

Piper's Eight Concerns about Wright

1. *The Gospel Is Not about How to Get Saved?*

First, it is striking to read not just what Wright says the gospel *is*, but what he says it *isn't*. He writes, "The gospel' itself refers to the proclamation that Jesus, the crucified and risen Messiah, is the one, true and only Lord of the world."⁵ For Paul, this imperial announcement was "that the crucified Jesus of Nazareth had been raised from the dead; that he was thereby proved to be Israel's Messiah; that he was thereby installed as Lord of the world."⁶ Yes. That is an essential announcement of the gospel. But Wright also says, "The gospel' is not an account of how people get saved."⁷ "Paul's gospel to the pagans was not a philosophy of life. Nor was it, even, a doctrine about how to get saved."⁸ "My proposal has been that 'the gospel' is not, for Paul, a message about 'how one gets saved.'"⁹ "The gospel is not . . . a set of techniques for making people Christians."¹⁰ "The gospel' is not an account of how people get saved. It is . . . the proclamation of the lordship of Jesus Christ."¹¹

These are striking denials in view of 1 Corinthians 15:1–2, "Now I would remind you, brothers, of *the gospel* I preached to you . . . by which you are being *saved*." But be careful. Perhaps this only means that salvation *results* from believing the gospel, not that the gospel message tells how to be saved. Perhaps. But one wonders how the death and resurrection of Jesus could be heard as good news if one had spent his life committing treason against the risen King. It seems as though one would have to be told how the death and resurrection of Christ actually saves sinners, if sinners are to hear them as good news and not as a death sentence. There is so much more to say (see especially chapter 5). I am only illustrating the flash points.

5N. T. Wright, "Paul in Different Perspectives: Lecture 1: Starting Points and Opening Reflections," at the Pastors Conference of Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church, Monroe, Louisiana (January 3, 2005). Accessed 5-11-07 at http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Auburn_Paul.htm.

6N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 46.

7Ibid., 133.

8Ibid., 90.

9Ibid., 60.

10Ibid., 153.

11Ibid., 133.

2. *Justification Is Not How You Become a Christian?*

Second, Wright says, "Justification is not how someone becomes a Christian. It is the declaration that they have become a Christian."¹² Or again, "'Justification' in the first century was not about how someone might establish a relationship with God. It was about God's eschatological definition, both future and present, of who was, in fact, a member of his people."¹³ "[Justification] was not so much about 'getting in', or indeed about 'staying in', as about 'how you could tell who was in'." In standard Christian theological language, it wasn't so much about soteriology as about ecclesiology; not so much about salvation as about the church."¹⁴ So the divine act of justification does not constitute us as Christians or establish our relationship with God. It informs or announces. "The word *dikaioō* [justify] is, after all, a declarative word, declaring that something is the case, rather than a word for making something happen or changing the way something is."¹⁵

This is startling because we are used to reading Romans 5:1 as if justification had in fact altered our relationship with God. "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." We thought that justification had brought about this fundamentally new and reconciled relationship with God. (For further discussion, see especially chapter 6.)

3. *Justification Is Not the Gospel?*

Third, it follows then that Wright would say that the message of justification is not the gospel. “I must stress again that the doctrine of justification by faith is not what Paul means by ‘the gospel.’”¹⁶ “If we come to Paul with these questions in mind—the questions about how human beings come into a living and saving relationship with the living and saving God—it is not justification that springs to his lips or pen. The message about Jesus and his cross and resurrection—‘the gospel’ . . . is announced to them; through this means, God works by his Spirit upon their hearts.”¹⁷

12N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 125.

13Ibid., 119.

14Ibid.

15N. T. Wright, “New Perspectives on Paul,” in *Justification in Perspective: Historical Developments and Contemporary Challenges*, ed. Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 258.

16Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 132.

17Ibid., 116.

