

## JUSTIFICATION: YESTERDAY, TODAY, AND FOREVER

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### I. INTRODUCTION

I am grateful for the invitation to be with you at this meeting and to take part in a further discussion of justification. I cherish the hope that we will be able this morning to sort out one or two key questions and see where the disagreements of recent years really lie. You may recall that John Henry Newman—who himself said some interesting things about justification—made a distinction between two different types of disagreement. Sometimes, he said, we disagree about words, and sometimes we disagree about things. Sometimes, that is, our disagreements are purely verbal: we are using different words, but underneath, when we explain what we mean, we are saying the same thing. Sometimes, though, we really are disagreeing about matters of substance—even though, confusingly, we may actually be using the same words. I suspect there is something of both types of disagreement going on in current debates, and it would be helpful if we could at least get some clarity there.

You might have thought, perhaps, that my title reflected the fact that this debate seems to be going on and on, yesterday, today, and perhaps forever. I hope that will not be the case, though I am not particularly optimistic. The title is intended to do two things. First, it is intended to flag up the fact that justification is anchored firmly and squarely in Jesus the Messiah, the crucified and risen Lord, who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Though that is a quotation from Heb 13:8, it could stand as a summary of Paul's view of Jesus, too. And the point about justification is that what God says of Jesus the Messiah, he says of all those who belong to the Messiah. He said it yesterday, when Jesus died and rose again. He says it today, in and through Jesus who ever lives to make intercession for us. And he will say it tomorrow, when Jesus returns to judge and save, to complete his kingdom work on earth as in heaven. So the first point is that justification is anchored and rooted firmly in Jesus himself.

The second point to which my title refers is the triple tense of justification. Justification has, as we all I think know, three tenses in Paul's writing. He can speak of past justification; he can speak of it as a present reality; and he can speak of it as still in some sense future. He can do all three in close proximity. This is not carelessness. He thinks eschatologically: God *has acted* in Jesus the Messiah, he *is at work* presently affirming that all who believe

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are justified and so giving them assurance, and he *will act* through Jesus when he comes again in glory. Theologians have often spoken of the three tenses of salvation, but not always, or perhaps not clearly enough, of the three tenses of justification. (Nor are justification and salvation the same thing, despite the confusions of popular usage.) That is the structural framework to which I shall return at the end of this paper.

First, however, there are several preliminary matters. My time is short, and I cannot say everything. That should not be a problem in an academic context—we all know we have to abbreviate—but it is often a problem in a blogsite context. We badly need a new ethic of blogging, particularly Christian blogging. It is not healthy to come to a lecture or conference regarding the papers as simply raw material for the blog one will write later in the day. That is like the tourist who stalks the streets with camera to eye and never really experiences the foreign city because the photograph, and its display back home, has become the reality. Nor will it do to pull statements out of context, draw false conclusions from them, and then attack someone for holding views they do not hold. This, sadly, is all too common. It happens more widely, too. I have seen footage of public discussions of my work in which people referred to views which I hold, declared that someone who believes such things must also believe certain other things, and then criticized me for believing those certain other things. Since I do not believe those other things, I naturally regard this procedure as both unscholarly and uncharitable. One of the things that has been said about me is that I have not responded to criticisms people have made. It would be tedious to go through a list, but I hope today to say something about some of them at least. One is, of course, damned both if one does and if one does not; if I do not defend myself against charges, I am failing to respond, but if I do I am being “defensive”! I hope any who have come to this session eager to find further examples of Tom Wright’s heretical views will pay close attention to what I actually say, as opposed to what some people have guessed I must really think. A good example: as with Newman, sometimes (surprise, surprise) theologians and exegetes use the same word in different senses. We must be sure to ascertain what someone means by a particular term (I have in mind, for instance, the word “basis,” to which we shall return) before assuming they are using it in the sense with which one is oneself familiar.

## II. PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

I have four preliminary considerations. They are, first, the question of Scripture and tradition; second, the question of Paul’s context and later contexts; third, the methodological issues of words and stories; and fourth, the understanding of Second Temple Judaism.

First, let us make no mistake: this debate is about Scripture and tradition, and about whether we allow Scripture ever to say things that our human traditions have not said. Here there is a great irony. It has often been said of the so-called “New Perspective” that in criticizing the Protestant reading of Paul it is pushing us back towards Roman Catholicism. That is already silly: has Ed Sanders become a Roman Catholic? Has Jimmy Dunn? Has any

