

JUSTIFICATION IN KINGDOM OF GOD CONTEXT

Reflections on N. T. Wright's *Justification: God's Plan & Paul's Vision*

I spent the last week of 2009 reading N. T. Wright's book on *Justification: God's Plan & Paul's Vision*, and found it to be one of my more fascinating reads of the year. The lively polemics with John Piper *cum suis* made it hard to put the book down. Wright is first and foremost an exegete eager to dig out a text's true meaning, thus providing building blocks (and sometimes architectural corrections) to those of us who are more focused on a comprehensive biblical theology, and who used to be referred to as "systematic theologians."

Some system builders may want to go beyond the text in order to accommodate a current philosophical trend or ideological interest. Others may become so enamored with a new or rediscovered insight that they lose sight of the big picture. In both cases, one ends up with half-truths that are the hallmark of all heresies.

Of course, exegetes, too—good ones, especially—are bound to do some systematizing of their own. While focusing on a particular author, they cannot help but think of the wider context in which that author operates. What captured my attention in this book was not so much Wright's exegetical moves in this intellectual wrestling match (and they are impressive), but his underlying "game plan"; or rather, Wright's vision of God's plan for the world.

There is a divine plan, revealed to us in a redemptive drama that runs from creation to the recreation of all things. The plan entails a "universal restoration" (Acts 3:20, Ephesians 1:10) of a fallen and broken world.

Humanity is offered a vision, yes; but more than that, there are certain divine events of special revelatory significance (*Heilstatsachen*) that give us a foretaste of the promised future of universal *shalom*. The "New Testament" describes those as signs of the coming kingdom, first fruits of a great harvest, or a down payment on an inheritance that is signed and sealed. These revelatory events (*magnalia Dei*) come to us as breakthroughs of God's re-creative power. We see them in the calling of Abraham and the promise for the nations; in the election of a covenant people, Israel, who received Torah to shape their individual and collective lives; in the prophets who kept the dream alive during desperate times; in the messianic ministry of Jesus, who in his person embodied the gospel of the kingdom of God; in the victory of the cross over the powers of evil; in the resurrection, ascension, and outpouring of the Holy Spirit; in the Church and its mission in the world.

These Spirit-empowered signs in our midst give all reality an eschatological orientation. History, as it were, becomes charged with expectation and hope—a hope well founded in redemptive events as perceived by faith.

What does justification mean in that dramatic context? In what follows, I shall dwell briefly on three perspectives that must be part of a biblical doctrine of justification. They are indicated in the following quote found in the final pages of Wright's book: "Any attempt to give an account of a doctrine which screens out the call of Israel, the gift of the Spirit and/or the redemption of all creation is doomed to be less than biblical" (250).

The trio of Israel, the Holy Spirit, and the *eschaton* in the kingdom of God provides a framework, I believe, for a theology of redemption that encompasses the personal/mystical as well as the historical/cosmic dimensions of existence. In short, we are talking about God's historical-eschatological dealings that, in biblical parlance, pertain to *all things (ta panta)*.

"Part of the problem with the old perspective on Paul is...that it has *de-Judaized* Paul. It has snatched him out of the context where he lived, where he made sense, out of the God-given theological context, rooted in Israel's Scriptures, according to which God made promises to Israel and never went back on them because they were promises *through* Israel for the world" (195/196).

A de-Judaized Paul is bad enough, but the problem of de-Judaization went way beyond that. Since its early days, the Church has de-Judaized large segments of its faith, theology, and practice. It was in and through Jesus, son of Israel and Torah observant Jew, that God reconciled the world to himself. The gospel has a strong Israelitish accent. However, the more the world of Athens infiltrated the thought-world of Jerusalem, the greater became anti-Judaic tendencies in the Church's teachings which, in turn were, often translated into an anti-Semitism that has had disastrous consequences for Israel, the Church, and the world at large.

Without "Moses and the prophets" and the biblical this-worldliness found in the "Old Testament," Gnostic spiritualities and individualistic interpretations soon found access to the hearts and minds of Christian believers. Then the converted heart begins to take center stage to the neglect of God's transformative power in history. The state of one's soul becomes more important than the state of society, while justification and justice are assigned to separate compartments.

It is only very recently (in the post-Holocaust era) that Christians and Jews have begun a meaningful dialogue about the sad fruits of those developments. Over the past sixty or so years, a voluminous and sometimes ambitious body of literature has been produced on the Israel-centeredness of God's redemptive plan. I think, for instance, of Paul van Buren's three-volume *Theology of the Jewish-Christian Reality*. Admittedly, in some cases the results of these efforts have raised as many questions as they have answered; but that is to be expected when a radical re-orientation occurs.

