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# Justification: The Reformers and Recent New Testament Scholarship

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## Introduction

As is well known, the classical Reformed doctrine of justification by faith, or more properly, justification by grace through faith, has come under increasing scrutiny in recent years.<sup>1</sup> This has happened because some New Testament scholars have suggested that the traditional Protestant understanding of Paul's doctrine is fundamentally flawed. As J D G Dunn has recently put it:

Luther's conversion experience and the insight which it gave him also began a tradition in Biblical interpretation, which has resulted for many in the loss or neglect of other crucial Biblical insights related to the same theme of divine justice. And particularly in the case of Paul, Luther's discovery of 'justification by faith' and the theological impetus which it gave especially to Lutheran theology has involved a significant misunderstanding of Paul, not least in relation to 'justification by faith' itself.<sup>2</sup>

Dunn is careful not to conclude from this that the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith is wrong; his complaint is that it is a one-sided presentation of the evidence. As he puts it:

The Protestant doctrine of justification has been a restatement of central Biblical insights of incalculable influence and priceless value. In drawing attention to aspects of a larger, still richer doctrine I do not mean to detract from or diminish this aspect which has been so prominent in Reformation-inspired exegesis and teaching. It is important, however, that these other aspects be brought more fully

- 1 For a recent survey of the issues see D A Carson ed *Right with God: Justification in the Bible and the World* (Grand Rapids: Baker and Carlisle: Paternoster 1992)
- 2 J D G Dunn 'The Justice of God: A Renewed Perspective on Justification by Faith' *Journal of Theological Studies* NS 43 1992 pp 1-22. The quotation is from p 2. This article was originally the Henton Davies Lecture given at Regents Park College Oxford in January 1991.

into the light so that in turn their value may once again be appreciated and their influence felt to fuller effect.<sup>3</sup>

Dunn summarizes the problems with Luther's understanding of justification as follows:

1 Luther supposedly understood Paul's conversion as the climax of a long, inward spiritual struggle, similar to that of Augustine, who had classically misinterpreted Romans 7 by applying it to his own pre-Christian experience.<sup>4</sup> Dunn does not quote Luther on this subject, however, and for good reason. For as far as we can tell, Luther did not interpret Romans 7 in that way! In his *Commentary on Romans*, Luther often quoted Augustine, and he must have known the relevant passage extremely well, but he did not make use of it when interpreting Romans 7. According to Luther's understanding of that passage, Paul was speaking about himself *as a Christian*, not as a restless unbeliever seeking peace with God.<sup>5</sup> The parallel with Augustine seems to have grown up in later Lutheran tradition and been assimilated to Luther's account of his conversion, which does not mention Romans 7 at all.<sup>6</sup> We may therefore accept Dunn's contention that Lutheran theology has generally been mistaken on this point, but not his assumption that this error goes back to Luther himself.

2 Luther supposedly understood justification by faith in distinctively individualistic terms. Dunn points out that this view was reinforced in the early twentieth century by Rudolf Bultmann, whose existentialist interpretation of Paul restated what Dunn calls the 'classic Lutheran doctrine'.<sup>7</sup> Undoubtedly Luther did understand justification by faith as something which applied directly to every member of the body of Christ, but his doctrine of baptism ought to be sufficient refutation of the charge of 'individualism'. Luther believed that every baptized person was united with Christ, and that this union of necessity preceded the experience of justification. The need to receive Christ by faith was therefore common to all the baptized, and not an individual experience divorced from the life of the Covenant community.<sup>8</sup>

3 J D G Dunn 'The Justice of God: A Renewed Perspective on Justification by Faith' *Journal of Theological Studies* NS 43 1992 p 2

4 *Confessions* 8.5

5 Luther's *Works* (American Edition) Vol 25 (St Louis: Concordia 1972) pp 322-43

6 See R H Bainton *Here I Stand* (London: Hodder and Stoughton 1951) p 65 quoted in a slightly adapted form by Dunn p 1.

7 J D G Dunn 'The Justice of God: A Renewed Perspective on Justification by Faith' *Journal of Theological Studies* NS 43 1992 p 4. See R Bultmann *Theology of the New Testament* (London: SCM 1952) I 242-3. Dunn points out that Bultmann's view carried the day, despite cautionary warnings which had been given earlier by scholars like W Wrede and A Schweitzer.

8 Luther's *Works* (American Edition) Vol 35 (Philadelphia: Fortress 1960) pp 29-43

3 Luther supposedly understood Paul's conversion as a turning away from Judaism, which he therefore regarded as the antithesis of Christianity. Dunn counters this by claiming, along with Alan Segal,<sup>9</sup> that Paul experienced a conversion *within* Judaism, and that he saw his Damascus Road experience as a calling from God to preach salvation to the Gentiles. Luther's anti-Semitism is well-known, and there is no doubt that he would have rejected Segal's interpretation, but he would hardly be alone in this. Nevertheless, it is too simplistic to say that Luther regarded Judaism as the *antithesis* of Christianity. More accurately, he regarded the law as the antithesis of the Gospel, without making the crude identification of the former with Judaism. It is particularly noticeable that when he deals with Paul's criticism of the Jews, Luther generalizes the Apostle's remarks and refers to the Jews only in passing.<sup>10</sup> As Dunn points out, discussion of this subject has become very difficult because of the dreadful history of Christian-Jewish relations, but whether it is right to make amends for this by saying that Paul never ceased to be a Jew and never saw anything wrong with Judaism is another matter altogether. Even Dunn, who does as much as anyone can to rehabilitate first-century Judaism as a religion of grace, does not go quite as far as that!

4 Luther supposedly regarded the Judaism of Paul's time as a degenerate religion, similar to the Catholicism of Luther's own day. In support of this, Dunn refers to Luther's statements to the effect that the Church of his day was tainted with 'Jewish legalism', and had borrowed much of its sacramental practice from the Jews.<sup>11</sup> No doubt Luther did think in these terms to some extent, but it is probably wrong to say that he regarded the Judaism of Paul's time as *degenerate*, in the way that the Catholicism of his time was. Judaism had rejected the Messiah and had therefore stumbled on the rock of offence, making hollow its pretensions to be the bearer of God's salvation. Catholicism, on the other hand, had accepted Christ, but then concealed him under a structure of works-righteousness which in some respects seemed like a return to Judaism. Because of that, it could be called degenerate in a way which does not strictly apply to Judaism, either then or now. To put it another way, Judaism was mistaken because of the spiritual blindness of the Jews; Catholicism was corrupt because of the conscious deception practised by the Catholic hierarchy.

9 A Segal *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee* (New Haven: Yale 1990)

10 See, for example, Luther's comments on Rom 10:2, in *Works* (American edition) Vol 25 pp 404-5.

11 J D G Dunn 'The Justice of God: A Renewed Perspective on Justification by Faith' *Journal of Theological Studies* NS 43 1992 pp 6-7. Dunn takes his cue from a recent book by M Saperstein *Moments of Crisis in Jewish-Christian Relations* (London: SCM and Philadelphia: TPI 1989).

## Justification: The Reformers and Recent New Testament Scholarship

The modern criticisms of Luther, which Dunn has so helpfully summarized, may be somewhat unfair to the views of the Reformer himself, but there remains a feeling that Protestant tradition, which has developed out of Luther's theology, has distorted the teaching of the Apostle Paul on two fundamental points. Somehow or other, it has misunderstood the meaning of *δικαιοσύνη* and related words, and (partly because of that) has misinterpreted Paul's understanding of the relationship between his inherited Judaism and his faith in Christ.

