

N.T. Wright—A Westminster Seminary Perspective

(A slightly revised version of a post to the "Wrightsaid" List, January 5, 2004)

Recently, frustration has been expressed at the failure of certain professors at Westminster Theological Seminary (PA) to express publicly their sympathy for the New Perspective in general and Tom Wright in particular. While I cannot speak for any of my colleagues, I will speak for myself.

There are many reasons for my silence. For one, I recognize that as a professor at Westminster, I need to speak responsibly and circumspectly when commenting on or taking sides in theological debates. Additionally, there is the problem of the "political" climate. When respected Reformed theologians describe Wright's views as "dangerous"¹ and "an attack on the very heart of the gospel"² and more extreme voices denounce "Wright's Antichristian theology,"³ it is hardly an environment that encourages seminary professors – let alone those who teach at Westminster – to stand up and say, "Hold on, maybe Wright's on to something here. Let's be a little less suspicious and see what we can learn." I admit that the current adversarial climate has made me cautious. Frankly, there are days when I envy the freedom (not to mention the intellect) that many contributors to this list have.

Another reason I have not spoken up is that while I am very interested in the topics being discussed on this list my primary areas of academic expertise lie elsewhere. With the constant demands of teaching, I find it difficult enough to write in those areas, let alone tackle the complex issues raised by the New Perspective! But while I don't have time to write academically on the topic, I can at least give a few bullet points explaining why I react positively to the basic outlines of Wright's reading of Paul.

¹ Ligon Duncan, "The Attraction of New Perspectives on Paul": "the new perspective on Paul is productive of dangerous errors" and "N. T. Wright's arguments are more dangerous to the evangelical community than Dunn or Stendahl or Sanders" (www.christianity.com/partner/Article_Display_Page/0,,PTID307086%7CCHID581338%7CCIID1660662,0.html) and www.fpcjackson.org/resources/apologetics/Covenant%20Theology%20&%20Justification/ligon_whynew_perspsaatt.htm).

² Sidney D. Dyer, "N. T. Wright's View of Justification: An Ecumenical Interpretation of Paul" *Katekōmen* 14:1 (Summer 2002): 15-20 (20) (www.gpts.edu/resources/katekōmen_dyer_1402.html).

³ John Robbins, "N. T. Wright and the Presbyterian Churches" (www.trinityfoundation.org/reviews/view-horror.asp?ID=20).

So for those who might be interested, I have appended below an expanded version of comments that I made last year in the context of internal seminary discussions about the New Perspective. These remarks included endnotes intended to direct the original readers to reasonably accessible articles etc. (e.g., on the web). While most readers of this list will be familiar with the material in these notes, for the sake of completeness I include them in this post.

Some words of explanation are in order. These comments should not be particularly controversial, especially for those who embrace a redemptive-historical approach to Scripture. You won't find any stunning new insights. I say nothing here that hasn't already been said many times on this list. Finally, these remarks will make most sense when read in the context of the hermeneutical and theological distinctives of Westminster Theological Seminary (PA).

I post these comments to this list as a partial and perhaps preliminary response to those who are disappointed and frustrated by the almost unanimously negative reaction to Wright coming from conservative Reformed seminaries in the USA. I share this disappointment and would like to take this opportunity to express my deep appreciation for Wright's work. Reading Wright has stimulated my thinking in many areas. More importantly, it has fed my soul.

By the way, you may treat this as a public statement that is not protected by this list's normal "members only" rule.

In Christ,

Doug

Douglas J. Green, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Old Testament
Westminster Theological Seminary
Philadelphia, PA

My remarks will not deal with the New Perspective in general. It is *far* too amorphous to comment on with sound bites. I have therefore chosen to focus on N. T. Wright. I do this not only because I am more familiar with his work than I am with, say, James Dunn or E. P. Sanders, but also because Wright currently exerts the strongest influence in Reformed circles.

