before God because our sins have been forgiven and because we enjoy the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

The imputation of righteousness is also supported by Romans 5:12–19.<sup>53</sup> We do not have time here to linger over the text, but its main point is clear. At least five times we are told in these verses that both death and condemnation are the portion of all people because of Adam's one sin. Adam functions here as the representational head of all human beings. Similarly, those who belong to Jesus Christ are justified (Rom 5:16) and righteous (Rom 5:17) because of their union with him.<sup>54</sup> Sometimes scholars say that those who defend imputation are importing an abstract and alien notion into the text. But the charge can be reversed, for when believers are united with Christ, they receive all of who Christ is, both in his life and his death, both in his obedience and his suffering, both in the precepts he obeyed and in the penalty he endured. Therefore, believers are not just forgiven; they also receive God's righteousness in Christ. All of Christ is theirs, for they belong to him, and thus their righteousness is in him.

#### V. CONCLUSION

Naturally much more could be said about the fundamental importance of justification. The issues here are not merely academic but are crucial for pastoral ministry and the mission of the church and for assurance of salvation. Luther is on target when he says the following about justification by faith, "This is a very important and pleasant comfort with which to bring wonderful encouragement to minds afflicted and disturbed with a sense of sin and afraid of every flaming dart of the devil . . . your righteousness is not visible, and it is not conscious; but it is hoped for as something to be revealed in due time. Therefore you must not judge on the basis of your consciousness of sin, which terrifies and troubles you, but on the basis of the promise and teaching of faith, by which Christ is promised to you as your perfect and eternal righteousness."<sup>55</sup>

In conclusion, we can be grateful on so many fronts for the scholarship of Wright. His innovative scholarship has helped clarify biblical teachings and rectify wrong notions. My hope is that this essay will be received in the spirit in which it is intended, for like so many I stand in debt to his outstanding scholarship. Nevertheless, in my judgment Wright's view of justification needs to be both clarified and corrected, for our sure hope for eternal life is the righteousness of God which belongs to us through our union with Jesus Christ.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Wright argues that Jesus was faithful to God's plan, not to the law, and hence there is no "treasury of merit through Torah obedience" here (*Letter to the Romans* 529).

<sup>54</sup> Wright comes close to saying the same thing here. "That which Israel, or groups within Israel, thought to gain has been appropriately attained by the true Israelite, the Messiah, the obedient one. He now shares this status with all his people" (*ibid.* 524). But this is still not the same thing as saying we enjoy a gift of righteousness given to us by God in Christ.

<sup>55</sup> Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians 1535: Chapters 1–4*, vol. 26 of *Luther's Works* (ed. Jaroslav Pelikan; St. Louis: Concordia, 1963) 21.

<sup>56</sup> I am grateful to Jim Hamilton, Justin Taylor, Matt Crawford, Greg Van Court, and Joshua Greever for their helpful comments and criticisms of an earlier draft of this essay, and I have incorporated some of their suggestions.