

## WHAT IS THERE BETWEEN MINNEAPOLIS AND ST. ANDREWS? A THIRD WAY IN THE PIPER-WRIGHT DEBATE

MICHAEL F. BIRD\*

### I. INTRODUCTION

John Piper and N. T. Wright are two of the most influential figures in the English-speaking church today. The attraction is easy to see. Piper combines a majestic vision of divine glory with his Christian hedonism and a neo-Puritan theology. Wright wonderfully combines together the big picture of the biblical meta-narrative with a historical sensitivity to Scripture, plus an entertaining panache for theological synthesis within a broad evangelical Anglicanism. Both are able authors, committed pastors, and stimulating speakers. However, there are many differences between them as seen in their respective books on justification that engage each other.<sup>1</sup> It seems that many young evangelicals have been polarized around the Piperazi and the Wrightonians on theology in general and justification in particular.<sup>2</sup> I do not think this polarization is necessary or helpful. It may be the case that on any given issue one author has it over the other in terms of the soundness of their argumentation. There again, on some topics, the biblical truth may lie somewhere between Piper and Wright. What I want to do in this study is to look at five points of contention between Piper and Wright and offer some adjudicating thoughts with a view to establishing a modified Reformed view that acts as a middle way between the two.

### II. THE USE OF ANCIENT LITERATURE IN BIBLICAL EXEGESIS

One of the differences between Wright and Piper is their attitude toward the use of ancient literature in biblical exegesis. Wright is very fond of calling himself a “historian” and talking about what it means to “think historically.” As such, he invests a great amount of energy into how the writings of Paul

\* Michael Bird is Lecturer in Theology and New Testament at Crossway College, Brisbane, Australia. This essay was initially presented as a lecture at the Evangelical Theological Society meeting in Atlanta on November 19, 2010.

<sup>1</sup> John Piper, *The Future of Justification: A Response to N. T. Wright* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007); N. T. Wright, *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Brett McCracken, “Wrightians and the Neo-Reformed: ‘All One in Christ Jesus,’” *Christianity Today* (April 22, 2010) <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2010/aprilweb-only/26-42.0.html>. Cited 10 Jan 2011.

fit into the Judaism of the first century. That requires examining the historical sources and how they illuminate one's reading of Paul. A good example of where I think Wright does this well is in his discussion of "gospel" where he notes its background in the Book of Isaiah and its umbilical connection to the imperial rhetoric of the Roman Empire. The parallels are genuinely illuminating for what Paul meant and was perceived to have meant by referring to a "gospel."<sup>3</sup>

In contrast, Piper is both cautious and even dismissive of the use of non-biblical sources to illuminate a biblical text. He thinks that first-century ideas can "distort and silence" what the NT authors say for three reasons. First, the sources may be misunderstood because knowledge of extrabiblical literature is often tenuous. Second, the first century sources do not speak unanimously and no single source document can speak for what Jews of antiquity really believed. Third, scholars can misapply a first-century document to a biblical text. Piper concludes that scholars, pastors, and lay people should have a "modest skepticism" when an overarching worldview is used to give "new" or "fresh" interpretations to biblical texts that in their own context do not naturally provide grounds for these new interpretations.<sup>4</sup> I genuinely sympathize with Piper for three reasons: (1) We all know about misuses of extrabiblical literature especially in the case of the "parallelomania" against which Samuel Sandmel warned. This "parallelomania" consists of assuming that the meaning of X in some extrabiblical text is the same as X in the NT which commits the semantic transfer fallacy.<sup>5</sup> (2) By focusing too heavily on background literature we can create the impression that the only people competent to interpret the Bible are those with expertise in the vast array of ancient literary sources. In contrast, we should privilege the canonical context of Scripture since the canonical context is sufficient for acquiring a *basic* understanding of the biblical writings. (3) I think N. T. Wright's application of the meaning of "works of the law" in 4QMMT to Paul's letters commits some of the errors against which Piper warns.<sup>6</sup>

However, I cannot go along with Piper's objections for three reasons. (1) While Piper is alarmed by the use of first-century Jewish sources to illuminate the New Testament, he shows no such alarm or caution in using

<sup>3</sup> Cf. for example, N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Oxford: Lion, 1997) 77–94; idem, "Paul's Gospel and Caesar's Empire," in *Paul and Politics: Ekklesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation. Essays in Honor of Krister Stendahl* (ed. Richard A. Horsley; Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000) 160–83; idem, *Paul: Fresh Perspectives* (London: SPCK, 2005) 59–79.

