

THE NEAR WORD OF CHRIST AND THE DISTANT VISION OF N. T. WRIGHT

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In Romans 10, in the midst of his discussion of the faith of the Gentiles and failure of Israel, Paul provides a defense of his apostolic ministry in which he expands the highly condensed summaries of his Gospel that appear in 1:16–17 and 3:21–26. The passage provides a window to the way in which Paul's gospel came to expression in his proclamation, just as the earlier summaries display its deeper theological structure. Romans 10 therefore may be regarded as providing an interpretive key to his earlier characterizations of his gospel and as indicative of the message he proclaimed. Here the themes of faith, justification, and the community of faith come to expression in a way that is highly relevant to the reading of Paul that N. T. Wright has offered. We shall attempt, then, to listen to Paul and having listened to him, to assess Wright's vision.

In the opening of the passage, verses 1–3, Paul expresses his longing and prayer for the salvation of Israel, recalling the lament that opens his discussion of his nation (9:1–5) as well as his preceding narrative of the strangest of all foot-races (9:30–33).¹ Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have taken hold of it. Israel, pursuing a “Law of righteousness,” has failed to be the first to arrive at the Law (9:30–33).² That failure, Paul explains, is due to Israel having imagined that one could attain the Law and righteousness by works and not by faith (9:31). “They” therefore stumbled at the “stone” that the Lord warned that he would place in Zion (9:33a; Isa 8:14; 28:16). As Paul explains, the one who “believes on” that stone of stumbling shall not be put to shame. According to biblical idiom, that is to say that they shall be vindicated in judgment and delivered from distress (9:33b; LXX Isa 28:16).³ They shall

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¹ In his brief narrative in 9:30–33, Paul develops the judgment he renders in 9:16: “So then, it is not of the one who wills nor of the one who runs, but of the God who has mercy.”

² In this context *prothrono* retains the sense of “anticipate” or “arrive first,” as it does in 2 Cor 10:14; 1 Thess 4:15 and perhaps even in 1 Thess 2:16 and Phil 3:16. See *LSJ*; *BDAG*.

³ In the relevant biblical contexts, “shame” arises from defeat in a “contention.” Only if the Lord comes to the aid of the psalmists shall they triumph—and their adversaries be put to shame (Ps 31:17–18; 35:4, 6; 40:14–15; 52:1–9; 69:9–18; 70:1–3; 71:13, 24; 83:1–18; 86:14–17; 109:26–31; 129:1–8). Paul's opening declaration, “I am not ashamed of the gospel” (1:16), recalls these appeals of the psalmists (“Let me not be put to shame!”, Ps 25:20; 30:1; 71:1) and faith of the Isaianic servant, to which Paul returns in Rom 8:31–39 (Isa 50:7–9: “The Lord God helps me. Therefore I shall not be put to shame!”). “Shame” is thus no mere feeling. It involves the experience of defeat. It is Isa 50:7,

be justified. Paul's argument in 10:1–21 is clearly resumptive, taking up and interpreting this description of the success of the Gentiles and the failure of Israel. Now he directly charges his people. Their zeal for God does not accord with what has been made known (10:2). Ignoring the righteousness of God and seeking to establish their own righteousness, they did not submit to the righteousness of God (10:3).⁴

I. FAITH AND OBEDIENCE

We shortly shall consider the expression "righteousness of God," which Paul emphatically repeats in verse 3. Before we do so, it is important to observe that in this verse Paul characterizes faith as "obedience." "Faith" for Paul is no mere quality or virtue quietly resting within the human being. It is an act of obedience, determined and defined by its object, namely, Christ and God's work in him. More precisely, as the larger context makes clear, it is the *response* of obedience to God, who has given himself to human beings in a *word* that is proclaimed and made known (10:8–10). Without the proclamation of the "good news," there can be no faith (10:14).⁵ In faith, the rebellion of the human being is overcome. Confronted with the "word" of the gospel, the human being lives either in the disobedience of unbelief or in the "obedience of faith." This latter expression is Paul's own, of course, appearing in the opening and closing of the letter (1:5, 16:19, 29). It receives its interpretation here, as well as in 6:17. Faith is subjection to God's righteousness (10:3). *The gospel itself* calls for this obedience, one that Paul in understatement acknowledges, "not all" yield (10:16). Hidden though it is within the human heart, faith brings an agreement, a "speaking-together" (*homo-logein*) with the divine word, a confessing "with the mouth" that Jesus is Lord (10:9). As the fundamental obedience of the human being, the "obedience of faith" is the power that lies behind the whole of life in all its dimensions and details, as is evident from Paul's later word to factions within the church: "Everything that is not from faith (ἐκ πίστεως) is sin" (Rom 14:23).⁶

The obedience of faith is not "faithfulness." It is passive. It is not an obedience of action, but an obedience of reception. It receives the good news of what God has done and given in Christ.⁷ This receptive character of faith comes to pointed expression in Paul's description of the "righteousness of faith" in verses 6–8:

with the servant's profession of faith in his justification (Isa 50:8, "I know that I will not be put to shame; my justifier is near"), which stands closest to Paul's citation of Isa 28:16 in 9:33 and 10:11: *no one* who believes in Christ will be put to shame (Rom 9:33, 10:13; Isa 28:16).

⁴ Paul's appeal to the Isaianic "stone of stumbling" (9:33) as well as his following reference to the "righteousness of God" (10:3), that has been revealed (Rom 1:17, 3:21), indicate that ἀνγώω here signifies not merely ignorance, but a refusal to recognize God's righteousness. On this usage see: Rom 2:4; 1 Cor 14:38; 2 Cor 6:9, and perhaps Rom 6:3 and Rom 7:1.

⁵ See the discussion of Israel and the Gentiles below.

⁶ With this word, the apostle aims at resolving the conflict between the "weak" and the "strong" in the church at Rome.

⁷ Matters are different with love, of course, which is active in relationship to one's neighbor, and indeed to "the other," as Paul will later make clear in 13:8–10.

But the righteousness of faith speaks thus: “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who shall ascend into heaven?’ That is to bring Christ down. “Or, ‘Who shall descend into the abyss?’ That is to bring Christ up from the dead.” But what does it say? “The word is near you. In your mouth and in your heart.” That is the word of faith, which we preach.

Just as the Lord once warned Israel against boasting in a falsely-imagined righteousness,⁸ the “righteousness of faith” addresses the human being who is tempted to evade the gift of the divine word. The alternative is a mission impossible: the search for someone to ascend into heaven or descend into the netherworld.⁹ As Paul has made clear in his description of Israel’s failure, the Law and the righteousness it requires cannot be attained by human performance—no matter that this performance is aided by God’s created gifts (10:5; Lev 18:5; cf. 9:1–5). The righteousness that Moses *writes* is a demand that stands at a *distance* from the human being. Paul here dramatically changes the image that appears in his description of Israel’s pursuit of the Law (9:32–33).¹⁰ Righteousness is not to be found in any course that humans might run, nor indeed, on any earthly horizon. It comes like a plumb-line from above. It is God alone who sent Christ, his Son, into this fallen world (8:3), and God alone who raised him from the dead (1:4; 6:4; 8:11). Christ is the stumbling stone that God has placed in Zion (9:33). In false piety, fallen human beings are tempted to ignore this gift in favor of the vain hope of attaining the goal by willing and running (9:16). The fundamental disobedience of the human being is a rejection of the Giver in favor of his gifts, gifts that we then misuse and pervert. It is the worship of the creature rather than the Creator. This disobedience comes to a head in the rejection of the gift of righteousness in which God gives himself to us.¹¹ Our rebellion, moreover, is a *speaking*

⁸ Paul draws the opening of the citation from Deut 9:4, the warning to Israel against imagining that the Lord has granted it possession of the land on account of its righteousness. Israel is a stiff-necked people (Deut 9:6). The apostle thus sets the admonition of Deut 30:11–14 within the larger theology of the book of Deuteronomy and its realistic assessment of Israel’s rebellious heart. The search for someone to scale the heavens or plummet the depths thus appears as a misunderstanding of the human condition.