single person gone to Rome as a result of the New Perspective? The point is not that the Reformers had a faulty hermeneutic, therefore the Catholics must be right. Get the hermeneutic right, and you will see that the critique is all the stronger. Just because they used a faulty hermeneutic to attack Rome, that does not mean there was nothing to attack, or that a better hermeneutic would not have done the job better. But here is the irony. I was the Anglican observer at the Roman Catholic Synod of Bishops two years ago, when for three weeks the cardinals and bishops were discussing “The Word of God.” Some of the bishops wanted to say that “the word of God” meant, basically, Scripture itself. Others wanted to say that it meant Scripture and tradition. Others again wanted to say, “Scripture, tradition, and the magisterium.” I, naturally, wanted to hold out for a sense of “word of God” in which Scripture held the prime place and was allowed to question tradition and magisterium alike. That, I take it, is the historic Protestant position. Now I discover that some from what I had thought were Protestant quarters are accusing me of something called “biblicism.” I’m not sure what that is, exactly. What I am sure of is what I learned forty years ago from Luther and Calvin: that the primary task of a teacher of the church is to search Scripture ever more deeply and to critique all human traditions in the light of that, not to assemble a magisterium on a platform and tell the worried faithful what the tradition says and hence how they are to understand Scripture. To find people in avowedly Protestant colleges taking what is basically a Catholic position would be funny if it was not so serious. To find them then accusing me of crypto-Catholicism is worse. To find them using against me the rhetoric that the official church in the 1520s used against Luther—“How dare you say something different from what we’ve believed all these centuries”—again suggests that they have not only no sense of irony, but no sense of history. I want to reply, how dare you propose a different theological method from that of Luther and Calvin, a method of using human tradition to tell you what Scripture said? On this underlying question, I am standing firm with the great Reformers against those who, however Baptist their official theology, are in fact neo-Catholics.

Second, following from this, it is always important to remember that the NT Scriptures are the original, first-century, apostolic testimony to the great, one-off fact of Jesus himself. The doctrine of the authority of Scripture is part of the belief that the living God acted uniquely and decisively in, through, and as Jesus of Nazareth, Israel’s Messiah, to die for sins and to rise again to launch the new creation. Again, it is a central Protestant insight that this happened once for all, *ephhapax*. It does not have to happen again and again. At the time, in the early sixteenth century, some Roman Catholics were implying that Jesus had to be sacrificed again in every Mass; the Reformers insisted that, no, the unique event happened once only. But that once-for-all-ness plays out directly in the way Scripture summons us to attend to its own unique setting and context, at that moment when, as Paul says (following Jesus, of course), “the time had fully come.” The problems faced by the early church, the controversies Paul and the others had to address, are not therefore merely exemplary. We cannot strip them away in order to get down to something else, something that corresponds more closely, less obliquely, to the questions we ourselves have come with. That is the route of demythologization. No: Paul’s

letters were themselves part of that great life-changing, world-changing, Israel-transforming event. It is therefore vital that we pay close and strict attention to the actual detail of what the NT says rather than assuming that we have the right to abstract bits and pieces and make them fit quite different scenarios *and then be absolutized in their new form*. Of course what Paul said in his context needs to be applied in different contexts. That is what Luther and Calvin and the others did, while being very clear that *historical* exegesis, not allegorical or typological, was the rock bottom of meaning to which appeal had to be made.

Now of course it is true that some people in the first century were asking some questions which have some analogy with those of Luther. The Rich Young Ruler wants to know how to inherit the age to come (not “how to go to heaven,” by the way). But Jesus does not answer as Luther would have done. He sends him back to the commandments, and tops them off by telling him to sell up and become a disciple. Part of the problem is that Luther’s question was conceived in thoroughly medieval terms about God, grace, and righteousness. Put the question that way, and Luther’s answer was the right one. The fact that the words are biblical words does not mean that theologians in 1500 meant what writers in AD 50 meant by them, or rather by their Greek antecedents.

This leads to my third introductory point. I have been accused of doing word studies and then forcing meanings of particular words onto the rest of the text. I have also been accused of coming to the text with a large, global narrative and then reading the text in the light of that. These seem to be opposite charges, but the truth of the matter is this. Yes, I do think lexicography matters; unless we pay close attention to the meaning which words had at the time we will read other meanings into Paul’s sentence. Yes, the big story matters, and the problem is that most western Christians, Catholic as well as Protestant, liberal as well as evangelical, have had an implicit big story, so big they never even noticed it, but it was not—it demonstrably was not—the story which Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Paul had in their minds and hearts. So it is not a matter of me bringing a big story to the text and everyone else just reading the text straight. The question is: Are we prepared to own up to our big stories and allow them to be checked and challenged in the light of history?

One word, in particular, about the big story of Scripture—the story which is presupposed throughout the NT. How much clearer can I make this? The big story is about the creator’s plan for the world. This plan always envisaged humans being God’s agents in that plan. Humans sin; that’s their problem, but God’s problem is bigger, namely that his plan for the world is thwarted. So God calls Abraham to be the means of rescuing humankind. Then Israel rebels; that’s their problem, but God’s problem is bigger, namely that his plan to rescue humans and thereby the world is thwarted. So God sends Israel-in-person, Jesus the Messiah, to rescue Israel, to perform Israel’s task on behalf of Adam, and Adam’s on behalf of the whole world. He announces God’s kingdom, and is crucified; and this turns out to be God’s answer to the multiple layers of problems, as in the resurrection it appears that death itself has been overcome. It all fits—and it all shows that the point of the covenant is organically and intimately related at every point to the particular concern of sinful, guilty

humankind. *The point of the covenant with Israel, in the whole of Scripture, is that it is the means by which God is rescuing the children of Adam and so restoring the world.* It is not a side issue or a different point. I am surprised to hear of late that I have downplayed Adam. That, perhaps, is part of the attempt to make out that really I'm a dangerous liberal in disguise, going soft on sin. Ask people in the Church of England about that! On the contrary, Adam is vital. Adam's sin is the problem: God's covenant with Abraham, which will be fulfilled in Jesus the Messiah, is the solution. If you forget Abraham and the covenant—as so much Protestantism, alas, has done—you will be forced to interpret the solution, which is Jesus the Messiah, in some other way. And when you do that you will introduce major distortions.

