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NOTES FOR THEOLOGY STUDENTS PHILIPPIANS AND THE NEW PAULINE PERSPECTIVE

This is a good moment to embark on the study of a Pauline Epistle. The evangelical world is currently being stirred by a vigorous dispute between two of its giants, John Piper and Bishop N. T. (Tom) Wright. The storm, which has been brewing for some while, burst in 2008 with the publication by Piper of his book *The Future of Justification: a response to N.T. Wright*, and continued last year with Wright's response *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision*.ⁱ Piper, of course, has form in attacking British evangelical leaders after his recent sorties against Steve Chalke concerning the doctrine of substitutional atonement.ⁱⁱ At the time, I felt Piper's assault was based more on what Chalke did not say rather than on what he did, but we should not underestimate its impact. The consequence was a division within British evangelicalism resulting in the establishment of a rival conference (headed by the UCCF) to the popular Spring Harvest event.ⁱⁱⁱ I expect Piper's latest sortie to have equally important consequences. Regular listeners to my sermons will know that I quote both Piper and Wright extensively, and respect them immensely, so the books seem to sit uneasily side by side on my bookshelf.

So what is it all about? At its heart is a new understanding of Paul's Jewish background, known as the New Perspective on Paul.^{iv} The old perspective is traced back to Luther, struggling with his existential guilt, a product of medieval Catholicism. He found release in the doctrine of justification by faith, which developed through the Reformation period. Justification is taken to mean:

- God is the divine judge who acquits us as in a law court.
- Christ's righteousness is "imputed" or reckoned to us. It is not based on our leading a righteous life, neither is it infused in to us.
- It is by faith alone.
- We are justified now on the basis of Christ's work in anticipation of God's verdict on the final day.

Within that perspective Paul was generally portrayed as having been tortured by his inability to obey the Torah, and finding release from Jewish works legalism through free forgiveness by grace in Christ.

The new perspective, is usually traced back to Stendahl^v and E. P. Sanders^{vi}. It was argued that the old perspective merely read medieval angst back into Paul. A closer look at Second Temple Judaism demonstrates that Paul lived under a system of "covenantal nomism" in which his place in God's plan would have been established by his birth into the Jewish nation which had been granted its security by grace through the covenant. His obedience to the Torah would have demonstrated his place in the covenant, and any lapse would have been forgiven through repentance and the sacrificial system.^{vii} Paul would have been perfectly content with the Torah, and both pleased and proud to obey it. James Dunn took the argument further,^{viii} reasoning that God's righteousness is his covenant faithfulness to Israel and his verdict in their favour. Tom Wright is an ardent exponent of the New Perspective, albeit from a conservative evangelical point of view, Piper and most of the Reformed evangelicals like him reject it. Certainly we cannot agree with all the different flavours of the New Perspective, but where do Piper and Wright disagree?

Let me begin with a short excursus on the problem of the English language. I lived and preached for 20 years in the Portuguese language where the word which translates the Greek diakiosis is translated “justiça”. There is no other choice. However, English offers us two words: justice and righteousness. Both words translate the one Greek word ‘dikaiosune’. Confusing. Even worse, we then have the other related words: just/righteous, justly/righteously, and to justify/? Now, here is a problem. There is no equivalent word to “justify”. E. P Sanders invented ‘righteoused by faith’^{ix} and Morna Hooker suggests “to right”^x, but we must remember that the noun dikaiosune and the verb dikaioo come from the same, single root in the Greek and must mean something very similar indeed. ‘To justify’ must mean ‘to make/declare/reckon righteous’ in some way. So what do Piper and Wright understand by these two words?

Piper believes that “the essence of righteousness is God’s unwavering faithfulness to uphold the glory of his name. And human righteousness is the same: the unwavering faithfulness to uphold the glory of God.”^{xi} Wright questions, what he calls this “idiosyncratic” definition and asks how such “righteousness” could possibly be imputed to the believer in the act of justification? “Concern for someone else’s glory is not the same as concern for one’s own.” It is a strange idea, anyway, for a judge’s own qualities to be transferred by imputation or any other means to the defendant.^{xii}