<sup>4</sup> Piper, *Future of Justification* 34–36. See also Guy Prentiss Waters, *Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2004) 154–57.

<sup>5</sup> Samuel Sandmel, "Parallelomania," *JBL* 81 (1962) 2–13.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. N. T. Wright, "Paul and Qumran," *Bible Review* 14 (1998) 18, 54; idem, "4QMMT and Paul: Justification, 'Works,' and Eschatology," in *History and Exegesis: New Testament Essays in Honor of Dr E. Earle Ellis for His 80th Birthday* (ed. A-W Son; London: T & T Clark, 2006) 104–32. I should say that Wright does sensibly nuance his remarks (ibid. 110) and I generally agree with him that the "works of law" in 4QMMT C 26–31 are halakhic. But I demur from his view that the "works" are chiefly boundary-markers of the sect and that performance of the "works" were "demonstrations" and "eschatological definitions" of group membership rather than the basis for an eschatological justification.

seventeenth-century Puritans or nineteenth-century Baptist preachers to understand the text. In other words, Piper does not want us using Qumran or the Apocrypha to understand the NT, but he is perfectly happy using John Owen and Charles Spurgeon to do the same. Given that Reformed writers can impose foreign frameworks upon biblical texts, why no caution here? (2) Immersion in the historical sources of the biblical world should be part of the study habits of every pastor. James Charlesworth mentions that he has inherited the libraries of four scholars and preachers who have passed away and every single one of them had a copy of William Whiston's *The Complete Works of Josephus*. He comments: "Our grandfathers knew the history of the first century."<sup>7</sup> On several occasions I have heard D. A. Carson counsel that before writing a commentary on Revelation one should read 500 pages of Jewish apocalyptic literature in order to get a feel for the genre. A good interpreter of a text is also a good interpreter of cultural contexts.

Personally, I believe that a reading of Jewish, Greek, and Roman sources, social-science studies, archaeology, and just generally immersing ourselves in the ancient world brings deeper insight into the biblical text and greater precision in our teaching of the text. (I regularly adjure my students to stop reading the *Shack* and *Left Behind* novels and go and read instead the Apostolic Fathers, Apocrypha, Dead Sea Scrolls, Plato, Herodotus, and Cicero.) As a case in point, in 1 Cor 11:3–5 the ESV rightly renders  $\gamma\upsilon\upsilon\eta$  as "wife" rather than as "woman" as given in the TNIV/NIV10. The ESV is correct here because, as Bruce Winter has shown from his study of ancient sources, the wearing of veils primarily relates to the status of wives.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, background studies enable us to move from analogue to digital or from black and white to technicolor. They give shape and substance to the biblical texts we are committed to studying. My concern is that Piper wants to rule out of bounds a whole sway of evidence because it might potentially falsify his traditional way of reading Paul. While I do not necessarily agree with N. T. Wright's entire reading of sources like 4QMMT, at least he is reading it for some profit. Thus Wright represents a better strategy than Piper for reading the Bible. Moreover, I would go so far as to say that if Piper could view the first-century materials more positively, and if Wright could read the Reformed authors more sympathetically, then they would actually find more resources available to them to help them say the kind of things that they want to say.

### III. ORDO SALUTIS AND HISTORIA SALUTIS

One of the main issues in the Piper-Wright debate is whether one reads the NT through the lens of an *ordo salutis* (a theologically constructed order of salvation) or in light of a *historia salutis* (a biblically constructed salvation-history of the Bible's storyline). We could simplify this and insist that a major

<sup>7</sup> James H. Charlesworth, *Jesus within Judaism: New Light from Exciting Archaeological Discoveries* (London: SPCK, 1989) 90.

<sup>8</sup> Bruce W. Winter, *Roman Wives, Roman Widows: The Appearance of New Women and the Pauline Communities* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) 77–96.

difference is the disagreement about whether the controlling paradigm for interpretation of Paul rests in systematic theology or in biblical theology. A number of commentators have noted this tension in the debate.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, while Paul is the battleground, the debate has often been argued between theologians and exegetes.<sup>10</sup>

