

N.T. WRIGHT ON JUSTIFICATION

by **Charles E. Hill**

There is so much in this book that is good and should elicit a loud “Amen!” A balanced review of this book would focus on both its strengths and weaknesses. Here, unfortunately, I shall have to be unbalanced. The essential problem I have is that Wright, for whatever reason, wants to redefine justification by faith. We’ll start with a few quotations:

“‘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.”¹

“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 ... On anyone’s reading, but especially within its first-century context, it [i.e., 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 Jewish race, or in some other way?”²

“What Paul means by justification, in this context, should therefore be clear. It is not ‘how you become a Christian,’ so much as ‘how you can tell who is a member of the covenant family.’”³

Notable also is his paraphrase of Philippians 3:9 in which “righteousness” is replaced by “covenant membership:”

“He is 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.”⁴

THE PROBLEM OF DEFINITION

Wright is right about justification being an eschatological definition, but wrong about the content of that

definition.

How does one go about determining the meaning of a word when it is called into question? This happens with other controversies as well. When faced with definitional problems, how should we attempt to resolve them?

One sort of mechanical but still indispensable way is to look at lexicons. Lexicons are compiled by people who have tried to encompass all the uses, or categories of uses, of words from the sources. Lexicographers are human and fallible; they sometimes have biases and blind spots. And lexicons don't give you the particular contexts. But they are invaluable nonetheless as integrated attempts at exhaustive evaluations of the meanings of words. Challenge: find a lexicon which defines the Greek word *dikaiosune* ("righteousness") as "membership within a group" or *dikaioo* ("justify") as "to make or declare the member of a group."

Another way is to look at previous and contemporary works, etc., to try to establish current usage. The claim to have discovered and restored this broad Jewish context is central to Wright's attempt to redefine justification. He essentially argues that in the Judaism which nurtured Paul and which Paul addressed throughout his ministry, justification is all about covenant membership in God's Israel. Here I think he is radically wrong. He has certainly not established this in his book. The covenant relationship may be the context in which Jews discussed justification, but it was the context for their discussion of everything!

When first-century Jews talked about justification by God, as far as I can see (so far), it had to do with the last judgment, or with something in the present which would anticipate or approximate the last judgment, and it was about one's standing before God in terms of sin. Judgment, even by Jews, was viewed as a universal thing and thus as a universal human concern. Jews would have all sorts of advantages on that day because they were Jews and members of the covenant. But the real issue was: How are you going to escape the wrath of God?

But the clearest road to the meaning of a word in a given author is the context which that author gives you, assuming that he gives you a context. In determining how the context points to a word's meaning, we need to ask some important questions: What is the author's train of thought and how does this concept fit within it? What words, phrases, or concepts does he equate with the word? With what does he contrast it? What kinds of other words does he use when he uses this word? This kind of information gives us the necessary boundaries for defining the word. When we do this for Paul's use of justification, I do not see how we can follow Wright.

THE PROBLEM OF THE BROADER CONTEXT

Consider the broad context of Romans 1-5 as a test case for Wright's new definition of justification. In his treatment of Romans 3:21-31 Wright makes the whole issue one of covenant membership: "The

passage is all about the covenant, membership in which is now thrown open to Jew and Gentile alike.”⁵ I beg to differ. Wright concedes that it also has to do with dealing with sin, but his exposition does not do justice to the issue of sin in the text.

Paul begins this long section in Romans by declaring that the gospel is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek (Rom. 1:16). The gospel is the power of God for salvation. Salvation from what? Romans 1:18 tells us: “For the wrath of God is revealed.” The problem that sets up Paul’s exposition of the great, powerful gospel in Romans is the wrath of God. It is the wrath of God from which we need salvation through the gospel. It is not a theodicy, in which God and his covenant faithfulness are on trial. Those on trial are human beings exposed to the wrath of God because of their sins.

Paul then begins in Romans 1:18 to charge that because of their rampant wickedness, the Gentiles are ripe for the wrath of God. This, presumably, will get no argument from Jewish readers. Then in chapter 2⁶ he brings our attention to the coming judgment of God, writing, “On the day of wrath ... God’s righteous judgment will be revealed. For he will render to every man according to his works” (Rom. 2:5-6). Having brought our attention to “that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus” in Romans 2:16, he turns his attention in Romans 2:17 to the Jew who relies upon the Law and boasts in God. Paul now dashes the confidence of presumptuous Jews by showing that, though they have the law, they too are lawbreakers.

From Romans 2:25 Paul starts putting Jew and Gentile on the same level. Circumcision and being a Jew are spiritual things. Being a literal Jew had advantages so long as the advantages were used rightly. But the Jews were not faithful. (Nor can they accuse God, whose holy prerogative it is to judge mankind.) Paul then spends Romans 3:9-20 demonstrating powerfully from Scripture that “all men, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin ... so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For no human being will be justified in his sight by works of the law, since through the law comes knowledge of sin” (Rom. 3:9,19-20).