Before going on to consider these points in greater detail, it may be useful to point out certain areas in which modern scholars have reached a consensus which they believe has altered the traditional Protestant understanding of Paul. Virtually everyone now accepts that justification by faith is not the 'centre' of Paul's theology, although it is important and even 'central' to it.<sup>12</sup> Paul's theology does not have a readily definable 'centre' around which everything else is organized. Therefore it is not legitimate to take justification by faith (or anything else) as the yardstick by which all of his writings can be judged. But if it is true that justification by faith cannot explain everything, it is also true that it is not a side issue which can comfortably be ignored most of the time. It was certainly one of Paul's major preoccupations, and in some of his epistles, notably Galatians and Romans, it plays a leading role in the development of his argument.

It has been relatively easy for New Testament scholars to argue that the debate over the 'centre' of Paul's theology is misguided, because the occasional nature of his epistles makes such a systematic approach impossible. This would hardly be an issue at all, were it not for the fact that most Protestant theologians have traditionally assumed that justification by faith is the 'centre' of Paul's theology, because it was the theological basis of the Reformation. But as we have already had occasion to discover, what passes nowadays as Protestant tradition does not necessarily reflect the teaching of the Reformers themselves. Luther regarded justification by faith as the 'article of a standing or falling Church'<sup>13</sup>, but there is no sign anywhere that he thought of it as the 'centre' of Paul's theology in the way that modern Lutherans have sometimes done. When Calvin treated the subject (*Institutes* III,11), he began by explaining why he felt the need to discuss good works first! Like

12 For the most recent discussion of this subject, see M A Seifrid *Justification by Faith: The Origin and Development of a Central Pauline Theme* (Leiden: Brill 1992) pp 1-77. A briefer introduction can be found in P T O'Brien 'Justification in Paul and Some Crucial Issues of the Last Two Decades' *Right with God: Justification in the Bible and the World* D A Carson ed (Grand Rapids: Baker and Carlisle: Paternoster 1992) pp 69-95 esp pp 78-85.

13 The phrase is a somewhat loose translation of an idea which occurs in Luther's writings, and later became a watchword of classical Protestantism. Cf eg Luther's *Commentary on Psalm 130* Luther's *Werke* (Weimar Ausgabe) Vol 40/3: 352.3, where he writes: *quia isto articulo stante stat Ecclesia, ruente ruet Ecclesia*.

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Luther, he regarded the doctrine of justification as fundamental for understanding the Christian life, but there is little sign that he considered it to be the organizing principle behind Paul's thought. The truth of the matter is that the Reformers never tried to systematise Paul's writings on the basis of a single principle, however important they thought it was. They were at least as flexible in their exegesis as those modern scholars who deny the existence of a Pauline 'centre', and whatever may be said about their modern followers, it is unjust to accuse them of holding so rigid a position.

Contemporary scholars also tend to agree with Ernst Käsemann, that justification and sanctification cannot be separated.<sup>14</sup> But although they accept that Käsemann was very properly reacting against a one-sided understanding of the doctrine of justification, and that his work has helped to correct an imbalance, many are reluctant to go the whole way with him. They usually add the important qualification that justification and sanctification can, and sometimes must, be distinguished *as concepts*, even though they cannot be separated *in practice*, as the existentialistic Lutheranism of the early twentieth century tried to do.

Luther's famous remark to his friend Melanchthon, that he should 'sin boldly', is often quoted to the effect that for him, sanctification was of little importance, but this is a serious misunderstanding. What Luther told Melanchthon was: 'Be a sinner and sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly'.<sup>15</sup> Luther's true opinion can be seen from the following remarks, first in his treatise on baptism (1519) and then in his essay on the Councils of the Church (1539):

... you give yourself up to the sacrament of baptism and to what it signifies. That is, you desire to die, together with your sins, and to be made new at the Last Day . . . God accepts this desire at your hands and grants you baptism. From that hour he begins to make you a new person. He pours into you his grace and Holy Spirit, who begins to slay nature and sin, and to prepare you for death and resurrection at the Last Day . . . God trains and tests you all your life long, with many good works and all kinds of sufferings.<sup>16</sup>

... there is always a holy Christian people on earth, in whom Christ lives, works and rules *per redemptionem*, 'through grace and the remission of sin', and the Holy Spirit, *per vivificationem et*

14 See M A Seifrid *Justification by Faith: The Origin and Development of a Central Pauline Theme* (Leiden: Brill 1992) pp 37–46. Käsemann developed his views in an article entitled 'Gottesgerechtigkeit bei Paulus', in his *Exegetische Versuche und Besinnungen II* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht 1965) pp 181–93.

15 Luther's *Works* (American edition) Vol 48 (Philadelphia: Fortress 1963) p 282

16 Luther's *Works* (American edition) Vol 35 (Philadelphia: Fortress 1960) p 33

*sanctificationem*, 'through daily purging of sin and renewal of life', so that we do not remain in sin but are enabled and obliged to lead a new life, abounding in all kinds of good works, as the Ten Commandments or the two tables of Moses' law command, and not in old, evil works. That is St Paul's teaching.<sup>17</sup>

Throughout his career, Luther never deviated from the need for sanctification as an integral part of the Christian life. Calvin, for his part, not only did not divorce sanctification from justification; as we have seen from the passage referred to above, he even dealt with the question of good works first, in order to avoid any misunderstandings on this score! There is thus no reason to suppose that the Reformers would have disagreed with Käsemann in principle, though they certainly opposed the fusion of the two concepts which we find in the Council of Trent's decree on the subject (Sixth Session, 13 January 1547), to which Käsemann's position is rather close.<sup>18</sup> Luther and Calvin adopted a position which appears to us to be midway between Trent and Bultmann, and nearer to Paul's true teaching than either of those.

### Δικαιοσύνη

It is now time to focus more closely on those matters which are still widely debated, of which the first is the precise meaning of the Greek word *δικαιοσύνη*,<sup>19</sup> and especially of the phrase *δικαιοσύνη Θεοῦ*. Bultmann believed that *Θεοῦ* was a genitive of authorship, and that the phrase 'righteousness of God' refers to a divine gift which God has bestowed on those who have entered into the right relationship to him, a relationship which is established by faith and not, as the Jews had supposed, by the works of the Law.<sup>20</sup> In essence, righteousness is an ethical quality imputed to human beings who stand in the right relationship to God through Christ.

In contrast to this, Käsemann believed that the 'righteousness of God' was a Jewish apocalyptic concept which had to be distinguished from mere 'righteousness', whether this was understood as a divine gift or as a

17 Luther's *Works* (American edition) Vol 41 (Philadelphia: Fortress 1966) p 144

18 This may explain why his views have proved so popular with Roman Catholic exegetes. See P T O'Brien 'Justification in Paul and Some Crucial Issues of the Last Two Decades' *Right with God: Justification in the Bible and the World* D A Carson ed (Grand Rapids: Baker and Carlisle: Paternoster 1992) pp 72-4.

19 J D G Dunn, 'The Justice of God: A Renewed Perspective on Justification by Faith' *Journal of Theological Studies* NS 43 1992 p 21, has pointed out that *δικαιοσύνη* is translated into English by a number of different words, most notably 'justice', 'justification' and 'righteousness'. He makes a plea for a return to the use of 'justice' as a way of avoiding the disjunction in terminology which has become customary in English, though in actual fact he usually translates the word as 'righteousness', a practice which we have followed here.

