

Today's Debates on How to Read St. Paul-1

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Introduction

The topic I've been asked to present to you in these breakout sessions, and the topic which I'm glad for the opportunity to address especially among a group of confessional Lutheran colleagues, is "Today's Debates on How to Read St. Paul." Looking back five and half years to my graduation from Luther Seminary, I recall a young man eager to preach the same gospel that St. Paul proclaimed in a time and place far, far away, but I don't think I was more than vaguely aware that there really were any serious debates on how to read St. Paul, other than, perhaps, whether he could be conscripted into service for or against the third use of the law. Such was the condition of my Lutheran myopia.

But indeed very serious debates had been raging for at least several decades, and continue unabated, and they have to do with an entirely different level of alleged Lutheran myopia. It has become more the rule than the exception now in scholarly debates about Paul to refer to "the Lutheran misreading of Paul" and to expect that readers and auditors alike will nod in knowing agreement and wait for the next point. Though many of these kinds of disparaging references demonstrate a deep ignorance of what Lutheran theology really is, there is enough substance to their accusations and to their expositions of Paul, that the heirs of the Reformation must sit up and take serious notice. In the brief time allowed in this format I will have no opportunity to plumb the full depths of this debate nor to resolve even the

key issues in a responsible fashion. I have distributed a handout with some brief bibliography for further reading for those of you who would like to work through the issues more completely, and I hope that will be many of you. In the time that we have here, I would like to pursue two tasks that I hope will put the primary issues on the table and set us up for some probing discussion. The topic assigned is so large that I fear it may feel at times as if I'm backing up the dump truck and dropping far too much load far too quickly. I ask your forgiveness in advance and hope that our discussion time may give us at least some opportunity to sort through the trash and find the treasure.

The first and briefer of the two tasks is to introduce the shot across the bow launched by E. P. Sanders with the publication of his magisterial monograph *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* in 1977.¹ It is true that there is nothing new under the sun, and Sanders was preceded in much of his work by the great Albert Schweitzer and even by Krister Stendahl, a Lutheran bishop with serious misgivings about the Lutheran retrojection of the "introspective conscience of the West," to use his term, onto the apostle to the Gentiles.² Nevertheless it was Sanders who moved the inertia of the debate forward, and a presentation like this one would be incomplete without at least a short introduction to his work.

The second task, on which I intend to spend more time, and which I hope will draw us into a discussion of the primary text when I have finished this paper, is the comparison of two different exegeses of Rom 3:21-31. Since this passage contains the exposition of the righteousness of God where Luther made his famous breakthrough (his Augsburg Aha?), I don't imagine that I need to point out how much is at stake for Lutheran theology in the correct exegesis of this passage. We will compare N. T. Wright's treatment of this passage in his 2002 commentary in the *New Interpreter's Bible*³ with that of Roy Harrisville in his 1980

commentary in the Augsburg New Testament Commentary series.⁴ Hopefully the contrast will be instructive for us, with Wright representing a kind of “new perspective” interpretation of Romans and Harrisville representing traditional Lutheranism.

The contributions of E. P. Sanders

We begin with E. P. Sanders, limiting ourselves for the present context to three general points that represent the thrust of his work. First, Sanders spends the lion’s share of *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* reconstructing the pattern of religion in Palestinian Judaism, and this historical reconstruction has a very polemical edge. He argues against the long tradition of reading 2nd Temple Judaism as a religion of petty legalism, producing individuals somehow both arrogant because of their self-achieved legal standing before God and yet hopelessly anxious because of their need to achieve it. Jews of that period have been imagined to be individuals on their own, facing a god whose demands overshadowed his mercies, whose promises to the patriarchs mattered little or not at all, and who counted or weighed each person’s deeds to determine their eternal fate. For many Lutherans, this may sound like a description of “life under the law.” Such a presentation of ancient Judaism, however, rests on “a massive perversion and misunderstanding of the material” according to Sanders. It is, in fact, one of his stated goals “to destroy the view of Rabbinic Judaism which is still prevalent in much, perhaps most, New Testament scholarship.”⁵ And Sanders has succeeded to a large degree. New Testament scholarship in what is often referred to as “the post-Sanders era” does now usually have to account for the character of 2nd Temple Judaism very differently than it did earlier in the 20th century and before.

