

Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision. By N.T. Wright. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009. 279 pp. Cloth. \$25.00.

Whether you have been following the theological battle between those that refer to themselves as New Perspective on Paul and those that are referred to as Old Perspective, Wright's newest work will give you a good taste of what the former means by justification in Paul. *Justification* serves as Wright's final volley, with Piper (and his book *The Future of Justification*) as the primary target, in a match of obscurity. While I would describe the book as a murky and arrogant diatribe ironically intended to make Wright's position clear, the hubris does serve a purpose—the book would be dreadfully boring without the verbal outbursts. He repeatedly wonders whether Piper will ever understand his views even though they have been explained (in his opinion) in numerous ways. At one point, he writes, "It is (to coin a phrase) just as if I'd never said it" (p. 59). Yet, in the end this is a battle between two authors that travel down different paths but arrive at the same misguided end. They both believe that we are justified by faith (Wright would at times define faith as faithfulness) that must be confirmed by the Holy Spirit's work (Piper, 110-11). Both emphatically defend their position as faith alone in Christ alone with the caveat that it must evidence itself in works. Thus, they both believe that works must be present in one's life to receive eternal life.

Wright believes that the Western church has long suffered from "truncated and self-centered readings...and [the church] is not well served by the inward-looking soteriologies that tangle themselves up in a web of detached texts and secondary theories..." (p. 25) He lambastes those that think the Christian life "is all about me and my salvation" (p. 23). While I do agree that the Church could be less self-centered, the NT writers make it clear that *you* and *your* eternal state do matter. Jesus asked Martha, "Do *you* believe this?" (John 11:26). The Philippian Jailer inquired of Paul and Silas, "What must *I* do to be saved?" (Acts 16:30). Paul and Silas did not chastise the jailer and tell him that he was asking the wrong question. They responded, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ..." Paul and Jesus were in agreement—one's eternal salvation was significant and personal.

Wright believes that justification means "membership in God's true family" (p. 121) and when the phrase *dikaioynē theou* occurs, he believes that it means "God's faithfulness to the covenant with Abraham, to the single-plan-through-Israel-for-the-world" (179). He believes this because of the "massive sense it makes of passage after passage, the way in which bits of Romans often omitted from discussion, or even explicitly left on one side as being irrelevant to the main drift of the discourse, suddenly come back into focus with a bang" (p. 179). Without completely rehashing Daniel Wallace's cogent response on the bible.org website, I will mention several key points. Wright's exegetical treatment of these passages leaves much to be desired. He only deals with certain passages, which seems to fly in the face of his own reasons for rejecting the "Old Perspective" views. Wright's sociological explanation, Yahweh's covenantal faithfulness, of Rom 1:17 does not adequately explain the indictment of Rom 1:18–3:20. Wright also uses Hab 2, referenced by Paul in Rom 1:17, to justify his view of God's covenantal faithfulness, yet the emphasis in Hab 2 is on the faithfulness of God's people. Thus, Paul's point is that only when God's people live *by faith* can they truly be called *faithful*.

Wright also blasts the Reformers view of justification by stating, “Part of the problem with the ‘old perspective’ on Paul is that it has followed the long mediaeval tradition” (p. 195). Wright states that he put the Greek and NIV side-by-side and he “discovered that the translators had another principle, considerably higher than the stated one: to make sure that Paul should say what the broadly Protestant and evangelical tradition said he said” and “I do know that if a church only, or mainly, relies on the NIV, it will, quite simply, never understand what Paul was talking about” (52). Yet, his views on justification began with Ambrosiaster, a late fourth century Church father. He defined *dikaiosynē theou* in Rom 1:17 as “God’s fidelity to His promises.” Yet, Ambrosiaster had no access to the Greek. He got this by reading from the Latin manuscripts.

Wright’s explanation of how someone can gain eternal life and his concept of judgment should be especially interesting to *JOTGES* readers. First, although he thinks “How can I gain eternal life?” is the wrong question (p. 146), he infers many times that one must have good works in order to have final salvation. He explains, “Paul never says that the present moral life of the Christian ‘earns’ final salvation. It looks toward it, it ‘seeks for’ it (Romans 2:7)” (p. 237). Yet, Rom 3:9-20 makes it clear that our problem is that we don’t seek good. We have all turned away. Wright also makes it clear that the “signs of the Spirit’s life must be present: if anyone doesn’t have the Spirit of Christ, that person doesn’t belong to him (Romans 8:9)...” (p. 237). Wright clearly does not differentiate between past (justification) and present (sanctification) salvation in Romans.

Nevertheless, to his credit, Wright does see a danger in assuming every instance of “salvation” refers to eternal salvation (p. 170). Unfortunately he doesn’t employ this logic in Phil 2:12-13 where Paul says, “Work out your own salvation...” Wright uses this to say, “Clearly he is not talking about the security of justification by faith. That is given, solid, emphatic, unassailable. He is talking about the journey toward the final judgment, the ultimate resurrection” (p. 152). His logic is that the Spirit will “bring it [final salvation] to completion” (Phil 1:6) in the end. Yet, Phil 1:6 is actually about participating in Paul’s ministry (cf. Phil 4:15-17) and Phil 2:12-13 is about being like Christ so that you will be *rescued* from the consequences of not conforming to Christ and instead will receive reward (cf. 1:19; 3:14; 4:17). To his credit, Wright does acknowledge the rewards view (p. 186). Nonetheless, he does not agree and often lumps the Bema Seat and the White Throne Judgment into one (pp. 184-85).

While I commend N.T. Wright for dealing with the text, the book was admittedly rushed (p. 13), at times wanders aimlessly, often seasoned with a hubris tone, and rushes blindly through the text. Whether you are a scholar or a lay teacher, if you want to learn more about the New Perspective on Paul and N.T. Wright’s views on justification, *Justification* is an important work.

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