20 See eg his article on *δικαιοσύνη* in *TDNT* 3 pp 646-9.

human achievement. In his view, the righteousness of God was a divine quality which could never be dissociated from God himself; where his righteousness was, there God was also. Furthermore, Käsemann claimed that, in Jewish apocalyptic, 'the righteousness of God' referred to an 'obedience-producing power' which went beyond the individual, and would eventually lead to the salvation of the whole world.<sup>21</sup> Käsemann's views on this subject have become the starting-point for all subsequent discussion, though support for his position has been about evenly balanced by criticism of it.

Käsemann's view that *δικαιοσύνη Θεοῦ* was a technical term borrowed from contemporary apocalyptic Judaism has now been shown to be somewhat dubious. There is no doubt that Jewish apocalyptic writers used the phrase, and something of that may well be reflected in Paul's use of it, but to claim any more than this is to go beyond the available evidence. The phrase occurs too frequently, and its meaning is too open-ended, for it to be classified as a technical term, even in Jewish apocalyptic writings.<sup>22</sup>

What Paul actually meant by *δικαιοσύνη Θεοῦ* has been discussed at length by M A Seifrid, who starts from the Apostle's use of the term in 2 Cor 5:21. There Paul wrote that Christ 'became sin for us . . . that we might become the righteousness of God in him'.<sup>23</sup> As Seifrid correctly points out, Jesus never became 'sin' in an ontological sense; what Paul meant is that he took the place of sin and suffered the consequences. Following the same logic, believers do not become the 'righteousness of God' ontologically; rather, they receive the benefits which result from being accounted righteous in God's sight, even though they have no claim to such favourable treatment. Because of this, it is impossible to regard Paul's use of the term *δικαιοσύνη Θεοῦ* as ontological, at least in this passage, and we are forced to accept that it must be interpreted forensically – which is just how the leading Reformers understood it! Käsemann was therefore wrong to discard the concept of forensic justification, and the traditional view of the matter can still be supported – by this verse at least.

Seifrid's most acute observation is that Rom 7:14–25 cannot be read as an account of Paul's pre-Christian experience in the way that so many modern scholars have done, though it is not adequate to relate it exclusively to his post-conversion spiritual struggles either.<sup>24</sup> What Paul

21 See M A Seifrid *Justification by Faith: The Origin and Development of a Central Pauline Theme* (Leiden: Brill 1992) pp 71–2.

22 Seifrid pp 42–3 and 99–108

23 Seifrid pp 213–14

24 Seifrid pp 226–44. The substance of this passage can also be found in M A Seifrid 'The Subject of Rom 7:14–25' *Novum Testamentum* XXXIV/4 1992 pp 313–33.

was really saying is that the believer must continue to rely on Christ for his justification – that on purely human grounds our condition is permanently hopeless. Speaking as a Christian, Paul describes what would happen to him if he were to try to obtain justification by his own efforts. The passage cannot refer to the spiritual condition of an unbeliever, since those who do not know Christ would not be troubled by such a dilemma. Seifrid rightly supports E P Sanders' contention that Paul felt no such agony of conscience before his conversion.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, it is of the very essence of conversion that we then become aware of the fact that we have been justified through no effort of our own, and the more sanctified we become, the more we realise that. Paul never lost this consciousness, and towards the end of his life he was able to write of himself: 'Unto me who am less than the least of all saints has this grace been given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ' (Eph 3:8).

A true understanding of Paul, to which Seifrid's study has made such a notable contribution, must surely accept that for him, the righteousness of God can never be a human possession, whether it be understood as a gift or as an achievement (by works). To the end of his days, Paul knew that he had no claim on God's justice; only because of God's unfathomable mercy was he able to stand in the divine Presence. Because of this deep self-knowledge, and out of it, Paul taught the Church that the only righteousness any human being can claim is that which is imputed to us by the shed blood of Christ. It is for this reason that he stresses that we are the righteousness of God *in him* (ie Christ). Union with Christ is the secret; take that away and any claim to righteousness disappears.

This union may be preceded by spiritual torment, as it was in the case of Martin Luther, but this cannot be made into any sort of norm. Saul of Tarsus was as far away from God as he could be when Jesus met him on the road to Damascus, and to all appearances he was fully convinced of the rightness of his mission to persecute the Church. There is no reason to suppose that before that happened, he had anything other than a 'robust conscience', to use Krister Stendahl's famous expression.<sup>26</sup> The assimilation of Saul's Damascus Road conversion to Luther's 'Tower experience', though it has been common among Lutherans, is illegitimate in psychological terms, however much it may be true to say that both men experienced the regenerating power of God in their lives. It is only fair to add that Luther never identified himself with Paul in this way; the two men made the same spiritual journey in quite different circumstances and surroundings. We may therefore conclude that there is no reason to suppose that Luther misunderstood Paul on these grounds.

25 M A Seifrid *Justification by Faith: The Origin and Development of a Central Pauline Theme* (Leiden: Brill 1992) p 231

26 'The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West' *Harvard Theological Review* 56 1963 pp 199–215

Far more important than this, of course, is the question of the interpretation which the Reformers gave to the concept 'righteousness of God' in Paul's writings. Are there valid reasons for concluding that they got the Apostle's message seriously wrong? Let us begin by looking at the classic Reformation text, Rom 1:17. Paul wrote: 'The righteousness of God is revealed in him from faith to faith, as it is written, The righteous shall live by faith'. Luther believed that this meant that there is a righteousness of God, as opposed to the righteousness of men, which is given to us by faith as revealed in the Gospel. He wrote:

Only in the Gospel is the righteousness of God revealed (that is, who is and becomes righteous before God and how this takes place) by faith alone, by which the Word of God is believed . . . For the righteousness of God is the cause of salvation. And here again, by the righteousness of God we must not understand the righteousness by which he is righteous in himself but the righteousness by which we are made righteous by God. This happens through faith in the Gospel.<sup>27</sup>

Luther makes it clear that he understands Paul's use of *δικαιοσύνη Θεοῦ* in Rom 1:17 in terms of divine action on our behalf, though he does not ignore the fact that the term can also refer to a quality of God's own being. However, he does not regard righteousness as God's gift to redeemed sinners in the sense that it has now become our possession. In ontological terms, the righteousness of God is, and always remains, his and his alone. It becomes 'ours' by faith in the Gospel, or to put it a different way, by union with Christ in his suffering and death. We benefit from Christ's saving work because we have been united with him – that is what it means to be 'righteous'. In modern terms, we would say that it is because Christ has established us in the *right relationship* with God that we can be considered 'righteous', and claim the benefits of his passion. The relational dimension of the biblical concept of the 'righteousness of God' is widely recognised today, but its origin in Luther's theology is not, perhaps because of a certain modern tendency to downplay the objective nature of God's righteousness, which is primarily an attribute of his character.<sup>28</sup>

Calvin held a view similar to that of Luther, though he was somewhat more precise in the way he expressed it. He preferred to interpret the

27 *Commentary on Romans 1:17 Works* (American Edition) Vol 25 (St Louis: Concordia 1972) p 151

28 J D G Dunn, 'The Justice of God: A Renewed Perspective on Justification by Faith' *Journal of Theological Studies* NS 43 1992 p 16, recognises the relational quality of God's righteousness, but traces its rediscovery to H Cremer *Die paulinische Rechtfertigungslehre im Zusammenhange ihrer geschichtlichen Voraussetzungen* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann 1900).

