

CHRISTLESSNESS, APOSTASY, AND NOVELTY: MODERN VIEWS ON JUSTIFICATION

In this article we turn to justification by faith as understood in modern theology. After briefly considering some of the more prominent accounts of justification proposed by modern theologians, we turn to the 1999 *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, which represents the peak of modern ecumenical discussions of justification by faith. Finally, we conclude with an evaluation of justification as understood by N. T. (Nicholas Thomas) Wright (1948-)—the leading representative of a group of biblical scholars often identified as proponents of a “new” perspective on Paul (Campbell et al. 2:263).

Justification in Modern Theology

With the advent of the so-called Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, the Christian faith came under increasingly harsh and public attack. Many of the foundational teachings of the Christian church were ridiculed as contrary to reason or inimical to moral progress, and this onslaught included an attack on justification by faith. Many attempts by modern Christian philosophers and theologians to salvage justification by faith (e.g., those of Immanuel Kant [d. 1804] and Friedrich Schleiermacher [d. 1834]) suffer from the same fatal defect, namely, that they do so without a divine Christ. Other attempts suffer from the conviction that the language and concept of justification are no longer relevant to modern people. According to Paul Tillich (d. 1965), for instance, the language of justification is a relic of Paul’s Jewish background, having no significance in the present. The primary concern of modern people, Tillich argues, is the quest to “find meaning in a meaningless world” (3:227). In light of this primary concern, Tillich urges us to understand justification by faith to be little more than our acceptance of the fact that God has accepted our lives as meaningful. Another prominent view among modern theologians is that objective justification is God’s declaration ahead of time concerning what He will do in the future life of the believers to make them actually righteous within. According to Karl Holl (d. 1926), for instance, “In God’s verdict of justification, the final outcome, the real sanctification of man, is the decisive

point. Otherwise, His act of grace would be a caprice and a self-deception” (13). Yet another novel approach has drawn on the modern speech-act theory of John L. Austin, which distinguishes between words that describe reality (e.g., “We are married”) and words that constitute reality (e.g., “I now pronounce you husband and wife”). When God justifies, some argue (e.g., Oswald Bayer [1939-]), He is not stating a counter-factual (e.g., this sinner is righteous) but bringing about a new state of affairs, namely, the state of righteousness.

All these distinctively modern accounts of justification attempt to evade the charge that the Protestant account of justification by faith is no more than a legal fiction. We agree, of course, that justification by faith is not a legal fiction. Justification by faith is based on the believers’ union with Christ as righteousness, but none of these thinkers appeal to this union. In this way, they have offered more confusion than help, distracting the believers from the Christ who is everything in God’s operation, not least of all, the righteousness of God and of the believers (Campbell et al. 2:263-272).

The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification

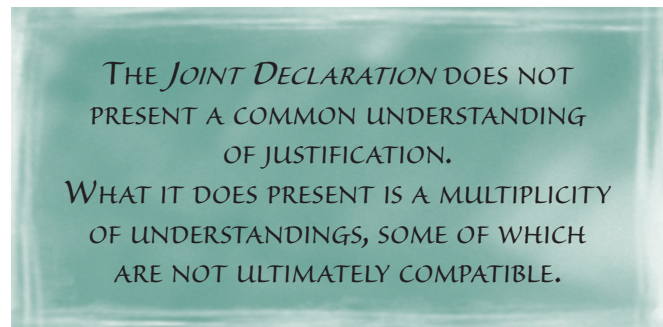
On 31 October 1999 in Augsburg, Germany, the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation ratified the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, the long-awaited culmination of several decades of ecumenical dialogue between Catholics and Lutherans and several years of intensive revision of the *Joint Declaration* itself. According to its preamble, the *Joint Declaration*’s intention is

to show that on the basis of their dialogue the subscribing Lutheran churches and the Roman Catholic Church are now able to articulate a common understanding of our justification by God’s grace through faith in Christ. It does not cover all that either church teaches about justification; it does encompass a consensus on basic truths of the doctrine of justification and shows that the remaining

differences in its explication are no longer the occasion for doctrinal condemnations. (10-11)

Whatever the *Joint Declaration*'s significance may be for the ecumenical movement and Catholic-Lutheran rapprochement, our interest is only in the content of the *Joint Declaration*, that is, in the understanding of justification that it presents. Even this merits only brief attention for the simple reason that, in our estimation, the understanding of justification presented in the declaration is unremarkable, for it bears no evidence of the believers' steadily progressing understanding of the truth.

