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**A Theological Critique of the Contractual  
Model of Christian Soteriology**

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Introduction..... 1

A. Justification as a declaration of a favorable verdict of acquittal based on an imputed righteousness received by faith alone in Christ alone ..... 3

    1. Union with Christ ..... 5

    2. Faith and Works ..... 6

    3. Present and Future Justification ..... 6

B. Justification as a declaration of a favorable status as a member of God's covenant community (NPP) ..... 8

    1. Union with Christ ..... 11

    2. Faith and Works in Justification ..... 12

    3. Present and Future Justification ..... 12

C. The gratuitous and irrevocable character of salvation as a testing ground of the classical/contractual and NPP models of justification ..... 13

**Introduction**

Historically, classical Reformed theology has championed a rich and robust soteriology that has embraced among other principles, but centrally, justification as the righteousness of the crucified and risen

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Christ imputed to an individual by faith. The exposition of this doctrine, again historically, has appealed to the dual covenantal nature and structure of God's redemptive dealings with man, vis-à-vis a covenant of works and a covenant of grace. This "contractual" model of Christian soteriology has been at the heart of the Reformed expression of the Christian gospel that points up the believer's already/not yet experience of the glorious triumph and eschatological joy that are commensurate with faith in Jesus Christ.

Over the past few decades, however, the Reformed concept of justification has undergone considerable--perhaps even radical--modification at the hands of several well-known and respected biblical scholars-- the most prominent of which is the able New Testament scholar, N. T. Wright.<sup>2</sup> Under the rubric, "New Perspectives on Paul" (NPP), discussions around justification have shifted seismically from viewing justification as the favorable verdict of not guilty based on the imputed righteousness of Christ received by faith alone to the favorable verdict that one is in fact a member of God's covenant community. As others have pointed out, this newer justification paradigm is not a *soteriological* expression of God's saving action in Jesus Christ; rather it is an *ecclesiological* and *corporate* expression of God's saving action in Jesus Christ. In addition, accompanying this novel reading of the Pauline corpus is a reductionist tendency to see one covenant--that of grace--rather than two--one of works and the other of grace--as underlying and structuring God's dealings with man.<sup>3</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the inherent superiority of the classical or contractual model of the doctrine of justification over against the recent challenges presented by NPP studies. By critiquing these two justification models I will seek to demonstrate that the classical Reformed model is far superior in its biblical orientation in that it succeeds where the newer NPP model does not in

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<sup>2</sup> E. P. Sanders and James Dunn, along with Wright, are the most notable architects of this recent, critical rethinking of the doctrine of justification.

<sup>3</sup> Federal Vision (FV), though distinct in some ways from NPP, shares similar distortions of the doctrine of justification and the covenants. For a detailed assessment of FV see Guy S. Waters, *The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology: A Comparative Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2006).

holding forth and fast the gospel as good news of the gratuitous and irrevocable character of salvation.

I will begin with a brief summary of the doctrine of justification within the ambit of the classical Reformed tradition. This will be followed by a somewhat longer summary of the contours of the doctrine of justification as a product of new perspectives in Pauline thought. Finally, I will attempt to demonstrate that the classical Reformed position, with its two covenants and the notion of an imputed righteousness received by faith alone, is exceedingly more faithful to the biblical gospel as it points to the gratuitous and irrevocable character of salvation.

**A. Justification as a declaration of a favorable verdict of acquittal based on an imputed righteousness received by faith alone in Christ alone**

The "good news" of the gospel is that believers are eternally, i.e. irrevocably, accepted in Christ, not on the basis of their moral performance, but on the basis of Christ's atoning sacrifice and His resurrection from the dead. Classical Reformed theology explains this "good news" within the biblical framework of God's covenant dealings with His people.