Piper evidently prefers the *ordo salutis* approach that centers upon the application of justification to the individual. He is concerned primarily with maintaining the distinction between sanctification and justification. Yet he unfortunately tends to miss the redemptive-historical horizon and the social context of “righteousness” in Paul’s letters. Piper pays close attention to the minutia of exegesis, the syntax of the Greek, and the theological meaning of words. But he does not link “righteousness” and “justification” to wider topics such as the Abrahamic covenant or the saga of salvation in Isaiah. Also, Piper does not engage the crunch question that Paul had to address: do Gentiles have to become Jews in order to become Christians?<sup>11</sup> Piper is aware that legalism and ethnocentrism can be merged together, but he asserts that a moralizing legalism is the root problem against which Paul was reacting.<sup>12</sup> Whether the chief matter in Galatians was legalism, synergism, or nomism is ultimately moot. The point is that we have to understand Paul’s arguments in light of how Jews in the first century related to Gentiles and how Paul responds with meta-narrative arguments that reach back to Abraham and Adam. If I may give an example, when I ask my students (alluding to Gal 3:13) why Christ was cursed on the cross, they often reply with terse answers like: “So that I might saved,” “So that we can go to heaven,” or “So that that God would forgive us our sins,” which in its own way is entirely true. But what does Paul say in Gal 3:14 about the purpose of Christ’s accursedness: “so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.” Whereas most of my students give answers related to personal and individual soteriology, Paul’s answer is in fact redemptive-historical and is applied to the sectarian context transpiring in Galatia. Awareness of these issues is what is missing from Reformed exegesis of Paul’s letters typified by Piper. While Gal 3:13–14 undoubtedly teaches penal substitution, it was obviously not Paul’s main point.

Wright, on the other hand, prefers a *historia salutis* approach that is mindful of historical context and the big narrative picture. According to Markus Bockmuehl: “Whereas lesser mortals may acquiesce in losing the wood for the

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Mark A. Seifrid, *Justification by Faith: The Origin and Development of a Central Pauline Theme* (Leiden: Brill, 1992) 1; Moises Silva, “Faith Versus Works of Law in Galatians,” in *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, Volume 2: *The Paradoxes of Paul* (ed. D. A. Carson, Mark A. Seifrid, and Peter T. O’Brien; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004) 238.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. discussion about justification and the *ordo salutis* in Don B. Garlington, *Faith, Obedience, and Perseverance: Aspects of Paul’s Letter to the Romans* (WUNT 79; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1994) 158–59.

<sup>11</sup> Mark Dever recognizes this point in his sermon, “Improving the Gospel: Exercises in Unbiblical Theology,” *T4G* (2008) available at <http://www.ligonier.org/rym/broadcasts/video/improving-gospel-exercises-unbiblical-theology>. Cited January 11, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Piper, *Future of Justification* 145–61.

exegetical trees, N. T. Wright deals in inter-galactic ecosystems.”<sup>13</sup> Wright is aware that Paul has his own little *ordo salutis* in Rom 8:30,<sup>14</sup> but Wright balks at the idea that justification is about conversion or getting “saved.” He regards justification as a post-conversion declaration that one is a member of the people of God rather describing the process of how one becomes part of the people of God. That would mean that justification is more about ecclesiology than soteriology (though it is clear that Wright thinks that both belong together).<sup>15</sup> I agree with Wright insofar that justification possesses a covenantal or horizontal dimension in terms of defining who the people of God (and, I would add, the basis for their inclusion in the people of God).<sup>16</sup> After all, if God justifies the elect, then justification and ecclesiology go naturally together.<sup>17</sup> On top of that, the first thing imputed to Gentiles in Romans is covenant membership (i.e. circumcision) in Rom 2:26. Yet the problem is not what Wright affirms but what he denies.<sup>18</sup> There is no reason why justification cannot be *both* covenantal *and* initiatory at the same time. Indeed, we have reason to believe that the traditional Protestant conception about the place of justification in an *ordo salutis* is rightly motivated and possesses heuristic value in the discourse of systematic theology. Protestant scholars set forth an *ordo salutis* so that they could describe the saving work of God divinely initiated in the individual. By exegesis and inference they endeavored to show that it was biblically sound to believe that our salvation is tied to the work of God in Christ and not reliant on our own merits. Therefore, we can have complete assurance in the God who calls, justifies, and glorifies his people. That is a legitimate Pauline theme if there ever were one (e.g. Rom 4:4–5; Gal 3:1–5; Eph 2:8–9; Titus 3:5). Finally, I agree with E. P. Sanders and James Dunn against Wright that justification is indeed about initiation into both salvation and into the church.<sup>19</sup> The initiatory nature of justification is clear to me from 1 Cor 6:9–10, Rom 5:1, 9, and Rom 8:30. Consequently, justification has a key place in an *ordo* about how a person is initially restored to a right

<sup>13</sup> Markus Bockmuehl, “Compleat History of the Resurrection: A Dialogue with N. T. Wright,” *JSNT* 26 (2004) 489.

