

## Is Tom Right?: An Extended Review of N. T. Wright's *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision*

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### Abstract

In this extended review I first describe Wright's complex account of the doctrine of justification in Paul, which combines emphases on the covenant, the lawcourt, Christ and eschatology and includes, further, important translation claims concerning 'the righteousness of God' as God's covenant faithfulness, 'justification' as vindication in a lawcourt setting, 'works of law' as sociological boundary markers, and 'faith' as speaking not infrequently of Christ's fidelity rather than the generic Christian's (although these last two things are not separate; the former grounds the latter making it a badge of Christian membership). I then suggest, second, that Wright needs to recognise more clearly a particular danger in the traditional approach to justification that he is trying to move beyond – 'foundationalist individualism', or 'forward thinking'. That is, the traditional reading of justification in Paul understands him to be arguing and thinking forward, from a nasty, legalistic, and essentially Jewish, plight, to a solution which is a gospel generously grasped by faith alone. This narrative, rooted in a certain reading of Romans 1–4, creates a large number of difficulties. (It begins with natural theology. It characterises Judaism unfairly. It asks a lot of sinful individuals unenlightened by grace. And so on.) And I am not convinced that Wright's complex revisionist account of justification has avoided them all. In particular, (1) he continues to emphasise a particular notion of the lawcourt in Paul's argument and thereby unleashes an account of God's character primarily in terms of retributive justice and hence in terms of Western politics. (2) He tends to define the covenant before he has taken full account of christology. The covenant should be defined by christology, rather than the other way around. One sign that things have not been tied together here as they ought to be is the number of different definitions of Israel that Wright supplies – as many as four. Moreover (3) even his revisionist sociological account of 'works of law' reproduces a key difficulty in the older approach, i.e. a jaundiced description of Judaism. And (4) his account of faith in Abraham does not explicitly link Paul's controversial reification of Genesis 15:6 to a christological hermeneutic, as it needs to in order to avoid crass reductionism. But Wright's definitive account of Paul is not yet fully articulated, so suitable adjustments might well allay my concerns here, with

various aspects of foundationalism presently appearing within his theological description.

**Keywords:** covenant, foundationalism, justification, lawcourt, thinking forward, revisionist, works of law, Wright.

Although occasioned by a spat at the more popular level, *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision*<sup>1</sup> is most interesting to scholars as a window onto N. T. (Tom) Wright's developing attempt to provide a definitive interpretation of Paul, especially at a point of recent contention, the apostle's view of 'justification'. Wright's full statement, although close, is not yet complete.<sup>2</sup> So for the time being we must consult more occasional and at times popular works like *Justification*, aware that further crafting may yet take place. (There is plenty to get on with.<sup>3</sup>)

<sup>1</sup> Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009. All page references hereafter are to this book unless otherwise indicated. Cf. John Piper, *The Future of Justification: A Response to N. T. Wright* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007). Piper's book is commendably charitable in tone but will generally disappoint the specialist. It defends a reading of Paul in strict accordance with the Westminster Confession, but does not generally argue for anything, relying on work done elsewhere and sometimes some time ago. There is no appreciation of major recent movements in Pauline studies – e.g. of the new view of Judaism, post-Sanders. Its position on the historical method is odd (and Wright correctly lambasts this in *Justification*, pp. 46–53, 86–7). Its description of Wright's position is not illuminating (i.e. it is difficult to gain any sense of Wright's actual position from Piper's work). However, some of its concerns are worth noting – certainly with Wright's position on Christian assurance, and his general clarity. Underlying Piper's defence of the doctrine of imputed righteousness one might also detect a concern for a more vicarious emphasis in Wright's account of Paul's christology. I will revisit some of these concerns below.

<sup>2</sup> He has now taken up full-time academic work at the University of St Andrews in large measure to finish this and other such projects.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *inter alia*, "The Messiah and the People of God: A Study in Pauline Theology with Particular Reference to the Argument of the Epistle to the Romans" (DPhil, Oxford, 1980); *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991); *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992); *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996); 'The Law in Romans 2', in J. D. G. Dunn (ed.), *Paul and the Mosaic Law* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1996), pp. 131–50; 'The Letter to the Romans: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections', in L. Keck (ed.), *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2002), pp. 393–770; *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003); *Paul for Everyone: Romans, part 1: Chapters 1–8*, and *Paul for Everyone: Romans, part 2: Chapters 9–16* (London: SPCK, 2004); *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* (London: SPCK, 2005); '4QMMT and Paul: Justification, "Works", and Eschatology', in S. Aaron Son (ed.), *History and Exegesis: New Testament Essays in Honor of Dr E. Earle Ellis on*

Scholars often cavil about two things concerning Wright's work in general which affect our reception of his more focused thoughts on justification.<sup>4</sup> Although these seem less than decisive problems to me, I mention them here only to try to move discussion beyond them:

- (1) They criticise Wright's constant emphasis on the 'covenant' in Paul when the apostle uses the word *διαθήκη* relatively infrequently (cf. Rom 9:4; 11:27; 1 Cor 11:25; 2 Cor 3:6, 14; Gal 3:15, 17; Eph 2:12<sup>5</sup>). But Wright points out that covenant for him merely denotes the broader sense in which Paul affirms an overarching plan or purpose by God in Israel's history,<sup>6</sup> and this is a difficult claim to object to, although specific conceptions of it can vary. I would speak of the promissary nature of pre-Christian Israel, or of Israel's election, and mean much the same thing as Wright means by covenant, but fail, I suspect, to elicit much of the same criticism.
- (2) Wright is often criticised for emphasising a meta-narrative of Israel as fundamental to the interpretation of Paul. But, again, although one can quibble about specifics, it seems likely that Paul does operate with a meta-narrative of some sort and that it is probably Jewish. Research in diverse fields is impressively affirming the importance of narrative templates for human cognition,<sup>7</sup> and it is widely acknowledged that

his 80th Birthday, ed. S. Aaron Son (London: T&T Clark, 2006), pp. 104–32. *Justification* contains a full (impressively long) bibliography on pp. 264–7.

<sup>4</sup> See *inter alia* Mark A. Seifrid, 'Unrighteous by Faith: Apostolic Proclamation in Romans 1:18–3:20', in D. A. Carson, Mark A. Seifrid and Peter T. O'Brien (eds), *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, vol. 2, *The Paradoxes of Paul* (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 2001), pp. 105–46, esp. pp. 118–39; Christ, our Righteousness: *Paul's Theology of Justification* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), pp. 18, 21–5, 39–40; 'In What Sense is "Justification" a Declaration?', *Churchman* 114 (2000), pp. 123–36; and 'The Narrative of Scripture and Justification by Faith: A Fresh Response to N. T. Wright', *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 72 (2008), pp. 19–44.

<sup>5</sup> Both Wright and I view Ephesians as authentically Pauline (cf. pp. 43–4, 168–75, 247).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. 'the single-plan-of-the-creator-through-Abraham-and-Israel-for-the-world' (p. 97; cf. also pp. 94–100). Wright also speaks of the divine 'purpose'.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. esp. Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (3rd edn. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007 [1981]). George Lakoff, *Metaphors we Live by* (2nd edn. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003 [1980]); *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think* (2nd edn. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002 [1996]); and *The Political Mind: A Cognitive Scientist's Guide to your Brain and its Politics* (New York: Penguin, 2009).