And let us be clear. No other “New Perspective” writer, I think, has said anything like what I just said. This version of the “New Perspective” gives you everything you could possibly have got from the “old perspective.” But it gives it to you in its biblical context.

But if the promise to Abraham was also a promise that *through* Abraham God would rescue Adam (which is not to diminish God's love for Abraham and his people but rather to enhance and ennoble it), then God's intention to rescue Adam was also an intention that *through* Adam God would bless the whole of creation, restoring the original intention of Genesis 1 and 2. That is why, in Scripture, God's redeemed are to be “a royal priesthood.” I have recently been accused, for saying this, of implying that God does not really love us, he merely wants to use us; and, on the basis of that strange smear, I have been accused myself, as a pastor, of not really caring for people but only wanting to use them in some purpose or other. This is ridiculous and insulting, but more importantly it is unbiblical. Read Revelation 5: the love of God, in the death of the Lamb, ransoms people *and makes them kings and priests to God.* Is the love any less because of the grand purpose in store? Of course not. When Jesus, showing his continuing love for Peter, tells him to feed his sheep, does that mean he does not really love Peter, he only wants to use him? Of course not. If a great composer has a child who is a brilliant musician, and the composer, out of sheer love for the child, writes a magnificent concerto for her to play, is he merely using her? Or is his love not expressed precisely in this, that he wants to celebrate and enhance her wonderful gifts?

Fourth and last preliminary point: It is of course true that all variations of the so-called “New Perspective” on Paul look back as a historic marker to Ed Sanders's 1977 book *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. But, as I had assumed was now well known, there are as many variations within the “New Perspective” as there are scholars writing on the subject, and I in particular have spent almost as much time disagreeing with Sanders on many things, including his analysis of Judaism, as I have in a different context with Dom Crossan. I had already reached a point in my own research, before I read Sanders, where I had begun to read Rom 10:3 very differently from the traditional reading, indicating that Paul's critique of his fellow Jews was not that they were legalists trying to earn merit but that they were nationalists trying to keep God's blessing for themselves instead of being the conduit for that blessing to flow to the Gentiles. “Seeking to establish their own righteousness,” I came to believe, meant that they were seeking to maintain a status of covenant membership

for themselves and themselves only. Then, when Sanders published his book, I saw at once that its basic line was sympathetic to this. I do not think, however, that Sanders got first-century Judaism entirely right. Sanders himself has gone on to make many nuances, though he is not a theologian, and it shows. I wrote the entire middle section of *The New Testament and the People of God* in order to sketch my own very different picture. However, it simply will not do to cite those volumes called *Justification and Variegated Nomism* as though they have disproved Sanders's reading of Judaism. Carson's summary at the end of the first volume is disingenuous: most of the authors have not drawn the conclusions he wanted them to draw. Notably, the main discussion of Qumran failed even to mention the most important text, 4QMMT. A lot more work needs to be done. But, in particular, we need to pay much more attention once more to the controlling narrative within which most first-century Jews were living. Sanders does not do this; his critics do not do it; I and others have tried to do it. No doubt it can be done better, but let us at least try.

So much for my four preliminary points. Now to more substantial matters: context, language, exposition, and systematic overview.

### III. JUSTIFICATION IN CONTEXT

Paul's letters, obviously, arise from a wide variety of different needs. In most of his letters, justification is barely mentioned. Where it is, apart from the one-liners like 1 Cor 1:30 and 2 Cor 5:21, the context in the letter indicates a particular set of questions. In Philippians 3, Galatians 2 and 3, and Romans 3 and 4, the wider question at issue is not first and foremost about how I get saved, how I find a gracious God, how I go to heaven, or whatever. I'm not saying any of that is unimportant or irrelevant. I am merely pointing out, which anyone can see if they look at the texts, that the basic question has to do with *membership in the people of God, in Abraham's family, in Israel*. This is obvious in Philippians 3, where "the righteousness of my own" which Paul forswears is not his legalistic self-achievement. It is, explicitly, his membership in physical Israel: circumcised on the eighth day, of the race of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; when it comes to the law, a Pharisee; when it comes to zeal, a church-persecutor; when it comes to righteousness under the law, blameless. Of course there is a sense in which that contains something that could be called "legalism," but it is not the detached legalism of the proto-Pelagian. It is the covenantal legalism of the Jew for whom the law is the way of demonstrating and maintaining membership in the ethnic people of God. That is where Paul started. That is what he gave up by discovering that the Messiah was the crucified Jesus and that, in him, God had radically redefined the terms of covenant membership.