⁹ In its Deuteronomic context, the admonition warns against an attempt to search for divine instruction and in any other place than in the word given to Israel. The search for wisdom appears in a slightly altered form in which “crossing the sea” (Deut 30:13) is replaced by a searching of the depths (e.g. Eccl 7:23–24; Job 28:12–14; Prov 30:1–4). The figure of attempting to ascend into heaven or descend into the depths is used within Jewish tradition to express the impossibility of attaining wisdom apart from the divine gift of Torah (Bar 3:9–4:4, Sir 1:1–10; 4 Ezra 4:8; on the rabbinic literature see *Str-B* 3:278–81).

¹⁰ The “written” character of the righteousness of the Law does not in the first instance signify *normativity* or *fixedness*. The “righteousness which is of faith” is also fixed and normative. It, too, presents an unchanging demand to which one must submit. As Paul expressly states here, the “righteousness from the Law” is contingent on the *action* of the human being. It is not already present with the human being, but first arises through *performance* of its demand. The contrast between writing and speaking, distance and nearness close to the image of contrast between the tablets of stone and the tablets of human hearts that Paul presents in 2 Cor 3:3.

¹¹ On the fundamental nature of God’s giving, and the rejection of gift as the fundamental human sin, see Oswald Bayer, “The Ethics of Gift,” *LQ* (2010) (forthcoming). Granted, in the modern world and especially in the West, there are many who do not feel the need to find “a gracious God.” This tendency is not a mark of greater sophistication, but of increasing superficiality, as Karl Barth

rebellion that arises from the self-deception of our hearts. The “righteousness of faith,” echoing the word of the Lord in Deuteronomy, thus warns: “Do not say in your heart . . .” (10:6; Deut 9:4). The fundamental enemy of faith is not unbelief, but superstition. It is an idolatry that is overcome only in the obedience of faith, which speaks in a new tongue, confessing Christ and calling on his name.¹² Faith no longer asks what we must do, it proclaims what God in Christ has done, with heart and mouth, and thus with the whole of body and life. Precisely in its passivity, faith is highly active.

Nevertheless, even in its activity, faith remains passive. The “righteousness of faith” that warns against the rejection of God’s gift (10:6) is a resumptive formulation of the righteousness given in Christ “to all who believe” (10:4). In this metonymous figure, Paul underscores the new identity of the human being that comes to expression in new language.¹³ He thereby underscores the passivity of those who bear witness to Christ. It is not finally they who speak, but the righteousness of God that speaks in them. The communication of faith takes place not merely through the transmission of tradition, but through a living voice, a voice speaks in and through the human being. It is a communication “from faith to faith” (1:17). The “word of faith” that the apostles proclaim (10:9) is the word already given into their mouth and heart, which they pass on to others (10:8). Paul’s use of the genitive in this expression is intentionally suggestive. The “word of faith” signifies both the *source* of the apostolic word in the near Christ (10:8), as well as the *content* of the apostolic word, namely, proclamation of Christ as risen Lord (10:9).¹⁴ The mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart.¹⁵ Yet once more in his summary statement in verse 10, Paul underscores the passivity of the human being in faith and its activity: “With the heart *it is believed* unto righteousness, with the mouth *it is confessed* unto salvation.” The heart and the mouth are not merely the members through which the human being obeys. They are instruments through which the word of the Gospel performs its work.

One of these instruments is none other than Moses himself. In verses 6–8, Paul strikingly juxtaposes the witness of “the righteousness of faith” to that which “Moses writes,” a witness that is nothing other than an interpretive citation of Deut 30:11–14. What Moses speaks paradoxically overturns what Moses writes. Paul’s provocative juxtaposition cannot rightly be dissolved as

observed more than half-century ago (CD IV/1, 531). It is largely the result of our prosperity and the corresponding loss of the horizon of final judgment from our sight. That is to say, it is the result of our worshipping God’s gifts rather than God the Giver.

¹² The enemy of faith (*Glaube*) is not *Unglaube* (unbelief), but *Aberglaube* (superstition). See E. Käsemann, “The Spirit and the Letter,” *Perspectives on Paul* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 153.

¹³ The “righteousness of faith” is no mere personification. It is a metonymy for God and his voice as it echoes in the believing human being. See O. Hofius, “*Fides Ex Auditū*”: *Denkraum Katechismus: Festgabe für Oswald Bayer zum 70. Geburtstag* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009) 77, who, following Johann Albrecht Bengel, takes the figure as a metonymy for the human being.

¹⁴ In Christ and the word which proclaims him, *fides quae creditur* and *fides qua creditur* are inseparably joined. Pace Hofius, “*Fides Ex Auditū*” 77, who understands “word of faith” as the “word that works faith.”

¹⁵ Paul’s thought here is obviously in line with the biblical tradition as it appears in Matt 12:34; 15:18; Luke 6:45.

Barth attempts to do by inserting Christ into verse 5: that verse speaks of the requirement of obedience. Nor can it be dissolved as Wright attempts to do by inserting obedience into verses 6–8: these verses speak of Christ incarnate, crucified, and risen.¹⁶ Paul's setting Moses against Moses does not, however, constitute a rejection of the Law.¹⁷ He already has presented the explanation for his use of Scripture in verse 4: the Law is not an end in itself. It is not final. It has its τέλος, its goal, outside itself in Christ. Christ is the stone of stumbling placed in Zion. The righteousness that Israel pursues by works is found by faith in Christ (9:33; Isa 8:14; 28:16). The righteousness of God has been manifest apart from the Law, yet the Law and the prophets, including Moses, bear witness to that righteousness (3:21). According to the book of Deuteronomy itself, in the mysterious work of the Lord, the gift of the Law to Israel was finally to bring not blessings, but a curse that would expose its rebellious, uncircumcised heart (Deut 30:1–5; cf. 29:28). The Lord promises to grant the second gift of a new heart, only when and where that curse has come to pass (Deut 30:6; cf. Rom 2:25–29). According to Paul, that curse and that second blessing have come to pass in the crucified and risen Christ. In him, what "Moses writes" meets what "the righteousness of faith says." In Christ all illusions of human piety and progress are brought to a decisive end. The obedience which the Gospel demands is the passive of obedience of faith (10:16)

II. RIGHTEOUSNESS AND JUSTIFICATION

As Paul makes clear from the outset in verse 3, the gift that faith receives from God is nothing other than "God's righteousness." Both here and in the opening of the letter, Paul makes clear that God's righteousness speaks and *communicates* itself to all who believe (cf. 1:16–17; 3:21–26).¹⁸ The "righteousness of God" to which Israel refused to submit (10:3; 2x) corresponds to the "righteousness given to those who believe" (10:4) and likewise to the "righteousness of faith" that speaks in Moses and the apostles (10:6–8). Moreover, as Paul's abrupt transition from 10:3 to 10:4 makes clear, the righteousness of God is found in Christ, who is "the goal of the Law, for righteousness to all who

¹⁶ N. T. Wright, "The Letter to the Romans," *The New Interpreter's Bible: Volume 10* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002) 660. For discussion of Wright's appeal to 4QMMT in this context see M. A. Seifrid, "Romans," *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007) 658.

¹⁷ Here it must be underscored that the distinction between Law and Gospel does not entail a "negative" view of the Law, as Wright along with many others supposes. It is based on a radical affirmation of the Law—and a realistic understanding of the human being.