Paul's templates derive in the main from Jewish precursors. So once more it seems misguided to deny Wright's claims here in general terms.<sup>8</sup>

With these preliminary quibbles addressed, we should note Wright's positive contributions to the debate.

Wright recognises explicitly that the usual reading of Paul – known rather unhappily as 'the Lutheran reading'<sup>9</sup> – is, at least in certain respects, a major problem which needs to be confronted (although many Pauline scholars still seem to be in a state of denial about this). Wright is a leading champion of the need to reinterpret the apostle in response to this, at times radically – although the best of the old must be retained alongside the new. This is in large measure because he appreciates clearly that various advances, not least in our understanding of Judaism contemporary to Paul, lead us to suspect that the Lutheran reading, with all its privatised and individualised tendencies,<sup>10</sup> is not a good account of Paul. We can therefore search hard for alternative construals of the key texts with a clear conscience, and he does. Moreover, Wright indeed realises that much of this interpretative pressure will be focused on Romans, hence the need to reread that extraordinary letter comprehensively, something he has been doing now for over thirty years.

Wright constantly arranges architectonic dogmatic constructions in relation to exegesis of the text, involving these interpretative dimensions in a broader hermeneutical spiral. This realisation that the complete interpretation

<sup>8</sup> In close relation to the foregoing, Wright can be criticised for introducing Jewish stories into almost everything Paul says, esp. in Romans. He is very much a maximalist in this respect. However, it seems pointless to make blanket charges concerning this practice. Some intertextuality is almost always in play in Paul, as in everyone else, so the basic question is really one of degree. Moreover, if we feed an awareness of reader response into the original epistolary situation(s) then we end up with a spectrum of possible readings, at which point it seems difficult to deny the detection of multiple Jewish echoes along the lines that Wright suggests by any auditors of Paul who were steeped in the Jewish sources. Such auditors would not necessarily be typical listeners, but they can hardly be excluded from the letters' receptions. Hence, we must simply consider the intertextual and narrative dimensions of individual texts as they come up, aware that at times both maximalist and minimalist readings in Jewish intertextual terms may be possible.

<sup>9</sup> Krister Stendahl's famous designation which has long outlived its helpfulness; see 'The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West', *Harvard Theological Review* 56 (1963), pp. 199–215.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. 'the [mistaken] belief that Christian truth is all about me and my salvation' (p. 23; emphasis original); and '[w]e are in orbit around God and his purposes, not the other way around' (p. 24; emphases original).

of Paul requires, at the least, smoothly interlocking readings at the exegetical, argumentative and theoretical (which is to say theological or systematic) levels, is much overlooked but absolutely vital. To omit one of these levels is to limit the necessary conversation and fail to embrace the interpretative fullness which our subject demands.

Wright realises that Paul's description of Judaism must be rendered in more sympathetic and nuanced terms, if this is possible, and he is of course particularly worried by any tendencies to 'de-Judaise' Paul by following an effectively Marcionite hermeneutic – one in which Paul is cut off from his Jewish antecedents. Indeed, Wright seems concerned about this approach on almost every page that he writes. Against this, he emphasises the role that covenantal categories should play, grasping at the same time that significant interpretative pressures must come from Paul's christology, if warranted in its fuller trinitarian setting, and from eschatology, conceiving of the latter in the fully embodied, comprehensive sense appropriate to Paul's day (and in fact as warranted by his christology).<sup>11</sup>

This countervailing interpretative work will lead to different emphases within Paul's thinking. A more robust church and politics will emerge beyond the individualised, privatised and politically anaemic positions of the old Lutheran reading (which tends to recapitulate the domesticated Constantinianism of its precursors), at which point different judgements vis-à-vis the Pauline canon will also become obvious (so Wright's sympathy for Ephesians).<sup>12</sup>

With these broad characterisations in place we can turn to consider Wright's distinctive construal of justification in Paul, although it rather defies summarisation – so I have a degree of sympathy for Piper here. Nevertheless, in *Justification* Wright himself identifies four motifs as central,<sup>13</sup> to which we should add his two (further) key exegetical recommendations.

<sup>11</sup> 'Paul does indeed think of history as a continuous line . . . But within this continuous line there is a mighty crash, like the great chord in the Surprise symphony which wakes everyone up with a start even though it belongs exactly within the harmony and rhythm of the movement: an apocalyptic moment within the covenant story, the moment – to change the musical image – when the soloist bursts into the music with a torrent of violent chords, which yet reveal themselves on reflection as the point towards which the orchestral introduction had been heading all along' (pp. 34–5; emphasis original).

<sup>12</sup> His programmatic emphases on Jewish intertextuality and narrative have already been noted.

<sup>13</sup> 'Paul's doctrine of justification is the place where four themes meet' (p. 11); cf. also pp. 11–13, 86–108 (ch. 4, ss. 2 and 3).

## Covenant

Wright is concerned to argue that a single saving plan of God runs through the history of the world, although in specific relation to Israel. It stretches from the patriarchs through the exodus and the monarchy to the exile (which for Wright is in a sense ongoing), looking forward to eventual national and cosmic redemption. Wright interprets the famous phrase *dikaïosunê theou* in this setting. Often translated ‘the righteousness of (or “from”) God’, he insists that it means rather God’s covenant faithfulness, and that Romans is thematically concerned with this notion (cf. 1:16–17). Similarly, Paul’s discussion of Abraham has this covenantal story in view: Paul working two great covenantal passages into his discussion, Genesis 15 and 17, and returning to the theme when he treats texts drawn from Deuteronomy 27–30 elsewhere. These texts signal that Paul views the great plan, the covenant, being fulfilled in Christ.

## Lawcourt

Wright argues that the important verb *dikaïoô* should not be made to do too much theological work by itself, despite the emphasis on it in much church tradition, but should be understood as part of the much broader story already being developed. In terms of actual meaning, he links it in the first instance to a generic lawcourt setting in ancient Israel, where it denotes the status of being declared innocent in relation to a particular charge – of being vindicated. Hence it does not mean that a person so declared is comprehensively righteous;<sup>14</sup> it is declarative, concerning status, and nothing more. But he also links it to key covenantal passages where it denotes Israel’s final vindication over the nations.<sup>15</sup>

Significantly, two great divine assizes are visible in the story as well: a present assize that Christians pass by means of forgiveness – being justified or declared innocent of particular charges – and a future assize when they will, with the help of the Spirit, be declared thoroughly righteous (i.e. not

<sup>14</sup> Wright is in part trying to avoid here the well-known problem that the verb in Paul is said by some to denote a strange legal fiction – God’s acquittal of sinners despite their guilt. He is also creating the possibility of explaining Christ’s ‘justification’ in terms of ‘vindication’; cf. Rom 1:4; 1 Tim 3:16. Moreover, this commitment problematises the notion of imputed righteousness for Wright; the notion that a judge would somehow transfer his or her righteousness to a defendant in a generic lawcourt just makes no sense to him.

