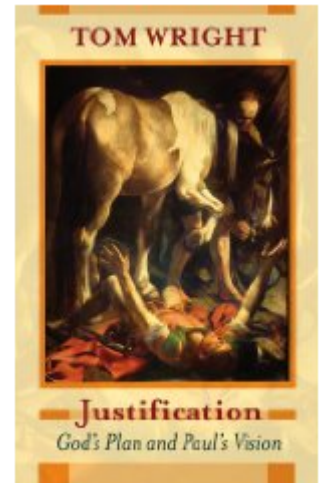


# Review: Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision

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?"