Sanders’s alternative proposal for understanding the Judaism of

Paul's day, which has been countered but never yet effectively refuted, is summed up in his term "covenantal nomism." Jewish religion was the religion of a graciously made covenant of election that included essentially all Israelites in the group of the saved.⁶ This covenant also came with a law to which God required obedience, but obedience did not imply legalistic perfection. Jews regularly transgressed the law and were required to repent and make sacrificial atonement for their sins.⁷ Certainly Lutheran ears will be tuned to hear this as a concession to a "works-based" soteriology, but it must be said that the Rabbis who wrote Mishnah, for example, never understood their obedience as earning the grace of the covenant. In Sanders's view, to equate the necessity of intra-covenantal obedience with legalistic works righteousness that earns God's favor requires the importation of a foreign interpretive framework and a rejection of the Rabbi's own interpretation of their religion. The Jewish religion of Paul's day, then, was not a tortured legalistic system from which Paul is likely to have wished for an escape, which he then happily discovered in Jesus the herald of grace and conqueror of law.

All this brings us to our second point from Sanders, which may be the most fundamental and controversial, i.e. that Paul's theology did not run from plight to solution but from solution to plight. The biographical aspect of this contention may already be clear. Paul very likely did not think there was problem with his Jewish religion that God needed to fix, at least not one of legalism. He was not plagued by feelings of terror or guilt but probably had rather normal feelings of covenantal security. His assertion in Philippians 3 that his life before Christ could be characterized as "blameless" with respect to the law confirms this picture. Paul probably thought that he sinned only rarely, and when he did, he repented and made atonement for his transgression. Sanders argued for this

conclusion not only biographically but also on the basis of Paul's letters.⁸ First, Paul's references to his own preaching, though truncated, seem to indicate that Paul's message was more about God's action in Christ than the human need for it, referring to his proclamation with summary phrases like "word of the cross," "Christ crucified," "Christ raised from the dead," and "Christ is Lord."⁹ Second, passages like 2 Cor 3:10 ("what once had splendor has come to have no splendor at all because of the splendor which surpasses it") seem to indicate that there was no problem with the law before the coming of Christ. Sanders explains, "It appears that the conclusion that all the world – both Jew and Greek – equally stands in need of a Savior *springs from* the prior conviction that God had provided a savior."¹⁰ (There may be some in the audience who may understandably be wondering whether this is really an objection to or confirmation of Lutheran theology.)

The third and final point from Sanders for this presentation is likely to be the one most challenging for Lutheran exegetes and theologians. Having identified two sets of soteriological terminology in Paul, the forensic terminology of justification and righteousness by faith and the participatory terminology of dying, living, and rising with and in Christ, Sanders argues that the righteousness or justification by faith terminology is secondary and derivative.¹¹ It is not righteousness by faith that drives Paul, but rather, "the real bite of his theology lies in the participatory categories."¹² This may be seen by at least the following four considerations: 1. The descriptions of Christ's death are more frequently and typically participationist than expiatory, and they appear in his sacramental and paranetic passages. 2. Paul's juristic language is defective, i.e. it lacks a discussion of repentance and atonement. Even in Romans 3:9, at the end of a long discussion of sin as transgression, Paul's conclusion is not that all

humans are guilty but that they are “under sin.” 3. Transgressions like sex with a prostitute or partaking of idol meat are not condemned as transgressions but as wrong unions. 4. Paul’s juristic language is sometimes pressed into participationist meanings (e.g. 1 Cor 6:11, Rom 6:7).

I am well aware, especially in the present context, that these are fighting words, and I sincerely do hope that you will want to fight about them and engage Sanders’s book in detail. There is much more to his work than I have been able to address here, and it deserves a response. There will no doubt also be some time and necessity to clarify these issues a bit in the second half of our session together.

Luther’s “Breakthrough” or Breakdown? Two Readings of Rom 3:21-31.