By covenant, I am referring to the way Scripture illumines God's relationship with creatures made in His image and likeness. Central to this structuring of divine-human relations is God's free act in establishing a mutually binding agreement with man in which God, on the one hand, obligates Himself to bless man unconditionally, while, on the other hand, He stipulates the conditions of covenant blessings on the part of man as covenant keeper. Covenant theology, as the system of theology that emerges from this controlling concept, depicts God's one work of redemption as embracing two great covenants: the covenant of works made with Adam and the covenant of grace made with the second or last Adam, Jesus Christ. The covenant of works, established with Adam prior to the Fall (prelapsarian), stipulated that under the condition of obedience Adam would merit eternal life in his role as representative of the entire human race. The covenant of grace, established with Christ the second or last Adam after the Fall (postlapsarian), centers on Christ overturning Adam's failure by living a perfect life of obedience which merited the promise of life for those whom He represented.

The obedience of Christ, then, as a covenantal concept, must be perceived as a key soteric component of the classical Reformed formulation of the doctrine of justification. For Paul, justification is a legal or forensic concept; it is, as the Reformed tradition has rightly interpreted Paul, a “transfer” term denoting the sinner’s transition from wrath to grace as a juridical declaration. Redemption in its application must effect the removal of guilt due to sin. Justification answers to this problem. Therefore, it is this forensic, legal outcome that Paul has in his sights when he speaks of God justifying the sinner.<sup>4</sup> This outcome, negatively considered, involves the forgiveness of sins or what Paul denotes in Romans 4:7-8 as the “non-reckoning” of sins, i.e. God’s not counting sins against the offender.<sup>5</sup> Positively considered, however, justification consists of the “reckoning” or “imputing” of Christ’s righteousness to the believer’s account as he is united to Christ by faith.<sup>6</sup> Romans 5:18-19 clarifies that the righteousness that is counted or reckoned as the believer’s is the perfect obedience of Christ.<sup>7</sup> These verses stipulate that as the individual’s connection to the first Adam in *his disobedience* led to his condemnation, so the individual’s connection to Christ the last

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<sup>4</sup> For example, Romans 4:5: “And to one who does not work but trusts him who *justifies the ungodly* [δικαιοῦντα τὸν ἄσεβῆ], his faith is reckoned [λογίζεται] as righteous.” Of course, the Reformed model differs from justification in Roman Catholic theology which is based on an *imparted* righteousness, i.e. righteousness as moral renewal. At the risk of oversimplification we might say justification in the Roman Catholic view is *renovative*, whereas in the classical Reformed view it is, as mentioned above, *forensic*. Despite recent ecumenically-driven dialogues and joint declarations between Catholics and Protestants on the nature of justification, the Roman Catholic view has not changed substantially since Martin Luther ignited the firestorm of the Protestant Reformation. When read critically, the various joint statements of carefully nuanced justification language continue to betray the Catholic predilection to confuse justification and renewal.

<sup>5</sup> “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count [μὴ λογίσῃται] his sin.”

<sup>6</sup> Romans 4:5 again.

<sup>7</sup> “Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man’s disobedience [i.e. Adam] the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience [i.e. Jesus Christ] the many will be made righteous.” Classical Reformed theology has taught that Christ’s obedience has two aspects: active and passive. The former denotes Christ’s obedience to the Father in perfectly fulfilling the law on behalf of those for whom He would die. Christ’s passive obedience refers to Christ’s suffering on the cross in bearing the penal punishment of sin as a substitutionary sacrifice. Though Christ’s active and passive obedience are distinct, they are nonetheless inseparable. The statement that throughout Christ’s “entire life as He actively obeyed He passively endured, and as He passively endured He actively obeyed” hold together these two aspects of Christ’s obedience. Lorraine Boettner, *Studies in Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1989), 303-304.

Adam in *His obedience* (i.e. His righteousness) results in justification, i.e. the declaration of the reversal of his condemnation status.<sup>8</sup>

In speaking of Christ's obedience as a covenantal concept whereby Christ merited eternal life for those whom He represented in the covenant of grace, it is important that we look briefly at three related notions: union with Christ, faith and works in justification, and justification as a present and future reality. We will see shortly that these concepts are integral to our investigation as they assume an entirely different look and feel under the NPP model, one that undermines the gratuitous and irrevocable character of the gospel.

