

AN INTERVIEW WITH N. T. WRIGHT

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CTR: According to many New Perspective (NP) scholars, Second Temple Judaism did not promote a works-based salvation. Yet, other scholars, especially those from a reformed perspective, disagree with this assessment. How do you account for this lack of consensus?

WRIGHT: It all depends what you mean by “a works-based salvation.” There is an enormous amount of confusion here because of three slippery points.

First, does one mean “salvation” or “justification”? The two are not the same, not in Isaiah (where Paul gets much of his language from), not in Paul. *Justification* is a declarative act in which God as the judge pronounces someone “in the right.” *Salvation*, on the other hand, is an actual rescue from sin and its consequences. Since many people, including many who should know better, use the terms as though they were synonymous, it is not surprising that there is no consensus.

Second, are we talking about justification in the present or justification (judgment) in the future? Paul is quite clear: the future judgment will be based on the totality of the life that has been led (Rom 2:1–16; 2 Cor 5:10). The point of “justification by faith” is that this final verdict is brought forward into the present when someone believes the gospel (an event which itself takes place because, according to Paul, the word of the gospel carries power, the power of the Spirit, to bring about this effect).

Third, many use “salvation” to mean “getting converted” or something like it (as in “Are you saved?”). Granted, the NT does use salvation language in that way sometimes, but if we are talking about the finer points of theology, it is better to keep a strict eye on usage. I have attempted to get my mind around Paul’s implicit, and sometimes explicit, *ordo salutis* (see my paper at the Rutherford House Dogmatics Conference 2003), according to which the past event of someone’s hearing the gospel and responding in faith is referred to as the “call,” which happens completely without any human initiative or cooperation until the Spirit has worked through the Word; then “justification” is God’s declaration about that person, based entirely on faith; then (final) salvation and (final) justification/judgment is based on the complete Spirit-driven life between initial faith and bodily death. I know there are some in various post-Reformation traditions who see even this last point as smuggling in “works” by the back door, but all I can say is what is good enough for Paul is good enough for me.

CTR: And how does this confusion precisely affect our understanding of Second Temple Judaism?

WRIGHT: The result is that, when we ask similar questions about Second Temple Judaism, it is not always clear what we are talking about. Not surprisingly, most Jews of Paul’s day believed in a final judgment according to works, as not only Paul but also Jesus seems to have endorsed! Most Jews who thought about such things would almost certainly have said—and this is the point the NP is making—that Jews are Jews not because they do good works to become members of the covenant family but because of God’s grace in election and the covenant, i.e. in allowing them to be born as physical children of Abraham. This means, or ought to mean, that at the first point in the *ordo salutis* they believe in grace (they come into the covenant not because of anything they have done), at the third point in the *ordo salutis* they believe, like Jesus and Paul, in final judgment on the basis of the whole life led and that the question ought to concern the middle point: “How, in the present time in advance of the final judgment, are they marked out as God’s covenant people?” Let me say this as clearly as I can: Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith not of works belongs at that middle point. As a Pharisee, he had believed that, once people came into God’s covenant by grace, they were to be marked out in the present time, ahead of the final judgment, by their possession of and their attempts to keep the Jewish law, the Torah. As a Christian, he believed that once people came into God’s covenant by grace, they were to be marked out in the present time, ahead of the final judgment, by their belief that Jesus was Lord and that God had raised him from the dead.

To characterize that Pharisaic view as a “works-based salvation” is clearly a gross oversimplification and confusion. It is clear to me that (a) most Jews whose views we can track at the time—an important qualification—believed that God called them to be Jews, Israelites, through his covenant actions in the Exodus, etc., fulfilling the promises to Abraham and his seed, i.e. by grace, not by their own works; (b) most Jews believed that there would be a final judgment at which their works in the present time would be an important part, if not the whole part, of what counted and that in this respect early Christians like Paul agreed with them; and (c) most Jews believed that you could tell in advance who would be vindicated at that final judgment *because they possessed Torah and tried to keep it*. I say “tried to keep it” because they knew that, if they failed, there were the sacrifices to cover such sins. What Second Temple Jews held (to overgeneralize to make the point) was *a works-based present justification*, and that is what Paul was attacking.

CTR: When some Reformed theologians accuse you of distorting the gospel and abandoning forensic imputation, how do you personally handle and respond to such criticism?

