



Spring 2004

Around the FIRE

The Newsletter of Fellowship of Independent Reformed Evangelicals

*Greetings in the blessed name of our Lord Jesus Christ! Our hope and prayer is that you are encouraged in the battle, and running with endurance the race before you, looking to Jesus the founder and perfecter of your faith (Hebrews 12:2). As in our previous newsletters, our aim through this medium is to increase your awareness of ministries within FIRE and also to sharpen you in your local church ministry. Therefore, please take note in this newsletter particularly of the church and missionary profiles, and especially of our “putting on hold” of both of our current newsletter study series - Bruce Ray’s series on FIRE’s acronym and Phil Johnson’s “Are We Losing The Battle For the Bible?” Our reason for this excursus stems from our need to address, as a movement, the current confusion over the doctrine of justification within the Reformed community. This grievous doctrinal slide needs a clear-headed response. After reading Phil Johnson’s incisive critique of this theological fad, the board became convinced that making it available to you all would be of great benefit. Thanks to Phil, we are about to do so. **This edited and condensed article was originally given as an address to the London Baptist Theological Seminary on January 10, 2004.***

*For the FIRE Executive board,
Pastor Jerry Marcellino
Moderator of FIRE (2002-2004)*

A Defense of the Old Perspective on Paul: What Did St. Paul Really Say?

by Phil Johnson

There is a so-called “New Perspective” on the apostle Paul these days. Serious New Testament scholars suggest we ought to overhaul our interpretation of the Pauline epistles and completely revamp our understanding of the apostle Paul’s theology. And that, in turn, obviously, has serious and far-reaching ramifications for all of New Testament theology.

As far as grassroots-evangelical support for the New Perspective on Paul is concerned, N. T. Wright is by far the most influential voice of evangelicals. Indeed, at the last Evangelical Theological Society meeting in Atlanta, he was an invited guest and was given extensive time to air his Pauline perspective.

Wright was the canon theologian of Westminster Abbey until last year. He is now the Bishop of Durham (which makes him the fifth highest ranking bishop in the Church of England). He is also a very

prolific writer, having written more than thirty books. Bookshelves are filled with his titles—running the gamut from technical and academic works to popular-level books like *What Saint Paul Really Said*. He is quite gifted as a writer; he is able to communicate on almost any level; and his works are easy to read and often thought provoking.



I want to acquaint you to the New Perspective’s controversial point of view and give you a critical review of at least one very important aspect of Wright’s short, but single most influential popular, lay-level presentation of the New Perspective, namely his *What Saint Paul Really Said*. That aspect is the doctrine of justification by faith.

The New Perspective claims that traditional Protestant Christianity has seriously confused and distorted what the apostle Paul taught about justification. According to them, the Pauline doctrine of justification has very little to

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do with personal and individual salvation (*soteriology*) from sin and guilt but fits more properly in the category of *ecclesiology*, or the doctrine of the church. They assert that Paul was dealing with people's standing in

the community of faith, not an individual who was dealing with his or her own salvation. It is their view (commonly called *covenantal nomism* as opposed to the idea of individual salvation for the believer), that one need not talk about getting "saved" at all. It was all about maintaining status within the covenant community. The question that must be raised is how these ideas relate to the matter of justification. I believe that the greatest and most immediate danger posed by the New Perspective on Paul lies in their redefinition of the doctrine of justification by faith.

I'm convinced it is impossible to harmonize Wright's New Perspective and the historic Protestant creedal understanding of justification by faith. In *What Saint Paul Really Said*, Wright includes a chapter titled "Justification and the Church," in which he says that the traditional Protestant doctrine of justification "owes a good deal both to the controversy between Pelagius and Augustine in the early fifth century and to that between Erasmus and Luther in the early sixteenth century," but (according to Wright) the historic Protestant view of justification "does not do justice to the richness and precision of Paul's doctrine, and indeed distorts it at various points."¹

Wright is expressly arguing against a Reformed understanding of justification, and he repeatedly insinuates that Protestants need to rethink the whole doctrine and re-tool our teaching in light of his new understanding of what Paul really meant. He claims that the classic Protestant understanding of justification has resulted in a reading of Romans that "has systematically done violence to that text for hundreds of years, and . . . it is time for the text itself to be heard again."²

