

What's Wrong with Wright: Examining the New Perspective on Paul

By Rev. Phil Johnson

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My assignment in this hour is to give a critical review of an influential book by Anglican author N.T. Wright, the Bishop of Durham. The book is titled *What Saint Paul Really Said*. It's a fairly thin paperback, fewer than 200 pages, and although Wright is a prolific writer, best known and most influential because of his massive scholarly works, this little book—which is written in a simple style for the serious lay person—has undoubtedly been the most influential (and perhaps the most controversial) of all his published works. One of its aims is to explain the so-called “New Perspective on Paul” in a clear and concise format so that lay readers can grasp the main ideas.

The book is easy to read and thought-provoking. Wright is a gifted writer. He is able to communicate effortlessly on either a scholarly or a popular level, and he moves back and forth easily between the two styles. He seems to feel as much at home writing simple material for lay people as he does when he writes massive tomes for scholars. And he's prolific. It's no easy task to keep up with everything Tom Wright publishes.

His style in this book is warm and winsome. He no doubt anticipated that he would have critics when he wrote the book, so throughout the book he makes every effort to disarm his critics. He seems to labor to leave the impression throughout the book that even though he subscribes to a “New Perspective on Paul,” he's not trying to overthrow the old Protestant confessional doctrinal standards. He claims he is not *denying* that Christ took believers' sins and they in turn get His righteousness; he's simply saying that's not what the apostle Paul meant when he spoke about *justification*. Wright claims his concerns are biblical and exegetical, not theological and dogmatic.

Evangelical readers who know Wright's reputation are likely to read him with great sympathy. In his other works, Wright has skillfully defended the historicity of Jesus and the truth of the resurrection against the skepticism and liberal scholarship of people like the “Jesus Seminar.” Lots of

evangelicals know Wright best from his excellent work in this realm of scholarly apologetics, and we do owe him a great debt for the clarity and force with which he has answered the left wing of contemporary scholarship.

Tom Wright's name and face have become recognized throughout the United Kingdom, mainly because of his frequent appearances on the BBC—where he usually takes the conservative side against the radical skeptics in the scholarly world. People who know him from the popular media usually assume that Tom Wright's evangelical credentials are impeccable. And (let's face it) he probably *does* have much more in common with evangelicalism than the average Anglican bishop these days.

But it is my strong conviction that the position Wright lays out in *What St. Paul Really Said* is not an evangelical position at all. It's a faulty and dangerous reinterpretation of Paul and it misunderstands Scripture in a way that fatally undermines the doctrine of justification by faith and the principle of *sola fide*.

I'm going to show you *why* I believe that and give you as many biblical reasons for rejecting the New Perspective on Paul as I can pack into this hour.

First, let me acknowledge up front that N. T. Wright has many acolytes and defenders who *insist* that we can embrace Wright's version of the New Perspective on Paul and still retain our confessional doctrinal standards. They contend—and Tom Wright makes this claim himself—that Wright has simply given us a bigger and more biblical understanding of the concept of justification. If you accept Wright's new reading of what Paul meant, they say, you can still keep whatever elements of your confessional theology you like. Here's what Wright himself says about the doctrine of justification on page 113: “Briefly and baldly put, if you start with the popular view of justification, you may actually lose sight of the heart of the Pauline gospel; whereas if you start with the Pauline gospel itself you will get justification in all its glory thrown in as well.”

That's a disingenuous claim. It's not true, and the proof is seen in the fact that wherever you find the influence of N. T. Wright and the New Perspective, you will find the historic formulations of the doctrine of justification under fire. Wherever you find a proponent of the New Perspective on Paul, you will find a critic of the classic Protestant stance on

sola fide. This is one of the major reasons—if not the single, central, most important reason—that suddenly, within just the past three to five years, the doctrine of justification has become a fierce battleground on so many different fronts in the broad evangelical movement.

And justification by faith is not the only issue at stake. The next major controversy you can expect to see arising out of the community that has embraced the New Perspective on Paul is will be a debate over the issue of whether Christ's sacrifice on the cross was actually a penal substitution. So the atonement will also become fodder for debate with those who embrace the New Perspective. I'll have more to say on that at the end if time permits.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let me first explain the basics of the New Perspective on Paul according to N. T. Wright from this book, and then I'll give you some biblical arguments for why I think Wright's perspective on Paul is the wrong perspective.