Although the *Joint Declaration* suffers from many deficiencies, we will address only three of them in the interest of brevity. A basic deficiency, illustrative of the declaration's ambiguity, is that the declaration does not give us a clear, consistent definition of justification. What we find in the *Joint Declaration* are diverse statements about what justi-



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fication is, and what it means, with little to no explanation of how (or whether) these diverse statements can be fit together into a coherent conception of justification. This is a significant shortcoming for a declaration aimed at presenting a common understanding of justification.

A related deficiency of the *Joint Declaration* is that it skirts one of the most crucial issues related to justification: the so-called formal cause of justification, which refers to its essential content or constitutive element. This issue has been a major source of disagreement between Catholics and Lutherans (among others) since the Reformation, with Catholics insisting that justification's essence is *righteousness infused into the believers* and Lutherans contending that justification's essence is *Christ's external righteousness imputed to the believers*. This is no minor disagreement, for it concerns whether, in justification, a person is made righteous internally (through infused righteousness) or merely accounted righteous externally (through imputed righteousness). Although the *Joint Declaration* includes mention of "justification as forgiveness of sins and making righteous" (18), it ultimately evades the fundamental, centuries-old disagreement between Catholics and Lutherans concerning

the essence of justification, and the "common understanding" of justification it presents does not demonstrate a genuine resolution of this disagreement.

A third deficiency is that, in its explication of justification, the *Joint Declaration* neglects the believers' union with Christ. It thus fails to elucidate a central matter in the scriptural revelation of justification: that the believers' (objective) justification by God is based upon their union with Christ as righteousness. Although several references to the believers' union with Christ can be found in the declaration, these do little, if anything, to clarify the relationship between union and justification and to bolster the understanding(s) of justification presented in the declaration. The *Joint Declaration* does not tell us, for instance, whether the believers' union with Christ is a cause or an effect of justification. Nor does it tell us much about what this union is or how it comes about. As a result, everyone is free to read what they want into these scattered affirmations of union (or to ignore them), no real consensus is reached, and no impetus for further refinement is supplied.

Given these (and other) deficiencies, we can only conclude that the *Joint Declaration* does not present a common understanding of justification. What it does present is a multiplicity of understandings, some of which are not ultimately compatible. But even if we were to grant that the declaration expresses a common understanding of justification, we would still conclude that there is nothing remarkable about this understanding compared to those Catholic and Lutheran understandings already evaluated in this issue. As an ecumenical initiative, the *Joint Declaration* may represent an advance for the modern ecumenical movement and Catholic-Lutheran reconciliation (although this is debatable), but as a theological statement it does not represent an advance in the understanding of the scriptural revelation concerning the believers' justification by faith (Campbell et al. 2:272-278).

N. T. Wright's View of Justification by Faith

The New Perspective on Paul (NPP) is an informal name for a new interpretive approach espoused by an increasing number of biblical scholars. These scholars generally agree that previous understandings of Paul and his view of justification by faith are insufficient—even misleading—because they lack an appreciation of the historical factors of Second Temple Judaism relevant to the time in which Paul developed his understanding. The leading proponent of NPP is N. T. (Nicholas Thomas) Wright (1948-), Oxford research fellow and former bishop of Durham, England. Influenced by the work of E. P. Sanders, Wright addresses the subject of justification in a way that, he feels, has been missed by all theologians from the time of Augustine to the present, including to some extent even his fellow authors who take the NPP approach. Wright's view of the whole of God's plan