¹⁸ That is already apparent from Rom 3:21–26, where Paul speaks of God's righteousness as both given through "the faith that is of Christ," (3:22–24, 26) and as God's own coming to be righteous in the world (3:26). It is this communicative righteousness of God in Christ that Wright first and foremost fails to see. See Wright, "Romans" 654. Paul likewise speaks directly of communication and exchange between God and the fallen human being in Christ in 2 Cor 5:21. Wright, however, misunderstands the text as speaking of the apostle alone as "God's righteousness" so that distance is set between him and the Corinthian Christians. See N. T. Wright, *Justification: God's Plan & Paul's Vision* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2009) 162–65. For further discussion of this problematic reading, see M. A. Seifrid, "(W)Right with God?: A Response to N. T. Wright's Vision of Justification I: Atonement and Justification in Biblical Perspective," *MWJT* 8 (2010) 17–18.

believe.”¹⁹ The righteousness of faith thus does not speak of righteousness or life, but rather of Christ, who has been brought near and given to the human being in a word placed in the mouth and in the heart (10:6–8).²⁰ The “word” (τὸ ῥῆμα) as sign or expression is indivisible from the “matter” itself (τὸ ῥῆμα). The “word” of the Gospel brings the incarnate, crucified, and risen Lord to the human heart. In him, God communicates his righteousness to us. Here lies the fundamental issue in the debate with Wright, to which we shall return.

As Paul makes clear in his summary in 10:17, the communication of God’s righteousness to us in the risen Christ, is a communication by the risen Christ: “So then, faith comes from the message, and the message from the word of Christ.”²¹ Here Paul recalls his earlier allusion to Deut 30:14 in verse 8, taking up the term ῥῆμα (“word”).²² The genitive expression ῥῆμα Χριστοῦ (“word of Christ”) is again suggestive, the genitive most likely signifying Christ as both the content and source of the word, both object and subject, both the Proclaimed and the Proclaimer, both human and divine.²³ Indeed, Paul’s remarkable concentration upon the risen Christ in the prior context suggests that his primary point here is that Christ himself is the abiding source of the apostolic message. It is Christ whom one calls upon as Lord, believing that God raised him from the dead (10:9). It is Christ in whom one believes, and thus shall not be put to shame (10:11; Isa 28:16). Christ is the Lord who abounds in riches for all who call upon him (10:12–13; Joel 3:5 [ET 2:32]). Likewise, according to normal Greek usage (yet contrary to nearly all translations) in verse 14 Paul rhetorically asks, “How shall they believe him, *whom* they have not heard?”²⁴ Paul’s appeal to the figure of Isaiah in verse 16 continues this rhetoric: “Lord, who has believed our report?” (10:16; Isa 53:1). The Isaianic query then provides the basis for Paul’s conclusion: “so then, faith is from the message, and the message is from Christ’s word.” It is the risen Christ who has spoken and given word to the apostles: “the one who hears you, hears me” (Luke 10:16). Through them Christ comes to the human heart, bringing righteousness. Those who reject the apostolic report reject Christ himself.²⁵

The righteousness of God thus opens up communication between God and the fallen human being, a communication in which God speaks and gives him-

¹⁹ More precisely stated: Paul immediately follows his claim that Israel ignored God’s righteousness with the explanation that *Christ* is the goal of the Law. On this account, righteousness comes to all who believe (10:4).

²⁰ This “nearness” of the word is a biblical idiom for the nearness of saving help, indeed, the nearness of the Lord himself, e.g. Ps 22:1; 34:18; 69:18; 73:28; 119:151; 145:18; 148:14; Isa 50:8; 55:6.

²¹ Here as in LXX Isa 53:1, ἀκοή should be rendered not as “hearing” but as “message” or “report,” a report proclaimed and given forth to others (see also Gal 3:2, 5; 1 Thess 2:13).

²² Otherwise Paul uses the term ῥῆμα only infrequently: 2 Cor 12:4; 13:1; Eph 5:26; 6:17.

²³ This usage is facilitated by the term ῥῆμα which expresses a “thing” about which one speaks, rather than a “thought” about which one speaks (λόγος), and which may pass over into signifying the thing itself, rather than the word about it. Hofius takes the genitive to express the object of the apostolic proclamation. See Hofius, “*Fides Ex Auditu*” 83.

²⁴ See BDF § 173. The genitive with ἀκούω generally signifies the person or source of that which is heard, while the accusative signifies content.

²⁵ Indeed, it is not at all unlikely that Paul understands the warnings given to Israel through Moses and Isaiah in the closing words of this chapter to be the words of Christ, who shares in the divine identity (10:19–21).

self in Christ, and in which the human being responds in confessing Christ and calling on his name (10:9–12). Paul’s references to Scripture throughout this passage have to do precisely with this self-communication and self-giving of God in Christ. In the Isaianic context, the stone of stumbling that the Lord places in Zion is none other than the Lord of hosts himself (9:33; 10:11; Isa 8:16).²⁶ In Deut 30:11–14, it is the Lord who warns Israel and who thus implicitly speaks in “the righteousness of faith” (10:6–8). To confess Christ is to call on the name of *the Lord* and to be saved (10:13; Joel 3:5). It is the Lord who speaks in the first-person through Moses, when he announces his provocation of Israel by his binding himself in love to a “non-people” (10:19; Deut 32:21). The Lord likewise speaks in the first-person in Isaiah. He has been found by those who did not seek him (10:20; Isa 65:1). He has stretched out his hands to a disobedient and contrary people (10:21; Isa 65:2). In Christ, God communicates and gives himself to fallen human beings as the saving Lord, upon whom we may call and from whom we receive help in all trouble and distress. Those who believe upon this Lord (10:11), call upon him (10:13). In this way, the communication of God’s righteousness to the human being in Christ entails the very communication of God. In this communication, the fundamental disobedience of the human being, the worship and service of “the creature rather than the Creator” (1:25) is overcome. In Christ, Gift and Giver are one. Israel’s disobedience is to be understood in this light, as we shall see shortly.

This communication of God’s righteousness in Christ stands in contrast to “the righteousness of the Law.” To be sure, “the righteousness of the Law” is commutative. Moses writes that, “The one who does these things shall live by them” (10:5; Lev 18:5). Yet life-bringing exchange never takes place. The Law communicates the divine demand, but not the doing of it. Righteousness and life remain a distant and unattainable goal.²⁷ The “righteousness of faith,” in contrast, announces the nearness of the word of the incarnate, crucified, and risen Christ, “in the mouth and in the heart” (10:8).²⁸ Consequently, the apostolic proclamation: “If you confess with your mouth . . . and believe in your heart,” serves not merely as the call to faith and offer of salvation, but also as the promise and assurance of a salvation already given (10:9).

²⁶ The presence of the Lord as an offense to Israel is accompanied by the fresh *הורוה*, the fresh “instruction” that the Lord gives and likewise promises that shall come in fulfillment of that “instruction” (Isa 1:10; 2:3; 5:24; 8:16, 20). This fresh instruction comes in the face of Israel’s disobedience and perversion of the Law (Isa 1:10–17; 24:5), which continues in its rejection of this new word that promises forgiveness (Isa 1:18–19; 30:9). This thematic is taken up in the Servant Songs and their larger context (Isa 42:4, 24; 51:4, 7). This promised Torah from Zion anticipates the newness of the gospel.

²⁷ The unattainability of the Law is not due to weakness of the will (*akrasia*), but to open rebellion of the whole person against the God who gives commandments, as Paul makes clear in Rom 7:7–25.

²⁸ The confession of Jesus as Lord for which the righteousness of faith and the apostolic proclamation calls clearly is a confession of his *saving* lordship. This Lord is the One who is “rich in blessing for all who call upon him” (10:12). Paul has sounded this refrain repeatedly in the letter (Rom 4:24; 5:1, 21; 6:23; 7:25) and does so emphatically in 8:39: the love of God, from which no power can separate us, is present “in Jesus Christ, our Lord.” Thus whether we live or we die, this risen Lord has savingly made us his own (14:7–9).