<sup>14</sup> N. T. Wright, “Romans,” in *NIB* (ed. L. E. Keck; 12 vols.; Nashville: Abingdon, 2002) 10.602–5; idem, “The Shape of Justification,” *BR* 17 (2001) 8, 50.

<sup>15</sup> Wright, *Saint Paul* 117, 132–33; idem, *Fresh Perspectives* 121–22, 159. See the valid concerns and critiques of Piper, *Future* 18–19.

<sup>16</sup> Michael F. Bird, *The Saving Righteousness of God: Studies on Paul, Justification, and the New Perspective* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2007) 152–54. On those who regard justification as having vertical and horizontal dimensions, see Peter T. O’Brien, “Was Paul a Covenantal Nomist?” in *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, Volume 2: *The Paradoxes of Paul* 291; Mark Reasoner, *Romans in Full Circle: A History of Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005) 5; Francis Watson, *Paul, Judaism, and the Gentiles: Beyond the New Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007) 6; James D. G. Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem* (CITM 2; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009) 489. And see Wright’s qualified acceptance of that model *Justification* 126–27.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Wright, *Fresh Perspectives* 121.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. I. Howard Marshall, *New Testament Theology: Many Witnesses, One Gospel* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004) 446.

<sup>19</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998) 386–87; E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 471–72.

relationship with God, rather than a post-facto declaration that they are in God's covenant people.

I cannot give a nice and neat formula as to how to integrate an *ordo salutis* and a *historia salutis* together. Recently some reformed authors such as Michael Horton and J. V. Fesko have consciously tried to integrate the *ordo* and the *historia* into a comprehensive *salutis*.<sup>20</sup> God bless them, they are on the right track, but their efforts still seem constrained by dogmatic concerns and lack social realism in my view.<sup>21</sup> The best advice I can give is that we should engage in close reading of Paul that is attentive to social and canonical contexts. Beyond that I suggest that when you read Paul, do not just ask yourself the question, "What must I do to be saved?" as if that is the issue lurking behind every verse. Also ask yourself another question, "Who are the people of God?" With those two questions in our mind as we read Paul's letters it will hopefully lead us to a more comprehensive view of Paul's theology that integrates soteriology and ecclesiology together.<sup>22</sup>

#### IV. THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD

On the "righteousness of God," Wright is well known for his preference that it refers to God's covenant faithfulness.<sup>23</sup> This position is not as novel as often thought, since it was also held by the Church Father Ambrosiaster, the humanist Erasmus, the Protestant ecumenist Jean-Alphonse Turretin, the English puritan George Joye, and the Swiss theologian Karl Barth. In contrast, John Piper regards the "righteousness of God" in Rom 1:17, 3:21 as an external righteousness that is imputed to believers and this view has a

<sup>20</sup> Michael S. Horton, *Covenant and Salvation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007) 108; J. V. Fesko, *Justification: Understanding the Classic Reformed Doctrine* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2008).

<sup>21</sup> One of the biggest problems in my view is that some Reformed authors simply cannot compute or comprehend the notion that justification is eschatological and has a now and not-yet structure. They are constricted by their *ordo* that cannot extend justification to any moment co-terminus with or after glorification. Adding eschatology to their understanding of justification causes a systematic meltdown of their theological system. The objections of J. V. Fesko (*Justification* 320–23), Piper (*Future of Justification* 58), and Waters (*Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul* 131, 133, 176–77) are indicative of this meltdown and one cannot recognize their reading of Paul as genuinely Pauline on the one hand or the validity of their criticism of Wright on the other hand. On the eschatological nature of justification see, for example, Geerhardus Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952) 54–55; Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (2 vols.; trans. K. Grobel; London: SCM, 1952) 1.270–79 (esp. 274–75); Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (3d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965) 283; Herman N. Ridderbos, *Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 165–66; G. E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (rev. and ed. Ralph P. Martin and Donald A. Hagner; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 482–84; Mark Seifrid, *Christ Our Righteousness: Paul's Theology of Justification* (NSBT; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000) 81–82; Paul Rainbow, *The Way of Salvation* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2005) 155–74, 204–5; Richard Gaffin, *By Faith, Not by Sight: Paul and the Order of Salvation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2008) 98–103; and R. Daniel Kirk, *Unlocking Romans: Resurrection and the Justification of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008) 226–27. Note esp. Wright's discussion in *Fresh Perspectives* 146–50; idem, *Justification* 214–15.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Kirk, *Unlocking Romans* 223–24.