At this point, however, I wish to move on to what I think is even more interesting and important, a close exegetical examination of Romans 3. The differences between the commentaries by Wright and Harrisville that we shall be comparing will become clear in the presentation of their exegeses, but you may also note substantive difference between Sanders and Wright as we go along. Though both are often lumped together in the movement usually called “the new perspective on Paul,” they, like other scholars so identified, differ widely in their interpretations of Paul. What they generally share are (1) a basically positive evaluation of 2nd Temple Judaism, akin to Sanders’ description summarized above, accompanied by a commitment to read Paul in that light and (2) a suspicion that the Reformation traditions have distorted Paul’s theological emphases to a greater or lesser degree. I shall proceed at this point to present Wright’s and Harrisville’s readings of Romans 3 independently of one another, trying to walk step by step, as

neutrally as possible, through their exegetical decisions and trying to clarify their representations of what Paul is really up to in this passage. Finally having presented each of these two representative figures, I shall try to flag up some key points of comparison that may serve our ensuing discussion.

Wright on Romans

The righteousness of God, the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah, and the restoration of the covenant people. These are the building blocks of Wright's reading of Romans in general but especially of Rom 3:21-31. "But now (nuni. de.)," Paul begins 3:21 with these words to announce his news, not a new religion or a new ethic, "but an event through which the world...had been changed forever."¹³ That event was the revelation of the righteousness of God through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ to all who believe.

Two of these terms especially require explanation, i.e the righteousness of God and the faith(fullness) of Jesus the Messiah. Wright explains in the introduction to his commentary that he understands the phrase *dikaioy, nh qeou/* in Romans, which he translates as "the righteousness of God," to be trivalent; it evokes notions of Covenant, Lawcourt, and Apocalyptic.¹⁴ It denotes first of all God's loyalty to the covenant with Israel, his faithfulness to the promises made to the patriarchs. This covenant loyalty includes God's commitment not only to Israel but ultimately to all of creation, the covenant with Abraham having been made in the first place to deal with problem of Adam. Connected to this covenantal meaning but distinct from it is the image of the lawcourt, wherein "righteous" is the adjective used to describe both the successful party in a suit as well as the necessary character of the judge. "Acquitted" is not quite a good synonym for righteous because it only applies to a successful defendant. "Vindicated"

may be better. Such images of the lawcourt are necessarily involved in questions of God's righteousness or justice because of the reality of sin's offense against God and His creation. God will have to deal with sin, both to render his verdict on it and eventually, somehow, to overcome it. Finally, the righteousness of God also bears an apocalyptic character because Paul's discussion of it includes "a way of writing that uses highly charged and coded metaphors to invest space-time reality with its cosmic or theological significance," in the tradition of 2nd Temple Jewish apocalyptic literature. To speak of the righteousness of God being revealed is to speak of God acting within history to vindicate Israel, right in the face of other would-be vindicators or lords.

Translating *dikaiousunh qeou* as the "righteousness of God" instead of the "righteousness that comes from God" only foreshadows the even more controversial decision to translate forms of *pi,stij Cristou*/ (e.g. in 3:22, 26) as "the faithfulness of the Messiah" instead "faith/belief in Christ." The literature on this debate is extensive, and Wright does not argue for the point in detail.¹⁵ He notes that it coheres better with the general thrust of the argument and that it makes better exegetical sense of the relationship between 3:22a and 3:22b, which would otherwise be basically redundant ("the righteousness of God which comes through belief in Christ to all who believe").

Verse 22 concludes that this revelation of righteousness to those who believe makes no distinction. All, Jews and Gentiles alike, sinned (*h[mar-ton, aorist active indicative*) and fall short (*u`sterou/ntai, present active indicative*) of the glory of God. Wright sees here a reference to Adamic humanity with the simple aorist tense of the verb "sinned" (*contra* the perfect tense translations in nearly all English editions) and the reference to the loss of God's glory, a theme prominent in

Rabbinic writings about Adam and sin. The problem that all humanity is “in Adam” (a theme Wright sees developed in Rom 5) is the problem that God’s covenant with Abraham was meant to solve. Because Israel itself suffers the same liability, God’s faithfulness to all creation is revealed finally in the only faithful Israelite, the Messiah Jesus who plays the role of faithful Israel in himself.