‘righteousness of God’ as primarily eschatological – this is the reality of the Kingdom of Heaven which will one day be revealed in the second coming of Christ. He accepted that it was possible to interpret the expression as meaning ‘what is given to us by God’, but he understood by this exactly the same thing as Luther. We can only be righteous by imputation – in other words, it is our relationship with Christ, established by faith in the Gospel, which permits us to claim a share in God’s righteousness.<sup>29</sup>

The basis for this relationship is *faith*, a point made equally by both Luther and Calvin. They have often been criticised, especially by Roman Catholic commentators, for turning ‘faith’ into a work, an act of belief, and it must be admitted that neither Reformer spelt out his position adequately when commenting on Rom 1:17. However, in his *Institutes*, Calvin made it perfectly clear that ‘faith’ refers primarily to a relationship with God in Christ which is implanted in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. As he said:

. . . faith is the principal work of the Holy Spirit. Consequently, the terms commonly employed to express his power and working are, in large measure, referred to it because by faith alone he leads us into the light of the Gospel, as John teaches: to believers in Christ is given the privilege of becoming children of God, who are born not of flesh and blood, but of God (John 1:12-13).<sup>30</sup>

This is of great importance for understanding the last part of the verse: ‘The righteous shall live by faith’. Calvin was well aware (as Luther may not have been) that Paul was quoting Hab 2:4 somewhat out of context, though he argued that the underlying principle was the same and that the Apostle was therefore not distorting Habakkuk’s fundamental position.<sup>31</sup> For both Paul and Habakkuk, the basic fact was that our relationship with God depends entirely on faith in his promises. This faith is God-given and is the only basis of our righteousness in his sight. Its content is determined by Scripture, which contains and explains the meaning of these promises. As Calvin put it when commenting on Rom 5:22:

It becomes more clear now why and how his faith brought righteousness to Abraham: it was because he depended on the Word of God, and did not reject the grace which God had promised. This relation between faith and the Word is to be carefully maintained and committed to memory, for faith can bring us no more than it has received from the Word. The man, therefore, who comes to the

29 *Commentary on Romans* 1:17 (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd 1960) p 28

30 *Institutes* 3,1,4 Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press 1960)

31 Much the same point has recently been made by N T Wright *The Climax of the Covenant* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark 1991) pp 148–9.

decision that God is true, having in his mind only a general and confused knowledge of God, will not immediately be righteous, unless he rests secure on the promise of his grace.<sup>32</sup>

The Reformers were aware of linguistic nuances and accepted the possibility that words do not always mean the same thing, but in this case there is no doubt that they regarded 'righteousness' and 'the righteousness of God' as having a single basic meaning which is found throughout the Bible. In their eyes, true 'righteousness' belongs exclusively to God. It is imputed to us by faith in Christ, who establishes a saving relationship with us by the power of his Holy Spirit. It can only be called a human possession within the context of this relationship, in which we as believers are so closely united with Christ that we share in *his* righteousness.

To what extent is this interpretation faithful to the intentions of the Apostle Paul? Here it may be instructive to quote Karl Kertelge, who criticises what he understands to be the traditional Protestant position as follows:

God's action is not exhausted in simply an external decree (a purely forensic declaration), but signifies the effective creation of a new reality through God. This new reality of the justified one, created by God, is not to be understood in terms of a static ontology, but rather as a 'relational reality' . . . ie a reality which consists of nothing except that new relationship between God and man created by God, the content of which is, from the side of God, Lordship, and from the side of man, obedience.<sup>33</sup>

But this is precisely what Calvin, and (less obviously) Luther believed! There is therefore little reason to accept that the new departure initiated by Käsemann, which Kertelge follows, has anything substantially new to say about the righteousness of God. Käsemann may have been correcting an imbalance which he perceived in Bultmann, but he was not overturning the traditional Protestant position which Kertelge inadvertently repeats! We must therefore conclude that the challenge made to the Reformers' theology from this particular angle is more apparent than real, and that if Käsemann-inspired exegesis has overturned certain aspects of 'traditional' Protestantism, the result has been to reaffirm the main points of what the Reformers taught, not to discredit them.<sup>34</sup>

32 *Commentary on Romans 5:22* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd 1960) p 100

33 From *Rechtfertigung bei Paulus* (Münster 1967) as quoted in P T O'Brien 'Justification in Paul and Some Crucial Issues of the Last Two Decades' *Right with God: Justification in the Bible and the World* D A Carson ed (Grand Rapids: Baker and Carlisle: Paternoster 1992) p 78.

34 In fairness to Käsemann, that was his own intention. See E Käsemann *Perspectives on Paul* (London: SCM 1971) pp 60–78.

### **Christ, the Law and the Covenant**

More controversial even than Paul's understanding of God's righteousness, is the question of the nature of contemporary Judaism and Paul's links with it. Käsemann raised this issue when he pointed to Jewish apocalyptic as the main source of Paul's terminology, but other scholars have taken matters much farther. Krister Stendahl may be said to have opened a new line of debate by taking issue with Käsemann's neglect of salvation-history,<sup>35</sup> and more recently E P Sanders has issued a challenge to the scholarly world by suggesting that our understanding of first-century Judaism and Paul's relationship to it needs to be fundamentally rethought.<sup>36</sup> Have Protestant theologians traditionally misrepresented first-century Judaism in a way which invalidates their understanding of Paul? To what extent did Paul share the assumptions of his fellow Jews? Did his conversion to Christianity result in a radical break with his Jewish past, or was the change more subtle than that?

These questions lead naturally to the rabbinic understanding of righteousness, which many scholars are now claiming was quite different from what most Christians have thought. Furthermore, it is usually assumed that if the Jewish view (as understood by Sanders) turns out to be the one accepted by Jesus and/or Paul, this will lead to a considerable modification of classical Protestant teaching on the relationship between Judaism and Christianity.<sup>37</sup> For a start, the picture of Jews labouring under legal demands which they could not meet will disappear entirely. The notion that they were trying to earn their salvation by pious works will also have to be discarded. And finally, the concept of justification as a spiritual experience of the individual will give way to a doctrine of corporate redemption, bound up with the nature of the Covenant which God made with Abraham and his descendants.<sup>38</sup> Are changes such as

35 'The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West' *Harvard Theological Review* 56 1963

36 *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress 1977); *Paul, the Law and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Fortress 1983)

37 It is probably true to say that, at the present time, Sanders has convinced most scholars that Judaism has been unfairly treated in recent Protestant scholarship. However, there have been a number of studies which have taken issue with him on this point, notably R H Gundry 'Grace, Works and Staying Saved in Paul' *Biblica* 66 1985 pp 1-38. See also D Moo 'Law', 'Works of the Law' and 'Legalism in Paul' *Westminster Theological Journal* 45 1983 pp 73-100. In a major study of Sanders' position, H Weder has admitted that Sanders is right about Judaism, but doubts whether this makes any real difference to the debate about Paul's understanding of righteousness, H Weder 'Gesetz und Sünde: Gedanken zu einem qualitativen Sprung im Denken des Paulus' *New Testament Studies* 31 1985 pp 357-76. The most recent treatment of this complex subject is N T Wright *The Climax of the Covenant* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark 1991). Wright accepts Sanders' basic premise, that Paul must be understood in the context of contemporary Judaism, but he is critical of many of Sanders' positions.

38 All of these points are developed at some length by J D G Dunn 'The Justice of God: A Renewed Perspective on Justification by Faith' *Journal of Theological Studies* NS 43 1992 pp 8-15.

these required by the evidence, or is there still something to be said for the classical Protestant understanding of these matters?