What I like:

- (1) *The New Perspective (including Wright) forces us to take Paul's Jewish background seriously.* All theological reflection – including Paul's – is historically and culturally conditioned. In the study of the Old Testament, this demands attention to ancient Near Eastern backgrounds; in New Testament studies, to Jewish and Graeco-Roman backgrounds. To interpret Paul without appropriate attention to this context would be to deny the profoundly historical character of our faith and to espouse an essentially Docetic doctrine of Scripture.
- (2) *Wright's hermeneutical stance is strongly redemptive-historical/covenantal and Christocentric (or "Christotelic")⁴.* Wright places the story of Christ – his life, death, resurrection, heavenly reign and return⁵ – at the center of Paul's gospel. This is consistent with Westminster Seminary's approach both to biblical hermeneutics and systematic theology.
- (3) More specifically, *Wright takes the "Israelness" of redemptive (or, covenantal) history very seriously⁶ – more seriously, I think, than does the tradition launched by the Westminster Standards.⁷ Consequently, for Wright, the Old Testament plays an*

⁴ Hermeneutics and theology must be Christocentric, but the term "Christotelic" allows me to add a helpful nuance to the idea of Christ- (or Gospel-) centered interpretation. In using this term I am picking up on language used by Richard B. Hays, "On the Rebound: A Response to Critiques of *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*," *Paul and the Scriptures of Israel* (eds. Craig A. Evans and James A. Sanders; 1993), 75-96 (77-78). Since I adopt a redemptive-historical approach to biblical interpretation, my model for describing the coherence of Scripture is primarily linear (i.e., a story, narrative) rather circular (i.e., system). Therefore, the gospel – the story of Jesus – is best understood when it is defined in terms of a narrative *telos*, a climax, an end, a goal ("Christ is the climax of Israel's story") rather than as the "center point" of a theological system.

⁵ See Wright's lecture "God and Caesar, Then and Now" (www.westminster-abbey.org/event/lecture/archives/020428_tom_wright.htm): "The New Testament grows, of course, out of the belief that the crucified and risen Jesus of Nazareth is God's Messiah, and Lord of the world; that he is already reigning at the right hand of the one true God; and that he will return, reappear, to complete this rule by abolishing all enemies, ending with sin and death themselves."

⁶ See, for example, Wright's "Jesus and the Identity of God," *Ex Auditu* 14 (1998): 42-56 (45) (www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright_JIG.pdf) "If we are to be biblical theologians, it simply will not do to tell the story of salvation as simply creation, fall, Jesus, salvation. We desperately need to say: creation, fall, Israel, Jesus, salvation." To put slightly differently, for Wright, the gospel places Jesus as the climax of a distinctly Israelite and Jewish story.

⁷ A hint of this "softening" of the "Israelness" of redemptive history can be seen in WCF 19:3, where Israel is called "the church under age." By using this language, the Confession speaks truly, but inadequately. This kind of "reading back" of the church into Israel needs to be preceded and balanced by a "reading forward" of Israel into Christ and the church.

important role in understanding Paul's soteriology. It is at this point that Wright significantly improves on our tradition.

- (4) Wright has a *good understanding of the deeply eschatological character of Paul's gospel*⁸ – something that redemptive-historical exegetes from the Reformed tradition have also emphasized.⁹
- (5) His *strong emphasis on the lordship of Christ*¹⁰ resonates with central strands of the Reformed tradition.¹¹

⁸ See, for example, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 131: justification is a declaration, or verdict that will be made at the end of history, but "through Jesus, however, God has done in the middle of history what he had been expected to do – and, indeed, will still do – at the end; so that the declaration, the verdict, can be issued in the present, in anticipation." Rich Lusk, "A Short Note on N. T. Wright and his Reformed Critics"

(www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich_lusk/a_short_note_on_n_t_wright_his_reformed_critics.htm), summarizes Wright's position succinctly: "justification is the eschatological verdict of God brought into the present time." See also Rich Lusk, "Some Random Thoughts on N. T. Wright's Romans Commentary" (www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich_lusk/wright_on_romans.htm): "Wright grasps the fundamentally eschatological nature of the gospel and the Christian life. These thoughts are developed with even greater fullness in his big book on the resurrection, but the Romans commentary introduces them as well."

