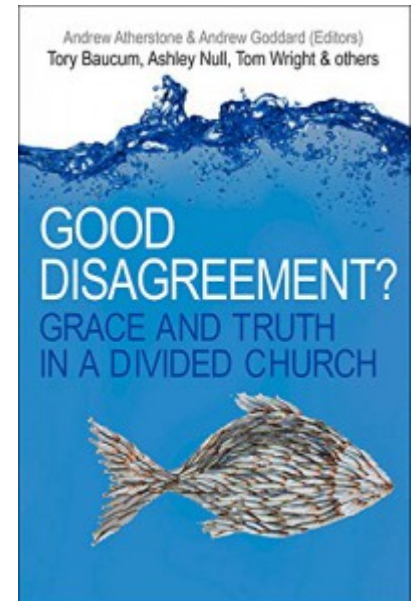


# Review: Good Disagreement? Pt. 5, Pastoral Theology for Perplexing Topics: Paul and Adiaphora

I am continuing with my chapter-by-chapter, essay-by-essay review of *Good Disagreement?* Previously:



- Part 1: Foreword by Justin Welby
- Part 2: Disagreeing with Grace by Andrew Atherstone and Andrew Goddard
- Part 3: Reconciliation in the New Testament by Ian Paul
- Part 4: Division and Discipline in the New Testament Church by Michael B. Thompson

N. T. Wright. Big fan. I've been exploring the depths of his perspective for some time now. In this contribution to *Good Disagreement?* he not only delivers his insights into the broader framework for conflict, he actually applies it to the issues at hand. Are sexual ethics a matter for indifference in the church? Wright's answer is a resounding "no".

Wright identifies a "double stress" in the current problems: an apparent tension between "unity" and "holiness." For Wright this is only an appearance because "properly

understood, they do not form a paradox, pulling in opposite directions... they actually reinforce one another." (p67). I suspect those who would differ from him on sexual ethics would also resolve the tension; but for a different understanding of 'holiness.' The tension exists when there is need to agree to disagree.

For matters of *adiaphora*, (so-called "things indifferent), this tension is resolvable in charity – *significant* charity!

Speaking of Paul's appeal at the end of Romans, Wright offers:

*He does not here ask the different groups to give up their practices; merely not to judge one another where differences exist. As Paul well knew (though we sometimes forget), this is actually just as large a step, if not larger, than a change in practice itself. ...That is, of course, why the apparently innocuous "live and let live" proposals for reform are the real crunch, as most reforming groups know well. (pp76-77)*

I love this summation of how the tensions of *adiaphora* are to be handled: **"Messiah-people will make demands on one another's charity; they must not make demands on one another's conscience."** (p77). And similarly:

*...the subtle rule of adiaphora is about as different from a modern doctrine of "tolerance" as can be imagined. "Tolerance" is not simply a low-grade version of "love"; in some senses, it is its opposite, as "tolerance" can imply a distancing, a wave from the other side of the street, rather than the rich embrace of "the sibling for whom the Messiah died. (p81)*

I think I was saying something similar earlier about the danger of mere "conversation" being the stuff of theological strangers.

For issues that are not indifferent, the “live and let live” tension is simply not tenable. They are matters which define and undergird the unity, rather than those which are worked out in the charity of unity. On such matters the difference is not simply a tension, it is a chasm.

To discern, therefore, the scope of what is *adiaphora* we must come to where Wright begins, to his understanding of Paul’s “vision for the church.” Here we have straight-down-the-line New Perspectives ecclesiology. In fact, for those getting into the New Perspectives, this chapter is not a bad introduction. The detail does not need rehearsing here and he is explicit about his conclusions:

Certain things are indifferent because...

*The divine intervention, as Paul saw it, unveiled in the messianic events concerning Jesus, was to create a single worldwide family; and therefore any practices that functioned as symbols dividing different ethnic groups could not be maintained as absolutes within this single family. (p70)*

Certain things are not indifferent because...

*This divine intervention... was that this single family would... embody, represent, and carry forward the plan of “new creation”, the plan which had been the intention for Israel from the beginning; and that therefore any practices that belonged to the dehumanizing, anti-creation world of sin and death could likewise not be maintained within this new-creation family. (p70)*

And this is where Wright picks his side.