In v. 24, all those who believe (referred to in v. 22) are being justified. Both the covenant and lawcourt connotations of justification and righteousness must be maintained in reading this word.¹⁶ The judge declares that all these believers have good standing as members of his covenant people. This justification happens “freely,” “by his grace,” and “through the redemption which is in Jesus the Messiah.” Wright emphasizes “by his (God’s) grace” against conceptions of Jesus persuading an angry God to accept these pitiful sinners whom he would otherwise be predisposed simply to destroy. This act is an act of God’s own grace. The disposition of Jesus should not be played off against the disposition of God.

Wright spends more time, though, elaborating on Paul’s use of the term “redemption.” It evokes the slave-market to be sure, but the redemption of slaves would resonate for Paul and any of his contemporary Jewish readers deeply to the story of the Exodus, the example *par excellence* of God’s covenant loyalty to his people. It is not, therefore “a metaphor chosen at random as another bit of street-level color for the meaning of Jesus death,” but it coheres tightly with Paul’s argument for the revelation of the righteousness of God in the faithful death of the Messiah throughout this passage.

Verses 25-26 are exceptionally tightly woven, and Wright himself notes that nearly every word and phrase contained therein has been the subject of much debate. He begins with the conclusions

drawn in v. 25b-26 to clarify the meaning of what Paul says 25a that leads to those conclusions. In v. 25b-26 Paul speaks of a demonstration of God's righteousness in the present time in the face of previous sins that have been passed over in God's forbearance. In this present demonstration of his righteousness, God is shown to be both just (di,kaioj) and the one who justifies (dikaiou/nta), and the object of this justification is, literally, "the one out of the faithfulness of Jesus" (to.n evk pi,stewj VIhsou/), which Wright explains periphrastically as "the one whose status rests on the faithful death of Jesus."

Verse 25a then must give rise to these conclusions in v. 25b-26. Paul must there explain "how it is that God has now dealt with sins on the one hand and declared 'the one out of the faithfulness of Jesus' to be in the right on the other." Paul's explanation is heavily sacrificial, the first time, Wright observes, that such language appears in Romans. Paul says that Jesus was put forth as a i`lasth,rion (*hilasterion*). There is no question that this is a cultic reference, but we are forced to ask, "How does the sacrifice of Jesus mean that sins have now been dealt with, creating a 'righteous' people and leaving God's righteousness unimpeachable?" as vv. 25b-26 require us to see.

Wright traces this train of thought to the mercy seat on the ark of the covenant in Lev 16:2, with its importance for the Day of Atonement, to the notion of vicariously efficacious martyrdoms in 4 Maccabees, and ultimately to the righteous sufferer in Isaiah 40-55. In Isaiah in particular Wright sees "a sustained exposition of the righteousness of God, focused more and more tightly on a suffering figure who represents Israel and fulfills YHWH's purpose of being a light to the nations and whose sufferings and death are finally seen in explicitly sacrificial terms." In other words, "[w]e have...exactly that combination of elements that we have observed, and that are otherwise puzzling in exactly that combination, in Rom 3:21-26."

Wright clarifies that Jesus' righteous and vicarious suffering on behalf of the people of God functions at least in part to propitiate the wrath of God over human sin. In spite of those who are put off by such notions, Wright maintains that the wrath of God has been in Paul's view since 1:18. This propitiating sacrifice is done "through faith" and "by means of his blood," which Wright reads as independent modifiers of *ἵνα*, taking faith again to refer primarily to the faithfulness of Jesus unto death.

Wright infers from Paul's "therefore" (*οὖν*) in 3:27 that Paul is now drawing the conclusion that he has had in mind since 3:21 and answering the question he has had in mind since at least 2:17, that of the "boasting" of "the Jew." Now we see that such boasting is excluded. Paul, Wright says, is "not addressing the more general 'boast' of the moral legalist whose system of salvation is one of self-effort, but the ethnic pride of Israel according to the flesh, supported as it was by the possession of the Torah and the performance of those 'works' that set Israel apart from the pagans."

Wright reads each of Paul's uses of the term *νόμος* in these verses as a reference to Torah rather than as a general kind of "principle" as is sometimes argued (for 3:27 in particular). So Paul then is distinguishing between the Torah characterized by works and Torah characterized by faith, with analogies to his references to a bifurcated Torah also in the opening verses of Rom 8. Explaining the Torah of faith, Wright says, "the Torah is to be fulfilled through faith; in other words, where someone believes the gospel, there Torah is in fact being fulfilled, even though in a surprising way."