begins with and centers on God's covenant with His people Israel and how that covenant finds its ultimate fulfillment in the work of Jesus as Israel's Messiah. According to Wright, the central issue in justification is the righteousness of God and His requirement for human righteousness, but not as understood in the individualistic, go-to-heaven gospel of popular evangelicalism. God sits as Judge in a law court, but this is not a criminal court after the manner of Luther's self-centered preoccupation with sin; it is a kind of civil court hearing the "implicit lawsuit" between God and Israel concerning the latter's restoration to the Abrahamic covenant, which they have broken (*Justification* 63). In the language of covenant, therefore, *righteousness* refers not to a moral quality or virtuous acts but to acts in fulfillment of God's covenant promises. In this light the righteousness of God is simply His faithfulness to His covenant with Israel. On God's side, righteousness is manifested when, according to the stipulations of the covenant, He restores His fallen yet repenting people to full covenant status. On the human side, righteousness is covenant membership in good standing. Hence, justification is God's declaration of His civil court verdict, His vindication, that His people have been restored to good standing in the covenant family. According to this view, God's "single-plan-through-Israel-for-the-world," which faltered due to Israel's failure, came to fruition in the work of Israel's representative, Jesus the Messiah, whose death and resurrection reconstituted God's covenant community by redefining its boundaries (104). Justification is thus carried out through Christ's faithfulness to God's covenanted plan.

Wright claims that this view of God's plan fits all the puzzle pieces of Romans and Galatians in their right places, allowing us to finally understand the real meaning of the conflict over justification between first-century Judaism and the New Testament gospel. God's law court verdict (justification) now includes an added stipulation: the Gentiles also can become members of the true covenant family that God originally promised only to Abraham and his Jewish seed. In Paul's day, however, a problem arose in that the Jews, being ignorant of the enlargement of God's covenant faithfulness, "sought to establish their own righteousness" (Rom. 10:3), not in a legal or moral sense, but by the now-outdated insistence that their ethnic claim to the Torah was the unique sign of covenant membership, a claim that the Gentiles could not make. Wright finds this problem, with the solution, most dramatically expressed in Paul's exposition of justification in Romans 3. After announcing justification by faith in verses 21 through 28, Paul asks, "Or is He the God of the Jews only?" (Rom. 3:29). To Wright, the word *or* is of paramount importance, having the meaning of 'in other words...'; it is Paul's way of restating all that went before as a single, succinct rhetorical question related to covenant membership: Which people can now claim God as their own—the Jews, or Gentiles also? This was the question

that Peter had still not resolved, as indicated by his unwillingness to eat with the Gentiles (Gal. 2:11-13). Paul's opposing argument in Galatians 2 is that now "a man is not justified out of works of law, but through faith in Jesus Christ" (Gal. 2:16). For Wright, *justified* means 'declared to be members of the covenant,' and *works of law* in verse 16 refers not to a legalistic struggle for approved behavior but to the ethnically distinctive Jewish boundary-markers—the Sabbath, regulations on eating, and circumcision—that had served as the qualifying tokens for covenant membership. Paul's argument is that the Gentiles' faith in Christ serves as their own mark of admission to the covenant, just as circumcision had served for the Jews. Hence, the Gentiles too are justified. Wright asserts that his understanding of justification as God's verdict on covenant membership corrects one and a half millennia of failed expositions. Justification is wholly a matter of membership in the covenant that God made with Abraham and that Christ the Messiah opened to the Gentiles, and God's righteousness is His faithfulness to that covenant.

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We feel compelled to offer a critique of Wright's view of justification by faith, not least because his view falls far short of—and even distorts—the Pauline view while pretending faithfulness to it. Although such a critique could easily be more extensive, we will focus on four especially egregious errors in Wright's account of justification. These errors lie in the basic understanding of four great and crucial truths: the righteousness of God, the righteousness that becomes the believers', the causal role of faith in justification, and the reality of the believers' union with Christ through faith. Wright has much to say about righteousness, but we do not believe that his usage of the term comes close to the enlightened understanding that is according to the Scriptures. God is righteous, and He is righteousness itself. Righteousness is a chief attribute of God and is manifest in His ways, procedures, methods, and actions (Ezra 9:15; Psa. 11:7; 48:10; 71:19; 92:15; 145:17; Isa. 45:21; Jer. 12:1; Dan. 9:14). Moreover, Christ, the person, is the righteous One; He is called "Jesus Christ the Righteous" and "Jehovah our righteousness" (1 John 2:1; Jer. 23:5-6). Righteousness, then, is not only a divine attribute but a divine person. However,

