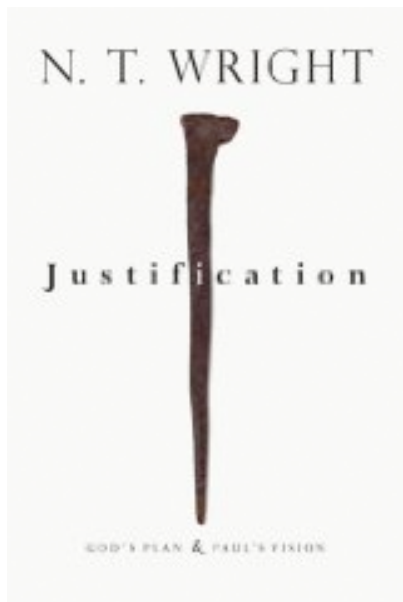


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**Wright, N. T.**

***Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision***

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Scarcely needing any introduction, N. T. Wright has distinguished himself as a New Testament scholar, theologian, and churchman. In addition to his responsibility as bishop of Durham, Wright is a tireless writer and lecturer, having popularized his interpretation of the New Testament for a large cross-section of readers. Among his more scholarly works are *The New Testament and the People of God*, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, and *The Resurrection of the Son of God*.

This new volume, *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision*, was written in reply to John Piper's critique of Wright's "New Perspective" on Paul's view of justification by faith. The so-called New Perspective, grounded particularly in E. P. Sanders's 1977 publication, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, has not met with wholehearted approval from those of the Lutheran and Reformed persuasion.

Bishop Wright's reply to Piper's criticisms is polemical, to say the least. Wright uses some of the strongest analogical language to put his opponents in their place behind the times in their traditional interpretation of Paul's thought in his letters. Peter Leithhart's comment on the back cover is telling: "This is a sharply polemically book, and N. T. Wright occasionally rises to Pauline heights of exasperation at his opponents."

Wright thinks he must not have made himself clear earlier, so he makes this further concerted effort to restate his case for clarity. But surely clarity of expression is not the issue. Difference of interpretive conclusion is. John Piper holds to the more traditional position of Paul's view of justification, while Wright has adopted and adapted another perspective on Paul. The question is not whether the interpretation is new but whether it is true. Wright's stated aim is to be true to Paul in his reading of the text of the letters.

The central thesis of *Justification*, says Wright repeatedly and variously, is this: "God's single plan, through Abraham's family, to bless the whole world" (66). Hyphenated versions of this theme phrase occur to the point of tedium, sometimes appearing four times on a page (e.g., 124, 126, 128, 132, 200). Wright's shorthand for the longer phrase is simply "covenant": God made a covenant with Abraham to bless the world; the plan was, and will be, accomplished through one faithful Israelite, Jesus Messiah (e.g., 203–4).

Even though Wright rejects the notion of Luther's interpreters that the righteousness of God is imputed to persons of faith in Jesus Messiah/Christ, he regards Paul's vision of justification in the context of a law court in which God *declares* the sinner righteous. God as judge finds in favor of the defendant, thus granting the person of faith in Jesus Messiah the *status* of righteousness (e.g., 72, 203–4). Regrettably, to my mind, the nature and function of that status is not spelled out in significant detail. Is the status the entrance requirement into the covenant community of Israel, with Christ being the God's faithful Israelite who made it happen? What difference does the new status make in the life of the Jewish or Gentile person of faith? According to Wright, the divine courtroom *declaration* of righteous status in Paul has nothing to do with virtue or moral character. Nor is the operation of justification an individualistic, private, personal experience merely, but a right status for membership in community. In rejecting individualistic, experiential justification Wright is to be commended. Ancient agrarian society was community-oriented, Israel no less, and the new community of Messiah/Christ likewise. Whether Paul understood himself as one involved in a worldwide restoration program after (or out of?) exile, as Wright suggests, is debatable (61).

To his credit Wright commits himself to reading Paul's texts on their terms and in their own context (46–47; see also my recent textbook, *The New Testament in Context*, 2008). At the same time, Wright engages the Pauline texts in conversation with Luther and his interpreters and with Calvin and his, all the while being Tom Wright the modern/post-modern interpreter. Texts do not speak for themselves. Wrightian insights are brought to bear in connection with texts, and like all insights, they are, as Bernard Lonergan said, a dime a dozen. They require verification in accordance with reasonable and responsible inquiry, which Wright purports to provide in his exegesis.