The righteousness of faith is not dispensed piecemeal, but is given to us in Christ, the incarnate, crucified, and risen Lord.²⁹ Here there is no scale to be measured, no course to be run. All distance has been spanned by God. Here it becomes clear that Paul understands justification an effective judgment, a forensic *act* that brings the human being life and salvation, as is already implicit in his opening allusion to Psalm 98: “the Lord has made known his salvation, he has revealed his righteousness before the eyes of the nations” (1:17: Ps 98:2).³⁰ To be sure Paul is able to distinguish between present righteousness and final salvation: “with the heart it is believed unto righteousness, with the mouth it is confessed unto salvation” (10:10). That salvation is a deliverance from judgment and disaster, as the following citation from Joel makes clear (10:13; Joel 3:5 [ET 2:32]). It is a salvation from the coming wrath of God.³¹ Righteousness and salvation are bound together in the crucified and risen

²⁹ This theme is prominent, of course, in Romans 5–8. See especially Rom 5:1–11; 6:1–14; 7:25; 8:1–11.

³⁰ The usage has its background in the context of “ruling and judging” in which judicial, executive, and legislative powers were combined in one person, who was to take up the cause of justice and of the oppressed. That is apparent in the concrete examples of the biblical texts that take an entirely different form from the courtroom of Wright’s imagination (*Justification: God’s Plan & Paul’s Vision* 68–9). See, for example, the Deuteronomic instruction (Deut 17:8–13), Solomon’s famous judgment (1 Kgs 3:16–28), the appeals of the psalmists (e.g. Ps 35:1–28), the Isaianic contention of the Lord with idolaters (e.g. Isa 41:1–10), and the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:25–26, 40). Verdicts do not appear independently of the execution of justice, but within the execution of justice, as is especially clear in a number of contexts in which the *hiphil* of פָּרַט appears (2 Sam 15:4; 1 Kgs 8:32; Isa 5:23; Isa 50:8; Ps 82:3; 2 Chr 6:23; in all likelihood, the same sense is present in all other contexts: Exod 23:7; Deut 25:1; Isa 53:11; Job 27:5; Prov 17:15; Dan 12:3). Thus the Lord “does” judgment and righteousness, as once David did, and as the failed Davidic line was supposed to do (e.g. 2 Sam 8:15; 1 Kgs 8:32; 10:9; Isa 1:27–28; 5:7; 9:6–7; Ps 99:4). J. L. Austin appeals directly to judicial sentences in his description of “performative utterances.” See *How to Do Things with Words* (William James lectures; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962) 152–53. The judge’s pronouncement: “Ten years!” *does something*. The verdict which precedes it, in contrast, is a mere constative utterance, a mere finding of the facts. In the Hebrew Scriptures the two are presented synthetically as one act of justice. Not to be overlooked here, either, is the legislative authority of the judges, and especially of the Davidic kings: they “legislated from the bench” creating fresh law by their decisions (see K. W. Whitelam, *The Just King: Monarchical Judicial Authority in Ancient Israel* [JSOTSup 12; Sheffield: JSOT, 1979]). Righteousness had to be established ever anew in the face of continuing injustices and disputes (see, e.g., 1 Sam 30:21–25; 1 Kgs 3:16–28). The promise of God’s righteousness, fulfilled in Jesus Christ may be understood as the final and definitive bringing of justice to the world. Despite his recent appeal to Austin’s category of “performative utterances,” Wright regularly misconstrues the image of divine judgment in terms of a modern courtroom by failing to see that the divine verdict is inseparable from the effecting of justice in Jesus’ resurrection. He likewise construes God as a mere impartial administrator of law and not as the one who contends with fallen humanity on the part of the oppressed (Rom 3:9–20). He thereby misunderstands what is at stake in the revelation of God’s righteousness which finally and definitively establishes “law,” in a way that the Torah given to fallen human beings could never do. In judgment God *contends* against all lies, bloodshed and wrongdoing on earth, in which we all are found guilty. His justification is the condemnation of our lie (Rom 3:4; Ps 51:6), and the final manifestation of that which is right. See further Seifrid, “(W)Right with God?” 19–20.

³¹ The same distinction between present righteousness and final deliverance appears in 5:9–10, where Paul argues *a fortiori*: we are justified now through Christ’s blood, and shall—*much more*—be saved from the wrath of God through him.

Christ in whom one believes and upon whom one calls.³² The righteousness that is presently *hidden* in the risen Christ will be *manifest* in the final judgment. In that crisis, the righteousness hidden in the heart becomes manifest in the cry for deliverance and the saving response of the Lord: “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” Between the present righteousness given to faith and the salvation which is yet to come stands nothing but the risen, saving Lord.

III. ISRAEL AND THE GENTILES

As we have noted, in Romans 10 Paul not only defends his apostolic mission to the Gentiles, he also brings a charge of disobedience against Israel. That disobedience is nothing other than the rejection of God the Giver in favor of his gifts. For them, Christ the Lord has become a stumbling stone (9:33; Isa 8:14). They have ignored the voice of the righteousness of faith that announces the presence of the risen Christ (10:6–8). They do not call on the name of the Lord (10:13; Joel 3:5). Although God in Christ stretches out his hands to them “all the day,” they remain a disobedient people, who “contradict” him, speaking against him in unbelief (πρὸς λαὸν . . . ἀντιλέγοντα.; 10:21; Isa 65:2). Paul points to this tragic rebellion already in 9:1–5, where he enumerates Israel’s gifts, underscoring the giving of the Law (ἡ νομοθεσία; 9:4), and concluding dramatically with God’s fresh and final gift of himself in Christ, who is “over all things, God, blessed forever. Amen” (9:5). In rejecting God’s gift of himself in Christ, Israel has engaged in the very idolatry of the Gentiles, who likewise “worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen” (1:25). The common language of Paul’s benedictions corresponds to the common rebellion of Israel and the nations that calls them forth. *Superstition* is the fundamental rebellion of the human being. Now, however, despite their blindness to the Creator (1:19–20), the Gentiles are having their ears opened to the voice of the Creator through the apostolic message in which Christ himself speaks. It is no accident that in his description of his proclamation to the nations, Paul takes up the words of the psalmist, whose ears have been opened to hear the voice of the heavens that sing the Creator’s praise (10:8; Ps 19:5). Israel, in contrast, no longer hears the Law as a promise of God’s final self-giving in Christ.³³

“The righteousness of faith” that speaks with the words of Moses is a reminder of this provisional and promissory character the Law. Israel has failed to see the Law that requires works is itself a promise of God’s work. It stumbled on Christ, the stumbling stone (9:32–33). As Paul indicates, Israel thereby has made *arrival* at the Law into a matter of human performance: “not as of faith, but as of works” (9:32). Once its role as witness and promise

³² It is precisely for this reason that Paul’s references to the revelation of God’s righteousness parallel those passages of the Psalms and Isaiah that speak of that revelation as the manifestation and arrival of salvation, especially Rom 1:17; 3:21 (Ps 98:2; LXX 97:2). See further LXX Ps 50:16; LXX Ps 97:2; LXX Ps 118:117, 123; LXX Isa 46:12–13; LXX Isa 51:5–8; LXX Isa 59:17; LXX Isa 62:1–2; LXX Isa 63:1.

³³ Of course, the Law is a gift in contrary form: it does not bring the human being to God, but merely exposes our rebellion, as Paul makes clear in Rom 7:7–25.

is set aside, the demand of the Law—which, according to the apostle, cannot be diminished or dismissed—becomes determinative.³⁴ Israel's misjudgment in making the Law final does not mean, of course, that the nation as whole was given over to an introspective conscience.³⁵ Paul's description of Israel's zeal indicates that in general the opposite was the case. Israel pursued the Law in the same, blind, self-confidence that had characterized him prior to his encounter with Christ. Nor did Israel forget the gifts and grace of God so that it imagined that it had to pull itself up by its own moral bootstraps. Paul significantly recounts those gifts in 9:1–5. Israel misread those gifts, however, so that they no longer were seen as the promise of God's gift of himself in Christ. This misreading of the Law was also Israel's misreading of its own condition, as is apparent from Paul's diatribe in Rom 2:17–29, "You who teach another, do you not teach yourself?" (2:21). Paul's rhetorical question makes it clear that Jews did not see the Law as a possession to be hoarded, but as one to be shared with their benighted Gentile neighbors. Precisely in this readiness to share their possession, however, their failure becomes manifest. In refusing to submit to the righteousness of God, and in "seeking to establish its own righteousness," Israel fixed a distance not only between itself and God, but between itself and its Gentile neighbors.³⁶ The Law, or at least the outward observance of it, had become a boundary-marker that set Israel apart as the community of the godly, rather than as the bearer of the promise that precedes the Law and transcends it. Outward boundary-markers are always ambiguous, and thus always misleading. The true Jew is not the one who possesses the Law and circumcision, but the hidden Jew, whose circumcision is of the heart (2:25–29). Israel had drawn a false distinction between itself and the nations, and out of its false understanding of the human being had attempted to make a false community:

Our towns are copied fragments from our breast;
And all man's Babylons strive but to impart
The grandeurs of his Babylonian heart.³⁷

³⁴ In this way the Law reveals how all God's created gifts become impossible demands once they are no longer seen for what they are as gifts and promises of the Creator. On this theme see Bayer, "Ethics of Gift."

