

N. T. Wright. *Justification: God's Plan & Paul's Vision*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009. 279 pages. \$25.

Reading this book feels like reading Wright's own "Letter to the Galatians." It exudes his passion for the gospel against his opponents who preach a different gospel. That is only a bit of an overstatement, because he is not dogmatically setting his view against any view that differs. Rather he is distressed that his opponents often do not seem to have really listened to what he is saying nor have they examined the cogency of his arguments. He indicates that he is perfectly open to correction and learning something new, but to convince him people must argue on sound exegetical principles and not on the basis of the fact Wright is disagreeing with the interpretation of the Reformers.

The occasion for the book is another book by John Piper, *The Future of Justification: A Response to N. T. Wright* (Crossway, 2007). The gist of Piper's response seems to be that Wright has abandoned the view of the Protestant reformers, substituting an imaginative sort of alternative in its place. Wright's argument is that, while the Reformers certainly made a breakthrough in our understanding of Paul, they took only a step along the way. Because of the issues and needs of their own particular era, they missed some very important dimensions of Paul's thought. Wright compares Piper to a person who insists that the sun revolves around the earth simply because that is what it looks like to the naked eye when that person gazes at the horizon and sees the sun "rise." There is a larger context than that of the human viewer standing on the earth. Or to change the analogy, there are more pieces to the puzzle of Paul's thought than we realized. Wright wants to include all the pieces of the puzzle, assembling the entire picture and not just part of it.

The argumentative rhetoric of the book is very helpful. It keeps the reader engaged, and it contributes to clearer understanding, since Wright is continually contrasting his view to that of a variety of others. Most of us who read this book have been deeply influenced by Reformation thinking or some popular version of it; or we have been reading Pauline scholars who have been discovering a "new perspective" as they have painstakingly pondered Paul's rather difficult epistles. We may hope that we all have internalized some critical dimensions of our faith from some interpretation of St. Paul, and that at least some of the perspectives Wright takes on have been our own, thus engaging us in the extended argument Wright has produced.

Wright describes the larger perspective within which we must understand Paul, and his view of "justification" especially, in the following words: "God had a single plan all along through which he intended to rescue the world and the human race, and . . . this single plan was centered on the call of Israel, a call which Paul saw coming to fruition in Israel's representative, the Messiah" (35). This is what makes his analogy of the person watching the sun "come up" especially telling. The focus of the Reformation, Wright points out, is the individual in relation to God, and particularly in respect to how God will judge that individual after death. The larger context is a narrative of salvation that includes not only the individual but "the world and the entire human race," and that further includes Israel as the center of God's focus and the Messiah as the one who brought Israel's role to fruition. This larger narrative makes it clear that we individuals are not the center of the universe. Standing where we do looking at the sun may lead us to think that we are at the center and that Paul's entire gospel is to be interpreted from our purported central perspective. But our individual salvation takes place in the context of a much larger perspective on God's part that includes both the world as a whole and Israel as well as the Messiah. The truncated perspective of the Reformation was the fruit of de-Judaizing Paul and

also of a loss of the Bible's repeated witness to God's promise to transform all of creation, not abandon it for some non-material "heaven."

Wright lays out his argument in two parts. In "Part I: Introduction," he deals with general questions of sound interpretation and themes that play a role in a variety of letters. In "Part II: Exegesis," he leads us on an exegetical journey through the most important texts, principally Galatians and Romans, with Philippians, Corinthians, and Ephesians providing supplementary passages.

This book will provide a lively introduction for anyone not already acquainted with the "new perspective" on Paul that has been developing for almost half a century from the insight that the church has for most of its history de-Judaized the New Testament and lost the larger perspective from which its authors spoke. For those already fascinated by this new perspective and involved in reading the contributions of Wright and other scholars like E. P. Sanders and James D. G. Dunn, this book will draw them more deeply into the struggle to bring a clearer picture out of the complexities of letters written not to us but to Christians living in a world so different from our own who brought to what Paul said a perspective very different from our own.

Adam Gilbert Bartholomew
Church of the Ascension
Mount Vernon, New York