

A Defense of the Old Perspective on Paul

What Did St. Paul *Really* Say?

By
Phil Johnson

For more of Phil's sermons and messages go to: www.SwordandTrowel.org

The following is transcribed from a seminar given by Phil Johnson at the London Reformed Baptist Seminary, meeting at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, London, on 10 January 2004.

In this hour, I want to give you a brief critique of a theological trend that began on your side of the Atlantic and is rapidly gaining influence among evangelicals in America.

It is a point of view known as "The New Perspective on Paul." Some of you will be familiar with that label. It's the nickname for a school of thought that suggests we need to overhaul our interpretation of the Pauline epistles and completely revamp our understanding of the apostle Paul's theology. And that, in turn, obviously, has serious and far-reaching ramifications for all of New Testament theology.

I hesitate to label the New Perspective a *movement*, because it lacks the cohesiveness of a movement. At this point, it's a loose aggregate of similar opinions. The three New Testament scholars who are the leading advocates of the New Perspective don't entirely agree with one another on some of the most basic points of Christian doctrine. Two of the three don't even claim to be evangelicals.

There's no single spokesperson for the view, and no organization exists to propagate it.

And yet the influence of the New Perspective has been felt profoundly across the spectrum of Christian denominations—including the evangelical world, where the New Perspective has recently been embraced and propagated by some surprising advocates.

The New Perspective has been promoted in America, for example, by John Armstrong, of Reformation and Revival ministries. He was once

regarded as a champion of historic, confessional particular Baptist theology. Now he is aggressively peddling the New Perspective on Paul in his journal, in his newsletters, and in his conferences.

And there is currently a division between conservative Presbyterians in America over this issue. One church in Monroe, Louisiana—The Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church (a church affiliated with the largest evangelical Presbyterian denomination in America)—has for the past three years been host to an annual conference featuring speakers who are mostly sympathetic to the New Perspective. One smaller Presbyterian denomination (The RPCUS) has declared the teachings of the Auburn conference "heresy." And the result has been widespread debate and confusion.

Meanwhile, all over the Internet, you'll find dozens of Web sites devoted to propagating the New Perspective—and other Web sites devoted to exposing its errors. Because of the complexity of all the issues involved, it's not an easy controversy to sort out.

So in this hour, I want to begin to acquaint you to this controversial point of view and give you a critical review of a short book that is probably the single most influential popular, lay-level presentation of the New Perspective. It's a book by N. T. Wright, titled *What St. Paul Really Said*, published in the UK by Lion, and in America by Eerdmans.

I mentioned already that there are three leading spokesmen whose names are most frequently associated with the New Perspective. Tom Wright is one of these. And as far as grassroots-evangelical support for the New Perspective is concerned, he is by far the most influential voice of the three. He is the only one of the three who considers himself an evangelical.

Tom Wright was canon theologian of Westminster Abbey until last year. Now he is the Bishop of Durham (which I believe makes him the fifth highest ranking bishop in the Church of England). He is also very a prolific writer, having written more than 30 books. The last time I was in the bookshop at Westminster Abbey, the shelves were filled with titles by Wright—and they run the gamut from technical and academic works to popular-level books like *What St. Paul Really Said*. He has also written a popular series of soft-cover commentaries published by SPCK and targeting an audience of lay people. So he is quite gifted as a writer; he is able to communicate on almost any level; and his works are easy to read and often thought-provoking.

The other two leading advocates of the New Perspective on Paul are E. P. Sanders and James D. G. Dunn. Those are names you are

undoubtedly familiar with if you have paid attention to the academic world of New Testament studies. Sanders is formerly a professor of Exegesis at Oxford, now on the faculty at Duke University. I believe Dunn is on the faculty at Durham University.

Sanders is the one who first rocked the world of New Testament scholarship in 1977 with his seminal work titled *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. That book was the first major statement of the New Perspective. Dunn, on the other hand, is the one who coined the expression "the New Perspective on Paul" during a lecture in 1982. But neither of those men could be classed as evangelical in any meaningful sense. Both Sanders and Dunn reject the Pauline authorship of Paul's pastoral epistles, and both of them would repudiate many of the doctrines you and I would deem essential to Christianity, starting with the authority of Scripture. So the roots of this movement spring out of a rationalistic tradition that is overtly hostile to evangelicalism—and the view itself would probably hold no interest whatsoever for rank-and-file evangelicals if it were not for the influence of N. T. Wright.

