



N. T. Wright



N.T.Wright: Interview on *JUSTIFICATION: God's Plan and Paul's Vision*

InterVarsity Press: What prompted you to write *Justification*?

N. T. Wright: I'd often thought about writing a little book on justification because it's been such a hot topic over the years. But I've always had other things to do which seemed more pressing. But then when John Piper's book came out, various friends said, "You need to respond to this because people are picking it up and saying, "There you are. He has just disproved what N. T. Wright says about justification." So eventually I thought, yes. I would rather wait and do this as part of a larger project, but actually since it is such a buzz at the moment, I think it'd better be dealt with sharply as much as I can before I get the chance to do the fuller treatment, which still awaits.

IVP: Who is the audience for the book?

Wright: My hope is that this book will appeal to Christians of a wide variety of sorts, because the question of justification concerns every Christian, whether or not they realize it. There are some for whom those questions are right at the center of their traditions, and others for whom they are rather marginal. My hope is that this book would draw in readers from a wide variety of Christian contexts who would just find it stimulating and exciting and perhaps catch a new vision of what how Paul sees God's purpose for us.

IVP: You make some efforts in the book to respond to John Piper's criticisms of your perspective. Does one have to have read Piper's book to appreciate yours?

Wright: People have wondered how you can write a book which is for everybody when, in fact, it's responding to one book particularly. So I didn't want this book to be too easily dated and too easily categorized as just a response to Piper. I've taken a run at the topic from the beginning to the end, as it were, and gone through the key elements of the subject, going through all the key texts. So even if people had never heard of John Piper, they would still be able to read this book and see the subject laid out.

Most of the debate with Piper consists of footnotes so that those who want to know about

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that can chase it up. There are a few passages where he comes up in the main text as well, but that's in order to help me sharpen up a particular point in the general exposition. So I think that anyone, whether or not they've read Piper, would be able to benefit from this book.

IVP: Tell us about the analogy to the sunrise to illustrate how people have misunderstood what Paul is saying?

Wright: When I was thinking about whether or not I should write this book, one particular image kept coming to my mind, and eventually I decided I would use it as a way to get into the main topic.

Supposing you have a friend who comes over to stay who, you discover in conversation over supper, has never realized that, in fact, the earth goes round the sun rather than the sun going round the earth. And you're fascinated by this. You've never met somebody who didn't know this before. So you take some time and you explain how astronomically we know that in fact we are going round the sun, even though from our perspective it looks as though the sun is going round us. The friend is a bit puzzled about this, and actually a bit worried.

The next morning he wakes you up early and takes you for a little walk and says, "Now let's just stand here for a bit." And you're up on a hill and you see the sun coming up in all its glory. And the friend says, "There you are. You know, you have these funny theories, and I know that scientists can come up with these weird ideas sometimes. But now you've actually seen it with your own eyes. Perhaps it's better to stay with what we've always more or less believed."

That is how I have felt when people have listened to what I and many others have said about Paul, justification, the law, Abraham, Israel and so on. They've looked puzzled and a bit worried, and then they've said, "Well, yes, that's all very fine. But actually Luther and Calvin got it all right, and the Westminster Confession got it all right, so let's not worry about any of this other stuff."

The frustration is that they're not listening. They're not actually paying attention to what I and others are saying. I'm not saying I've got it all right; I'm quite sure there'll be significant flaws in what I've said. What I am saying is, Can you not actually see that what is being said is not an overthrowing of all your perceptions, but a placing of them in a larger context?

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As I was developing this illustration to get us into the book, to explain my frustration with how the debate currently is or isn't, it occurred to me that actually it's more than just an illustration of the frustration you feel. Because when people say that Paul is concerned about me and my salvation, I want to say, well, yes, you and your salvation, me and mine, these are important. But actually we mustn't make the mistake of thinking the sun goes round the earth.

We mustn't make the mistake of thinking that everything God does is just for the sake of little old me. We should rather realize that in biblical theology it is we who are circling round God; it is we who are in orbit around him. God and God's purposes for the whole creation are what matters, and we should be so lucky as to be caught up in orbit round God. That shift of perspective is actually what I think a lot of people are resisting. But resistance is futile because the Bible is about God and God's purposes before it is about me and my salvation. So that's how the whole book really gets under way.

IVP: Can you give an example of how the doctrine of justification has become something quite different from what Paul had in mind?