### 1. Union with Christ

Union with Christ is the organizing principle in the soteric structure of Paul's gospel. As Lane Tipton observes, expressing in his own words John Calvin's classic formulation on this point, union with Christ is the "nuclear theological structure for the application of redemption to the believer."<sup>9</sup> In other words, not one of the redemptive benefits of Christ's atonement, including justification, occurs outside of union with Christ. However, this was Pauline before it was ever Calvin or Tipton! Paul's signature statement is that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ "has blessed us *in Christ* [ἐν χριστῷ,] with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places," which must include justification (though it is not mentioned specifically in the context).<sup>10</sup> More directly, Paul's declaration in Romans 8:1 that "there is therefore now no condemnation" is true only in the case of "those who are in [union with] Christ Jesus [ἐν χριστῷ ἰησοῦ]." Similarly, Paul states that it was "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God *in him* [ἵνα ἡμεῖς γενώμεθα δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ]" (2 Cor. 5:21).

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<sup>8</sup> Of which Romans 5:1 makes the point clearly. Imputation, again, is the theological term that explains how these connections are made. According to classical Reformed thought, scripture sets forth a three-fold doctrine of imputation in the outworking of redemption: Adam's sins imputed to his posterity; the sins of the elect imputed to Christ on the cross; and Christ's righteousness imputed to the sinner at the moment of faith.

<sup>9</sup> Lane Tipton, "Union with Christ and Justification," in *Justified in Christ: God's Plan for Us in Justification*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint (Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-shire, IV20 1TW, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publication, 2007), 39. Tipton's quote of Calvin is as follows: "First, we must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value to us." Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Paul does mention forgiveness, which is involved in justification (see Rom. 4:6-8), in Ephesians 1:7.

And Galatians 2:17: “But if, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ [δικαιωθῆναι ἐν χριστῷ], we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not!” For Paul, then, faith is the instrument by which individuals are united to Christ and it is in the context of union with Christ that Christ’s righteousness, i.e. His perfect obedience in its active and passive modes, is imputed to the believer.

## 2. Faith and Works

To repeat, faith is the sole appropriating instrument that unites one to Christ in justification. It is faith over against hope, love, humility, repentance, or any other virtue, behavior or “work” that unites us to Christ because faith singularly possesses the specific quality of resting, reposing or completely abandoning oneself to Christ as the ground of justification.<sup>11</sup> The relation of faith and works in justification is set forth sharply by Paul when he states “For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law [χωρὶς ἔργων νόμου]” (Rom. 3:28).<sup>12</sup> Clearly, faith excludes works in justification as its instrument. However, the flip-side of this is that faith includes works in justification as its evidence. In other words, works never justify the believer along with faith, but works are the fruit, sign and evidence that the faith by which one is justified is genuine. Pauline formulas like “faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6), “the obedience of the faith” (Rom. 1:5; 16:26), “your work of faith” (1 Thess. 1:3) clearly demonstrate the interrelationship between faith and works in justification. Good works stem from justifying faith *necessarily* as its fruit, which is to say, justifying faith is always the undergirding principle of good works.

## 3. Present and Future Justification

The point above concerning works in justification leads to a final observation about the place of works in the final judgment. Some students in the Reformed tradition embrace a present/ future justification schema—an initial justification by faith and a future

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<sup>11</sup> A good acrostic that illustrates faith’s posture is “Forsaking **All I Take Him**.”