Wright calls himself an evangelical; he apparently comes from an evangelical background (I believe his first published work was a chapter in a book published by the Banner of Truth Trust); and Wright has won favor in some evangelical circles by defending the historicity of Christ against the rank liberalism of the Jesus-Seminar brand of New Testament "scholarship." Wright is unquestioningly accepted as an fellow evangelical by many in the broader evangelical movement. So his work is without a doubt the single factor most responsible for bringing the New Perspective on Paul into the evangelical arena.

Just five years ago, the New Perspective was unfamiliar to almost everyone outside the academic world. Over the past few years, however, partly because of the Internet, and partly through the influence of Tom Wright's popular-level books, the New Perspective on Paul has become more and more familiar to evangelical pastors and lay Christians, and it has become the focus of brewing controversy almost everywhere it has gone in the evangelical world.

So, what is being taught by those who advocate the New Perspective on Paul? In a nutshell, they are suggesting that the apostle Paul has been seriously misunderstood, at least since the time of Augustine and the Pelagian controversy, but even more since the time of Luther and the Protestant Reformation. They claim first-century Judaism has also been misinterpreted and misconstrued by New Testament scholars for hundreds and hundreds of years, and therefore the church's

understanding of what Paul was teaching in Romans and Galatians has been seriously flawed at least since the time of Augustine.

I think you'll agree that's a pretty audacious claim. Here are four important ways they say Paul has been misunderstood:

First, regarding first-century Judaism, the New Perspective on Paul claims that the Judaism of Paul's day was not really a religion of self-righteousness where salvation depended on human works and human merit. So we've misunderstood Paul because we have misunderstood what he was up against. The Pharisees weren't legalists after all, it turns out. But they have been misunderstood by biased exegetes who erred because they superimposed Augustine's conflict with Pelagius and Luther's conflict with Roman Catholicism onto their reading of Paul's conflict with the Judaizers.

Instead, according to the New Perspective, there was a strong emphasis on divine grace in the Judaism of Paul's time, and the Pharisees were not *really* guilty of teaching salvation by human merit. This is the one basic point upon which Sanders, Dunn, and Wright are all in full agreement. They base that claim primarily on their study of extrabiblical rabbinical sources, and they treat the matter as if it were settled in the world of New Testament scholarship—even though it seems to me that there are still plenty of weighty New Testament scholars who would strongly disagree with them. But that's the starting point of their view: first-century Judaism was not legalistic after all. For centuries, Christians have simply misunderstood what the Pharisees taught.

Second, regarding the apostle Paul, the New Perspectivists are very keen to absolve Paul from the charge of anti-semitism—and therefore they deny that he had any serious or significant *theological* disagreement with the Jewish leaders of his time. Obviously, if the religion of the Pharisees was a religion of grace and not human merit, then Paul would have had no fundamental disagreement with them on the doctrine of salvation.

But Paul's real controversy with the Jewish leaders, we are told, had to do with the way they treated Gentiles. His conflict with the Judaizers and the Pharisees had to do more with racial and cultural differences than with any kind of soteriological debate. They tell us that Paul's great concern *actually* was for racial harmony and diversity in the covenant community. So the only significant complaint Paul had with the Pharisees and the Judaizers was their racial and cultural exclusivity.

Third, regarding the gospel, the New Perspective on Paul claims that the gospel is a message about the Lordship of Christ, period. It is the

declaration that Christ, through His death and resurrection, has been shown by God to be Lord of creation and king of the cosmos. We would agree that this truth is an essential feature of the New Testament gospel, of course. But we would not agree with advocates of the New Perspective when they say the gospel is therefore *not* really a message about personal and individual redemption from the guilt and condemnation of sin.

To quote Tom Wright (p. 45 of *What St. Paul Really Said*), "[The gospel] is not . . . a system of how people get saved." He writes, "The announcement of the gospel *results* in people being saved. . . . But 'the gospel' itself, strictly speaking, is the narrative proclamation of King Jesus." "[The gospel is] the announcement of a royal victory" (p. 47).