<sup>15</sup> Wright makes an important statement co-ordinating the covenant and lawcourt imagery on p. 100; Daniel is an important text for him in this relation.

technically justified, but judged comprehensively righteous on the basis of deeds).<sup>16</sup>

## Christ

For Wright Christ is the Son of God in the full Chalcedonian sense.<sup>17</sup> In this relation it is worth noting that pneumatology is important for Wright, ultimately generating a trinitarian reading,<sup>18</sup> although Christ's function as Israel's Messiah, the son of David, in whom the covenantal story reaches its goal, and who inaugurates eschatology through his resurrection, is more prominent. Christ achieves these things in large measure by providing the obedience that Israel could not previously offer, the inner truth for Wright of both 'the faithfulness of Christ' and 'the imputed righteousness of Christ'. Christ also, like the kings of old, represents his people, atoning for them. (He has an important future role as well – one of judgement at the second great assize already noted.)

## Eschatology

Wright emphasises that the foregoing story ends eschatologically, which is to say, in the redemption of creation, something inaugurated in Christ.<sup>19</sup>

Wright supplements the preceding narrative with important exegetical claims. Two have already been noted – 'the righteousness of God' understood as covenant faithfulness, and 'justification' understood as a verdict of innocence and consequent vindication in a lawsuit. But two important motifs in Paul's justification texts as yet remain untreated: 'works of law' and 'faith'. Wright needs to integrate these into his developing reading.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Piper is particularly concerned about the insecurities generated by the future judgement here when the imputed righteousness of Christ has been denied. Of course, Christ's perfect imputed righteousness would enable the believer to face this judgement without anxiety, but Wright views any such procedure as incomprehensible and unfaithful to Paul's texts, and Piper's perspective on the final judgement as unnecessarily anxious.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. also the title 'Lord', which denotes variously Christ's heavenly enthronement, sovereignty, rule and divinity.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. pp. 10–11, 106–7.

<sup>19</sup> Here Wright is building on his earlier work undertaken in relation to Jesus as much as to Paul, and inveighing against the pervasive Christian conception of final salvation essentially in terms of the immortality of the soul. Wright wants to emphasise both the embodiment of future salvation and its comprehensive, cosmic breadth; cf. *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003); also *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008).

<sup>20</sup> Any discussion of justification in Paul will tend to involve certain well-defined texts which articulate an opposition between 'works of law' and 'faith' in terms

## Works of law

Wright has famously emphasised the sociological and ethnic dimensions of ‘works of law’ in Paul, prompted especially by a particular reading of Galatians 2:11–14 in context, supported by key texts and episodes from Jewish history. Paul criticises such works, he contends, for their potential function as rather exclusive boundary markers, effectively shutting Jews off from the pagan nations that surround them when they are supposed to be a light to those nations, mediating God’s presence to them. Works thereby become a badge of inappropriate ethnic pride and participate in a selfish, exclusive and hoarding mentality. Moreover, as Paul transcends these troublesome practices in Christ, he thereby also transcends ethnicity *per se*, moving the church beyond bounded cultural and national disputes.<sup>21</sup>

## Faith

Wright endorses the subjective construal of Paul’s half-dozen or so *pistis Christou* genitive constructions (cf. Rom 3:22, 26; Gal 2:16 (twice); 20; 3:22; Phil 3:9; Eph 3:12), speaking of ‘the faithfulness of Christ’ as well as of human faith, but he folds this fairly directly into his overarching covenantal narrative; the fidelity of Christ discloses the covenant fidelity of God (cf. Rom 1:17; 3:21–2). Beyond these texts and this question Wright tends to speak of faith as a ‘badge’, that is, a sign of involvement in God’s saving purposes rather than an act which effects such involvement (cf. Rom 4:11; and pp. 207–10). Abraham demonstrates the original presence of this badge with the inception of Israel, when the covenantal story begins in earnest. But Christians, of course, currently continue to sport this badge as well as a sign of their membership within the people of God, although not in any proud ethnic sense.

With this brief summary of Wright’s construal of justification in Paul complete we are left asking what to make of such a dazzling array of narratives and exegetical manoeuvres. Clearly there is a great deal going on – a wealth of interpretation both new and old – and it would be foolish to disagree with much of it. But, as we turn to evaluation, I suggest that we can detect: (1) a further necessity; (2) an ongoing weakness; and (3) concerns with some subordinate aspects of Wright’s construal of Paul’s theorising. My emphasis in what follows will fall on this third anxiety; the first two can be introduced quite briefly.

of righteousness or justification – in the Greek, texts which use a lot of *pistis*- and *dikaio-* language, and also the phrase *ergon nomou*. These are found principally in Rom 1–4, 10, Gal 2–3, and Phil 3.

<sup>21</sup> Eph 2 speaks strongly of these concerns for Wright.



First, I think there is still a need for more close exegesis of Romans. Wright's own reading of Romans is so different from the broad consensus evident in the commentaries that we need a blow-by-blow account of the primary text in the Greek which demonstrates the superiority of his reading over against the alternative accounts. Wright has provided us with detailed treatments of key points, and with a broad articulation of his reading, but not with the fully fledged academic commentary that his revisions really necessitate.<sup>22</sup> (J. D. G. Dunn has fulfilled this requirement, and in relation to Galatians as well as Romans.<sup>23</sup>)

Secondly, Wright talks a lot about grand conceptions of history but does not locate Paul very tightly in history, which is to say that his readings, especially of Romans, lack contingency. Although he disavows treating Paul's texts in systematic terms, this is in effect what he does.<sup>24</sup> And this violates a basic methodological axiom in Pauline studies – that all the apostle's texts should be carefully contextualised.<sup>25</sup> Romans in Wright's hands reads more like an early 'Theology of the New Testament' than a letter addressing the specific concerns of the small Christian congregations at Rome.<sup>26</sup> Addressing this concern will not necessarily change anything that Wright wants to say

<sup>22</sup> Perhaps for Wright his 1980 doctoral thesis, 'The Messiah and the People of God', fills this role, but it is inaccessible and presumably a bit dated. (Should a revised version be published?) Key studies of detailed questions for Romans include 'The Law in Romans 2', *The Climax of the Covenant*, chs. 2 and 10–13, pp. 18–40, 193–257, and '4QMMT and Paul: Justification, "Works", and Eschatology'. His reading of Romans in total is best gleaned from his thesis and 'The Letter to the Romans' (see n. 4). Paul's eschatology is treated in detail in *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, although the critical primary texts come from the Corinthian correspondence. I have learned a great deal from Wright's exegesis, which can be deeply insightful. He has recently led me to rethink substantially my account of Rom 4:17–22, and I am grateful for it.

<sup>23</sup> See esp. *Romans 1–8* and *Romans 9–16* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1988); and *Galatians*, BNTC (London: A&C Black, 1993).

<sup>24</sup> Wright's comments on the bottom of p. 40 in *Justification* are most indicative.