I'll try to give you a thumbnail overview of *What St. Paul Really Said* as we go. I'll highlight for you six distinctives of the New Perspective according to Wright. I'll be quoting a lot from Wright, and I've tried to limit my quotations to what he says in this book, so that when I quote him and simply give a page number, that's a reference from *What St. Paul Really Said*, published in the United States by Eerdmans, copyright 1997. The same book is published in England by Lion Publishing Company.

Here, according to N. T. Wright, is What St. Paul Really Said:

Wright begins by giving a sketch of the pedigree of twentieth-century scholarship on Paul. He acknowledges that the New Perspective is deeply rooted in the work of a line of scholars who were by no means evangelicals. Indeed, most of them were hostile to the evangelical perspective. He lists, for example, Albert Schweitzer, W. D. Davies, Ernst Käsemann, and E.P. Sanders as the main influences in developing the New Perspective.

Schweitzer's contribution was to emphasize the fact that Paul was a Hebrew, not a Hellenist. Paul thought in Jewish categories, not *Greek* ones. Schweitzer therefore argued that the traditional Protestant emphasis on justification by faith missed the heart of Pauline theology. Paul's emphasis was on our union with Christ [true enough], but Schweitzer argued that it is therefore wrong to think of justification by faith as a forensic declaration, the

way historic Reformed and Protestant theologians always have. Here's how Wright describes Schweitzer's view on page 14: "What mattered [to Schweitzer] was being 'in Christ', rather than the logic-chopping debates about justification, [and therefore] one was free to live out the life of Christ in new and different ways."

Notice, then: the historic Protestant understanding of justification by faith was under attack from the very birth of the earliest ideas that led to this new interpretation of the apostle Paul. Forensic justification was denied in favor of living out the life of Christ.

The next major turning point—and it was a big one—was the end of World War II, when the full scope of the Nazi Holocaust was made known. Liberal New Testament scholars desperately wanted to exonerate Paul and the other New Testament authors from the charge that they were anti-semitic. Many of them seemed to accept without much protest the allegation that the foundation for German anti-semitism was rooted in the history of Protestant opinion. And so they began to interpret the New Testament in a new light.

Building on Schweitzer's work, W. B. Davies made much of the fact that Paul himself was a Jewish Rabbi. On page 16, Wright says, "Davies' work signals a new attitude toward Judaism on the part of post-war scholarship. Until then, Judaism had been regarded by most Pauline expositors as the great exemplar of the wrong sort of religion. It represented human self-effort, legalism, prejudice and pride... . [But] with Davies the whole scene has changed ... and of course with the post-war reaction against the vile anti-Semitism which caused the Holocaust. Judaism was suddenly in vogue; Jewish ideas were regarded as good, and Hellenistic ones were labeled 'pagan' and therefore (implicitly) bad."

The next major bombshell in New Testament scholarship came in 1977, with the publication of E. P. Sanders' monumental work, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. This was an analysis of Paul based on an exhaustive study of first-century Jewish sources. It was the first major work on the New Perspective, although it was a later author, James D. G. Dunn, who first coined the expression "New Perspective" in a 1982 lecture.

Sanders, Dunn, and Wright are without doubt the three most influential living proponents of this closely-related collection of ideas known as the New Perspective on Paul. But Wright is the only one of the bunch who

might be classed, in the broadest sense of the term, evangelical. Both Sanders and Dunn reject the Pauline authorship of Paul's pastoral epistles, and both of them, together with Schweitzer, Davies, Käsemann—and virtually every name associated with the pedigree of the New Perspective—would repudiate many of the doctrines you and I would deem essential to Christianity, starting with the authority of Scripture.

Wright's point seems to be that the New Perspective on Paul has an impressive scholarly pedigree. What I want to point out is that these views are rooted in the kind of scholarship that has historically been hostile to evangelical distinctives, such as the authority and inspiration of Scripture. It is ironic, and I think not without significance, that the earliest exponents of this new expertise on Paul were all men who were happy to discard whatever portions of the Pauline writings did not fit their theories. So you have experts on Paul who reject large portions of what Paul actually wrote.

In short, this is not the kind of pedigree that ought to inspire the confidence of evangelical scholars. And I rather suspect that evangelicals would have little interest in the New Perspective at all if it were not for the work of Wright, whom many evangelical scholars respect for the work he has done in defense of the historicity of the resurrection.