[By the way, I'll quote Tom Wright several times in this hour, and I'll try to remember always to give page numbers. Almost every quote I'll cite comes from this book, *What St. Paul Really Said*. So we can save some time if I just give you page numbers.]

Ultimately, the New Perspective divests the gospel of—or downplays—every significant aspect of soteriology. The means of atonement is left vague in this system; the issues of personal sin and guilt are passed over and brushed aside. The gospel becomes a proclamation of victory, period. In other words, the gospel of the New Perspective is decidedly *not* a message about how sinners can escape the wrath of God. In fact, this gospel says little or nothing about personal sin and forgiveness, individual redemption, atonement, or any of the other great soteriological doctrines. Soteriology is hardly a concern of the New Perspective—even when they are dealing with the gospel message.

And that brings me to a *fourth* characteristic of the New Perspective—and this is where I want to spend the remainder of our time. This is the issue of how the New Perspective deals with the doctrine of justification by faith and the principle of *sola fide*.

The New Perspective claims that traditional Protestant Christianity has seriously confused and distorted what the apostle Paul taught about justification by faith. According to the New Perspective, when Paul wrote about *justification*—especially when he wrote about justification—his concerns were (once again) corporate, national, racial, and social—not individual and soteriological.

According to them, the doctrine of justification as taught by the apostle Paul has very little to do with personal and individual salvation from sin and guilt. Justification, they say, doesn't really pertain to *soteriology*, or the doctrine of salvation. It fits more properly in the category of *ecclesiology*, or the doctrine of the church.

To quote Tom Wright again, "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'" (p. 122). On page 119, he says,

"Justification" in the first century was not about how someone might establish a relationship with God. It was about God's eschatological definition, both future and present, of who was, in fact, a member of his people. In Sanders' terms, it was not so much about "getting in," or indeed about "staying in," as about "how you could tell who was in." In standard Christian theological language, it wasn't so much about soteriology as about ecclesiology; not so much about salvation as about the church."

Again, and at every opportunity, the emphasis on personal and individual sin is minimized or denied. The gospel is not really a message about redemption from sin and personal guilt; it is simply and only the declaration that Jesus is now Lord over all. Justification is not mainly about sin and forgiveness; it's about membership in the covenant community. And when you're done reading everything that has been written to promote the New Perspective, the issues of personal guilt, individual redemption, and atonement for sin have hardly been dealt with at all. These great soteriological doctrines are left in a fog of uncertainty and confusion.

As I said, this issue of justification by faith is where I want to focus our attention in the remainder of the time we have together today. I believe the greatest and most immediate danger posed by the New Perspective on Paul lies in their redefinition of the doctrine of justification by faith. I'll leave it to others to answer the New Perspective on historical grounds. [D. A. Carson has made a good start answering the claim that Protestant interpreters have historically misrepresented first-century Judaism. He is editing a two-volume academic work titled *Justification and Variegated Nomism*. The first volume, subtitled "The complexities of Second Temple Judaism" is already available, answering the historical argument about the nature of Judaism in Paul's day. A second volume, subtitled "The Paradoxes of Paul," will deal with the exegetical issues raised by the New Perspective.]

But what I want to do today is address *this specific claim* that the doctrine of justification, in Paul's theology, is all about the Gentiles' standing in the covenant community—rather than about the individual's standing before God as it relates to sin and forgiveness.

This is a total redefinition of justification. And I'll tell you at the outset that I'm convinced it is impossible to harmonize N. T. Wright's New

Perspective and the historic Protestant creedal understanding of justification by faith.

Now, the most conservative defenders of N. T. Wright and the New Perspective often insist that they *do* affirm what the great Protestant creeds teach regarding justification, and some of them have taken great pains to try to find language in the Westminster standards and other creeds that they can interpret as an affirmation of their views. But having read several such treatments and dialogued at length with some of these people, it is my conviction that when they are finished trying to reconcile their views with the historic evangelical and Protestant view of justification by faith, all the main issues are left confused and muddled rather than clarified. That's because the New Perspective's view of justification is radically and fundamentally different from the teaching of Reformational Christianity. And I hope to show you why.