Now, others would use these categories on their side. For some, I’m sure, the church’s traditional view of homosexuality is “dehumanizing” and therefore the correction of that through the blessing of same-sex relationships etc. is a matter of

necessity, and is not adiaphora. Despite the protestations of some (I think particularly of Loveday Alexander's declared intentions that I heard recently) it is clear that the current disagreements are much more than letting some getting on with what they want to do; it's each side seeing the gospel denied in the other. I cannot see how, if "live and let live" is the outcome of the shared conversations, we will have done much more than prove the insipidity of the identity we have left in common.

Wright's basis for his position enters right into that ecclesial identity, and the call on the church to embody both new covenant and new creation:

*In terms of creation and new creation, the new creation retrieves and fulfils the intention for the original creation, in which the coming together of heaven and earth is reflected in the coming together of male and female. This vision of the original creative purpose was retained by Israel, the covenant people, the "bride" of YHWH, and the strong sexual ethic which resulted formed a noticeable mark of distinction between the Jewish people and the wider world. (p71)*

*Paul insists that the markers which distinguish Jew from Gentile are no longer relevant in the new, messianic dispensation; but the Jewish-style worship of the One God, and the human male/female life which reflects that creational monotheism, is radically reinforced. (p72)*

The line he draws around the adiaphora clearly rebuts the tired argument by which critics of the church's position play the "why aren't you obeying the whole law?" card.

*The differentiation he introduces has nothing to do with deciding that some parts of the Torah are good and to be retained (sexual ethics) and other parts are bad and to be abolished (food laws, circumcision and so on). That is not*

*the point... Some parts of Torah – the parts which kept Israel separate from the Gentile world until the coming of the Messiah – have done their work and are now put to one side, not because they were bad but because they were good and have done their work. Other parts of Torah – the parts which pointed to the divine intention to renew the whole creation through Israel – are celebrated as being now at last within reach through Jesus and the Spirit. The old has passed away; all things have become new – and the “new” includes the triumphant and celebratory recovery of the original created intention, not least for male and female in marriage. (p74)*

There can be no good disagreement if the scope of *adiaphora* cannot be agreed to. It is the very playing field upon which the charitable and constructive tussle of church life can occur. Wright has provided, here, a thorough and thoughtful determination of the shape of that playing field; but the very same things have also determined which side he is playing on. Those who “play on the other side” must also justify a field of play that is coherent with their position. The danger of course is that the conversation is then cross-purposed: to extend the metaphor to breaking point, one side turns up to play football on a football field, and the other turns up with rugby kit across town; by what rules do the two engage?

Or, with more precision, the ongoing problem is outlined by these concluded remarks from Wright. It’s a problem to which he offers no solution:

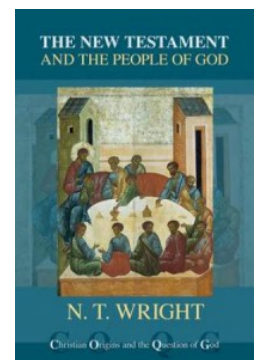
*We of course, live in a world where, in the aftermath of the Enlightenment’s watering down of Reformation theology, many have reduced the faith to a set of abstract doctrines and a list of detached and apparently arbitrary rules, which “conservatives” then insist upon and “radicals” try to bend or merely ignore. It is this framework itself which we have got wrong, resulting in dialogues of the deaf, or worse, the*

*lobbing of angry verbal hand grenades over walls of incomprehension. (p82)*

Next: Part 6: Good Disagreement and the Reformation by Ashley Null

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## Review: The New Testament and the People of God (N. T. Wright)



The work of N. T. Wright has become a defining marker for the thoughtful Christian. Whether that be as an exemplar of a supposed soteriological heresy, or as an expositor of a refreshingly dynamic eschatology, Wright is now a centre, a touchstone of theological thought. To go to *The New Testament and the People of God*, the first volume in Wright's definitive multi-volume multi-decade opus *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, is therefore a valuable exercise. This volume lays the foundations.

The key to the volume is in the title. This book is about *The New Testament* as both literature and history. And it is about the *People of God* and the interwoven historical worldviews

that both distort and reveal the depths and power of the Christian identity in this real world.

My own motivation in reading it stems from something of a working hypothesis: that the Jewish roots of Christian spirituality, articulated through the so-called New Perspectives framework in particular, are a solid base on which to construct an effective contemporary apologia. Which is to say: As a Christian community we need to explain (and defend) both *how* and *why* we follow Jesus, to an audience that is increasingly sceptical of both our explanation and our motivation; the language and ideas of Wright's project are not simply helpful, but *essential*, to this task. To defend and disciple we must know who we are; and before we are grounded in *ideas*, we are grounded in *history*; before personal *introspection*, communal *experience*; and at the centre of that historical experience is a Jewish Messiah.