Wright's definition of the righteousness of God, which forms the core of his thesis, is that it is God's "unswerving commitment to be faithful" to His covenant with Israel, through which He will put the world at right (*Justification* 66-67). Thus righteousness, as Wright claims, must be thought of in a supposedly Hebrew sense as proper standing within the context of a covenant. We certainly acknowledge the close relationship between God's righteousness and His faithfulness to His covenants. But this does not entail that the one is reducible to the other. Wright's account altogether misses the view of righteousness as an identity of the person of God Himself and His saving Christ, which is the deeper revelation of both the Old and New Testaments. Wright's notion implies that righteousness is not an intrinsic feature of God's very being. On this account God would not be righteous if He had not made a covenant. It seems to us much more reasonable to say that God is faithful to His covenant *because* He is righteous in His being, even righteousness itself. God is continually revealed, proclaimed, and praised in the Scriptures as righteous in His being, whether in the context of a covenant or otherwise, and so we must protest that Wright's account of God's righteousness is far too limited. All consideration of righteousness and justification must be based on the crucial understanding that righteousness in its highest definition is a divine person, not merely an attitude, manner, or action. God made Christ, the person, to be righteousness to us (1 Cor. 1:30)! It is this, the scriptural understanding of righteousness, that is intrinsic to the truth of justification, which entails our being joined through faith to Christ the righteous One. But it is a view that is thoroughly neglected by Wright.

Wright's view of the righteousness that becomes the believers' also falls short of Paul's revelation. Again, Wright's emphasis is entirely on the forming and maintaining of God's covenant with Israel. A believer's righteousness, in this view, is simply his or her status as a member of the covenant, and justification, in law court terms, is the declaration of the verdict that creates that status. It is strictly objective and need not, and ought not, be a judgment of any kind on the righteousness of the defendant in the moral or spiritual sense. In this way Wright altogether minimizes the aspect of sin, sinfulness, and God's judgment on sinful humanity in his perspective of justification. We feel that Wright's view, with its sole emphasis on covenant membership, neglects the relationship of justification to the problem of sin, corporately and individually. Although justification by faith is not the forgiveness of sins, there can be no justification without prior forgiveness. The chief attributes of God—His righteousness, holiness, and glory—place requirements on sinful human beings that they are unable to meet. Within the Ark of the Testimony was the law with its holy and righteous requirement, exposing human beings and bringing them into condemnation, and watching over the Ark were the cherubim of glory (Exo. 25:17-21). Only

by the sprinkling of the blood of the sacrifice on the propitiatory cover, signifying Christ Himself with His redemptive work on the cross, can the demands of God be satisfied. This is the argument that Paul makes in Romans 3, declaring that God set forth Christ "as a propitiation place through faith in His blood, for the demonstrating of His righteousness, . . . so that He might be righteous and the One who justifies him who is of the faith of Jesus" (Rom. 3:25-26). Justification must, and does, speak directly to the need of sinful humankind to meet the holy and righteous requirements of God. Although all genuine Christians should believe and cleave to this truth, it may still be occluded by an emphasis that misses the mark of the gospel of God, and we feel that this is precisely what Wright's New Perspective view has done. We consider this to be a defrauding to Wright's readers.

Wright's account also obscures the causal role of faith in the believers' justification. In his understanding, faith is evidentiary rather than causative. Although he affirms on a superficial level that justification is by faith, this (human) faith is simply "the recognisable badge of a renewed covenant people" marking out those who belong to God's covenant community ("Justification" 57), a community centered around the Messiah and His covenant faithfulness. This conception of faith—as a badge of covenant membership—predominates Wright's consideration of how faith pertains to justification. But Wright's evidentiary conception of faith in relation to justification falls short of the biblical revelation, which depicts a direct, causal relationship between faith and justification. This relationship is clearly seen in the experience of Abraham, whom the apostle Paul points to as the example of justification by faith. Genesis 15:6 tells us that, in response to Jehovah's speaking, Abraham "believed Jehovah, and He accounted it to him as righteousness." Abraham reacted to Jehovah's speaking by believing, and Jehovah reacted to Abraham's believing (i.e., his faith) by justifying him. Shortly after quoting this verse in Romans 4:3, Paul declares a profound truth: "But to the one who does not work, but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted as righteousness" (Rom. 4:5). Elsewhere Paul says, "Knowing that a man is not justified out of works of law, but through faith in Jesus Christ, we also have believed into Christ Jesus that we might be justified out of faith in Christ" (Gal. 2:16). Here Paul does not say that we have believed into Christ *because* we are justified; he says that we have believed *that* we might be justified. Faith does not simply evince our justification; it causes it. These and other verses (e.g., Rom. 3:26) draw a direct, unambiguous relationship between the believers' faith in Christ and their justification, revealing that, in a real sense, their justification by God issues from and hinges upon their faith in Christ. Their faith in Christ has real efficacy in their justification by God. Although Wright attempts to explain how verses such as these fit into his overarching conception of justification as covenant membership, our frank assessment is

that he fails to elucidate a most basic matter: justification is uniquely and effectively *by faith*.