Now, here are six distinctives of N.T. Wright's perspective on Paul, in a somewhat logical order. First of all, Wright begins with the assertion that New Testament scholars have badly misunderstood first-century Judaism. This misunderstanding, according to Wright, dates back at least to the early fifth century and Augustine's battle against Pelagianism.

Wright also claims that our misunderstanding of Judaism reached its zenith with Luther and the Reformers—in other words, historic Protestantism. Wright thinks evangelicals in particular have perpetuated the misunderstanding because of our systematic and theological approach to interpreting the New Testament. We're guilty of thinking in Greek categories rather than Jewish ones. We have been too prone to read Augustine's conflicts with Pelagius and Luther's conflict with Rome back into the biblical text, and that has corrupted and prejudiced our understanding of the Jewish culture surrounding Paul.

But according to Wright and all other proponents of the New Perspective on Paul, Judaism in the time of Paul did not teach any form of

works-righteousness. Judaism had nothing in common with Pelagianism. Instead, according to Sanders, Dunn, and Wright, if you study the records of second-temple Judaism, there is a strong emphasis on divine grace and a covenantal focus that rules out the notion of works-righteousness completely. Here's how Wright says it on page 32: "I am convinced, Ed Sanders is right: we have misjudged early Judaism, especially Pharisaism, if we have thought of it as an early version of Pelagianism."

He goes on to say (still on p. 32), "This point is clearly of enormous importance, but I cannot do more than repeat it in case there is any doubt: Jews like Saul of Tarsus were not interested in an abstract, timeless, ahistorical system of salvation. They were not even primarily interested in, as we say today, 'going to heaven when they died.'" (By the way, that is a ridiculous statement, and if you want to see how ridiculous it is, read [Hebrews 11:13–16](#). Those who had true faith *were* interested in going to heaven when they died. [Hebrews 11:16](#): "they desire[d] a better country, that is, an heavenly [one].")

Anyway, according to Wright, we have badly misunderstood Judaism, and that leads to a second key idea of the New Perspective. Having misunderstood Judaism, Wright says, we have therefore misinterpreted what Paul was arguing against in his polemics against the Judaizers. Obviously, if the Pharisees were not legalists, Paul could not have been arguing against legalism *per se*. He wasn't even primarily concerned with the question of how an individual can be right with God. Page 120; he writes:

Despite a long tradition to the contrary, the problem Paul addresses in Galatians is not the question of how precisely someone becomes a Christian or attains to a relationship with God. (I'm not even sure how Paul would express, in Greek, the notion of 'relationship with God', but we'll leave that aside.) The problem he addresses is: should ex-pagan converts be circumcised or not? Now this question is by no means obviously to do with the questions faced by Augustine and Pelagius, or by Luther and Erasmus. On anyone's reading, but especially within its first-century context, [the problem] has to do, quite obviously, with the question of how you define the people of God. Are they to be defined by the badges of the Jewish race, or in some other way?

Wright is explicitly acknowledging that if the New Perspective is correct, and first-century Judaism had no issue with works-righteousness, then all the

traditional interpretations of Romans, Galatians, and the other Pauline epistles must be thrown out the window, and we must go back to square one in our exegesis of the apostle Paul.

Wright's critics, including me, have pointed out that this is a pretty audacious claim. Wright is claiming, in effect, is that he is the first person in the history of the church—or at least since the time of Augustine—who has correctly understood the apostle Paul (and hence the majority of the New Testament). Wright is pretty careful not to state explicitly that he thinks this would require a complete overhaul of Protestant confessional standards. And some of Wright's Presbyterian advocates in America have denied with great passion that Wright's beliefs pose any threat whatsoever to the historic Protestant creeds. But it would seem patently obvious to me that if the whole foundation of our Pauline exegesis is brought back to square one, then we can throw out every creed and systematic theology ever written by anyone who adhered to the old perspective on Paul, and start over with our theology as well. And in practice, that is precisely what is happening. That's the very upheaval you see in the various controversies that are being addressed in this conference this weekend.

But let's move on. Here's a third idea in the logical flow of Tom Wright's New Perspective. According to Wright, Protestant scholars have historically mistaken what Paul meant when he spoke of "the works of the law."