*We need to do both history and theology: but how? Ultimately, the present project is part of the wider task— which I believe faces modern Western culture in its entirety, not only theologians or Christians— of trying to rethink a basic worldview in the face of the internal collapse of the one which has dominated the Western world for the last two centuries or so. (Kindle Location 960-962)*

I think Wright can assist us in this task. But, in this volume in particular, we need to put the work in. This is a dense book. Even in ebook format, it is a weighty volume.

Wright is laying foundations for his later volumes and all foundations are both heavy and precisely calculated. Here Wright is interested not only in telling us his thoughts, but justifying his thinking. This volume is therefore, in part, a philosophical treatise, arguing points of epistemology and historiography as much as communicating what he knows and how he knows it.

There is every danger that the reader could get lost in the trees and not see the beauty of Wright's forest. To that end let me give a word to the wise: he does provide a map! It's just that he gives it to you at the end, in the concluding "Part VI."

Parts I and II are about philosophical fundamentals, an explanation of what he means by "worldview," and hermeneutics:

*I argued in Parts I and II of this book for a holistic reading of the New Testament that would retell its stories faithfully, that would allow its overtones as well as its fundamentals to be attended to. (Loc. 13750-13752)*

*...the New Testament can only properly be understood if we recognize that it is a collection of writings from precisely this community, the subversive community of a new would-be 'people of god'. (Loc. 13758-13759)*

*It is not simply, like so many books, a guide for private spiritual advancement. To read it like that is like reading Shakespeare simply to pass an examination. The New Testament claims to be the subversive story of the creator and the world, and demands to be read as such. (Loc. 13799-13801)*

Parts III and IV uses these tools to consider the overlapping and interlocking worldviews of God's People in 1st Century Judaism and early Christianity.

*We must ask: why did this Jewish sect, out of all the other groups and movements within the first century, develop in this way, so strikingly different from all others? And, whenever we approach the early Christian writings with this question, we have a strong sense that it was not simply a matter of the sect's early corporate decisions, enthusiasm, shrewd planning or anything else. It was something to do with Jesus... Jesus stands between the two communities, living and working within that first-century Judaism which we mapped out*



*in Part III, and being claimed as the starting-point of the community we mapped out in Part IV. (Loc. 13733-13742)*

It is not possible in a short review to do justice to the detail. Moreover, it is the sort of detail that needs to be mulled over and digested; it's impact sometimes only being noticed in hindsight as you find yourself cogitating on Scripture with different questions than normal, or frustrated by niggling misinterpretations and misapplications that could otherwise be avoided, or approaching a pastoral or ecclesial problem from a slightly different perspective. For my own benefit, if nothing else, I have included below something of an appendix with some snapshots and highlights.

What is certain is that this tome has emboldened and encouraged me in my project: to know and tell the story of the God who has moved definitively in this world, and certainly in history; the New Testament story that defines, shapes, and moves us as the people of God.

## **APPENDIX:**

### ***Preparatory Work (Parts I and II) – Epistemology, Hermeneutics and History***

Wright's **epistemology** is *critical realism*. He critiques enlightenment positivism and phenomenism and asserts

*Over against both of these positions, I propose a form of critical realism. This is a way of describing the process of 'knowing' that acknowledges the reality of the thing known, as something other than the knower (hence 'realism'), while also fully acknowledging that the only access we have to this reality lies along the spiralling path of appropriate dialogue or conversation between the knower and the thing known (hence 'critical'). (Loc. 1241-1244)*

*Critical realism* paves the way for a consideration of

worldview in terms of symbols and story, ("Human life... can be seen as grounded in and constituted by the implicit or explicit stories which humans tell themselves and one another." Loc. 1302-1303), which provides the eventual connection point with Biblical content and the self-understanding of the people ("Our task, therefore, throughout this entire project, will involve the discernment and analysis, at one level or another, of first-century stories and their implications." Loc. 2283-2284) . In short: Wright's epistemological (and therefore hermeneutical) toolbox has us delving into narrative, but not in a disembodied sense. We examine narrative that is both in and of community.