Wright: Part of the difficulty we face with the word *justification* is that from quite early on in church history, different theologians used this word *justification* or its Latin or Greek equivalents, *dikaio4sis* or *justificatio*, to mean things that are significantly different from what Paul means by it.

One of the most famous writers on justification in the last generation, Alister McGrath, who's an old friend of mine, says early on in his history of the doctrine of justification that the Church has actually used the word *justification* to mean something significantly different from what Paul himself meant. Because what's happened is that, perhaps even since Augustine, but certainly in the twentieth century with theologians like Karl Barth and Hans Küng, the word *justification* is used to cover the entire process of salvation from the first workings of God's grace right through everything else that has to happen—conversion, sanctification, to final glorification. The trouble is that when you use the word like that, and then come back with that in your head to read Paul, you are bound to misunderstand him. So that at one point, many theologians have used *justification* as a general term for getting saved, for being converted and all that follows from it.

This is rather like, as I say in the book, somebody who, on discovering how important the

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steering wheel is in a car, uses the phrase “steering wheel” to refer to the whole car. “You know, I’m going to take my wheel and drive down the road.” You can imagine somebody doing that, but it’s a bit misleading, because the steering wheel has a very precise function. There is more to the car than that. But saying that there’s more to the car than that doesn’t devalue the place of the steering wheel; it merely puts it in its proper context.

Equally, there are some people who have shaped the doctrine of justification as an answer to questions which were not exactly Paul’s questions, but were particularly the late medieval questions. Because in the late middle ages people had this idea that there was this thing called righteousness which you needed to acquire, and that it was basically a sort of moral quality or virtue. So if you didn’t have enough of your own, how could you get some from somewhere else?

Much of the Reformation and Post-Reformation formulations of the doctrine were answering that question about how can I get enough righteousness so that when God looks at me he’ll see that I am righteous. In a sense what, say, the Westminster Confession does is to give the right answer to the wrong question, because the question Paul is asking is not, “How can you get enough righteousness so that when God looks at you he’ll be happy with you?” but, “How can you be sure that you are a member of God’s people, that your sins are forgiven, and that therefore you are part of the covenant purposes of God which, ever since Abraham, have been the way in which God was addressing and rescuing the world?”

Some people hearing what I’ve just said might say, “It sounds pretty much the same to me,” and that’s part of the difficulty. But until you get down into the nitty-gritty of it, it’s easy just to let the words wash over your head and say, “Oh, yes, it’s more or less this. It’s more or less that.” But what we have to do when we’re reading Paul is be very precise. He uses his words in a very precise way to mean very precise things. And until we’ve done business with that precision, we haven’t actually taken him seriously.

IVP: So you would say we have been asking questions that arose later, questions that Paul wasn’t actually trying to answer in his own context. What is the distinction between the *concept* of justification and the *doctrine* of justification? And why is that important?

Wright: When we read Paul and grapple with what he meant by the concept of justification, we find ourselves, I believe, straight back in a world of first-century Judaism,

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wrestling with the question, How is God faithful to the promises to Abraham? How has that come about that through Jesus Christ God has done what he always promised? And how does that work out in terms of the mission of the church and the individual coming to faith, and so on?

Part of the difficulty we face is that when the Church has formulated particular doctrines later on in church history, it hasn't always had regard to the particular concerns that were there in the texts in the first place. An example of this might be in the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, say, that the Holy Spirit in the New Testament comes to us as the Spirit who is there present at creation, the Spirit who inspired the prophets, and so on. Sometimes later on the church, when it thinks about the Holy Spirit, has tried to think in terms culled from different philosophies, like in the nineteen- and twentieth-century Kantian philosophy, and so on. If you come with those questions, you won't actually get the concepts that were there in the Scriptural text initially.

Something like that has happened with justification. The doctrine of justification has developed, and has, as it were, taken on a life of its own, has developed new debates which grow out of that fresh life, rather than being anchored back where the concept was originally.

Another illustration which I've often used is that of the musician who goes to the piano, puts down the loud pedal, and then plays a low note which generates overtones. If you listen carefully, you play a bottom A, you'll hear another A, then an E, and then, if you're lucky, another A and a C# and so on and so on. Now those are the harmonic series which are generated by that bottom A. They are genuinely part of that. But then if somebody who has only heard one bit of that goes and plays one of those notes, that will generate a different series of overtones which belong to that new note.