<sup>23</sup> Wright, *Saint Paul* 100–111; idem, "Romans" 10.424–26; idem, *Justification* 178–82.

distinguished heritage from Luther to Bultmann.<sup>24</sup> Yet I find both positions dissatisfying.

Against Wright, I doubt that “covenant faithfulness” exhausts the meaning of the “righteousness of God” in Paul’s letters. I can grant, first, that “righteousness” and “divine faithfulness” can be expressed together particularly in Isaiah (1:26; 11:5; 16:5; 42:3; 48:18; 51:1, 7; 57:12; 58:2; 61:3, 8; 64:5), the Psalms (33:4; 40:10; 85:10–11; 89:14; 111:7–8; 119:75; 143:1), and elsewhere (Deut 32:4; Dan 9:4–7; Zech 8:8). I can grant, second, that Paul is quite aware of the motif of God’s faithfulness (Rom 3:3; 1 Cor 1:9, 10:13; 2 Cor 1:18; 1 Thess 5:24). Still, we should observe Seifrid’s dictum, that all covenant-keeping is righteousness, but not all righteousness is covenant-keeping.<sup>25</sup> There are horizons before and after God’s covenant with Israel that need to be taken into account such as creation (e.g. Gen 18:25) and new creation (e.g. Isa 45:8,13; 46:12–13; 51:5, 8; 54:14; 58:8; 59:16, 17; 61:10 61:11; 62:1, 2; 63:1) as spheres of divine righteousness. They are not antithetical to covenant faithfulness, but they are certainly broader than it.

Against Piper, I am unpersuaded that the “righteousness of God” is God’s unswerving commitment to preserve his honor and glory.<sup>26</sup> Douglas Moo is correct that Piper narrows the conception more than is justified. God’s righteousness, more broadly, is God’s acting in accordance with his own norms and promises (and I would add that norms and promises are encapsulated in God’s covenanting activity).<sup>27</sup> Elsewhere Piper asserts that the righteousness of God is an external righteousness that is imputed to believers, that it is an objective genitive, a righteousness *from* God.<sup>28</sup> I prefer the subjective genitive view for several reasons: (1) It makes sense of the context as Romans 1–3 is pervaded by statements about qualities and activities of God denoted by reference to God’s “power” (Rom 1:16), “wrath” (Rom 1:18; 3:5), “judgment” (Rom 2:2–3, 5), “goodness” (Rom 2:4), “truthfulness” (Rom 3:7), and “faithfulness” (Rom 3:3); (2) There are multiple instances in the OT where “righteousness” and “salvation” are effectively synonymous (e.g. Ps 51:14; 71:15–16; Isa 46:13; 56:1) and usage here is also analogous to instances where God’s righteousness is his mighty actions of deliverance (e.g. Judg 5:11; 1 Sam 12:7). In other words, the “righteousness of God” signifies the uprightness of God’s character and how he demonstrates his character as the judge of all the earth and in his faithfulness toward Israel in Jesus Christ. The righteousness of God, then, is the character of God embodied and enacted in his apocalyptic saving actions which means vindication for his people and condemnation for the wicked. The righteousness of God is revealed in the saving event of gospel that rectifies

<sup>24</sup> Piper, *Counted Righteous* 66–78.

<sup>25</sup> Mark A. Seifrid, “Righteousness Language in the Hebrew Scriptures and Early Judaism,” in *Justification and Variegated Nomism: Volume 1* (ed. D. A. Carson, Mark A. Seifrid, and Peter T. O’Brien; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004) 424.

<sup>26</sup> John Piper, *The Justification of God* 111–19; idem, *Future of Justification* 64–71.

<sup>27</sup> Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 84.

<sup>28</sup> Piper, *Counted Righteous* 66–68; idem, *Future of Justification* 180.

the status and state of the fallen creation. This includes not only justification, but also reconciliation, transformation, and new creation.<sup>29</sup>

## V. IMPUTATION

A big sticking point has been the issue of the imputation of the righteousness of Jesus Christ in the debate. This has been the toe that many have felt has been stepped on by Wright.

John Piper presented a detailed case that it is only by the merits of Jesus Christ imputed to the believer that the godless has any hope of salvation.<sup>30</sup> He states: "By *imputation* I am referring to the act in which God counts sinners to be righteousness through their faith in Christ on the basis of Christ's perfect 'blood and righteousness,' specifically the righteousness that Christ accomplished by his perfect obedience in life and death."<sup>31</sup> Thus, justification depends on a forensic and alien righteousness that is imputed rather than imparted.