Of course, the apostle Paul uses that phrase repeatedly. In [Galatians 2:16](#)—in that one verse alone—he uses it three times: "Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified." According to Wright, when Paul spoke of "the works of the law," he did not have in mind the moral requirements of the law of God. Rather, he was speaking of the badges of Jewish nationalism—circumcision, the dietary laws, the priesthood, the holy days, and whatnot. In other words, he's talking about the ceremonial law. Quoting again from page 120, Wright says that the question Paul is addressing in Galatians is "the question of how you define the people of God. Are they to be defined by the badges of the Jewish race, or in some other way?"

So, according to Wright, Paul *is not* deliberately ruling out works as instrumental in justification. Instead, by Wright's understanding, Paul was

merely saying that the distinctly Jewish elements of Moses' law—the ethnic badges of Judaism—those things don't guarantee covenant membership, and they cannot be used to exclude Gentiles from covenant membership. Or to put it as concisely as I can, Wright is suggesting that [Galatians 2:16](#) and other texts like it are not intended to deny that meritorious human works have any role whatsoever in justification.

That brings up a fourth major idea Wright sets forth in his book, and this one is huge. It's the source of most of the controversy surrounding Wright's book. He says that we have utterly misconstrued Paul's doctrine of justification by faith. We have read Luther into Paul, and in Wright's words (page 117), "This way of reading Romans has systematically done violence to that text for hundreds of years, and ... it is time for the text itself to be heard again." Wright goes on: "Paul may or may not agree with Augustine, Luther, or anyone else about how people come to a personal knowledge of God in Christ; but *he does not use the language of 'justification' to denote this event or process.*"

Wright insists that in the true Pauline theology, justification by faith has almost nothing to do with a person's standing before God, but it has everything to do with the corporate makeup of the covenant community. To quote Wright again (p. 119),

"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. In Sanders' terms, it 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.

So in Wright's view, justification is not about how *we* relate to God; it's about how ethnic and cultural groups relate to *one another*. Page 122: "What Paul means by justification ... is not 'how you become a Christian', so much as 'how you can tell who is a member of the covenant family.' ... [Justification] is the doctrine which insists that all who share faith in Christ belong at the same table, no matter what their racial differences."

So in Wright's estimation, justification is an ecumenical and ecclesiological issue, not a soteriological one. Page 158:

Paul's doctrine of justification by faith impels the churches, in their current fragmented state, into the ecumenical task. It cannot be right that the very doctrine which declares that all who believe in Jesus belong at the same table (Galatians 2) should be used as a way of saying that some, who define the doctrine of justification differently, belong at a different table. The doctrine of justification, in other words, is not merely a doctrine in which Catholic and Protestant might just be able to agree on, as a result of hard ecumenical endeavour. It is itself the ecumenical doctrine, the doctrine that rebukes all our petty and often culture-bound church groupings, and which declares that all who believe in Jesus belong together in the one family... . The doctrine of justification is in fact the great *ecumenical* doctrine.

Is there no soteriological or personal dimension in Wright's understanding of justification, then? There is, and this is one of the most troubling aspects of his work. Like many today who are proposing new understandings of justification, he bifurcates justification into immediate and future aspects, and pushes the personal and salvific dimensions of justification into the eschatological future, in a final judgment. Page 129: "Present justification declares, on the basis of faith, what future justification will affirm publicly ... on the basis of the entire life."

That's troubling for two reasons: first, it makes a person's covenant faithfulness—obedience—the basis of final justification, thus grounding the ultimate declaration of righteousness in the believer's own works, rather than grounding justification completely in the finished work of Christ on our behalf.

Second, by dividing justification into immediate and future aspects, Wright has unwittingly made justification into a process.

It would be simplistic and unfair to characterize Wright's view of justification as the precise equivalent of post-Reformation Roman Catholicism. But nonetheless, I think it is fair to point out that there is a definite Romanizing tendency in that view. It *does* have more in common with Trent than with Geneva.

And even though Wright's defenders have tried desperately to exonerate him from this charge, it seems clear to me that throughout his book, he is selfconsciously and deliberately rejecting the main distinctive—the material principle—of the Protestant Reformation. In Luther's words, this is the

article by which the church stands or falls. In Calvin's words, it is the principle hinge of all religion.