Now what happened, I think, is that Martin Luther and John Calvin, for instance, genuinely did tune in, as you might say, to things which really are overtones of what Paul was saying, and they were necessary overtones for their time. As I say, they were the right answers to perhaps slightly skewed questions. But when they then express it in their own way, they generate a different set of overtones, a different range of doctrinal questions, and the measure of how different they are is how difficult it is sometimes to address those secondary doctrinal questions from the New Testament itself, because the New Testament is concerned with something slightly, but importantly, different.

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IVP: Why is the English language frustrating when we dealing with the concept of justification?

Wright: I suspect there are many languages that have difficulty when you translate the New Testament into it, and I've translated most of the New Testament in the last few years as part of another series of books I'm writing, so I'm constantly bumping up against these problems. So it isn't only that we have a difficulty with *righteousness* and *justification*. But saying that puts the difficulty on the table right away.

In translation we might use *righteousness* here and *justification* there. But to us as readers they're different words: *right*, *rightwise*, *righteous*, *righteousness*, on the one hand and *just*, *justice*, *justify*, *justification* on the other. As far as our English-speaking and English-hearing brains are concerned, these are different things. But they all go back to the same Greek root, which is *dike*, *dikaio4sis*, *dikaio4sune* and *dikaioo4* and so on.

It's consequently very difficult for us to remind ourselves constantly that when we see the word *justify* on the page, it is actually the same root word in Greek as we find in the word *righteousness*, and vice versa. So a kind of an education process has to go on constantly when somebody who doesn't know the Greek comes to read Paul in English, or to read books about Paul. Some people have tried to solve that by trying to abolish one set of those words, and instead of saying *justify*, for instance, using the old English word *rightwise*. So we are rightwised by faith. But that hasn't caught on, really.

You could instead go with all the *just*, *justify* words and simply, instead of saying *righteousness*, use the word *justice*. Again, that doesn't quite catch the overtones which are there in Paul. This is a familiar problem to all serious students of the Bible that, of course, you always lose things in translation, and you always pick up other stuff which wasn't there in the original. So Bible study is a constant matter of trying to find the original meanings of the words, which is why translation and interpretation has to be something which goes on in every generation.

IVP: What does Paul actually mean by the term *justify*, and what does he not mean?

Wright: When Paul says that we are justified, he has in mind several different contexts of meaning which all cluster together around that word. One of the first is the metaphorical law court, that we are sinners, guilty before God. Famously, in Romans 3, he sets up this law

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court context where the whole human race is in the dock before God. Now how does that work? It works because the judge, at the end of hearing the case, must find in favor of either the plaintiff or the defendant. All ancient Hebrew law courts were simply the judge with somebody here and somebody there, somebody bringing a case against somebody else. In other words, there isn't a director of public prosecutions. So at the end of a case, the judge finds in favor of Mr. or Mrs. X and against Mr. or Mrs. Y. who may be the plaintiff or the defendant.

The word *justify* means "to find in favor of." So that if you are justified by the court, a declaration has gone out that in terms of this law suit, you are in the right, and you leave the court without a stain on your character. Now that might apply to the plaintiff or to the defendant. But obviously if the whole world is guilty, then we're all defendants. So then if some people are justified, it means that God has announced that despite the fact that we're sinners, we are nevertheless leaving the court in the right.

Now, it's a very odd thing, because the Bible says in the Old Testament that the righteousness judge should not justify people who are wicked. So the question is, how on earth can God actually do that? And this is made sharper when we add in the second factor, which is eschatology, that is, Paul's vision of the ultimate future and the way that it comes forward into the present. Because in the ultimate future, as we see in Romans 2, Paul says that God is going to judge the whole human race justly according to the totality of the life that has been lived. Paul says to those who are patient in well-doing and seeking for glory and honor and immortality, God will give them eternal life, and for those who are fractious and don't obey the truth, God will provide wrath and fury.

Many Christians, many devout Reformation Christians, have been puzzled, because here in Romans 2 we have, as it were, justification by works, or so it seems. But, of course, what Paul is talking about there is the entirety of the life that has been led. And the point about justification by faith is that God brings forward that ultimate declaration into the present, so that the moment that somebody believes in Jesus, whatever their moral, cultural, racial background, etc., that person is declared to be in the right already, ahead of the verdict on the last day.

