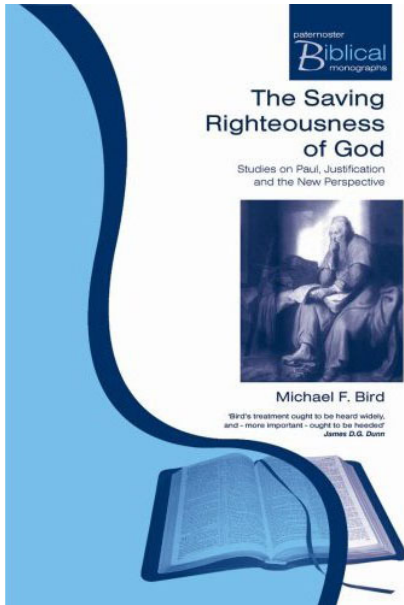


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Bird, Michael F.

The Saving Righteousness of God: Studies on Paul, Justification and the New Perspective

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In the present volume, Michael F. Bird, New Testament Lecturer at the Highland Theological College in Dingwall, Scotland, brings together four previously published journal articles (chs. 3–6) along with new material (chs. 1–2, 7, and the conclusion) in a project on Paul, justification, and the New Perspective on Paul (NPP) in an attempted *via media* between traditional reformed theology and the NPP. Bird intends this *via media* to be exegetically robust and true to Reformational emphases. According to the preface, he wants this study to be “a voice in the continuing conversation about the meaning of justification in Paul and how it relates to individual salvation and the unity of the people of God” (xiv). The book consists of a brief preface (xiii–xiv), an introduction (ch. 1), six essays on various aspects of justification and the NPP (chs. 2–7), and a conclusion (ch. 8). Appended to the content of the book is a bibliography of the NPP (194–211) and Scripture and author indices (212–24 and 225–30, respectively).

In a brief introduction (1–5) Bird describes the “burden of this project”: “to demonstrate that reformed *and* ‘new’ readings of Paul are indispensable to attaining a full understanding of Paul’s soteriology” (1). He further maintains that an analysis of Galatians and Romans demonstrates that the covenantal and forensic dimensions of justification fit together when appropriately described and weighted. For Paul, “faith *alone* in Jesus Christ is the

instrument for eschatological vindication, and faith *alone* marks out the true people of God” (1).

Chapter 2, “The Riddle of Righteousness” (6–39), examines four key interpretive issues: whether righteousness is (1) imputed or imparted, (2) relational or adherence to a norm, (3) transformative or forensic, and (4) the relationship between righteousness and covenant. With regard to (1), Bird comes to no clear conclusion. While Bird gravitates toward imputed righteousness with certain qualifications, James Denney’s comment about the “unreal” distinction between the two concepts leads him to question whether it makes all that much of a difference under the aegis of a forensic act of justification. In terms of (2), Bird maintains that there can be no bifurcation between a norm and a relationship in so far as righteousness relates to God’s people. As for (3), owing particularly to Rom 6:7, Bird sees no reason to drive a wedge between justification and transformation but suggests that it is perhaps more accurate to view the two as linked logically rather than conceptually in Paul’s thinking. The longest portion of the chapter is devoted to (4) (19–39). Bird argues that righteousness is more than, but not less than, a forensic verdict. Because of the parallel spheres of creation and covenant, righteousness encompasses God’s faithfulness to the whole of creation and to Israel. Hence the status of God’s people within the covenant is one of the many things that are rectified in God’s saving activity. With regard to righteousness, then, both its forensic-eschatological force and its covenantal context need to be given equal weight.