*History, then, is real knowledge, of a particular sort. It is arrived at, like all knowledge, by the spiral of epistemology, in which the story-telling human community launches enquiries, forms provisional judgments about which stories are likely to be successful in answering those enquiries, and then tests these judgments by further interaction with data. (Loc. 3114-3117)*

This is the basis for Wright's framework for distinguishing and describing **worldview**:

*There are four things which worldviews characteristically do, in each of which the entire worldview can be glimpsed.*

*First... worldviews provide the stories through which human beings view reality. Narrative is the most characteristic expression of worldview, going deeper than the isolated observation or fragmented remark.*

*Second, from these stories one can in principle discover how to answer the basic questions that determine human existence: who are we, where are we, what is wrong, and what is the solution?*

*Third, the stories that express the worldview, and the answers which it provides to the questions of identity, environment, evil and eschatology, are expressed... in cultural*

*symbols...*

*Fourth, worldviews include a praxis, a way-of-being-in-the-world.*

*(Loc. 3576-3598)*

There is some application even at this base level: “in principle the whole point of Christianity is that it offers a story which is the story of the whole world. It is public truth. Otherwise it collapses into some version of Gnosticism.” (Loc. 1383-1385) In a postmodern world events, even objects, *things*, can be construed as embodied stories.

Symbolism and narrative *matters*, connects the ancient to the now, and, most importantly, *moves* people. Understanding of narrative in worldview prevents talking at cross-purposes and avoids stalemate (see Loc. 3645). It aides apologetic.

### ***Applying the Tools (Parts III & IV) – First Century Judaism and Early Christianity***

These sections are all about applied critical-realism.

*My aim is... not to project non-Jewish ideas on to Judaism, but to achieve a critical-realist reading of first-century Judaism, including its beliefs and aspirations, in its own terms, which will then shed unexpected light on the rise of Christianity. This, as I argued earlier, is what history is all about. (Loc. 4187-4189)*

The object of the application is Wright’s wealth of historical knowledge. Taking us back to the exile he builds the narrative through the intertestamental period. He outlines political currents, the rise of the Jewish sects (Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes), allowing each to contribute to the worldview-scape that comes together at the time of Jesus.

There is too much to precis but Wright himself summarises:

*Story, symbol and praxis, focused in their different ways on*

*Israel's scriptures, reveal a rich but basically simple worldview. We can summarize this in terms of the four questions which...are implicitly addressed in all worldviews.*

*1. Who are we? We are Israel, the chosen people of the creator god.*

*2. Where are we? We are in the holy Land, focused on the Temple; but, paradoxically, we are still in exile.*

*3. What is wrong? We have the wrong rulers: pagans on the one hand, compromised Jews on the other, or, halfway between, Herod and his family. We are all involved in a less-than-ideal situation.*

*4. What is the solution? Our god must act again to give us the true sort of rule, that is, his own kingship exercised through properly appointed officials (a true priesthood; possibly a true king); and in the mean time Israel must be faithful to his covenant charter. (Loc. 6872-6879).*

Alongside the Jewish worldview, particularly at the point of it's eschatology, Wright connects (juxtaposes?) a similar analysis of the early Christian worldview. His methodology is to consider the "kerygmatic" church at certain extra-biblical "fixed points" in it's early history. This frustrates those who are keen for some biblical interpretation, but it is a necessary step which strengthens the historical/literary basis of later chapters (and New Perspectives exegesis in general).

Beyond the crucifixion itself we are taken to the martyrdom of Polycarp, the correspondence of Pliny and other familiar primary sources. He summarises the defining narrative:

*These events form a chain stretching across a century in which, time after time, the Roman authorities found the Christians (as they found the Jews) a social and political threat or nuisance, and took action against them. The Christians, meanwhile, do not seem to have taken refuge in the defence that they were merely a private club for the advancement of personal piety. They continued to proclaim their allegiance to a Christ who was a 'king' in a sense*

*which precluded allegiance to Caesar, even if his kingdom was not to be conceived on the model of Caesar's. This strange belief, so Jewish and yet so non-Jewish (since it led the Christians to defend no city, adhere to no Mosaic code, circumcise no male children) was, as we shall see, a central characteristic of the whole movement, and as such a vital key to its character. (Loc. 10373-10378)*

The juxtaposition with Judaism is found in the basic questions. Compare this with the list I quoted earlier:

**Who are we?** *We are a new group, a new movement, and yet not new, because we claim to be the true people of the god of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the creator of the world. We are the people for whom the creator god was preparing the way through his dealings with Israel...*