Then there is also the so-called Jewish Roots movement, seeking to shift the churches back to their Hebraic heritage. A cursory internet check shows how widespread this movement is, and how fragmented it is in numerous competing ministries—all with their own agendas and often highly speculative dispensational theories. Yet, they touch on a true issue! A return to the Judaic roots of the faith is a matter of urgency in our age of Gnostic and New Age heresies. True, there are risks involved in such a venture; but the potential gains for the Church's life and mission make it worth the effort. We have made some progress over the past decades, but we have still a long way to go.

“There is no complete doctrine of justification without the Spirit” (187).

The Holy Spirit was poured out on all flesh “in the last days” (Acts 2:16), after the ascension/exaltation of the risen Lord. This, too, was an act of God in the midst of Israel, giving a new thrust to covenant history as gentiles are now incorporated into the Abrahamic promises—engrafted into the olive tree of Israel with its deep roots in the Mosaic/prophetic legacy.

The messianic presence in the form of *assumptio carnis* had come to an end but, to use a favored John Calvin phrase, a new presence *sprituali modo* has been initiated. Here we must negotiate our theological-pneumatological explorations between the Scylla of an excessive existentialism, and the Charybdis of an ultra sacramentalism that leans toward a doctrine of deification that tends to think in terms of *substance* rather than the “working” of the Spirit in us. We must dare to speak very realistically about the indwelling of the life-giving Spirit in us (Romans 8:10, II Corinthians 3:6). Classical theology used such terms as *inhabitatio Spiritus sancti*, *gratia interna (or infusa)*, and *unio mystica*. Through the Spirit, the very love of God is poured into our hearts (Romans 5:5). This is a truly divine presence which some theologians have rightly expressed in terms of *operatio* rather than in terms of an ontological substance—a “something” that is added to existence. Personally, I would avoid the word “deification” when dealing with these complex issues.

As a young pastor of a suburban congregation, I wrote a book entitled *Redemption and Historical Reality* that was published by Westminster Press in 1964. I headed chapter IV on “Word, Holy Spirit, and History” with the following quote from Roger Hazelton: “Indeed, one may develop with the help of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit an entire theological understanding which may be quite at variance with that of the last generation, which was rightly called theology of the Word...Our accent in the time immediately ahead must clearly be upon the Holy Spirit.” In a way, that is what happened in the emergence and rapid expansion of the charismatic movement and Pentecostalism. But have they provided the Church with an adequate pneumatology for our time?

I wrote my book during the hey days of Rudolf Bultmann's demythologizing theology. Pursuing lines of thought from the earliest stages of the dialectical (especially Barthian) theology to what he thought was their logical conclusion, Bultmann de-

historicized biblical eschatology by concentrating redemption entirely on the moment of encounter with the preached Word, while Barth's Christo-centrism would eventually be developed along more broadly pneumatological lines. The Word of forgiveness, existentially received, became the sum total of Bultmann's doctrine of redemption.

On the other side of the coin we had Catholic (Roman, Orthodox, and Anglican) theologians espouse an incarnational-sacramental theology in opposition to an alleged Reformation position that was portrayed as entirely centered on the atonement to the neglect of the creation, preaching imputation without any form of impartation. The incarnation of the hypostatic union between the divine and human natures in Christ came to be seen as in itself a source of redemptive reality even if the Fall and the Cross (atonement) were not taken into account. In other words, the incarnation, or "the marriage between heaven and earth," has a permanently redemptive significance which is perpetuated in the Church and its sacramental mystery. Christ is viewed as the crown of creation; the Church is the extension of the incarnation; and there is an almost organic process that runs from the creation to the recreation of all things. Metaphysical and ontological terminology now enter into the world of the biblical historical-cosmic vision.

Thus there is talk of "the sacramental universe" (William Temple) and "the transfiguration of the whole universe" (Jean Daniélou). A more cautious Jacques Maritain preferred the term "elevation," but a less cautious E. L. Mascall spoke of "a gradual supernaturalization of the whole created order." From there it is a small step to a doctrine of deification. To me, this theological construction seems like a wide detour around the importance of the ascension and the act of God in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Ephesians 4:10 describes the ascension both in terms of vast distance ("far above all things") and fullness of presence ("fill all things"). This is not a theology of organic progression, but a theology of *realis presentia Dei*.

Thank God, *tertium datur!* John Calvin in particular, it seems to me, developed a theology of Word *and* Spirit that preserved a historical-pneumatological realism about revelation without falling either into hyper existentialism or ultra sacramentalism.