In contrast, N. T. Wright rejects a wooden application of the accounting metaphor about crediting and categorically dismisses the idea of the imputation of the merit of Jesus. As an alternative, Wright suggests that union with Christ effectively does the job normally attributed to imputation. He writes: "Paul's doctrine of what is true of those who are in the Messiah does the job, within his scheme of thought, that the traditional Protestant emphasis on the imputation of Christ's righteousness did within that scheme. In other words, that which imputed righteousness was trying to insist upon is, I think, fully taken care of in (for instance) Romans 6, where Paul declares that what is true of the Messiah is true of all his people. Jesus was vindicated by God as Messiah after his penal death; I am in Messiah; therefore, I too, have died and been raised. . . . He sees us within the *vindication* of Christ, that is, as having died and risen again with him."<sup>32</sup>

Against Piper, for the most part I find his exegesis of the key texts a little labored. You see this in his treatment of 2 Cor 5:21 with his examination of becoming the "righteousness of God." For him Christ's being "made sin" is parallel to our "becoming the righteousness of God" which amount to imputation. The righteousness of God is the obedience of Jesus from God.<sup>33</sup> That is not to deny that Wright's take on 2 Cor 5:21 has problems,<sup>34</sup> but Piper is

<sup>29</sup> For the rich exposition of the polyphonic nature of the "Righteousness of God," see Colin Kruse, *Paul, the Law and Justification* (Leicester, UK: Apollos, 1996) 169–70; A. Katherine Grieb, *The Story of Romans: A Narrative Defense of God's Righteousness* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002) 24–25; Tim Chester, "Justification, Ecclesiology and the New Perspective," *Them* 30 (2005) 14.

<sup>30</sup> Piper, *Counted Righteous* 53–119.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* 41.

<sup>32</sup> N. T. Wright, "New Perspectives on Paul," in *Justification in Perspective: Historical Developments and Contemporary Challenges*, ed. Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006) 260–61. See similarly Don Garlington, "Imputation or Union with Christ? A Response to John Piper," *P & R* 12 (2003) 45–113.

<sup>33</sup> Piper, *Counted Righteous* 81–83; *idem*, *Future of Justification* 172–80.

<sup>34</sup> Wright, *Climax of the Covenant* 203, which Piper (*Future of Justification* 175–79) rightly critiques.



massaging the text with his reading of Romans 4 and 5. It has been recognized by G. E. Ladd, R. H. Gundry, Leon Morris, Don Carson, Brian Vickers, and Mark Seifrid, that the standard passages lined up to proof-text imputation just do not say that. The texts cited are similar, partial, or analogous descriptions of imputation, but they do not establish it. What they do show is that our righteousness is irrefragably tied to our union with Christ. Yet while imputation is not exegetically established, it may not necessarily be without theological warrant.

I *generally* accept Wright's sketch about union with Christ, but I think we are still left with one important question: what does union *actually do* that makes us "righteous" before God? This is where a concept like imputation is, I believe, a *corollary* of the biblical texts. Wright even moves in this direction when he states that one of the "great truths of the gospel" is that "the accomplishments of Jesus Christ is *reckoned* to all those who are 'in him.'"<sup>35</sup> Thus Wright does have a theology of imputation rooted in the reckoning of Jesus' faithfulness to the believer. The difference between Wright and his Reformed interlocutors is whether that imputation is a meritorious achievement that fulfils an eternal law or a representative role that Jesus faithfully embodies. I hold the latter to be true. Still, if we take all the pieces together, including the language of "reckoning" from Romans 4, the gift of righteousness in Rom 5:17 and Phil 3:9, the representative nature of Adam and Christ as federal heads, the forensic nature of *dikaioō* and *dikaioσynē* in several passages (e.g. Rom 3:21–26; 10:10; Gal 2:15–21; 5:5), and the indebtedness of salvation to Jesus' faithfulness and obedience in his task as Son, then something like "imputation" is a useful way of holding all of these things together.<sup>36</sup> Yet rather than speak of an "imputed righteousness," perhaps we should speak of an "incorporated righteousness."<sup>37</sup> On this model our apprehension of an alien righteousness, consisting of our participation in the faithfulness of the Son of God and his judicial vindication, takes place in the sphere of union with