**Where are we?** *We are living in the world that was made by the god we worship, the world that does not yet acknowledge this true and only god. We are thus surrounded by neighbours who worship idols that are, at best, parodies of the truth, and who thus catch glimpses of reality but continually distort it. Humans in general remain in bondage to their own gods, who drag them into a variety of degrading and dehumanizing behaviour-patterns. As a result, we are persecuted, because we remind the present power-structures of what they dimly know, that there is a different way to be human, and that in the message of the true god concerning his son, Jesus, notice has been served on them that their own claim to absolute power is called into question.*

**What is wrong?** *The powers of paganism still rule the world, and from time to time even find their way into the church. Persecutions arise from outside, heresies and schisms from within...*

**What is the solution?** *Israel's hope has been realized; the true god has acted decisively to defeat the pagan gods, and to create a new people, through whom he is to rescue the world from evil. This he has done through the true King,*

*Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, in particular through his death and resurrection. The process of implementing this victory, by means of the same god continuing to act through his own spirit in his people, is not yet complete. One day the King will return to judge the world, and to set up a kingdom which is on a different level from the kingdoms of the present world order. When this happens those who have died as Christians will be raised to a new physical life. The present powers will be forced to acknowledge Jesus as Lord, and justice and peace will triumph at last. (Loc. 10804-10824, emphasis mine).*

Finally, with his well-founded hermeneutical lens, he can consider the New Testament through a standard systemic consideration: the synoptics, Pauline writing, Johannine writings, and so forth. For instance,

*All three synoptic gospels, we have seen, share a common pattern behind their wide divergences. All tell the story of Jesus, and especially that of his cross, not as an oddity, a one-off biography of strange doings, or a sudden irruption of divine power into history, but as the end of a much longer story, the story of Israel, which in turn is the focal point of the story of the creator and the world. (Loc. 11516-11519)*

Slowly but surely it all comes together as Christian worldview is placed alongside and drawn out from the Jewish narrative.

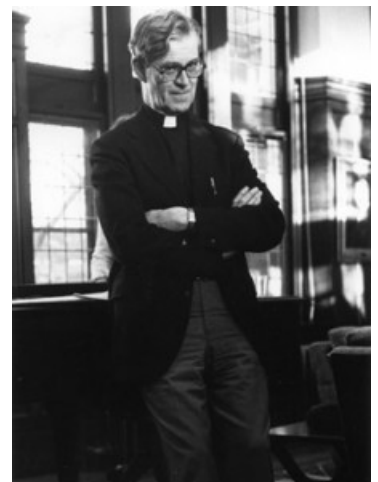
It is not simplistic considerations of propositional continuity and discontinuity, but fulfillment and development in the same narrative arc. Consider this snippet from his treatment of Paul [with its wonderful gem highlighting that “taking every thought captive” is not introspection but missional intellectualism!]

*These major features of Paul’s theology only make sense within a large-scale retelling of the essentially Jewish story, seen now from the point of view of one who believes*

*that the climactic moment has already arrived, and that the time to implement that great achievement is already present... Because this story is the story of Israel understood as the story through which the creator god is restoring the creation, and with it the race of Adam and Eve, it addresses, confronts, and attempts to subvert the pagan world and its stories. We therefore often see Paul, as he says himself, 'taking every thought captive to obey Christ', meeting pagan ideas coming towards him and, like Jehu, bidding them turn around and ride in his train .(Loc. 11754-11768)*

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# **Review: Stendahl's The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West**



I have embarked on a self-imposed project to explore the links

between the New Perspective and a new apologia.

It seemed good to begin with Krister Stendahl's 1963 classic article, The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West. It's a short piece that is a good insight into the beginnings of the New Perspectives movement. It raises the basic questions pertaining to the disparities between the Pauline, Reformation and modern milieux and chases these down some hermeneutical rabbit holes.

Not that Stendahl goes too deep. It's a pleasant read which gives the broad brushstrokes and only glimpses of the obvious academic rigour that lies underneath.

It suits my purposes to summarise and condense his argument, codifying and storing away the framework as I continue my wider exploration.

**Point #1 – The modern world wrestles with matters of introspection and individual conscience. This is not what Paul-the-fomer-Pharisee wrestles with.**

Stendahl uses the psycho-social term "introspection" and "introspective conscience." It is crucial but short-hand language and he never unpacks exactly what he means by it.

Here is a connection point between Pauline hermeneutic and the modern world which is at the heart of my project. The hermeneutical end of this connection is Stendahl's phrase "Pauline awareness of sin" for which, Stendahl suggests, we have a primarily Lutheran and Augustinian lens that is not entirely aligned with Paul's concerns.