But Wright misses no opportunity to dis or downplay or caricature Luther and the Reformers. Their views are regularly dismissed as "western." Wright says on page 113 that the classic Reformed understanding of justification "does not do justice to the richness and precision of Paul's doctrine, and indeed distorts it at various points." While he carefully avoids saying so explicitly, Wright's main point—the direction in which his book consistently pushes readers—is a flat-out renunciation of the view of justification that sparked the Protestant Reformation.

Wright's notion of justification is clearly at odds with the doctrine of justification as understood by Luther, and Calvin, and every significant writer in the lineage of the Reformation.

And you see this most clearly in the fifth distinctive of Wright's position that I want to highlight for you. Here is idea number five, if you're making a list of these: According to Wright, Protestant and Reformed exegetes who in the mainstream of evangelical theology have all misread what Paul meant when he spoke of "the righteousness of God." According to Wright, divine righteousness is not an asset that can be imputed from God to the believer. It has nothing to do with virtue or excellence or moral rectitude that can be imputed. Instead, God's righteousness is simply His covenant faithfulness. And when Paul speaks of the believer's righteousness as a righteousness that comes from God, he is talking about covenant membership, our status in the covenant, which ultimately must be maintained by our own faithfulness.

Now if that sounds to you like implicit denial of the classic doctrine of *imputation*, I believe that is *precisely* what Wright is saying. He downplays or denies or redefines the principle of imputation at every turn. Page 98: "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."

According to Wright (p. 123), [1 Corinthians 1:30](#) is "the only passage I know of where something called 'the imputed righteousness of Christ,' a phrase more often found in post-Reformation theology and piety than in the New Testament, finds any basis in the text." Wright then goes on to argue

that if we are to claim [1 Corinthians 1:30](#) as a proof text about the imputation of Christ's righteousness, "we must also be prepared to talk of the imputed wisdom of Christ; the imputed sanctification of Christ ... " and so on.

Say what you will about Wright; he himself makes it abundantly clear that he does not like the notion of imputation, because he does not believe divine righteousness is something that can be reckoned, or put to the account, of the believer. And he is equally silent—ominously silent—about the biblical teaching that the believer's guilt was imputed to Christ and paid for on the cross.

Now, that's a longer summary than I wanted to give, but I think it's all important ground to cover. To review, these are five key distinctives of Tom Wright's perspective on Paul: 1. He says we have misunderstood first-century Judaism. 2. He says we have misinterpreted Paul's argument with the Judaizers. 3. He says we have mistaken what Paul meant by the expression "works of the law." 4. He says we have misconstrued Paul's doctrine of justification by Faith. and 5. He says we have misread what Paul meant when he spoke of "the righteousness of God."

Therefore, he says, we have got the gospel all wrong. And he says this repeatedly. Page 60: "'The gospel' is not, for Paul, a message about 'how one gets saved', in an individual and ahistorical sense." Page 41; here is how Wright 10 describes what he is convinced is a *misunderstanding* of the gospel: "In certain circles within the church ... 'the gospel' is supposed to be a description of how people get saved; of the theological mechanism whereby, in some people's language, Christ takes our sin and we his righteousness."

"Some people's language"? Wright himself disdains to use such language. He is careful to insist that he is not intolerant of people who *do* use that language. He goes on (p. 41): "I am perfectly comfortable with what people normally *mean* when they say 'the gospel'. I just don't think it's what Paul means."

But if that's not what Paul means, it's not what *Scripture* means. Is Wright suggesting that Protestants have historically proclaimed a "different gospel"? It would certainly be uncharacteristic of Tom Wright to

anathematize anyone, but he does rather clearly imply that he thinks Protestants have been getting the gospel wrong since the 16th century.

He says he has no problem with what people mean when they say “the gospel,” and he also seems to try to stop short of *explicitly denying* the imputation of Christ’s righteousness, the idea of propitiation, and the principle of penal substitution. But he *does* say that he can’t find those truths in Scripture. And if you’ll permit me to think in Greek categories for a moment, it seems to me that this is tantamount to suggesting that those doctrines are untrue.

Perhaps that’s too harsh a conclusion to draw, but frankly, if Wright had no agenda to undermine the heart of historic Protestant theology, then I would think he ought to do more to affirm the central principle of Protestant theology—the truth that Paul so succinctly states in [2 Corinthians 5:21](#): That “[God] made [Christ,] who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” The apostle Paul himself teaches everywhere that no sinner can stand before God on any ground other than the work of Christ, who “came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.” That’s the very principle of individual justification and forgiveness of sin that Tom Wright says he can’t find in Paul’s teaching.

