AN OVERVIEW AND CRITIQUE OF THE NEW PERSPECTIVE ON PAUL'S DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION

(Part One: The New Perspective Identified)

Jeffery Smith*

The great doctrine of justification by faith alone was the main point of controversy in the Protestant Reformation that began in the early 1500s. Arguably the rediscovery of this doctrine led to the Reformation. Martin Luther, an Augustinian monk stricken by a deep and abiding conviction of his sin and by the terrors of God's wrath, by God's grace was brought through the study of Scripture to embrace the truth of justification by faith alone that long had been buried under Roman Catholic superstition and priestcraft. This was the spark that began the Reformation. Luther referred to justification by faith alone as "the summary of Christian doctrine"[1] and declared it to be the article of a standing or falling church. Calvin agreed, referring to justification by faith alone as "the main hinge

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* Jeffery Smith is one of the pastors of Covenant Reformed Baptist Church, Easley SC. He is also an instructor in Soteriology and Pastoral Theology for the newly formed Reformed Baptist Seminary. These articles are edited excerpts of lectures delivered at the Midwest Reformed Baptist Pastors' Fraternal in Grand Rapids, MI on March 29-30, 2005.

[1] See Luther's exposition of Psa. 130:4, quoted by Robert Reymond, *Paul Missionary Theologian: A Survey of His Missionary Labours and Theology* (Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2000), 466. Luther also said, "The article of justification is the master and prince, the lord, the ruler, and the judge over all kinds of doctrines; it preserves and governs all church doctrine and raises up our consciences before God. Without this article the world is utter death and darkness... If the article of justification is lost, all Christian doctrine is lost at the same time... This doctrine is the head and the cornerstone. It alone begets, nourishes, builds, preserves, and defends the church of God: and without it the church of God cannot exist for one hour... In short, if this article concerning Christ—the doctrine that we are justified and saved through Him alone and consider all apart from Him damned—is not professed, all resistance and restraint are at an end. Then there is, in fact, neither measure nor limit to any heresy and error... Whoever departs from the article of justification does not know God and is an idolater... For when this article has been taken away, nothing remains but error, hypocrisy, godlessness, and idolatry, although it may seem to be the height of truth, worship of God, holiness, and so forth." Quoted by Reymond, *Paul*, 466, from *Martin Luther, What Luther Says*, compiled by Ewald M. Plass (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), 2.703-704 (2192, 2194, 2195, 2196, 2197).

on which religion turns."[2] Out of the fires and battles of the Reformation came the great Confessions and Catechisms in which the Reformed doctrine of justification is set forth so clearly. There is possibly no better statement of this doctrine than that found in the Westminster Larger Catechism. "Justification is an act of God's free grace unto sinners, in which he pardons all their sins, accepts and accounts their persons righteous in his sight; not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but only for the perfect obedience and full satisfaction of Christ, by God imputed to them, and received by faith alone.[3]

In recent years (within evangelicalism), interpretations of the apostle Paul, and particularly of his doctrine of justification by faith, have arisen that openly challenge the "Reformed" or "traditional Protestant" view.[4]

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[2] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 3.11.1.

[3] *Larger Catechism Q.70.* We have here, first, that the author of justification is God: "Justification is an act of God." Second, the source or moving cause of justification: "Justification is an act of God's free grace." Third, the recipients of justification: "It is an act of God's free grace unto sinners." Fourth, the twofold blessings of justification. Negatively, the pardon of all our sins: "Justification is an act of God's free grace unto sinners in which he pardons all their sins." Positively, the accepting and accounting our persons righteous. "And accepts and accounts their persons righteous in his sight." Fifth, the basis of justification. On what basis does the holy and just God of heaven declare the ungodly sinner righteous who trusts in Jesus? Negatively, it is "not based on anything wrought in us" or on "anything done by us." Positively, "but only for the perfect obedience and full satisfaction Christ." Christ's perfect spotless obedience, culminating in His atoning death upon the cross, is the righteousness that is the basis of our justification. Sixth, the method of justification. How does that righteousness (which is not our righteousness, but the righteousness of Christ) justify us? The answer is wrapped in the word "imputation." "But only for the perfect obedience and full satisfaction of Christ, by God imputed to them." The righteousness of Christ is reckoned to the sinner's account, credited to him, imputed to him. Seven, the instrument of justification. "By God imputed to them and received by faith alone." Faith is the alone instrument of justification. Faith is not the basis of justification, not the ground upon which we are justified; but faith is the instrument, the empty hand by which Christ and justification in Him are received. This is the Reformed doctrine of justification by faith..

[4] Actually there are several contemporary challenges to the traditional Protestant doctrine. There is a growing rejection of the doctrine of imputation even among some who write against tenants of the New Perspective. See Robert Gundry, "The Nonimputation Of Christ's Righteousness," in *Justification: What's at Stake in the Current Debates*, ed. Mark Husbands and Daniel Treier (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 17-45, and Mark Seifrid, *Christ, our Righteousness: Paul's Theology of Justification*, (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 173-177. Siefrid has done some very helpful work in refuting some of the major tenets of the NP, but included in this work are the following statements from pages 174-175: "The common Protestant formulation of justification as the 'non-imputation of sin and the imputation of

One of these interpretations is now commonly known as "the New Perspective" (NP). This is the challenge to the doctrine of justification that these articles address. For the last few years, I have been reading some of the major advocates of the NP, trying to understand them in their own words. Throughout this study I will refer often to original sources and to how NP advocates describe themselves.

There are significant difficulties in addressing this subject. First, there are different nuances in the teaching of the men found in this camp. The leading advocates of this reassessment of Paul and the doctrine of justification don't agree on every point. Added to this, it seems that some of these men can write faster than most men can read and their opinions on certain details seem to be constantly changing. Sometimes it's like trying to nail Jell-O to the wall. As J. Ligon Duncan puts it, "There is no such thing as '*the* New Perspective on Paul' if you mean a unified, uniform, comprehensive theory or mode of interpretation about which there has come to be broad consensus agreement."[5] There is a sense in which we could refer to "New Perspectives" rather than to "*the* New Perspective." At the same time, there are similarities of opinion, shared assumptions, and common traits that are characteristic of what may be

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Christ's righteousness' is understandable as a way of setting forth justification as a forensic reality, in distinction from the Tridentine claim that an infused, imparted or inherent righteousness had to be added to the grace of forgiveness. It nevertheless treats the justifying verdict of God as an immediate and isolated gift... there is no need to multiply entities within 'justification' as Protestant orthodoxy did when it added the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the forgiveness of sins. When Paul speaks of the forgiveness of sins, he has in view the whole of justification, the resurrection from the dead, not merely the erasure of our failures which must be supplemented by an 'imputed' righteousness (Rom. 4:6-8, 25). Likewise, the further distinction which some Protestants made between the imputation of Christ's active righteousness (in fulfilling the law) and his passive obedience (in dying on the cross) is unnecessary and misleading... In reducing 'justification' to a present possession of 'Christ's imputed righteousness,' Protestant divines inadvertently bruised the nerve which runs between justification and obedience."

Consider also the hypercovenantalism of the Auburn theology (see below), in which there is a tendency to join faith and works together in such a way that evangelical obedience or faithfulness becomes either the instrument or basis of justification. Consider also recent attempts to bring evangelicals and Roman Catholics together, as epitomized in the 1994 joint declaration *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millenium*, and the document *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, The Lutheran World Federation and The Roman Catholic Church* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2000).

[5] J. Ligon Duncan, "The Attractions of the New Perspective(s) on Paul" (2003) [online] 3; available from www.christianity.com.

called a "developing perspective." In that sense, we may refer to "the New Perspective," as long as we recognize that the men associated with this movement put differing twists on the details of their new way of understanding Paul.

A second difficulty is space limitation. I want to overview what the NP is saying, particularly on the doctrine of justification. Yet I hardly can leave it at that. Critique and even refutation of some of its major tenets also is needed. I wish that I could do that thoroughly, but that is too much for these short articles. It is even impossible to do a detailed exposition of the relevant biblical passages in such limited space. Therefore, the best that I can do is to critique the NP in a summary way, pointing to the main lines of biblical argument against the NP's major tenets.[6] I also identify some of the books that I've found most helpful.[7] My goal therefore is to focus on those aspects of the NP that touch most directly on the doctrine of justification. And I at least want to point the way to how its errors can be exposed and refuted.

The New Perspective Identified

Like most theological movements, the NP did not develop in a vacuum. Much attention could be given to its forerunners and to the social and

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[6] To illustrate the difficulty that I feel, Guy Waters' 212 page book, *Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul* is one of the best, most thorough overviews and responses to the NP from a Reformed position that I have read. But his book is material revised from 20 hours of lectures that Waters gave on the subject and still one could argue that it's only an overview. So what he could only cover in 20 hours, I certainly can't cover in exhaustive detail in these few articles. There is a sense in which a thorough interaction and refutation of the NP would involve a detailed exposition of the entire doctrine of justification. Nearly every aspect and element of that doctrine is affected and distorted by the NP's understanding.

