

Churchman

EDITORIAL

The Wrioughteousness of God

Lovers of theological controversy have been treated to a rare feast just recently, but perhaps the most significant of the battles being waged at the moment is the one concerning justification by faith, otherwise known as Tom Wright *contra mundum*. The Bishop of Durham's latest book, *Justification. God's plan and Paul's vision* (London: SPCK, 2009) is meant to be his reply to John Piper's *The Future of Justification. A response to N. T. Wright* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007) but in fact it ranges much more widely than that, taking in a broad band of critics and setting out his various positions in opposition to theirs. In this broadside attack against all and sundry, Mr. Piper has to take his place alongside such unlikely co-defendants as E. P. Sanders and James Dunn, to whom he dedicates the book, not to mention a host of anonymous people to whom all sorts of views are ascribed. What is going on here?

Bishop Wright's views on Paul, Israel and justification have been known for many years, and have often been debated in scholarly circles. As this latest book makes clear, those views have not been widely accepted—indeed, they have been openly opposed by almost everyone engaged in the field, from the most conservative Evangelicals to the most ardent liberals. In response to this, Bishop Wright has gone on digging his heels in ever deeper, and has defended his corner with great determination, despite the fact that his disciples seem to come mainly from the ranks of those who have not studied the subject in any depth. Many of them are students who are bored with traditional ideas that their elders expect them to absorb in parrot fashion, and who are therefore responsive to an alternative voice, like Bishop Wright's, whose powerful rhetoric has carried them along and helped them across whatever hurdles may be thrown up by the facts. Unfortunately, most of these people have not had the time or the inclination to examine the issues involved with the seriousness that they deserve, and so they are swept up in a heady atmosphere of protest that can easily lead them to abandon their earlier moorings in the gospel.

This is where John Piper comes in. As the pastor of a big church in Minneapolis, he has watched with increasing concern as young people, dazzled by the intellectual brilliance of Bishop Wright, have bought into his logic without adequate critical reflection upon it, and who seem to have used it to reject what they had been taught in church and Sunday school about justification by faith alone. Determined to get to the bottom of this, Mr. Piper took several months of sabbatical leave in 2006 and dedicated himself to reading everything of Bishop Wright's that he could lay his hands on. He had never met Tom Wright in the flesh and knew little about him beyond his published writings, but he did enter into correspondence with him, asking for clarification of his views so that he could make sure that what he said about them was accurate. Bishop Wright was good enough to make a lengthy reply, which doubled the size of Mr. Piper's book and clarified his thinking on any number of points great and small. Having done all that, Mr. Piper came to the following conclusion:

My conviction concerning N. T. Wright is ... that his portrayal of the Gospel—and of the doctrine of justification in particular—is so disfigured that it becomes difficult to recognise as Biblically faithful. It may be that in his own mind and heart Wright has a clear and firm grasp on the Gospel of Christ and the Biblical meaning of justification. But in my judgment, what he has written will lead to a kind of preaching that will not announce clearly what makes the lordship of Christ good news for guilty sinners or show those who are overwhelmed with sin how they may stand righteous in the presence of God (p. 15).

These are fighting words, and Mr. Piper went on to support them by a lucid examination of what Bishop Wright has written and a demonstration from the New Testament text that what he has to say does not fit with the overall teaching of Scripture. Why not?

Fundamentally, what Bishop Wright believes is that the Protestant, and especially the Evangelical, world has gone wrong since the time of Luther by interpreting justification by faith in medieval categories that are far removed from anything that can be found either in the Bible or in ancient Judaism. According to him, Luther was trapped by a legacy of theological thought which concentrated on the spiritual status of the individual. Medieval theologians had said that every believer needs to have the grace of God

imparted to him. This could happen in different ways, but the main one was by infusion of that grace in and through the sacraments of the church. Luther quite rightly reacted against this, but he did so by using familiar theological categories, with the result that he came up with a competing doctrine of imputation. According to him, and virtually all conservative Protestants since, a person is saved by having the righteousness of Christ imputed to him, rather than imparted. Bishop Wright claims that both these words imply that there is some kind of transfer of righteousness from God in Christ to the individual believer, who thus becomes righteous in God's sight because of his faith in the saving work of Jesus on the cross. Not only is this view reductionist in its understanding of the righteousness of God, claims the Bishop, but in Evangelical circles at least, it has led to a rampant individualism which is a parody of true Christian discipleship.