In order to deal with all of this in the abridged form our time allows, I'm going to quote selectively a few of the most troubling statements made by Tom Wright in his little book *What St. Paul Really Said*. I realize *What St. Paul Really Said* is Wright's popular treatment of the subject, and as such it is not as thorough and perhaps not as precise as his more academic works. I also know from prior experience that people who are sympathetic to the New Perspective will claim I have not really understood Wright or given him a fair and thorough reading. They will fault me for quoting selectively. They will also point out various places where Wright tries to qualify elsewhere what I find objectionable in *this* book. OK, I recognize the limitations of this one-hour lecture format, and I will concede up front that I am not even attempting here to respond to the full corpus of Tom Wright's published works.

On the other hand, since this work is a popular distillation of Wright's perspective on the apostle Paul, aimed at serious lay people and pastors, I presume *his* aim was to convey his thoughts the clearest and most unambiguous language. This book is supposed to be a non-academic introduction to the New Perspective and a simple digest of the New Perspective's most important ideas, so I'm going to respond to it on that basis—in a non-academic fashion, trying to deal with the big ideas and not getting bogged down in side issues and technicalities.

I don't pretend that I'm making a full, careful academic reply to Wright. But all I have time to give you today is a brief summary of why Wright's New Perspective is problematic, and point out the major things to be on guard against in his work. So I hope you'll bear with me, and let no one claim I'm pretending this brief lecture is anything more than it is.

Now, no doctrine is more important in Protestant theology than the doctrine of justification by faith. This was the material principle of the Reformation, the central issue over which Rome and the Reformers fought and ultimately split. But if Tom Wright and his New Perspective are correct, Luther badly misunderstood the apostle Paul and seriously misconstrued the doctrine of justification. He was mistaken on the *main* issue. That is a very serious charge, but it is precisely what the New Perspective suggests. A corollary is that they are also claiming that they are the first people since the early church Fathers who have correctly understood the Pauline epistles. I do want to point out that that's an extremely bold stance to take—especially since it's a view that was spawned by the work of E. P. Sanders, who doesn't even accept the Pauline authorship of most of Paul's epistles.

But I digress. In *What St. Paul Really Said*, Wright includes a chapter titled "Justification and the Church," in which he says (113) that the traditional Protestant doctrine of justification "owes a good deal both to the controversy between Pelagius and Augustine in the early fifth century and to that between Erasmus and Luther in the early sixteenth century" but (according to Wright) the historic Protestant view of justification "does not do justice to the richness and precision of Paul's doctrine, and indeed distorts it at various points."

Wright is expressly arguing *against* a Reformed understanding of justification, and he repeatedly insinuates that Protestants need to rethink the whole doctrine and re-tool our teaching in light of *his* new understanding of what Paul really meant. He claims (117) that the classic Protestant understanding of justification has resulted in a reading of Romans that "has systematically done violence to that text for hundreds of years, and . . . it is time for the text itself to be heard again."

But Wright's own doctrine of justification is seriously deficient. I believe he is at odds with Scripture on at least four major points related to this issue of justification alone. I'll start with the most basic one:

1. HIS DEFINITION OF JUSTIFICATION

I've already given you a basic description of how Wright portrays the doctrine of justification. Here's how he states it in his own words. Page 115: "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." Page 120; he writes:

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

And so he says (122), "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, as they together wait for the final new creation."

So according to Wright, justification is more a corporate issue than a personal one; it has more to do with the identity of the church than with the standing of the individual before God.

When Wright *does* connect the doctrine of justification with the individual's standing before God, it is nearly always in contexts where he is speaking of "final justification," which takes place in the eschatological future, at the last judgment, when God judges men according to their works. In an article he has posted on the Web titled "The Shape of Justification," Wright refers to this future justification and cites as a proof text Romans 2:13 ("Not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified.") Thus Wright and other New Perspective writers tend to confuse the question of whether the believer's standing before God depends in some part on our own works, or whether Christ's work on our behalf is the sole and sufficient ground of our justification. More on this later if time permits.