<sup>25</sup> J.-C. Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), esp. pp. 11–19; cf. also pp. 23–36; and pp. xiii–xx in the 1984 paperback edn.

<sup>26</sup> Wright would doubtless reply that he does generally treat Paul's letters circumstantially but that Romans is a special case – its peculiar circumstances entailed that a largely systematic letter was called for. Suffice it to say that I don't find this rejoinder persuasive. I don't find Wright's account of Romans' contingency persuasive in its own terms. I also think a better account can be provided, which leads to a different treatment of the letter body. Moreover, I don't find the evidence persuasive in support of the further claim that 'this' is how Paul argues systematically when the need arises; in my view this basically begs the question, and is contradicted by evidence from elsewhere in Paul's corpus – a little ironically, particularly from Ephesians! But these are complex matters best treated elsewhere. See my *The Deliverance of God: An Apocalyptic Rereading of Justification in Paul* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), ch. 13, pp. 469–518.

about Paul, but it will add an important interpretative layer, along with a greater degree of control, to his suggested readings.

We turn now to my main set of concerns with what *Justification* recommends. I suggest that some nasty traps lurk here in Paul that Wright runs the risk of falling into, although in order to identify and avoid them we need to make a brief detour in our discussion.

I have recently argued that the main difficulty in the Lutheran reading of Paul at the theoretical level is what we might call ‘foundationalist individualism’.<sup>27</sup> Some Pauline scholars might object that such concerns are too theoretical if not theological; we can safely set them to one side and simply attend to the text. Fortunately, both Wright and I would demur immediately to this objection. Dogmatic frameworks are inevitably in play in any reading of Paul, as witnessed to especially clearly by the debate which occasioned Wright’s *Justification* in the first place. Moreover, any account of ‘justification’ in Paul almost always holds the apostle to be speaking in some sense *doctrinally*, which is to say, articulating a particular theory about salvation in his justification texts. Just note the extent to which it is assumed that when Paul speaks of ‘justification’ he is in fact speaking of some coherent and distinctive theory; this assumption does not follow from his mere use of the cognate Greek participle.<sup>28</sup> The theoretical dimension is therefore always involved in any interpretation of such texts – even if ultimately only to be rejected – and we need to be as transparent as possible about it because of its complexity and hermeneutical power.

But what is important about a diagnosis of the Lutheran reading’s pathology in terms of foundationalist individualism? I suggest that it is this specific theoretical or theological dynamic which underlies most of our problems in this relation, and so I will introduce it here to ask whether Wright has navigated past it successfully or not, or let him argue by way of reply that this is not in fact the key theoretical conundrum facing us in the discussion of justification in Paul. There are two interrelated problems in my diagnosis in these terms.

First, the Lutheran reading is foundationalist, meaning that it builds from a definitive account of ‘the problem’ to its account of ‘the solution’. So, as E. P. Sanders said insightfully, this approach to Paul assumes that he is ‘thinking forward’,<sup>29</sup> although I would emphasise that this is an epistemological, not

<sup>27</sup> Cf. *The Deliverance of God*, *passim*. These are, incidentally, key issues not at all peculiar to my work which I simply want to introduce into the conversation.

<sup>28</sup> Wright resists just this notion on pp. 86–8.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), pp. 434–5, 38–40, 42, 74–85. Note, Sanders can put this point in

a phenomenological or psychological claim.<sup>30</sup> Unfortunately, this approach generates all sorts of problems for accurate Christian thinking; indeed, some would argue that it is the problem for right knowledge about God.

Foundationalism establishes its own truth criteria initially – its foundation – so that it can then build to a solution. Consequently, it rests ultimately on human effort, at which point it is subject to human self-deception and self-ratification – the tendencies to endorse theologically a construction of the self and its culture and politics. At the same time, it rests on problematic ontological and epistemological claims by assuming that intrinsically sinful beings can somehow reason about God with clarity on all the key questions without making recourse to God. (This generates some of the anthropological dualism which rightly concerns Wright.) Moreover, as we would expect from such a starting point, in the midst of fallen, sinful beings, it generally fails; it does not succeed in grasping the truth about God – the lesson of repeated attempts to do just this in church history, none of which seems to have proved plausible. Paradoxically, foundationalism consequently tends to create the antithesis of its intended goal in atheism.<sup>31</sup> In a further tragedy, advocates of this approach often go on to resist revelation, overruling the truth criteria contained in the Christ event in the name of their own flawed and self-ratifying criteria. (Paul seems to suggest that truth is simply revealed by the Christ event in texts like Gal 1:15–16.)

These are serious problems, generated by all foundationalist variants. And if we hold Paul to be thinking forward at any point, perhaps in his justification texts, then we are committed to his involvement in these difficulties *whether we are aware of this or not*. But foundationalism occurs in specific variations, when further variant-specific problems can occur.

The Lutheran reading of Paul belongs to a family of voluntarist foundationalisms orientated anthropologically and so appropriately dubbed ‘foundationalist individualism’. This model revolves around a person conceived of fundamentally as an individual with a degree of essentially rationalistic capacity, sin notwithstanding.<sup>32</sup> The resulting model

different ways. Often he asserts that scholars have been reading Paul ‘backwards’ when they have been articulating him prospectively.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. J. Louis Martyn, ‘Epistemology at the Turn of the Ages’, in *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark; Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1997), pp. 89–110 (orig. 1967).

<sup>31</sup> M. Buckley’s incisive thesis: cf. *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987).

<sup>32</sup> See Helmut Thielicke, *The Evangelical Faith*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena*, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1974 [1968]). I use the adjective ‘rationalistic’ to denote an especially confident, post-Enlightenment view of ‘reason’ in humanity. The possession

concentrates on this individual's journey, given the right realisations, from a situation of sin, prototypically found in Judaism, through to salvation by the Christian gospel. Indeed, quite a powerful if harsh explanation is thereby generated for things like Paul's transcendence of law observance and Judaism.

But the assumptions which drive the definition of the problem go on to colour its solution as well. The individual journey takes place in the problem away from the punishment of a sternly just God. In the solution these punishments are redirected onto Christ, and Christ's contribution to salvation is consequently focused almost entirely on the cross, this work being interpreted in terms of penal satisfaction. As a result, christology in its full sense is really subordinated to the model's prior forensic assumptions about God.

This just God is clearly satisfied by the fulfilment of certain conditions – at first, the stringent condition of complete law observance but, secondly, in the softer, more generous Christian phrase, the condition of faith. (Other conditions can be added, depending on the specific variant.) This conditional aspect of both phases in the model corresponds to its sustained focus on the individual who is asked to act in certain ways for consequentialist reasons such as gaining heaven and avoiding hell. This then imparts self-interested and contractual qualities to the basic soteriological arrangements characterising both of the main phases; if and only if certain things are done in fulfilment of specified conditions will particular results take place.<sup>33</sup> It is interesting to note the characterisation of Jews in just these terms in much of our literature – as self-interested, even mercantile, legalists.<sup>34</sup>

I suggest – in a move Wright will be entirely comfortable with – that much of the current theological description of Paul is informed by this underlying foundationalism and individualism. (Note that it is found not the least in Piper's account of Paul.<sup>35</sup>) Its key metaphors and narrative

of this nature and degree of reason in humanity can – and should – be denied but the rational aspect of humanity still affirmed.