<sup>12</sup> We will see momentarily that Wright parts with the traditional view of ἔργων νόμου as proto-Pelagian works righteousness and understands these as ethical boundary markers that identify Jews as belonging to the true covenant community.

justification according to works at the final judgment.<sup>13</sup> Richard Gaffin makes this distinction while carefully seeking to avoid the inference that works are co-instrumental with faith in final justification. Gaffin avers that “For Christians, future judgment according to works does not operate according to a different principle than their already having been justified by faith. The difference is that the final judgment will be the open manifestation of that present justification.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, the same faith principle that operates in initial justification operates in final justification at the last day. Final justification is not a separate justification by works but it is a separate future aspect of the one justification- by-faith event. Gaffin observes rightly that the scriptures speak of one justification consisting of both a present and future aspect that mirrors the already/not yet structure of Paul’s theology. “Let it be said then, that it would certainly betray or misrepresent Paul...to call into question that settled certainty [of future justification]. That is no more or less the case than it would be to question for him, because the resurrection of the body is still future, the settled certainty of the believer’s already having been resurrected.”<sup>15</sup> According to Gaffin, as there is an already/not yet structure to the resurrection of the believer, there is also an already/not yet structure to the believer’s justification (and adoption, Rom. 8:23). In other words, the final judgment, which is simultaneous with the bodily resurrection, is the guaranteed future consummating salvation event that confirms the past event of justification. It is the “not-yet,” but no less certain outcome of the believer’s present justification. To put the matter another way, in the resurrection and the final judgment at the last day it will be demonstrated undeniably, irrevocably and irreversibly that the believer has “therefore...*been justified* by faith” (Rom. 5:1).

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<sup>13</sup> Of course, the question here is whether works are the evidence of justifying faith or are co-instrumental with faith in future justification at the final judgment. It seems that Wright holds the latter view, which we will address shortly.

<sup>14</sup> Richard B. Gaffin, *By Faith, Not by Sight: Paul and the Order of Salvation* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2006), 80.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 116. Notwithstanding Gaffin’s commitment to tow the line on this point, his views on justification at other points are not classically Reformed (e.g. his view of imputation). Indeed, Gaffin’s views may be closer to FV and NPP than he and others are willing to admit. John Piper, it seems, may have missed this ambiguity in Gaffin when he implies that, unlike Wright, Gaffin is closer to the classical Reformed view. John Piper, *The Future of Justification: A Response to N. T. Wright* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 115-117.



**B. Justification as a declaration of a favorable status as a member of God's covenant community (NPP)**

Having examined the classical Reformed exposition of the doctrine of justification as a covenantal concept, we turn our attention now to the doctrine of justification as it is advanced by NPP and FV proponents. This analysis will interact with the groundbreaking work of N. T. Wright who is well-known and respected as a leading NPP scholar.<sup>16</sup>

Wright is a prominent New Testament scholar who has written extensively on Paul and the New Testament corpus that is attributed to him. Inarguably, Wright has done more to advance the NPP model of justification on both a scholarly and popular level than any other New Testament scholar of his stature. Of particular interests to this study are Wright's views on justification which have become a watershed in New Testament studies.

We may begin by noting what Wright says the gospel is and is not according to Paul. Reversing this order, Wright says the gospel is not “a system of how people get saved.”<sup>17</sup> It “is not for Paul, a message about ‘how one gets saved’, in an individual and ahistorical sense.”<sup>18</sup> By “the ‘gospel’, [Paul] does not mean ‘justification by faith.’”<sup>19</sup> The gospel Paul subscribed to does not describe “how people get saved, how they enter a relationship with God as individuals.”<sup>20</sup> “The doctrine of justification by faith is not what Paul means by ‘the gospel.’”<sup>21</sup> “‘The gospel’ itself is neither a system of thought, nor a set of techniques for making people Christians.”<sup>22</sup> According to Wright, then, what people mean by the gospel today (or have meant historically) is not what Paul meant by “the gospel” in his first century context. Here is what Wright says Paul really said about the gospel, and here just a few quotes will suffice. The gospel is the simple and direct message that “Jesus, the crucified and risen

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<sup>16</sup> For the most part, I will restrict my comments to Wright's *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997) as a briefer exposition of Wright's views on Paul and justification.