In v. 28 Paul states his position that human beings are justified by faith apart from works of the law, a position for which, Wright notes, Paul has not actually argued up to this

point. He will argue for it in Rom 4, but at this point it is merely part of the argument against Jewish boasting. With reference to this verse Wright also clarifies his view that being justified is not synonymous with being converted or becoming a Christian. Paul's word for that is more likely "called," as in his *ordo salutis* recited in Rom 8:30 (called...justified...glorified). Justified is the "declaration that certain persons are members of the covenant people, that their sins have been dealt with." So justification by faith means that the boundary marker for God's covenant people is no longer the distinctive works of Torah but rather the "law of faith."

Reading 3:27-28 in this way allows one to see clearly why v. 29 follows next. Recalling the Shema, Paul insists that God is one, that he is the God of Jew and Gentile alike. It is, in fact, a matter of God being justly God that he act for the salvation of all creation. This recalls what, from Paul's point of view, Israel was likely to forget, that "the god who made the covenant with Abraham is the creator of the whole world and that the covenant was put in place precisely in order that through Israel God might address the whole world." Because God is the God of the whole world, he will justify both the circumcision and the uncircumcision on the basis of faith. "Only faith can have this role" of marking out the new covenant people of God, "not because faith is a superior type of religious experience to anything else, nor because faith is an easier substitute for 'works,' putting it within the range of the morally incompetent...but because faith – this faith, to be defined in 4:18-25 and 10:9 – is the appropriate human stance of humility and trust before the creator and covenant God..."

Does this work of God overthrow the Law? Of course not. If it is to be a demonstration of God's righteousness, naturally we expect, as Paul says in 3:31, that it serves to establish to law, fulfilled of course through faith.

Harrisville on Romans

Roy Harrisville also begins his exegesis of this same passage by calling attention to the “but now” at the beginning of 3:21. Just as it does in all its other occurrences in Romans, Harrisville explains, this phrase is used to draw a contrast with what precedes. In this case Paul is beginning to draw a contrast between two types of existence, an existence according to the law and an existence apart from the law.

Harrisville, following the translation of the RSV in accordance with the practice of the Augsburg Commentary series,¹⁷ notably takes Paul’s key phrase *dikaiosis, nh qeou*/

as the “righteousness of God” instead of “the righteousness that comes from God,” but he does not explain precisely what he takes this phrase to mean. Given the contrast that he sees being introduced in 3:21, the righteousness of God presumably is the divinely given condition that makes possible the existence apart from the law.

In spite of a demonstrated inability in the history of interpretation to come to grips with Paul’s phrase “apart from the law,” Harrisville explains that Paul took it very seriously. God never did “intend for the first covenant with its law to be the ultimate expression of his will.” To that end, God paired it with a promise (a point Harrisville substantiates with reference to Gal 3) that “pointed to the end of life ordered according to judicial decree.”

Harrisville’s treatment of 3:22b-26 is very brief. He takes 22b (“for there is no distinction”) as explaining why faith is for all. Verse 23 is simply a summary of the argument in 1:18-3:18. Verse 24 “turns the other side of the coin.” “If righteousness is not effected by works,” then it must be a gift. Furthermore, the “means or instrument” of God’s righteousness must be the

redemption which is in Christ Jesus.

Harrisville then glances at some exegetical details in 3:25-26, asking whether their substance might be from a hand other than Paul's, perhaps together with the doxology in 16:25-27. He also tentatively suggests that "expiation" in v. 25 (which he takes as parallel with redemption in v. 24) should perhaps not be read in light of the mercy seat sprinkled with blood on Yom Kippur but instead with the Maccabaeen martyrs of 4 Macc 17.

Harrisville's treatment of 3:25b-26 is not very systematic but he does sketch some lines of connection between the demonstration of God's righteousness and the sacrificial death of Jesus. In fact, the reason that Jesus was set forth as a propitiation¹⁸ was "to prove that (God) himself was righteous."

In the interpretation of vv. 27-31 Harrisville translates *no,moj* alternately as "principle" or "law." Boasting is excluded on the principle of faith because law is excluded from the revelation of righteousness, "for we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the law."