Wright's account of justification by faith is further impaired by a deficient understanding of the believers' union with Christ. Wright states on several occasions that justification is "in the Messiah" (e.g., *Paul* 2:831-832, 950-951) and that justification by faith and being in Christ "must not be played off against one another, and indeed they can only be understood in relation to one another" (*Justification* 229). However, Wright's understanding of being in Christ proves hollow, and he thus fails to properly explain what bearing the believers' union with Christ has on their justification. His overwhelming tendency is to explain our being "in Messiah" in terms of our being in the covenant family that is represented and summed up by the Messiah. According to Wright, being "in Christ" means "belonging to the people of the Messiah" (*Pauline Perspectives* 109). God's justifying verdict is pronounced over those who are "in Messiah" in the sense that they are in God's covenant family, "the people-of-God-in-the-Messiah" (*Paul* 2:912). Their membership in this family ostensibly gives God the ground to justify them, thereby rendering His verdict "as to who really is a member of his people" (*Justification* 121). Whereas in our understanding, God justifies the believers because they are in Christ and thus have Him as their righteousness, in Wright's understanding, God justifies the believers because they are in His covenant family.

The errors we have spotlighted in Wright's account of justification are not inconsequential. By construing faith as a badge of covenant membership and reducing the believers' union with Christ to their membership in God's covenant family, Wright effectively hollows out the truth concerning justification by faith in Christ. His account does not leave us with a clear impression that justification is actually by faith. Neither does it leave us with a clear impression that justification is by faith because faith in Christ unites the believers to Christ. Wright's view thus obscures and deflates what the Scriptures clearly and vividly reveal: God's justification of the believers is based upon their union with Christ—the person—as righteousness through their uniting faith. It is only by being joined to Christ by faith that the believers can receive Him as their righteousness, and it is only by receiving Christ as their righteousness that the believers can be approved by God according to His standard of righteousness, which is Christ as the righteousness of God. Remarkably, Wright proffers an ostensibly Pauline view of justification by faith that ignores the salience of the believers' union with Christ through faith. This is tragic, but it is also unsurprising because, if Wright is correct, there seems to be no need at all for a person to be joined to Christ as righteousness in order to be justified. Justification, according to Wright, is "all about being declared to be a member of God's people" (*Paul* 2:856). Moreover, the righteousness

that pertains to justification is not Christ Himself or even His righteousness; it is, rather, a status of covenant membership, a status created by a speech-act of God pronounced over those who are now in His covenant family. This, allegedly, is the righteousness of which Paul speaks in Philippians 3:9, which Wright suggests that we read in the following way:

And that I may be discovered in him [Messiah], not having my own covenant status (*dikaiosynē*) defined by Torah but the status (*dikaiosynē*) which comes through the Messiah's faithfulness: the covenant status from God (*tēn ek theou dikaiosynēn*) which is given to faith. (2:831)

On Wright's reading, the righteousness that Paul attained was a covenant status given to him by God through the Messiah's faithfulness; it is this righteousness—not Christ Himself as righteousness—that is relevant to the believers' justification. We reject Wright's misreading of Paul's Epistles, not least because it misrepresents the righteousness relevant to the believers' justification. According to the Scriptures, God demands nothing less than Christ Himself as righteousness for our justification, and He gives us nothing less than Christ as righteousness for our justification when we first believe into Him.