In a June 14, 2005 *Christian Century* article, Douglas Harink mentions a professor of the so-called Finnish School of Luther interpretation and a Fuller Theological Seminary professor who find seeds of a deification (*theosis*) view in Luther. That strikes me as a farfetched and misguided claim. In reference to the kingdom of Christ (*regnum Christi*), Luther seemed comfortable with the term *Hörreich*, to indicate a narrow form of verbal revelation that tends to be detached from social-political realities. In that case, the aim of the Church's ministry becomes the nurture of *fromme leute* who don't meddle too much in worldly affairs. In Calvin's theology, on the other hand, the Holy Spirit is described as *effector*, the power of Christ's kingdom in both church and society. Hence, in Book IV of the *Institutes* he could seamlessly move from a discussion of the Church and the sacraments to a discourse on government authorities. I do not believe that it is the goal of the divine plan that we become gods, or that the whole creation find its destiny in becoming absorbed in the Deity; but rather that we become fully human and, as God's image bearers, find life's joyful meaning in glorifying God in a world where God's order

has overcome the powers of sin. I have discussed these issues extensively in my aforementioned book, and this is not the place to repeat the arguments.

“...alas, the same Western tradition that has highlighted the cross at the expense of Paul’s full theology of resurrection has also highlighted a supposed Pauline soteriology at the expense of the Gospel’s theology of the kingdom of God” (248).

At one point Wright raises the question of what would have happened if we had come to Ephesians first, with Colossians close behind, and then read Romans and Galatians and the rest in the light of them instead of the other way around. “What we would find straight off,” he answers, “is nothing short of a (very Jewish) cosmic soteriology” (43). Indeed, we then start from the biblical perspective of “all things.”

By the same token, what if we were to take our starting-point in the gospels? “I have been increasingly concerned,” wrote Wright in a June 17, 2008 *Christian Century* article, “that much evangelical Christianity on both sides of the Atlantic has based itself on the epistles rather than the Gospels.” In the gospels we learn about God entering the public stage, as we enter into the world of the kingdom of God. Both of these starting-points open wide horizons on what God is doing in our world and the whole realm of terrestrial realities.

The gospels make it quite clear that Jesus’ ministry was first and foremost about the kingdom of God (Matthew 4:17, Mark 1:14, Luke 4:43). He came to proclaim that kingdom and, beyond that, to reveal its transforming power in his own person. “If it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you” (Matthew 12:28). Origen used the term *autobasileia*. Hearing the word of divine forgiveness can be a wonderful life-changing experience, but any theology of conversion must find its true context in the message about the kingdom of God. In the end (from the perspective of the *eschaton*) saving society is closer to God’s redemptive purpose than saving souls; just as sanctification and ultimately glorification are our destiny, with justification a step along the way.

Biblical revelation is about the active presence of the Lord of the Universe. The “last days” are the dispensation of the Holy Spirit when both positive and negative signs of the kingdom are manifested in nature and history: war, natural disasters, and the proclamation of the gospel throughout the world (Matthew 24:3ff.).

The gospel is Christ-centered, but kingdom-oriented. In 1997, Jürgen Moltmann wrote an article for *Evangelische Theologie* (57) describing his journey from a theology of belief to a theology of hope, from the doctrine of justification to a theology of the kingdom of God. To him that meant a broadening of Reformation theology as he had understood it to a motivating and empowering vision of righteousness and justice in the world. The divine word of justification and forgiveness is the Word of the Lord of creation, and as such it *happens* and becomes *deed*. The spoken/written Word of the Lord in the context of a biblical pneumatology is an event that moves both the human

heart and world history, “for the kingdom of God depends not on talk but on power” (I Corinthians 4:20).

The journey from justification to a theology of the kingdom of God is still too rarely traveled. In 1997, four churches of the Reformation heritage (Lutheran and Reformed/Presbyterian) adopted *A Formula of Agreement*, leading to full communion among their churches. In 1999, the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church issued a *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* which, from a Reformation perspective, was considered the crux of all the disputes. Both documents contain valuable insights and advance the ecumenical vision; but the vision of the coming kingdom of God is sadly lacking in them.

The Commission on Faith and Order of the National Council of Churches has been working on a study that was originally entitled “Justification/Sanctification/Theosis and Justice/Ethics, a First Study in Theological Anthropology”—since happily shortened to “Salvation and Justice.” Will the end product of that lengthy process sound a clear voice on the gospel of the kingdom of God? I, for one, surely hope so.

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