Notice how the whole train of thought is controlled by the overarching threat of the wrath of God upon sin. The pressing question from Romans 1:18 on is how one will stand in the judgment of God. Paul has exacerbated the problem by showing that the whole world is under sin. The question at hand here is not the question of who is to be called the people of God or who belongs in the covenant. Sin, or the wrath of God against sin, is the immediate problem – and this problem is faced by Jews who are in the covenant as well as by Greeks who are not. Righteousness is what all men need; sin is what all men have. Where there is sin, there is no righteousness: “None is righteous, no, not one” (Rom. 3:10).

Paul does not mention the covenant as a hypothetical vehicle for escaping God’s wrath. But he does mention the hypothesis that works of the Law might avail to justify one (declare one righteous) in his sight (Rom. 3:20). But this hypothesis, if it is held by anybody, is utterly false and dangerous. Here in Romans 3:20, “justify” can hardly mean “show that one has already become a Christian and a part of the people of God.” Wright thinks that the traditional Protestant view of justification by faith is an “abstract

doctrine.”⁷ It can only be abstract if you also think that the coming judgment of God is abstract!

“But now” (Rom. 3:21) signals the turning point in Paul’s argument so far – and what a turning point it is: “But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law.” That is, there is a way to a righteous standing before God which is not dependent upon the false road of law-keeping. If “righteousness of God” here means “God’s covenant faithfulness,” Paul’s argument does not seem to make sense: it is not God who is on trial here. This is why “righteousness of God” here and earlier in Romans 1:17 has traditionally been seen as the righteousness which God bestows on us in Christ as a gift: “the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe” (Rom. 3:22). This is an alien righteousness (cf. Rom. 10:3-4; Phil. 3:9).

Paul then goes on once again to place all men, Jews and Gentiles alike, under sin:

“Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith” (Rom. 3:23-25).

This continues his emphasis on sin as the universal problem of all mankind (of those in the covenant as well as of those outside the covenant), and on God’s gracious justification as sin’s only solution. The propitiation language reaffirms and emphasizes that the problem is not membership in the covenant *per se* but sin, which sin results in God’s wrath, which wrath must be propitiated and is propitiated by Christ’s blood.

In other words, the context which could validate Wright’s view simply does not exist. He says, “Within this context, ‘justification,’ as seen in 3:24-26, means that those who believe in Jesus Christ are declared to be members of the true covenant family which of course means that their sins are forgiven, since that was the purpose of the covenant.”⁸ In Wright’s construction, forgiveness of sin has the character of a by-product, a bonus that comes with covenant membership. The removal of one’s sins is not connected directly to justification. Justification for Wright simply confirms an already-possessed status as members of God’s covenant.

But in Paul, justification is the pronouncement of righteousness, and righteousness has to do with sin and God’s wrath. How can God pronounce the ungodly to be righteous? He sets forth Jesus Christ as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. Jesus’ death as a propitiation is the basis for justification, for dealing with sin and with God’s wrath. Membership in the new covenant people is surely an outworking of this, but Paul clearly describes justification as God’s answer to the universal sin problem, the problem which otherwise prevents all persons, persons who were in the covenant and persons who were not, from being “right with God” when they stand before his judgment seat (Romans 2:2-16).

THE PROBLEM OF THE NARROWER CONTEXT

Contextual Definitions

It is important to notice that in Romans 4 Paul essentially defines the concept of reckoned righteousness. In verses 6-8 Paul demonstrates what reckoned righteousness is from Scripture: “So also David pronounces a blessing upon the man to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works: ‘Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not reckon his sin.’” David defines God’s “reckoning righteousness apart from works” as the forgiveness of iniquities and the covering of sins, as the non-reckoning of sins, and Paul adopts this definition as his own. It is not “being in or out of the covenant” but “having one’s sins forgiven.” The emphasis is on getting rid of the sin problem, not on who’s in and who’s out of the covenant. In fact, Paul goes on to make the point that the blessing of faith being reckoned as righteousness was given to Abraham before he received circumcision and before, incidentally, he was part of the covenant people (cf. Gen. 15:6).

Contextual Contrasts

In Romans 8:33-34 the opposite of “justify” (*theos ho dikaion*) is “condemn” (*tis ho katakrinon*). In Romans 5:18 Paul uses the word *dikaiosis*, which means “justification” or “acquittal.”⁹ In this verse, the opposite of *dikaiosis* is *katakrima*, which means “condemnation.” The opposite of “justification” is not “exclusion from the covenant people”; the opposite of “justify” is not “declare non-membership in the covenant people.” The issues which justification meets are sin, condemnation, and God’s wrath.

Ideally, we would want all three of these approaches – lexicography, broader context, and narrower context – to coalesce, to be mutually reinforcing. I think the traditional Protestant understanding of Paul’s notion of justification as we have outlined it holds up extremely well here, but that Wright’s definition fails in all three categories.