But it is Wright's own doctrine of justification that is seriously deficient. I believe he is at odds with Scripture on at least four major points related to this issue of justification by faith alone. I'll start with the most basic one:

1. HIS DEFINITION OF JUSTIFICATION

I've already given you a basic description of how Wright portrays the doctrine of justification. Here's how he states it in his own words: "The discussions of justification in much of the history of the church, certainly since Augustine, got off on the wrong foot—at least in terms of understanding Paul—and they have stayed there ever since."³ He states:

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. (I'm not even sure how Paul would express, in Greek, the notion of 'relationship with God,' but we'll leave that aside.) The problem he addresses is: should ex-pagan converts be circumcised or not? Now this question is by no means obviously to do with the questions faced by Augustine and Pelagius, or by Luther and Erasmus. On anyone's reading, but especially within its first-century context, [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 the Jewish race, or in some other way (p. 120)?

According to Wright, justification is more a corporate issue than a personal one; it has more to do with the identity of the church than with the standing of the individual before God. When Wright *does* connect the doctrine of justification with the individual's standing before God, it is nearly always in contexts where he is speaking of "final justification," which takes place in the eschatological future, at the last judgment, when God judges men according to their works. This is a serious biblical departure from historic Reformed Protestantism on the definition of justification.

2. HIS DESCRIPTION OF "THE WORKS OF THE LAW"

Galatians 2:16 uses the expression, "the works of the law," three times in a single verse. There are three other references to "the works of the law" in Galatians and one in Romans 9:32, and in each case, the apostle Paul's point is the same: legal obedience has no saving efficacy.

Obviously, the historic Protestant position has been that these very texts prove that Paul was arguing that the law condemns sinners and therefore their own efforts to obey the law cannot save them. Meritorious

works of any kind are antithetical to grace. That is precisely what Paul states in Romans 11:6: "And if by grace, then is it no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, then is it no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work."

But Wright says that we need a *new* understanding of what Paul meant when he spoke of the works of the law. In a paper Wright wrote entitled, "The Shape of Justification" (available online), he defines "the works of the law" as "the badges of Jewish law-observance." He says Paul is speaking of circumcision, the dietary laws, and so on. He is echoing James Dunn, another New Perspectivist, who wrote: "'Works of the law' are nowhere understood here, either by his Jewish interlocutors or by Paul himself, as works which earn God's favor, as merit-amassing observances. They are rather seen as badges: they are simply what membership of the covenant people involves, what mark out the Jews as God's people. [What Paul denies in Galatians 2:16 is that] God's grace extends only to those who wear the badge of the covenant."

In other words, Paul isn't saying that meritorious works in general contribute nothing to our justification. His point is only that the distinctly Jewish elements of Moses' law don't guarantee covenant membership, and they cannot be used to exclude Gentiles from covenant membership. Or to put it as concisely as I can, Wright and others are suggesting that Galatians 2:16 and other texts like it are not intended to deny that meritorious human works have any role whatsoever in justification.

And according to Wright, that means that "Justification, in Galatians, is the doctrine which insists that all who share faith in Christ belong at the same table, no matter what their racial differences."⁴ So Paul is not arguing against meritorious works; he is arguing against racial exclusivity. Notice carefully: Wright at this point is not explicitly arguing that a person's works *do* provide grounds for his righteous standing before God; he is merely arguing that the standard proof-texts against such a doctrine prove no such thing. Once again, he stands against the Reformers on the Roman Catholic side of the justification debate. He at least leaves the door open for human merit as part of the grounds for our "final justification."

3. HIS DISTORTION OF "THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD"

Wright has a major section discussing the meaning of the phrase "the righteousness of God,"⁵ and says that Protestants have always misunderstood the concept of divine righteousness. He maintains that God's righteousness is his "covenant faithfulness." It is not "something that 'counts before' God or 'avails with"

God."⁶ It is not something God can either impart or impute to sinners. When Scripture speaks of God's righteousness, it is using the expression as a synonym for his covenant faithfulness. Wright is so hostile to the notion of righteousness as something that counts with God that he goes so far as to paraphrase the traditional concept of righteousness out of Philippians 3:9 completely! For Paul, "righteousness" there becomes "covenant membership."