<sup>33</sup> It ought to be emphasised that God is depicted as fundamentally just – i.e. in essentially retributive terms – in this schema; this is his basic nature and posture towards humanity underlying the broad contracts which constrain the cosmos. He can therefore be conditioned into benevolence towards a smaller group who contract out of their situation in dependence on the work of Christ. But this whole arrangement is essentially secondary, taking place within the framework established by the prior definition of the problem. In this whole relation see the incisive treatment by James B. Torrance, 'Covenant or Contract? A Study of the Theological Background of Worship in Seventeenth-Century Scotland', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 23 (1970), pp. 54–66.

<sup>34</sup> This claim is documented further in *The Deliverance of God*, ch. 4, pp. 96–124.

<sup>35</sup> Things are of course usually not stated this baldly. The model is often concealed – doubtless at times unintentionally – by technical exegetical displays, not to mention

frequently seem to underlie more superficial, diverse, technical discussions of the meaning(s) of Paul's texts.<sup>36</sup> And it should be immediately apparent why many interpreters of Paul, including Wright and myself, are worried by this approach's endorsement. Such interpreters are seeing the wrong story in Paul for much of the time – the wrong grand narrative. This is not really a story of God's saving action in Christ on behalf of humanity in terms of grace and love at all. Many of the account's consequences seem odd, jarring and even sinister, and much in Paul seems to stand directly against it – points where another story seems plainly to be going on. It is, in short, well past time to find our way back to the right story of Paul's gospel (cf. Gal 2:11–14).<sup>37</sup>

We come now to the nub of my concern with Wright's developing project. I am not convinced that he is yet using the tactics necessary 'on the ground' for the complete elimination of foundationalist individualism from Paul –

mitigated by an easy blending of dogmatic categories when that seems necessary. Cf. *The Deliverance of God*, chs. 9 and 10, pp. 284–337. Piper's *The Future of Justification* is (again) a pristine example of these dynamics.

<sup>36</sup> It should also now be apparent why calling this construct the Lutheran reading, when it occurs in some variation in Paul, is unhelpful. This model can be found in Luther, and is even dominant in some of his later disciples, like Melancthon. But a great deal in Luther is not reducible to this approach and even stands firmly against it. The legacy of the entire Reformation meanwhile should emphatically *not* be reduced to this approach. Moreover, the Catholic tradition is arguably characterised by similar ambiguity. Wright is constantly concerned in *Justification* to introduce similar qualifications in relation to the heritage of the Reformation.

<sup>37</sup> Someone might query at this point whether I am overstating the antithesis between foundationalist and non-foundationalist accounts of Paul's thought. I don't think so. This is in effect the difference between finding in Paul the endorsement of Athanasius or of Arius, of orthodoxy or heresy. Does Paul's gospel witness to the trinitarian faith of the church through the ages, or does he witness to its opposite? The stakes here simply couldn't be higher, and anyone denying this probably hasn't grasped the nature and gravity of the issues involved. Having said this, the situation is even more precariously poised in Paul than this because few doubt that in many texts he *does* witness to a retrospective, christological gospel, that is, to the orthodox, non-foundationalist approach. Consequently, to admit an alternative, foundationalist account of the 'gospel' in any significant way to other parts of his thinking is not merely to corrupt an unalloyed witness to the true gospel and to risk overriding that witness but also to characterise his thought as being in a state of fundamental confusion. This is why I view these questions as critical. It is hard to put the issues more clearly than A. I. C. Heron, 'Homooousios with the Father', in T. F. Torrance (ed.), *The Incarnation: Ecumenical Studies in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed A.D. 381* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1981), pp. 58–87. The case for a contradictory Paul has been made most famously by Heikki Räisänen in *Paul and the Law* (2nd edn. WUNT 29; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1987 [1983]).

the overarching strategic goal on which I think we are agreed – without, moreover, causing further difficulties.

Before going into details, however, we should recall that any battle to drive foundationalist individualism out of Paul will almost certainly take place through the apostle's 'justification' texts, and especially through Romans 1–3 (specifically 1:18–3:20). It is here that the all-important account of 'the problem' in essentially individualistic, contractual and conditional terms takes place. (Certainly it does not seem possible to launch this model from anywhere else in Paul.) This definition then drives the account of 'the solution' that is articulated from 3:21–4:25 (being anticipated by 1:16–17), overriding any subsequent contribution by Paul's christology to that account, perhaps from Romans 5–8, and transferring its own account of matters into analogous texts elsewhere in Paul (i.e. other justification texts). It is, in short, this stretch of text in its usual rendering – Romans 1–4 – which unleashes the beast of foundationalist individualism within the interpretation of the apostle, and hence my special interest in how Wright deals with this material.

#### Four areas of concern in Wright's recommended construal

##### *lawcourt*

As we have already seen, Wright endorses the lawcourt as one of four fundamental elements in his reconstrual of justification in Paul alongside christology, eschatology and the covenant,<sup>38</sup> and this concerns me. Any unreconstructed deployment of judicial imagery into Paul's soteriology must unleash foundationalist individualism. Moreover, few discourses are more prone to subliminal cultural projection than judicial ones. In the West such imagery would obviously seem to be retributive, contractual and conditional, and there is even a sinister translation history attesting to this cultural projection in relation to Paul.<sup>39</sup> Hence, we need to tread very carefully at these points. And, unfortunately, little to no impact from christology or eschatology is apparent on Wright's notion of the lawsuit, which is invoked constantly and at fairly critical points but never rethought or reconstructed christologically in any substantial sense as it ought to be. His treatment of

<sup>38</sup> Cf. pp. 68–70, 90–2, 100–2.

<sup>39</sup> The apostle's Greek *dikaio-* terms (originally often reflecting Hebrew terms from *tsdq*) have been translated in terms of Latin *iust-* terms leading ultimately to the English 'justice' (etc.); the Hebrew *torah* and Greek *nomos* have been rendered as *lex* and ultimately 'law'; and, perhaps most damagingly, *berit* and *diathékē* have been rendered in terms of *foedus*, which has passed into much law as 'contract' as against 'covenant', or even as 'covenant' with the actual meaning of 'contract'. (Wright touches on these issues on pp. 88–92; see also J. B. Torrance, 'Covenant versus Contract'.)