³⁵ The external voice of the Law is decidedly different from the self-torment of guilt, which "seemed to chain the mind and life of serious Christians to the self-centered cycle of their sins needing forgiveness," as rightly observed by K. Stendahl, *Final Account: Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) xi–xii. We cannot diagnose and cure our own illness, we need a word from without. Without the external word, the "robust conscience" that Stendahl recommends is just as much danger as an introspective one.

³⁶ The imagery of striving makes it clear that the "righteousness" that Israel sought to "establish" was one to be achieved by their works (as in 9:31–32), and that precisely this "righteousness" was to make them different from the Gentiles. That does not mean, of course, that they sought this achievement by their own effort. Against Wright, "Romans," 655, who wishes to interpret Israel's "own righteousness" as merely their ethnic particularity.

³⁷ Francis Thompson, "The Heart Sonnet."

In its disobedience to the Gospel and false hope in creaturely gifts, Israel has recapitulated its former idolatry and has entered its final exile, one which shall be brought to an end by the Redeemer who comes from Zion.³⁸

As a rejected lover, then, God encounters Israel not merely as a faithful covenant partner, but as its judge, who shuts it up in its disobedience in order finally to show it mercy (11:32). According to Paul, Moses “as the first” warns of the Lord’s coming provocation of Israel (10:19). The course of true love never did run smooth. In Christ, God has given himself to pagans who were happily pursuing their own pleasures and had no interest in righteousness. God provokes Israel to jealousy in order to save it (10:19; 11:11, 14).³⁹ It thus becomes clear that the story of Israel is not the metanarrative by which the story of Christ is to be understood. The story of Christ, the crucified and risen Lord proclaimed to the nations, is the metanarrative by which the story of Israel is to be understood.⁴⁰ The story of Christ is the big story, which God himself has put out on the table. He is the Alpha and Omega, in whom all other stories are interpreted.⁴¹ It was never God’s purpose to make Israel a light to the nations as a moral beacon. Israel was to be a light to the nations as the object of his forgiving and redeeming love. That is the prophetic comfort: “Arise, shine, for your light has come!” (Isa 60:1).⁴²

³⁸ As is well-known, Paul brackets this defense of his apostolic ministry behind and before with scriptural references to Israel’s exile, or, more precisely, references to the moment of judgment that the Lord brings upon Israel. Only a remnant shall be saved. Rom 9:27–28 (Isa 10:22–23); Rom 9:29 (Isa 1:9). The Lord places a stone of stumbling in Zion. Rom 9:32 (Isa 28:16; Isa 8:14). No one who believes on him shall be put to shame. Rom 9:33 (Isa 28:16). Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. Rom 10:13 (LXX Joel 3:5). The Isaianic announcement of “good news” to Israel does not bring it salvation since, “not all obeyed the Gospel.” Rom 10:16–17 (Isa 52:7; 53:1). Israel stands not at the end of exile, but in a new exile, an exile of unbelief that will be brought to an end at the coming of the Redeemer from Zion. Rom 11:25–27 (Isa 59:20; Isa 27:9).

³⁹ R. H. Bell, *Provoked to Jealousy: The Origin and Purpose of the Jealousy Motif in Romans 9–11* (WUNT 2/63; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1994).

⁴⁰ The former is the basis of Wright’s program, of course. See, e.g. Wright, “Romans” 667. I have the wording, “Christ as metanarrative” from Edward Kim, a student at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, who might not be willing to embrace the claim I am making here.

⁴¹ In this sense, it is all Jesus, and everything else, including Israel, that is all rock-and-roll, as Wright himself confesses.

⁴² Likewise, it is not through the Servant’s obedience or fidelity that the Servant comes to be a “light” (Isa 42:6; 49:6; cf. Isa 42:12; 49:3). The Servant—both as Israel and as Israel’s deliverer—manifests the glory of the Lord as the *object of the Lord’s deliverance*. Unlike the lifeless idols, the Creator promises salvation and brings it to pass in and for his Servant, thus making the Servant “a light to the nations.” The Servant’s active role of bringing justice to the nations (Isa 42:1–4; 49:7–13) is subordinate to the Servant’s passive role as the *recipient of justice*. The Lord takes him by the hand, preserves him in trouble, and through him brings forth “new things” (Isa 42:5–9; 49:8). It is through *his own experience of being delivered* that the servant delivers others from violence, sufferings and death. He first listens, then speaks and embodies the Lord’s work that he announces (Isa 42:5–9; 49:1–6, 7–13; 50:4–9; 52:13–12). In *answering* and helping his servant—who not only is identified with Israel, but also distinct from it—the Lord comforts his people and delivers them from oppression—and also from their own unbelief and idolatry (Isa 42:18–43:7; 43:22–43:8; 46:3–13; 48:1–11 50:4–9; 52:3–6). Formed by the Creator in his experience of suffering and deliverance, the servant thus displays the Creator’s glory. In the book of Isaiah, as in the Psalms, this glory and “light” signifies the saving work of the Creator alone, the One who alone “forms light and creates darkness, who makes peace and creates evil” (Isa 45:7). See Isa 50:10; 51:4; 52:10 (cf. Isa 40:5); 53:11 (Qaband LXX); 56:1; 58:8–9; 60:1–3, 19–20 (cf. Rev 22:5); 62:1. Deliverance, correspondingly, appears

Likewise, Abraham, Israel's forefather, appears in both Isaiah and Romans, not as the solution to humanity's plight, but rather as the place where the solution first arrives (Isa 51:1–2; Rom 4:1–25). Paul especially makes clear that the divine promise is given *not* to be a moral exemplar of the new humanity, but to the godless Abraham, who before all else is subject to the curse of weakness, infertility, and death (Rom 4:17; 19). The family which God has created in Abraham is nothing more than a family of forgiven sinners. The forgiveness they have received in Christ constitutes their unity, despite all outward differences in badges and piety.

In Romans 10, Paul does not merely speak in corporate categories, of course, but also in starkly individualistic terms. That is true not only for the voice of the righteousness of faith (“do not say in your [sg.] heart,” and so on; 10:6–8) and the apostolic proclamation (“if you [sg.] confess with your mouth . . . and you [sg.] believe in your heart”; 10:9), but also and in the first instance for the demand of the Law (“the one who does these things shall live by them”: 10:5). Conversely, Israel is not the only corporate reality that appears in Romans 10. God now provokes Israel by “that which is not a people” (10:19; Deut 32:21). This “non-people” is not the plurality of the Gentile nations, as is often supposed, but rather the miracle of those called “from among Jews and Gentiles” (9:24–26; Hos 2:1, 25), as the singular form of the citation suggests. It is the believing community of Jews and Gentiles, who with one mouth glorify the God and father of Jesus Christ (15:6).⁴³ Outward boundary markers remain, but have been overcome in Christ. The *pro me* of the Gospel does not end in an isolated individualism. It ends in the community of justified sinners.