This is astonishing in view of the fact that Paul brought his sermon in Pisidian Antioch to a gospel climax by saying, “Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone who believes is *justified* [□□□□□□□□□□] from everything from which you could not be *justified* [□□□□□□□□□□] by the law of Moses” (Acts 13:38–39, my translation). And again it is difficult to know how a sinner could hear the announcement of the cross and resurrection as good news without some explanation that by faith it makes a person forgiven and righteous before God. (See more on this in chapter 6.)

4. *We Are Not Justified by Believing in Justification?*

Fourth, part of the implication of what Wright has said so far is that we are not justified by believing in justification by faith but by believing in Jesus: “We are not justified by faith by believing in justification by faith. We are justified by faith by believing in the gospel itself—in other words, that Jesus is Lord and that God raised him from the dead.”¹⁸ This sounds right. Of course, we are not saved by doctrine. We are saved by Christ. But it is misleading, because it leaves the meaning of “believing in the gospel” undefined. Believing in the gospel *for what?* Prosperity? Healing? A new job? If we are going to help people believe the gospel in a saving way (not the way the demons believe, and not the way Simon the magician believed, James 2:19; Acts 8:13, 21–23), we will have to announce the good news that Christ died *for them*; that is, we will have to announce why this death and resurrection are good news *for them*.

There is more than one way to say it. Many people have been saved without hearing the language of justification. The same is true with regard to the words and realities of “regeneration” and “propitiation” and “redemption” and “reconciliation” and “forgiveness.” A baby believer does not have to understand all of the glorious things that have happened to him in order to be saved. But these things do all have to happen to him. And if he comes to the settled conviction, when he hears about them, that he will not trust Christ for any one of them, there is a serious question mark over his salvation. Therefore, it is misleading to say that we are not saved by believing in justification by faith. If we hear that part of the gospel and cast ourselves on God *for this divine gift*, we are saved. If we hear that part of the gospel and reject it, while trying to embrace Christ on other terms, we will not be saved. (There is more on this in chapter 5.)

5. *The Imputation of God’s Own Righteousness Makes No Sense At All?*

Fifth, Wright’s construction of Paul’s theology appears to have no place for the imputation of divine righteousness to sinners.

If we use the language of the law-court, it makes no sense whatever to say that the judge imputes, imparts, bequeaths, conveys or otherwise transfers his righteousness to either the plaintiff or the defendant. Righteousness is not an object, a substance or a gas which can be passed across the courtroom. . . . If and when God does act to vindicate his people, his people will then, metaphorically speaking, have the status of 'righteousness' But the righteousness they have will not be God's own righteousness. That makes no sense at all.¹⁹

But Wright would protest that if we leave it there, we quibble with words and miss the substance. With his new definitions and connections, he believes he has preserved the substance of what the Reformation theologians meant by imputation:

[Jesus'] role precisely as Messiah is not least to draw together the identity of the whole of God's people so that what is true of him is true of them and vice versa. Here we arrive at one of the great truths of the gospel, which is that the accomplishment of Jesus Christ is *reckoned* to all those who are "in him". This is the truth which has been expressed within the Reformed tradition in terms of "imputed righteousness", often stated in terms of Jesus Christ having fulfilled the moral law and thus having accumulated a "righteous" status which can be shared with all his people. As with some other theological problems, I regard this as saying a substantially right thing in a substantially wrong way, and the trouble when you do that is that things on both sides of the equation, and the passages which are invoked to support them, become distorted.²⁰

I doubt that this is the case. But we will save the argument for chapter 8.

¹⁹Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 98–99.

²⁰Wright, "Paul in Different Perspectives: Lecture 1." Emphasis in original.