this motif is generally quite generic. When Wright asks the right questions he comes close to the right answers; he notes the performative nature of a 'verdict' (p. 69), and is well aware that Christ's resurrection functions soteriologically (p. 106). But he tends to translate the key christological forensic texts in terms of 'vindication', which is a fair claim in general terms but probably not what Paul is getting at in these texts.<sup>40</sup> Wright's strong reliance on Romans 2, a text to which he assimilates christology, and marginalisation of Romans 6:6–8, an overtly christological text, are then telling.<sup>41</sup> In this last argument we receive the most explicit christological account of forensic terminology in Paul and learn that *dikaiô* in relation to Christ and his resurrection – and note the eschatological emphasis in this christology – must mean 'liberate', 'deliver' or 'set free'. This is a fair connotation of the forensic verb in its performative aspect; a verdict sets someone free from accusation, oppression and even imprisonment, and is often the 'right' thing to do, hence the use of the root *dik-*. But the right act in the situation of imprisonment under Sin and Death facing all people is to set the prisoners free *tout court*, at which point the indicative connotation present in other uses of the verb is dropped. No thought is necessarily being given in this narrative to anyone's conditional satisfaction of certain requirements, but it is just this absence which allows the sinister conditional implications of lawcourt imagery to be transcended. All are sinful; we know this. God's

<sup>40</sup> Cf. pp. 92, 157, 223.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. pp. 225, 29–33, 39. Wright tends to reply at such points that his position is simply in the texts. But they are only 'in' the texts because of the way he is reading them. Hence, this rejoinder would be fair if no exegetical alternatives were available, but they are. Indeed, in this relation Wright arguably conflates Paul's future judgement texts a little carelessly. I do not concede that any except Rom 2 describe a scenario in which salvation itself is at stake and in strict relation to deeds – i.e. future accountability conceived of in terms of desert. And I contend that there are lots of good reasons for reading Rom 2 in a way which does not relate its claims strictly to Paul's positions. In my view, all the other future judgement texts in Paul denote accountability. But most personal situations of accountability do not involve calculi of desert – only serious western judicial processes. And clearly it is a great matter to project such a process into the final action of God, reducing him to conditionality at the end, and apparently irrespective of both christology and faith! It is worth noting finally that 1 Cor 3 seems to stand in explicit contradiction to this scenario; the deeds themselves will be exposed, but the doer of unsatisfactory deeds will be saved, albeit through fire. All in all, it seems that we can read Paul another way, and at this point we probably should. Cf. esp. Martinus C. de Boer, 'Paul and Apocalyptic Eschatology', in J. J. Collins (ed.), *The Encyclopaedia of Apocalypticism*, vol. 1, *The Origins of Apocalypticism in Judaism and Christianity* (New York: Continuum, 1999), pp. 345–83; and Stephen Travis, *Christ and the Judgment of God: The Limits of Divine Retribution in New Testament Thought* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009).

right act is then the ‘amnesty of grace’,<sup>42</sup> made especially clear in Christ, but running all the way back through the history of Israel in the covenant as well. It is, moreover, precisely this act of utterly unconditional – but very costly – divine benevolence which supplies the ‘brothers’ with unshakeable assurance no matter what the present or future brings; this is the verdict of God.<sup>43</sup>

In short, Wright is not faithful to his own announced programme in relation to the all-important metaphor of the lawcourt; he does not press the implications of his eschatological christology far enough, substantially redefining forensic imagery in performative and liberative terms – and these only. The result is that he shoos the Lutheran reading of Paul out of the front door but immediately lets it in again through the back.<sup>44</sup>

### *Covenant*

In something of an irony, Wright’s account of the covenant is arguably insufficiently christological. It is a step, if not a leap, beyond many competing interpretations, to be sure, but is still arguably constricted. For Wright Jesus certainly fulfils the covenant as the Messiah, but he has less impact on the nature of the covenant, and this opens the door dangerously to prior

<sup>42</sup> Elsa Tamez’ felicitous phrase in *The Amnesty of Grace: Justification by Faith from a Latin American Perspective*, trans. Sharon H. Ringe (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1993).

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Rom 8:30, 33. Wright notes how John’s Gospel has grasped this point, apparently with approval, but curiously resists reading Paul in the same way; cf. p. 263, n. 4.

<sup>44</sup> My suspicion is that some of Wright’s maintenance of an amount of traditional unreconstructed judgement language in Paul is rooted in ethical concern. But he doesn’t need such a strongly open-ended, future scenario to generate ethical traction within Paul’s gospel. When the apostle was challenged concerning ethical laxity he did not respond in Rom 6 with future threats but with a strong reiteration of transformation in Christ, coupled with an argument for the unintelligibility of sinfulness (and this is where his argument references the future – in consequential terms). And this should not surprise us. To underplay the ethical effectiveness of the Christ event is effectively to undermine Paul’s entire gospel! If Christ has not come and truly dealt with sin then we are still in it, and perhaps to be pitied above all people. Certainly, leaving key parts of the law behind seems unintelligible. Perhaps then Wright underestimates the ontological realism which seems to underpin many of Paul’s claims at such points. It is true that we are to ‘regard’ each other as dead to sin and alive to righteousness in Christ, but this is no mere change of viewpoint; it is a regard grounded in the underlying reality of what we are regarding! This is one of the main claims of Rom 5:12–21, the passage which frames ch. 6. If we take Paul at his word regarding life in Christ, then there is no need for heavy reliance on a future scenario which will threaten the disobedient in Christ with definitive exclusion and punishment. Paul’s ethics in Christ seem to make such threats unnecessary, and his christology makes such a scenario implausible.



conceptions of the covenant ultimately controlling christology – a reversal of the correct explanatory pressure. Surely Christ is, for Paul, the content of the covenant and not just its climax. Hence the whole notion of the covenant itself must be thought through in the light of Christ. As a result of this the people of Israel must be primarily promissory – the bearers both of the promises concerning Christ and of his concrete biological lineage (cf. Rom 9:4–5). There is of course more to say than this, but this must be said and said first. This means further that there are now no other critical stages or terms of involvement in the covenant – a fortuitous thing because the consequences are dire if there are.<sup>45</sup> I can, however, find four different definitions of Israel and the Jews in Wright's work, which is really three too many ('spiritual' Israel in accordance with Rom 2:25–9, hidden and righteous by works; Israel saved by faith, like Abraham; sinful Israel, hoarding works of law having been given them by Moses; and elect Israel heading towards the promised Messiah). A strictly christological account of Israel's covenant only generates one definition: an elect Israel, journeying concretely through history and heading towards the promised Messiah – who has now come, God with us!<sup>46</sup>

Such an approach roots the covenant in an event of revelation which is impervious to human acts of interpretation or challenge. It can thereby avoid any charges of historicising – the vulnerability generated by the construction of the grounds of the covenant in scholarly terms, which yields an academic foundationalist covenantalism. Do we know that Israel is structured covenantally because Christ reveals this, or because Wright's essentially historical reconstruction of Jewish history demonstrates this – because any right-thinking reading of the Jewish sources leads to this conclusion? If we stress this last position too strongly it is a perilously anachronistic and fragile basis for assertions about the covenantal nature of Israel, although it is entirely understandable as a response to the christological premise.

<sup>45</sup> God's integrity is called directly into account if the covenant functions in different stages with an earlier stage bound to fail. The mediator becomes formally unnecessary – a stop-gap. God then loses his christological nature, actually becoming another sort of God. Grace becomes secondary. And sin is treated trivially and also redefined nomistically, rather than in opposition to grace, where its depth and absurdity are apparent. These issues are put well by Karl Barth in special relation to federal theology; cf. *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark [Continuum], 2004 [1956]), pp. 54–66. J. B. Torrance points out some of the further dangers of conditionality in 'Covenant versus Contract'.