[7] I would especially recommend (as very readable introductions to, overviews of, or critiques of the NP) Guy Waters, *Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 2004); Philip Eveson, *The Great Exchange: Justification by faith alone—in light of recent thought*, (Surrey, UK: Day One Publications, 1996); Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: the 'Lutheran' Paul and his Critics*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004). Also, see Peter O'Brien, "Was Paul a Covenantal Nomist" in *Justification And Variegated Nomism vol. 2: The Paradoxes of Paul*, eds. D.A. Carson, Peter O'Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004). See also Duncan, *Attractions*, referenced above. For a good summary of the NP from one of its advocates, see Mark Mattison, "A Summary of the New Perspective on Paul", 2004 [online], accessed from www.paulpage.com. The Paul Page is an Internet site devoted to the NP and contains many articles pro and con.

theological trends that gave rise to it. We don't have space for that;[8] but, passing over these things, we begin with the NP's leading proponents.

1. Leading Proponents of the NP

Krister Stendahl

Krister Stendahl is a Lutheran scholar who, in his influential essay, *The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West*,[9] argued that the tendency of western culture since the days of Augustine has been to misread Paul as though he developed his doctrine as the answer to a troubled conscience. He writes:

> This problem becomes acute when one tries to picture the function and manifestation of introspection in the life and writings of the Apostle Paul. It is more acute since it is exactly at this point that Western interpreters have found the common denominator between Paul and the experience of man, since Paul's statements about 'justification by faith' have been hailed as the answer to the problem which faces the ruthlessly honest man in his practice of introspection. Especially in Protestant Christianity—which however, at this point has its roots in Augustine and in the piety of the Middle Ages—the Pauline awareness of sin has been interpreted in the light of Luther's struggle with his conscience. But it is exactly at that point that we can discern the most drastic difference between Luther and Paul, between the 1st century and the 16th, and, perhaps between Eastern and Western Christianity.[10]

Stendahl argues that the interpretation of Paul imposed on the Scriptures by the so-called "introspective conscience of the West" has produced a misunderstanding of Paul's doctrine. Paul spoke of justification, not as the answer to the problem of a bad conscience before God, but to "explain why there is no reason to impose the law on the Gentiles, who

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[8] Waters does that rather thoroughly in his book on the new perspectives. In the first two chapters, he traces out various developments in the study of Paul after Luther and Calvin—from F.C. Baur and the Tubingen School, the liberal theology, the history of religions school, Albert Schweitzer, Rudolph Bultmann, W.D. Davies, and Ernst Kasemann. There is perhaps an even better overview of the various influences that flow into this perspective in Stephen Westerholm's extremely helpful book referenced above, 101-204.

[9] Krister Stendahl, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," in *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 78-96. This was first delivered as an address in 1963.

[10] Ibid., 79.

now, in God's good Messianic time, have become partakers in the fulfillment of the promises to Abraham."[11]

> Where Paul was concerned about the possibility for Gentiles to be included in the messianic community, his statements are now read as answers to the quest of assurance about man's salvation out of a common human predicament.[12]

> We should venture to suggest that the West for centuries has wrongly surmised that the biblical writers were grappling with problems which no doubt are ours, but which never entered their consciousness.[13]

Stendahl's article, "like a cloud no bigger than a man's hand, gave the promise of a coming storm."[14]

E.P. Sanders

James Dunn has written:

> If Stendahl cracked the mold of twentieth-century reconstructions of Paul's theological context, by showing how much it had been determined by Luther's quest for a gracious God, Sanders has broken it altogether by showing how different these reconstructions are from what we know of first-century Judaism from other sources.[15]

E.P Sanders was formerly professor of exegesis at Oxford and is now a member of the faculty at Duke University. In 1977, he published *Paul and Palestinian Judaism.*[16] Although others before him had made some of the same points, Sanders received a wider hearing than his predecessors. This is the foundational book out of which the NP has arisen. Sanders examines a wide variety of Jewish sources. He first surveys the early Rabbinic literature from the period between the fall of Jerusalem (AD 70) and the compilation of the Mishnah (AD 200). He

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[11] Ibid., 86.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid., 94-95.

[14] Kim Riddlebarger, "Reformed Confessionalism and the 'New Perspective' on Paul" (2002); available at http://angelfire.com/mi2/paulpage/Sahpe.html.6. Riddlebarger does not give the source of the quotation.

[15] James D.G. Dunn, "The New Perspective on Paul" in *Jesus, Paul, and the Law*, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 186.

[16] E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).

then looks at portions of the Dead Sea Scrolls and a selection of material from apocryphal and pseudepigraphical writings. From this lengthy survey, he argues that the Judaism of Paul's time was not a religion in which one must seek to gain acceptance with God through acquiring personal merit through good works. Instead, the Jews of Paul's day were taught to keep the law out of gratitude to God for His mercies. This was not in order to gain acceptance with God or in order to enter into a covenant relationship with Him. That acceptance and covenant relationship was understood as freely bestowed on them by God's grace. Rather the keeping of the law was in order *to maintain* that acceptance. "Getting in" is purely by God's grace, but "staying in" involves grateful obedience to the law—not sinless obedience, but what Sanders describes as "the intention and effort to be obedient."[17] Obedience does not earn acceptance; it simply maintains acceptance. Sanders calls this pattern of religion "covenantal nomism."

Remember the words "covenantal nomism," for they come up often in discussions about the NP. Near the conclusion of his study, Sanders summarizes covenantal nomism in the following manner:

> (1) God has chosen Israel and (2) given the law. The law implies both (3) God's promise to maintain the election and (4) the requirement to obey. (5) God rewards obedience and punishes transgression. (6) The law provides for means of atonement, and atonement results in (7) maintenance or re-establishment of the covenantal relationship. (8) All those who are maintained in the covenant by obedience, atonement and God's mercy belong to the group which will be saved.[18]

He adds, "An important interpretation of the first and last points is that election and ultimately salvation are considered to be by God's mercy rather than human achievement."[19]

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[17] Ibid., 180.

[18] Ibid., 422. On page 180 Sanders summarizes the pattern of religion in the early Rabbinic writings this way: "God has chosen Israel and Israel has accepted the election. In his role as King, God gave Israel commandments which they are to obey as best they can. Obedience is rewarded and disobedience is punished. In case of failure to obey, however, man has recourse to divinely ordained means of atonement, in all of which repentance is required. As long as he maintains his desire to stay in the covenant, he has a share in God's covenantal promises, including life in the world to come. The intention and effort to be obedient constitute the condition for remaining in the covenant, but they do not earn it."

[19] Ibid.

Now in all this, Sanders is arguing that contrary to the view of Protestant interpreters generally, first-century Palestinian Judaism was not a works-righteousness religion, in which men acquired personal merit in order to gain acceptance with God. No, it was essentially a religion of grace, i.e., a religion in which acceptance into covenant relationship with God is the gift of God's grace, not something earned by keeping the law. Attempting to keep the law, and availing oneself of repentance and various other means of atonement for one's sins, is necessary in order to maintain covenant status, but it is not the way in which we acquire covenant status. Palestinian Judaism saw that status as being given by grace. So the main point for now is that Sanders draws the conclusion that traditional Protestantism has been guilty of wrongly understanding Palestinian Judaism as a religion of works-righteousness.

Now, if Sanders' understanding of first-century Palestinian Judaism (or 2nd Temple Judaism, as it's sometimes called) is correct, this presents a problem for the traditional interpretation of Paul, particularly for his doctrine of justification. How is that? If the Judaism of Paul's time was not a religion that sought to gain acceptance with God by good works or by keeping the law, why does Paul so strongly affirm over and over that by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified? As all agree, Paul argues in Romans and in Galatians especially that works of the law cannot justify. But if the Jews of his time were not trying to be justified by keeping the law, what was the point of Paul's argument? As Douglas Moo frames the dilemma, "If no one in first-century Judaism really believed that a person could be justified by doing the law, then why deny it?"[20]

Those who accept Sanders' view of first-century Judaism offer various answers to this question. Some argue that Paul misunderstood or deliberately misrepresented Judaism for polemical purposes, that he meant to imply that the Jews were seeking justification and acceptance with God by means of law keeping, and thus that the traditional understanding of Paul is right. The problem then is that Paul himself was wrong in his representation of the Judaism of his day. It has been argued then that Paul's teaching about the law is incoherent and inconsistent and

[20] Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 212.

that he was willing even to distort his opponent's position for polemical purposes.[21]

Others have given Paul more credit, arguing that the problem in reconciling Sanders' picture of Palestinian Judaism with Paul's teaching is a failure to properly understand exactly what Paul means by "the works of the law." Supposedly understanding what he really means by this gives the clue to the true meaning of Paul's doctrine of justification and helps us to understand the real battle that Paul was fighting.

