

Tom Wright's Ecumenical Teaching

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TOM WRIGHT'S VIEW OF JUSTIFICATION: AN ECUMENICAL INTERPRETATION OF PAUL

Wright does admit that there are other important elements to the gospel than the mere proclamation that Jesus is Lord. For example, he places the cross at the center of Paul's gospel

by Dr. Sidney D. Dyer

N.T. Wright is an Anglican whose works have attracted considerable attention among New Testament scholars in recent years. He has also had considerable influence on laymen due to the popular style of his writings.

Wright clearly has an agenda that he is seeking to advance. Among the items in his agenda is an attempt to bring Roman Catholics and Evangelicals together. This endeavor becomes evident in his book *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* It is seen in his interpretation of Paul's teaching on justification. He takes the doctrine out of the realm of soteriology and places it within ecclesiology. This enables him to claim that "the doctrine of justification is in fact the great ecumenical doctrine" (158).

The purpose of this review article, therefore, is to oppose Wright on this point by demonstrating that his interpretation of Paul's teaching on justification is not valid and is driven by his ecumenical agenda. This article will also deal with two other of Wright's interpretations: the gospel and the phrase "the righteousness of God." Dealing with these other interpretations first will facilitate a better understanding of Wright's view of justification.

WRIGHT'S VIEW OF THE GOSPEL

Wright begins chapter 3 by telling his readers what the gospel is not. It is not "a system of how people get saved" (45). On this point, he is quite correct in pointing out that "the announcement of the gospel results in people being saved" (45). He then argues that the gospel is primarily the proclamation that Jesus is Lord. Concerning Paul's calling he states that

"Paul's new vocation involved him not so much in the enjoyment and propagation of a new religious experience, as in the announcement of what he saw as a public fact: that the crucified Jesus of Nazareth had been raised from the dead by Israel's God; that he had thereby been vindicated as Israel's Messiah; that, surprising though it might seem, he was therefore the Lord of the whole world." (p. 40)

Paul emphasized the Lordship of Jesus as an inseparable element in his proclamation of the gospel. What is disturbing is that Wright does not explain how this proclamation results in the salvation of sinners. Wright correctly points out that the title Christ refers to Jesus' office as King. He then states that "it would do no harm from time to time to translate Iesous

Christos not as 'Jesus Christ', nor even 'Jesus the Messiah', but as 'King Jesus' (52). What Wright fails to point out is that the name Jesus means Jehovah saves. Thus, the Lord's office as King and role as Savior are expressed in the words Jesus Christ. Furthermore, Paul refers to Jesus as Savior seven times in the New Testament (Acts 13:23; Eph 5:23; Phil 3:20; 2 Tim 1:10; Ti 1:4, 2:13, 3:6), as well as saying that He is Lord.

Wright does admit that there are other important elements to the gospel than the mere proclamation that Jesus is Lord. For example, he places the cross at the center of Paul's gospel:

"The cross was for Paul the symbol, as it was the means, of the liberating victory of the one true God, the creator of the world, over all the enslaving powers that have usurped his authority. That is why it is at the heart of 'the gospel' (p. 47).

Notice that Wright presents the cross as the means by which God took back His authority from enslaving powers. This fits with his definition of the gospel as the proclamation that Jesus is Lord.

Wright does connect the cross to the matter of sin, but he never states its relationship to sin in such a way to distinguish between Roman Catholic or orthodox Evangelical views. He explains that God condemned sin on the cross (46), that He "executed judicial sentence on sin itself" (48), that Christ became a man "and died under the weight of the sin of the world" (68) and that He became a man "to die for sinners" (69). Wright, however, never speaks of Christ dying in order to satisfy God's justice and to propitiate His wrath (cf., e.g., Rom 3:22-26). He appears to affirm that Christ in His death suffered vicariously when he says that the cross "was the moment when the sin that stood in the account against Jew and Gentile was dealt with as it deserved" (174).

A major problem with Wright is that, if he does hold to Christ's vicarious atonement, he believes Christ died for and will save all men. He argues that

"the covenant between God and Israel was always designed to be God's means of saving the whole world. It was never supposed to be the means whereby God would have a private little group of people who would be saved while the rest of the world went to hell (whatever you might mean by that)" (163).

Thus, it would appear that Wright is a universalist in the fullest sense of the term. His denial of eternal punishment shows that he has a lax view of sin and that he believes God does as well.

Wright has intentionally sought to shift the gospel away from the office of Christ as Savior. He believes that "believing in Jesus - believing that Jesus is Lord, and the [that] God raised Him from the dead - is what counts" (159). Wright virtually never mentions the need for repentance from sin or the need to flee the wrath to come. He does quote 1 Thessalonians 1:10, where Paul declares that Jesus is the One "who delivers us from the wrath to come," but Wright fails to say anything further about that wrath. The good news is more than that Jesus is Lord. It is also that He delivers from the coming wrath. Evangelicals and Roman Catholics can agree that Jesus is Lord. The area of contention, however, involves Jesus as Savior. Roman Catholics deny the sufficiency of His work as Savior. For example, they believe Christ is sacrificed anew in the Mass and that partaking of the elements grants

atonement. Wright's view of the gospel appears to be an attempt to move the focus away from what divides Evangelicals and Roman Catholics, bringing them together in ecclesiastical fellowship.