<sup>46</sup> This account can include a programmatic emphasis on faith, suitably interpreted. Unsuitably interpreted, faith creates an alternative account of Israel. See more on this just below.

A rigorously christological approach, in addition, defines the covenant unconditionally.<sup>47</sup> The covenant as revealed in Christ is fundamentally benevolent, even towards the most recalcitrant, and as such has no contractual features at all, merely specifications of response. God will never abandon Israel – or the church (cf. Rom 11:28–9; although this does not rule out the absurd possibilities that Israel and the church will abandon God). Assurance, resting in God's unconditional love, is thereby itself assured – the plain message of Romans 5:1–11 and 8:14–39. Mercifully, it seems clear, at least in Paul, that the covenant never was and never will be a contract, and anybody who argues otherwise is being insufficiently covenantal.<sup>48</sup>

### *Works of law*

In the light of the foregoing presuppositional realisations, it follows that 'works of law' will have to be handled very carefully indeed in semantic and argumentative terms. Most interpreters construe 'works of law' as part of a soteriological contract operating in Judaism prior to the coming of Christ. Works are also of course fundamentally negative; their pursuit must end in failure, thereby preparing Jews to become Christians. And this seems broadly fair to the texts, especially Romans 1–3, where Paul seems overtly negative about them and has usually been held to argue forwards. But this reading thereby treats 'works' as a prior phase – a contract – and so launches a conditional foundationalism which culminates in a rendering of the Christian gospel in individualist and contractual terms as well. Additionally, it crushes Judaism necessarily into a self-referentially negative posture. The problem here then is not so much the negation of works as the *location* of that negation in a prior descriptive phase which launches a forward-moving argument in Paul.

Wright has famously modified the usual reading of works. (Dunn's name is also closely associated with this.) Works of law are understood to refer to particular Jewish practices associated especially with ethnic definition. As we have already noted, Paul's difficulty is then not imperfection *per se* in general ethical terms, resulting in eschatological accountability before God, but the separation of Jews from pagans, jeopardising their God-given mission to the nations.

<sup>47</sup> Wright seems ambiguous here. Sometimes the covenant is described as 'unbreakable' (i.e. presumably unconditional; cf. p. 226), but at others it has conditions and is therefore necessarily breakable (cf. p. 63).

<sup>48</sup> Arguably a resolutely christological approach also eliminates *ex definitio* the notion of supersessionism. But this is not the place to elaborate that claim, significant as it is.

This suggestion has been widely debated. Suffice it to say that certain questions still need to be answered. It has been asked in particular if this is the best reading of the phrase in context; certainly Romans is less supportive than Galatians in this respect. I have been puzzled, further, about how all this works as a broader argument leading to some endorsement of 'faith' over against 'works' as the key saving practice (leaving aside momentarily the critical issue whether the latter is appropriative or responsive; see more on this just below).<sup>49</sup> Most important for our present concerns, however, is the observation that this reading still construes the direction of the basic justification antithesis between works and faith forwards. It therefore retains the troubling foundationalism of the Lutheran reading, its anti-Jewishness (because it still begins with a negative account of non-Christian reality orientated by the typical Jew), and its debilitating contractual features, which undermine any authentic accounts of either Israel's covenant or the gospel of grace in unconditional terms. With this rereading of works of law then we seem to have shifted keys but the basic tune remains wrong; we are still arguing in the same problematic direction.

Moreover, in Wright's story, two quite distinct definitions of Israel have now been unleashed – one generated retrospectively in the light of Christ,

<sup>49</sup> Wright and Dunn both make their case for this reading primarily in Galatians. They need a certain construal of the brief and contested Gal 2:11–14 to hold firm, along with a plausible continuation through some of Paul's most difficult material which begins in 2:15. (They argue in slightly different ways of course, and interpret *pistis* very differently.) This fragile case seems to me to struggle desperately in Romans though. The key phrase occurs in 3:20, but seems overtly anticipated by 2:6–8, 13–16, where generic works of righteousness are indisputably in view. That is, the context favours the traditional reading, and nothing in the context of 3:20 supports the alternative, sociological account. 4:2–8 can then hardly overrule these earlier indications, and any attempt to do so would rely in turn on a definitive reading of another very difficult, contested text (i.e. Rom 4). I assess this reading, in Dunn's hands, in more detail in *The Deliverance of God*, pp. 444–55; a detailed discussion of Rom 4 is on pp. 715–61. To exegetical fragility we must add the argumentative weaknesses of the reading; it provides no coherent rationale for 'faith' as the apparently critical new indicator of Christian identity and salvation. Dunn is more vulnerable to this critique than Wright because he retains the traditional reading of faith as the Christian's act of appropriation of the gospel. There is then, for him, no coherent argumentative journey from the constricting ethnicity of works of law to salvation by faith alone; the correct response to hoarding works would be unselfish sharing, while it is difficult to conceive of the correct response to ethnic practices *per se*, but it is unlikely to be faith. (Hegel provided detailed arguments for this position, in terms of universality and particularity, but New Testament scholars like Dunn do not generally endorse those.) Wright's reading of faith is rather different from Dunn's, but I fail to see how it answers these particular argumentative concerns.

and the other prospectively and negatively in some relation to works of law (to mention just the strictly relevant difficulties here). Hence, either God is being unfair in some way, or Paul is muddled. Or perhaps we are. Certainly it is hard to see how this reading allows Wright to maintain a unified sense of the covenant in relation to Israel which begins and ends in Christ.

The only way forward in support of Wright's overarching goals must actually be through a reading of 'works of law' in retrospective terms. They must reflect negatively in some way out of Christ's fulfilment of Israel's purpose, which always was characterised in a (christological) sense by faith; they must be some misguided 'religious' response to grace. Only in this way can the unconditionality, unity and benevolence of the covenant be preserved. Hence Wright needs to find another interpretative option for this motif or risk undermining his whole project.<sup>50</sup> (But then perhaps he will now be able to make a grand concession.<sup>51</sup>)

#### *Conditionality*

If conditionality and foundationalism threaten to sneak back into Wright's reading of Paul when he discusses the basic lawcourt framework of justification and the function of works of law in the theory's first phase, then a strongly conditional emphasis in the gospel can achieve the same unfortunate end. If 'faith' is a condition which must be fulfilled in order to appropriate the salvation offered by what is then really a second contract, conditionality and contractualism will be reflected back through Paul's entire argument.

Once again, Wright is well aware of this danger so he interprets faith primarily as a badge. As we have seen, he also endorses the subjective construal of various genitive constructions generating emphases at such points on Christ's faithfulness rather than on the faith of the Christian in Christ. With these decisions he is very much on the right track. But one wonders again whether he has been sufficiently christological and eschatological to reach his overarching goal.