RECKONING AS RIGHTEOUSNESS

A special problem with Wright’s presentation in this admittedly short book is his lack of treatment of the notion of righteousness being “reckoned.” In places Wright polemicizes against the idea of imputation, at least against the idea of God’s or Christ’s righteousness being imputed to us.¹⁰ He must deal with some kind of imputed or reckoned righteousness, however, because Paul explicitly uses the terminology of “reckoned righteousness” in Romans 4. Here is how Wright summarizes Paul:

“When Paul speaks of Abraham’s faith being ‘reckoned as righteousness’ (4:5), he means that faith in Jesus Christ ... is the true badge of covenant membership ... the badge of the sin-forgiven family. The emphasis of the chapter is therefore that covenant membership is defined not by circumcision (4:9-12), nor by race, but by faith.”¹¹

There are at least two significant problems with Wright’s understanding of Romans 4. First, “covenant

membership” is not the issue of the chapter; being considered righteous before God is, and that because of the problem of sin. Paul begins the chapter by continuing his discussion from chapter 3 about being justified before God, and he goes to Abraham as his prime example for his assumed Jewish audience at this point.

Second, Wright confuses the notion of reckoning with the notion of a badge. This is another instance of “redefinition.” Faith, according to Wright, is the true badge of covenant membership.

PAUL:	faith	is reckoned	as righteousness
WRIGHT:	faith	is a badge	of covenant membership

These are two entirely different concepts. Now, Paul says that there is a “badge” of covenant membership, but that badge is circumcision. Listen to what Paul says: “He received circumcision as a sign or seal of the righteousness which he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised” (Rom. 4:11). That is, before Abraham got his “badge” of the covenant (i.e. circumcision), he had already been justified by God through his faith. In Paul’s mind, faith is reckoned as righteousness, the badge of which is circumcision (baptism).

The “badge” idea is expressed by Paul with words like “sign and seal” (Rom. 4:11). Faith is not said to be the sign or seal of righteousness, or of anything else for that matter. Rather, faith is *reckoned* as righteousness, it is *counted as if it were* righteousness itself. In Romans 2:26 Paul had said that when an uncircumcised man keeps the precepts of the law, his uncircumcision will be “reckoned” as circumcision. It makes no sense to say that his uncircumcision will be the “badge” of his circumcision. This is simply not what “reckoning” means. Let’s illustrate the difference: Money (paid in dues) is reckoned as membership at Costco. My Costco card is by badge of membership. The reckoning of money as membership initiates and sustains the relationship as a member. The card signifies the membership already possessed.

What does this redefinition do for Wright? It keeps justification (reckoned righteousness) at the point of “ecclesiology” rather than “soteriology.” Justification is for him the presentation of your card at Costco: Are you a member? Here’s my card. I pronounce you justified, come in. This happens every time you go to Costco.

But for Paul justification is not a test of a membership already possessed, a test which can be repeated each time your “righteousness” is called into question. It is the eschatological pronouncement of God, once and for all, that those who believe in Christ stand before God as fully forgiven, fully righteous, on the basis of Christ’s propitiation for them. This reckoned righteousness is not an abstract thing. Elsewhere Paul says that our righteousness is not our own, not based on law or works, but is the gift of God (e.g. Rom. 3.24; 4.4; 10.3-4; Phil. 3.9).

What difference does Wright's redefinition of justification make? I think it risks minimizing the importance of sin and of the atoning significance of Christ's death. I'm not saying he denies the atoning significance of Christ's death. But when you minimize the central importance of sin, you necessarily call into question the centrality of Christ's atoning death.

The membership concept can cloud the issue if it replaces or subsumes the law court. You may want to be a member of Costco, or of the Country Club. But as I see it, Paul says you have an antecedent problem which takes precedence over all others. You have been hauled downtown and placed in front of a judge and you have no money to post bail. The only club you can even think about joining meets behind bars. Your only hope is in the court-appointed lawyer, who alone can get a stay of execution from the judge. That lawyer is Jesus, who takes your penalty upon himself.

The whole coherency of justification as meeting the problem of the wrath of God against sin, and therefore as being absolutely grounded in the substitutionary atonement by Christ which diverts that wrath from us, is lost or obscured in the membership interpretation. These things may not yet be denied by Wright, but there is no intrinsic connection between them and justification, as I see it, in Wright's view.

[1.](#) Wright, N.T. *What Saint Paul Really Said. Was Paul of Tarsus the Real founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 119.

[2.](#) Wright, p. 120.

[3.](#) Wright, p. 122.

[4.](#) Wright, p. 124.

[5.](#) Wright, p. 128.

[6.](#) See Wright's "The Law in Romans 2," in J. D. G. Dunn, ed., *Paul and the Mosaic Law. The Third Durham Tübingen Research Symposium on Earliest Christianity and Judaism (Durham, September, 1994)* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1996), 131-150. This is a good article overall, but Wright explains Rom. 2 in almost exclusively collective terms, whereas for Paul there is also an unavoidably individual concern throughout. This keeps Wright from finding any emphasis upon justification as concerning the individual's standing before God.

[7.](#) Wright, p. 129.

[8.](#) Wright, p. 129.

[9.](#) *dikaiosis* is used only one other time in the New Testament: Romans 4:25.

[10.](#) E.g. Wright, p. 125. For our sin being imputed to Christ, cf. e.g. 2 Cor. 5:21.

[11.](#) Wright, p. 129.