In my view, the way Wright speaks of this "future dimension" of justification is careless and unclear. Though he strenuously denies that justification is a process, one gets the distinct impression he believes the individual Christian's standing before God is not truly settled until the final judgment, and then it will depend (at least in part) on the believer's own righteous works. That is almost precisely the very point over which Rome and the Reformers fought their most important battles. If Wright is not on the Roman Catholic side of that issue, he certainly is *not* on the Reformers' side.

By the way, in that same article on the World Wide Web, Wright insists that the doctrine of justification by faith is "a second-order doctrine," not an essential doctrine of Christianity. It seems to me that even if we accepted Wright's redefinition of justification, the text of Galatians—and especially the anathema of Galatians 1:8-9—still seems to make the doctrine of justification a first-order doctrine.

Here's a second problem I find with Wright's teaching on justification

2. HIS DESCRIPTION OF "THE WORKS OF THE LAW"

Galatians 2:16 uses this expression "the works of the law" three times in a single verse. Listen: "Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified." There are three other references to "the works of the law" in Galatians and one in Romans 9:32, and in each case, the apostle Paul's point is the same: legal obedience has no saving efficacy. Galatians 3:10: "For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse."

Obviously, the historic Protestant position has been that these very texts prove that Paul was arguing that the law condemns sinners and therefore their own efforts to obey the law cannot save them. Meritorious works of any kind are antithetical to grace. That is precisely what Paul states in Romans 11:6: "if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work."

But Tom Wright says that we need a new understanding of what Paul meant when he spoke of the works of the law. In his paper, "The Shape of Justification," he defines "the works of the law" as "the badges of Jewish law-observance." He says Paul is speaking of circumcision, the dietary laws, and so on.

He is echoing Dunn, who wrote this: "Works of the 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 the Jews as God's people. [What Paul denies in Galatians 2:16 is that] God's grace extends only to those who wear the badge of the covenant."

In other words, Paul *isn't* saying that meritorious works in general contribute nothing to our justification. His point is only that the distinctly Jewish elements of Moses' law don't guarantee covenant membership, and they cannot be used to exclude Gentiles from covenant membership. Or to put it as concisely as I can, Wright is suggesting that Galatians 2:16 and other texts like it are *not* intended to deny that meritorious human works have any role whatsoever in justification.

And according to Wright (122), that means that "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." So Paul is not arguing against meritorious works; he is arguing against racial exclusivity.

Notice carefully: Wright at this point is not explicitly arguing that a person's works *do* provide grounds for his righteous standing before God; he is merely arguing that the standard proof-texts against such a doctrine prove no such thing. And so once again, he stands against the Reformers and on the Roman Catholic side of the justification debate. And he at least leaves the door open for human merit as part of the grounds for our "final justification."

I have to move on. Here's a third point on which I believe Tom Wright is at odds with Scripture on the doctrine of justification.

3. HIS DISTORTION OF "THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD"

This is a huge issue in *What St. Paul Really Said*, and I haven't nearly enough time to deal with it thoroughly, but I *must* at least mention it. Wright has a major section discussing the meaning of the phrase "the righteousness of God," beginning on page 95 of his book. In summary, he says—of course—that Protestants have always misunderstood the concept of divine righteousness. God's righteousness is his "covenant faithfulness." It is *not* (102) "something that 'counts before' God or 'avails with' God." It's not something God can either impart or impute to sinners. When Scripture speaks of God's righteousness, it's using the expression as a synonym for His covenant faithfulness.

And Wright is so hostile to the notion of righteousness as something that counts with God that he goes so far as to paraphrase the traditional concept of righteousness out of Philippians 3:9 completely. In the actual text, Paul says that His great hope as a Christian is to "be found in [Christ], not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of

God by faith:" But according to Wright (124) Paul is *really* "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." So righteousness becomes "covenant membership."

Quickly, a fourth and final complaint I have with Tom Wright's treatment of justification is—

4. HIS DENIAL OF IMPUTATION

Over and over again, Tom Wright assaults the classic Reformed and biblical doctrine that the righteousness of Christ is imputed, or reckoned, to the sinner's account, and it is on the ground of Christ's righteousness alone that *we* obtain our righteous standing before God.