<sup>35</sup> N. T. Wright, "Paul in Different Perspective: Lecture 1: Starting Points and Opening Reflections," unpublished paper delivered at Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church, January 3, 2005. [http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright\\_Auburn\\_Paul.htm](http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Auburn_Paul.htm). Cited 11 December 2010.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Michael F. Bird, *A Bird's-Eye View of Paul* (Nottingham, UK: Apollos, 2007) 96–98. See similar Brian Vickers (*Jesus' Blood and Righteousness: Paul's Theology of Imputation* [Wheaton: Crossway, 2006]) who repeatedly sees imputation as resulting from a "synthesis" of Pauline materials. Leon Morris (*The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* [3d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984] 282) regarded imputation a "corollary" of the identification of the believers with Jesus. D. A. Carson ("The Vindication of Imputation: On Fields of Discourse and Semantic Fields," in *Justification: What's at Stake in the Current Debates* [ed. M. Husbands and D. J. Treier; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004] 72–73) comments: "justification is, in Paul, irrefragably tied to our incorporation into Christ, to our union with Christ . . . imputation is crucial, but it is itself grounded in something more comprehensive." Note as well Wright (*Justification* 229): "It is not the case, in other words, that one has to choose between 'justification' by faith' and 'being in Christ' as the 'center' of Paul's thought. As many Reformed theologians in particular have seen . . . the two must not be played off against one another, and indeed they can only be understood in relation to one another"; Piper (*Counted Righteous* 84–85): "The implication [of 2 Cor 5:21; Phil 3:9; Gal 2:17; 1 Cor 1:30] seems to be that our union with Christ is what connects us with the divine righteousness."

<sup>37</sup> Bird, *Saving Righteousness* 60–87.

Christ. This motif of “righteousness by incorporation” has also found support in studies by Timo Laato and Kevin Vanhoozer.<sup>38</sup>

#### VI. FAITH, WORKS, AND JUDGMENT

A final point of contention is the relationship between faith, works, and the final judgment. While I might exegete several texts differently, I concur with Piper that our works at the final judgment are evidential rather than the basis of our final and public justification.<sup>39</sup> I constantly grind my teeth whenever I read Wright’s phrasing that eschatological justification is God’s verdict rendered “on the basis of a life lived” since that would appear to make justification dependent upon performance (though elsewhere Wright clearly seems to envisage an evidential judgment by works).<sup>40</sup> I understand why Wright said that, and I recognize the cogency of how he got there. He is trying to take particular texts such as Rom 2:13 seriously, but his wording is misguided. The basis upon which believers are justified is faith, as Paul makes quite explicit in Philippians (Phil 3:9). Paul also knows of a distinction between believing and working when it comes to the basis of being put right with God (e.g. Gal 3:1–5; Rom 4:4–5). Nevertheless, justification according to works is entirely biblical (e.g. 2 Cor 5:10; Rom 14:10) and the question is how does righteousness by faith and judgment according to works relate to each other. I think the solution is to note the prepositions that Paul uses. Paul consistently employs *dia* (“through”) and *ek* (“by/from”) to indicate that faith is the instrument by which believers are justified (Rom 3:22, 25; 5:1; Gal 2:16). But Paul uses the *kata* (“according to”) when it comes to the role of works at the final judgment (Rom 2:6; 2 Cor 11:5). The works, faithfulness, obedience, and life of the believer must accord with God’s verdict at the final judgment. Thus, justification is on the basis of Christ’s work, it is appropriated through the instrument of faith, while the verdict of the final judgment is congruent with the life of Christian works.

The basis for our being right with God is in Christ Jesus who was handed over for our sins and raised for our justification. Yet we must integrate into that picture the new covenant reality of the indwelling of the Spirit, the organic unity of faith-faithfulness-obedience, the transforming power of union with Christ, and God’s continuing work in the life of the believing community. Wright is correct to note the relative lack of attention given by Reformed theologians to the role of the Holy Spirit in justification given its importance in Paul’s letters (see 1 Cor 6:11, Gal 5:5–6, and Rom 8:1–17).<sup>41</sup> On works in the

<sup>38</sup> Timo Laato, “Paul’s Anthropological Considerations,” in *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, Volume 2 348–49; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Wrighting the Wrongs of the Reformation? The State of the Union with Christ in St. Paul and in Protestant Soteriology,” in *Jesus, Paul and the People of God: A Theological Dialogue with N. T. Wright* (ed. Nicholas Perrin and Richard Hays; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2011).

<sup>39</sup> Piper, *Future of Justification* 103–16.