<sup>17</sup> Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 45.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.



Messiah, is Lord.”<sup>23</sup> Or even more compactly and evoking the *Christus Victor* motif of Gustaf Aulén, the gospel “is indeed the announcement of royal victory,”<sup>24</sup> “the narrative proclamation of King Jesus” the Victor over this world’s rulers, powers and principalities.

This understanding of what Paul really said about the gospel has reshaped Wright’s thinking on what Paul really said about the doctrine of justification as well, which he believes has been mistakenly restricted to law-court language.<sup>25</sup> As the gospel is not about how people get saved, but is the announcement of and about King Jesus, justification is not about how God as Judge acquits people on the basis of an alien righteousness imputed to them by faith. According to Wright, justification is not “how you become a Christian, so much as ‘how you can tell who is a member of the covenant family.’”<sup>26</sup> As I will demonstrate momentarily, Wright heaps up statements like this one in expounding the seismic shift in his thinking from viewing justification *soteriologically* to viewing justification *ecclesiologically*. To restate, this is a massive move, with major implications to a biblical understanding of the gratuitous and irrevocable nature of the gospel. We will examine these major implications in short order, but for now a few additional quotes will serve to point up Wright’s radical rethinking of justification as a key soteriological (for Wright, ecclesiological!) doctrine.

Wright sets the record straight that justification as Paul meant it “is not a matter of *how someone enters the community of the true people of God*, but of *how you tell who belongs to that community*....”<sup>27</sup> “‘Justification’ in the first century was not about how someone might establish a relationship with God. It was about God’s eschatological definition, both future and present, of who was, in fact, a member of his people.”<sup>28</sup> Following E.P. Sanders, justification “was not so much about ‘getting in’, or indeed about ‘staying in’, as about

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 47

<sup>25</sup> As Wright sees it, the “discussion of justification in much of the history of the church, certainly since Augustine, got off on the wrong foot—at least in terms of understanding Paul—and they have stayed there ever since.” Ibid., 115.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 119. Emphasis his.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

‘how you could tell who was in.’”<sup>29</sup> Justification “wasn’t so much about soteriology as about ecclesiology; not so much about salvation as about the church.”<sup>30</sup> “Justification is not how someone *becomes* a Christian. It is the declaration that they *have become* a Christian.”<sup>31</sup> “Justification is the covenant declaration, which will be issued on the last day, in which the true people of God will be vindicated....”<sup>32</sup>

For Wright, what Saint Paul really said about the gospel and justification are “organically and integrally linked” in the covenant: “‘Justification’ is...the doctrine which declares that whoever believes that gospel...are truly members of his [covenant] family.”<sup>33</sup> The link that Wright forges between the gospel and justification is that belief in the gospel graciously connects one to the life and privileges of the covenant; justification, on the other hand, declares the reality of one’s *membership* in the covenant. For Wright, the doctrine of justification is not at the very heart of the gospel; it is tangential to the gospel. It is not “the true scheme of salvation, as opposed to Jewish self-help moralism,”<sup>34</sup> rather it is the declaration that one is a Christian and a member of God’s covenant community. As Wright puts it, justification belongs under the category of *ecclesiology*, not *soteriology*. This new paradigm represents a radical departure from the gospel-covenant-justification logic that has been at the heart of classical Reformed soteriology. By redefining justification *ecclesiologically* as opposed to *soteriologically*, Wright has stripped Reformed covenantal redemptive theology of imputation as a core, gospel-defining doctrine.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 125. Emphasis his.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. Again: “Justification is the covenant declaration, which will be issued on the last day, in which the true people of God will be vindicated.” Ibid., 131.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>35</sup> This does not mean that Wright objects totally to the notion of imputation. As Piper points out in *The Future of Justification*, Christ’s vindicated status as the resurrected Lord is imputed to the believer, but not Christ’s obedience (123-125). This is a basic NPP and FV move which Piper rightly criticizes. Interestingly though, Piper criticizes Wright on this point while failing to criticize Gaffin who holds basically the same view. I only mention this fact because Piper seems to put greater distance between the views of Wright and Gaffin than is actually the case. Gaffin’s less-than-classically-Reformed statement of imputation reads as follows: “Christ’s resurrection is his own justification in the sense that the resurrection is God’s *de facto* declarative recognition, on the ground of that obedience, of his righteousness...For Christians, then, Christ’s justification, given with his resurrection, becomes theirs, [Footnote continued on next page ... ]