In his interpretation of v. 29, Harrisville paraphrases, "Or...would you prefer a tribal deity, seeing that the law erects barriers between Jew and Gentile." Instead God will justify them all "through the instrumentality of faith" (Harrisville's periphrastic translation of the two prepositional phrases in v. 30).

In v. 31 Harrisville sees Paul saying that this position "upholds" the law, "not as a means to justification but as an agent of the knowledge of sin (3:20)." The law is kept by faith, but "a law kept by faith, without constraint and thus without division in the self, a law 'upheld' and to the point of an exhaustion of its possibilities in a radically new existence, is to Paul's mind a radically different sort of law."

Comparing Wright and Harrisville

1. Harrisville represents a venerable tradition of reading Romans when he sees Paul distinguishing between two kinds of human existence in this passage, one kind that is characterized by law, performance, and “judicial decree” and one kind that is characterized by grace. Harrisville’s reading centers on this issue, and Wright almost completely ignores it, except for his very brief comment on v. 30b that faith is not to be understood as a “superior kind type of religious experience.”

2. dikaiosunē qeou. Both Wright and Harrisville translate the term as “the righteousness of God.” Wright explains very carefully what he means by this term with extensive reference to Paul’s Jewish milieu. Harrisville does not pause to explain what he thinks this term means, but it seems safe to infer that he is understanding it differently from Wright, something very closely connected to the new grace-based existence that he understands Paul to be introducing in these verses.

3. Harrisville takes redemption and “expiation” in 3:24-25 as essentially synonymous and interprets both with reference to 4 Macc 17:22 where the death of the martyrs is viewed as a “propitiatory offering.” Wright hears echoes of the Exodus in the language of redemption and discerns here another hint at the importance of God’s covenant faithfulness. Also, Wright insists on “propitiation” as the translation of iʿlasth, rion (not expiation) and makes thus a connection to the wrath of God over human sin and the treatment of that topic in Rom 1:18-3:18.

4. Harrisville and Wright are miles apart on the translation of nomos. Wright thinks that Paul is concerned with Torah throughout. Harrisville sees Paul using the term with various denotations within this passage. Sometimes it is best translated as “law” and sometimes as “principle,” and under the translation

“law” Harrisville seems to make yet one further distinction. Sometimes law means specifically the Jewish Torah; sometimes it designates the broader kind of nomistic existence of which Jewish Torah-keeping may be the best possible example.

5. Wright and Harrisville interpret boasting differently. For Harrisville, boasting about deeds done is excluded because deeds are excluded from justification. For Wright, Jewish boasting about ethnic privilege (an idea drawn from Rom 2:17) is excluded because God is one and justifies Jew and Gentile both.

6. Wright and Harrisville seem not to be very far apart on vv. 29-30, both reading Paul’s insistence that God is not a “tribal deity,” to use Harrisville’s term. And both follow Paul’s logic similarly that justification for all creation will necessarily have to be justification by faith, though Wright goes to greater lengths to explain why it should be by “faith” in particular. This emphasis on Israel’s God being also the God of the Gentiles fits naturally into Wright’s account of the covenant God whose real aim has all along been to put the whole creation to rights. Harrisville does not explain how the emphasis on the oneness of God in these verses coheres with Paul’s primary point about different kinds of human existence or the exclusion of boasting about deeds.

7. It is probably quite obvious that Wright and Harrisville diverge in their translations and interpretations of the *pi,stij* *Cristou*/ phrases. Wright opts for a subjective genitive reading, “the faithfulness of the Messiah,” in both full occurrences of this phrase and also sees the Messiah’s faithfulness referenced in 3:25. Harrisville never acknowledges the possibility of such a reading and takes all of Paul’s references to *pi,stij* as descriptions of human faith or belief. It should be clarified that Wright does not exclude human belief. Especially in vv. 27-31 Wright identifies human faith as the appropriate response

to divine faithfulness.