Then there is a third context, which is what I have called the covenant. I think Paul refers to it as the covenant as well, but it's become controversial in discussion, because for Paul justification is something that happens because of God's long-term promises to Abraham.

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God called Abraham and his family, in biblical theology, as the means of putting the whole world right. And the question is, but how can you do that if the whole world is in the wrong? Paul explains that the covenant has been fulfilled because Jesus, the Messiah of Israel, has done what God always intended Israel to have as its goal, namely, to take the weight and the shame and the penalty of the sin upon himself and thus to make it possible for God to justify people who, as they stood, were completely sinful.

So we have the law court context, we have the eschatological context, we have the covenant context, and at the heart of it all we have Jesus and particularly his death and resurrection. I'm thinking very clearly of Romans 3 and 4, but other passages like Galatians and Philippians as well at this point. Now that seems to me to be fairly whole and satisfying and to have the great merit that it is deeply, deeply biblical.

One of the key problems, though, is that eschatological thing, that final justification. And many people hearing what I've just said would say, "Oh, my goodness, so we're justified by faith at the moment, but then we have to be justified by works ultimately." To that Paul would say, "You're forgetting about the role of the Holy Spirit." Paul's doctrine of justification is profoundly Trinitarian. Many doctrines of justification through the years have actually kept the Spirit a bit at arms length and have not factored in what for Paul is absolutely vital, that when somebody becomes a Christian, even the faith by which they believe, Paul says, is the result of the Holy Spirit's working through the grace-filled preaching of the gospel of Jesus. I'm thinking of 1 Thessalonians, I'm thinking of Galatians and many other passages we could call in at this point.

The result is that when somebody then lives the kind of life which in Christ is honoring to God, it isn't that they are earning their final justification by their own efforts; it is already given; it's a datum; it's part of who they are in Christ from the moment they believe and are baptized. Rather it is the Spirit working in them, through them, so that they are freely choosing to do what the Spirit wants them to do.

There is then a fascinating, and for Paul quite difficult, way of describing how it is both me doing it and the Spirit doing it. You see Paul doing this when he says, "I worked harder than all of them; yet it was not I but the grace of God which was with me," or words to that effect. I think that is a normal Christian response. For Paul there isn't the problem that Post-Reformation theologians have had about saying that the works that we do in the power of the Spirit are part of the sign on the final day that we are indeed the people whom God will

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raise from the dead, whom he will ultimately justify.

Now because many people have tried to get a Pauline doctrine of justification without really understanding how Paul's law court language works, they have often slid off into talk of relationality. They say justification is a relational doctrine because what happens when you become a Christian is that you establish a personal relationship with God in Christ. People think that justification is really talking about me and God becoming friends, or me discovering that Jesus is real and alive and I can get to know him. I want to say those are enormously important, but that's not justification. That is reconciliation, which goes with it, but it's not the same thing.

Back to the car again. It's the difference between the steering wheel and the starter motor. You need both in order to drive the car. They correlate, but they're not the same thing. Some people make the mistake of thinking that justification is just about me and God becoming friends, whereas the point of the law court is not that the judge and the defendant can go off and have a drink together afterwards. The point is what the judge has said about the defendant, and the declaration which gives that person a new status or standing in the community.

Likewise some people have thought that, because they really haven't grappled with the Israel context, the covenant context of it all, that you can construct a theology of justification which is simply about me being seen by God to be a good sort of person, despite the fact that I'm not. So they have got this idea of the righteousness of Christ as though Jesus Christ himself, by living a perfect sinless moral life, has, as it were, acquired a stock of something called righteousness which he can then bequeath to us or cover us with so that when God looks at us he sees the righteousness of Christ.

I understand what that doctrine is trying to do, but actually Paul achieves the same end by a different means when in Romans 6 he says that when you are baptized as a believing Christian, then you have died with Christ and been raised with him, and that means when God looks at you he sees you as someone who has died and been raised in Christ. Again—I mean there are so many distortions and peculiarities about the doctrine and the way it's developed, we could go on all day—but in particular many have tried to expound justification without factoring in that whole Pauline theme of being in Christ, which is absolutely essential to justification in Romans and Galatians, the two primary texts. Yet some people have felt that that's a rather confusing side issue, and so have pushed it away a bit, whereas

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for John Calvin, one of the great biblical theologians of the Reformation period, being justified in Christ was absolutely central.