Krister Stendahl may be said to have opened the current debate by his criticism of Käsemann, who according to him, completely ignored the question of 'salvation history', and therefore divorced Pauline 'righteousness' from its Biblical context. Käsemann responded to Stendahl by criticising a view of 'salvation history' which turned it into an almost metaphysical concept which stands in judgment over Scripture. He accepted that Paul did work within a framework which could be defined as 'salvation history', but insisted that this term be interpreted in a much looser sense than the one offered by Stendahl.<sup>39</sup> However, it has to be said that it is Stendahl who has had the greater impact on recent scholars, of whom S K Williams is one of the more significant. Williams has argued that 'the righteousness of God' means 'God's faithfulness to his covenant promises to Abraham', a faithfulness by which both Jews and Gentiles will ultimately be saved.<sup>40</sup> This interpretation leads Williams to accept Käsemann's distinction between *δικαιοσύνη* in general and *δικαιοσύνη Θεοῦ* in particular. According to him, it is the former term, not the latter, which picks up the Reformers' idea of a gift of righteousness which we receive by faith.<sup>41</sup>

When set against Käsemann's approach, Williams' interpretation of *δικαιοσύνη Θεοῦ* has the distinct advantage of restricting God's saving activity to the bounds of the Covenant and not extending it, as Käsemann did, to include the whole of Creation. However, it also has the distinct disadvantage of positing a fundamental distinction between *δικαιοσύνη* and *δικαιοσύνη Θεοῦ*, which is highly questionable when we consider Paul's use of the terms. Williams has demonstrated that when Paul uses *δικαιοσύνη Θεοῦ*, it can plausibly be interpreted as referring to God's Covenant faithfulness, but he has not proved that the expression is a technical term which must be distinguished from other uses of *δικαιοσύνη* and interpreted in this particular way.

A quick look at Rom 3:21-4:25 will show that Williams' attempted distinction between *δικαιοσύνη* and *δικαιοσύνη Θεοῦ* cannot work in practice. In the space of these 35 verses, Paul uses *δικαιοσύνη* twelve times, and related words a further eight times, making a total of twenty. If

39 E Käsemann *Perspectives on Paul* (London: SCM 1971) pp 60–78. For Stendahl's reply, see K Stendahl *Paul among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress 1976) pp 129–33.

40 'The "Righteousness of God" in Romans' *Journal of Biblical Literature* 99 1980 pp 241–90

41 Williams appears to have misunderstood the Reformers on this point. At least he does not make it clear that they understood the word 'gift' in the sense of something *imputed*, not of something *imparted*.

Williams' theory is correct, the first four uses of *δικαιοσύνη* (all in Romans 3) must refer to God's Covenant faithfulness, whereas the last eight (all in Romans 4) do not. Of the related *δικ-* words, it would seem that four<sup>42</sup> apply to God's Covenant faithfulness and four<sup>43</sup> to man's state before God, though the division is less neat. Three of the first four are in Romans 3, but so are two of the second four, which means that on Williams' theory, Paul switched from one meaning to the other and back again in the course of a single paragraph. This is possible of course, but it is also unlikely, particularly when we realize that in order to accommodate his theory, Williams is forced to argue that the passive voice of *δικαιώω* has a fundamentally different meaning from the active. That this is improbable becomes clear when we observe that both voices are used in connection with 'faith'. Consider the following:

Rom 3:26 – *δικαιοῦντα τὸν ἐκ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ* (God's Covenant faithfulness)

Rom 3:28 – *δικαιοῦσθαι πίστει ἄνθρωπον* (man's standing before God)

Can these two verses really be referring to different kinds of righteousness? In the former, God justifies man on the basis of faith in Christ, in the latter, man is justified by faith. What is the difference, apart from the fact that 3:28 puts it the other way round from 3:26? There is none, and Williams' distinction between the active and passive voices of *δικαιώω* turns out to be artificial and unsustainable from the context.

When we turn from the verb to the noun *δικαιοσύνη*, we find that the same pattern repeats itself. In Rom 3:21 'the righteousness of God' is declared to be available to all who believe in Jesus Christ, a theme which recurs in Rom 4:11,13 where *δικαιοσύνη* is used without *Θεοῦ*. Williams would distinguish two different uses of *δικαιοσύνη* here, but it is hard to see how the meaning differs. The only verse which can be said to support his contention that *δικαιοσύνη Θεοῦ* means 'God's Covenant faithfulness' is Rom 3:26: 'To declare his righteousness at this time, that he might be righteous . . .'. However even here it is more likely that 'his righteousness' refers to his justifying work, which is mentioned in the latter part of the verse: ' . . . and the justifier of the one who believes in Jesus'. The only part of the verse which refers back to God is the phrase: ' . . . that he might be righteous (*δίκαιον*) . . .'. No doubt this was intended to be a reference to God's character, but it is doubtful whether Paul meant that God had to keep his Covenant promises in order to establish, confirm

42 *δίκαιον* (Rom 3:26); *δικαιοῦντα* (Rom 3:26); *δικαιώσει* (Rom 3:30) and *δικαιοῦντα* (Rom 4:5).

43 *δικαιούμενοι* (Rom 3:24); *δικαιοῦσθαι* (Rom 3:28); *ἐδικαιώθη* (Rom 4:2); *δικαίωσιν* (Rom 4:25).

or maintain his righteousness. God's righteousness would not have been diminished if he had decided to annul the Covenant – that would have been a just and proper decision in the light of man's sinful disobedience.<sup>44</sup>

God's righteousness does not depend on his actions – it is the other way round, as the order of the sentence indicates. What Paul means is that God's inherent and unchanging righteousness is manifested by the way in which he justifies sinners. In the Greek text, *δίκαιον* must be taken together with *δικαιοῦντα* as a single expression of God's righteous act, and not separated from it as if it were a distinct phrase with its own independent meaning. Here perhaps more than anywhere, the relational character of 'righteousness' must be borne in mind. By acting to produce in us the right relationship with him, God is showing us clearly just what his righteousness means.

The only real conclusion from all of this is that Williams' distinction is not viable, and that all forms of *δικαιοσύνη* and *δικαιόω* in this passage are referring to essentially the same thing. The great danger of Williams' approach is that it could easily make God subject to his promises instead of Lord over them. Romans 4 indicates that many Jews tended to think in this way; as children of the Covenant and heirs of the promises, they believed they were somehow safe from God's wrath – an illusion which Paul is quick to condemn. Later on in the epistle he warns Christians not to fall into the same trap (Rom 11:17-21). There are no circumstances in which human beings have a right to call God unrighteous because he has apparently failed to keep his promises to them!

The basic thesis of Stendahl and Williams has recently been developed by N T Wright, who regards it as axiomatic that *δικαιοσύνη* must be interpreted in terms of membership in the Covenant community.<sup>45</sup> This view has been defended by J Ziesler<sup>46</sup> but it is far from having attained universal acceptance. T Schreiner, for example, states categorically:

The word *δικαιοσύνη* . . . does not refer to maintenance of Covenant status. The obtaining of righteousness by the Gentiles in Rom 9:30 involves *entrance* into the Covenant, since the Gentiles were previously outside the circle of God's people. The close relationship between the calling of the Gentiles (Rom 9:24-26) and their obtaining of righteousness (Rom 9:30) provides further evidence that righteousness here refers to entrance into the people of God.<sup>47</sup>

44 Paul did not hesitate to suggest something close to this when he spoke of the Jews who had been rejected (Rom 11:20).

45 N T Wright *The Climax of the Covenant* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark 1991) p 10

46 *Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Philadelphia: TPI 1989) pp 251–2

47 T Schreiner 'Israel's Failure to Attain Righteousness in Romans 9:30-10:3' *Trinity Journal* NS 12 1991 pp 209–20. The quote is from n 5 p 211. See also T R Schreiner *The Law and its Fulfilment: A Pauline Theology of Law* (Grand Rapids: Baker 1993).