⁹ See, for example, Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. "Resurrection and Redemption: How Eschatology and the Gospel Relate," *Modern Reformation* 8: 1 (Jan/Feb1999): 23-26

(www.modernreformation.org/mr99/janfeb/mr9901resurrection.html). Daniel Kirk, "New Perspective on Reformed Tradition: A Response to Kelly" (www.christianity.com/partner/Article_Display_Page/0,,PTID23682|CHID125043|CIID1526232,00.html), summarizes the situation: "Within the Reformed community, we have also seen healthy employment of 'eschatology' as a vital aspect of Paul's thought. The works of Geerhardus Vos (*The Pauline Eschatology*), Herman Ridderbos (*Paul: An Outline of His Theology*) and, again, Richard Gaffin and Westminster Seminary, have all underscored the architectonic function of eschatology in the apostle's thought." In other words, well before Wright, redemptive-historical exegetes from the Reformed tradition had come to appreciate the eschatological nature of Paul's gospel.

¹⁰ Some illustrations:

(a) From Travis Tamerius, "A *Reformation & Revival Journal* Interview with N. T. Wright, Part Two," *Reformation & Revival Journal* 11:2 (Spring 2002): 137-54 (144-45) (= "An Interview with N. T. Wright," www.hornes.org/theologia/content/travis_tamerius/interview_with_n_t_wright.htm): "It's quite clear what Paul is talking about, that he comes into town announcing that Jesus is Lord, as a royal herald. He is saying that the crucified Jesus is the Lord of the world. And this is not, 'Here is a way of salvation. You might like to apply it to yourself.' It's not, 'Here is a new way of being religious and you might enjoy it.' This is really an imperial summons: 'On your knees!' Nobody ever went into a Roman town and said, 'Caesar is lord and you might like to have this experience of acknowledging him as lord if that suits you.' They said, 'Caesar is Lord, get on your knees and we want the tax right now.'"

(b) From "God and Caesar, Then and Now" (above): "The New Testament grows, of course, out of the belief that the crucified and risen Jesus of Nazareth is God's Messiah, and Lord of the world; that he is

(6) I fundamentally agree with the analysis¹² that sees *Wright's approach to Paul as compatible with Calvin's emphasis on union with Christ*.¹³ At Westminster Seminary, union with Christ – rather than justification by faith – is viewed as the organizing center of Pauline soteriology.¹⁴ This emphasis – along with the tradition of redemptive-historical hermeneutics and the consequent subordination of *ordo salutis* to *historia salutis* in soteriology¹⁵ – should encourage a sympathetic reading

already reigning at the right hand of the one true God; and that he will return, reappear, to complete this rule by abolishing all enemies, ending with sin and death themselves."

(c) From "Paul's Gospel and Caesar's Empire" (www.ctinquiry.org/publications/wright.htm): "for Paul 'the gospel' is the announcement that the crucified and risen Jesus of Nazareth is Israel's Messiah and the world's Lord."

¹¹ This is where Wright has significantly challenged my thinking. He has a big vision of the implications of the lordship of Christ, one that has social and political as well as individual implications. I now find myself asking whether I tend to reduce my faith to a narrow exercise of "private religion." I can see why some "post-theonomists" find him attractive – see, for example, Peter J. Leithart "Repoliticizing Jesus," *Biblical Horizons Newsletter* 99 (November 1997) (www.biblicalhorizons.com/bh/bh099.htm) – although Wright avoids the error of the classic theonomists who, in my opinion, place the Law rather than Lord (i.e., the gospel) at the center of their reflections on the social and political implications of the gospel.

¹² For example, Kirk, "New Perspective on Reformed Tradition" (see above).