The same is true for Galatians. I have heard it said, in a tone of wondering scorn, that I believe that Paul is speaking in chapter 2 about the question of who you are allowed to eat with. There is, among my critics, a rolling of the eyes at this point, as though to say, How weird can you get? Well, but does the text not say exactly that? Here is Peter at Antioch, first eating with the Gentiles, and then, when people come from James, separating himself. It

simply will not do to generalize this problem, to demythologize it, to transform it into the modern formulation according to which Paul's opponents were offering a message of "Christ and . . ."—Christ and a bit of law, Christ and a bit of self-help religion, whatever. Of course in a sense that is true, but what mattered was that the Galatian agitators were doing it the other way round. They were saying, "Ethnic Jewish covenant membership *and Jesus*." They were not adding something extra to Jesus. They were trying to add Jesus on to the thing they already had. And Paul's whole point is that it cannot be done: "I through the law died to the law that I might live to God; I am crucified with the Messiah."

What has this got to do with "the gospel"? Exactly what Ephesians 3 makes clear (I hope, among evangelicals, I do not have to argue for the Pauline authorship?). "The mystery of the Messiah" (Eph 3:4), which was secret for a long time but is now revealed, is "that the Gentiles are fellow-heirs, sharers-in-the-body, partners in the promise in Messiah Jesus through the gospel, whose servant I became" (Eph 3:6–7). The point of the gospel, the revelation of Israel's Messiah as none other than the crucified and risen Jesus, now Lord of the whole world, is that the promise made to Abraham—which, remember, was the promise to deal with the sin of Adam, that is, the promise of forgiveness and new life—is now made available to all. I should not have to point out that this is precisely what is going on right across Galatians 3, which ends with the solid line: if you belong to the Messiah, you are Abraham's seed, heirs according to the promise. That was what was at stake in the context.

I leave aside Romans 3 for the moment. I have said enough to remind you that the context of Paul's major "justification" passages is not the individual search for a gracious God but the question of how you know who belongs to God's people. And belonging to God's people—call it "ecclesiology" if you like—is not something detached from "soteriology," as in so much low-grade Protestant polemic. The vital and central questions of forgiveness, of peace with God, of assurance of salvation in the age to come—these are not questions to be detached from the OT, from the promises God made to Abraham. They are contained within them. As Paul insists in Romans 9—notice, by the way, how the normal Protestant reading or misreading of Paul always tends to leave chapters 9–11 to one side—it is to Israel that the promises belong, the promises now fulfilled in the Messiah. My main point, then, about the context of Paul's justification-language is that the question of justification is always bound up with the question of Israel, of the coming together of Jews and Gentiles in the Messiah. Of course, in some parts of the "New Perspective"—I think, for instance, of the extraordinary *tour de force* recently offered by Douglas Campbell—the two are played off against one another. I believe this is totally mistaken. Only by paying close attention to the scriptural context can the scriptural doctrine be scripturally understood.

#### IV. THE LANGUAGE OF JUSTIFICATION

This brings me to the question of the specific language involved. What does "righteousness" mean—in particular, what does the phrase "reckoned as

righteousness” mean? That phrase only occurs twice in the OT. Genesis 15 is well known and is part of the question. But in Ps 106:31 it says that after Phinehas’s act of intercession it was “counted unto him for righteousness from generation to generation forever.” What does this mean? Granted that the Psalmist is summarizing the story quite loosely—“intercession” is an interesting word for what Phinehas did, killing a couple *in flagrante*—it is clear from Num 25:10–13 that what was granted to him from generation to generation for ever was “a covenant of peace” and “a covenant of perpetual priesthood,” because of his zeal and his making atonement for Israel. It would be a bold exegete who declared that zeal, atonement, and reckoning as righteousness had nothing to do with one another in Paul’s writings: think of Galatians 1, 2 and 3, or Romans 10. What we have here, I suggest, is a tell-tale indication of what “reckoning as righteousness” was taken to mean within Scripture itself (not within some dodgy Second Temple text upon which I am sometimes accused of relying!). It is about the establishment of a covenant with that person and their descendants.

Exactly that is at stake as well in the more famous passage from Gen 15:6. The whole passage to that point is about Abraham’s continuing family. God promises Abraham a great “reward,” but Abraham asks how this can be since he has no heir of his own. God promises him a massive, uncountable family; Abraham believes the promise; and God “reckons it to him as righteousness.” The rest of the chapter explains what this means: God makes a covenant with Abraham, to bring his descendants up from Egypt and give them their land. That this covenantal meaning of “righteousness” is not a trick of the light is confirmed in Rom 4:11, when Paul says that Abraham received circumcision as a sign and seal of “the righteousness of faith” which Abraham already had when uncircumcised. But in the passage which Paul is echoing, Gen 17:11, it says that Abraham received circumcision as “a sign of the *covenant*” between God and Abraham’s descendents. Here is my primary, inner-biblical evidence for understanding *dikaiosyne*, in these contexts and phrases, in terms of God’s covenant.

A footnote to this. I was surprised to hear it said elsewhere that I understand *dikaiosyne* to mean “covenant faithfulness.” Of course, that is (part of) what I think it means as applied to God. But as applied to humans the best rendering is “covenant *membership*.” Of course, that membership is marked precisely by *pistis*, faith or faithfulness. But for Paul *dikaiosyne*, like its Hebrew background *tsedaqah*, is easily flexible enough to mean, if you like, “covenant-ness,” with the different nuances appropriate for different contexts flowing from this.