The third chapter, “Raised for Our Justification” (40–59), focuses on the place of Jesus’ resurrection in justification. In contrast to the heavy focus on Jesus’ crucifixion in Western theology with regard to the justification of believers, Bird suspects that “the resurrection is far more intrinsic to justification than merely comprising an authentication that our justification has taken place at the cross” (42). Bird examines passages such as 1 Cor 15:17, selective portions of Romans, and 1 Tim 3:16, and the relation between resurrection and final judgment. He concludes his discussion by observing that justification flows not only from the cross but also from its kerygmatic sequel: Jesus’ resurrection. Both should be viewed as an inseparable part of one redemptive event. Bird sees four implications arising from the inseparable connection between Jesus’ death and resurrection in justification: (1) it provides a tenable connection between the juridical and participationist categories in Paul; (2) it calls for an explanation as to why Paul could speak of justification and salvation without direct reference to the resurrection (Bird maintains this reflects Paul’s pastoral concerns); (3) justification is supremely christological, implying not only Jesus’ passiveness in undergoing crucifixion but also his faithfulness; and (4) given that justification can be conceived of as union with Christ, this raises the question as to whether there is still a role for the notion of imputation. (Bird takes this question up in ch. 4.)

In chapter 4, “Incorporated Righteousness” (60–87), Bird examines the debate between Robert H. Gundry and John Piper as to whether the language of imputed righteousness is an appropriate way to characterize Paul’s ideas about justification. Bird begins by giving a brief history of the notion of imputed righteousness and provides an overview of the debate between Gundry and Piper. He then looks at a series of passages (Rom 4:1–25; 5:18–19; 1 Cor 1:30 and Phil 3:8–9; and 2 Cor 5:21) that he maintains better accords with the idea of incorporated rather than imputed righteousness. Bird contends that the prooftexts for imputed righteousness do not establish it at the exegetical level and that the notion fails to grapple with Paul’s in-Christ language, which gravitates more in the direction of incorporation, substitution, and representation. At the same time, Bird recognizes the importance of distinguishing between differing theaters of discourse with regard to both biblical and systematic theology. It is in the latter theater that imputed righteousness retains its usefulness. In the theater of biblical theology, one might ask of the Pauline corpus: How are persons justified? In the theater of systematic theology, one could ask: How does union with Christ justify? The answer to the one question, which Paul does address, would be (according to Bird), “Through union with Christ and incorporation into his righteousness.” The answer to the other question, which Paul does not address, might aptly be offered along the lines of imputed righteousness.

Chapter 5, “When the Dust Finally Settles: Beyond the New Perspective” (88–112), delineates both the perceived weaknesses and the perceived strengths of the NPP. Principal areas of perceived weaknesses reflected in contemporary critiques of the NPP center on matters of merit theology, election and eschatology, works of the law, nationalistic righteousness, righteousness as covenant membership, the relationship between regeneration and righteousness, as well as a few additional minor criticisms. The perceived value of the NPP includes insights with regard to the Jewish context of Paul’s theology, the social function of the law, the unity of Jews and Gentiles in one body, justification as covenant status, and the relationship between justification and obedience. Bird maintains that the NPP should neither be neglected nor employed as a hermeneutical grid in the study of Paul and his letters. It is evident, too, that Bird favors “variegated nomism” to “covenantal nomism” as a more accurate description of the diversity of the soteriologies of second-temple Judaism (see 93).

Bird turns to the subject of “Justification as Forensic Status and Covenant Membership” in chapter 6 (113–54). He again attempts to strike a *via media* between Reformed and revisionist approaches to Paul’s view of justification. He sums up his thesis as follows: “I agree with the traditional reformed view that justification is a vertical category dealing with a person’s status and standing before God, but with the NPP I affirm that justification is Paul’s primary weapon to argue for the inclusion of the Gentiles *as Gentiles* into Christian fellowship” (113). The principal areas of textual focus are Gal 2–3 (119–40)

and Romans (140–52). Bird argues that both the NPP and traditional Reformed readings offer insights into these letters. He understands the issue of contention behind these letters to be ethnocentric nomism, not simply “legalism” or “nationalism.” Bird maintains that Paul’s direction of argument moves in Romans from vindication to covenant inclusion, while in Galatians Paul begins with covenantal inclusion and then proceeds to eschatological vindication. Bird contends that a holistic reading of the two letters should tie together the covenantal (horizontal) and forensic (vertical) dimensions of God’s righteousness. He further suggests that Reformed exegetes have ignored the horizontal dimension while adherents of the NPP have overemphasized this dimension. He lastly proffers that a new domain of exchange should be opened regarding the relationship between justification and adoption as a possible means of attaining a post-NPP equilibrium.