IV. PAUL'S FAITH AND WRIGHT'S VISION

As Wright's recent work again makes clear, his vision of justification is predicated on a confusion of “faith” and “faithfulness.” On the one hand, Wright is able to speak in relatively traditional terms of Abraham's faith as “the sign of a genuine humanity, responding out of total human weakness and helplessness to the grace and power of God.”⁴⁴ On the other hand, he immediately follows this description with the assertion that: “‘faithfulness’

as the granting of sight to the blind: Isa 42:7, 18–25; 43:8–13; 44:9, 18; 59:9–10. “Light” thus stands alongside the related Isaianic images of salvation, including the making of a way (Isa 40:3–5; 42:16; 43:19; 51:9–11), the giving of drink (43:20; 44:3; 45:8; 48:21; 49:10), and, especially, the opening of the ears of the deaf (Isa 42:19; 43:8; 50:4–5). Israel—insofar as the image of the servant includes the nation—does *not* (as Wright claims) fail in its calling to be a “light to the nations.” Indeed, its calling never rested in its own obedience or actions, but in the redeeming work of the Lord who is Creator. It is not any moral quality within Israel that causes it to shine, but purely and entirely the glory of the Lord, which rises upon the rebellious nation precisely in the midst of the misery and retribution that have come upon it (Isa 60:1–3). The Isaianic language thus stands in stark contrast to Wright's moralistic interpretation of “light” as imitative participation in God's faithfulness and goodness.

⁴³ Of course, it is the “ingrafting” of the nations into the “rich root” of the patriarchs by which God provokes Israel (Rom 11:13–17). But neither Paul's organic imagery nor his reference to the plurality of the nations sets aside his emphasis on the newness of the one people of God that has come to reality in Jesus Christ (Rom 15:1–13).

⁴⁴ Wright, *Justification: God's Plan & Paul's Vision* 209.

has all along (so it seems) been the thing that God requires from his people.”⁴⁵ The divine plan “has been fulfilled by the Messiah’s faithfulness (*pistis*),”⁴⁶ so that “the badge of the covenant people from then on will be the same: *pistis*, faith, confessing that Jesus is Lord. Faith of this sort is the true-Israel, true-human sign, the badge of God’s redeemed people.”⁴⁷ Questions naturally arise out of this confusion. Is faith to be equated with faithfulness? If “faith” is to be equated with “faithfulness,” shall we say that we are “justified by faithfulness”? If so, how much “faithfulness” is necessary for us to be justified at the final judgment? It is hard to see any difference between Wright’s correlation of “faith” and “faithfulness” and the Thomistic and Tridentine emphasis on “faith formed by love” (*fides caritate formata*) that finally saves, in contrast to “unformed faith” (*fides informis*).

In joining “faith” to “faithfulness” Wright construes faith as fundamentally *active*. For this reason, “faith” for him serves as a “sign,” “emblem,” or “badge,” a visible mark of the Christian.⁴⁸ Precisely here Wright sets himself at odds with the apostle, for whom faith remains fundamentally *passive* and *hidden*, even though it is operative in the whole of life. God alone sees the hidden Jew and the circumcision of the heart (Rom 2:29).⁴⁹ The obedience of faith is an obedience of reception that no longer seeks to secure life and righteousness by performance, but simply grasps the divine word that announces the Christ who is present in the Gospel. All distance between God and the human being, between our present state and final justification, has been spanned by the crucified and risen Lord. Ironically, in his active conception of faith that sets distance between the human being and God, Wright meets his *bête noire*, Rudolf Bultmann. While Bultmann internalizes faith in existential decision, Wright externalizes it in the outward badge of faith(fulness). For Paul, faith is God’s creation. Both Wright and Bultmann turn faith into a moral demand that must be actualized, and thereby lose God’s absolute, unqualified gift of

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ On the interpretation of the debated expression πίστις Χριστοῦ, I am persuaded that both the objective genitive (“faith in Christ”) and the subjective genitive (“faith/faithfulness of Christ”), favored by Wright, miss the mark. The expression is best understood as containing a genitive of source or possession: Paul speaks of the faith that *comes from Christ*. See M. A. Seifrid, “The Faith of Christ,” in *The Faith of Jesus Christ: Exegetical, Biblical, and Theological Studies* (ed. M. F. Bird and P. M. Sprinkle; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010) 129–46.

⁴⁷ Wright, *Justification: God’s Plan & Paul’s Vision* 209. Whether Wright is aware of it or not, his line of thought follows that of Barth, who makes a similar suggestion concerning the twofold usage of πίστις. To his credit, however, Barth makes a clear distinction between “the center” and the “circumference” of faith, between justification by faith alone and our correspondence to Christ in faithfulness. What Barth differentiates, Wright confuses. Barth suggests that the twofold usage of the term πίστις shows that in faith we have to do with an *imitatio Christi* as an imitation of God (CD IV/1, 634–637). Nevertheless, Barth makes a distinction between the judgment of God and the life of the Christian, between “the center” and “the circumference” of faith (CD IV/1, 618), between unqualified justification and our correspondence to Christ (CD IV/1, 645–636).

⁴⁸ Wright, *Justification: God’s Plan & Paul’s Vision* 209; N. T. Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005) 112.

⁴⁹ Against Wright, “Romans” 663, the faith that is in the heart can hardly be an outward “a badge of membership” in the people of God. Not even Paul is prepared to make this judgment (1 Cor 4:1–4).

himself to us in Christ. Consequently, neither of them has a taste for the cross as a “great pleasure of our existence.”⁵⁰

Wright binds “faith” to “faithfulness” in the vision of Jesus the Messiah, in whom the faithfulness that God required of Israel has come to reality. Here lies the heart of his program: the image of God and of true humanity had to be embodied in human life, a calling at which Israel failed.⁵¹ In now seeing Jesus as our representative, we see the true God and what it means to be truly human.⁵² In seeing him, we are transformed by the power of the Spirit.

Wright’s very appeal to the metaphor of “vision,” which sets a distance between us and Christ, is problematic. It overruns Wright’s own affirmation that “genuine . . . image-bearing humanity” is present in faith.⁵³ In Wright’s vision, Christ is no longer present “in (the) mouth and in (the) heart” as crucified and risen Lord (10:8). Christ instead stands over against us, manifesting a moral ideal to which we are to be conformed, and to which we cannot ourselves attain. For this reason, Wright calls for trust in the Spirit, who bridges the gap between us and Jesus, the embodiment of the divine image.⁵⁴ In contrast to God’s word of promise fulfilled in the resurrection and exaltation of the crucified Jesus, there is no concrete word of Scripture to which such a “trust in the Spirit” may be attached.⁵⁵ Faith thus becomes divided and diffuse. In what measure shall we place our trust in the crucified and risen Lord, and in what measure shall we trust in the Spirit? To what word is the Spirit bound, if it is not the word of Christ (Gal 3:2)?⁵⁶ What benefits does the Spirit bring, if they are not the benefits of Christ given to us in the word of the gospel (cf. John 16:14–15)? If trusting in the Spirit is the same as trusting in Jesus, as Wright affirms, what is the significance of the distinction between them—a distinction that implies distance? The distance that Wright implicitly sets between the human being and Christ brings with it distance between initial

⁵⁰ Johann Georg Hamann: “Im *Kreuz*, wie es unsere Religion schon sinnlich und bildlich nennt, liegt ein großer *Genuß* unserer Existenz—und zugleich das wahre Treibwerk unserer verborgensten Kräfte” (ZH IV, 391, 16–19; Johann Georg Hamann, *Briefe* [7 vols; ed. W. Ziesemer and A. Henkel; Wiesbaden: Insel, 1955–79] 4.391.16–19): “In the *cross*, as our religion sensually and pictorially calls it, lies a great *pleasure* of our existence—and at the same time the true movement of our most hidden powers.” See O. Bayer, *Theologie* (Handbuch systematischer Theologie 1; Gütersloh: Gütersloher, 1994) 479; O. Bayer and C. Knudsen, *Kreuz und Kritik. Johann Georg Hamanns Letztes Blatt: Text und Interpretation* (Beiträge zur historischen Theologie 66; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1983) 111.