Wright’s allegedly more-Pauline (pristine) understanding of justification is seen to deviate considerably and even radically from the classical Reformed view when it is examined from the perspectives of union with Christ, faith and works in justification, and present and future justification—the three categories that we examined earlier under the classical view. It remains for us to look briefly at these before I seek to demonstrate the superiority of the classical Reformed position on justification as opposed to NPP, the former being exceedingly more faithful to the biblical gospel as it witnesses to the gratuitous and irrevocable character of salvation.

### 1. Union with Christ

Wright is emphatic that the perfect obedience of Christ (His righteousness) imputed to the believer is not what Paul meant by the doctrine of justification. Indeed, the whole law court imagery with which the doctrine of justification gets underway does not require the notion of the imputation of “righteousness” from one party to another. Wright argues that in the context of law-court language “it makes no sense whatever to say the judge imputes, imparts, bequeaths, conveys or otherwise transfers his righteousness to either the plaintiff or the defendant. Righteousness is not an object, a substance or a gas which can be passed across the courtroom.”<sup>36</sup> Having defined God’s righteousness as “covenant faithfulness,” Wright argues that such remains God’s own property.<sup>37</sup> God (or Christ’s) righteous is never imputed or otherwise transferred so that it defines the believer’s status. Nor is imputation of this nature necessary since, according to Wright, union with Christ accomplishes what imputation is mistakenly called upon to furnish in classical Reformed theology. According to the traditional view, it is in the context of union with Christ that Christ’s righteousness, i.e. His perfect obedience, is imputed to the believer. However, in Wright’s view because union with Christ identifies the believer with Christ everything that is Christ’s is jointly the believer’s. It is therefore redundant and

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when united to the resurrected, that is, the justified Christ, by faith, his righteousness is reckoned as theirs or imputed to them” (*By Faith, not by Sight*, 84, emphasis his). Though Gaffin mentions the obedience of Christ, what he says is actually imputed to the believer as righteousness is Christ’s resurrected, vindicated status.

<sup>36</sup> Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*,” 98.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

unnecessary to speak of imputation unless this is what one means by the term.<sup>38</sup>

## 2. Faith and Works in Justification

Wright's thinking on the doctrine of justification clashes with the traditional understanding of Paul's "works of the law" (ἔργων νόμου) as a sort of proto-Pelagian works righteousness which he condemns. Recall that in classical Reformed theology works are never construed as co-instrumental with faith in justification. Faith and works are joined at the hip in justification but only as the latter are evidential of justifying faith. However, Wright's contribution to NPP studies includes reframing the discussion of works in justification around his interaction with features of Second Temple Judaism. He concludes from this background and context that "'justification by works' has nothing to do with individual Jews attempting a kind of proto-Pelagian pulling themselves up by their moral bootstraps."<sup>39</sup> On the contrary, Wright understands this concept to refer to the observance of certain acts—Sabbath, circumcision, and dietary restrictions—not as a means to earn God's favor, but as "badges of membership" by which Jews thankfully were marked out as God's true covenant people.<sup>40</sup> Their shortcoming, as Wright views Paul's criticism and opposition, is not that they went about observing these acts in a legalistic manner, but that their observance was conducted in a selfish, ethnocentric manner that precluded the inclusion of Gentiles as covenant members, of which the only true "badge" now, according to Paul, is faith. Therefore, Wright sees faith and works in Paul's theology as being joined at the hip co-instrumentally in justification. Just how joined to the hip they are becomes clear as we move finally to examine Wright's understanding of justification as being present and future.

