

9.2 Romans in Light of the New Perspective on Paul

Introduction

In recent years, coming from scholars in England, there are some new perspectives on the teachings of Paul (especially Romans and Galatians). It is good policy, I think, to approach such developments looking for the good but critical in judgment to discern the bad. We can identify vitamins and toxins. A good that comes of study here is to clarify even more the work of Christ and His marvelous saving grace. As a pastor, I must inform the church regarding such movements, on one hand, to help you be on guard against error, and on the other hand to promote your growth in truth. Thus, I think *the church should be informed to some degree* on this topic depending on your needs, interests, and the need of the moment in relation to the influence of this view that is growing.

Thinker: NT Wright

Regarding NPP (the new perspective on Paul), NT Wright is one representative of a diverse group of scholars (JD Dunn and others). Wright is in the pastoral wing of the group and his work covers more ground than NPP. He has a remarkable work on the resurrection defending it within his Anglican tradition where many scholars deny it. Therefore, Wright, as I see it, is the best of the group (and he has good things to help us with, but even his pastoral writings (as on the Lord's Prayer) have "foreign" elements in it along with the good). As to the NPP part of his thinking, this is also a mixed bag. Wright's work in this regard has both vitamins and toxins, but here the toxins may outweigh the vitamins.

Problem

Some of the problem is the confusion that this perspective brings to the theme of justification by faith, and part of the problem is the varying degrees of departure from the reformed doctrine of justification by faith alone without works (which I take to be a departure from biblical teaching). Thus, there is serious danger here of another gospel. This is so both in the lack of clarity in general confusing major Reformation themes (we are to pray for clear proclamation of the gospel) and in the "clear" denial in particular of justification by faith alone without works.

New perspective on justification begins with new perspective on Paul's references to works

In a word, the NPP emphasizes extra biblical literature to determine what the thinking was of Paul's opponents (and the opponents of Jesus). Doing so, they conclude that Paul does not labor to refute a merit system in Judaism. They reason that "justified by faith not works" (Rom. 3.28, For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law; Gal. 5.4, You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace) is not a reference to attempts at legal justification. Accordingly, they seek to reinterpret Paul as opposing something else than what the reformers (against Rome) thought Paul opposes. The Reformers (especially Luther) took Paul to be denying a merit ladder to heaven that Jews proposed; the Reformers then applied this teaching to Rome of their day.

In NPP thinking, "works" refer to claiming to be Jews with special privilege in some negative and exclusive way (we, soaked in ethnic pride, are God's people contrary to outsiders; we have the Sabbath, circumcision, etc). Paul, following Jesus, proclaims the inclusiveness of the gospel to all nations.

This frees the view to adopt some form of justification by works (in varying ways akin to Rome). For example, Wright speaks of two different justifications: a) by faith in the present and b) future justification on the Day of Judgment based on faithfulness (*What Paul really said*, p. 129; note how the title reflects a new perspective: we have what the Reformers claimed Paul said, and we have what Paul *really* said).

This is a toxin that proclaims salvation-justification that has its ground or basis in the justified person's faithfulness and good works, even though the accent shifts to the final day (there are difficulties here to begin with and this maneuver adds confusion to difficulty).

Criticizing the view does not mean that Christians are not called to a life of faithfulness, *but the faithful life—a repentant life throughout—is not the basis of either present or future declarations of the righteous status of sinners*—the basis is the work of Christ alone, for both the now and not yet of our justification!

Wright on Romans in general

In general, his teaching has a “scholastic” or academic quality about it, especially the NPP part. However, on the practical level, the critique of Wright is this. If someone trusts in Christ plus their own works for their right standing with God, then the person falls under the legalism Paul condemns as another gospel (we have to be concerned for people who embrace this teaching without all the technical nuances of Wright just as we have to be concerned about Catholics who embrace the teaching of Rome).