WRIGHT'S INTERPRETATION OF "THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD"

Wright properly recognizes that the phrase "the righteousness of God" to be one of Paul's "most crucial and controversial technical terms" (95). He explains that the word "righteousness 'is a forensic term, taken from the lawcourt.'" (97). He then shows how the word is applied to the judge, the plaintiff, and the defendant in a court case. Wright insists that "the righteousness of God" refers to God's righteous acts in fulfilling His covenant with Israel. In other words, it expresses His covenant faithfulness. Notice the ecumenical language in this statement: "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" (98). Orthodox Evangelicals argue for an imputed righteousness and Roman Catholics for an imparted righteousness. Wright has attempted to shift the focus away from a major area of contention between orthodox Evangelicals and Roman Catholics. Robert Haldane gives a concise expression of the orthodox Evangelical view of this phrase when he states that it "signifies that fulfilment of the law which God has provided, by the imputation of which sinners are saved." Haldane further declares that the fulfilment of the law which God provided was through the obedience of Christ.

It should not be thought that every occurrence of the phrase "the righteousness of God" always has the same meaning. The context must be the deciding factor. What Wright denies is that the phrase ever expresses imputed righteousness. He presents a helpful chart that shows the various interpretations of the phrase (101).

Wright wants Evangelicals and Catholics to share his interpretation of "the righteousness of God" in order to remove the major difference between them. He seeks to do this in his discussions on the use of the phrase in Philippians 3:9, 2 Corinthians 5:20-21, Romans 3:21-22, Romans 10:2-4, and Romans 1:17. Each time he argues that Paul is not referring to imputed righteousness. He does recognize that in some sense God declares believers to be righteous (107), but he denies that Paul used the phrase "the righteousness of God" to express it (107). Concerning 1 Corinthians 1:30, Wright states, "It is the only passage I know where something called 'the imputed righteousness of Christ,' a phrase more often found in post-Reformation theology and piety than in the New Testament, finds any basis in the text" (123). He then goes on to explain why the text should not be taken in that sense. Contrary to Wright's interpretation, the use of the phrase "the righteousness of God" in Romans 3:21 and 22 does refer to imputed righteousness. Wright argues, of course, that the phrase refers to God's covenant faithfulness. Nothing in the immediate context of Romans 3, however, supports this understanding. In the preceding verse Paul teaches that "by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight (Rom 3:20)." Paul then declares that the righteousness of God is revealed apart from the law and that the Law (the Pentateuch) and the Prophets (the rest of the Old Testament) testify to this righteousness (Rom 3:24). In chapter 4, Paul then uses two examples, one from the Law (Gen 15:6) and the other from the Prophets (Ps 32:1-2), to establish his point. He uses Abraham (4:1-5) as an example of one who was justified by faith and David as one who describes "the blessedness of one to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works" (4:6-8). Thus, in the immediate context Paul is teaching that God imputes righteousness by faith in Christ apart from works. It is the context that must determine Paul's use of the phrase.

Thus, there is solid evidence that Paul used the phrase to refer to imputed righteousness.

WRIGHT'S ECUMENICAL VIEW OF JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

Wright's view of justification is an attempt to take the doctrine out of the realm of soteriology and to put it in the realm of ecclesiology. He states:

"'Justification' in the first century was not about how someone might establish a relationship with God. It was about God's eschatological definition, both future and present, of who was, in fact, a member of his people . . . In standard Christian language, it wasn't so much about soteriology as about ecclesiology; not so much about salvation as about the church" (119).

In his treatment of the book of Galatians, he argues that Paul did not write a polemic against salvation by works. He believes that the law and circumcision are "the badges of Jewish race" (120). According to him,

"circumcision is not a 'moral' issue; it does not have to do with moral effect, or earning salvation by good deeds. Nor can we simply treat it as a ritual, then designate all religious ritual as cryptoPelagian good works, and so smuggle Pelagius into Galatia as the arch-opponent after all" (121).

He understands the law in Galatians to be "the national charter of the Jewish race" (122). In other words, it distinguishes the Jews from other nations. What Wright argues is that Paul is not teaching that men are justified by grace rather than works, but that men do not have to become Jews in order to demonstrate that they are Christians. Thus, according to him, "justification, in Galatians, is the doctrine which insists that all who share faith in Christ belong at the same table, no matter what their racial differences" (122). But, the book of Galatians has been properly called "the battle-cry of the Reformation." It clearly demonstrates that salvation is not by works, as the Roman Catholics claim, but that it is by grace alone through faith alone, as the Reformers affirmed (cf Gal 2:15-16, 21; 3:10-22, 5:1-5).

Another text Wright deals with is Philippians 3:9 where Paul declares that he does not have his "own righteousness, which is from the law." He interprets this to mean that what Paul "is refusing in the first half of verse 9 is not a moralistic or self-help righteousness, but the status of orthodox Jewish covenant membership" (124). Concerning Romans 3:21-31, Wright claims that

"Paul has no thought of warding off a proto-Pelagianism, of which in any case his contemporaries were not guilty. He is here, as in Galatians and Philippians, declaring that there is no road into covenant membership on the grounds of Jewish racial privilege" (129).