What then about the lawcourt scenario which is constantly implied in the OT? Once again I have been accused, absurdly, of importing a modern idea of the lawcourt into Paul’s ancient context. Not so. It is precisely the ancient Hebrew lawcourt that is envisaged, in which two parties appear before a judge—precisely and explicitly unlike the modern court where, in my country at least, there is a Director of Public Prosecutions to bring criminal charges. All cases in the Hebrew lawcourt are what we call civil cases, one person against another, before a judge. That is the picture in so much of Scripture: God is the judge, and Israel is coming before him pleading (as with the Psalmists) for

vindication against the enemy. The problem is that Israel, too, is guilty. How then can God be faithful to the covenant with Abraham? That is the problem in Romans 3.

That is why it is wrong to invoke, as some have done, the scenario in (for instance) the book of Job, where God seems for a while to be one of the parties in the lawsuit. That is a possibility which Paul explicitly examines, in Rom 3:5–6. If God were simply one of the parties in the lawsuit, then he would be shown to be in the right by our being in the wrong, so he would then be unjust to inflict wrath! Not so, he says; or how could God judge the world? The fictive prophetic scenario of God as the adversary-at-law is possible, but it is not the main picture, and it is not Paul's picture. In his picture, as in most of the OT, God is the judge.

The different layers of metaphorical meaning then all nest snugly and appropriately together, without forcing or straining. All humans are in the dock before God, the impartial judge. All have sinned and come short of God's glory. But God has made covenant promises to and through Israel; that is what Rom 2:17–3:9 is partly all about. How is he to be faithful to those promises? Answer: through the Messiah, Jesus, who has been the one and only faithful Israelite, embodying God's covenant faithfulness and hence evoking, through his death as an act of sheer divine grace, the answering faith which is the recognisable badge of a renewed covenant people, the people who turn out to be the people God promised Abraham in the first place, the people composed equally of believing Gentiles and believing Jews. This is the action—the sin-bearing “obedience” of the last Adam to the Israel-vocation as in, for instance, Isaiah 53—through which God's faithfulness to the covenant generates that forgiveness of sins because of which there can now be a sin-forgiven people.

What then does it mean, within the lawcourt setting, for someone to be “righteous”? Simply this: that the court has found in their favor. It means that they have been declared to be “in the right.” They have not been granted or imputed a “righteousness” which belongs to someone else. The judge's “righteousness” consists of his trying the case fairly and in accordance with law, showing no favoritism, punishing the wrongdoer and upholding the widow, the orphan and the defenceless. *When the court finds in favor of one of the two parties at law, there is no sense in which their “righteous” status carries any of these judge-specific connotations.* The “righteousness” which they have is their right standing in the lawcourt, now that the verdict has been announced. In the same way, when God as the God who made the covenant with Abraham declares that someone is a member of that covenant, the covenant faithfulness because of which God sends his own son to take upon him the sins of Israel and the world is not at all the same thing as the covenant membership which is demarcated by faith. The “righteousness” which God has in this case is simply not the same thing as the “righteousness” (covenant membership) of those who have faith. *To think otherwise—to insist that one needs “righteousness,” in the sense of “moral character or repute” or whatever, in order to stand unashamed before God, and that, lacking any of one's own, one must find some from somewhere or someone else—shows that one is still thinking in medieval categories of iustitia rather than in biblical categories of lawcourt and covenant.*

I have thus, by drawing in the covenant, anticipated the next point. The lawcourt in question is the covenantal one in which God's promises to Abraham are at stake, The "right standing" of those in whose favour the court has found is at the same time the *covenantal* status they enjoy as members of Abraham's true family—which includes among its privileges, as I have insisted, the assurance of sins forgiven and of the promise that "those whom God justified, them he also glorified." The lawcourt setting, in other words, is not just one illustration among others. It is the theologically apt and appropriate metaphor through which we see what has happened to God's covenant promises. The covenant was established in the first place in order to set the world right. This is how the language works. And it works without equivocation in passage after passage throughout Paul. That, for a biblically faithful Christian, is what counts. We are not at liberty to pick and choose in God's word. We are bound to search it all, to study it all, to make sure we interpret each element in the light of the whole and the whole in the light of each element.

#### V. EXEGESIS AND EXPOSITION

This brings us nicely to the exegesis of particular passages. I have always insisted that this must be the heart of the question. It is often frustrating to find that discussion has taken place at one or two removes from the actual text.

I have written about the relevant passages at length, of course, in various places (a fairly complete list may be found in the bibliography for my book *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision* [2009]). I have drawn attention repeatedly, for instance, to the single-letter word "e" in Rom 3:29, which indicates that for Paul, though not for the current "old perspective" proponents, there is a close and unbreakable link between justification by faith and the inclusion of Gentiles within God's people. I have drawn attention to the difference between Paul's phrase "a righteousness *from* God" (*dikaioisynē ek theou*) in Phil 3:9, referring to the righteous status of the covenant member, and the more usual *dikaioisynē theou* (the righteousness of God himself) in Rom 1:17; 3:21–26; 10:3, and I have shown how these precise verbal distinctions are an exact index of exactly what Paul wants to say. Once again, it is strange and even amusing to find people whose main claim is that they are faithful to Scripture ready to twist and bend Paul's actual and specific language to fit the traditional schemes with which they start, especially when the precise meaning of the words offers an excellent and coherent sense. But I want to home in now on what seems to me one of the most important, and often misunderstood, passages: the first few verses of Romans 4. Here I have something more to add to what I have written earlier. This may be of particular interest.

