

Why NT Wright Is Wrong



NT Wright, the Bishop of Durham, enjoys tremendous popularity among "thinking Christians". He is even getting a foothold in the secular bookstores, as evidenced by finding his latest book on display at the front of a Barnes and Noble store I recently visited. This has prompted me to write a post about him as he has not been previously discussed on this blog.

It is true that Wright's landmark book "The Resurrection of the Son of God" is widely recognized as an outstanding defense of Christ's bodily resurrection. Getting the resurrection right seems to have opened a lot of people's receptivity to Wright's subsequent books where he discusses the cross, justification, and penal substitutionary atonement (Wright even endorsed Steve Chalke's book in which Chalke described the doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement as "cosmic child abuse"). Many reformed theologians have been greatly disturbed by the theology that NT Wright's subsequent works have revealed. It may well be that Wright's scholarly defense of the resurrection turns out to be a scholarly trojan horse concealing destructive heresies.

At the heart of Wright's many troubling ideas lies his view of the doctrine of justification, particularly the component of imputed righteousness. Over and over again, Wright attacks the classic Reformed and biblical doctrine that the righteousness of Christ is imputed, or reckoned, to the sinner's account, and it is on the ground of Christ's righteousness alone that we obtain our righteous standing before God. Wright says:

If we use the language of the law court, it makes no sense whatsoever 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 we leave the notion of 'righteousness' as a law-court metaphor only, as so many have done in the past, this gives the impression of a legal transaction, a cold piece of business, almost a trick of thought performed by a God who is logical and correct but hardly one we would want to worship (p98 What St Paul Really Said).

Phil Johnson responded to these exact comments in a sermon by saying "Well, I, for one, am quite happy to worship a God who justifies the ungodly and who is both just and the justifier of the one who believes in Jesus."

John MacArthur has this to say about the importance of getting imputation right:

The cornerstone of justification is the reckoning of righteousness to the believer's account. This is the truth that sets Christian doctrine apart from every form of false religion. We call it "imputed righteousness". Apart from it salvation is utterly impossible (p197 The Gospel According to Jesus).



Here is an excerpt from an interview RC Sproul had with Michael Horton discussing the theology of N.T. Wright.

[Q] Considering Bishop N.T. Wright's doctrine of justification, do you believe he is teaching another gospel?

[A] J.I. Packer has a great line: Tom Wright foregrounds what the Bible backgrounds, and backgrounds what the Bible foregrounds—but Wright does more than that; he denies a crucial component of justification, namely imputation. So, in answer to your question, yes—in denying imputation, Wright is preaching another gospel.

There's a kind of fundamentalist approach to Scripture that Tom Wright seems to want to confront. And while he does a wonderful job of highlighting the fact that justification in Paul's writings is understood within a broader redemptive-historical framework, something not all presentations and defenses of justification do, he is not confronting historic Reformed theology. Reformed theology always has understood justification within a broader redemptive-historical framework. If he were to read the Reformers and more recent Reformed writers, such as Geerhardus Vos and Herman Ridderbos, he would clearly see that justification is placed in its proper context with the believer's union with Christ and within the whole history of redemption. Reformed writers speak of Paul's treatment of justification being inseparable from the inclusion of the Gentiles. Then, when you read Tom Wright he makes it seem as if he's the first person who saw these emphases of Paul, and that everyone else before him sort of taught the four spiritual laws. It's an incredibly naïve view.

I know Tom Wright—not well, but we had a few conversations in my Oxford days; we've gone back and forth about these issues, and he simply doesn't know historical theology. He'll actually admit that when you catch him at a few points; he'll say something along the lines of "well this really isn't my area of expertise." Well, if your thesis is that the Reformation fundamentally misunderstood Paul, it better be your area of expertise to at least know what the Reformers said—and he doesn't. So, Wright creates a straw man. And the people who are swayed by him, who are enamored of him, are also in many cases ignorant of what the Reformers actually taught, what Reformed theology has taught on these matters. And let me offer an impassioned plea to folks: There are Reformed presentations of the doctrine of justification that include some of the very salient points that Tom Wright has raised and incorporated, without denying the very crucial component of imputation as Tom Wright does. Without imputation, justification isn't good news. When he says that the Gospel is "Jesus is Lord," I reply, there are many passages that tell me "Jesus is Lord" isn't good news. There are many passages that tell me "Jesus is Lord" means to a whole lot of people "the great Avenger on

the white horse with a sword in His hand, bringing the last judgment.”
“Jesus is Lord” means that He will be your judge. On Mars Hill in Athens, Paul said there is a judgment coming, a last judgment coming, and God has given proof of this to everyone by raising Jesus from the dead. So Jesus is Lord is not necessarily good news. Only when God assures me that I am in Christ by grace alone through faith alone and kept by grace is the announcement “Jesus is Lord” good news rather than the worst possible news ([online source](#)).

It is worth noting that many false teachers survive on the basis of their lack of clarity. We tend to give people the benefit of the doubt when they speak in a foggy and unclear manner. NT Wright has become (unwittingly perhaps) the Mr Miyagi of the emergent movement for this reason. Wright communicates a different gospel in a way that is obscure enough not to be pinned down outside of orthodoxy. He is the master of answering questions by cutting a short story long and burying the initial question in the process. With this in mind, I have found a good rule of thumb when choosing our feeding grounds for Christian teaching. Sound biblical teachers are always explicitly clear about the fundamental truths of the Christian faith. Choose feeding grounds that communicate the Gospel faithfully, accurately, and clearly.