⁵¹ Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective* 70. See M. A. Seifrid, “The Narrative of Scripture and Justification by Faith: A Fresh Response to N. T. Wright,” *CTQ* 72 (2008) 28–34.

⁵² I fail to see why in Wright’s view other figures may not be seen as representative of what it means to be truly human. Why should we not practice the adoration of Mary?

⁵³ Wright, *Justification: God’s Plan & Paul’s Vision* 209.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 107, 188.

⁵⁵ On the basis of this word of promise and its fulfillment in the risen and exalted Lord, faith in God is found only in faith in Jesus, and faith in Jesus constitutes faith in God.

⁵⁶ See Wright, *Justification: God’s Plan & Paul’s Vision* 188. Wright confuses *fides quae* and *fides qua creditur*. If we place our faith in the Spirit according to the Apostles’ Creed, as Wright urges that we do, shall we not also place our faith in the Church? See M. A. Seifrid, “(W)Right with God?” *MWJT* 8 (2010) 29–30. In this respect, and in view of Wright’s address at the 2010 Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, I want to assure him that I have a life. The reason that he cannot see it is that it is not found in outward badges and marks, but hidden with Christ in God.

justification and final justification. It likewise sets a distance between us and our neighbor.

V. GOD'S RIGHTEOUSNESS AND WRIGHT'S VISION

The confusion of faith and faithfulness that is inherent to Wright's vision spills over into his understanding of justification. For Wright, "justification" is no transfer or communication of God's righteousness but a mere declaration concerning the faith(fulness) that God finds in his people as it is worked by the Spirit.⁵⁷ His conception of justification corresponds remarkably to the medieval understanding of penance, according to which the priest was to pronounce absolution upon seeing the contrition of the penitent. The heart of Luther's reformational discovery was his recognition that the gospel is an effective word of promise that communicates the righteousness of God to the fallen human being.⁵⁸ In other words, Luther's reformational discovery was a rejection of the very sort of understanding of justification that Wright offers.⁵⁹ Against Wright, it must be maintained that God justifies us not *because* of what he finds in our hearts, but *in spite of* what he finds in our hearts. That is to say with Paul that God is the One who justifies the ungodly (Rom 4:5).

In his more recent work, Wright appropriates speech-act theory, and specifically, the concept of a "performative utterance" in his interpretation of justification. The divine "act of declaration" effects something, it confers the "status" of membership in the people of God.⁶⁰ Questions then arise. Does God, in justifying, recognize the "status" of membership in the people of God, or does he effect it? If this "status" is effected, in what does it consist? Does it remain in the mind of the divine judge? Does its place within the world depend on our enactment? Wright's lack of clarity suggests that he is still working out the details of his system.

As we have seen, for Wright, the distance between initial justification and final justification is spanned by the work of the Spirit of God given through the faithfulness of Jesus. Wright thus distinguishes between justification as a declaration and the "actual rescue from death and sin" that follows.⁶¹ The gift of the Spirit is given to God's people, so that we may become "in reality" what we already are "by declaration."⁶² It is the Spirit who makes God's "victory operative

⁵⁷ Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective* 159–60.

⁵⁸ See O. Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation* (trans. Thomas H. Trapp; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008) 52–53.

⁵⁹ It is remarkable that Wright along with other proponents of the "new perspective on Paul" show virtually no knowledge of "the new perspective on Luther" that has been current since the early part of the 20th century. See E. M. Heen, "A Lutheran Response to the New Perspective on Paul," *LQ* (2010) 281.

⁶⁰ Wright, *Justification: God's Plan & Paul's Vision* 90–92.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* 170.

⁶² *Ibid.* 106. Here the inconsistency in Wright's understanding of justification reemerges. Wright understands justification as a divine declaration of the "faith(fulness)" that God finds in his people. Is this "faith(ful)ness" is not a reality? How can it require the subsequent work of the Spirit to become so? Doesn't Wright at this point turn justification into a divine fiction? See Wright, *ibid.* 91–92.

in our moral lives and who enables us to love God in return.”⁶³ God is at work in us, so that we come to embody the righteousness of God, namely, God’s self-giving covenant-faithfulness that is manifest and announced in Jesus.⁶⁴ In him God has found a way to overcome sin and death by enabling “Israel” to be faithful after all.⁶⁵ Between initial justification and the final judgment, the Spirit makes us pleasing to God, so that we can stand at the final judgment.⁶⁶

As Wright repeatedly insists, his conception of salvation is *not* Pelagian. It is Augustinian through and through. Salvation is God’s work alone. Quite right. But the Protestant debate with Catholic doctrine, evident in its confessions, concerns the question as to whether justification is by faith alone. Is justification comprehended within a divine declaration that is grounded solely on Christ? Or is our final justification contingent on God’s work in us?⁶⁷ Here lies the heart of the debate, which cannot be resolved by an affirmation of a judgment “according to works” as opposed to one “on the basis of works.”⁶⁸ Nor can it be set aside by the affirmation that final justification corresponds to initial justification.⁶⁹ The crucial question is whether the righteous that justifies us remains abidingly alien and extrinsic to us, found in Christ alone, or if justification depends on something worked in us. Seen in this light, Wright’s proposal is nearly Tridentine. Perhaps one might characterize it as an Osian-drian theology shifted from the Son to the Spirit.⁷⁰ In any case, the proposal is certainly not evangelical and reformational. Wright’s conception of initial justification as a constative judgment concerning the faith(fulness) found in the human heart bends Calvin’s concept of mystical union with Christ in a moralistic direction, so that “sanctification” is no longer a fruit of that union,

⁶³ Ibid. 239.

⁶⁴ Ibid. 163–67.

⁶⁵ Ibid. 201.

⁶⁶ Ibid. 144, 149, 156, 182–93, 226, 239.

⁶⁷ See, for example, the Epitome of the Formula of Concord, Article 3; Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 23–24; Thirty-Nine Articles, Number 11; Westminster Confession, Chapter 11.

⁶⁸ As legitimate as it is to seek to preserve the priority of faith, this way of dealing with the question fails because it is not sufficiently grounded in the language of the relevant texts (e.g. Rom 2:6; Rom 14:10–12; 2 Cor 5:10). As Wright recognizes, it makes little difference whether one speaks of a judgment of a *person* “according to works” or “on the basis of works.” The fundamental question is whether the person lives in the disobedience of unbelief or the obedience of faith. Faith, it is to be recalled, is fundamentally passive, determined by Christ and God’s work in him. To be sure, this faith is active in love (Gal 5:6). The Spirit bears fruit in our life (Gal 5:22–24). Yet the Spirit is bound to the gospel and to Christ, in whom we have been set in a new relationship with God and in whom our sin has been judged and overcome. That is to say that we remain sinners. Yet we are now justified sinners, who by the power of the gospel speak the truth about God and about ourselves. In this sense, only the ungodly will stand at the final judgment. The godly, who justify themselves in their own mind and heart, make God a liar. We shall be brought through the final judgment by the life from beyond the judgment given to us in Christ. There is no escaping this paradox.

⁶⁹ The debate at the 2010 annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society swirled around these issues.