To counteract this malign tendency, says Bishop Wright, it is necessary to get back to what the Apostle Paul meant in the context of the Judaism of his time. According to the Bishop, the Jews were still awaiting their spiritual return from exile. Physically, they had gone back from Babylon and rebuilt something of their earlier kingdom in Palestine, but this was a pale shadow of what had been promised to King David and his descendants. For the Jews of Paul's day, to believe in the righteousness of God was to believe in his covenant faithfulness. What God had promised to his people, beginning with Abraham and continuing through the prophets, priests and kings of later times, would eventually come to pass, however long it might take for that to happen. As Bishop Wright conceives of it, Israel did not receive the promises because it had failed to accomplish the task assigned to it by God. God had chosen Israel as his instrument for the salvation of the world, but Israel had either retreated into itself or abandoned its mission and conformed to the world it was meant to save. As a result, God had to resort to what might be termed plan B, which was the sending of the Messiah. Jesus, whom we call Christ (the Greek equivalent of Messiah, though this has been obscured in later tradition) therefore came as the faithful Israelite, who did what God had intended Israel to do and obtained the reward of the promises originally promised to the nation as a whole. The person who believes that God's covenant faithfulness has been demonstrated in Jesus is the one who has been justified by faith and joined the body of those who are the first-fruits of God's project for transforming the entire universe into his glorious kingdom. To be justified is therefore to be incorporated into this Messianic purpose,

which gives the believer a bigger vision of his destiny than the one traditionally provided by the language of forgiveness from sin by the shed blood of Christ. It is not so much that Bishop Wright rejects what Luther and his followers were trying to say; rather, he claims to have transcended it with a new vision of salvation that focuses our minds on God and his purposes rather than on ourselves and our imagined needs.

As Mr. Piper points out however, this grand picture does not do justice to the New Testament, where the use of the word 'justification' and its many cognates cannot bear the meaning of 'covenant faithfulness' that Bishop Wright attaches to it. Whatever God's ultimate purpose for the transformation of the world may be (and Mr. Piper does not deny that), the fact remains that the body of Christ on earth is made up of individuals, each one of whom needs the righteousness of the Saviour pleading for him if he is to enter the kingdom of heaven. Imputation is not a transfer of God's righteousness to us, as Bishop Wright seems to think, but a reckoning of that righteousness, which is not and can never be ours, to us. To be incorporated into Christ is to be shielded by his righteousness and covered by the sacrifice of his blood. That it is possible to be in that position is the good news of the gospel, which we are required to preach to every creature, because there is no-one on earth to whom it does not apply. But at the same time, God knows who are his, and he draws them to himself by convicting them of sin in such a way as to send them rushing to the cross for salvation. By the power of the Holy Spirit, such people die to their previous life and are born again in a new kind of relationship with God. Those who were once his enemies and strangers to the promises made to Israel have been incorporated by the blood of Christ into his body, drawing on that attachment to obtain the standing before God which only the righteousness of Christ can provide. That this righteousness is not imparted or infused into the believer is clear from what happens if he is cut off from Christ. The branch of the tree so pruned withers and dies because it has been detached from the source of its life; it cannot claim that because its wood is the same as that of the main tree, it has a status which God is obliged to recognise as 'righteous'. Imputation does not involve a transfer of God's righteousness, but an extension of it to cover believers who are (and who remain) totally unworthy of it.