6. Future Justification Is on the Basis of the Complete Life Lived?

Sixth, Wright makes startling statements to the effect that our future justification will be on the basis of works. "The Spirit is the path by which Paul traces the route from justification by faith in the present to justification, *by the complete life lived*, in the future."²¹ "Paul has . . . spoken in Romans 2 about the final justification of God's people *on the basis of their whole life*."²² "Present justification declares, on the basis of faith, what future justification will affirm publicly (according to [Rom.] 2:14–16 and 8:9–11) *on the basis of the entire life*."²³ That he means future "justification by works" is seen in the following quote:

This declaration, this vindication, occurs twice. It occurs in the future, as we have seen, *on the basis of the entire life a person has led in the power of the Spirit*—that is, it occurs *on the basis of "works"* in Paul's redefined sense. And near the heart of Paul's theology, it occurs in the present as *an anticipation of that future verdict*, when someone, responding in believing obedience to the call of the gospel, believes that Jesus is Lord and that God raised him from the dead.²⁴

Again, beware of thinking this means what you might think it means. Remember that Wright has redefined "justification." It is not what makes you a Christian or saves you. Therefore, it may be that Wright means nothing more here than what I might mean when I say that our good works are the necessary evidence of faith in Christ at the last day. Perhaps. But it is not so simple. (I return to this topic in chapter 7.)

7. First-century Judaism Had Nothing of the Alleged Self-Righteous and Boastful Legalism?

Seventh, Wright follows the New Perspective watchword that Paul was not facing "legalistic works-righteousness" in his churches. The warnings against depending on the law are not against legalism but ethnocentrism. Wright is by no means a stereotypical New Perspective scholar and goes his own way on many fronts. But he does embrace the fundamental claim of the New Perspective on Paul as articulated by E. P. Sanders:

²¹Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective*, 148. Emphasis added.

²²*Ibid.*, 121. Emphasis added.

23Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 129. Emphasis added.

24Wright, "New Perspectives on Paul," 260. First two emphases added.

[Sanders's] major point, to which all else is subservient, can be quite simply stated. Judaism in Paul's day was not, as has regularly been supposed, a religion of legalistic works-righteousness. If we imagine that it was, and that Paul was attacking it as if it was, we will do great violence to it and to him. . . . The Jew keeps the law out of gratitude, as the proper response to grace—not, in other words, in order to *get* into the covenant people, but to *stay* in. Being "in" in the first place was God's gift. This scheme Sanders famously labeled as "covenantal nomism" (from the Greek *nomos*, law).²⁵ When Wright did his own research, for example, into the mind of the Qumran sect represented in 4QMMT, he concluded that these documents "reveal nothing of the self-righteous and boastful 'legalism' which used to be thought characteristic of Jews in Paul's day."²⁶ In chapters 9 and 10, I will examine whether 4QMMT sustains this judgment. More importantly, I will try to dig out the implications of the fact that a common root of self-righteousness lives beneath both overt legalism and Jewish ethnocentrism. Something was *damnable* in the Galatian controversy (Gal. 1:8–9). If it was ethnocentrism, it is hard to believe that the hell-bound ethnocentrists were "keeping the law out of gratitude, as a proper response to grace." But again, I will have much more to say on this in chapters 9 and 10.

8. God's Righteousness Is the Same as His Covenant Faithfulness?

Eighth, I will mention one more thing that I think *should* be startling but no longer *is*. Wright understands "the righteousness of God" generally as meaning God's "covenant faithfulness." It does include "his impartiality, his proper dealing with sin and his helping of the helpless."²⁷ But chiefly it is "his faithfulness to his covenant promises to Abraham."²⁸ I am going to argue in chapter 3 that these descriptions stay too much on the surface. They denote some of the things righteousness *does*, but do not press down to the common root beneath these behaviors as to what God's righteousness *is*. When Paul says,

25Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 18–19.

26N. T. Wright, "4QMMT and Paul: Justification, 'Works,' and Eschatology," in *History and Exegesis: New Testament Essays in Honor of Dr. E. Earle Ellis for His 80th Birthday*, ed. Aang-Won (Aaron) Son (New York and London: T&T Clark, 2006), 106.

27N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 36.

28Ibid.

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"For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become *the righteousness of God*" (2 Cor. 5:21), one must break the back of exegesis to make this mean, "We become *the covenant faithfulness of God*." This is exactly what Wright does—in one of the most eccentric articles in all his work.²⁹ Chapter 11 is my effort to show that this unprecedented reinterpretation of 2 Corinthians 5:21 does not stand.