Wright’s view is very different indeed. He begins his understanding of justification with God’s call to Abraham in which he promises that all the nations will be blessed through him. This, for Wright, is the crucial moment, the covenant moment, to which God will be wholly faithful. It is not God’s glory which is the central issue, but the promise which Abraham believes by faith and it is reckoned to him as righteousness. Righteousness, for Wright denotes “the status that someone has when the court has found in their favour.” Thus God’s righteousness is not his moral character but his declaration that we have the status of belonging to his people. It does not transform us, so much as change our status (if it helps, substitute the word “justice’ for ‘righteousness’ here and you may understand better what Wright is claiming). You will note immediately that “justification” in this scheme is just a part of something much bigger. God intended the whole world to be blessed through the descendents of Abraham, but they were not able to live up to the covenant requirements. So he gave them the Torah, which held them in check to some extent, but they still failed. However, all along he knew this would happen, so the Messiah was born amidst the covenant people, and by his obedience, his death on the cross and his resurrection he fulfilled all that the covenant and the Torah required. Now, through faith in him, our sins are forgiven and we are integrated into the covenant people of God. “We are the circumcision (Phil 3: 3)!” There is no need for imputation of moral righteousness because we are now in Christ. We have his Spirit and God is at work in us as he intended all along. Justification, for Wright, does not just mean forgiving our sins, but also (note: it is “both-and”) declaring us his people.

The difference between Piper and Wright is wide. Whereas for Piper, justification is almost (some would say) synonymous with salvation, very individualistic and a guarantee of going to heaven, for Wright justification is about being integrated into a people and is almost (some would say) synonymous with ecclesiology.^{xiii} It means becoming part of the people of God and part of his work as we are filled and led by his Spirit. Salvation for Wright is much wider than justification.

Now, I have summarized their views simply but, I hope, faithfully, and I leave it to you to read their books and come to your own conclusion. While neither I nor you are likely to agree with everything they say, we will probably gravitate to one or the other. This will effect how we preach the gospel of Christ. If we favour Piper, then our preaching will concentrate on Christ’s death, his

substitutionary death on the cross for us and our need to receive him by faith. Faith in Christ will result in our being saved. If we favour Wright we will stress God's desire to draw our listeners into his kingdom, his desire for them to join his people, with Christ's death and resurrection as the way he has achieved this. Faith in Christ will result in our becoming his redeemed, forgiven people who live "in Christ" and are led by his Spirit. It is not principally about our personal salvation, but about the community we become.

Consider, for example, how both sides might unpack Galatians 2:19-20, which says "For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.(NIV)." I guess that the Old Perspective might phrase that: "*Paul has discovered that Jesus died in his place on the cross to save him from his sins which in his old life under the Torah condemned him, and so he warns the Philippians against trying to win their salvation by works.*" Wright unpacks it as "*Paul has discovered in the Messiah the true-Israel identity to which his life under Torah had pointed but which it could not deliver and he therefore warns the Philippians against being drawn in that false direction.*"^{xiv} Read it in its context and decide which is closer to Paul's original intention.

So how is this going to impinge on our study of Philippians? For Wright, all the benefits of Christ's work are to be had by our union with Christ without the mechanics of imputation. As it happens, the phrase "in Christ" is fundamental to Philippians. The saints are "in Christ Jesus at Philippi" (1:1), there is joy in Christ (1:26), hope in Christ (2:19), confidence in Christ (2:24). We glory in Christ (3:3), are found in Christ (3:9), have righteousness through faith in him (3:9), are destined for heaven in him (3:14), stand firm in him (4:1), agree with each other in him (4:2), rejoice in him (4:4), know peace in him (4:7). Being in Christ is what being a member of God's covenant nation is all about.^{xv} Our Christian life is anchored in our relationship to the Messiah who fulfilled God's purpose by being born a Jew, dying on the cross and being raised from the dead. Our spiritual status was defined when we believed and through our faith God justified us. Whereas the Reformed school of thought might well focus our attention on the passage where the Christ humbles himself to death on the cross, Wright's school of thought will stress how that death results in our day to day experience of being in Christ, living out our destiny as the ones declared (justified) to be the people of God.