In this book, Wright spends considerable time and space exploring Galatians and Romans in support of his understanding of Paul on justification as the single-plan-of-God-through-Israel-for-the-world. The plan finds its center in the family (*sperma*) of Abraham (Gal 3:16), focused finally in the death and resurrection of Jesus as the faithful Israelite and operative through the work of the Holy Spirit in creating a new-covenant community that includes both Jewish and non-Jewish members. But Wright also applies his insights to Philippians, Corinthians, and, remarkably, Ephesians (168–75). Ephesians is widely held among New Testament scholars to be Deutero-Pauline, reflecting a time and situation beyond Paul of the 50s C.E. Eschatology is largely realized in Ephesians. The saints are seated with Christ “in the heavenlies,” having been *raised* with Christ already and having been saved already by grace through faith. Paul of the unquestioned letters, by comparison, reserves resurrection language for the future Day of the Lord, even at points where such resurrection terminology would seem appropriate (e.g., Rom 6:4). Because of his use of Ephesians, Wright speaks of the believer as baptized into Christ and raised with Christ. Paul of Romans and Galatians, together with the other five undisputed letters, refrains from that language, stating rather that he has not yet attained the perfect resurrection life of Christ (Phil 3:12–14).

Identified as he is with the New Perspective on Paul, Wright’s work echoes—not always positively—the work of E. P. Sanders (my much-valued mentor and supervisor in doctoral work). Sanders’s fingerprint can be detected in Wright’s version of the New Perspective, but fingerprint is where the metaphor ends. The character of Sanders’s magisterial work on Paul and the Judaism of his time is regrettably veiled in Wright’s *Justification* and even somewhat misrepresented. For example, Wright maintains that Sanders resuscitated the old English word “right-wised” as an alternative term for “justified” (88–89). As far as I have read in Sanders, and from lengthy conversations with him, he rejected “right-wised” and minted his own term, “righteoused.” I suspect that Wright would reject that term also as appropriate for Paul’s sense of “justified.” Wright downplays the idea of transfer and change associated with the operation of justification by faith in the faithful Jesus-Messiah.

Wright has not taken sufficiently into contextual account the massive effort of Paul in gathering Gentiles into Messiah/Christ in community. Gentiles were idolatrous. Paul will have none of that in the community of Christ (1 Cor. 10:14). Nor will he allow sexual immorality in the community of the Spirit of Messiah, as evidenced boldly in his call for the exclusion of the immoral man from the Corinthian fellowship (1 Cor 5:1–13). Moreover, justification, by whatever term of reference, involves exchange, not merely from one family to another (115), but a gracious transfer out of *the power of Sin* (Rom 3:9) into the saving power of Messiah/Christ. Justification in this light, therefore, involves eschatological participation in Messiah/Christ on the basis of faith in accordance with the plan of God to bless the world as promised to Abraham. This blessing sets both Jewish and

non-Jewish people of faith in Messiah on their on their way to the Day of the Lord and resurrection life.

Despite himself, Wright latches onto an old adage coming out of Luther's interpreters (e.g., Bultmann), namely, the impossibility of keeping the law perfectly (118–19). Paul's view of the purpose of the law (Torah) is not that it is impossible to keep. That would make God's gift to his people less gift and more problem, Rom 7 notwithstanding. Romans 7 is more a vindication of the law than proof of the impossibility of keeping it. In this regard also I think Wright could have unpacked more pointedly the contrary-to-fact condition in Gal 3:21: "If a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law." The fact is that the law had another purpose, not that it is impossible to keep, but that it acted only as guardian until the life-giving Christ would come.

I wonder if an equally strong case could be made for the Adam-Christ reversal typology underwriting much of Paul's thought in his letters, beyond the explicit mention of the first and last Adam (1 Cor 15:45–49; Rom 5:12–21). Certainly the Abrahamic covenant figures prominently in the solution to the human plight, especially in terms of Paul's privileged text (Gen 15:6), but Paul's call for the ingathering of Gentiles along with Jewish people speaks of the restoration of humanity through the death and resurrection of Jesus. A new creation out of the old is underway (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15), a new "Israel of God" (Gal 6:16).

Finally, Wright seems to relish the use of analogy against his critics. His major analogy is the story in which Wright and a friend disagree on whether the sun revolves around the earth. Wright knows from his modern understanding that the earth moves around the sun, but his friend takes him to the top of the hill to witness the "sunrise." Thus the simple experience proves the point for his friend. Wright then uses this analogy against his critics throughout the discussion. His critics are implicitly unlearned folk, unlike Wright's more enlightened understanding. Polemically, or more precisely, sarcastically Wright asks: "Will [Siefried and Westerholm] walk me up the hill to view the sunrise?" (94). Ironically, these two critics along with Piper would believe as Wright does that the earth revolves around the sun, whereas his hero, Paul, would not have thought so. Another persistent analogy is the putting together of a jigsaw puzzle. When some people—Wright's critics in view—are not able to find the correct pieces of the puzzle they force the wrong ones into place or leave the proper pieces in the box. By implication, Wright (in his "humble but accurate opinion," 207) knows the correct pieces of the puzzle of Paul on justification in comparison to his critics who force the wrong pieces into place, thus distorting the true picture.

Without doubt, Bishop Wright has an engaging facility of speech and writing, which comes to expression in this book with such flourish that one is led to keep reading without tiring. This book will generate much discussion among church people, to whom Tom Wright's popular writings appeal.