James D.G. Dunn

Dunn currently serves as the Lightfoot Professor of Divinity in the University of Durham. He coined the term "New Perspective" in a 1982 lecture that was later published in his *Jesus, Paul, and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians.*[22] Dunn has written extensively in the area of Pauline studies. Other works written by him that articulate and promote the NP are *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians,*[23] *The Theology Of Paul's Letter To The Galatians,*[24] and *The Theology of Paul the Apostle.*[25] Dunn also wrote a two volume commentary on *Romans* in the *Word Biblical Commentary*, a series which advertises itself as a repository of evangelical biblical scholarship.[26]

Dunn accepts fully Sanders' interpretation of Palestinian Judaism. He believes that Sanders proved conclusively that first-century Judaism did not teach a doctrine that salvation is earned by the merit of good works. Thus he agrees with Sanders that the Reformation understanding of Paul's doctrine of justification was wrong.

Building on Sanders' work, Dunn's major contribution to the NP is his answer to the question, "What then was Paul's controversy with the

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[21] See Waters' discussion of the interpretations of Hiekki Raisanen. *New Perspective*, 91-96. He quotes from Raisanen's work on Paul and the Law in *Wissenshaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neven Testament* 29 (Tubingen, Germany: Mohr-Siebeck, 1983).

[22] James D.G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul, and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990).

[23] James D.G. Dunn, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* (London: A.C. Black/Peabody, MA: Hendricksen, 1993).

[24] James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul's Letter to the Galatians* (Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

[25] James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

[26] James D.G. Dunn, *Romans*, 2 vols. in *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word Incorporated, 1988). Many of Dunn's conclusions in these volumes are anything but evangelical.

Jews about?" If the Jews were not trying to gain acceptance with God on the basis of obedience to the law, why does Paul keep insisting in his epistles that we are justified by faith and not by the works of the law? Dunn argues that this question's answer is found in rightly understanding what Paul is referring to when he speaks of the works of the law. I can do no better than to quote one of the friends of the NP in his summary of Dunn's teaching:

> Dunn's major contribution consists in his view that the "works of the law" Paul opposed in Galatians primarily referred to circumcision... keeping the religious calendar... and observing the dietary laws... that distinguished Jews from Gentiles. Drawing on insights from sociology, Dunn calls these particular "works of the law" the badges or boundary markers of Judaism. Paul opposed these practices because they functioned to separate people whom Christ died to bring together... In short, Paul's target was not an insistence on basic moral behavior, but on particular religious practices that differentiated Jews from Gentiles, demonstrating the former group's status as members within God's covenant.[27]

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[27] Michael Thompson, *The New Perspective on Paul* (Cambridge: Grove Books Limited, 2002), 10. Be aware that Thompson presents the NP against the background of a highly caricatured presentation of the Reformed perspective. This is common. I also have included here quotes from Dunn confirming the accuracy of this summary. See Dunn, *Jesus, Paul, and the Law*, 194. In the context, Dunn has been arguing that when Paul denied the possibility of "being justified by works of the law," he was battling the idea that God's acknowledgement of covenant status is bound up with the observance of particular Jewish boundary markers. He then underscores the following points:

1. "'Works of law' are nowhere understood here, either by his Jewish interlocutors or by Paul himself, as works which earn God's favor, as merit amassing observances. They are rather seen as badges: they are simply what membership of the covenant people involves, what mark out Jews as God's people..."

2. "More important for Reformation exegesis is the corollary that "works of the law" do not mean 'good works' in general, 'good works' in the sense disparaged by the heirs of Luther, works in the sense of self-achievement...The phrase 'works of the law' in Galatians... refers precisely to these same identity markers described above, covenant works—those regulations prescribed by the law which any good Jew would simply take for granted to describe what a good Jew did. To be a Jew was to be a member of the covenant, [it] was to observe circumcision, food laws, and Sabbath."

Dunn has since seemed to modify his position a bit in the face of criticism, yet with no substantial change. For example, in his later work, *The Theology of The Apostle Paul*, 358, he writes that the phrase "'works of the law,' does, of course, refer to all or whatever the law requires, covenantal nomism as a whole." However, he then immediately follows in the next sentence with these words, "But in a context where the relationship of Israel with other nations is at issue, certain laws would naturally come more into focus than

To summarize, Dunn agrees that the problem Paul is addressing in his doctrine of justification is not the problem of legalism. He argues that here the Reformation was wrong. Paul's antagonists were not trying to earn acceptance with God on the basis of good works. The problem that Paul is addressing is Jewish exclusivism expressed in the insistence that Gentile Christians adhere to certain boundary marking regulations such as circumcision, Sabbath, and food laws. Also, Dunn has no place in his understanding of justification for a righteousness imputed to the believer as the basis of his acceptance with God.[28] Justification is not about answering the question, "How can I, a lost sinner, be accepted by a Holy God?" Justification is about erasing ethnic boundaries between Jews and Gentiles by declaring that all who believe in Christ and are faithful to Him are in the covenant.

N.T. Wright

N.T. Wright is the Bishop of Durham, a prolific writer, and the most influential advocate of the NP among evangelicals. There are at least two reasons for Wright's influence.

First, he styles himself as an evangelical and associates with evangelicals. He also has been highly acclaimed by some evangelicals for his defending the historicity of Christ against the denials of rank

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others. We have instanced circumcision and food laws in particular." I believe that Waters summarizes Dunn's position well. After his lengthy detailed review of Dunn's writings and positions, he says: "Dunn regards 'works of the law' to have been the whole pattern of Jewish obedience to the Mosaic Law, as that pattern came to *expression* (italics mine) in certain boundary-marking ordinances: circumcision, Sabbath, dietary laws. Paul's critique then, is directed at individuals who would, in pride, cling to certain boundary markers to the exclusion, e.g., of Gentile believers. He is not concerned to address persons who by striving to obey the Mosaic Law are attempting to meet a divine moral standard in order to be justified before God." Waters, *Justification*, 116.

[28] Dunn, *Theology of Paul*, 344, says that the options of "make righteous" and "declare righteous" are a false dichotomy. "So once again the answer is not one or the other but both." Dunn, *Romans*, 41-42, "to justify: does it mean 'to make righteous' or 'to count righteous?' This is the classic dispute between Catholic and Protestant exegesis...Since the basic idea is of relationship in which God acts even for the defective partner, an action whereby God sustains the weaker partner of his covenant relationship within the relationship, the answer is really both. This is the basis of Kasemann's quite proper and influential understanding of divine righteousness as a gift which has the character of power, because God is savingly active in it."

liberalism.[29] Therefore, he has been the major conduit through which the NP has been smuggled into the evangelical arena.

The second reason for his influence is his ability to write and speak at a popular level.[30] He is at home interacting not only with intellectuals and scholars, but also with pastors and Christian laymen. Wright is a gifted communicator and his very readable presentation of the NP in his *What Saint Paul Really Said* [31] has possibly done more to popularize the NP than anything else. What then are some of the characteristics of his teaching as it relates to the doctrine of justification?[32]

First, Wright agrees with Sanders' basic interpretation of 2nd Temple Judaism. He writes, "Serious modifications may be required but I regard his basic point as established."[33] Describing this "basic point," he says, "Judaism in Paul's day was not, as has regularly been supposed, a religion of legalistic works-righteousness. If we imagine that it was, and

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[29] Duncan, *Attractions*, 11. Also Phil Johnson, in "A Defense of the Old Perspective on Paul: What Did St. Paul Really Say," transcribed from a seminar at London Reformed Baptist Seminary, meeting at the Metropolitan Tabernacle on January 10, 2004, makes this comment: "I believe his [Wright's] first published work was a chapter in a book published by Banner of Truth Trust." This may be obtained from The Paul Page on the web. I've not yet been able to confirm if his recollection is true or not.

[30] I can only speak myself for his writing ability. My comment on his speaking ability is based on second hand reference. See, e.g., Greg Strawbridge, "On the 2005 Auburn Avenue Pastors' Conference: A Reflective Review," accessed from The Paul Page (referenced above) on the web. This is an example of the almost giddy reception that Wright receives from some paedobaptists and the often superficial basis of it.

[31] N.T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Oxford: Lion Publishing, 1997). For an excellent survey and critique of this book see Ed Goodwin's thorough and insightful review presented to Sam Waldron at Midwest Center for Pastoral Studies in Owensboro, KY. 2004. Goodwin is a member of Heritage Baptist Church in Owensboro and a copy may perhaps be acquired on request. The critique addresses other troubling elements of Wright's teaching that I will not be addressing in these articles.

[32] Let me acknowledge that Wright has expressed discomfort with being grouped in with the NP. In an article defending his views, there is a heading at the beginning that says, "Wright submits his response with the caveat that he is not entirely happy being part of what could appear a monochrome 'new perspective,' since it's a complex phenomenon." Later in the article Wright says, "though I have some things in common with Sanders, and some with J.D.G. Dunn, I am by no means an uncritical 'new perspective' person." Fair enough, but in the discussion that follows I try to let Wright speak for himself when I describe his views as they touch on the doctrine of justification. See N.T. Wright, "The Shape of Justification, 2001; available online at angelfire.com/mi2/paulpage/Shape.html.