It has sometimes been suggested that Rom 4:4–8 is the "smoking gun" which shows us that Paul did, after all, have an "old perspective" vision of justification. He is, on this view, contrasting someone who works for a "reward" and someone who does not do that, but simply trusts in "the God who justifies the ungodly." I wish to offer a new view of this passage which strongly and strikingly confirms the reading of chapter 3 which I have given often enough elsewhere. The question may be put: why does Paul suddenly introduce the notion of "reward"? Where has that come from?

The answer, which one or two commentators notice though none, I think, explore, is that the word “reward,” *misthos* in Greek, comes from Gen 15:1. “Fear not, Abraham,” says God, “I am your shield; your reward (*ho misthos sou* in the LXX) shall be very great.” But what does this notion of *misthos* lead to in Genesis 15? As we just noted, Abraham’s answer to that initial promise is to ask a puzzled question about his inheritance: he has no heir. Never mind, comes the answer, explaining what the *misthos* is going to be: your seed will be like the stars of heaven. That is the promise (the promise of a *misthos* which consists of an uncountable family of “descendants”) which Abraham then believes, so that it is then “reckoned to him as righteousness”—in other words, he is granted a covenant, to him and his seed hereafter.

This explanation of *misthos*, tying it tightly in to the meaning both of Genesis 15 as a whole and Romans 4 as a whole, has quite an explosive result on the reading of the rest of those opening verses of Romans 4. “What shall we say, then? Have we found Abraham to be our forefather according to the flesh?”—in other words, by coming to faith in Jesus the Messiah, has this new family of Jews and Gentiles together come to a position where it must regard Abraham as its physical, ethnic ancestor? (I know that most commentators resist the repunctuation of 4:1 in the way that Hays proposed and I modified; but looking at their counter-arguments gives me the impression that they have not understood the point being made. Romans 4 is not about Abraham as example of a soteriological scheme; it is about Abraham as the father of the worldwide covenant family. ) The question about whether Abraham is to be considered “our father according to the flesh” is the question of the Galatian agitators, who would have answered it “yes”: now that you have come to faith, you must join the physical, “fleshly” family. Paul then explains this in verse 2: if Abraham was found to be in the covenant on the basis of his works, his badges of membership according to the flesh, he has something to boast of (note the proximity of this to the “boasting” of Paul in Phil 3:4–6). But not, says Paul, before God; because, when Scripture declares that “it was reckoned to him as righteousness,” that is, that God established his covenant with him and his family, that was on the basis of his believing of the promise, the promise precisely of a massive, uncountable family. Verse 4: if he had performed works already, this “reward” would have been his by rights, something earned, not by grace.

Then verse 5 comes up in a sudden new light: “but to the one who does not work, but *trusts in him who justifies the ungodly*,” his faith is “reckoned as righteousness.” Who are the “ungodly” for whose justification Abraham is trusting God? The normal answer, I take it, is to say that it is Abraham himself who is “ungodly,” so that in this passage Abraham is trusting God to justify *him*. No doubt that is an element in it. After all, the rest of the chapter emphasizes that Abraham’s call was prior to his circumcision, and prior to the giving of the Torah. But the emphasis, exactly as in Galatians 3, is on the Gentiles who are to come in to the family. That is what Abraham believed: not that God would justify him, but that God would give him a worldwide family, *which could only come about if God were to bring the “ungodly,” that is, the Gentiles, into the family by an act of sheer grace*. That faith—faith in this future family-creating act of grace—is the faith because of which the

covenant is established with Abraham. And that same grace which reaches out to the ungodly Gentiles is recognisable because it is the blessing and grace which Israel itself knows in the forgiveness of sins, as in Ps 32:1. Forgiveness for sinning Jews, welcome (with forgiveness thrown in) for ungodly Gentiles: that is the theme of the whole chapter. That, I suggest, is what Paul means by his interesting variation of expression in Rom 3:30: God will justify the circumcised on the basis of faith and the uncircumcised *through* their faith, bringing them in as it were from the outside. And that resonates exactly with the conclusion of a not unrelated argument in Gal 3:10–14.

I wish there were more time for exegesis, but there is not. This must stand, part for the whole, as a sign and seal of the reading of Paul which, I have argued, makes more sense of the big sweep and the tiny details than any other. I turn, rapidly, to my conclusion.