8. The Christology that Wright sees in this passage is highly messianic. Everything in his interpretation hangs on Jesus' role as Israel's Messiah. As Messiah he is both Israel's representative and God's. Wright explains, "Though it would not be strictly accurate, it would not be a very great hyperbole to say that, for Paul, 'the righteousness of God' was one of the titles of Jesus the Messiah himself. God's saving justice walked around in Galilee, announced the Kingdom, died on a cross, and rose again. God's plan of salvation had always required a faithful Israelite to fulfill it. Now, at last God had provided one."¹⁹ It is not evident that Messianic categories are important to Harrisville's understanding of Jesus as he is presented in Romans 3.

Where do we go from here?

As we transition from this formal presentation to the time of discussion that is its real goal, it seems to me that there are at least two related but separate tasks that lie before us, not only for the next half hour but far beyond that. First, it behooves us to discern who has gotten the better of the argument. Does Wright offer a more persuasive account of Paul's argument or does Harrisville (or for that matter any other faithful exponent of the Lutheran tradition)? Let us not kid ourselves; there are real differences, and the differences of interpretation result in differences of proclamation. Wright is, of course, perfectly aware that his reading of Romans is a direct challenge to the exegesis of the Lutheran Reformation. In his opinion, an anxious 16th century monk who concludes on the basis of Romans that the "performance of Christian duties is not enough" is actually recognizing a legitimate and important "overtone" of Paul's statements, but that overtone is not the

fundamental note.²⁰ Wright warns, "If we play an overtone, thinking it to be a fundamental, we shall set off new and different sets of overtones, which will not then harmonize with Paul's original sound." Thus the exegetical challenge.

Finally, it may be worth asking to what extent the proposals that understand themselves to be challenges to Lutheran theology have really found their mark. Is it, for example, actually un-Lutheran to suppose that Paul thought from solution to plight? The Lutheran systematicians that taught my seminary classes years ago explained to us that we understand the real depth of human alienation from God not on the basis of counting transgressions but because the solution required was the crucifixion of the Son of God. Examples like this could be multiplied. On the other hand, even while admitting that Wright's discernment of Paul's fundamental note is substantively different from Harrisville's, a Lutheran could be forgiven for wondering if some Lutheranism's deepest convictions are not still upheld in Wright's picture of Romans, even as others are called into question. Even as the righteousness of God is understood differently and *pi,stij Cristou* is retranslated as the faith of Christ instead of faith in Christ, one should ask, "But has the relationship between law and gospel actually changed?" Does Wright's articulation of Paul's gospel in terms of God's saving faithfulness acted out in Jesus on behalf of the whole world adulterate that gospel with law? Scores of additional questions follow upon this one, but at this point, we should turn to some live questions and discussion among us.

References:

- 1 E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1977).
- 2 Krister Stendahl, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective

Conscience of the West," in *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 78-96.

3 N. T. Wright, *Romans* (NIB X; Nashville: Abingdon, 2002).

4 Roy A. Harrisville, *Romans* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980).

5 Sanders, *Paul*, xii.

6 Sanders, *Paul*, 147-50.

7 Sanders, *Paul*, 157.

8 Sanders, *Paul*, 442-47.

9 Sanders, *Paul*, 446.

10 Sanders, *Paul*, 443; emphasis original.

11 One notes that Sanders was famously anticipated in this conclusion by Albert Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle* (trans. W. Montgomery; New York: Macmillan, 1956), not to mention by earlier streams of Christian thought, especially in the eastern tradition.

12 Sanders, *Paul*, 502.

13 The reader will find it frustratingly redundant to read page number citations for each of Wright's points in the summary that follows. The reader should refer to Wright, *Romans*, *ad loc* throughout. Citations to specific pages will continue to be made whenever I refer to parts of the commentary outside of 3:21-31.

14 Wright, *Romans*, 398-406.

15 A good entry point into this debate is Richard Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002). In addition to the main content of the book, see especially the

appendix including counterpoint essays by Hays and James D. G. Dunn.

16 The difference between justification terminology and righteousness terminology in English obscures the important fact that both are translations of dik- roots in Greek.

17 For which Harrisville himself served on the editorial committee.

18 Note that Wright distinguishes between propitiation and expiation whereas Harrisville uses the terms interchangeably. Cf. Wright, *Romans*, 476.

19 Wright, *Romans*, 470.

20 Wright, *Romans*, 464. Wright makes this comments in his reflections on Rom 3:9-20, but they apply equally well to our passage.

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