Stendahl's insistence is that Paul has had no real problem with law keeping; after all, the Law includes elements of grace despite the Lutheran law-grace dichotomy. Paul's concern is with the Law itself, not with the keeping of it.

*It was not to him a restoration of a plagued conscience; when he says that he now forgets what is behind him (Phil 3:13),*



*he does not think about the shortcoming of his obedience to the Law, but about his glorious achievements as a righteous Jew, achievements which he nevertheless has now learned to consider as “refuse” in the light of his faith in Jesus as the Messiah. (200-201)*

Yes, there is an impossibility about keeping the law. But the real issue is that even when Paul is righteous ‘according to the Law’ it is nothing to the grace now revealed in Jesus.

The communal & covenantal emphases of the New Perspective is apparent here. For Stendahl, Paul’s concern is not to assuage individual conscience but to demonstrate that the two communities – those who have lived under the old covenant of Law, and those who have been a Law unto themselves – now must approach God in the same way, through Christ.

**Point #2 – Paul-the-Christian’s introspection is not shaped around a personal wrestle with sin.**

A comparison is made here between the Pauline world and the world of the Reformation in which Luther stood firmly on the legacy of Augustine, who was the “first modern man” (205) who “may well have been one of the first to express the dilemma of the introspective conscience” (203).

*“It is in response to their [the Augustine/Lutheran milieu] question, “How can I find a gracious God?” that Paul’s words about a justification in Christ by faith, and without the works of the Law, appears as the liberating and saving answer... (203)*

*Augustine and the Church was by and large under the impression that Paul dealt with those issues with which he actually deals: 1) What happens to the Law (the Torah, the actual Law of Moses, not the principle of legalism) when the Messiah has come? – 2) What are the ramifications of the Messiah’s arrival for the relation between Jews and Gentiles?*

*For Paul had not arrived at his view of the Law by testing and pondering its effect upon his conscience; it was his grappling with the question about the place of the Gentiles in the Church and in the plan of God... (204)*

Paul's chief concern was about the inclusion of the Gentiles into Christ-centred grace, not the exclusion of sin-wracked Jews from grace because of their Law. Paul's own "conversion" is not so much an individual relief of conscience, but a prophetic (and very Jewish) call to be the Apostle to the Gentiles to gather those who are now included.

To break into commentary for a second – this is a useful consideration. I recognised many years ago that the great evangelistic sermons of Acts do not accord with the evangelistic shape of the modern age. Here I see in Stendahl an exploration of why this is so.

**Point #3 – The Introspective Conscience framework gives rise to hermeneutical difficulties.**

This section is the most valuable part of the article. Stendahl unpacks some considerable implications. The launching point is this:

*Where Paul was concerned about the possibility for Gentiles to be included in the messianic community, his statements are now read as answers to the quest for assurance about man's salvation out of a common human predicament. (206)*

Paul's concern is to demonstrate that

*Once the Messiah had come, and once the faith in Him – not "faith" as a general religious attitude – was available as the decisive ground for salvation, the Law had done its duty as a custodian for the Jews. (206)*

But

*In the common interpretation of Western Christianity, the matter looks very different. One could even say that Paul's argument has been reversed into saying the opposite to his original intention. (206)*

The Law, which was for Paul an obsoleted custodian *for the Jews* until the coming of Christ (in which Christ himself is prefigured in the gracious aspects of the Law), has become the tool of introspection – a custodian that takes *each of us individually* to Christ by crushing us with its righteousness.

There is a true disparity here and Stendahl helps us know what is at stake. It is the shape of the gospel of itself, and certainly the defining points of an effective kerygma.

*Paul's argument that the Gentiles must not, and should not come to Christ via the Law, i.e., via circumcision etc., has turned into a statement according to which all men must come to Christ with consciences properly convicted by the Law and its insatiable requirements for righteousness. (207)*

#### **Point #4 – Modern introspective exegesis can be rebutted.**

Stendahl finally gets to his positive consideration of the matter and gives a quick rendition of the New Perspective lens (and, yes, he does use the term “new perspective” in passing (214)). My summation is this:

1) Sin is real. “Rom 1-3 sets out to show that all – both Jews and Gentiles – have sinned and fallen short of the Glory of God.” This is properly conceived as covenantal sin of peoples, not the travailing conscience of individuals. (208)

2) Paul's personal awareness of sin is not a present wrestle of conscience, but a past fact of his persecuting actions against the people of God. Paul uses this to speak of the

covenantal inclusion of the godless – as a rhetorical device, not a conclusion. If “Paul’s enmity to Jesus Christ and the church” can be “gloriously and gracefully blotted out”, how much more can God justify the “weak and sinful and rebellious” (209)

3) Paul’s consideration of present troubles is one of “weakness” and attack from the enemy. When it comes to matters of conscience he more readily speaks of victory in Christ and “his good conscience before men and God.” (210)

4) Romans 7, which is meant to be the epitome of introspection is actually an “acquittal” of the Christ-focussed ego, “not one of utter contrition.” This is because Romans 7 is an argument in which good (but ineffective and obsoleted) Law can be made distinct from “bad Sin.”