#### VI. SYNTHESIS AND SYSTEM: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

One of the key charges against me, in the human lawcourt which, if I were Paul, would not bother me (see 1 Cor 4:3), is that I have said that final justification, the verdict of the last day, will be in accordance with “works.” Sometimes I have been quoted as saying “on the basis of works,” with the meaning—at least, this is the meaning that has apparently been heard—that “works” are thereby a kind of independent “basis,” something entirely of my own doing which takes the place, on the last day, that is occupied in present justification by the finished work of Jesus Christ. When writing the first version of this paper, surrounded by cardboard boxes and other paraphernalia of moving house, I did not have the means to check, but because I have never intended to say what was there being heard, I was puzzled. It appears that the word “basis” is being used in different senses, just as within the Pauline corpus the word “foundation” can be used in different ways—in 1 Cor 3:11, for Jesus himself; in Eph 2:20, for the apostles and prophets, with the Messiah as the cornerstone. I repeat what I have always said: that the final justification, the final verdict, *as opposed to the present justification, which is pronounced over faith alone*, will be pronounced over the totality of the life lived. It will be, in other words, *in accordance with* “works,” with the life seen as a whole—not that any such life will be perfect (Phil 3:13–14) but that it will be going in the right direction, “seeking for glory and honor and immortality” (Rom 2:7). When I have spoken of “basis” in this connection, I have not at all meant by that to suggest that this is an independent basis from the finished work of Christ and the powerful work of the Spirit, but that within that solid and utterly-of-grace structure the particular evidence offered on the last day will be the tenor and direction of the life that has been lived.

(There is, of course, a similar problem in talking of “faith” as the “basis” of present justification. From one point of view, that sounds as though “faith” is something which we do to earn God’s favor, and there have indeed been some who have expounded it exactly like that. But no, declares Reformed theology: the basis is God’s grace and love in the finished work of Christ. Fine; if we want to keep the word “basis” for that, let us do so, but let us not forget Newman: maybe this debate is about words rather than things. This

kind of discussion, in fact, is in danger of collapsing under the weight of its own postbiblical language. Not that there is anything wrong with postbiblical language, as for instance in the doctrines of the Trinity, but that when we find ourselves tripping over words like “basis,” or indeed “center” or “heart,” in relation to Pauline theology, we should perhaps stop and ask ourselves what, in full sentences rather than shorthand formulae, we are actually saying.)

This view of mine—which I take also to be Paul’s—has been seized upon as evidence that I do not believe in the firm, solid assurance of justification by faith in the present; that I believe in justification as a gradualist process; that I am undermining assurance; or—a bizarre charge, this, but I heard it just the other day—that I am encouraging people to trust in the Holy Spirit as well as in Jesus Christ, whereas in the Creed, when we say “I believe in the Holy Spirit,” we do not mean that we *trust in* that Spirit, but merely that we acknowledge its existence. Final justification by works? Must be something horribly wrong!

This is a classic example of people saying “Tom Wright says x; x must entail y and z; y and z are clearly wrong, or dangerous; we will therefore attack him for those.” But in this case x does not entail either y or z. If it did, it is Paul himself who is in the dock, not me. “It is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God,” he says, referring to the future justification, “but the doers of the law who will be justified” (Rom 2:13). He is there summing up what he said a few verses earlier, that on the day of God’s righteous judgment he will give to each according to their works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory, honor, and immortality he will give eternal life, and its opposite to those who disobey and disbelieve.

Ah, you say, but that is hypothetical, and Paul is about to declare it null and void and to show a different way altogether. I respond that it is you, O exegete whoever you are saying such things, that is making the word of God null and void through your tradition. Did you never read in 2 Corinthians 5 that we must all appear before the Messiah’s judgment seat, so that we may each receive what was done in the body, good or bad? Who wrote that verse? Ed Sanders? Tom Wright? No: Paul. Or, back in Romans, what about 14:10–12, where each of us will give an account to God, at his judgment seat? How do you fit that into your system? Unless you can, you have stopped reading Paul and have instead imposed your own scheme onto him. For Paul, future justification will be in accordance with the life that has been lived. He does not say we will earn it. He does not say we will merit it. He says we will have been “seeking for it” by our patience in well-doing. And the whole of Romans 5–8—which generations of anxious exegetes have struggled to fit with a Protestant reading of chapter 3—is there to explain how it works: how it works in theory, how it works in practice. The theory involves baptism and the Spirit, neither of which feature that much in normal Protestant schemes of justification. The practice involves reckoning that if one is in the Messiah, one is dead to sin and alive to God; and then, on that basis, and in the power of the Spirit, putting to death the deeds of the body. If that is not happening, then according to the logic of Rom 8:5–11 it must be questioned whether one really belongs to the Messiah at all.

The future justification, then, will be in accordance with the life lived, but the glorious conclusion of chapter 8 makes it clear that this is no ground for

anxiety. "If God be for us, who can be against us?" This is looking to the future, trusting that the Jesus who died, who rose, and who now intercedes for us will remain at the heart of the unbreakable bond of love with which God has loved us. And when we read this wonderful passage, as we must, in the light of the whole of the preceding argument, especially Rom 5:1–11 and 8:12–27, it is clear that it is precisely the Spirit who enables us to be the people who can celebrate in that way, the people of patience, the people of hope, the people in whose hearts love for God has been poured out. This is why it is so utterly foolish to separate out trust in Christ alone from trust in the Holy Spirit. In my tradition, at least, when we are asked "do you believe in and trust in God the Father," we respond "I believe and trust in him"; and we give exactly the same response in relation to Jesus the Messiah and to the Spirit. "I believe and trust in him." Trusting in the Spirit is not something other than trusting in Jesus the Messiah, since he is the one whose Spirit it is, and through whom and because of whom the Father gives it to us.