## 3. Present and Future Justification

The co-instrumentality of faith and works in justification in Wright's thinking is demonstrated by the role he assigns to works in final justification. The telling statement is this: "Present justification

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<sup>38</sup> See Piper's excellent discussion in *The Future of Justification*, 121-125.

<sup>39</sup> Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 119.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

declares, on the basis of faith, what future justification will affirm publicly (according to 2:14-16 and 8:9-11) on the basis of the entire life.”<sup>41</sup> According to Wright, there is a present justification “on the basis of faith,” and a future justification “on the basis of the entire life.” It is difficult not to construe this as suggesting that for Wright works are paramount in final justification. One desires to hear Wright out on this matter so that he is not judged unfairly. However, it is clear that final justification “on the basis of the entire life” is different from saying with classical Reformed thought that future justification is “according to works,” where works are understood as evidential (as opposed to instrumental). Wright seems to be allowing a place for works in final justification that is co-instrumental with faith as the following somewhat lengthy excerpt suggests:

It is strange, above all, that the first mention of justification in Romans is a mention of justification by works—apparently with Paul’s approval (2:13: ‘It is not the hearers of the law who will be righteous before God but the doers of the law who will be justified’). The right way to understand this, I believe is to see that Paul is talking about final justification. Eschatology, the hope of Israel, dominates the horizon as ever. The point is: who will be vindicated, resurrected, shown to be the covenant people, on the last day? Paul’s answer, with which many non-Christian Jews would have agreed, is that those who will be vindicated on the last day are those in whose heart and lives God will have written his law, his Torah. As Paul will make clear later on in the letter, this process cannot be done by the Torah alone; God has now done in Christ and by the Spirit what the Torah wanted to do but could not do.<sup>42</sup>

For Wright, then, works appear to have a determining role with faith in the verdict at the final judgment. Clearly though, as the above excerpt bears out to Wright’s credit, Wright does not seem to be advocating works accomplished otherwise than by the power of Christ and His Spirit.

**C. The gratuitous and irrevocable character of salvation as a testing ground of the classical/contractual and NPP models of justification**

Is Wright’s understanding of what Saint Paul really said really what Saint Paul said? Is Wright right when he intimates that Saint Paul understood justification otherwise than as belonging to the very

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 127.

heart of the gospel? In this section, I want to argue that the classical Reformed exposition of the doctrine of justification, as opposed to the NPP and FV models, adequately depicts Paul's gospel as the "good news" of the gratuitous and irrevocable character of Christ's life-giving and sin-destroying work as the crucified and risen Savior.

The gospel is "good news" only as it is gratuitous and irrevocable. Paul is emphatic that salvation is "by grace through faith...and not of works"--always (Eph. 2:8). He is equally emphatic that nothing in heaven or on earth, spiritual or otherwise could ever "separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:39). For Paul, a salvation that is dependent in any way on the individual or revocable for any reason by God, is not equivalent to the "good news" of the gospel. The gospel is "good news" precisely because God is forever for the believer because the believer is forever clothed in the righteousness of His Son imputed by faith. Classical Reformed theology's gospel-covenant-justification logic is, if anything, Pauline in its expression and exposition of the gospel.

NPP and FV proponents, it seems, however, do not adequately express by their understanding of Paul the gratuitous and irrevocable character of the gospel that Paul was unashamed of as the power of God to save (Rom. 1:16). Let's test this observation first by determining whether the NPP and FV views are faithful to the gospel as a gratuitous expression of God's saving work in Jesus Christ. Next we will test this observation by determining whether the NPP and FV views are faithful to the gospel as expressions of the irrevocable character of God's saving work in Jesus Christ.