WRIGHT: Well, by writing papers like the one I gave at Rutherford House in September 2003 and by accepting invitations to dialogue, like the conference I did with Professor Richard Gaffin in New Orleans in January 2005. Frankly, there are often times when I find myself thinking that some at least of my accusers have simply not bothered to read what I have actually written or insist on interpreting it with maximum suspicion. I like to draw attention to the fact that my guiding light has always been *sola Scriptura* over against *all* human traditions including those generated by the Reformation! I think if Luther or Calvin were asked, “Should we have always taken your words on Scripture as final, or should we go back and read Scripture carefully, prayerfully, historically, and lexicographically for ourselves, and if we find that you were wrong on some things, who should we follow?” they would say, without missing a beat: “Follow Scripture, and leave our traditions as monuments to our best efforts.” And I hope those who read me in generations to come will do the same.

CTR: In what way do you feel your adversaries have misrepresented your teaching on the NP?

WRIGHT: Starting at the top . . . the most remarkable misrepresentations—remarkable because they come from an internationally famous scholar—are those of Stephen Westerholm in his recent book. He insists on a complete disjunction: either Paul’s language about justification is all about how sinners get saved by God’s grace, or it’s all about how Gentiles get into the community without being circumcised. The silly

thing is that, though some NP advocates may sometimes have implied something like this, I certainly have not. My commentary on Romans in the *New Interpreters Bible* should make this clear.

More than this, it is remarkable how many people have accused me of having a defective theology of Scripture when my method from my earliest days has been to allow Scripture to speak over against all our traditions and when advocates of a renewed-old-perspective regularly use only a shrunken version of what Paul actually wrote (e.g. stopping at Rom 3:28, which I saw done recently).

Further, I am often accused of not believing in substitutionary atonement. I presume the grounds for this accusation are (a) N.T. Wright is a NP advocate, (b) some NP advocates sound like old-fashioned liberals, (c) old-fashioned liberals do not believe in substitutionary atonement, and (d) therefore N. T. Wright does not either. I can only think the line of thought is something like that because anyone with even a nodding acquaintance with my work would be able to refute the charge. For instance, chapter twelve of *Jesus and the Victory of God* is the longest defense ever written, I think, of the view that Jesus made Isaiah 53 determinative for his own thinking and vocation and that this committed him to the belief that he had to take upon himself the judgment he had announced as hanging over the whole nation.

There are other misrepresentations but that will do for the moment!

CTR: Continental scholars have been slower than their American counterparts to embrace the NP. Why is this? Do you see this changing anytime soon?

WRIGHT: By “Continental” I guess you mean German Lutheran. Part of the problem here is that E. P. Sanders, commonly cited as the main proponent of the NP, has said a lot of quite dismissive things about Joachim Jeremias, who is revered in many German circles as one of their finest and most deeply Christian scholars of the last generation. That got the NP off to a bad start. In addition, many German NT scholars are far more deeply embedded in Lutheran understandings of Paul than many of us in the UK or USA so that simply explaining what the NP is all about comes as quite a problem for them. I would like to think that things will change, but it will take a lot of hard work and mutual listening and explanation all around.

CTR: For Martin Luther, a fresh interpretation of Rom 1:16–17 led to his new belief in forensic justification. Was there a verse, book, event, or process that most contributed to your embracing the NP?

WRIGHT: I have written here and there about the process, which was going on before there was such a thing as the NP. I was wrestling during the early and middle 1970s with the problem of understanding Romans and Galatians and couldn't quite make it all make sense on either the Lutheran scheme or the Calvinist scheme. The breakthrough came when I read Rom 10:3 in terms of Paul's fellow Jews "seeking to establish their own righteousness" not in terms of a legalist's ladder of good works to earn God's moral approval but in terms of "a status of covenant membership for Jews and Jews only." Suddenly scales fell from my eyes and the whole of Romans and Galatians made sense.

CTR: What do you believe is the biggest stumbling block standing in the way of those not willing to embrace the NP? Is it theological, Biblical, psychological, sociological, or a combination of all the above?