¹³ Note this quote from Wright in Tamerius, "A Reformation & Revival Journal Interview with N. T. Wright, Part One," *Reformation and Revival Journal* 11:1 (Winter 2002): 117--39 (129) (= "An Interview with N. T. Wright" (see above): "The imputation of Christ's righteousness is one of the big sticking points for sure. I think I know exactly what the doctrine is about and I believe you don't lose anything by the route I propose. The force of what people have believed when they have used the idea of imputation is completely retained in what I have tried to do. Why? Because in Christ we have all the treasures, not only of wisdom and knowledge (Colossians 1, and also I Corinthians 1), but in whom we have the entire package, meaning sanctification and wisdom, as well as righteousness. So Paul's theology of being in Christ gives you all of that."

¹⁴ See Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., "Biblical Theology and the Westminster Standards," *Westminster Theological Journal* 65 (2003): 165-79. This is a slightly reworked version of an article with the same title published in *The Practical Calvinist* [Clair Davis Festschrift] (ed. Peter A. Lillback; 2002), 425-42. (Note also that this article is substantially the same as the lecture Gaffin gave on the occasion of his inauguration as the Charles Krahe Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology at Westminster Seminary, October 16, 2002. It can be heard at www.gospelcom.net/cgi-bin/ramhurl?f=/wts/Gaffin20021016.rm). Specifically, Gaffin argues that "in the Westminster Standards the heart of the application of salvation, underlying all further consideration of *ordo salutis* questions, is being united to Christ by Spirit-worked faith, a union providing for multiple other benefits without one benefit either being confused with or existing separately from the others. This is essentially Calvin's '*ordo salutis*,' though not as clearly elaborated as one might wish" (175 in *WTJ*; 435 in *Practical Calvinist*).

¹⁵ Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., *Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Paul's Soteriology* (1987, repr. of *The Centrality of the Resurrection*, 1978), and more recently (2002 and 2003), "Biblical Theology and the Westminster Standards" (see above).

of Wright, at least in those strands of Confessional Reformed theology are more indebted to Calvin than to Luther.

- (7) Wright's reading of Paul coheres well with the message of the Gospels – especially when they are read in terms of the Kingdom of God rather than forced to fit a justification-centered gospel.

Possible Weaknesses:

- (1) Balancing what I said above, the emphasis on Paul's Jewish context means that sometimes there is *inadequate attention to the way the Graeco-Roman context also shapes his thinking*.¹⁶
- (2) Some of Wright's *ways of speaking about matters like justification and atonement are not traditional and at times somewhat confusing*. Wright affirms the forensic nature of justification¹⁷ and the centrality of substitutionary atonement¹⁸ but I admit that his explanations of how they "work" at least on a superficial reading do not *appear* to fit easily into classic Reformational categories. At this point, I want to put up a yellow – but not a red – flag of caution. Are these dissonances a result of different universes of discourse (e.g., the use of Paul's language vs. the

¹⁶ I should note, however, recent developments in Wright's thinking that go at least part way to answering this criticism. See, for example, his "A Fresh Perspective on Paul," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 83 (2001): 21-39, a "lightly revised" version of which is published as "Paul and Caesar: A New Reading of Romans," *A Royal Priesthood? The Use of the Bible Ethically and Politically: A Dialogue with Oliver O'Donovan* (eds. Craig Bartholomew et al; 2002), 173-93.

¹⁷ See, for example, Wright, "The Shape of Justification" (www.thepaulpage.com/Shape.html), *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 96-99.

¹⁸ Wright's *Romans* commentary (*The New Interpreter's Bible. Volume 10, 393-770*) should be consulted here for his most recent and developed thinking on this topic, but note this statement from "An Interview with N. T. Wright" (= "Interview, Part One," 119): "If one ended up saying, 'Well, shucks, after all the work I've done, it really looks as though Jesus didn't think he was going to die for the sins of the world' ... then I would have to say, 'Sorry, something has gone wrong somewhere.' And if I found myself seriously believing that, then I hope I would have the guts to say, 'This is not the orthodoxy that I grew up in. I have changed.' Maybe I would have to give up preaching. But that is not where I've been. Not at all." In November 2003, in a lecture at the Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society Wright spoke of "the saving death of Jesus, the Messiah, as Israel's and hence the world's representative and hence substitute" and added "I found it very strange in the reaction and responses to my book 'Jesus and the Victory of God' that my long chapter arguing that Jesus made Isaiah 53 thematic for his own understanding of his own death, over against people who denied that because they didn't want to face the implication of substitutionary atonement" (www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright_ETSCConf.txt). Also note Mark Horne, "N. T. Wright on the Atonement – A Brief Statement" (www.hornes.org/theologia/content/mark_horne/n_t_wright_on_the_atonement.htm).