The problem with Bishop Wright's analysis is that in attempting to get beyond the limitations of the individual, he constructs a pattern of salvation that is

essentially abstract. This can be seen from the way in which he establishes a parallel between Israel and Jesus. How was Israel originally expected to save the world? The entire nation could not have died as a sacrifice for the sins of mankind, so that idea must be ruled out. Could Israel have fulfilled its side of the covenant by keeping the law, in faithfulness to the God who gave it to them? This also seems very unlikely, not least because every single Israelite would have had to keep every jot and tittle of the law for that to have happened. But who would have been able to police that? The truth, of course, is that Israel was never intended to save the world. God chose Abraham and his descendants to be a blessing to the nations, but that is not the same thing as salvation. The presence of Jews or Christians is a blessing to any society, but that does not guarantee that it is thereby saved. Israel was meant to be a light to the nations, proclaiming God's standards and promises to those who accepted them, but only until such time as the Messiah should come. Far from being a sort of plan B, the incarnation of the Son of God in Jesus Christ was the culmination of the divine purpose from the beginning. For that reason, Israel must be interpreted in the light of Christ and his work, not the other way round. Bishop Wright's elaborate hermeneutical construction is unsound at the root, and so we should not be surprised that it has been rejected as unsatisfactory by those like Mr. Piper who have taken the trouble to examine it.

How has Bishop Wright responded to this? It is only natural that he should be perturbed by such a massive assault on his views, and nobody should begrudge him the right of reply. If he chooses to write a book similar to Mr. Piper's in length, then so be it—we need to hear the other side of the story in order to be able to evaluate which of them has the better case. Alas, it has to be said that Bishop Wright has let us down badly. He himself admits that he was rushed for time and could not do justice to his subject; he did not even manage to send his draft to Mr. Piper for comment, as politeness dictated, considering that Mr. Piper had shared his thoughts with him before presuming to publish them. The result is that the book bears all the hallmarks of hasty production. It is full of digressions, personal anecdotes which appear to have no purpose other than to win sympathy for the author, and random attacks against unnamed people who are supposed to be typical of popular modern Evangelicals. Whereas Mr. Piper is unfailingly gracious and sticks rigorously to his subject, Bishop Wright verges on the downright rude and wanders all over the place, with the result that it is often hard to know whether he is addressing Mr. Piper's concerns or

not. So bad does this get that at one point he lunges out at Don Carson, not for anything he wrote or commissioned in the massive two-volume study of the subject which he helped to edit (Justification and variegated nomism, a title guaranteed to limit the potential readership), but for a sentence that appears as a blurb on the back of Mr. Piper's book (p. 211)! Anyone with Bishop Wright's experience of the book trade knows that such blurbs have been solicited by the publishers for marketing purposes and should not be taken too seriously, but desperation knows no bounds and so we are treated to a refutation of something Dr. Carson may never have intended to say and which has little to do with the book's overall purpose.

If anything is clear from Bishop Wright's book, it is that it is impossible to serve two masters at the same time. Either one is a diocesan bishop or one is a serious scholar—having a day job in Auckland Castle and pottering around with scholarship in one's spare time is not a viable option in today's world. Bishop Wright pleads lack of time for what even he recognises is the inadequacy of his response to Mr. Piper, but if that is so, he needs to reconsider his priorities. There is no shame in giving up scholarship, or in resigning a bishopric, when the pressures become too great, but doing a half-baked job in one is bound to lead to the suspicion that one is doing an equally half-baked job in the other, and that the longsuffering recipients of such treatment are ending up with the worst of both worlds. By responding to John Piper in the way he has, Bishop Wright has embarrassed himself, diminished the standing of his office and contributed to the already strong feeling that he is essentially wrong in what he has to say about justification. It is a sad outcome, and one that is unworthy of a man who has so many gifts to offer to the church. Let us hope and pray that he will see this for himself and decide whether he wants to be a bishop or a scholar—but not both. We would all be better off if he has the courage to take the right decision and choose one or the other, but best of all, he himself would be a happier and more productive man for it, and it is for him that our primary concern at this point must surely be.

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