The intention of this book is to reconcile the traditional Reformed view of justification with insights of the so-called “New Perspective on Paul.” Some chapters are revised versions of studies previously published between 2004 and 2006.

In chapter 1 (1–6) Bird shares with the reader his individual development concerning the interpretation of Pauline letters and gives an overview of the following contributions.

In chapter 2, “The Riddle of Righteousness” (7–39), Bird discusses some riddles raised by dogmatic tradition and exegetical discussion. The Catholic-Protestant controversy on imputed or imparted righteousness is to be solved by the thesis that our righteousness is an imputed one, yet not fictitious but real (7–10). Exegetically, there is no dichotomy between relational or norm-oriented righteousness: “In so far as righteousness relates to God’s people, the norm of righteousness is then provided by the covenant relationship” (11–12), that is, Torah as covenant charter. In my view this thesis is correct concerning early Jewish literature, but hints should be given on the well-disputed issue Torah and ethics of Paul. Somewhat different is Bird’s solution to the issue of righteousness as transformative or forensic. The phrase “righteousness of God” is no technical apocalyptic term (against Käsemann) but must be seen against the background of Judg 5:11; 1 Sam
12:7; Pss 51:14; 71:15–16; Isa 46:13; 56:1; CD 20:20 (14–15) as “denot[ing] the saving action of God now revealed and now manifested in the gospel of Jesus Christ” (15), whereas the verb “is strictly forensic” (17). Paul’s apocalyptic theology is based on his narrative world, that is, on the concept of God’s relationship with Abraham and Israel mediated through the covenantal promises, including the hope for the restoration of Israel and the salvation of the Gentiles (31). The unity of Jews and Christians in the body of Christ is not only an illustration of the effects of salvation but is constitutive in that God’s saving righteousness creates a new people (33). However, I am not sure that “justification by faith” is more related to the ongoing Christian life than to entry into that life (see 2 Cor 5:10).

In chapter 3, “Raised for Our Justification” (40–59), Bird emphasizes that the resurrection of Christ is not only the vindication of his cross but the transforming of believers to bear fruit for God (53). This insight “posits a tenable connection between the juridical and participationist categories in Paul’s thought” (58).

The main thesis of chapter 4, “Incorporated Righteousness” (60–87), is that the notion of “imputation” is legitimate within the field of systematic theology but is not the language of the New Testament: “believers are incorporated into the righteousness of Christ. The matrix for understanding justification is union with Christ” (70, emphasis original). “In sum, Romans 4 does not assert that one is justified because of the imputed righteousness of Christ or that God reckons faith as covenantal conformity. Instead, God regards faith as the condition of justification (reckons faith as righteousness) and he justifies believers (credits righteousness) because of their union with Christ (raised for our justification)” (77). Similarly, Rom 5:18; 1 Cor 1:30; Phil 3:9; and 2 Cor 5:21 should be interpreted in terms of participation.

In chapter 5, “When the Dust Finally Settles” (88–112), Bird evaluates the failures and insights of the New Perspective on Paul. The umbrella term “covenantal nomism” should be replaced by “variegated nomism” (93) in order to underscore the diversity of concepts of salvation within Second Temple Judaism. Instead of “getting in,” the wording “being in” is appropriate; “election” is a Pauline term appearing in 2 Cor 11:16–12:10 and Phil 3:1–11 “in the context of perseverance and the qualifications for the true Christian” (95). The “works of the law” in Qumran literature are not only badges of the Qumran community but include ethical deeds as well (98, with a hint at 1QS 6–7 and CD 5:5–6). The Pauline doctrine of justification is not only a social epiphenomenon. “The plight to which Paul responds in justification by faith is not only the ethnocentric ethos of his Jewish contemporaries, but the predicament consists of the verdict of condemnation laid upon all persons who toil under the power of sin, law and death” (102). But we should also note valuable insights from the New Perspective on Paul. The Jewish background of
Pauline theology is emphasized (105). The law is indeed a social boundary between Jews and non-Jews (105–7), and in Gal 3:13–14 Paul argues “along the line of corporate, horizontal, pneumatology and ecclesiology” (109). Justification includes both declaring righteous and making righteous (110–11).

In chapter 6, “Justification as Forensic Status and Covenant Membership” (113–54), Bird seeks to reconcile insights from the New Perspective on Paul with traditional readings and horizontal and vertical dimensions of justification. Paul does not confront merely “legalism” or “nationalism” but “ethnocentric nomism” (117). His view of justification is not exclusively individualistic; justification “cannot be isolated from the public vindication of the people of God. What drives the biblical concept of vindication (and the Pauline notion of justification) is not the problem of how sinners can find a gracious God, rather the controlling question is: Who are the people of God and in what economy shall they be vindicated?” (119).

As is appropriate for these presuppositions, Bird offers exegetical comments on Gal 2–3 and on Romans. Paul’s zeal to persecute the Christian communities was the zeal “to protect the sanctity of the boundaries separating Jews from Gentiles” (122, with a hint at Num 25:11; 1 Macc 2:24–27). The social dimension of Christian faith is also the main issue of Gal 2:11–14: “What was so reprehensible to the ‘certain men from James’ and ‘those of the circumcision’ was not the nature of the food, but the implication that the meals identified Gentiles as equals with Jews without making them come via the route of proselytization” (131). Ioudaizein in Gal 2:14 does not mean only following the Jewish food laws but “conversion to Judaism via the ritual circumcision” (132); similarly, the meaning of “works of the law” is not to be restricted to the “boundary markers” of Judaism but refers to judaizing (133).

The survey of Romans emphasizes that justification means both breaking down the barrier of sin between God and humans and removing the dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles (145). The themes “of the justification of the sinner and membership in the new covenant people are intimately intertwined” (141) in this letter, and Bird correctly hints at predecessors of this insight (see M. Meiser, Galater[NTP 9; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007], 129, 158, 243, 246).

Chapter 7, “Justification to the Doers of the Law” (155–78), is concerned with the debate about eschatology and works in relation to justification. Bird gives a survey of a variety of approaches to Rom 2:12–16 and offers a helpful list of criteria for a compelling exegesis including issues of religion history and context analysis. In Rom 2:12–16 Paul has Gentile Christians in mind “who fulfill the Torah through faith in Christ and life in the Spirit” (166). There is no tension between justification by faith and judgment according to
works: “Works as christologically conceived, pneumatically empowered, and divinely endowed are necessary for salvation in so far as they reveal the character of authentic faith expressed in the form of obedience, love, faithfulness, righteousness and holiness” (178).

The concluding chapter (179–93) sums up Bird’s positions in a way that is both clear and irenic. Similarly, in the fierce debate “waging in some American reformed circles over the orthodoxy of N. T.Wright” (183), his “excursus” (183–93) is an attempt to calm the discussion.

The very useful bibliography on the New Perspective on Paul (194–211) attests to the author’s profound acquaintance with the history of research. A Scripture index and an author index conclude this inspiring book, in which only a few typographical errors are to be found. In sum, this well-reasoned pladoyee for reconciliation deserves many attentive readers.