language of systematic theology¹⁹) or are the differences deep and substantive? I believe that the former is the case, but only a constructive, reasoned dialogue between biblical theologians and historical theologians will help us answer that question.

- (3) It is possible that Wright's *criticisms of the Reformation are not as informed as they could be*.²⁰
- (4) Inevitably, a new approach *overstates the benefits of new insights and the weaknesses of classic positions*.
- (5) While Wright's work is quite compatible with Paul's emphasis on union with Christ, in my opinion he has *not (as yet) done justice to the centrality of this doctrine*.²¹ This is a point at which Wright could perhaps benefit from interaction with those in the conservative Reformed tradition who have done most to develop this doctrine.²²

Some of Wright's conservative Reformed critics have hinted that there are many positive aspects to Wright's interpretation of Paul, but they have nonetheless chosen to focus on the problem areas.²³ I adopt a different stance, choosing to emphasize the positive contribution and placing the problem areas in the background. I do this

¹⁹ See Jonathan Barlow, "Levels of Theological Discourse and the New Perspective" (www.christianity.com/partner/Article_Display_Page/0,,PTID23682|CHID125043|CIID1532882,00.html).

²⁰ See Carl R. Trueman, "A Man More Sinned Against than Sinning? The Portrait of Martin Luther in Contemporary New Testament Scholarship: Some Casual Observations of a Mere Historian" (www.crcchico.com/covenant/trueman.html). But now note James D. G. Dunn, "A Man More Sinned Against than Sinning? A Response to Carl Trueman" (www.thepaulpage.com/Response.html).

²¹ While identifying himself as a New Perspective theologian and sympathetic to Wright, Don Garlington, "A Study of Justification," *Reformation & Revival Journal* 11:2 (Spring 2002) 55-73 (67), makes a similar point: "[Wright's] overall treatment of justification is rendered less than adequate because it does not allow for a righteousness that finds its very origin in the believer's union with Christ." I note with interest that Garlington is a graduate of Westminster Seminary (M.Div. 1973; Th.M. 1975). I suspect that both his appreciation for and his criticism of Wright at some level have their origins in his seminary training.

²² It is understandable but a little unfortunate that Wright appears to be unfamiliar with Gaffin's work in this area.

²³ One example is Charles E. Hill, "N. T. Wright on Justification," *IIIM Magazine Online* 3:22 (May 28 to June 2, 2001) (www.thirdmill.org/files/english/html/nt/NT.h.Hill.Wright.html), who takes Wright to task for his redefinition of justification by faith. But he also admits, "There is so much in this book that is good and should elicit a loud 'Amen!' A balanced review of this book would focus on both its strengths and weaknesses. Here, unfortunately, I shall have to be unbalanced." Similarly, in his negative review of *What Saint Paul Really Said*, Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., "Review Essay: Paul the Theologian," *Westminster Theological Journal* 62 (2000): 121-41 (128), admits, "I recognize that I have not dwelt on positive aspects [of the book] as I might have."

because I am confident that Wright has not denied the gospel, as some appear to be claiming. Furthermore, as one who locates himself in the redemptive-historical tradition of Reformed theology, I am of the opinion that Wright's work marks a significant advance in theological reflection on Paul. At the very least, I believe that a judicious appreciation and appropriation of much of Wright's theology is consistent with a commitment to the Westminster Standards, when interpreted from a redemptive-historical and union-with-Christ perspective. Putting it more optimistically, I believe that Wright's work has the potential to contribute considerably to the enrichment and development of the redemptive-historical strand of Confessional Reformed theology.

March 3, 2004