So I would go back again and again to the law court, to eschatology, to the covenant, and above all to God's action in Jesus Christ. And I would say if we start there, we will get a thoroughly Pauline read on it, and we'll be able to see in different directions ways in which the developed doctrine has actually spun off in different ways.

IVP: Why do you think this topic of justification becomes such a hot issue for so many?

Wright: One of the things I've been fascinated by over the course of my lifetime as a Pauline theologian is the way in which some debates which were rumbling along but were not particularly bothersome have suddenly in the last ten or fifteen years become very hot issues. It's hard sometimes to figure out quite why.

For instance, in my own country, in my own context, most of my folk in the diocese where I minister as Bishop of Durham are not bothered about the doctrine of justification at all. In fact, I wish they were more so, and I sometimes preach about it energetically and try to get them excited. But in my tradition, in the Anglican tradition, justification is there, it's part of the package, but it isn't something people get hugely excited about all the time.

After all, if you read the New Testament from cover to cover, there are only two or three books in the New Testament where justification is a central major theme. It's here, there and elsewhere. I would argue that it's actually more important, for instance, in John's gospel than many people realize, but you have to read the whole gospel in a particular way to get that. But you read a book like Hebrews or Revelation or indeed some of Paul's other letters like 1 or 2 Thessalonians, there's no mention of justification. And there doesn't need to be, because it's a topic which comes up when certain key issues are under focus.

So I scratch my head and I think, why is it that in some circles in North America at the moment this has become the hot-button issue, so that people will be refused ordination if they don't tick the right boxes on this topic. I'm honestly not sure that I have the complete answer to that. I suspect that it's partly to do with how in our culture there are certain extraordinary pressures at the moment, call it postmodernity, call it what you like, which seems to people to be shaking the very fabric of our whole society, our whole Western way of life and all that we've believed and held dear.

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For some people in some Christian traditions, the doctrine of justification expressed in a particular way has been the absolute fulcrum, the lynch pin, the thing that's held everything together. So that if they think people are expounding it in different ways, it looks as though their entire theological edifice is going to come crashing down. Then, of course, the other anxieties that they have for cultural and social reasons come into play, and this doctrine is made to bear the weight of all of that angst that's going on. There's no doubt more to it than that, and some people might talk about spiritual warfare or whatever, I don't know.

It seems to me that when something becomes a hot issue like this, the key thing is to go back as coolly and calmly as you can and read the biblical texts again. I am not trying to say anything which isn't in Scripture, and indeed my whole argument is that those who have opposed and attacked what I've been doing are being very selective in their reading of Scripture, three verses here and four there and a few passages here and there; and I'm trying to say, no, Romans wasn't written like that, Galatians wasn't written like that. These are whole letters which mean what they mean as wholes. Only when we do business with them on that basis will they yield up their secrets.

IVP: What is the main thing you would like readers to take away from the book *Justification*?

Wright: I would hope that anyone reading my book on justification will come away with a sense of excitement at the big vision which Paul sets before us. Because it's not just a vision about me and how I get to heaven, or even, which would be better, me and how I get to be one of those who share in the new heavens and new earth. It's about God himself and about a big picture of God and God's purposes for the whole world. The point of justification is not that the spotlight is on me all the time. The point about justification is the spotlight is on what God is doing through the gospel for the whole creation.

One of the extraordinary things about the way the Reformation tradition has read Romans is that the great climactic vision of the renewal of the entire cosmos, which we get in Romans 8:18-26, is often just bypassed because that doesn't seem to be so relevant to me and how I get to heaven. The answer is that Paul is much more concerned with this big picture of God and God's purposes for the whole world and how we get incorporated into that picture, than he is about turning the thing outside in so that it all focuses on me. So I hope people reading this book would come away with a refreshed and excited vision of God and his purposes for the whole world, and then where we can fit into that.

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IVP: Do you think there is anything in our current cultural atmosphere that might be contributing to the contemporary debate over justification?

Wright: I think in our present cultural climate in the Western world, and this is so on both sides of the Atlantic, there is an enormous amount of what you can only call amorality. The old moralities have broken down. In that world where it seems anything goes, people are no longer asking the question, “How can I be sure I’m saved? How can I find a gracious God?” People are no longer saying, “If I behave myself in a certain way, I will earn my ticket to heaven.”