Now I promised to give you as many biblical answers to Tom Wright’s New Perspective as time allows, and in the time that remains, that is what I want to do. Let me try to answer each one of the five ideas I have outlined with at least one or two biblical arguments:

First, there’s the notion that we have misunderstood first-century Judaism. I answer that Tom Wright has erred by lending more credence to secular scholarship than he does to the testimony of Scripture. We ought to draw our understanding of the first-century religious climate from the New Testament itself, and not from the disputed conclusions of a handful of skeptical twentieth-century scholars who refuse to bow to the authority of Scripture.

And what does Scripture say about the religion of the Jews, and the Pharisees in particular? Scripture clearly teaches that their central error was that they trusted too much in their own righteousness rather than resting their faith in the Old Testament truth that God would cover them with the garment of His own righteousness. Paul says this explicitly in [Romans 10:3](#): “They being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and seeking to establish their own

righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God.” Jesus also said it repeatedly. He constantly criticized the Pharisees for trying to justify themselves. Remember the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican? [Luke 18:9](#) says Jesus told that parable “unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others.” And the whole point of Paul’s testimony in Philippians 3 was to show that he once had “confidence in the flesh”—those are Paul’s precise words in [Philippians 3:4](#). But Paul turned from that, jettisoned his self-righteousness, regarded it as dung, and testified that his one hope now, as a Christian and a believer, was “To be found in [Christ,] not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith.”

Wright tries to do away with the force of that text by removing the word *righteousness*, and suggesting that Paul was talking about “covenant membership.” But both the context and the very words of the passage prove that what Paul was describing was the difference between two contrasting ideas of righteousness—one he calls “my own righteousness,” and the other, an alien righteousness—the righteousness of God in Christ.

Wright is simply wrong—egregiously wrong—when he suggests that self-righteousness was not a problem in first-century Judaism.

By the way, Wright is making a caricature of the historic Protestant position when he suggests that most interpreters have equated first-century Judaism with Pelagianism, the notion that sinners can pull themselves up by their own bootstraps and save themselves through their own works.

Of course Judaism had a major emphasis on grace, and the mercy of God. The Pharisees knew the Old Testament, and the idea of grace was plainly prominent in the Old Testament. But the religion of the Pharisees, and the bulk of first-century Judaism, had corrupted the Old Testament notion of grace. Their religion wasn’t like Pelagianism, which is utterly devoid of grace. But it was much like *semi-pelagianism*, which has a watered-down notion of grace, and still places too much stress on human works. Semi-pelagianism suggests that grace is enough to get your foot in the door of salvation, but you have to maintain your salvation, or your covenant membership, by your own faithfulness and obedience to the law.

Listen, even in the way Tom Wright describes first-century Judaism, it is clear that there was a semi-pelagian tendency in that religion. And frankly, one of my great concerns with Wright and others who have followed his lead (as well as people like Norman Shepherd and the Auburn Avenue movement) is this: Their notion of “covenant faithfulness,” where a person maintains his membership in the covenant by legal means, through obedience, and looks for a final justification grounded at least partly in their own works—smacks too much of neonomian legalism for my tastes. It turns the gospel into a “new law”—a toned-down legal system where the requirements are diminished so that imperfect obedience counts as true obedience. And that makes the sinner’s own works either the ground or the instrument of final justification. That kind of thinking frankly has the stench of semi-pelagianism all over it. It is a subtle form of works-righteousness.

But because that is Wright’s own theology, he can’t seem to discover the error of it in the New Testament’s condemnations of Pharisee-religion.

Not to get sidetracked: What about the second of Wright’s distinctives? What about this charge that we have misinterpreted Paul’s argument against the Judaizers?

My reply is that if Wright is correct and the only issue Paul was concerned about was racial and cultural divisions in the Galatian churches and elsewhere, the force of Paul’s response is a little bit hard to understand. If Paul’s plea was merely an echo of Rodney-King theology (“Why can’t we all just get along?”) it’s hard to see why Paul himself pronounced such harsh anathemas against the Judaizers in Galatians 1. In effect, Paul banned them from the table Wright insists ought to be open to everyone who acknowledges Christ as Lord.