[33] Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said,* 20.

that Paul was attacking it as if it was, we will do great violence to it and to him."[34] This, he agrees, has been the error of most Protestant exegetes.

Second, Wright generally agrees with Dunn regarding "the works of the law." He defines this expression as "the badges of Jewish race"[35] and summarizes it in terms of "Sabbath, food laws, circumcision."[36]

Third, Wright argues that the traditional Reformed definition of justification is wrong. He says, "The discussions of justification in much of the history of the church, certainly since Augustine, got off on the wrong foot—at least in terms of understanding Paul—and they have stayed there ever since."[37] In another place, he says that 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.'"[38] He insists that justification is a covenant term that means to be recognized as a covenant member. In this case, to be "righteous" means to be faithful to the covenant or to be a covenant member. And to be "justified" is to be declared by God as a member of his true covenant family. Justification has nothing to do with how you become a member; it is simply the recognition that you are a member.

Wright repeatedly says that the doctrine of justification is improperly placed in the realm of soteriology. It is not about how to be saved, how to be right with God, how to attain acceptance with God. It is not about defining the gospel. Its proper place is in the realm of ecclesiology. It is about defining who the people of God are—not about how men "get in" but about how to define who "is in" God's covenant community. Justification is God declaring that all who believe are in the church and belong to the family of God.

Fourth, Wright advocates a very specific, limited understanding of the term "righteousness" or "righteous." Like other NP advocates, he argues that "the righteousness of God" should be understood as God's *covenant faithfulness.*[39] God has made covenant promises to Israel and,

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[34] Ibid., 18-19.

[35] Ibid., 120, 128-129.

[36] Ibid., 132.

[37] Ibid., 115, also see 120.

[38] Ibid., 122.

[39] The same is true of Dunn. For example, he says that the righteousness of God is "God's fulfillment of the obligations he took upon himself in creating humankind and particularly in the calling of Abraham and the choosing of Israel to be his people." *Theology of Paul*, 340-346. This broad brush equating of the righteousness of God with covenant faithfulness, and righteousness as respecting men as covenant membership, has become something of an accepted paradigm among many scholars. It is argued that

having made those promises, His righteousness is His faithfulness to His promises and to His people. It is the demonstration of His faithfulness to the covenant.[40] From the human side, "righteousness" refers to covenant membership, i.e., to be righteous is to be a member of God's covenant people. In other words, righteousness does not refer to perfect conformity to an absolute divine moral standard. Instead, a righteous man is one who is faithful to the covenant. Thus, to be declared righteous is to be recognized as a loyal covenant member.[41] Righteousness from the human

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righteousness in the OT is a relational concept connected to the covenant. God's righteousness is His saving activity and power within a covenantal framework. Piper refers to this as having become "a controlling biblical theology paradigm… that exerts a controlling effect on the exegesis of texts that clearly do not support it." John Piper, *Counted Righteous in Christ: Should We Abandon the Imputation of Christ's Righteousness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2002), 70. This concept is partly owed to the work of Ernst Kasemann, a student of Rudolph Bultmann. According to Waters (*New Perspectives*, 20-22), Kasemann argued that Pauline justification was fundamentally corporate. He argued that the righteousness of God in Paul's writings is not to be understood as a gift given by God to man but as a reference to His divine activity and covenant faithfulness to His pledge to restore His creation by His saving power. According to Kasemann, the tension between Paul's forensic and transformative righteousness language can be resolved by seeing the righteousness of God in this way. Waters summarizes, "First, Kasemann cuts the Gordian knot involved in sorting out the juridical/transformative language in Paul by resolving the language of righteousness into cosmic, saving power. In so doing, Kasemann has for all intents and purposes forfeited forensic language. Second, Kasemann, while maintaining a personal dimension to justification, clearly conceives it to be fundamentally corporate or cosmic in nature" (22). My only comment is that any theology that finds its roots in the German theological climate of the last century should be immediately suspicious to conservative evangelicals.

[40] Consider how this influences his interpretation of texts that traditionally have been understood as speaking of the righteousness of God as a righteousness that God gives to believing sinners. For example, Paul writes in Rom. 3:21-22, "But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe." According to Wright the righteousness of God here refers to God's covenant faithfulness. The covenant faithfulness of God apart from the law is revealed—even the covenant faithfulness of God through faith, or as he prefers, through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. N.T. Wright, "Romans," in *New Interpreters Bible: Acts-1Corinthians*, vol. 10, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon 2002), 469-470. His interpretation of 2 Cor. 5:21 is that when Paul speaks of Christ who knew no sin being made sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in Him, Paul is speaking of himself and his apostolic colleagues as having become in some way the living embodiment of God's covenant faithfulness. Wright, *What Saint Paul Said*, 104-115.

[41] For example, Paul writes in Phil. 3:9 that it is his concern to "be found in him (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." Here is Wright's

side simply means covenant membership, while the righteousness of God refers to His covenant faithfulness.

Fifth, Wright denies the Reformed doctrine of the imputation of the righteousness of Christ to the believer. He says, for example:

> If we use the language of the law court, it makes no sense whatever to say that the judge imputes, imparts, bequeaths, conveys or otherwise transfers his righteousness to either the plaintiff or the defendant. Righteousness is not an object, a substance or a gas which can be passed across the courtroom...To imagine the defendant somehow receiving the judge's righteousness is simply a category mistake.[42]

Sixth, in Wright's doctrine of justification, faith, instead of being the instrument by which Christ and justification are received, is effectively the basis of justification. His doctrine includes the idea that justification is based partly on the work of the Son and partly on the work of the Spirit.[43] He says that justification is the declaration that one is in the covenant or has covenant status. That declaration is based on faith, which is not the instrument by which we "get in," but the basis of the recognition that we "are in." This faith is the evidence and effect of the work of the Spirit in the heart. Thus, on the basis of the faith produced in the heart by the Spirit we are recognized as covenant members, or we are justified. One might even say that we are justified by faith alone, but

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take on the meaning of this verse in its context: [Paul] "is saying, in effect, I, though possessing covenant membership according to the flesh, did not regard that covenant membership as something to exploit; I emptied myself, sharing the death of the Messiah; wherefore God has given me the membership that really counts, in which I too will share the glory of Christ." Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 124.

[42] Ibid., 98. You may notice that this is a caricature of the Reformed doctrine and also that he fails to bring into the equation the fact that there's another person in the courtroom. Not just the judge, the plaintiff, and the defendant, but Christ (the advocate and representative and surety of the one accused) also is present. And it is by virtue of the believing sinner's union with Christ by faith as his surety and representative that His righteousness is credited to him and he is legally declared righteous. If Wright denies the imputation of Christ's righteousness in such a cavalier and caricatured manner, one wonders how he would express the reality of the imputation of believers' sins to Christ. Would he say that sin is "not an object or a substance or a gas which can be passed across the courtroom" and imagine that "the advocate somehow receiving the defendant's sin is simply a category mistake"?

[43] See N.T. Wright, "Justification: The Biblical Basis and its Relevance for Contemporary Evangelicalism" 2. This is an article that may be accessed from the Paul Page referenced earlier. It is an excerpt from *The Great Acquittal: Justification by Faith and Current Christian Thought*, ed. Gavin Reid, (London: Collins, 1980), 13ff.

certainly not in the sense that the Reformers meant this. This "new perspective" makes faith the basis of justification, at least partly, and not merely the instrument of justification. Faith is not merely the receptive instrument by which Christ and His righteousness are received. It is the badge by which we are recognized to be members of God's people.

Seven, Wright sometimes speaks of faith as amounting to the same thing as faithfulness. Faithfulness is not just a fruit and evidence of faith; it is an element of what justifying faith is. He writes, "Faith and obedience are not antithetical. They belong exactly together. Indeed, very often the word 'faith' itself could properly be translated faithfulness."[44] Faith therefore is the badge of present justification, and faith conceived of as faithfulness (or a life of covenantally faithful obedience) is the basis of continuing and future justification.[45]

This is a summary of the major teachings of the leading proponents of the NP. This isn't all that is problematic in what they teach concerning Paul; but I've limited myself to those things that relate more directly to their understanding of justification by faith. Having surveyed the leading proponents of the NP, let me summarize now its primary tenets.

2. Primary Tenets of the NP

1. First-century Judaism was a religion of grace. Characteristic of the NP is an acceptance of Sanders' argument that 2nd Temple Judaism was essentially a religion of grace and not a religion marked by a legalistic works-righteousness, as it is typically viewed in the Protestant tradition.

2. Paul's doctrine of justification addresses the problem of Jewish exclusivism, not the question of how can a sinner be right with God?[46] Dunn says, "'Justification by faith' was Paul's answer to the question: How is it that Gentiles can be equally acceptable to God as Jews?"[47] And, "The leading edge of Paul's theological thinking was the conviction

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[44] Wright, *What Saint Paul Said*, 160.

