

The Future of Justification – A Response to N. T. Wright

Colleagues,

For this Holy Week 2010 Richard Koenig, retired Lutheran (ELCA) pastor, erstwhile editor of LUTHERAN PARTNERS, lifelong gadfly for faith-alone justification—also a Concordia Seminary alum from my era in the previous millennium—takes a look at the current hassle going on in the academy about justification in the writings of St. Paul. It's also bubbling over into church life. Is justification of sinners the agenda for God and Jesus on Good Friday and Easter, or isn't it? As surprising as the question itself may sound—was there ever any doubt?—it is even more surprising that some folks, folks with impressive credentials, are saying, "For St. Paul, it is not." And, of course, some folks are saying "WHAT did you say? Wait a minute!" Koenig takes us into the debate with his review of a recent book on the topic.

Peace and Joy!
Ed Schroeder

**THE FUTURE OF JUSTIFICATION—A RESPONSE TO
N.T.WRIGHT.**

by John Piper.

Crossway Books, Wheaton, IL, 2007, 239 pp, \$17.99.

Years ago, many years ago, over fifty, if you want me to be exact, when I was in seminary, Rudolph Bultmann and his program of demythologizing the Gospels had claimed the attention of the theological world. As seminary students and later as pastors,

whether we wanted to or not, all of us had to face the question of history, whether to go behind the text and ascertain “wie es eigentlich gewesen ist” [how it really was back then] or follow the lead of Martin Franzmann “to take the text as it stands” in the process of paying attention to the text’s function in the narrative as a whole rather than as an isolated fragment.

Nevertheless, as years went by the question of historicity (facticity) became more acute as enterprises like the Jesus Seminar, not to mention the conflict over the Bible in the Missouri Synod in the seventies of the last century, made it difficult to follow Franzmann’s admonition without further thought. But now things have changed. In case you haven’t noticed, the focus of New Testament scholarship has shifted from concentration on the Gospels to Saint Paul. A “New Perspective” on Saint Paul and his writings, especially Romans, has taken center stage. Although elements of the New Perspective are to be found as far back as Albert Schweitzer, it is in the last thirty years, roughly speaking, that a veritable torrent of literature has appeared on the topic. Among the New Perspective’s most prolific-and popular– proponents at the moment seems to be Anglican Bishop N. T. Wright (born December 1, 1948).

In the book we are reviewing author John Piper (born 1946), pastor of a large Baptist congregation in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and a New Testament scholar himself, begins his response to Wright by citing eight direct quotations from such publications by Wright as “What St. Paul Really Said” (1997). Piper calls them “head-turners that prompt the critic to say, ‘He can’t be serious’” (pg. 17). The quotes from Wright are:

1. The Gospel is not about how to get saved.
2. The Gospel is not how you become a Christian.
3. Justification is not the Gospel.
4. We are not justified by believing in Justification.

5. The imputation of God's own righteousness makes no sense at all.
6. Future justification [Judgment Day] is on the basis of the complete life lived.
7. First century Judaism had nothing of the alleged self-righteous and boastful legalism.
8. God's righteousness is the same as his covenant faithfulness.

Piper devotes a chapter of his book to each of these eight claims. For Piper it's all about how to interpret the Pauline texts that Wright uses to build his case. After examining those texts as interpreted by Wright, Piper concludes again and again, "That's not what these texts say." Wright's reading of the text is "misleading" is Piper's gentle rejoinder. Now and then he will almost say it: Wright is wrong.

So how does Wright read Paul to arrive at his conclusions? He does so by revising the traditional understanding of Paul's missionary career. Wright says what Paul is occupied with is NOT soteriology-how Christ saves sinners and how that saving is appropriated, i.e., how sinners are justified. Nor is Paul concerned to proclaim the goodness of the Gospel in terms of its "otherness" from legalism, that is, salvation earned by obedience to God's Law.

According to Wright the Judaism of Jesus' day, and Paul's also, centered on the covenant, how to get in and stay in. The issue was not salvation as taught by Augustine and Luther wherein the question is how sinful mortals obtain the forgiveness of their sins. One is included in the covenant by grace alone, and one is kept in the covenant by grace alone. God's election accomplishes both by grace alone. Torah-faithful behavior naturally follows as gratitude. So Wright claims on his reading of the texts and so Piper denies after careful examination of the same.

Wright continues: Gentiles, of course, were not of the elected people. They came into the world as covenant outsiders. Jesus is explicit Good News for Gentiles. He opens the door for the outsiders to get in on the election covenant. To read Paul correctly, according to Wright, he is arguing that Gentiles believing Christ (not believing IN Christ) are included in the same covenant as genetic children of Abraham. Paul's major concern is to bring this Good News to Gentiles. The "bad theology" that Paul critiques in Romans and Galatians comes from those Jewish believers and Gentile believers, too, who tell Gentile converts that they must follow Jewish Old Testament ordinances in order to be covenant participants.