*“If I do what I do not want, then it is not I who do it, but the sin which dwells in me.”... This distinction makes it possible for Paul to blame Sin and Flesh, and to rescue the Law as a good gift of God.” (212)*

*We should not read a trembling and introspective conscience into a text which is so anxious to put the blame on Sin, and that in such a way that not only the Law but the will and mind of man are declared good and are found to be on the side of God. (214)*

Stendahl’s considerations are not without difficulty, both exegetically and practically. I am driven to read Romans in particular and to weigh Stendahl up against Scripture. I am concerned practically in the downplaying of present sin in terms of weakness and enemy attack; it seems but a variation on “the devil made me do it.”

Nevertheless, this has been an intriguing and enjoyable beginning to my little project. I will move from here either backwards to Augustine, or forwards to Dunn and Wright and

others who have progressed the New Perspective. I'll probably do both.

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## Can the New Perspective be a New Apologia?

In my current role I get to spend a lot of time at the interaction between public discourse, the thought-life and momenta of culture, and the application of Christian theology and devotion. It's a muddled space to play with a lot of speaking at cross purposes and a fast reducing amount of common ground.



I've reached a point of both frustration and passion.

**The frustration** comes from the level of misunderstanding and presumption that exists, particularly about how others view Christians and Christian thought. Our philosophical framework is ignored, our motivations are questioned, and our ambitions rejected. This is very understandable. As a friend of mine articulated to me recently "We Christians are like bad students. The world is asking the same questions, and being frustrated by its same lack of answers, and we come along and say 'The answer is JAY-sus.' And we don't bother to show our working."

"We don't bother to show our working." Yep. And ouch.

Over the ages there have been those that seek to show our

“working out.” These are the *apologists* (from the word *apologia* which means ‘a formal written defense of one’s opinions or conduct’ which is synonymous with *apology* but you can’t use that because it sounds like you’re sorry for something...) And so the “first” apologist, Justin Martyr, showed his “working out” of the reasonableness (in both the moral and logical sense) Christianity in a context while defending against some common misunderstandings of Christians.

Many centuries later on we have those that defend against the rationalism and modernist experiment of the Enlightenment.

And more recently some engagement with postmodernity (although I find many of these are delivering an apology for modernity, not Christianity, but that’s another topic...)

I am simply not satisfied with the depths of our current *apologia*. A *defense* is a *responsive* exercise that is necessarily shaped by the context and the audience. We either ignore that context and audience and do the stereotypical bible bash; or we misunderstand our context and audience to the point of being rendered irrelevant.

So I am thirsty to *understand* our context. I’ve been reading some books that have engaged with philosophical theories that were fomenting in the mid 20th Century. The little I could quickly grasp gave me that “aha” moment: “*This* is where they are coming from, this is why they are saying, doing, teaching this and that. *This* is how they hear us when we say...” etc. etc.

So my resolution is this: **To learn more.** I want to join in with the unpacking of the Western World philosophically (and perhaps sociologically). I want to read a book a week from the ***top ten primary sources that have shaped or describe the Western World.***

Any recommendations?

Similarly, the passion, derives from an utter commitment that

the gospel is, well, good news. And remains so. I have always aspired to be as kerygmatic (from the word *kerygma* which means 'proclamation') as possible. The gospel is gospel only when it is proclaimed. The gospel demands kerygma.

Effective kerygma is thus a combination of hermeneutic, homiletic, and applied ethics in which the gospel connects and enlivens the surrounding context.

In recent times the best kerygma I have witnessed (in my slight reading) has come from the school of thought that has been tagged as the "New Perspectives on Paul." This is the stuff of Krister Stendahl and N.T. Wright and in my mind speaks to a framework that is high levels of realism. It emphasises community and activity, not simply as conceptual responses to revelational truth, but as innate fundamentals of divine historical interaction with the world.