4. HIS DENIAL OF IMPUTATION

Over and over again, Wright assaults the classic Reformed and biblical doctrine that the righteousness of Christ is imputed, or reckoned, to the sinner's account, and it is on the ground of Christ's righteousness alone that we obtain our righteous standing before God.

Wright believes this is utter nonsense. He writes: "If we use the language of the law court, it makes no sense whatsoever to say that the judge imputes, imparts, bequeaths, conveys or otherwise transfers his righteousness to either the plaintiff or the defendant. Righteousness is not an object, a substance or a gas which can be passed across the courtroom."⁷

Writing against the historic Reformed doctrine of imputation, he says, "If we leave the notion of 'righteousness' as a law-court metaphor only, as so many have done in the past, this gives the impression of a legal transaction, a cold piece of business, almost a trick of thought performed by a God who is logical and correct but hardly one we would want to worship."⁸

However, I, for one, am quite thrilled to worship a God who justifies the ungodly and who is both just and the justifier of the one who believes in Jesus (Romans 3:26).

Further, our understanding of Paul's old perspective on justification must be informed from texts of Scripture like Acts 13:38-39, where we have Luke's record of how Paul preached the gospel in Antioch. After mentioning the resurrection, Paul said, "Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins; [Clearly, the gospel Paul proclaimed is about personal forgiveness after all. And notice how he equates the forgiveness of sins with the doctrine of justification:] and by Him everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses."

Notice also that in the book of Romans, Paul's starting point for the gospel is divine wrath (Romans 1:17), and Paul begins his systematic treatment of gospel truth with almost two full chapters on the problems of sin

and guilt. It seems rather clear to me that Paul had a very different notion of the gospel and the doctrine of justification than Wright.

In conclusion, Wright says that those of us who regard justification as central to the debate between Protestants and Catholics “have turned the doctrine into its opposite.”

Frankly, I am happy to stand with Augustine, Luther, and the rest of the Protestant Reformers—and with the old perspective Apostle Paul—against the likes of a doctrine like this. In my assessment this doctrine does not build on the advances of the Protestant Reformation. Rather, it aims at destroying the Reformation at its very foundation.

¹ N.T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 113.

² Wright, 117.

³ Wright, 115.

⁴ Wright, 122.

⁵ Wright, 95ff.

⁶ Wright, 102.

⁷ Wright, 98.

⁸ Wright, 110.

Phil Johnson is executive director of Grace to You, the audio ministry of John MacArthur, and an elder at Grace Community Church in Panorama City, CA.

For more information on the New Perspective read Phil Johnson's entire article at http://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/new_p.html. Also available online, Ligon Duncan's article, "The Attraction of the New Perspective(s) on Paul." Available at www.alliancenet.org (under articles).



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1-800-405-3788

Around the FIRE
5726 Corey Cove
Sylvania, OH 43560

Supervising Member Church:
Assembly of Christians
419-882-0424
wwithrow@aol.com
Editor: Zoe Keeran

Meet a FIRE Sister Church

Juanita Community Church
10007 NE 132 St., Kirkland, WA 98034
425-821-8444
www.sermonaudio.com/jcc

by Pastor Bruce Ray

In April of 1937, Franklin Roosevelt was three months into his second term as President of the United States, German Chancellor Adolf Hitler was sending Jews in Europe to concentration camps, the “Great Purge” was underway in Joseph Stalin’s Russia, and Juanita Community Church (JCC) was officially organized in Kirkland, Washington, a suburb of Seattle nestled along the eastern shore of Lake Washington.

The Juanita ministry actually began earlier as an outreach of the American Sunday School Union (associated with Francis Scott Key). In 1920 Juanita (named after the first settler’s wife) was rural, sparsely populated and churchless. The ASSU started teaching children and adults in a lodge hall, which the church later purchased. A missionary came once a month to supervise the Sunday School while local women provided most of the week-by-week ministry.

This ministry was faithfully carried on for fifteen years before the first regular preaching services were begun in 1935. Two years later, the church was formally organized. It has maintained a biblical witness for sixty-seven years from the very same corner on which it began.

A reforming influence came into the church in 1949 through two brothers, Joe and Albert Greene, who had been missionaries in Mexico and China. Joe was called to serve as pastor and Joe asked his brother to help him start a Christian school. The more the brothers read in the field of Christian education, the more they bumped into Reformed authors. They brought that perspective back into the church and over the next decade the church became Reformed and Baptist. Juanita has been a member of FIRE since 2001.