The final, future justification, then, is assured for all who are "in the Messiah." Some of you will have heard Kevin Vanhoozer's splendid paper at the Wheaton College Conference in the spring (to be published in the collected papers of the conference, by InterVarsity), and I am fully in agreement with his proposal that incorporation and adoption are key categories with which we might effect a reconciliation between the different "perspectives." That has always been my own belief as well, though not always expressed as elegantly as Kevin did that day. But I want now to emphasize particularly that this future justification, though it will be in accordance with the life lived, is not for that reason in any way putting in jeopardy the present verdict issued over faith and faith alone. Precisely because of what faith is—the result of the Spirit's work, the sign of that Messiah-faithfulness which is the proper covenant badge—the verdict of the present is firm and secure. "The vilest offender who truly believes, that moment from Jesus a pardon receives." Of course. Nothing that Paul says, or that I say, about future justification undermines that for a moment. The pardon is free, and it is firm and trustworthy. You can bet your life on it. It is everlasting. It will be reaffirmed on the last day—by which time, though you will not be fully perfect even at your death, the tenor and direction of your life, through the Spirit's grace, will have been that patience in well-doing which seeks for glory, honor, and immortality. Following that final verdict, to quote another great hymn, we will be "more happy, but not more secure." That is the truth of justification by faith *in the present time*, as Paul stresses in Romans 3.

Today and forever, then; what about "yesterday"? All that I have said looks back to the finished work of the Messiah, representing Israel and hence the world, and so able fittingly to substitute for Israel and hence for the world. His obedience unto death, the death of the cross, is the once-for-all act of covenantal obedience through which God did, in and through Abraham's family, what needed to be done for Adam's family (Romans 5), and so, through the renewal of Adam's family, for the whole creation (Romans 8). When God raised Jesus from the dead, he declared him to be the Messiah, reversing the verdict of both the Jewish and the Roman courts. That act constitutes God's judicial declaration: "He really is my son." That is what Paul says in Rom 1:3–4; that is where

his great argument begins. And that, with all its proper overtones in play, is more or less what Paul means by “the gospel”: the royal announcement that the crucified and risen Jesus is Israel’s Messiah and the Lord of the World. (I have been criticized for making a somewhat abbreviated statement about “the gospel,” by contrast with the fuller and more detailed statements of others. I can be as detailed as you like, but there is also a time for brevity.) He is in charge. And to the challenge that this would only be good news if you knew that he had died for *your* sins, I respond that for Paul the announcement of this Jesus as Lord is, ontologically and absolutely, good news for the cosmos, posing the challenge to everyone to discover that it can be good news for themselves, but existing as good news antecedent to that response. To the further challenge, that Tom Wright has forgotten what the gospel is, or—as some have absurdly charged me with saying—that I would not know what to say to a dying person, I respond that whether in proclamation from the housetops or in whispering into a dying ear, it is the name of Jesus, Jesus the crucified and risen one, that must be spoken and that will bring healing, forgiveness, reconciliation, peace, and hope. By all means accuse me of fanciful exegesis here and there. I will fight my corner. But do not accuse me of forgetting the gospel of Jesus or not knowing its power to save and heal.

“Yesterday,” then, is the ground for “today.” When, in Romans 8, the Spirit enables us to call God “Abba, father,” we discover the inner, adoptive logic of justification itself: through the Spirit-inspired faith, we show that God’s verdict over us is the same. This one, too, declares God in baptism, is my child, my son, my daughter. That is Romans 6. And “tomorrow,” our own resurrection will constitute the final declaration which will correspond to those already given. It will still be God’s statement about Jesus the Messiah; it will still be God’s statement about us, and about who we are in the Messiah; and then it will be powerfully, visibly expressed not just in hopeful faith but in glorious, bodily reality. In this sense, and only in this sense, I would be happy to think of Paul thinking something which, in my view, he never explicitly says anywhere: that the verdict “in the right,” “righteous,” which God issues over Jesus at his resurrection, becomes the verdict God issues over us when we believe—in other words, that we are incorporated into the “righteous-verdict,” perhaps even the “righteous-ness,” of Jesus himself. That is not, of course, what the tradition has meant by “the righteousness of Christ” and its “imputation.” But I suspect it may be the Pauline reality to which that noble tradition, in which so many have found so much help, was rightly pointing as best it could. My hope and prayer as we go forward is that we will be so cheerfully grounded in those once-for-all events, so firm in our present faith, and so zealous in the Spirit to be patient in well-doing, that we may together find we can read Paul afresh and that he will make more and more sense to us all.

Perhaps the right way to conclude this lecture is to say: Yesterday we had all sorts of puzzling disagreements; today we are finding that our shared reading of Scripture is drawing us together; one day, we shall enjoy fellowship in the Messiah forever; so why not try to anticipate, in the present, that glorious future reality, so that with one heart and voice we may glorify the God and father of our Lord Jesus the Messiah? That, it seems to me, would be an appropriately Pauline exhortation with which to finish.