My hunch is that there is an apologetic connection between New Perspectives and the currents of Western thinking which has not yet been fully explored – but could bear fruit if it was.

I want to see if this is true. **I want to learn more.** I want to read a book a week ***from the top ten expositions New Perspectives commentary.***

Any recommendations?

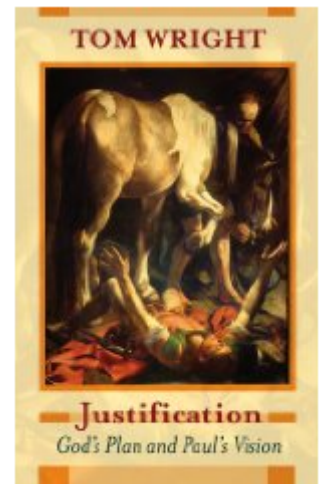
I'll let you know how it goes.

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## **Review: Justification: God's**

# Plan and Paul's Vision

I remember when I first began studying at College. We were taught exegesis of the Bible – applying literary and historical analysis, asking that all important question of “What did the text mean for the original hearers?”, and all that sort of thing. Many students who are used to a more devotional reading of Scripture find themselves stumbling. More than once I would read a passage, consider it's meaning as reasonably obvious, and then second guess myself: Have I been truly considerate of the context? Do I have a prejudicial hermeneutic that's getting in the way? The vast majority of the time my initial conclusion was right – the meaning was plain.



It is in this light that I find myself describing N. T. Wright's *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision* as an *exegetical* book. Firstly, because it is a book that requires two hands – book in one, Bible in the other. Secondly, because its unpacking of the New Perspectives has the same effect as the experience of novice exegetes. As I read Scripture from that perspective I get the mixture of “Isn't that obvious?” with “Am I reading that right?” with “It's not that controversial really is it?”

Apparently it is controversial. This book is a parry-riposte to John Piper's *The Future of Justification* which is itself “A Response to N. T. Wright.” Not having read Piper I can only infer from Wright's response that there are some theological differences surrounding some nuances of justification – for instance, what it means to be “righteous” before God (Piper wants an imputation of merit, Wright prefers the sense of legal acquittal), and the means of being made right (Piper elevates the salvific efficacy of faith in Christ, Wright elevates the covenantal consequences of the faithfulness of



Christ).

I find myself very sympathetic to Wright and the New Perspective (if “New” is the right word). The applicable heart of it all is the sense of “God’s-single-purpose-through-Israel-for-the-salvation-of-the-world.” It is a cohesive framework which draws the key aspects of the Christian kerygma into a God-honouring hermeneutic. Those theological things that are normally underdone or unsatisfyingly shoehorned in when needs must, instead find a full and fruitful place – the role of the Holy Spirit in salvation, for instance, and the salvific inherence of the resurrection, or the continuity of covenants old and new.

Wright is quite polemic in the early chapters when he clarifies his framework and negotiates the sticking points. He is less so when he gets to the more beneficial Part 2 which covers exegesis in Galatians, Philippians, Corinthians, Ephesians and Romans. This is where I found the book most enjoyable, almost devotional in its usefulness.

In the end, in application (and proclamation?) the debate ends up being about nuances and emphases more than anything else.

Wright admits that “we begin to realize at last how the emphases of the old and new perspectives belongs so intimately together” as he summarizes a section of Romans:

*(a) The overarching problem has always been human sin and its effects – idolatry, pride, human corruption and ultimately death.*

*(b) God launched a rescue operation, the single plan, through Israel, to save the world.*

*(c) But Israel, too, is part of the original problem, which has a double effect:*

*(i) Israel itself needs the same rescue-from-sin-and-death that everyone else needs;*

*(ii) Israel, as it stands, cannot be the means of the rescue*

*operation that God's plan intended.*

*(d) therefore the problem with which God is faced, if he is to be faithful to his own character and plan in both creation and covenant, is*

*(i) he must nevertheless put his single plan into operation, somehow accomplishing what Israel was called to do but, through faithlessness to his commission, failed to do;*

*(ii) he must thereby rescue the human race and the whole world from sin, idolatry, pride, corruption and death;*

*(iii) he must do this in a way that makes it clear that Israel, though still of course the object of his saving love, is now on all fours with the rest of the world.*

*In other words, God must find a way of enabling 'Israel' to be faithful after all, as the middle term of the single plan; God must thereby deal with sin; and God must do so in such a way as to leave no room for boasting...*

As the first year College student might say, "Isn't it obvious, or am I reading it wrong?"