Juanita has always had a strong interest in missions and still helps to support the very first missionary the church sent out during World War II (now retired). We currently support ministries in Brazil, India, Israel, Mauritius, Mexico, Mozambique, the Philippines and Spain.

Our present pastors are Bruce Ray (since 1976) and Steve Harris (since 1993). With the support of the church, Pastor Ray also serves the community as a police, fire and EMS chaplain.

Meet FIRE Missionaries Ken and Connie Temple

by Ken Temple

I am one of the elders of the Persian Community Church and support the national Iranian pastor, who is a former Muslim, an MBB (Muslim Background Believer). I have had the privilege of discipling several aspiring leaders in the Word of God. My wife Connie and I have three children; Paul (14), Blake (11) and Grace (4). Connie teaches Sunday School in Farsi to the Iranian children during the pastor's sermons which are largely Americanized — English being his first language. Both of us speak Farsi, the language of Iran, which we learned while living overseas among Iranian refugees for two years. Since that time we have been ministering to Iranians who live in our city.

There are about eighty to one hundred Iranian MBBs in our city and many others who are at various stages of seeking and interest or just "hang around" this new community and sometimes come to the special events.

We have been ministering full time to Iranian Muslims for the last eleven years now, and Muslims in general for twenty-one years. Our experience was mostly with Arabs before Iranians. Iranians are Persians and have a great and rich history and civilization. The Arab people converted the Iranians to Islam from the 650s AD into the 900s. Omar, the 2nd Caliph of Islam after Mohammed died, attacked Iran in Jihad and killed many Iranians. More Iranians have turned away from Islam and to Jesus Christ since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, than in all previous mission history! Because of the harshness of the Khomeini Revolution, the war with Iraq (1980-1988), and the resulting chaos and economic problems, Iranians are disillusioned with Islam and want freedom. God is doing a great work among Iranian Muslims to make them disillusioned with Islam and open to the gospel.

Recent Evangelism:

On January 2, 2004, the Persian Community Church had a great opportunity to witness to about forty Muslims at an Iranian Memorial "Yad Bood" for the mother of one of our members who suddenly passed away two weeks earlier in Iran. Some of the Iranian women wore the (hijab) head covering. Most Iranians

that we meet in America are very secular and throw off the veil as soon as they leave Iranian air space on the airplane, so it was kind of exciting to talk and witness to more committed Muslims!

We love Muslims! Many are hungry for the love and forgiveness of God through Jesus Christ, because more than ever before, they are realizing the emptiness of external religion without a dynamic relationship with the true and living God. Islam does not teach that "God is love" (I John 4:8); Islam adamantly rejects the fatherhood of God (Quran, Surah 112), and the propitiatory atonement for sin in the cross of Jesus Christ (Quran 4:157).

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It was a great experience to share the gospel with these people and give answers for the hope that is within us. I was able to answer questions in Farsi in a culturally-appropriate way, and challenge them to go to the Injeel (New Testament) and read for themselves, rather than accepting what they have heard from the Islamic teachers.

We are greatly blessed and filled with joy over God's sovereign work of grace in our hearts. He humbles us by using trials, pain, and the difficulty of ministry. He works all things to his glory and our good by constantly conforming us into the character of Jesus Christ and using us to share the gospel with Muslims and disciple former Muslims. As the old hymn says, "whatever my God ordains is right," and "for I know what'er befall me, Jesus doeth all things well."



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FIRE Executive Committee

Jerry Marcellino,
Moderator 2002-2004
601-649-8570
pastorjerry@audubonchurch.org

Jim Newheiser,
Moderator pro tem, 2002-2004
760-747-9252
jnewheiser@grcbible.org

Bruce Ray,
Secretary, 2003-2005
425-821-8444
revcop@juno.com

Steve Krogh, 2003-2005
616-669-6507
stevekrogh@hotmail.com

Greg Withrow, 2003-2005
419-882-0424
wwithrow@aol.com

Rick Anderson, 2002-2004
805-486-2676
randfcc@aol.com

Lance Quinn, 2003-2005
501-227-4980
lance.quinn@bclr.org

John Sale, 2002-2004
760-749-5151
pastorsale@aol.com

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