WRIGHT: That is difficult to say. In most cases I think it is simply a case of people being so firmly taught that there is only one way of reading Paul that they feel deeply disloyal to the tradition that has nurtured them if they even think for a moment that Paul might have had other things to say as well. In other cases it has something to do with the fact that America is currently polarized along one particular left/right axis (please note, the rest of the world does not sign up to this particular axis and feels free to embrace some things from your left and other things from your right) and where people who for other reasons vote on the right suppose that the NP is a left-wing movement they feel obliged to reject it, which seems to me a poor substitute for "searching the Scriptures diligently to see whether those things are so."

CTR: On the topic of connecting exegesis to systematic theology, do you believe the NP will require us to rewrite our systematic theologies in the areas of soteriology, ecclesiology, etc., or will it require us to simply appeal to different texts than we have traditionally?

WRIGHT: It is not just the NP, but also in the area of New Testament an enormous amount of contemporary research into the ancient world, both Jewish and non-Jewish, ought to make us rethink all kinds of issues. For instance, it is quite clear that the early Christians saw what we call "politics" and "religion" not as the enlightenment wanted us to see them as separate categories, but as interlinked in a large number of ways. This impacts on soteriology (in Paul's world, the word *soter*, saviour, was a regular title for Caesar), on ecclesiology (the *ekklesia* in Paul's world might be a synagogue, or might be a local civic assembly), and on several other things. But that is just one example among many. The NP should not be seen as a single take-it-or-leave-it thing; there are as many versions of the NP as there are people writing in it, and I for one have spent quite a bit of time distancing myself from other NP authors though

you would never know it from what some people write! Basically, the NP is part of a wake-up call to people in the Church and outside it that there are more things going on in Paul than we have traditionally supposed and that it is time we got the bigger picture.

CTR: In what ways does the controversy over the NP highlight the tension between historical research and faith?

WRIGHT: The Christian faith has always had, as a central component, the belief that certain things happened within history, and Christians have frequently been among those who advanced such historical knowledge through research. The Reformation itself had as one of its major drivers the fact that better knowledge of the Scriptures had come about through improved lexicography, etc., which is of course a branch of history, i.e. discovering what key words and terms actually meant in the first century as opposed to what they had been made to mean through long Latin tradition. Of course, there have been some who have used historical research as a way of belittling faith, just as there are some who use sex as a tool of lustful aggression. That doesn't mean that faith can dispense with history, any more than abuse of sexuality means that human relations, not least marriage, can dispense with sex.

CTR: In what ways will the NP contribute to healing the 500 year rift between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism? Is this a good or dangerous thing?

WRIGHT: I have no idea whether the NP will contribute to ecumenical relations. I would like to think it might, but that could only come about if it happened in tandem with several other things going on right now. Roman Catholicism today is not monolithic (though it still officially presents itself as such) just as Protestantism covers everything from extreme liberalism to extreme fundamentalism. What we all ought to be doing, if we name the name of Jesus Christ as our Lord, is not trying to see how we can patch up old quarrels for their own sake but asking, urgently, what Jesus Christ is summoning us to do and be, in and for his world today, and seeing how we can do it together as far as possible.

CTR: As a Canon and more recently a newly appointed Bishop in the Church of England, how has the NP affected your daily ministry? What shifts in emphasis has it prompted?

WRIGHT: It gives me a far more wholistic vision of Paul's gospel. I think the best thing would be for people interested in this question to log on to the Diocese of Durham website and examine some of my recent sermons and addresses. Please note that the personal challenge of the gospel—the challenge which must come to every child, woman, and

man—is not muted or bypassed, as some have accused me of doing. It is, rather, contextualized within a big, NT-based picture both of what the Church actually is and of the clash between the gospel of Jesus and the gospel of Caesar. This, together with the work I have done on Jesus himself over the last fifteen years and more, has meant that I find myself driven to preach more overtly “political” sermons, without neglecting (I hope) the personal and individual, which remains vital for me personally and I hope for those to whom I preach and with whom I minister.

CTR: What positive results do you see coming out of the current debate over the NP?

WRIGHT: I hope it will send people back to Paul to check things out for themselves. Anything that sends us back to the text rather than to our various traditions has to be a good thing. And it will alert us to the wholistic dimensions I have already spoken about.

CTR: What is the one question that you wish you were asked more often about the NP, and how would you answer it?

WRIGHT: “Why would a deeply Bible-believing person like Tom Wright embrace (a version of) the NP unless it helped him understand things the Bible is actually saying?” Answer: There would not be a reason. It must be therefore that the NP has helped him get into the text itself.