Notice Wright's remark about proto-Pelagianism. Throughout his book, he argues that the Reformers and their successors wrongly understood that Paul attacked a proto-Pelagianism in his epistles. In his critique of Wright in the Westminster Theological Journal, Richard Gaffin, Jr. points out that Wright makes "it appear that the Reformation is culpable not only for exaggerating the difference between Paul and Judaism of his day but also for exaggerating the difference between itself and the Roman Catholic Christianity of its own day." This needs to be taken one step further. Wright wants those of the Reformed tradition

to be regarded as exaggerating the difference between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics today.

Several times Wright identifies justification with the concept of vindication. For example, he states that "justification is the covenant declaration, which will be issued on the last day, in which the people of God will be vindicated and those who insist on worshipping false gods will be shown to be wrong" (131). Notice that Wright contrasts the people of God being vindicated with idolaters being shown to be wrong. He is teaching that justification does not refer to God declaring a man to be righteous, but declaring him to be in the right. Elsewhere he identifies the vindication of God's people with a status of righteousness (99) and according to him, this righteous status is gained by men "when the court finds in their favor" (98). Wright properly recognizes the forensic nature of the issues involved, but he misapplies it. He sees God as the Judge, the people of God as the defendants and idolaters as the plaintiffs. Wright regards justification to be God ruling in favor of His people against their enemies. For him it is a civil lawsuit between disputing parties, rather than a criminal case for a capital offense. Paul, however, in Acts 13:38-39 connects justification to the forgiveness of sins.

"Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins; and by Him everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses."

The Apostle, therefore, regards justification to express the transaction whereby God forgives sins through His Son. Paul in his epistles shows that he sees men as legally guilty before God and that they are in need of acquittal through the merits of Christ and His atoning blood.

Clearly, Wright will have nothing to do with a view of justification that would put Roman Catholics and orthodox Evangelicals at odds with each other. According to him, "The doctrine of justification is in fact the great ecumenical doctrine" (158). Consider the following statements:

"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 church groupings, and which declares that all who believe in Jesus belong together in the one family" (158).

"Many Christians, both in the Reformation and in the counterReformation 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 (158-59).

"Because what matters is believing in Jesus, detailed agreement on justification itself, properly conceived, isn't the thing which should determine eucharistic fellowship" (159).

"Believing in Jesus - believing that Jesus is Lord, and the (sic) God raised him

from the dead - is what counts" (159).

These statements demonstrate that Wright interprets Paul with an ecumenical agenda. He has clearly attempted to shift the focal point away from soteriology to ecclesiology. It is Wright who has done himself and the church a great disservice.

CONCLUSION

Wright hints at his ecumenical agenda in his discussion of the gospel. His view of the gospel appears to be part of an endeavor to shift the focal point away from what divides Evangelicals and Roman Catholics, thus bringing them into ecclesiastical communion. Evangelicals and Roman Catholics have no difficulty agreeing that Jesus is Lord. The area of disagreement involves Jesus as Savior. As already stated, Roman Catholics believe that Christ is sacrificed anew in the Mass and that partaking of the elements grants atonement. This is a denial of the sufficiency of Christ's atoning death.

Wright argues that the phrase "the righteousness of God" refers to God's covenant faithfulness and that it never refers to the imputation of Christ's righteousness.

The most disturbing material in Wright's book is that which sets forth his view of justification. His effort to take the doctrine out of the realm of soteriology and to put it in the realm of ecclesiology is undoubtedly motivated by his desire to tear down what divides Evangelicals and Roman Catholics. His view of justification is an attack on the very heart of the gospel. Paul warned of the danger of preaching another gospel in Galatians 1:8, "But if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached, let him be accursed." Paul, by using the words "any other gospel" (emphasis added), shows that he is attacking all other forms of the gospel, including therefore a proto-Pelagianism in the book of Galatians. It is against the backdrop of this attack that the true doctrine of justification shines so brightly and clearly. An unbeliever stands guilty before God as a criminal charged with a capital offense. He can only escape the judgment he deserves by believing in Christ who lived a righteous life and died an atoning death for sinners. Men are not waiting to stand before God as members of one of two disputing parties in a civil lawsuit who are hoping that God will find in their favor.

Wright's view of justification is an attempt to reverse the Reformation. We must resist such attempts. The issue is one of life and death - eternal life and eternal death. When theological professors and pastors abandon the biblical and confessional doctrine of justification, they sacrifice the gospel and the souls of men.

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This article appears in 'Katekomen' Vol 14 No 1 a publication of Greenville Seminary.
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Suggested Reading on Justification in Banner of Truth Publications

Romans 2:1-3:20 The Righteous Judgment of God, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones Romans 3:20-4:25 Atonement and Justification, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones The Doctrine of Justification, James Buchanan Justification Vindicated, Robert Traill Redemption Accomplished and Applied, John Murray