Wright says that's nonsense. He writes (98), "If we use the language of the law court, it makes no sense whatsoever to say that the judge imputes, imparts, bequeaths, conveys or otherwise transfers his righteousness to either the plaintiff or the defendant. Righteousness is not an object, a substance or a gas which can be passed across the courtroom."

Writing against the historic Reformed doctrine of imputation, he says, "If we leave the notion of 'righteousness' as a law-court metaphor only, as so many have done in the past, this gives the impression of a legal transaction, a cold piece of business, almost a trick of thought performed by a God who is logical and correct but hardly one we would want to worship."

Well, I, for one, am quite happy to worship a God who justifies the ungodly and who is both just and the justifier of the one who believes in Jesus.

How would I answer Wright and the New Perspective biblically in 90 seconds or less? I would point out *first* of all that our understanding of First-century Judaism ought to come primarily from Scripture itself and not the musings of twenty-first century scholars who themselves refuse to bow to the authority of Scripture. Tom Wright has erred by lending more credence to the scholarship of men like Sanders and Dunn than he does to the testimony of Scripture.

I think, for example of the parable about the Pharisee and the publican—one of the best clues about what Scripture really means when it speaks of justification. The parable describes the justification of an individual before God. And Luke 18:9 says Jesus told that parable "unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others." The New Perspective suggests that this kind of self-righteousness wasn't really a problem with the Judaism of Paul's and Jesus' time. Scripture plainly states otherwise. In fact, if we allow the gospel accounts to inform our understanding of the Pharisees' religion, rather than selling out to the scholarship of E. P. Sanders, we *must* come to the conclusion that the *old* perspective of first-century Pharisaism is the correct one.

Second—and likewise—our understanding of *Paul's* doctrine of justification ought to come from the text of Scripture and not from questionable first-century rabbinical scholarship. To cite just one text that is impossible to reconcile with the New Perspective, listen to Acts 13:38-39, where we have Luke's record of how Paul preached the gospel in Antioch. After mentioning the resurrection, Paul said, "Be it known unto you therefore, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins: [Clearly, the gospel Paul proclaimed *is* about personal forgiveness after all. And notice how he equates the forgiveness of sins with the doctrine of justification:] And by him all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses."

Romans 4:4-5 is another passage that, when exegeted correctly, demolishes N. T. Wright's New Perspective on justification.

Third, notice that in the book of Romans, Paul's starting point for the gospel is divine wrath (Romans 1:17), and Paul begins his systematic treatment of gospel truth with almost two full chapters on the problems of sin and guilt. It seems rather clear to me that Paul had a very different notion of the gospel and the doctrine of justification than N. T. Wright does.

Fourth and finally, I think it's ironic that N. T. Wright and other proponents of the New Perspective invariably complain that Luther and the Reformers were guilty of reading a conflict from their own time back into the New Testament. My answer would be that N. T. Wright and friends are doubly guilty of reading their own notions of twenty-first-century political correctness back into the text of the Pauline epistles. And the view they have come up with has a distinct post-modern slant. It is a perfect postmodern blend of inclusivism, anti-individualism, a subtle attack on certainty and assurance, and above all, ecumenism.

What they are really suggesting is that the apostle Paul was driven more by social and ecumenical concerns than by a concern for the standing of sinners before God. The New Perspective on Paul is, at the end of the day, an ecumenical, not an evangelical, movement.

By the way, Wright is totally frank about his ecumenical motives. Near the end of the book (158) he writes,

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

He says, moreover, that those of us who regard justification as central to the debate between Protestants and Catholics "have turned the doctrine into its opposite."

Frankly, I am happy to stand with Augustine, and Luther, and the rest of the Protestant Reformers—and with the Old-Perspective Apostle Paul—against the likes of doctrine like this.

I'm surprised, and very sorry, that a novelty like this is seducing so many men who profess to be Reformed in their theology. But in my assessment this doctrine does not build on the advances of the Protestant Reformation. Rather it aims at destroying the Reformation at its very foundation.

For more of Phil's sermons and messages go to: www.SwordandTrowel.org

© Copyright by Phil Johnson, <http://www.SwordandTrowel.org>