Wright's gospel, as one can see, centers on the covenant. And for him there is really only one covenant throughout the Bible. Righteousness for humans is to be in God's covenant. God's own righteousness is the same as covenant faithfulness. Therefore "the imputation of God's own righteousness [to sinners] makes no sense at all." No new action on God's part is needed to get sinners justified. Needed only is the correction of some Jewish voices on how Gentiles can get in. Jesus is the agent for this clarification, and Paul is the instrument for carrying it to the Gentiles. Bishop Wright holds that the Western Church has been off the track in its teaching of justification ever since Augustine, and as Luther renewed the Church by a fresh reading of Paul, the Bishop of Durham is doing the same in our day and time.

I will tell you frankly that I instantly and instinctively recoil from anyone who purports to have discovered the church to be in error on some fundamental doctrine of the faith for fifteen hundred years and that he has, fortunately for us, appeared to put it back on track again. But that aside, it is when Piper closes with Wright on what is meant by the righteousness of God that I am most grateful for Piper's reading

of Paul. I have not encountered a richer or deeper exposition of God's righteousness than what I found in reading Piper.

You might wonder, as I do, why it was left to a Calvinist Baptist preacher to respond to what amounts to a wholesale dismantling of the Lutheran Reformation's core teaching and thus of the Lutheran mission. I might be wrong, and being out of the loop as a longtime retired pastor I might have missed something. Yet I do not see that we as Lutheran pastors and as Lutheran Churches can nonchalantly proceed with our affairs in the face of the most intense and direct challenge to our core beliefs in recent history.

Ed Schroeder reminds me that one way to remedy that nonchalance is to apply the "Bertram axiom" which holds that how you read the Bible is always linked to what you think salvation is all about. [Bertram's exact words are "Biblical hermeneutics is at no point separable from Biblical soteriology." In "The Hermeneutical Significance of Apology IV." <https://crossings.org/archive/bob/hermeneutics-1974.shtml>]

The key terms that the Wright-Piper debate focuses on are salvation terms: sin, law, Christ's work, Gospel, faith, etc. Piper fills each of these terms with a different content from Wright according to Paul's theology. The principal reason for the difference is that the two scholars proceed from two different concepts of God's salvation for sinful humanity.

1. Sin is a much more drastic malady for Piper than for Wright.
2. Therefore, the Law of God is a much more serious problem for Piper than it is for Wright.
3. For Piper Christ's work is rescuing sinners from God the critic; for Wright it is "creating a new world in which justice and peace should reign supreme."

4. In Piper's view faith is trusting Christ's work of forgiveness. For Wright faith is "believing that Jesus is Lord and that God raised Jesus from the dead," that "with Christ's resurrection the powers of evil are overcome."
5. On justification, Wright says it comes as the end of a process on the Day of Judgment when the verdict will be rendered on us on the basis of the "complete life lived." Piper puts it at the very outset: when sinners begin trusting Christ, they ARE justified and their works follow. "Pace" [Just in case you don't know, Koenig uses an old Latin rhetorical term here: "Peace!" = "contrary to the opinion of"] Wright with his claim that "Paul, in company with mainstream Judaism, affirms God's final judgment will be in accordance with the entirety of a life led-in accordance, in other words, with works" (p. 111). Piper's response to that sentence is to go to "the historic Lutheran Augsburg Confession" and quote it for a full page as his own contrary opinion.

Concerning justification, therefore, Wright's new perspective on Paul appears to yield nothing but the old perspective of justification by faith and works, a perspective that vexed the Reformers five centuries ago and is possibly as old as Pelagius himself (A.D. 354-420). Following Piper's reading of Paul, the Future of Justification is not in doubt.

Piper's book is not a quick and easy read, nor should it be, dealing as it does with such a crucial subject. But read it for yourselves, brothers and sisters. You might learn something about justification that you might have forgotten or missed along the way. At the very least you will emerge from the experience with renewed appreciation and wonder for its glory and power.

Richard Koenig

Cromwell, Connecticut

[P.S. from E.S. Wikipedia: "John Piper did his doctoral work in New Testament Studies at the University of Munich, Germany (1971-74) under Leonhard Goppelt." Learning that was a surprise. Goppelt was my teacher during my doctoral program in the 1950s when he was then at the U. of Hamburg, Germany. His first book to be published in English was translated by Marie and Ed: Jesus, Paul and Judaism. An Introduction to New Testament Theology (New York: T. Nelson & Sons, 1964). Goppelt showed us students WHY Paul labelled "justification-by-faith-and-works" an "other" Gospel when it popped up in the Galatian congregation. Namely, that it was "other" than the one Jesus himself incarnated. The Augsburg Confessors, he told us, were explicit Paulinists when they detected the same thing in the church of their day. Question: Is it any different now?].