

N. T. Wright, "The Letter to the Romans: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections." Pages 393-770 in vol. 10 of *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*. Edited by Leander E. Keck. Nashville: Abingdon, 2002. Pp. xviii + 1011. \$70.00, cloth.

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N. T. Wright has created quite a stir in American evangelical circles. On the one hand, his work has been lauded as an academically competent defense of the historical integrity of the synoptic gospels; moreover, an earlier work on Paul's theology, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), was highly touted as a "theologically and exegetically insightful", "covenantal analysis of Paul's thought" by a reviewer in this journal (T. David Gordon, *WTJ* 56 [1994]). On the other hand, Wright has been condemned in no uncertain terms as an agitator of the faith, one whose soteriology represents a departure from "historic biblical orthodoxy"—and that, too, in a review article in this journal (Richard B. Gaffin, *WTJ* 62 [2000]). Those familiar at all with the scholars who wrote these widely diverging assessments of Wright's work will immediately recognize that the debate over N. T. Wright is not one whose lines can be drawn based on commitment (or lack thereof) to the doctrinal standards laid out in the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms. As the debate rages on, it is hoped that Wright's exposition of Romans, upon which so much of the Reformation soteriology has been built, will help to clarify the issues at hand.

The introductory section is short, 17 pages including bibliography and outline, which is likely a function of its place in a volume that also contains an introduction to epistolary literature and commentaries on Acts and 1 Corinthians. Nonetheless, the introduction truly serves its purpose, for the 10 pages covering "The Shape and Theme of Romans" engage various facets of "God's righteousness" that repeatedly undergird

Wright's exposition of the letter. He begins by explaining God's righteousness as a Jewish concept, related to larger fields of discourse, specifically covenant, law court, and apocalyptic language/thought forms. In reference to the covenant, "God's righteousness" means God's loyalty to the covenant (Wright uses the singular throughout) with Israel. In the law court, a righteous judge is one who acts impartially and upholds the law. In Wright's understanding of Second Temple Judaism, the covenantal and law court images are linked, as the covenant is established to undo the consequences of sin and evil in the world—that is, to establish justice or righteousness. The recognition that the world needs to be set aright and an unflinching confidence in God's covenant-loyalty to Israel merge to produce "apocalyptic" expectation: the hope that God will act suddenly and decisively to judge the world and vindicate his people Israel.

In light of this Jewish background, Wright discusses the vision of "God's righteousness" recast for Paul as a Christian. Wright contends that Paul came to recognize the death and resurrection of Christ as the apocalyptic moment for which Israel had been waiting. This unexpected climax to Israel's story causes Paul to rethink the nature of the people of God: a people that is to include Gentiles, a people that is not to be marked off from the world by Torah observance.

Narrowing his scope to Romans itself, Wright argues that Romans is about God's righteousness defined as God's *own* righteousness, not a status conveyed to believers, and he cites three lines worth of OT and Second Temple references as support. The polemical edge of this claim is that Romans is not about justification, conceived of as something that comes to individual believers (though this is one of its topics); in contradistinction to this Reformation-tradition claim, Paul is working "to explain to the Roman church what

God has been up to and where they might belong on the map of these purposes” (10:404). In other words, Romans is about *historia salutis* before it is about *ordo salutis*. The work of God in history includes a subversion of the “story” told by Rome—a story of worldwide peace brought by Caesar. This anti-Caesar subplot is also a recurring theme in Wright’s commentary.

The discussion of the letter’s theme is followed by a short section on the occasion for Romans, a one-page annotated bibliography, and a two-page outline of the letter. In assessing the comments themselves, we will have to restrict ourselves to a few topics that will likely be of greatest interests to the readers of this journal.

One facet of this commentary that sets it apart from much contemporary scholarship is the central role it gives to the idea of covenant in Paul’s theology. Despite the relative absence of the word *covenant* in Romans (it appears only twice, 9:4 and 11:27, the latter being an Old Testament citation), and in Paul more generally (only nine times, across only five letters), Wright views God’s covenant with His people as the indispensable building-block of Paul’s thought. More specifically, it is the covenant that insures the continuity of God’s redemptive purpose begun with Abraham (e.g., 10:464, 469). On the other side of the covenant coin, Wright also sets his theology over against the “return-to-the-land theology” of dispensationalism (and modern liberal theology) (e.g., 10:698).

As Wright unfolds his understanding of Romans, it is clear time and again that he views this letter, and scripture in general, as normative for the church. It is therefore all the more salutary to the reader, and important for assessing his theology, to hear the Reformation “solus” echoed throughout the commentary. As is typical in Wright’s work,