<sup>40</sup> Wright, *Paul: Fresh Perspectives* 145–50; idem, “New Perspectives on Paul” 254; idem, *Justification* 182–93.

<sup>41</sup> Wright, *Justification* 10, 188–89.

Christian life Peter O'Brien wrote: "The obedience and godly behavior of the Christian may be spoken of in terms of Christ working in and through those who have been united to him."<sup>42</sup> According to Mark Seifrid, "The works that God shall judge in us are not our own in the proper sense, but those of the risen Christ who has been given to us in faith."<sup>43</sup> Now if we substitute "Christ" for "Spirit" (and as trinitarian believers, why not?), then I do not see any tangible difference between O'Brien/Seifrid and Wright on works at the final judgment.<sup>44</sup> As I see it, God the Father, in Christ Jesus, and by the Holy Spirit, works his works in us so that we might be blameless and praiseworthy at the final judgment. On that day, God's verdict for us at the cross and resurrection will have parity with God's work in us from the Spirit-driven life of faith.<sup>45</sup>

## VII. CONCLUSION

In sum, I have compared and contrasted Piper and Wright on five areas: the use of ancient literature in exegesis; the *ordo salutis* vs. *historia salutis* as a dominating framework; the "righteousness of God"; imputation; and faith and works. I hope that I have shown the relative merits and deficiencies of both men on these topics. I conclude that we should neither uncritically embrace nor blatantly dismiss the conclusions of Piper and Wright. The strengths and weaknesses of both men should be judiciously weighed and only then imbibed or rejected. I hope that what I have presented here is a modified Reformed perspective that represents not so much an alternative to them, but something that harnesses the best of what both have to offer. I would also finish by underscoring what I think is the primary unity between these two pastor-theologians. At the end of the day, both affirm the reality that God in Christ saves men and women from their sins through God's unmerited mercy worked out in the crucifixion of the Messiah, the raising of God's Son, and this saving event issues forth in a forensic justification received by faith alone. And, may I add, whenever Piper and Wright are found united, it is like precious oil running down the beard of Aaron (Ps 133:1–2).

<sup>42</sup> O'Brien, "Was Paul a Covenantal Nomist?" 265.

<sup>43</sup> Mark Seifrid, "Justified by Faith and Judged by Works: A Biblical Paradox and its Significance," *SBJT* 5 (2001) 93–94.

<sup>44</sup> On justification and the Holy Spirit, see Frank D. Macchia, *Justified in the Spirit: Creation, Redemption, and the Triune God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Calvin (*Institutes*, 3.17.10): "Therefore, as we ourselves, when we have been engrafted into Christ, are righteous in God's sight because our iniquities are covered by Christ's sinlessness, so our works are righteous and are thus regarded because whatever fault is otherwise in them is buried in Christ's purity, and is not charged to our account. *By faith alone not only we ourselves but our works as well are justified*" (italics added).

Michael F. Bird, "What is There Between Minneapolis and St. Andrews? A Third Way in the Piper-Wright Debate," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 54.2 (June 2011): 299-309. pdf. Andrew Hassler, "Ethnocentric Legalism and the Justification of the Individual: Rethinking Some New Perspective Assumptions," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 54.2 (June 2011): 311-327. pdf. Paul A. Himes, "When A Christian Sins: 1 Corinthians 10:13 and the Power of Contrary Choice in Relation to the Compatibilist-Libertarian Debate," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 54.2 (June 2011): 311-327. pdf.

Paul A. Himes is currently Research Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at University of St. Andrews, and before that, he served as Bishop of Durham for The Church of England and taught New Testament studies for 20 years at Cambridge, McGill, and Oxford Universities. He has written a stack of widely-acclaimed and bestselling books, both academic and popular, and has a cult following among young Christian thinkers in the United States and Europe. But the underlying meaning Dr. Piper and others are seeking in that theory are, I believe, not only retained but enhanced in the larger and more textually grounded reading which I have offered. I have no interest in maintaining an either/or. The University of St Andrews is located in the small town of St Andrews. In the middle ages, there were no universities in Scotland and young Scottish people had to go abroad to study. Many of them went to study in France, to Paris University. In May 1410 a group of academics, mainly graduates of Paris University and the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, started a school of higher learning in St Andrews, which offered courses of lectures in logic, philosophy, and law. Later the school turned into a university. Third-year-students wear the gown off the left shoulder or on the right shoulder. A fourth-year-student will wear the gown off both shoulders, across the elbow. Students wear the red gown in different ways depending on which year they are in. 1) True. 2) False.