[45] See Wright, *Romans*, 420 and *What Saint Paul Said*, 129, 160.

[46] "While Paul addresses himself to the relation of Jews to Gentiles, we tend to read him as if his question was: On what grounds, on what terms, are we to be saved?... But Paul was chiefly concerned about the relation between Jews and Gentiles—and in the development of this concern he used as one of his arguments the idea of justification by faith." Stendahl, *Paul*, 3.

[47] Dunn, *Theology of Paul*, 340.

that God's purpose embraced Gentile as well as Jew, not the question of how a guilty man might find a gracious God."[48] Wright asserts:

> The Pauline doctrine of justification by faith strikes against all attempts to demarcate membership in the people of God by anything other than faith in Jesus Christ; particularly it rules out any claim to status before God based on race, class, or gender.[49]

3. Paul's expression "the works of the law" refers to Jewish boundary markers. In Dunn's words:

> 'Works of law' are what distinguish Jew from Gentile. To affirm justification by works of law is to affirm that justification is for Jews only, it is to require that Gentile believers take on the persona and practices of the Jewish people.[50]

Wright says, "Israel was determined to have her covenant membership demarcated by works of Torah, that is, by the things that kept that membership confined to Jews and to Jews only."[51] He summarizes these things in terms of Sabbath, food-laws, and circumcision.[52]

4. Righteousness terminology refers either to covenant faithfulness or to covenant membership. The righteousness of God is His covenant faithfulness, and never a righteousness that He gives to believers. The righteousness of believers refers to their covenant membership. To be a member of the covenant people is to be righteous. To be righteous is to be considered a loyal covenant member. "Righteous" does not mean that one conforms to an absolute standard of moral perfection. It means that one is a member in good standing in the community of God's people. To be justified therefore means to be declared a member in good standing of the covenant people of God.

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[48] Dunn, *Jesus, Paul, and the Law*, 232.
[49] Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 160.
[50] Dunn, *Jesus, Paul, and the Law*, 363-364.
[51] Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 130.
[52] Ibid., 132.

5. Faith is the present badge of covenant membership or the thing by which and on the basis of which we are recognized or declared to be covenant members.

6. Justification has nothing to do with the righteousness of Christ being imputed to believing sinners. It has nothing to do with the need for or the divine provision of a perfect obedience to the law of God or with His moral claims upon his creatures.

This is a general picture of what the new perspective is about. We've considered its leading proponents and primary tenets as related to the doctrine of justification. Now let's consider its growing influence.

3. Growing Influence of the NP

Not many years ago, most people had never heard of the NP, but that isn't the case now. The NP is being talked about everywhere, is all over the Internet, and is having a tremendous impact and growing influence in the theological world in general. It is impacting the Reformed world in particular.

In the Theological and Evangelical World in General [53]

Let me give a couple of examples. *The New Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Sinclair Ferguson, David Wright, and J.I. Packer, is a helpful tool; and certainly, under the editorial eye of these men, we would assume that it is a source that we can trust. But in the article on justification we read: "The question of justification is a matter of covenant membership. Who are the true children of Abraham."[54] The article on righteousness says that Luther's view that the "righteousness of God" refers to a righteousness that God gives to human beings is misleading, "for it directed attention away from the biblical notion of

[53] Edward Donnelly made these comments referring to E.P. Sanders, James Dunn, and N.T. Wright and their new perspective on justification: "The writings of these men are now percolating down out of the scholarly journals into the dictionaries, into the commentaries, into the seminaries, into the hearts and minds of the men who are being sent out to teach God's people" This quote was from a message delivered at the 2003 Southeastern Reformed Baptist Family Conference held at Bryan College in Dayton, TN. Pastor Donnelly brought four messages on the doctrine of justification. They may be obtained from Grace Reformed Baptist Church, Mebane, NC.

[54] "Justification," *The New Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 359.

God's covenant faithfulness."[55] Concerning righteousness as it relates to men, it says, "Righteousness thus comes to mean, more or less, covenant membership, with all the overtones of appropriate behavior."[56] The author of these articles is N.T. Wright. I do not intend to imply that the editors are sympathetic to the NP. In fact, I am almost certain that they are not. My point is simply to demonstrate how these ideas are creeping into evangelical literature.

Please consider one other example. I have already mentioned the *Word Biblical Commentary* series, which is promoted by its publisher as evangelical. Some of the commentaries in this set are excellent. However, the volumes on *Romans*, written by James D.G. Dunn, contain a massive exposition and interpretation of Romans from the viewpoint of the NP.

These are examples of how the writings and views of these men are trickling down into mainstream evangelicalism.

Its Influence in Reformed Circles In Particular

Many NP advocates claim to be Reformed Evangelicals. If you go to the "Paul Page" referenced earlier, a website devoted to promoting the NP, you will see that many of the articles supporting the NP, or defending aspects of it, are written by men who profess to be Reformed. There is no doubt that this teaching has influenced, to varying degrees, men that in the past we would have regarded as Reformed.

John Armstrong is editor of the *Reformation and Revival Journal.* Ironically, he is also one of the authors of the book *Justification by Faith Alone: Affirming the Doctrine by which the Church and the Individual Stands or Falls.*[57] This is an excellent book. Armstrong wrote the chapter on the sufficiency of faith for justification. However, whatever his views on justification may have been then, he is now very sympathetic to the NP, as is evident from *Reformation & Revival Journal* (11.2, Spring of

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[55] Ibid., "Righteousness," 592.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Don Kistler, ed., *Justification by Faith Alone: Affirming the Doctrine by which the Church and the Individual Stands or Falls* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1995). The five chapters are authored by John MacArthur, R.C. Sproul, Joel Beeke, John Gerstner, and John Armstrong. The book was published partly in response to the push to bring evangelicals and Roman Catholics together, as epitomized in the document *Evangelicals and Catholics Together.*

2002). The subject of that issue is "Justification: Modern Reflections."[58] It is full of articles that express sympathy with the NP or that were written by NP men. It contains two articles sympathetically discussing N.T. Wright and his teachings with respect to justification. It contains part two of an interview with Wright. And there is an article by Norman Shepherd, to whom I'll refer in a moment, and one by Don Garlington.

Don Garlington was formerly a Reformed Baptist and later a student of James Dunn and has become a leading advocate of the NP reading of Paul. Samuel Waldron has called him "one of the major conduits of 'the new perspective on Paul' into Reformed and evangelical circles"[59] Garlington unashamedly identifies himself with the NP.[60] He agrees with

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[58] John Armstrong, "Introduction," *Reformation & Revival Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 2, (Spring 2002), 7-8. Armstrong says: "Confessional Protestants, following Luther's understandable reaction against the idea that human effort contributes anything to one's acceptance before God, argue for an *exclusively* [italics his] forensic idea. Luther held that justification was granted to believing people solely on the basis of their response (*sola fide*). This response brought the imputation of Christ's merits. [Note how prominent the idea of 'merit' is in this debate]. In Luther's emphasis, stress is placed upon justification being only a legal declaration of the divine court. It has nothing to do with relational concepts. This is a declaration that says I am not guilty because of Christ's imputed righteousness for me. The result of this position has generally been to treat justification in strictly personal ways that forbid it to have anything to do with 'the works of the Spirit', union with Christ or the new covenant community." Notice the caricature of Luther in this paragraph. This is typical of the NP. Later he says: "In Paul, justification by faith is clearly a relational concept. The objections made over the centuries regarding legal fiction carry some weight. If, however, the concept is properly rooted in relationships it 'carries for Paul a dynamic nuance of a new attitude of God to human beings, as of humans to God, which in both instances leads to a chain of events'." I read that and wonder what in the world he is trying to say. Where is he going with this? It soon becomes clear as the remainder of the journal volume is full of articles sympathetic with the NP.

[59] This quote is from Dr. Waldron's unpublished doctoral dissertation, *Faith, Obedience, And Justification: Current Evangelical Departures From Sola Fide*, a dissertation presented to the faculty of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree Doctor of Philosophy, March 2005. This is a tremendous work that must be reckoned with by men like Don Garlington, Daniel Fuller, and Norman Shepherd, who use the language of *sola fide*, but as Waldron clearly demonstrates, have actually departed from the Reformed doctrine of *sola fide*.

[60] See Don Garlington, *Faith, Obedience, and Perseverance*, (Tubingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1994). Chapters 1, 3, and 4 of this book are found in the *Westminster Theological Journal*. "A Study of Justification by Faith," *Reformation and Revival Journal* 2, no.2 (Spring, 2002) and *The Obedience of Faith* (Tubingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1991). This was Garlington's doctoral dissertation. "Imputation or Union with Christ? A Response to John Piper," *Reformation and Revival Journal* 2, no.4 (Fall, 2003), 45-113. This may also be

Dunn about the nature of Paul's polemic against his Jewish opponents and about the meaning of the works of the law. Also, his understanding of the righteousness terminology of the Bible is in line with the NP understanding.