And why does Paul refer to the teaching of the Judaizers as “another gospel,” if the gospel is only a proclamation of Jesus’ lordship? There’s no hint whatsoever anywhere in Scripture that the Judaizers’ doctrine contained any deliberate denial of the Lordship of Christ. But what they corrupted was the truth that justification is by *faith alone*. If Wright is right, Paul might have corrected their error, but he would have had no reason to anathematize them. After all, in Wright’s own words (from page 158),

Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith impels the churches ... into the ecumenical task... . [Justification] is itself the great ecumenical doctrine that

rebukes all our petty and often culture-bound church groupings, and which declares that all who believe in Jesus belong together in the one family.

On page 159, Wright denounces those who think justification has anything to do with the way of salvation. He says, “They have turned the doctrine into its opposite. Justification declares that all who believe in Jesus belong at the same table, no matter what their cultural or racial differences (and let’s face it, [he says,] a good many denominational distinctions ... boil down more to culture than to doctrine).”

But the Judaizers’ doctrine *certainly* boiled down to culture. If Wright’s perspective is correct, it’s pretty hard to explain how Paul could anathematize the Judaizers. And it’s also hard to explain why he traveled from one end of the Roman Empire to another waging war with an error that, frankly, was all about earthly culture and earthly relationships and therefore would have had little eternal significance.

What about this third distinctive? Wright says we have mistaken what Paul meant by the expression “works of the law.”

[Romans 3:20](#) alone blows that argument to smithereens. Paul says, “By the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin.”

It’s the *moral* law, not the *ceremonial* law, that puts our sin under a bright light and condemns us. Paul is not talking about ethnic badges here; he is talking about the moral demands of the law. And he is saying as plainly as possible that the law, with all its high moral standards, cannot possibly justify us, because it condemns us as sinners.

Not only is Paul contrasting the law with our sin, making it clear that he is at least *including* the moral law when he says the law cannot justify us; but he also implicitly contrasts justification with condemnation, making it clear that when he speaks of justification, he is talking about an individual’s standing before God at the bar of justice.

And that’s as good a place as any to move on to this fourth idea of Wright’s New Perspective. He says we have misconstrued Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith. I reply that it is he who has twisted and deformed the biblical concept of justification, and he has distorted the idea almost beyond recognition.

Remember that the starting point of Paul's gospel in [Romans 1:17](#) is the wrath of God against *sin*. This is the dilemma Paul sets up, and when Paul launches into his discussion of justification in Romans 3, that is what he is still talking about.

Wright's definition of justification (as "covenant membership") downplays and almost completely eliminates the ideas of sin and forgiveness from the doctrine of justification completely. But forgiveness and redemption from the guilt of sin are the very issues Paul is dealing with in Romans 3 and 4. And Paul's illustrations and Old Testament proofs make it clear that what he is talking about is first of all individual, not corporate, justification. He is dealing with guilt, not merely covenant status. [Romans 4:4-5](#): "Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to the one who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted ["reckoned"; "imputed to him"] for righteousness."

Verses 6-7: "Just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works: Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, And whose sins are covered."

There's no way to be faithful to the meaning of that text if you try to evacuate the notions of individual guilt and forgiveness from the idea of justification.

I could go on, but time is short. Let me just give you one other example, from the teaching of Jesus. That parable of the Pharisee and the publican in Luke 18 teaches the very thing N. T. Wright wants to deny about the doctrine of justification. This is the one place where Jesus expounds most clearly on the principle of justification. And he is fully in agreement with the classic Reformed interpretation of Paul. He ends that parable by saying in [Luke 18:14](#): "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

There you have the principle of justification apart from works of any kind. It deals with individual guilt and forgiveness, not merely corporate relationships. One man was justified; the other was condemned.

The shortage of time prohibits me from dealing with the principle of imputation, but it's an idea that Paul gives much greater weight to than any advocate of the New Perspective could ever give.

Finally, what of this notion that we have misread what Paul meant by “the righteousness of God”? I challenge you to do a careful word study in Scripture on the various Hebrew and Greek expressions that speak of righteousness. I don't dispute that Scripture often uses the expression to speak of God's covenant faithfulness. There is a germ of truth in what Tom Wright says about divine righteousness. Biblically, righteousness is an active concept, not merely a metaphysical idea. In Wright's words again (p. 98), “Righteousness is not an object, a substance, or a gas which can be passed along the courtroom.” The statement itself is true enough.