⁷⁰ Despite significant differences, at this point Wright’s understanding of justification as based on the presence of the Spirit in the heart corresponds to that of John Henry Newman. See J. H. Newman, *Lectures on the Doctrine of Justification* (6th ed.; London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1894) 130–78; P. Toon, *Evangelical Theology 1833–1856: A Response to Tractarianism* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1979) 150–57. A contemporary parallel appears in F. D. Macchia, *Justified in the Spirit: Creation, Redemption, and the Triune God* (Pentecostal Manifestos; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

but its essence. In any case, the question as to how much faith(fulness) is required to stand at the final judgment does not thereby disappear. In rejecting the understanding that our works must be complete and perfect in order to be acceptable at the final judgment, Wright badly underestimates the power of sin and unbelief.⁷¹ Even our highest and best works bear the idolatry and selfishness of coveting within them. Any work that is not done out of pure love for God and neighbor is no good work. Shall we then come confidently before God with our works and “life lived”?⁷²

As we have noted, Wright’s fundamental mistake lies in his vision. So long as Christ remains a mere vision and image—even the image of God—he remains a distant, moral ideal.⁷³ As a mere vision, Christ would be, as Reinhold Niebuhr observes, “not only our hope, but also our despair.”⁷⁴ Not even a vision of the cross can impart the certainty of salvation. A word is always necessary, a word that dispels the false images, the terrors and idols of our hearts.⁷⁵ This is the word that Paul proclaims: Christ as the saving Lord, whom God has given into our very mouth and heart in the word of the Gospel. In Romans, Paul nowhere announces Christ merely as an obedient human being, but as only the Risen One, who acts as Lord and God.⁷⁶ He saves us, moreover, as the Crucified One who lives, and not merely as the Obedient One who was vindicated.⁷⁷ In Jesus Christ, God’s righteousness has become our righteousness. In him, our Judge has become our brother.⁷⁸ This participation in Christ is irreducibly verbal. Christ, who has entered into our sin and death and triumphed over them, comes to us in the good news of the gospel. In this word, the insurmountable distance of the divine demand has been overcome.

In place of this communication in the gospel and faith, Wright favors a Spirit-worked transformation of the human being that brings us to the goal. He does not recognize that the goal has come to us. The Spirit is no mere

⁷¹ Wright, *Justification: God’s Plan & Paul’s Vision* 192.

⁷² Luther’s “Against Latomus” is still worth reading, as Nicolai Techow has reminded me!

⁷³ We here leave aside the significant question as to whether such a visionary conception of the divine image does not do away with divine freedom.

⁷⁴ See R. Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (Living Age Books; New York: World [Meridian], 1956) 73.

⁷⁵ Admittedly, we must then surrender our desire to see and comprehend the whole of God’s dealings with us within this present world. We must be content to “know in part and to prophesy in part,” until the perfect comes (1 Cor 13:9–10). On God’s address to us as the means by which we “see” God, see O. Bayer, *Schöpfung als Anrede: Zu einer Hermeneutik der Schöpfung* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1990) 15–19, who takes up Johann Georg Hamann’s dictum, “Rede, daß ich Dich sehe — Dieser Wunsch wurde durch die Schöpfung erfüllt, die eine Rede an die Kreatur durch die Kreatur ist.”

⁷⁶ See especially Rom 1:1–4, the series of summary statements in Rom 4:25; 5:21; 6:23; 7:25; 8:39; and Rom 10:9–13. Romans 5:15–19 is no exception: the grace of God is coterminous with the gift and grace of the one human being, Jesus Christ (Rom 5:15). The obedience of Christ is no generic human faith(fulness), but obedience to the concrete will of God for *this one* (Rom 5:19; cf. Rom 8:32).

⁷⁷ Wright’s emphasis on “the faithfulness of Christ” obscures his death as the final locus of salvation. Our salvation rests not merely on what Jesus faithfully did, but on what he suffered. In what he suffered he acted not merely as an obedient human being, but as God: Paul identifies the “grace of God” with “gift by the grace of the one human being” (Rom 5:15). In the words of P. T. Forsyth, “(Christ) was God doing the very best for man, and not man doing his very best before God.” See *The Cruciality of the Cross* (London: Independent, 1957, [1948]) 17.

⁷⁸ Rom 8:15–17; 28–30; 14:4–12.

empowerment for moral living, and spans no gap between initial and final justification. The Spirit is the first-fruit, the new creation and life of the resurrection come to this fallen world, by which we groan for our unseen hope (Rom 8:23–25).⁷⁹ The Spirit is God's triumph over our highest and best powers, who comes to us first and foremost as a polemicist (Gal 5:18; cf. Rom 8:13).⁸⁰ The Spirit is the proclaimed Christ indwelling his people (Rom 8:10–11). The Spirit, who is given solely through the word of the gospel, does not call for trust in himself, but trust in Christ alone (Gal 3:5).

VI. THE PEOPLE OF GOD AND WRIGHT'S VISION

Ironically, despite his appeal to "community," the vision that Wright ascribes to Paul, like all visions, is necessarily an individual experience. Hearing, in contrast, especially hearing the gospel, requires a community that receives and passes on the tradition that has been heard (1 Cor 11:23; 1 Cor 15:1–3).⁸¹ Within this community of justified sinners, moreover, there is a simultaneity of radical equality and radical difference in outward badges and marks. This conjunction of hidden equality and outward difference creates the place for the dynamic of exchange, the exchange of giving and receiving, speaking the gospel and hearing the gospel, receiving forgiveness and forgiving others. Just as the gospel opens up communication between the human being and God, it opens up true communication among human beings, who in Christ have become members of one body.⁸²

Where Christian community is formed on the basis of outward badges or marks, as Paul's opponents in Galatia were attempting to do, it is subject to a coercive individualism. Distance from God translates into a false distance between human beings. All of us who share in the faithfulness of Jesus are human, but some of us are more human than others.⁸³ In setting a visible community above the individual, and by thus making its outward marks the criterion by which the individual is judged, we inevitably fall into false judgments, as does the Lukan Pharisee at prayer in the Temple. That is not to say

⁷⁹ The Spirit is likewise the downpayment of the resurrection that guarantees our resurrection (ἀρραβών). See especially 2 Cor 5:5. Believers shall stand at Christ's judgment seat because they already possess him, just as he possesses them (14:4–12).

⁸⁰ E. Käsemann, *Perspectives on Paul* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 71.

⁸¹ On this theme see O. Bayer, *Autorität und Kritik: Zu Hermeneutik und Wissenschaftstheorie* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1991). When Paul uses visual metaphors, it is clear that he regards "seeing" as taking place through the ears that hear the Gospel. Our participation in the image of God manifest in Jesus takes place through *hearing*: through our being *called* (Rom 8:29–30), through the light of the *gospel* (2 Cor 3:18; 4:4). It is faith in the gospel that effects our bearing the image of the last Adam, the one from heaven (1 Cor 15:49; 15:1–11). According to Colossians, we are to "put on" the new person, who is "renewed according to the image of the one who created him" (Col 3:10–11). This "putting on" is the grasping of that which is already given and done and announced, not seen: our life is "hidden with Christ in God" (Col 3:3).

⁸² On the "horizontal" dimension of forgiveness, see C. Gestrich, *The Return of Splendor in the World: The Christian Doctrine of Sin and Forgiveness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 14–35, 263–337.

⁸³ As Paul makes clear in other contexts, that is precisely the sort of competition and comparison at which he excelled prior to his encounter with Christ (Gal 1:13–14; Phil 3:2–6).

that the individual is to be set above the community as a sort of Lone Ranger, for whom community is secondary or unnecessary. Paul's point in Romans 10, as well as elsewhere, is that God in Christ has created a people and a community in which outward badges no longer mark distance, but have become delightful *adiaphora*. To be sure, the Church is a visible community. But its crucified and risen Lord is its center and criterion, a center that is hidden from human judgments. In Christ, and solely in Christ, individual and community are coincident, and have their vitality. This exclusivity of Christ requires that all human illusions of community must be destroyed in order for the community of Christ to have its place. God must shut up all in disobedience, in order to have mercy on all (11:32).

VII. SUMMARY

Our summary may be brief. The near word of Christ calls into question Wright's distant vision of faithfulness, of righteousness, and of Christian community in its most fundamental tenets. Wright's vision requires a healthy corrective, one that comes to expression already with Luther himself: "The ears alone are the organs of a Christian . . . , for [such a one] is justified and declared to be a Christian, not because of the works of any member, but because of faith."⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Martin Luther, *LW* 29:224 = *WA* 57 III, 222, 7.