Despite the many flaws in Wright's account of justification, his views have been widely appropriated by biblical scholars and theologians alike. This is explained in part by the fact that Wright offers a novel and more fashionable counterproposal to some of the admittedly underwhelming accounts of justification offered by many of the major Christian traditions today. But the widespread appropriation of his views also relies on the fact that Wright often flaunts his training as a biblical scholar to buffalo his reader into agreeing with him, and this too we must protest. Wright often appeals to a pervasive assumption that only biblical scholars can accurately read the text of the Scriptures because only biblical scholars have the requisite linguistic and cultural training to do so. In a chapter entitled "Rules of Engagement," for instance, Wright foists upon his readers the following principle of interpretation:

In our effort to understand Scripture itself...we are bound to read the New Testament in its own first-century context...This applies at every level—to thought-forms, rhetorical conventions, social context, implicit narratives and so on—but it applies particularly to words, not least to technical terms...

...The more we know about first-century Judaism, about the Greco-Roman world of the day, about archaeology, the Dead Sea Scrolls and so on, the more, in principle, we can be on firm ground in anchoring exegesis that might otherwise remain speculative, and at the mercy of massively anachronistic eisegesis, into the solid historical context where—if we believe in inspired Scripture in the first place—that inspiration occurred. (*Justification* 46-47)

Because all texts are produced within a particular cultural-linguistic world, Wright argues, we must read them within that cultural-linguistic world if we are to read them rightly. There is some truth in the assumption, of course, and there are many ancient texts that would appear to the modern reader impenetrable in meaning even in English translation. But this impenetrability arises from the fact that these ancient texts are largely captives of their cultural particularity. Not all ancient texts, however, are so captive. Even among the multitude of ancient secular texts, some break through the constraints of their cultural particularity to speak concerning matters of more universal concern, and so, among the plethora of ancient texts, there are some we now call classics and incorporate into precollegiate curricula without concern that the students who read them do not have the purportedly requisite training to do so. The existence of these classics, even among secular writings, tells against Wright's claim that his reading is somehow privileged above the readings of those without similar academic standing.

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Surely, someone with a doctoral degree in classical studies will better understand some of the nuance of the Platonic dialogues, and someone with a doctoral degree in the history of Elizabethan England will better understand some of the nuance of Shakespearean drama, but that does not by any stretch entail that these texts are somehow obscure to the untrained who read them. Human thoughts and human words are certainly colored by historical particularity, but the marvel of human thoughts and words is that they are able to transcend that coloring and to communicate meaning to peoples of vastly different circumstances, whether present or future.

And if this is true of merely human words, how much more it must be true of those precious words that the Christian church has always confessed to be not only the words of human beings but the Word of God Himself. The Epistle of Paul to the Galatians is certainly the word of Paul, but it is also the Word of God; it is certainly written to the Galatians, but it is also written to all of God's people spread across both space and time. Paul himself claims without apology that portions of the Old Testament were written for the sake of the New Testament believers: "These things happened to them as an example, and they were written

for our admonition, unto whom the ends of the ages have come" (1 Cor. 10:11). The inspiration of the Scriptures surely happened in time, as Wright insists above, but Paul claims here that they were inspired not only for those who read them at that time but also for us at the ends of the ages, and surely we are closer to the ends of the ages than even Paul himself was. Wright is thus wrong when he insists that "Scripture...does not exist to give authoritative answers to questions other than those it addresses—not even to the questions which emerged from especially turbulent years such as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries" (*Justification* 40). The God who inspired the Epistle to the Galatians was not unaware when He did so that there would be an Augustine, a Martin Luther, and a Witness Lee to read it down the ages. If Galatians is, as the church confesses it to be, the Word of God, then it is not only God's Word to the Galatians but also God's Word to all of us who come after them. And if He inspired these words for all of us, He surely crafted them in such a way that they are fully able to convey His meaning to His church without any extraneous materials to supply cultural context. God operated according to His sovereignty to ensure that the sacred writings were preserved, collected, edited, and translated for the sake of His people throughout the earth and throughout the centuries; He did not so operate to ensure that biblical scholars were always on hand to decipher these texts wherever they went. He did not do the latter, because He did not need to. Once the text has been accurately translated, God speaks through it, and to this all the nations, tribes, and tongues can readily testify.