Garlington also rejects the doctrine of imputation. His response to John Piper's defense of justification in *Counted Righteous in Christ* is very revealing.[61] There Garlington argues against the doctrine of the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer. His critique of Piper is full of quotes from NP men like Sanders and Wright, and Garlington clearly expresses his agreement with them on key points. Toward the end he makes this comment:

> All the above brings me to say that my main disagreement with Piper has to do with his insistence that justification has nothing to do with liberation from sin. To reiterate from above, justification and righteousness pertain to our conformity to God's covenant, not simply a forensic status.[62]

Norman Shepherd once taught systematic theology at Westminster Seminary (Philadelphia). In the mid-1970s a controversy broke out over his teaching, particularly with reference to the doctrine of justification by faith. In 1981 he eventually was dismissed from his teaching position. He also left his presbytery, where disciplinary charges had been filed against him, and joined the Christian Reformed Church.[63] All this may seem inconsequential in 2005, except that the recent appearance of his book

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had at www.thepaulpage.com. And *An Exposition of Galatians: A New Perspective/Reformational Reading*, (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2002).

[61] Don Garlington, "Imputation Or Union With Christ?: A Response To John Piper", may be read online or downloaded from www.thepaulpage.com. See John Piper, *Counted Righteous*, referenced earlier. The book is directed against the current popular rejection of the doctrine of the imputation of Christ's righteousness to believers, particularly as given expression in Robert Gundry. It is an excellent exegetical defense of the doctrine that the believer's justification is based on the imputation of the righteousness of Christ. See my review of Piper's book in *Reformed Baptist Theological Review*, Vol.1, No.1, January 2004, 160-163.

[62] Ibid., 36.

[63] This biographical and background information is taken from David Vandrunen, "Justification By Faith In The Theology Of Norman Shepherd," *Katekomen* 14:1(2002), 23. This is a publication of Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Greenville, SC.

The Call of Grace: How the Covenant Illuminates Salvation and Evangelism brings Shepherd's views again into prominence.[64]

It is difficult, if not impossible, to establish a *direct* link between Shepherd and the NP. I know of no real evidence that he arrived at his views or that he supports his views out of the context of a study of the NP or by referring to it. Yet at the same time there are clear parallels and significant points of contact between Shepherd and the NP. We can not now take up a detailed analysis of Shepherd's teaching; however, let me point out a few things. First, consider Shepherd's understanding of the role of faith in justification. In his view, good works are not just the fruit of faith, but an essential aspect of what justifying faith is. For Shepherd, as with the NP, faith in its relationship to justification is something akin to committed covenant faithfulness. Second, he blurs any distinction between the law and the gospel. The gospel is law, the law is gospel. The law never demands anything more than faith conceived of as evangelical covenantal obedience to be accepted by God.[65]

Douglas Wilson was involved in the controversy that arose out of the 2002 and 2003 Auburn Avenue Pastors' Conferences, sponsored by the Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Monroe, LA. A resolution by the Reformed Presbyterian Church in the United States condemned the speakers at this conference for denying the doctrine of justification by faith alone and for having affinities with the NP.[66]

Are Wilson and the other speakers at these conferences proponents of the NP? I've read the transcripts of the conference sermons from 2002

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[64] Norman Shepherd, *The Call of Grace: How the Covenant Illuminates Salvation and Evangelism* (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Co., 2000).

[65] See Waldron's dissertation. It is by far the best analysis of Shepherd's theology that I know of. He also points out some alarming implications of Shepherd's theology.

[66] Here is a summary given by Fred Malone in *Reformed Baptist Theological Review* Vol. 1 No. 1, January 2004, 123:

"The RPCUS Moderator says in summary, that the AAPC has combined the teaching of Norman Shepherd and the new perspective into a heretical doctrine of justification, i.e. that justification is a process begun by baptism (upon entering the covenant) and maintained by faithful obedience leading to eventual and final justification at the final judgment. This de-emphasizes individual justification by faith alone once-for-all in time and replaces it with a corporate justification of those in the covenant. It blurs the distinction between justification and sanctification and amounts to salvation by faith plus works, although the proponents vigorously deny it." For more details see the RPCUS website at http://www.rpcus.com/aapc.htm. Also see www.chalcedon.org/counsel for further information and for a copy of "A Call To Repentance" addressed to the 2002 Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Pastors Conference by Covenant Presbytery, Reformed Presbyterian Church in the United States, June 22, 2002.

and Wilson's *Reformed Is Not Enough,*[67] written partly in response to the charges brought against him. I've looked at his response posted on the Internet in which he sets out his understanding of justification, faith, the relationship of law and gospel, baptism. etc.[68] I've read his article on the NP from his *Credenda Agenda.*[69] As with Shepherd, it would be wrong to label Wilson as NP in the fullest sense.[70] He disagrees with and argues against some of the tenets of the NP, such as the characterization of 1st century Judaism as a religion of grace. However, at the same time there are clearly aspects of the NP that he is sympathetic with and that fit very nicely with the views that he and others at the Auburn conferences advocated.

Again, the connecting points with the NP are a clouding of any distinction between the law and the gospel, as well as between the old covenant and the new. There is also a confounding of justifying faith with covenant faithfulness. There is also an understanding of the new covenant—how one "gets in" and how one "stays in," that has definite similarities to Sanders' "covenantal nomism." Their distinctive position has been referred to as Hyper-covenantalism or Federal Vision Theology. It is also referred to as Auburn Avenue theology and New Covenant Nomism. The name that I give it is *Covenant Formalism.* Its advocates argue that a Christian is to be defined objectively, not subjectively. Thus, in an objective covenantal sense, any and every baptized person is a Christian and as such is in the covenant. The covenant is entered by baptism and the baptized person is united to Christ covenantally. He is regenerated covenantally, justified covenantally, sanctified covenantally.

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[67] Douglass Wilson, *Reformed Is Not Enough: Recovering the Objectivity of the Covenant* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2002).

[68] See http://www.rpcus.com/aapc.htm.

[69] See www.credenda.org/issues/15-5thema.php.

[70] It was confirming to my own conclusion to find that Waters agrees in his *Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul.* In the chapter "What's at Stake for Reformed Christianity," in the context of discussing Shepherd and Auburn Avenue theology, he says: "Nor do we mean to say that these two parties [Shepherd and Auburn Avenue] have arrived at their conclusions through a concerted study of NPP. Shepherd for example appears to maintain traditional and non-NPP views concerning first-century Judaism. Nor do we wish to say that these parties would be equally or necessarily supportive of all aspects of NPP scholarship." 204-205. This is followed by an endnote in which he says: "These comments are all the more important in view of a not infrequent tendency within the church to apply the label 'New Perspective' to the teachings of Norman Shepherd and the theology of the Federal Vision. While Shepherd and the Federal Vision share some of the concerns expressed by the NPP, it is inaccurate to categorize the three as a single movement." 261.

As such, the Christian, who is joined to Christ covenantally, must maintain his covenant status by believing on Christ, being faithful and continuing in the covenant. The alternative is to become an apostate. Christians viewed objectively as covenant members may apostatize.[71]

It would take another series of articles to open fully and to address carefully the problems and errors of the hyper-covenantalism of Douglas Wilson. Suffice it to say that, though I would not call Wilson NP in the fullest sense of the term, there are definite similarities and sympathies at some points. As an aside, N.T. Wright was one of the guest speakers at the 2005 Auburn conference.[72] To me that says a lot about the direction that these men are going. The Auburn Avenue theology is partly based on a new tendency to define a covenant as a relationship; not merely the foundation of a relationship with God, but as the relationship itself.[73]

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[71] Waters, *New Perspectives*, 208, gives a good summary of the Auburn position concerning the objectivity of the covenant: "God mysteriously has chosen to draw many into the covenant community who are not elect in the ultimate sense and who are not destined to receive final salvation. These non-elect covenant members are truly brought to Christ, united to him in the church by baptism and receive various gracious operations of the Holy Spirit... In some sense, they were really joined to the elect people, really sanctified by Christ's blood, really recipients of new life given by the Holy Spirit. God, however, withholds from them the gift of perseverance, and all is lost. They break the gracious new covenant they entered into at baptism."

[72] See the very helpful article by Fred A. Malone in which he addresses the connections between new perspective views and Auburn hyper-covenantalism. *Justification by Faith in Contemporary Theological Perspective: A Critique of "New Covenant Nomism,"* in *Reformed Baptist Theological Review* Vol. 1, No.1, Jan. 2004, 105-132.