Piper makes little use of Philippians in his book, but Wright finds that it serves very nicely to underscore his definitions. Chapter 3 especially throws light on Paul's view of himself before conversion. There is no anguish for sins, no traumatic failure to keep the Torah. On the contrary he presents himself as having been self-confident and assured. He had been born into the correct ethnic group, his parents had fulfilled the law's demands at the start of his life, he had taken every opportunity to demonstrate his membership of the covenant people by becoming a Pharisee and following their rules,^{xvi} and was blameless (*amemptos*) as far as the law was concerned. He has now, however, learned that such boasting is pointless. It is only by faith in the Messiah that you can become one of the covenant people of God, and it does not depend on ethnicity. This fits nicely with the New Perspective on Paul, and Wright makes much of it.^{xvii}

D. A. Carson has been quoted (allegedly) as saying that Wright's problem is in backgrounding what should be in the foreground and foregrounding what should be in the background, but Philippians does not define the Philippians' salvation experience in terms of trusting that Jesus died for their sins but rather as being in Christ, on an ongoing journey by faith(fulness),

with God working in them. The definition of church comes in 3.3b: we are those “who worship God in the Spirit, who boast in the Messiah, Jesus.”^{xviii} Furthermore, righteousness here (3:9) is not a quality of God, but comes from God (ek theou). It is not God’s righteousness but his status (Wright points out that equally the phrase “righteousness from the law” cannot mean that the law possesses righteousness and imputes it). Philippians does sit more easily with Wright than Piper.

This is not to say that all is plain sailing. Piper and Wright clash concerning the exhortations to work out our salvation. Once we are “in” how do we stay “in”? What place do our works have in our final justification? Piper, I think, would say that once God has justified you, the works wrought by the Spirit in you follow as proof that you are eternally justified. Wright seems to go further and say that they are an essential part of our justification. Piper accuses Wright here of faith+works salvation. Wright does answer this criticism by saying that this is where we see the Spirit working in us and it wrought by him, not by our own efforts. So the verdict of the last day will truly reflect what we have done in reality.^{xix} As there are a number of verses in Philippians on the subject of working out and completing our salvation (1:6; 1:10; 2:12; 3:11ff;) we will need to tread carefully. I would rather not offend Piper or Wright, but I may not be able to please both.

I will be keeping a close eye on The New Perspective as we go through this series of studies, but I will also be taking something of an existential approach to the epistle. This first came to my attention hearing a couple of sermons by the American preacher Rob Bell in which he looks quite deeply into the mental state of Paul in writing this letter. The existential approach to the book appeals to me.^{xx} There is a general consensus among theologians that the apostle is the author of the book and so, apart from the question of whether he wrote it from Rome or Ephesus, there is not much for me to add by way of introduction that cannot be found in any commentary. However, Paul’s state of mind is interesting. Look at the theme of “joy” which is one of the characteristics of the letter: he prays with joy (1:4), rejoices when others preach Christ (1:18), the Philippians have joy in Christ (1:25f), and they can complete Paul’s joy (2:2), he rejoices at the prospect of martyrdom (2:16ff), and they are to welcome Epaphroditus with joy (2:28f), rejoicing in the Lord (3:1; 4:4), for they are Paul’s joy (4:1, 10). Yet Paul is in chains, and has been imprisoned now for several years. In the meantime there are rival Christian preachers (1:15-18), non-Christians who oppose the Gospel (1:1:27-28; 3:18-19), a group to whom Paul refers as “those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh” (3:2), Euodia and Syntyche, key members at Philippi, are feuding with each other (4:2f), and from the number of exhortations to unity in this book we can be sure they were not the only ones. There are days that Paul wishes he were dead (1:21-26), and who could blame him. He sticks around out of sense of duty but heaven is looking very tempting. It has been said that “Philippians is an epistle of “intimate distance. Each description of the Christian life is marked with a reflection on the approach of death.”^{xxi} Paul has his internal conflicts and fears, so uncovering these in the pages of the sacred text is going to be fun.