It is fair to say of the Catholic and Protestant dividing line on justification that "For Rome grace makes human merit possible. For the Reformers grace makes such merit impossible."<sup>43</sup> Substitute for "Rome" NPP and FV and we have a pretty accurate assessment of the current justification debate in Reformed circles. In my thinking, NPP and FV are modifications of the doctrine of justification in the direction of Rome.

Wright's understanding of Paul's "works of the law" (ἔργων νόμου) bears this out. Recall that Wright does not view Paul's use of

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<sup>43</sup> R.C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), 149.

this expression as condemning the pursuit of legalistic work righteousness in order to earn God's favor, as Paul is often interpreted. Rather, Paul is condemning the observance of legitimate acts such as circumcision, Sabbath-keeping and dietary restrictions (which Wright refers to as "badges" of covenant membership) in illegitimate ways that discriminate against non-Jews and exclude them from covenant membership. The point that Wright is making here by redefining Paul at this critical point is that there is a place for works (the right kind) in justifying the believer. As Wright puts it, final justification is on the basis "of the entire life lived," which means that works play an instrumental role in the believer's final verdict. However, this proposition is difficult to reconcile with the gratuitous nature of Paul's gospel which holds that while works are the evidence of justifying faith they are never co-instrumental with faith in justifying the believer. The issue here, I must hasten to add, is not that Spirit-wrought works are co-instrumental with faith in justification, whereas self-wrought works are not. The issue is that works (period!) are never the ground of justification. Therefore, an initial justification by faith, following Wright, has an empty and hollow ring to it, if in the final analysis, at the last day, the believer is justified in any way other than by grace through faith. We must conclude, therefore, that in the NPP and FV models works assume a function in justification similar to that in Catholicism. And neither tradition can ever deliver on just this point: securing the believer eternally in the love of Christ. This leads to our final test: whether the NPP and FV justification models express the irrevocable nature of God's saving work in Christ.

Whenever one accedes to works a role in justification other than evidential, demonstrative or confirmatory, the issue of the final judgment remains unsettled. Gaffin, concedes this point when he writes:

To speak of justification as in any sense "not yet" appears to take away from its "already," definitive character. To view it as in some sense still future seems to threaten its present, absolute finality, to undermine its settled certainty in the life of the Christian. Let it be said, then, that it would certainly betray or misrepresent Paul if anything said in this regard would be heard or allowed to call into question that settled certainty. That is no more or less the case than it would be to question for him, because the resurrection of the body is still future,



the settled certainty of the believer's already having been resurrected with Christ.<sup>44</sup>

Though Richard Gaffin seems to embrace an NPP and FV view of imputation that centers on Christ's resurrected vindicated status as opposed to the obedience of Christ,<sup>45</sup> it is doubtful that he could speak of the "absolute finality" and "settled certainty" of the believer's verdict at the final judgment if in his thinking works played any key role in justification other than evidential or confirmatory. Gaffin's statement, however, is even more representative of the classical Reformed view on the certainty of final justification as one links it with the sole ground of justification, i.e. the obedience of Christ imputed to the believer as righteousness at the moment of faith. John Piper is more consistent with this view than Gaffin (and certainly Wright) when he observes that "The faith that justifies continues to hold fast to Christ alone as the ground of our having God as our Father who is completely for us."<sup>46</sup> Piper comments a few pages later that "God has not ordained that living the Christian life should be the basis of our hope that God is for us. That basis is the death and righteousness of Christ, counted as ours through faith alone."<sup>47</sup> I am not sure that N.T. Wright and other NPP and FV proponents see this as clearly or at all. After all, a future justification "on the basis of the entire life" lacks the "absolute certainty" and irrevocable quality that Saint Paul really spoke about as he heralded the gospel.



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<sup>44</sup> Gaffin, *By Faith, Not by Sight*, 80.

<sup>45</sup> See footnote 34.

<sup>46</sup> Piper, *The Future of Justification*, 182.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.