[73] A summary of the Auburn positions on covenant, baptism, and salvation approved by the session of the Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church may be obtained from www.monergism.com/the threshold/articles/topic/news_new perspective.html. See also an interesting article by Richard Philips, "Covenant Confusion," an address at the Philadelphia Conference on Reformation Theology (Phoenix/Indianapolis/Philadelphia, March-April, 2004), available from http://www.alliance.org. Philips points out that the Auburn Avenue theology is partly based on a new tendency to define covenant as a relationship; not merely the foundation of a relationship with God, but the relationship itself. This has resulted in a reworking of covenant theology. The main exponent according to Philips is Ralph Smith, in two books published by Canon Press, which is connected with Doug Wilson's ministry. The books are *Paradox and Truth: Rethinking Van Til on the Trinity* (2002), and *Eternal Covenant: How the Trinity Reshapes Covenant Theology*. The assumption is that covenant is the basis of unity among the three eternal Persons of the Godhead and from that assumption, and metaphysical reasoning on that assumption, a covenant is then defined as a relationship. Covenant is no longer the way God brings us into a saving relationship, but it is that to which God saves us, defined vaguely as a union in love. Based on abstract speculation, we are expected to understand

In identifying the NP, we have considered its leading proponents, its major tenets, and its growing influence. Now, we will consider its subtle appeal.

4. Its Subtle Appeal

Why is the NP so seemingly attractive to some evangelicals, even to a growing number of professedly Reformed evangelicals? Ligon Duncan offers some suggestions,[74] so does Guy Waters.[75] I'll draw from their insights and offer some thoughts of my own.

First, the NP appeals to those who are concerned to emphasize the centrality of the concept of covenant in the Bible. We agree with this concern and affirm that the divine covenants, properly understood, form the skeletal framework of redemptive history and redemptive revelation and really do hold a crucial place in our understanding of the Bible as a whole. However, today there is present in some quarters what one has called an imbalanced "covenant romanticism" that "has captured current study of Paul, in which '*the* covenant with Israel' has become the unexamined basis for resolving all questions about his soteriology."[76] We now have covenant families, covenant businesses, covenant schools,

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covenant to be simply God's gift of love in the form of relationship. Following this revisionist approach, in which the biblical structures of covenant are removed, Smith proceeds throughout *Eternal Covenant* to apply covenant to practically everything with little definition. Covenant is relationship, but it is hard to know what it is about a relationship that makes it a covenant, except that it becomes whatever Smith wants to make of it at any given time. As such, covenant serves as an ideal vehicle for Smith and his cohorts' purpose, which, it becomes clear, is a way of defining salvation in such a way as to remove the forensic theory of justification as classically understood in Reformed thought. This redefinition of covenant as relationship is especially important to the Auburn Avenue theology. Steve Schlissel asserts: "A covenant is a relationship." Douglas Wilson makes the same assertion, writing in *Credenda/Agenda*, Vol. 15, Issue 1: "A covenant is a relationship between two parties... a relation between persons." This amounts to a collapsing of the structure of covenants as long identified in God's covenants with man. All that is involved now is a mutual commitment to relationship. As a result, everything in salvation becomes synonymous with everything else. What is election? Smith says it is "the gift of covenant." Similarly, God's commands are the same as God's covenant. Smith says, "Keeping the commands is keeping the covenant." Likewise, love equals obedience equals covenant equals election. The same is true of law and of righteousness. They are covenant, which is love, which is election, which is holiness.

[74] Duncan, *The Attractions*, 11-14.

[75] Waters, *New Perspectives*, 198-204.

[76] Mark Seifrid, "In What Sense Is 'Justification' a Declaration?" *Churchman* 114, (2000), 124. As quoted by Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New*, 287, fn. 61.

covenant this and covenant that. Before we know it, we'll be able to buy covenant chewing gum and covenant deodorant. Now, the NP speaks a lot about the covenant. I've not seen much in terms of careful definition of what exactly *the* covenant is or even what *a* covenant is, but covenant is a big deal with the NP.

Many NP writers are fond of associating the Lutheran doctrine of justification with anti-Semitism. One may even argue that the NP began as a reaction against anti-Semitism, especially as displayed in the holocaust of WWII. The NP has arisen in an academic climate that stresses similarities and continuities between Judaism and Christianity.[77] This has also found a connecting point with the current reaction against Dispensationalism that is gaining force among American Evangelicals, especially the reaction against it in paedobaptist circles where there is a tendency to flatten differences between the old and new covenants.[78]

Second, the NP is attractive to some evangelicals because it seems to offer a needed corrective to Antinomianism. Wright argues that the gospel is the proclamation of the Lordship of Christ. In a sense rightly understood we agree with this. He emphasizes that it is a call to submission to Christ's Lordship in every realm of life and society. He does this, though, in the context of positing a false dichotomy. He tells us that the gospel is about Christ's Lordship, not justification. As one has rightly observed, asking "'Is the gospel about Christ's Lordship or justification by faith?' is a bit like asking the question, 'Which leg do you want me to chop off?'"[79]

Furthermore, the NP argues that in his doctrine of justification, Paul is not addressing obedience to the law as such, but Jewish exclusivism. The works of the law are Jewish boundary markers by which the Gentiles were excluded from God's covenant people. Otherwise, Jews and Christians were not at odds about the importance and place of obeying the law. Faith-obedience in Christianity, as well as in Judaism, is that faith by which alone we are justified, i.e., recognized or declared to be covenant members. It is the necessary means for maintaining covenant membership. The idea that we are justified once and for all on the basis of the righteousness of another through faith conceived of as passive reception and resting upon Christ and not active covenant devotion to

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[77] Waters, *New Perspectives*, 199.

[78] I am thinking of the extreme flattening of performed by Theonomists, some of whom seem to be especially attracted to certain aspects of the NP.

[79] Lionel Windsor, "The New Perspective on Paul: Reflections and Summaries." available at http://www.ans.com.au/~windsor/biblenew/Paul_New_Perspective_htm.

Christ leads to Antinomianism, or so we are told. The NP emphasizes the important role of obedience and faithfulness to the covenant and this has found a connecting point with evangelicals concerned about the problem of easy-believism.[80]

Third, the NP appeals to some simply because they are ignorant of what the Reformers actually taught and what the Reformed doctrine of justification actually is. Widespread historical and theological ignorance in our day leaves people open to NP teaching. As Duncan comments, "If you don't know what the Reformers said, then you are vulnerable to having someone else tell you what they said, and tell you wrong, and you'll have no way of telling the difference."[81]

Ignorance of historical theology is seen even in some of the scholars who promote the NP. When you read them you want to ask, "Has this guy ever really read Luther or Calvin?" Or "Hey, have you ever heard of guy named John Owen? He destroyed that argument over four hundred years ago." Lee Gatiss, in an article critiquing James Dunn, takes him to task for his evident lack of first hand knowledge of Luther's writings and his failure to seriously interact with Luther's own exegesis.[82]

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[80] NP advocates commonly caricature the traditional Protestant doctrine of justification. This doctrine, it is implied, completely separates faith and works as though it is not important how we live or what we do. Of course, this is a caricature of Reformed doctrine. Certainly there are lots of antinomians in our day who abuse the doctrine of justification in that way, as there were in Paul's day. But the Reformed doctrine of justification, as set forth in our confessional standards, doesn't teach that how we live doesn't matter. On the contrary our Confession (2ndLCF 11.2) says, "Faith thus receiving and resting on Christ and his righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification; yet it is not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but worketh by love." Luther especially is abused on this point. Yet it was Luther who said, "Our faith in Christ does not free us from works but from false opinions concerning works, that is from the foolish presumption that justification is acquired by works" (Luther, *Freedom*, 31:372-73, in Westerholm, 361).

[81] Duncan, *Attractions*, 13.

[82] After quoting sweeping statements that Dunn makes about Luther and his theology, Gatiss asserts "that every time Dunn quotes Luther he has gleaned the quotation (or opinion) indirectly from another writer, rather than from Luther's works themselves." Lee Gatiss, "Justified Hesitation?: J.D.G. Dunn vs. The Protestant Doctrine of Justification," in *Churchman*, 2001, at http://www.geocities.com/the_theologian/content /doctrine/dunn.html. Ligon Duncan in the article referenced above (on p. 13) also mentions an essay by Carl Trueman that speaks to this problem. He says, "Carl Trueman, who used to be at Aberdeen and who is now at Westminster Seminary, has done a good job of demonstrating the want and inaccuracy of pro-NPP historical assessments of Luther and the Reformers" (in an essay originally delivered in 2000 to the Tyndale Fellowship at Cambridge, called "A Man More Sinned Against than Sinning—the

Fourth, the NP effectively diminishes the issue of sin, a trait that is very attractive in the modern climate. The NP puts great emphasis on the social dimension of salvation. Justification is about breaking down social barriers. It's not about how a sinner who stands condemned before God's law with no righteousness of his own can find acceptance before God. As Duncan puts it, "the minute you say that justification is not about your relationship with God, it is about relationships in the covenant community, you have already diminished sin."[83] Even though some of these men would protest that the issue of forgiveness of sins is important, the reality is that their emphasis constitutes a de-emphasis of the problem of man's lost and condemned state in sin under the wrath of God. This is the problem, we are told, of that confounded "introspective conscience of the West" that we inherited from Augustine, Luther, and Calvin. This is not the problem that Paul or his hearers felt, or that he speaks to in his doctrine of justification.