Status *versus* entrance – that more or less sums up the difference of opinion between the two major schools of thought at the present time. The Reformers, of course, belong on the ‘entrance’ side of this debate, with the result that those who favour the ‘status’ position are compelled to distance themselves from classical Protestantism at this point. Before we can attempt to resolve this issue, it is necessary to outline Wright’s overall theological framework in so far as this can be done in a short space. Wright’s most basic concept is that of the Covenant community which goes back in time to Abraham, and which in Paul’s day was represented by the Jewish people. As Wright interprets Paul’s understanding of this, the community was shaped and held together by the Law (Torah), which defined the character of the People of God (Israel). When the Torah was given, Israel collectively ‘recapitulated’ the sin of Adam,<sup>48</sup> with whom the Covenant community was subsequently identified.<sup>49</sup>

But instead of providing the gateway towards Israel’s liberation, the Torah became a curse, because God used it to pile up the sins of the whole world in Israel.<sup>50</sup> This was because the Torah was meant to be replaced by Christ, who bore the sins of the world in his own body, and by his death and resurrection re-established the Torah on a new basis. For Wright, the resurrection becomes the ultimate sign of justification, the proof that the new life of righteousness in Christ has become a reality.<sup>51</sup> Like the resurrection, justification is both ‘now’ and ‘not yet’ – ‘now’ in the sense that Christ has already risen from the dead, and we have been incorporated into him by faith; ‘not yet’ in the sense that our resurrection has not yet taken place.

In the course of salvation history, says Wright, the Covenant community has been defined by external boundary markers. In the Old Testament these markers were governed by the Torah, whereas in the New Testament they are governed by faith in Christ. These two things are not contradictory but complementary. Even in the Old Testament it was not by performance of the Covenant rituals that membership in the community was secured, but by faith. Similarly, faith in Christ does not abolish the Torah, but puts it in its proper perspective. Wright claims that Hab 2:4 reveals the faith-relationship which undergirded the Old Testament Covenant, which explains why Paul felt free to borrow that text to make

48 N T Wright *The Climax of the Covenant* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark 1991) p 187

49 In support of this view, Wright cites a number of inter-testamental Jewish sources, which apparently portrayed Israel as Adam and the Gentiles as animals, etc. See pp 23–5. Of course, even if it can be shown that this view of Jewish apocalyptic is correct, that does not prove that Paul was deeply influenced by it. As our earlier discussion of *δικαιοσύνη Θεοῦ* showed, the links between Paul and apocalyptic Judaism have probably been overdone in recent research.

50 Wright p 152

51 Wright p 203

his own very similar point in Rom 1:17.<sup>52</sup> As Wright sees the matter, both Paul and Habakkuk interpreted faith and righteousness primarily in eschatological terms. Their sights were firmly fixed on the community of the redeemed which will gather round the Throne of Grace after the Last Judgment, and present circumstances must be read in that light.

Wright takes the Covenant theme to the point of saying that Paul's use of the δικ- family of words always has a covenantal reference point:

Though it is unfashionable to use covenantal categories in interpreting Paul, I believe... that they are actually central; and moreover, *they are habitually expressed in forensic language*, ie using the root δικ-. . . Δικαιοσύνη, I suggest, can often be translated, more or less, as 'covenant membership' (when referring to the δικαιοσύνη of humans, of course); and δικαίωμα can perfectly properly bear the meaning 'the covenant decree', ie the decree according to which one who does these things shall live . . .<sup>53</sup>

And further:

The Torah is the covenant boundary-marker, and, when its δικαίωμα is fulfilled through the work of the Spirit in the new covenant, it retains exactly the same function, of demarcating the people of God. δικαιοσύνη is, more or less, 'covenant membership', the status within the people of God of which 'righteousness' (in any of its senses from the Reformation to the present day) is merely one aspect.<sup>54</sup>

Wright's view of δικαίωμα is especially controversial, and needs to be stated with great care. He sees it as a positive concept, which expresses the content of the life of righteousness, whether in the Torah or in Christ. It is therefore not more or less synonymous with κατάκριμα (condemnation), but the exact opposite of it!<sup>55</sup> For this reason, Wright can sum up his understanding of justification as follows:

Paul is thus offering a doctrine of God, and of the people of God, which is built firmly on Christ and the Spirit, and in which the people of God are known, not by race or moral behaviour, but by Spirit-inspired faith in the God revealed in Jesus. Here is the doctrine of justification as it appears in Romans 9-11: Christian faith alone is the index of membership (10:4ff; 11:23).<sup>56</sup>

52 N T Wright *The Climax of the Covenant* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark 1991) pp 148-51

53 Wright p 203

54 Wright p 214

55 Wright p 210

56 Wright p 255

This is a neat solution to the question of the meaning of righteousness, but does it really stand up? In the light of what has been said above, there would appear to be a number of difficulties with it which Wright has not tackled. The first difficulty is that his theory applies only to *human* righteousness. This is fine if we accept that there is a significant difference between ‘righteousness’ as used of human beings and ‘righteousness’ as used of God, but as we have already seen, this is highly doubtful. There is no such thing as *human* righteousness in the true sense – only the ‘righteousness of men’ (which is false) or the righteousness of God which is imputed to believers. But if we take away this divine-human distinction, we are left with the same problem which confronts S K Williams’ theory, viz that God’s righteousness somehow becomes subject to a Covenant norm and therefore open to judgment by it. As we have already said, it cannot be that God should be held to account by mere human beings for an apparent failure to fulfil a Covenant promise!

The second difficulty is that Wright’s definitions of *δικαιοσύνη* and *δικαίωμα* are idiosyncratic. They may mean what he wants them to mean, but this is far from obvious, and other meanings fit the context just as well, or even better. This is particularly true of *δικαίωμα*, which Paul uses outside the Covenant context altogether in Rom 1:32. Even Wright appears to accept this, when he says:

Christ did not begin where Adam began. He had to begin where Adam ended, that is, by taking on to himself not merely a clean slate, not merely even the single sin of Adam, but the whole entail of that sin, working its way out in the ‘many sins’ of Adam’s descendants, and arriving at the judgment spoken of in 1:32 . . .<sup>57</sup>

But later he claims that the same text refers to the ‘just decree’ of God, which gives life in accordance with the Covenant.<sup>58</sup> What Wright does not explain is how Paul could say that ungodly Gentiles, who had no knowledge of the Torah, knew what its provisions were. The point of the passage, after all, is to show that even people outside the Covenant know the true law of God, which stands in judgment over them. But if this *δικαίωμα* was an integral part of the Torah, as Wright appears to maintain, it is hard to see how the Gentiles could have known about it. Especially in Rom 1:32, it is very difficult to see how *δικαίωμα* can mean anything other than ‘judgment’, making it virtually synonymous with *κατάκριμα* (condemnation), not its opposite. Wright is on surer ground when he applies his ‘positive’ understanding of *δικαίωμα* to Rom 2:26, though it is not clear that *τὰ δικάιώματα τοῦ νόμου* need mean anything more than ‘the commandments of the Law’ in a somewhat neutral sense.