he appeals to scriptural interpretation as he challenges various theologies and interpretations (e.g., 10:477-78, 616-17, 722). However one may differ with Wright on the doctrine of scripture, his use of scripture is exemplary for anyone wishing to espouse a *sola scriptura* posture. Further, Wright reflects on the Abraham narrative by saying that forgiven sinners are rescued “by grace alone” (10:506; cf. 10:696). He is equally clear with respect to justification per se: “Justification is by grace alone, through faith alone” (10:548). When it comes to the necessity and sole-sufficiency of the work of Christ, Wright clearly articulates *solus Christus* in a redemptive-historical framework: “The solution [to sin] is the same for all: grace, working through God’s covenant faithfulness, resulting in the life of the age to come, through Jesus, Israel’s Messiah” (10:525). Despite the aversions of some of Wright’s detractors, Wright understands Romans (and the entire New Testament for that matter) as demonstrating the need of *all* humanity (Jew and Gentile alike) for the saving work of God through Christ. Finally, Wright demonstrates that the whole work of God in redeeming humanity through Christ is for God’s own glory: “Now, in hope, through the gospel of the Messiah, Jesus, the glory is restored (5:2; 8:30); but the glory remains God’s, God’s to give, God’s to be reflected back to God, God’s own forever” (10:696). Any reader of this commentary will find the watchwords of the Reformation continually upheld and proved from the Pauline text.

This brings us to two, interrelated issues on which Wright has been challenged in the Reformed community, namely, atonement and justification. In terms of the atonement, if Wright’s comments on Paul reflect his own theology, then his theology must be labeled impeccable. First, in a lengthy comment on 3:25, Wright mounts a powerful case for interpreting *hilasterion* in terms of a propitiatory sacrifice—this over

against modern trends of seeing it merely as expiation (10:474-76). In addition, while reflecting on that same passage Wright denies that Jesus' sacrificial death was given to us as an example; it is, rather, something done "for me" (10:478). Wright, moreover, looks to 4:25, "Jesus was delivered up for our transgressions and raised for our justification," as the grounds for the whole discussion of justification in ch. 4 (10:503). Finally, Wright makes an appeal for Paul's atonement theology to be built from a combination of Rom 3:21-26; 4:25; 5:6-10, and 5:12-21 (10:531). He views 5:12-21 as an initial climax in the argument, to which the earlier verses were heading and from which later sections flow. Wright strongly upholds the one-time, epochal event of Jesus' death on the cross as the climax of God's action to save humanity from "the wrath to come" (1 Thess 1:10).

In terms of justification, Wright has been strongly criticized on two grounds. The first is that he views justification in mainly eschatological terms: it is a pre-participation in the vindication of the final judgment (10:471). To be sure, the primary reason for discomfort with Wright on this score comes from a lack of appreciation for that strand of the Reformed tradition that comes to us by way of G. Vos, H. Ridderbos, and R. Gaffin—all of whom have made similar points. Nonetheless, in his commentary Wright leaves the most serious question unanswered: How does he hold together the present, anticipatory verdict of "justification by faith alone" with an affirmation that Rom 2:6 speaks of a real (versus hypothetical) future justification on the basis of works? The second place where Wright has been widely criticized is in his adamant declaration that justification is not "entry language," but rather describes God's verdict on those who are already members of the covenant people of God. Here the Romans commentary helps clarify what is perhaps not as obvious elsewhere in Wright's writing. His point is that effectual calling

precedes justification in Paul's *ordo salutis* (10:481). It is the former that contains Paul's theology of regeneration, the work of the Spirit which enables people to come to faith. When this work of effectual calling has enabled a person to exercise faith, *then* the person is justified in the sight of God.

One final note from the standpoint of the Reformed tradition should be sounded. Given the sparse recognition that some facets of the diversity of the Reformed tradition (and Westminster Calvinism in particular) receive, Wright's passive-righteousness-only interpretation of Rom 5:18-19 is bound to raise some eyebrows. Such hesitancy from Reformed readers is nothing that could not be alleviated by a good dose of Calvin (e.g., *Institutes* 2.12.4, 3.11.5, 6, 9, 12, 21, 22) or Gataker (*An Antidote Against Error Concerning Justification* [London: Henry Brome, 1679; microfilm repr. "Early Christian Books, 1641-1700," Ann Arbor, Mich: UMI, 1979]; 5, 15, 19, 20, 24-25).

As for an overall assessment of the commentary, it is well done. Wright does a masterful job of cross-referencing Romans with itself, such that the richness of the letter stands out in sharp relief. This will likely help those who use this commentary from falling into the common trap of preaching various passages as though they were isolated statements of doctrine. In addition, Wright provides a number of intriguing readings that will likely challenge exegetes for some time to come. An example of this is his reading of Rom 2:15, "law written on their hearts," as referring to Gentile Christians (a reading once suggested by Augustine). One complaint about the commentary stems from the way Wright pawns off as "obvious" readings that are, in fact, quite novel to himself and sometimes questionable. His idea that Rom 6-8 provides a sort of retelling of the Exodus narrative is a case in point. At very best, the case is not proven; in no case is it obvious.

There are some minor typographical errors, such as the NRSV translation's being labeled as NIV on more than one occasion (10:414, 469).

The target audience of this commentary falls somewhere between scholar and pastor. In that respect, it serves its stated aim of bringing “the best of contemporary biblical scholarship into the service of the church” (10:xvii). Pastors will find this work exegetically stimulating and will likely be challenged by the application points suggested in the “Reflections.” It is the current reviewer's opinion that the commentary could confidently be given to an educated layperson for consultation, without fear that the theology contained therein would lead the sheep astray from our Reformed fold.

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