But Scripture nonetheless does speak of the *imputation* of righteousness to the believer. Jesus commands us in [Matthew 6:33](#) to “seek” God's righteousness—a notion that doesn't fit with the New Perspective definition. [Ephesians 4:24](#) connects the notion of righteousness with “true holiness.” In other words, it is an extensive moral attribute, not merely “covenant faithfulness.” Any definition of righteousness that does not include those concepts is an impoverished definition.

Righteousness is a much bigger concept than Tom Wright will acknowledge, and herein lies my chief complaint with his approach to theology: he has made righteousness a smaller concept than Scripture does. He makes sin a minor issue. He downplays the idea of atonement. He barely touches on the sinner's need for forgiveness. He diminishes the doctrine of justification by declaring it a second-order doctrine. What he ends up with is a theology that is destitute of virtually all the lofty concepts that the Protestant Reformation recovered from the barrenness of Medieval theology.

Let me close with an illustration of why I think Tom Wright's influence poses such a serious danger to sound doctrine. When I was in England last month, there was a great deal of controversy there about a new book titled *The Lost Message of Jesus*, by Steve Chalke. The Evangelical Alliance held a formal debate to discuss the merits and demerits of that book.

The book contains explicit denunciations of some fundamental doctrines of evangelical Christianity, including the notions of penal substitution and original sin.

Regarding the doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement, Chalke writes this: “John’s gospel famously declares, ‘God loved the ... world so much that he gave his only Son’ ([John 3:16](#)). How then, have we come to believe that at the cross this God of love suddenly decides to vent His anger and wrath on his own Son?”

Chalke says, “The fact is that the cross isn’t a form of cosmic child abuse—a vengeful Father, punishing his Son for an offense he has not even committed. Understandably, both people inside and outside of the Church have found this twisted version of events morally dubious and a huge barrier to faith. Deeper than that, however, is that such a concept stands in total contradiction to the statement ‘God is love.’ If the cross is a personal act of violence perpetrated by God towards humankind but borne by his Son, then it makes a mockery of Jesus’ own teaching to love your enemies.”

Every true Christian needs to understand that the kind of atonement Steve Chalke caricatures as “cosmic child abuse” is precisely what the Bible teaches. Christ did bear our guilt, and God did punish Him for it. That—and nothing less—is what the biblical word *propitiation* means. That’s how God can justify sinners without compromising His own justice, according to [Romans 3:26](#). That is also why the cross was the greatest imaginable display of God’s love to unworthy sinners.

And regarding the doctrine of original sin, Steve Chalke says this: “To see humanity as inherently evil and steeped in *original sin* instead of inherently made in God’s image and so bathed in *original goodness*, however hidden it may have become, is a serious mistake. It is this grave error that has dogged the Church in the West for centuries.”

It’s no surprise that Chalke’s book contains endorsements from Brian McLaren and Tony Campolo, the two leading advocates of every postmodern corruption of Christian doctrine.

But it may surprise you to learn that the lead endorsement on the book, at the top of the front cover, is an unqualified endorsement from the bishop of Durham, Tom Wright. Wright says this about Chalke’s book: “Steve Chalke’s new book is rooted in good scholarship, but its clear, punchy style makes it accessible to anyone and everyone. Its message is stark and exciting.”

To true evangelicals, the message of Steve Chalke's book is anything *but* exciting. It's depressing. It leaves sinners without any hope of true redemption. And it utterly corrupts the message of the Bible.

But frankly, if you embrace everything Tom Wright says, that's what you ultimately will be driven to. There's no room in the New Perspective—and no real need for—the classic view of the atonement as a vicarious payment of sin's penalty. The idea of propitiation makes too much of divine wrath; the idea of penal substitution involves the imputation of my guilt to Christ; and the Reformation understanding of justification involves all of those things. Reject the historic principle of *sola fide*, and you're left with every evil the Reformation rightly rejected.

I'm not a prophet or the son of a prophet, but I can see which way the wind is blowing. And it's my conviction that the next great controversy that will arise out of the New Perspective is going to involve an assault on the doctrine of the atonement. Steve Chalke has already put that issue on the table.

That's why I reject the New Perspective on Paul: because it's not a new perspective at all, but a recycling and repackaging of several serious errors that have already proved their spiritual bankruptcy. May God raise up men who will take the Word of God and the problem of sin seriously, and refute this error for the heresy I am convinced it is.