Chapter 7, “Justification to the Doers of the Law” (155–78), focuses on the identity of the Gentiles of whom Paul speaks in Rom 2, particularly in verses 12–16. Bird contends that Paul is discussing Gentiles who fulfill the Torah through faith in Christ and the power of the Spirit. Bird first surveys representative interpretive explanations regarding Paul’s identification of the Gentiles in Rom 2:12–16 (inconsistency, hypothetical, reality, impartiality, fidelity). He then sketches his own argument for an identity of Christian Gentiles against the framework of seven criteria that he outlines on page 166 and unpacks in the following pages (167–74). Bird contends that, whatever the role faithfulness and obedience play in the life of the Christian, the final ground for acquittal and vindication remains the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In the conclusion (179–83) Bird sums up his findings; he then closes with an excursus on “N. T. Wright and Reformed Orthodoxy” (183–93). His major contention in the first portion is for interpreters to let Paul be Paul without defending an old perspective because it is comfortable or a new one because it is faddish. He maintains that he has not sketched a perspective, whether new, fresh, post-, or the like, but rather “a portrait of Paul’s theology of the saving righteousness of God *now* revealed in Jesus the Christ” (181). He offers six distinguishing features (181–83). First, God’s righteousness is God’s saving action executed throughout creation, exhibited in his relation to his covenant people and revealed in the faithfulness, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Second, justification cannot be understood apart from Jesus’ resurrection. Third, no text explicitly states that Christ’s righteousness is imputed to believers. Imputation does, however, retain usefulness as a theological explanation of the mechanism by which union communicates righteousness to the believer. Fourth, Bird’s approach to the NPP is dialogical and irenic, simultaneously critiquing its weaknesses and affirming its strengths. Fifth, justification in Paul functions at two horizons: horizontally (socially) and vertically (soteriologically). Sixth, works are evidential rather than instrumental with regard to

justification. Bird's comments concerning N. T. Wright in the excursus are offered in an attempt to ease some of the suspicion with which Wright is viewed, particularly in American Reformed-evangelical circles. The basic thrust of this portion is summed up on page 192: "I wish to commend Wright as an interpreter *for* the reformed-evangelical tradition."

Bird has produced in this volume a useful overview of the current debate regarding Paul, justification, and the NPP. It reflects, to his credit, a more irenic tone than many writing from the perspective he represents ("a card carrying Calvinist who is committed to the reformed tradition in so far as it represents a faithful elaboration of the biblical witness" [183–84]). It will serve well as an introduction to the current debate, particularly for those of the evangelical tradition, to which it is largely directed. Doubtlessly, however, readers of differing backgrounds will weigh the positions set forth in this volume differently. One can imagine that it might be judged as falling between two stools. For those on the NPP side of things, Bird might be viewed as being too traditional (Reformed). For those on the Reformed side, by contrast, he might be viewed as conceding too much to the NPP. For those less committed to either side, it might be viewed as having struck a good balance among the competing options in the ongoing interpretation of Paul and his letters. Each reader will need to make his or her own decision about how successful Bird has been in his attempted *via media*.

Speaking personally, I find much of what Bird has written to be level-headed and helpful. My principal area of disagreement with him concerns his treatment of the Gentiles in Rom 2:12–16 (p. 143 and ch. 7). I am not convinced that Paul is referring to Christian Gentiles who fulfill the Torah by faith in Christ and the power of the Spirit in this section (such language sounds more Reformed than Pauline). There is little suggestion in verses 14–15 that the Gentiles spoken of *consistently* carry out what the Torah requires ("their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them" [v. 15] implies inconsistency). Instead, I understand Paul to be speaking illustratively about those instances—whether real or as a rhetorical foil in his argument—in which Gentiles do things that correspond to a given demand of the Torah. Whenever (ὅταν) they do (v. 14), however sporadically, they show the work of the Torah (i.e., the work that the Torah requires) written on their hearts on those (isolated) occasions, and hence this reflects poorly on those who, like Paul's hypothetical (Jewish) dialogue partner in Rom 2:1–11, boast in the Torah but do not obey it consistently either. Since it is far from a consistent obedience, however, Gentiles will not secure eschatological justification along these lines (Rom 2:13; cf. 2:12). That point aside, however, Bird has demonstrated that the Reformers, their contemporary heirs, and adherents of the NPP all, in differing ways, provide relevant insights of which interpreters of Paul should avail themselves. He offers a fitting reminder to those of a Reformed perspective that Scripture takes precedence over confessional statements, a