Paul has finally arrived in Rome, although not in the manner he was expecting. He has been arrested for telling the Jews that their Messiah has arrived, been crucified and has risen from the dead. If they are to fulfil their destiny as the people of God it is time they believed on him to be justified, forgiven and receive the Spirit. He has come to the capital of the Empire to tell it that Caesar is not Lord. Christ is the Lord and one day every knee will bow and acknowledge him. Travelling with Paul must have been a white-knuckle ride.^{xxii}

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- ⁱ John Piper, *The Future of Justification: a response to N.T. Wright* (Nottingham: IVP Press, 2008); Tom Wright, *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision* (London: SPCK, 2009).
- ⁱⁱ Steve Chalke and Alan Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003); John Piper has written numerous condemnations, e.g. <http://www.worldmag.com/articles/11958>. See also *The Future of Justification*, pp. 46-53.
- ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.christiantoday.com/article/uccf.keswick.end.spring.harvest.word.alive.partnership/10506.htm>
- ^{iv} I have commented on this before. See my Notes to Theology Students on Galatians.
- ^v Krister Stendahl, 'The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West', *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976).
- ^{vi} E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (London: SCM, 1977) and many other works.
- ^{vii} Seyoon Kim, *Paul and the New perspective. Second thoughts on the origin of Paul's gospel.* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 149 "if, in spite of the atonement theology, the Jewish nation could be thought of as falling under the curse of the law for their failure to keep the law, could individual Jews not also be so regarded? If the Jews around the New Testament times thought that atonement for their sins was as really available as the New Perspective insist, why did R. Gamaliel II "weep" for not being able to keep the law perfectly? This clearly suggests that some Jews could think of the requirement of perfect observance of the law quite apart from atonement practices." Seyoon makes an impassioned attack on the New Perspective from an Evangelical viewpoint, arguing that there were more varied opinions and beliefs in Second Temple Judaism than the New Perspective acknowledges. This is a fair point and calls us to tread with caution. Whether, however, R Gamaliel II was weeping because of fear of losing his soul, or for desire to demonstrate his righteousness with even more aplomb is a moot point.
- ^{viii} James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (London: SPCK, 1990) and other writings.
- ^{ix} E. P. Sanders, *Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 76.
- ^x Morna D Hooker, *Paul, A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2003), p.74.
- ^{xi} Piper, *The Future*, p.64 and explained in subsequent pages.
- ^{xii} Wright, *Justification*, p. 47.
- ^{xiii} *Ibid.*, p.124. "This is "ecclesiology (membership in God's people) as the advance sign of soteriology (being saved on the last day). It is 'justification' in the present, anticipating the verdict of the future."
- ^{xiv} *Ibid.*, p. 120 (italics original).
- ^{xv} Piper, *The Future*, pp. 171f argues that imputation of righteousness is implied here, if not stated.
- ^{xvi} J. Andrew Overman, "Kasya Nomon Pharisaioi: A short History of Paul's Pharisaism" Janice Capel Anderson, Philip Sellew & Claudia Stezer, eds., *Pauline Conversations in Context. Essays in Honour of Calvin J. Roetzel* (Sheffield; Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), pp. 180-193, doubts if Paul was really a Pharisee: "'Paul the Pharisee' is a phrase that rolls easily off the tongue but cannot bear up under close scrutiny . . . On the basis of a very few passages, most of them oblique and highly stylized, Paul the former Pharisee has become a staple of Christian history and scholarly convention." p. 193. Most commentators, however, believe that Paul was a Pharisee.
- ^{xvii} Wright, *Justification*, p.125.
- ^{xviii} *Ibid.*, p. 120.
- ^{xix} *Ibid.*, pp. 161-168. cf. Piper, pp. 117-121.
- ^{xx} This is hardly new of course. See Gerd Theissen, *Psychological Aspects of Pauline Theology*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1987).
- ^{xxi} F. Craddock, quoted by PHEME PERKINS "Theology for the Heavenly Politeuma", Jouette M. Bassler, ed., *Pauline Theology, Vol .1.*(Atlanta, Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), p. 97.
- ^{xxii} These are the commentaries I will be consulting:
Alec Motyer, *The Message of Philippians: Jesus Our Joy*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester: IVP, 1984)
Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (London: A & C Black, 1997)
Max Lucado, *Book of Philippians (Life Lessons)*,
Ralph P. Martin and Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians, Revised*, Word Bible Commentary (: Thomas Nelson, 2004)
Stephen E. Fowl, *Philippians* (Grand rapids/Cambridge; Eerdmans, 2005)
Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon* (London: SPCK, 2002)
William Hendricksen, *Philippians* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1962)
William Barclay, *Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians*, Daily Study Bible (Edinburgh: St. Andrews Press, 1959)