I’ve known some older folk who really did believe that they had to do certain moral good works in order to be acceptable to God. They need a healthy dose of justification by grace through faith. Hey, God is generous; God loves you because of Jesus Christ. You can be forgiven and it’s okay. But most people in our culture are not asking those questions in those ways any more. So now I think that a lot of Christians who grew up knowing how to address devout, Pelagian moralists, if you like, with the message of the gospel, are now finding it really rather difficult.

How are we going to evangelize? There’s a sort of sense of angst that the gospel the way that we have known it doesn’t seem to be scratching where people are itching any more. That then gets up more of a head of steam with the whole postmodern movement where we don’t know what truth is any more, we don’t know what the big stories are any more, we don’t even know what it means to be an authentic self any more. So people retreat into their safe spaces of their churches, where basically they can keep going what is essentially a modernist form of Reformation Christianity, and shore it up against the attacks, the cultural attacks of postmodernity. This goes with all sorts of political and social issues as well.

In addition, whenever Paul talks about justification he is also talking about the coming together of Jew and Gentile in Christ. I do wonder whether for many Christians in the Western world that sort of sense of ethnic integration has just not been on their radar screen. Or if it has, it’s been as one distant fragment of the message, rather than something that is front and center. And making it front and center I think is very uncomfortable for many people, not because they’re racists necessarily, but just because there’s a sense that this wasn’t something we thought was as central as that. No doubt we should love all our brothers and sisters in Christ, but it didn’t seem to be as important. For Paul it is radically important, and I think that demands in a lot of people a major category shift which they’re

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really worried about making.

I think there are all sorts of social and cultural factors involved here, and I've just named a few. There would probably be many more, and that will be a Ph.D. topic in itself, I suspect.

IVP: How would you compare the roles of divine and human agency in salvation in Second Temple Judaism and in Paul. Much the same? Somewhat different? Radically different?

Wright: There's been a lot of debate over the last fifteen or twenty years, ever since actually thirty years ago Ed Saunders published his book on Paul and Palestinian Judaism, about just how we align the Judaism of Jesus' and Paul's day, Second Temple Judaism, as it's sometimes called, alongside the Christian faith, and whether they're really saying the same thing. Is Paul simply a Second Temple Jew who happens to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, or is there something much more radical going on?

Part of the difficulty here is that there is not one monolithic thing called Second Temple Judaism. If you read the Dead Sea Scrolls, if you read the rabbis, if you read Philo, Josephus, the Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, etc., there are many, many different things going on there. One thing that is going on is that a lot of them don't seem to be terribly interested in our questions about salvation and justification. They're talking about a thousand other things, and so we sometimes foist our questions on them and force them to give answers to questions that they weren't really asking themselves. Then we can't be quite sure that we've got it right.

For the Jew salvation is something that is given because you're a Jew. God brought Israel out of Egypt as a great act of grace in fulfillment of his covenant promises to Abraham, that he gave Israel the law. This was not to say, "If you keep the law, I'll save you," but, "Now that you're saved, here's the law, and this is your way of life." It was for a people already rescued.

Now that's foundational for Judaism, and much Reformation thought, particularly in the Lutheran tradition, has just got that plain wrong. Judaism was not a religion which said, if you climb up this ladder of the law, then eventually you'll get rescued. It is instead, you've been rescued, now here's the law. Calvin got that right, whereas Luther basically got it wrong.

The problem then comes with this second stage thing. Does your final salvation, does the

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final renewal, the new age, the new heavens and the new earth, does that depend on your moral effort, or is that somehow a gift of grace as well? Second Temple Judaism wrestles with that and comes up with a variety of different answers.

In the New Testament there is not only this extreme clarity about Jesus and his death and resurrection as the foundation of it all, but also the extreme clarity about the Holy Spirit. And though you do find the Holy Spirit spoken of, for instance, in the Dead Sea Scrolls, that doctrine isn't developed in the way that it is in the New Testament. Whereas the Spirit in the New Testament is this powerful, personal, intimate influence, enabling one to reshape one's life so that as Paul says, I'm working very hard, but it's actually God the Holy Spirit working within me. That is the paradox of the Spirit who is working in me, enabling me to become more truly myself, to walk tall as a human being while knowing it is God doing it. You don't find that paradox, I think, in the same way in Second Temple Judaism.