Fifth, the emphasis of the NP on the social dimension of Christianity is itself a source of its attraction,[84] especially in the context of reaction to what has been called the pietistic retreat of Fundamentalism and the excessive pietism of much of Reformed Christianity.[85] We are told that American Christianity is far too concerned about the individual soul and the individual's relationship to God. The NP's emphasis on the relational and community aspect of Christianity is viewed as refreshing.[86]

Portrait of Martin Luther in Contemporary New Testament Scholarship: Some Casual Observations of a Mere Historian," Trueman shows the deficiency of the NP's account of the Reformers' teaching on Paul, the law and justification. This is available online at http://www.crcchico.com/covenant/trueman.html. This ignorance is not only a matter of historical ignorance of historical theology by N.T. specialists. There is great deal of ignorance of the Bible in the average evangelical church and therefore of what the Bible teaches about justification. I preached a series of sermons a few years ago in our church on the doctrine of justification and referred to it as the doctrine everybody thinks they know but so few people really do. Due to the fact that there is so little doctrinal preaching in our day and so little sound exegetical and expositional preaching in our day, American evangelicals are susceptible to whatever comes down the pipe, including the NP.

[83] Duncan, *Attractions*, 13.

[84] Ibid., 11.

[85] Waters, *New Perspective*, 200-201.

[86] Case in point, Andrew Sandlin, "The Biblical Perspective on Paul—the Real Test of the New Perspective" (Dec. 16, 2003). I accessed this article from the Paul Page. Sandlin writes: "It should come as no surprise that we proponents of Christian culture should be attracted to the NP — attracted, I might add, because we believe it draws close to the Biblical picture. For one thing, it softens the radical Gospel-Law distinction that usually (though not always) reduces to a "two-kingdom" theory—the Church as the realm

Sixth, the NP, particularly as developed by N.T. Wright, appeals to evangelicals who wish to take the Bible seriously while maintaining credibility in the mainstream academic world. Wright professes to take the Bible seriously and to derive his views from the exposition of Scripture. Yet he does so in a way that allows him to embrace commonly held hermeneutical presuppositions from the less than evangelical world of biblical scholarship. Thus, if you want to claim to be an evangelical who believes the Bible and yet at the same time have a hankering for academic accolades and acceptance, N.T. Wright can be attractive.[87]

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of grace (Gospel) and society as the realm of nature (Law). As Karl Barth correctly noted in his famous essay on Gospel and Law, it was precisely this sharp Gospel-Law distinction that propelled the collapse of orthodox Protestantism in the face of Nazi Germany. The NP, conversely, militates against social antinomianism. It exalts the Law, though never at the expense of the Gospel. For another thing, the NP champions the Lordship of Christ as a (perhaps the) central message of the Faith. In correctly identifying the Gospel as the message of the Lordship of Christ, Tom Wright and others open the way to a full-orbed Gospel whose goal is the subordination of all things—not merely "spiritual" things—to the reign of Jesus Christ. Art, music, education, politics, technology,—these and all other facets of life must fall within the purview of the Gospel, that is, the rule of Jesus in the world."

[87] Really the whole development of this new perspective is a further testimony to the danger of theological study divorced from the life and accountability of the church. This may not be so much the case with Wright, whose ability to appeal to the popular mind appears in part to be due to his never intentionally segregating his scholarship from his parish ministry (see Watters, 119). However, the danger does apply, I would argue, to the movement as a whole. When theological study is undertaken in a purely academic context it can be dangerous. In an article entitled, *The Influence of the German University System on Theological Literature*, Robert Dabney warns of the inherit dangers of the methods of theological study that were popular in Germany in his day, and were already then beginning to have an influence in America. Methods and tendencies have infected the traditional seminary approach in our country today even much, much more than when Dabney lived. There are two dangers of the German system that he mentions that especially caught my attention. One was the danger of what he called specialism. He means by that the danger attached to the theological scholar who devotes his life to the study of one small segment of theology. The tendency is to produce a lack of balance and disconnection from the proper relationship of that segment to the whole of biblical truth. And we see that tendency today, especially in the field of biblical theology out of which the NP has arisen. This was noted above when referring to the historical-theological ignorance manifested in many NP New Testament specialists. Another danger Dabney identifies is the pressure to do new work. There is certainly a place for pursuing a better understanding of the truth and we must not merely rely on the work of men who have gone before us. But the constant pressure felt in academic circles to do new work in order maintain academic respectability as a theological instructor can be very dangerous. Join that pressure to the native pride of the human heart that itches for the praise of men and it often leads to the development of novel and unbiblical ideas and heresies. See Robert

Seven, an important appeal of the NP is the ecumenical concern to find a solution to the division between Protestants and Roman Catholics. If you have faith in Christ, if you confess Christ as Lord, or if you are baptized, you are a member of the covenant. In a nutshell that's the doctrine of justification according to the NP. It's all about inclusion, not exclusion. The old doctrine was the bone of contention between Rome and Protestantism. But the old doctrine was wrong according to the NP, so the bone of contention is removed.

Wright, for example, is up front about the ecumenical implication of his doctrine. Consider these quotes:

> Paul's doctrine of justification 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 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 groupings, and which declares that all who believe in Jesus belong together in one family... The doctrine of justification is in fact the great *ecumenical* doctrine.[88]

> Many Christians, both in the Reformation and in the counter-Reformation traditions, have done themselves and the church a great disservice by treating the doctrine of 'justification' as central to their debates, and by supposing that it describes that system by which people attain salvation. They have turned the doctrine into its opposite. Justification declares that all who believe in Jesus Christ belong at the same table, no matter what their cultural or racial differences.[89]

Let's move now from the subtle attractions of the new perspective to consider its alarming implications.

Lewis Dabney, *Discussions of Robert Lewis Dabney*, vol. 1 (reprint ed., Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), 440-465.

[88] Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said,* 158.

[89] Ibid., 158-159.

5. Its Alarming Implications

What are the implications if this NP on justification comes to be the commonly accepted interpretation, which some argue that it already is in the general world of biblical scholarship? First, if the NP is right, then the Reformation was wrong. Luther was wrong, Calvin was wrong, all the Reformers were wrong. The Puritans were wrong, our Baptist forefathers were wrong, Bunyan was wrong, Spurgeon was wrong, our Confession of Faith is wrong, our Catechisms are wrong.[90] The whole Protestant Reformation was a big mistake.

Second, if the NP is right, our entire understanding of the Bible, of our relationship to God, of what it means to be a Christian, of the gospel itself is wrong.

Third, if our understanding and preaching of the gospel is wrong, we are under God's anathema and curse. Contrary to the NP, justification is an integral part of the biblical gospel.[91] Paul begins his exposition of the doctrine of justification in Romans with these words, "For the gospel is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it (in the gospel) the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, as it is written, the just shall live by faith." In Galatians, Paul begins his polemic or this doctrine with these burning hot words of warning:

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[90] For example, to borrow Duncan's illustration of this, let's take the *Shorter Catechism Q.33*. In answer to the question, "What is justification?" the catechism says: "Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein he pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us and received by faith alone." Now if we asked N.T. Wright to comment on that, what would he say? He would probably say something like this. There are really four problems with that statement. First, it is based on a misunderstanding of what justification is. Justification has to do primarily with how you know that you are a member of the people of God. Second, this definition introduces a concept foreign to the teaching of Paul and the N.T. as a whole–the concept of imputation. Justification is not about anything being imputed to us. Third, the writers of the Catechism put this question in the wrong section. They put it in the section that deals with soteriology, the doctrine of salvation. Justification, however, belongs in the realm of ecclesiology, the doctrine of the church. Fourth, the role of faith is misunderstood in the Catechism. It has faith as the instrument by which justification is received, as though justification has to do with how we get saved. But faith is the badge of membership of the covenant. It is the basis upon which we are justified or it is how we know that we are covenant members. We need to change the Catechism if Wright is right.

[91] Wright says, e.g., "By 'the gospel' Paul does not mean 'justification by faith'... Justification is a second order doctrine." *The Shape of Justification*, 3.

> But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed. (Gal. 1:8-9)

Paul said this with reference to the gospel of justification by faith alone, which he then sets out to defend, not in an air of academic detachment, but with his heart full of flaming passion because of the eternal issues at stake.

This is not a peripheral matter, as some would have us believe. This is not a secondary matter that has to do with ecclesiology but not with soteriology. No, Paul tells us that the issue is the heart of the gospel. The glory of God and of Christ is at stake. Our entire understanding of the Bible and the gospel is at stake. The eternal destiny of the never dying souls of men is at stake. The spiritual health and peace and assurance and happiness and motivation of God's people are at stake. May God help us to consider these things with the urgency and dead seriousness that they require.