<sup>50</sup> Wright's contingent weakness hurts him esp. at this point. Martyn has charted a viable way forward here, reading 'works of law' in relation to a Jewish Christian teacher who misunderstands Paul's gospel of grace and corrupts it retrospectively with the addition of particular Jewish conditions. (In Wright's parlance we could say that this Jewish Christian misunderstands his own Jewish story.) This concrete contingency could well be the reason why Paul wrote his justification texts. See Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1997).

<sup>51</sup> It is critical to note that Wright's important sociological and supra-ethnic concerns can still be retained, if not strengthened, by an alternative, retrospective reading of works. These positions are not all mutually exclusive.

Wright emphasises the badge of faith in Abraham as well, and thereby pushes faith as a key practice back through Israel (in fact one of his four definitions of Israel). But if faith is separated from inclusion in Christ at any point then Wright has engaged in a bizarre reduction of Israel, in defiance of much of its history, to an oddly Protestant entity – a reduction that is, furthermore, merely asserted (that is, we never learn why faith has suddenly become the virtue *par excellence*, and has excluded all others necessarily). It follows that he desperately needs his reading of Abraham in Romans 4 by Paul to be framed by a christological hermeneutic. But I am not sure to what extent he is involving his christology at these points. Wright's usual emphasis in discussions of faith is on the covenantal story, which might be construed christologically but, equally possibly, might not be. His treatment of 'the faithfulness of Christ' does not inspire confidence at this point. Wright tends to fold this into his covenantal narrative, when arguably the phrase denotes much more directly the christological and eschatological motifs which he very much needs at these points but tends not to emphasise.

Arguably the faithfulness of Christ in Paul is principally a metaleptic reference to Christ's broader narrative which culminates in resurrection and ascension; the faith of Christ presages eschatological salvation.<sup>52</sup> Faith is therefore, as Wright intimates, a badge, but of inclusion of the believer by the Spirit in Christ and his eschatological life, as against in some prior covenantal construct. Now all this is of course intrinsically related to Israel, but on this reading Christ rather than faith *per se* is the inner meaning of the prior covenant with Israel; faith is the badge in Abraham which anticipates the narrative of Christ. And at this point we are right where we need to be. All the foundationalist problems potentially triggered by the motif of faith in Paul's arguments have been avoided, not to mention an avenue opened up for a straightforward connection with Paul's participatory arguments concerning soteriology in Romans 5–8. Israel's definition in Paul is still unitary and unconditional – in short, fully covenantal. And faith for Paul turns out to be a gifted virtue mediated by participation in Christ – a thoroughly Reformed claim.

I wonder – in drawing this critical discussion to a close – if there is not a single methodological problem underlying all of the foregoing, more specific difficulties, namely, a lack of complete awareness on Wright's part

<sup>52</sup> It has already been noted that Wright himself has, a little ironically, said a great deal about this narrative; his good friend Richard Hays has written the classic account of the contentious *pistis* genitives, where the christological narrative is clear: *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1–4:11* (2nd edn. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002 [1983]).

of the dynamics and dangers of foundationalism, which appear in Pauline analysis more specifically in the form of readings which argue forward as against backward.<sup>53</sup> Constructive analysis needs to press consistently away from the former and towards the latter as rigorously as is possible – and the covenantal definition of Israel is as much at stake in this as anything else. But Wright's approach to Paul's reinterpretation is more complex than this relatively simple agenda and consequently risks compromising it.

That is, Wright is arguably insufficiently rigorous in purging motifs and arguments which unleash individualism, contractualism and conditionality into Paul's description, which tend to be interrelated problems. Vestiges of these may re-emerge, reasserting some of the features he wants to eliminate. His emphasis on a future judgement by works is arguably one such moment, and a critical one. Furthermore, he is clearly concerned to counteract wherever possible an effectively Marcionite reading of Paul. But he often seems to react to individualism (etc.) merely antithetically,<sup>54</sup> at a presuppositional level, and thereby risks endorsing an alternative, ultimately equally dangerous foundationalism<sup>55</sup> – a salvation-historical one.<sup>56</sup> This is emphatically *not* to be confused with the need to endorse retrospectively a certain salvation-history, which Wright is very good at – although clearly considerable confusion can result if these two salvation-historical

<sup>53</sup> Indeed, perhaps something of a general historicising tendency is detectable in much of his work – a typically modern form of foundationalism. But there is insufficient space to document this suspicion here. Note, this is *not* to negate the value either of history or of historical investigation, but only to suggest that these should not function foundationally.

<sup>54</sup> That is, asserting corporate categories in place of individual ones, historical analysis instead of ahistorical treatments, and a canonically sensitive, progressive position over against the rather harsh testamentary opposition affirmed by vulgar Lutheranism.

<sup>55</sup> The political problems of a foundationalist salvation-history are perhaps never seen more clearly than in their endorsement of Afrikaaner theology and politics during the apartheid era in South Africa. We certainly should not rely on a general liberal political background and culture to mitigate the problematic political implications of a foundationalist salvation-history. Other outstanding historical examples of the ferocious ethnicity which can be endorsed by such an approach include the ante-bellum south of the USA, and Serbia's behaviour during the breakup of Yugoslavia.

<sup>56</sup> This seems to be indicated by Wright's constant claim that Judaism was Paul's 'framework', a metaphor suggesting the existence of a key prior structure within it on which everything subsequent is built. Wright might be better served by using the language of 'encyclopedia', which would denote that Judaism was the critical semantic and narrative reservoir for Paul who nevertheless crafted something new under the impress of the revelation of Christ. Wright's language of 'quarry' would serve the same purpose (p. 228). Unfortunately, there is again insufficient space to develop these suspicions here.

projects are operating simultaneously. Further, in making this antithetical presuppositional alteration he may generate exegetical vulnerabilities; he is, after all, changing the meanings of words, motifs and arguments which have been carefully worked out for a long time. The overall result then is an interpretation which is often heading in the right direction, but sometimes isn't, and so can be quite confusing at the textual level. Elements of three ultimately incompatible discourses are mingling together in an exegetical arena which can politely be called challenging.<sup>57</sup>

In closing let me nevertheless affirm how significant and constructive Wright is for the way forward in Pauline interpretation, hence my desire to interact with him here in detail. Often his innovative readings are going in exactly the right direction – on the meanings of faith and Abraham, the centrality of both the covenant and the church for Paul, etc. And his broader concerns, both positive and negative, are generally spot on – concerning ethnicity, individualisation, proto-Marcionism, eschatology and so on. My main hesitation derives from the tendencies which have just been noted – minor but discordant notes within his overall orchestration.

Perhaps one might say then, by way of finale, that Wright's symphonic treatment of Paul – and we have attended here especially closely to the justification movement – is as yet unfinished. It is an innovative, stirring, complex piece; traditional and modern compositional techniques overlaid one another. Not all the symphony is yet resolved, or even written. But the basic shape of the work is clear and compelling. We all look forward then to the symphony's first performance, in the eager expectation that everything will by then have been fully resolved – all the themes, variations and developments orchestrated together into one satisfying, dramatic whole which dazzles and inspires.

<sup>57</sup> This is clearly one of Piper's concerns.