That is not to say, of course, that we do not all stand in need of some to interpret God's Word. God's Word is written to each of us individually but not to each of us alone. It is rather written to the whole church of God, and so each of us stands to benefit from fellowship in the one Body of Christ, whether with those members of the Body on the earth today or with those who have gone before us through the history of biblical interpretation. In every age, God has given gifts to His Body to open up His Word for the building up of His Body, and in the other articles of this issue we have happily acknowledged our great debt to Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and others as well. These gifts were not great scholars of Second Temple Judaism and Greco-Roman culture, offering insights from the cultural backgrounds of the world in which the New Testament was produced, but enlightened interpreters of the Scriptures, bringing forth new light and truth from the text of the Scriptures themselves for the building up of the church. These gifts to the Body many have rightly regarded highly (and some too highly). But to these great gifts of the Body, Wright clearly prefers himself, claiming that "the church has indeed taken off at an oblique angle from what Paul had said, so that, yes, ever since the time of Augustine, the discussions about *what has been called* 'justification' have borne a tangled, but ultimately

only tangential, relation to what Paul was talking about" (*Justification* 80).

Wright constantly tells us that he (sometimes he alone) is simply explaining what Paul really meant, in stark contrast, he claims, to the whole history of biblical interpretation. But the Paul presented to us by Wright—his new perspective on Paul—is decidedly contrary to Paul's own self-description. Paul understood himself to be "less than the least of all saints" (Eph. 3:8), but he did not blush to say that to him it had been given to "complete the word of God, the mystery which has been hidden from the ages and from the generations but now has been manifested to His saints" (Col. 1:25-26). In contrast to this high view of Paul's significance, we must say that Wright's Paul is little more than an agent of Second Temple Judaism. Wright regularly argues that later interpretations of Paul cannot possibly be correct because no one in Paul's day was thinking about such matters. For instance, he argues, "The worry about the afterlife, and the precise qualifications for it, . . . which have shaped and formed Western readings (both Catholic and Protestant) of the New Testament, do not loom so large in the literature of Paul's contemporaries" (*Justification* 56). The particular argument about the afterlife is not what concerns us here. What does concern us is the implicit argument that for a reading of Paul to be plausible, it has to fit with the particular concerns of Paul's cultural circumstances.

This might be true if Paul's primary commission from God were to solve the conundrums of Second Temple Jewish concern. Perhaps Paul did do so, but only because he unveiled the mystery of *all* the ages, and so a ponderous study of Second Temple Judaism simply cannot be as necessary (or even as helpful) as Wright often insists. Were we to trouble Paul with questions about his cultural circumstances, we suspect he would enjoin us not to pay so much attention to his earthen vessel and to instead pay more attention to the treasure within it (2 Cor. 4:7). Paul urged us to know no one according to the flesh, and if he included in this number even Jesus Christ, he surely would have included himself as well (2 Cor. 5:16). It is thus Wright himself—rather than Augustine, Luther, or Calvin—who has spilled too much ink over matters only tangentially related to what Paul was really talking about. Paul was not a mere agent of Second Temple Judaism but a steward of the mysteries of God (1 Cor. 4:1); the justification he proclaimed was not primarily his answer to the temporary problem of how Gentiles were to be brought into the church but his answer to the eternal problem of how human beings are to stand approved before the God of all righteousness. Paul's justification is not God's declaration that Gentiles can have table fellowship with Jews apart from Jewish ceremonial law (though they certainly can!); Paul's justification is God's approval that the believers whom He has placed in Christ as righteousness now have Christ as their eternal righteousness before

Him. That piece of good news is as relevant to any cultural-linguistic world as it was to the Galatian world, and we wish that Wright would cease his campaign to seize it from all the world and make it captive to one world alone (Campbell et al. 2:278-295).

Conclusion

Having sifted through a sampling of distinctively modern accounts of justification by faith, we can conclude that these accounts lack anything of real value. There is nothing in them that we can honestly acknowledge as an advance in the understanding of justification by faith. Even worse, there are many things in these accounts that obscure or distort the truth concerning justification by faith; if ingested, such things can frustrate the believers from a proper understanding of this crucial truth. In guarding against the faulty modern accounts of justification propounded by the likes of Tillich and Wright, we do well to heed Paul's warning to the Colossians not to allow anyone to defraud them (Col. 2:18). In relation to justification by faith specifically, we as believers should not allow anyone to defraud us of Christ as our righteousness, whom we receive for our justification simply by believing into Him (Campbell et al. 2:295).

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