Wright on the theme of Romans

Wright has salvation, etc, held within a larger discussion, namely, of what God has been up to in His covenant purposes for Israel (some think Wright outwits reformed theology on the covenant, or at the least, improves upon it). This is true in a historical-redemptive sense for what unfolds in the saving of sinners is the realization of God's covenant purposes (and these are rooted not only in the creation 6-1 covenant but all is rooted in His covenant with the Son of Jn 17). However, it seems better to see the biblical theology (BT, salvation history) of this letter to Romans as essential to Paul's explanation of the gospel. After all, Christ is a descendent of *David* for the obedience of faith *in all nations* (1.1-6). God reveals righteousness to all who believe (1.16-17) as part of salvation from sin (1.18f). The BT point is this: if the gospel is for all nations, then what about the Jews and God's faithfulness to His promises to them? The answer is that God's word of promise stands (there is no failure or unfaithfulness, Rom. 9.1-6f).

Thus, if we read 1.17 in light of 1.1-16 and in light of 1.18-3.26, then the salvation of individual sinners by grace through faith, and through a justifying faith that involves the counting of righteousness (God's through Christ) to them is at the core of Paul's explanation of the Gospel of Jesus son of David and child of the covenant. *To explain this gospel to the Romans for their strengthening, Paul must not only tell them the good news of salvation in Christ, but he must explain how that saving of sinners upholds the righteousness of God and accords His promises of the OT and squares with the Law. Because it is by grace and not by Law (by faith and not by Law), it is by the redemption in Christ.*

Thus, it seems inescapable to draw the inference that the righteousness of God that sinners receive in their salvation by justification by faith is righteousness that God counts to them. It is God's and He gives it to them by the work of Christ taking away their liability to punishment or their guilt, God declares them not guilty or righteous in this negative sense. Moreover, are they righteous in a positive sense in receiving God's righteousness? Of course, they are, and that righteousness that God counts to them must be the righteousness of Christ. That is, it must be His obedience (5.19) of His one act of righteousness (offering Himself up in the place of His people for both their need of righteousness and their need of forgiveness). The gift of righteousness stands in contrast to the many transgressions (5.16). Therefore, it includes righteousness of life that stands in place of many sins; that can only be the righteousness of Christ. It is His obedience of the cross, but in the context of His entire life (Q: on 5.10, is “saved by his life” a reference to resurrection life? Or, does it refer to His entire life or to both?). This is

His covenant faithfulness that is now our covenant faithfulness by imputation. In other words, what does it mean that by one man's obedience many become righteous?

Thus, these things make up the gospel. It is the gospel of God. It relates His love in Christ that displays what He does for sinners. Included is how it relates to the history of redemption in the shift from OT particularism to NT national universalism. It is how He is R in doing all this making sinners R.

It is thus the case that the gospel to the Romans is complex. We ought not to approach it reductionistically (reducing complex elements to a single theme). We cannot make the theme justification by faith of individual sinners, nor can we make the theme the formation of a new covenant people. The latter seems to be Wright's mistake. Perhaps, it is a happy theological counter-balance so that when the dust of discussion settles we do not lose sight of the covenant emphasis in the book. It may very well be the case that an overemphasis on justification by faith of individual sinners has led many astray from seeing the covenant faithfulness of God and how that theme emerges in the book. Of course, moving from one extreme to another is not the final answer.

Therefore, it seems correct to affirm that the more difficult way is the better way. Namely, Romans is about the gospel. It is about God's gospel in Christ by the Spirit to sinners of all nations equal in condemnation and in justification in accord with His promises of the OT. By justifying grace (apart from legalistic law works), the gospel is how God forms a new covenant people in a way that displays His righteousness in giving it to sinners in a way that is righteous and accords with His righteous dealings in the history of redemption.

Wright on Romans 3.28

What does Wright do with Romans 3.28 (hint: note the flow of context here)?

²⁸ For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. ²⁹ Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, ³⁰ since God is one. He will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith. ³¹ Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.

How do we answer Wright from the further flow of context of 4.1-5 (What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? ² For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. ³ For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness." ⁴ Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. ⁵ And to the one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness)?