57 N T Wright *The Climax of the Covenant* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark 1991) p 37

58 Wright p 211. Cf also p 203.

Wright's other example, Rom 8:4, betrays a certain ambiguity, which might at first sight support his case, but a closer examination of the text makes this somewhat doubtful. A lot depends on whether we take the phrase *ἵνα τὸ δικαίωμα τοῦ νόμου πληρωθῇ ἐν ἡμῖν* with what precedes it (*κατέκρινε τὴν ἁμαρτίαν ἐν τῇ σαρκί*) or with what follows it (*τοῖς μὴ κατὰ σάρκα περιπατοῦσιν ἀλλὰ κατὰ πνεῦμα*). Given that what follows is an adjectival clause defining *ἡμῖν*, it is preferable to take the *ἵνα* clause with what precedes it. If we do that, the relationship between *δικαίωμα* and *κατάκριμα* is reinforced. It is still possible to translate *δικαίωμα* as the 'just decree', and even to apply it, as Wright does, in a positive sense, referring to the life which God wants his covenant people to lead.<sup>59</sup> However, any suggestion that this can be achieved through the Torah is rigorously excluded by Paul's logic. Christ's substitutionary death is the only way in which the *δικαίωμα τοῦ νόμου* can be fulfilled. Furthermore, the adjectival clause makes it clear that this *δικαίωμα* is applied to us *κατὰ πνεῦμα* (ie by imputation), not *κατὰ σάρκα* (by impartation), so that the redeemed have no claim to God's righteousness apart from the relationship with Christ given to us by the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit. Wright's 'positive' definition of *δικαίωμα* is therefore probably right in this instance, but the Covenant framework into which he integrates it is more questionable.

The third difficulty is that Wright tends to give the Torah too great a role in his understanding of the Covenant. For example, when he talks about 'boundary markers' it is very easy to see how this applies to the Torah, which had many criteria by which insiders could be distinguished from outsiders. But when the 'boundary marker' idea is extended to faith in Christ difficulties arise. For a start, Paul's emphasis (eg in Gal 3:28) is on the breaking down of barriers, on including the outsiders in God's plan of salvation. This does not mean that there are no limits at all to the New Covenant, but the way in which these are perceived is different. 'Boundary markers' are by definition peripheral, and Paul may plausibly be said to have taken that view with regard to 'works of the Law' like circumcision. But faith in Christ lies at the heart of the Covenant, and to call it a 'boundary marker' makes something fundamental appear to be merely peripheral. That is not Wright's intention, of course, but it is the impression created by the use of terms like 'boundary marker', 'badge' and so on.

Without realizing it, Wright makes the Covenant community sound like the Boy Scouts, in which 'righteousness' is the sign of membership. It is

59 See C E B Cranfield *Romans* Vol 1 (Edinburgh: T and T Clark 1975) pp 383-4. Cranfield states: 'By *δικαίωμα* is meant here not "righteousness", "act of righteousness" as in 5:18, nor "justification" as in 5:16 (this word is only chosen there because Paul has just used other words ending in *-μα*), but "requirement", "righteous requirement", as in 2:26'.

almost as if Wright pictures the Gospel as a message of 'join our community, and you too will become righteous', which is not quite what Paul wanted to convey. This impression is unfortunately heightened when Wright defines 'faith' as 'belief', and comes up with the odd-sounding phrase 'justification by *belief*, ie covenant membership demarcated by that which is believed'.<sup>60</sup> In other words, it is correct theology which justifies, not the saving act of God by which we are put in the right relationship with him. It seems that the cart has been put before the horse – righteousness is something given to those already inside the Covenant community, rather than the condition which must be met before the community can be said to exist.

The fourth difficulty is that Wright is prone to make abstractions out of concrete realities. He identifies both Adam and Christ with Israel in a way which confuses the biblical distinction between the individual and the collective. Probably the root reason for this is the much-canvassed idea of 'corporate personality', by which Jesus Christ becomes more than just a historical individual. Somehow (it is never clear exactly how) his personality is held to extend outwards to include the members of the Covenant community, who are described as being 'in Christ'.<sup>61</sup> Wright takes this to the point where he is able to say: 'Because Jesus is the Messiah, he sums up his people in himself, so that what is true of him is true of them'.<sup>62</sup> This sounds good, but what does it mean? Is the Christian community collectively the spotless Lamb of God, which takes away the sins of the world? Such a view might be held by some Roman Catholic theologians, prone as they are to think of the Church as the extension of the incarnation, but does it not obscure the fact that if Jesus represents us to God, he also represents God to us? We can never be *totally* identified with him! The true connection between us and Christ (or Adam, for that matter) is not one of incorporation, but of *inheritance*. There is a relational quality about it which is obscured by trying to use 'incorporation' language to describe it.

It seems that Wright tends to express Paul's thoughts by using models which do not quite fit the Apostle's mentality, and which therefore subtly distort what he is trying to say. This is especially important when we look at the question of justification, because if we believe that it is a collective experience rather than primarily an individual one, our whole way of looking at Paul's theology will change. This is what Wright is arguing for, not least because he believes (correctly) that Paul's Jewish background has been neglected in the past. But by failing to give due weight to the importance of the individual, even to the point of identifying Paul's 'I' in

60 C E B Cranfield *Romans* Vol 1 (Edinburgh: T and T Clark 1975) p 2

61 Cranfield pp 165–6

62 N T Wright *The Climax of the Covenant* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark 1991) p 48

Romans 7 with Israel,<sup>63</sup> Wright has distorted the Apostle's meaning and produced a scheme which is too abstract. It must be hoped that as he develops his Covenant theology farther, so he will find room for a balanced presentation of the individual's participation in God's saving work.

The last major difficulty with Wright's theory brings us back to the point at which we started – it makes justification a state (or status) signifying membership in the Covenant, and not an event preceding or marking entry into it. The position has been put very clearly by W Dumbrell, in an article which picks up the themes developed by Wright. Dumbrell says:

Given Abraham's case, justification is not the means whereby it becomes possible to declare someone in the right; it is the declaration itself that Abraham was in the right. If we may transpose this analogy of the recognition of Covenant status, justification for Paul becomes not the means whereby someone is initiated into Christ but the declaration that someone is now a Christian and in the faith . . . It is not the means by which someone has come to the faith but simply the recognition that someone is in the faith.<sup>64</sup>

Here we see that the basic problem is closely connected with what is understood by 'faith'. Dumbrell, following Wright, takes it in an objective sense, as the content of the belief which undergirds the Covenant. But as Paul presents the matter in Romans, and especially in his discussion of Abraham (Romans 4), faith is really trust in the promises of God, even when these are not fully known or understood. From the Christian point of view, Abraham's faith could almost be described as 'contentless', since he had no knowledge of either the Person or the Work of Christ. But this in no way affected his relationship to God, which was based on something else altogether. Abraham was justified because God had met with him and given him the assurance which he needed to put his trust in him. Only after that was the Covenant established, as the sign and witness to the world that Abraham was righteous in the sight of God. Δικαιοσύνη is therefore an integral part of the Covenant, but it is not contained by it. Rather it is the other way round! It is because of δικαιοσύνη, belonging as of right to

63 C E B Cranfield *Romans* Vol 1 (Edinburgh: T and T Clark 1975) p 197: 'There was nothing wrong with wanting to keep Torah; it was merely impossible to do it, because Israel too (who I take as the principal referent of the ἐγώ, as in Galatians 2:19–20; Paul's theological, not psychological, autobiography is included in this picture as a result, but Paul is not seeking to draw attention to his own "experience") is in Adam, is σάρκινος. The vindication of the ἐγώ, closely bound up here with the vindication of Torah itself, thus stands very close to the vindication of Israel in 3:1ff'.