point not always clearly reflected in the argumentation of contemporary critiques of the NPP written from that perspective, where NPP adherents are sometimes dismissed on the basis of confessional assumptions rather than biblical exegesis. Bird issues an appropriate personal challenge to such adherents: “I adhere to a confession, but I refuse to treat the confessions as a surrogate for or extension of biblical authority. To be reformed is to be biblical first and confessional second” (190). The concluding sentence to his present study is also worth pondering: “God’s righteousness is where he justifies the ungodly and adopts them into the household of faith, a house filled with Jews and Gentiles, male and female, slave and free, white and black, Arabs and Americans—this is justification by faith” (183).

Two additional observations: (1) a subject index would have greatly enhanced the serviceability of this volume; (2) there are an unusually wide number of typographical and stylistic incongruities that detract from the presentation of the material. Given the important nature of the subject matter, Bird could definitely have used better editorial support. A representative list of examples includes the following: xvii [eleventh entry: f > of], 12 n. 19 [WUNT185 > WUNT 185], 15 [revealed “(Isa. 56.1) > revealed” (Isa. 56.1)], 26 [decided > decidedly], 28 [dispossess > dispossesses], 36 [to > too], 36 n. 120 [delete pp.], 40 n. 2 [idem., > idem.], 45 [Faith is an appropriation never the basis of justification. > Faith is an appropriation, never the basis, of justification.], 46 [wider attention, however, one gets ... > wider attention; however, one gets ...], 48 and 52 [The apostle vs. The Apostle], 49 n. 47 [delete additional space after note], 50 [from which the resurrection delivers believers from > from which the resurrection delivers believers], 51 [The verb δικαίωσις > The noun δικαίωσις], 51 [By process I am not suggesting a process of becoming just, rather, the > I am not suggesting a process of becoming just; rather, the], 52 [missing circumflex accent on αὐτου], 52 n. 63 [MI, > MI:], 73 [spacing needed after notes 64 and 66 in the text; a comma needed before note 65 in the text], 78 n. 79 [date of publication lacking], 79 [second to last line: missing verb “is”], 82 [in order give > in order to give], 83 [(?) importation > imputation], 84 [union with him is sphere > union with him is the sphere], 88–89 n. 4 [punctuation of Watson essay and delete pp.], 89 n. 4 [Paul use > Paul’s use], 100 [σκούβλα > σκούβαλα], 104 [several smaller criticism > several smaller criticisms], 107 [Matthias > Mattathias], 108 n. 75 [In contrast see, > In contrast, see], 115 [but for very different reason > but for very different reasons], 123 [space after n. 32 in text], 123 [considered in “unlawful” > considered it “unlawful”], 129 n. 58 [reword the following for clarity: When writing a defensive postured ...], 129 n. 58 [Conversely, although ... He can also add say > Conversely, although ..., he can also say], 143 [space after n. 104 in text], 146 [assurance, he > assurance. He], 149 n. 120 [*Paul*, 29, > *Paul*, 29.], 166 [space after n. 25 in text], 174 [the final grounds ... remains in the > the final ground ... remains the], 176 n. 59 [Macarthur > MacArthur], 186 n. 16 [it this lack > it is this

lack], 186 n. 16 [are little bit > are a little bit], 186 n. 16 [Garlington, (> Garlington ()], 191 n. 29 [new > knew], 192 [Ph.D > Ph.D. or PhD], and 229 [Sweeney, J. > Sweeney, D.].