So when you look back on Second Temple Judaism from the perspective of the New Testament, there are many things where you can say, yes, there's a family likeness here. But they don't have a crucified Messiah, they don't have a resurrected Messiah, they don't have a sense that new creation has therefore begun and that we can be part of that new creation, and they don't have the sense of the Holy Spirit enabling people to become genuine human beings who can actually by God's grace exercise the moral effort required to have their lives transformed.

IVP: Is it right to say that Tom Wright affirms the most significant points that his Reformed critics want to maintain but he finds them elsewhere in Paul or the New Testament? Is this debate, from your standpoint, in part a case of, "Great point; wrong text"?

Wright: One of the things that I've been frustrated and puzzled about in some of the debates that have gone on and in messages on blog sites and so on, is that people have often said things that imply that I, Tom Wright, don't believe, for instance, in substitutionary atonement. Or that I don't believe in justification by grace through faith. And I want to say to them, "Here. Read my lips. Look what I've done, look what I've written. I've been preaching and writing about substitutionary atonement and justification by grace through faith for twenty or thirty years now."

Indeed, when it comes to substitutionary atonement, I think I have written the longest ever defense of the view that Jesus himself conceived his own coming death in terms of Isaiah 53

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in my book *Jesus and the Victory of God*. I actually expected when I wrote that chapter that many of my evangelical friends and colleagues would stand up and cheer. Instead they were worried about other aspects of the book and that seems to have slid by them.

That caused me to reflect that sometimes people hold the right doctrine but they put it into the wrong story. It's possible to say a phrase, but the phrase comes out as part of a different narrative, then the phrase is going to mean something very slightly different. If I say, "I love you," and I'm in a context where I'm with my wife, and we're doing stuff together, then it means what it means within that narrative. But if I say, "I love you" in a different context it might mean something completely different. It's a silly example, but you see what I mean.

If you say Christ died in our place and took our penalty and our punishment, that's fine. But if the narrative that you have in mind is of a malevolent, capricious, angry God who is determined to punish somebody for all this sin that's going on, and, ah! here's somebody who happens to be his own Son, right, he'll do, we'll punish him and then the rest of you can go free—that story radically distorts the beautiful biblical meaning of substitutionary atonement.

Now I deliberately caricature to make the point. But substitutionary atonement which is so central to justification means what it means within the biblical story, which is not that rather arbitrary angry God, determined to take it out on somebody, and it just happens to be an innocent victim. I'm not surprised that when people hear the story told like that, they often react against it. My aim has been to tell the story of the death of Jesus in its proper biblical context.

One of the odd things about much of this debate is that the gospels often take a back seat completely. I really worry about that in terms of a Christianity which appears to be purely epistles-based and indeed selective within the epistles, and for whom the gospels really only function as interesting stories about stuff that Jesus did on the way to the cross, which was the great thing which enabled justification to take place. No, the gospels are about much more than that, and until we have seen how Paul's doctrines fit in with the larger picture of Jesus' establishment of the Kingdom of God, then we are always in danger of taking them out of their proper context and putting them somewhere else.

Likewise, when people talk about the imputed righteousness of Christ—that's been such a buzz word, not for all Reformation folk, but for a lot of them—then I want to say, yes, when

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God looks at me, thank God, he sees me, not as I am by myself, but in Christ. That's the truth which Romans 6 was written to expound. But when Paul expounds it, he does not mean that God sees me as perfectly morally righteous because Christ has completed moral righteousness. It means he sees me as having died to sin and come alive to him in Christ.

The point that the Reformed tradition is trying to make is indeed a Pauline point, but because they're making it, I would say, from the wrong texts and in the wrong ways, it comes out distorted, and then generates other second-order distortions, if you like. This lands up with us going to particular texts. 2 Corinthians 5:21 is a famous one where Paul says, "For our sake God made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." I have argued there that this doesn't mean what the Reformed tradition has made it mean, that the righteousness of God or of Christ is imputed to us. If that were so, why would Paul say, "become." It's not the same meaning. Righteousness for Paul here, as in Romans, is not a quality of God which is imputed to people; it is the fact that God himself is righteousness, which means he is faithful to the covenant, he deals properly with sin, he upholds and vindicates those who are weak and defenseless, and he does so totally impartially. You can see all of that going on in Romans.

So I want to say, I understand the points that the Reformed tradition is trying to make, and I want to say again, they're often giving the right answers to the wrong questions. I'm concerned to get back to Paul himself and discover the real questions, the Pauline questions, and by answering them be refreshed in our vision of God's purpose and mission for the whole world.