64 W Dumbrell 'Justification in Paul – A Covenantal Perspective' *Reformed Theological Review* 51 1992 pp 91–101. The quotation is from p 93.

## Justification: The Reformers and Recent New Testament Scholarship

God and imputed to man by faith, that the Covenant has come into being and taken the shape it has.

### **Conclusion: Were the Reformers Mistaken?**

We may now bring the above remarks to some kind of conclusion, by summarizing what the Reformers' position on the above issues was, and comparing it with modern theories which have been proposed as substitutes for their approach. The Reformers' position can be stated as follows:

1 God justifies his elect (sinners) by sending his Son to die for them.

2 God then sends his Holy Spirit into the hearts of his elect (still sinners) to move them to accept his justifying work on their behalf.

3 God unites his elect (still sinners!) to himself and to each other in Christ, from which time they enjoy the benefits of a Covenantal relationship in and with the Holy Trinity.

Wright and Dumbrell, on the other hand, advocate something more like this:

1 God establishes his Covenant community in Christ, and incorporates his elect into it by giving them the faith to believe in him. By means of this incorporation, the elect pass from the world of sin into the world of righteousness in which they are no longer accounted as 'sinners', even though they may still sin.

2 Once inside the Covenant community the elect enjoy the benefits of membership in the group, one of which is that they are now 'righteous' in God's eyes.

The first point to notice is that, in spite of what most modern New Testament scholars seem to think, the Reformers did not believe that justification is the process by which a person becomes a Christian. That is regeneration, which occurs *after* justification.<sup>65</sup> On the other hand, the

65 The idea that justification precedes regeneration was not new to the Reformers, and was held by a number of mediaeval theologians, some of whom would probably have accepted the views of Sanders and Wright more readily than those of Luther or Calvin. A good example is Gabriel Biel (c 1410-1495), who wrote (III *Sent* d 25 q 1 art 1 n 1A): *Tria enim haec concurrunt in iustificatione: impii scilicet infusio gratiae et caritatis per quam peccatori peccata remittuntur. Ipseque gratificatur Deo et per hoc iustificatur et ecclesiae incorporatur ut membrum vivens. Non tantum numero sed et merito. Neque extra ecclesiam potest fieri remissio peccatorum. Hanc autem iustificationem per infusam caritatem sequitur communio sanctorum qua peccator iustificatus participat omnia bona sanctorum omnium.*

## Churchman

Reformers could not have accepted the idea that justification is a definition of Covenant membership or status, because it is a work of God which reveals his character, not that of the elect. In principle, said the Reformers, we are justified by Christ's saving work on the Cross. He is our righteousness, and his work is the only plea we have to offer at the judgment seat of God. It is as and when the Spirit moves in our hearts that this objective fact becomes real to us as individuals, and only when that has happened does it make sense to speak of the Covenant promises being applied to us.

In contrast to this, the modern Covenantal theory posits a ready-made Covenantal framework, whose structure is closer to that of the Old Testament Torah than is warranted by the New Testament evidence. Justification is no longer a work of God but a status of man, awarded to the elect members of the Covenant community. Faith is reduced to belief, and sin becomes no more than separation or alienation from God, a condition which we have inherited 'in Adam' but for which we are not really responsible, at least not in the sense of having to feel guilty about it. The Torah provided a way out of this separation, but in the end it proved to be inadequate, because human effort was insufficient to fulfil its many demands. Christ however solved this problem, and now we can live happily in a state in which the norms of the Torah can be met. The barriers which have been overcome are rooted in finitude and ignorance, not in disobedience to the commands of God.

Theologically speaking, this view is a form of Pelagianism, mixed in a very curious way with hyper-Calvinism. What we have is something that could be called 'Old Testament Christianity', a faith in Christ which is closely tied to the norms of the Old Covenant law. It is Pelagian, not because it emphasizes a kind of salvation by works (it is careful to avoid any suggestion of that!), but because it fails to come to terms with the totality of our depravity, and the desperate state in which we find ourselves as sinners. In Wright's vision of the Torah there is frustration at Israel's inability to keep its high standards, but not real despair. Sin, and the death which it produces, is seen as a clash between the perfection of the Torah and the Adamic character of Israel, whose inadequacies are painfully highlighted by the presence of a perfect standard in its midst. By a strange paradox, it is the appearance of the Torah which becomes the occasion for sin to rear its ugly head, because every attempt on Israel's part to do what is right merely results in a deeper sense of failure.

It must be emphasized however, that this is not the same thing as *guilt*; Israel is not really to blame for circumstances which are ultimately beyond its control. Only God can solve this dilemma, and he does so by sending Christ to fulfil the demands of the Torah and thereby remove its curse.

Membership in the company of the redeemed is thus presented more as a sabbath rest for the people of God than as a constant spiritual struggle of the kind outlined in Romans 7, which on Wright's analysis must refer to Israel in its pre-Christian condition and not to the Christian believer.<sup>66</sup>

But if we resist the tendency to interpret Romans 7 in a 'corporate' way, and insist that the struggle of the individual is primary, a different picture emerges. We are no longer victims of forces beyond our control, but active participants in a spiritual battle which we cannot win in our own strength. The more we understand the true meaning of the Torah the more we are driven to despair at our inability to fulfil it. The problem with the Jews was not that they failed to understand this, but that they tended to emasculate the Torah by trimming it down to dimensions where it no longer posed any threat. They therefore had a (false) confidence in a Torah whose true meaning they were unable to grasp.

Before his conversion, Saul of Tarsus had shared in this false confidence; hence the 'robust conscience' and lack of any sense of spiritual struggle. But once Christ entered his life, all that changed radically – for the first time he saw himself as he really was. In both theological (objective) and psychological (subjective) terms, he was convicted of sin, and in his despair was driven to seek salvation in Christ, who had already justified him by his righteousness. It was in and through a personal crisis that Saul came to understand the true nature of the Torah and of God's promises to his Covenant people. That crisis changed his whole outlook, liberating him from a structure in which he was a slave to the Torah and placing him in a position where he could relativize and control it. This is the true significance of a Covenant relationship grounded in faith and not based on works.

It is certainly true that first-century Judaism was not a religion of works, as it has often been described, but a theology of grace. Sanders, Dunn and others have performed a useful and important service in drawing our attention to the fact that Protestant Covenant theology is in many ways closer to Judaism than most people had imagined – not because Protestantism is a message of slavery to the Torah, but because Judaism was (and is) a message of salvation by divine grace. The real problem is that Jews have failed to appreciate what this means in terms of Christ. Caught up in the Torah, they could not see beyond it, to the Messiah of whom it spoke. They therefore tripped over the stone of stumbling and the rock of offence, as Paul pointed out (Rom 9:33). Ultimately, Christ is still (and will always be) the stumbling block between Jews and Christians,

66 For his analysis of Romans 7, see N T Wright *The Climax of the Covenant* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark 1991) pp 196–200 and 226–30.

## Churchman

because it is he who defines not only what righteousness is in terms of the Torah, but how we may be accounted righteous in God's sight, whether we keep the Torah or not. The relationship between these two is best understood, not in terms of Christ fulfilling the Torah, but in terms of the Torah preparing the way for Christ. That is the true teaching of Paul, and the authentic content of the faith which the Church has always preached when it has been true both to Scripture and to its own calling.

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