

THEOLOGY AND LIFE

PASTORAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE NEW PERSPECTIVE PART 2 OF 3

by Rev. Darren Middleton

THE PASTORAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE NEW PERSPECTIVE

The pastoral implications of the new perspective are not as well articulated as the theology, but yet are just as important. Sanders and Dunn allude to the implications, but it is in Wright that they become clearest.¹ In evaluating such implications I will draw primarily (though not exclusively) from Wright and his latest work *“What Saint Paul Really said”*. Wright more than any other is happy to cash in his theological chips explaining what he sees as the pastoral implications of the new perspective.

OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE GOSPEL AND THE GREAT COMMISSION

According to Wright “the gospel is not an account of how people get saved. It is.... the proclamation of the lordship of Jesus Christ. If we could get that clear in current debates, a lot of false antithesis, not the least in thinking about the mission of the church, would quietly unravel before our eyes. Let us be quite clear. ‘The gospel’ is the announcement of Jesus’ Lordship, which works with power to bring people into the family of Abraham, now redefined around Jesus Christ and characterized solely by faith in him. ‘Justification’ is the doctrine which insists that all those who have this faith belong as full members of his family on this basis”²

For Wright the gospel is about a declaration, it is the announcement to the world, particularly the principalities and powers that their time is up. It is also God’s way of creating his Church, since when we declare the gospel, announcing Christ’s lordship, it demands an allegiance to Christ and therefore creates the Church. Moreover, it declares that men and woman everywhere should give up their idols and follow the true Lord, Jesus Christ. The Gospel is the message that “the one true God has dealt in Jesus Christ with sin, death, guilt and shame, and now summons men and woman everywhere to abandon the idols which hold

Editor’s Note:

A reading of [Doug Wilson](#), particularly his works on baptism, give practical illustrations of the results of understanding justification as an expression of ecclesiology.

² N.T Wright,

What St Paul Really Said (Eerdmans, Grand rapids, 1997) pg 133.

them captive to these things and to discover a new life, a new way of life, in him.”³

What is not obvious in Wright’s definition of the gospel is how he understands that God has dealt with the issues of sin, death, guilt and shame. Wright is not perspicuous in how or in what way the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ has dealt with any of these issues, so it is difficult to assess Wright with absolute certainty. However, as Robert Smith observed, “...little is said about Christ coming between the sinner and God’s wrath. Consequently, gospel ministry for Wright is calling and helping people out of dehumanizing effects of sin, rather than proclaiming an already accomplished redemption from sin’s condemnation.”⁴

This seems evident by the emphasis Wright gives to the challenge of the gospel to the socio-political powers. The gospel is about challenging the way of being human, a way characterized by love, justice and honesty as opposed to the powers of this world, that divide and manipulate people, keeping us at odds with one another.⁵ Therefore, Wright concludes that the gospel is in reality a challenge to the false gods of money, power and sex that is the way of powers and principalities but not of the gospel, nor the covenant community.

The gospel then, is not about individuals but about community. It’s not about sins forgiven, but having an allegiance to Christ. The gospel as Wright understands it is understood through the hermeneutical lens of salvation history that necessarily refocuses us the corporate element in Paul’s theology.

The benefit of Wright’s approach is its corrective function to the overly individualistic approach to the gospel by many theologians. Although, as Mark Thomson comments “It raises to prominence a number of themes which have been largely neglected in Protestant exegesis of the Pauline material.... However, there is an increasing danger for the formulations of the New Perspective to create unnecessary, and in the end, unhelpful, antitheses critical for our present concern. [This] is the way in which the accent on the historical and corporate (covenantal) dimensions of Paul’s thought are placed in sharp contrast with its individual and existential dimensions.”⁶

This can also be seen in Dunn who also emphasizes the corporate nature of Paul’s doctrine predicated upon a salvation historical reading of Paul’s writings. “... Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith should not be understood primarily as an exposition of the individual’s relation to God, but primarily in the

³ N.T Wright, What St Paul Really Said (Eerdmans, Grand rapids, 1997) pg 157.

⁴ Robert S Smith Justification and Eschatology: A dialogue with ‘The New Perspective on Paul’.

(RTR, Supplement Series#1, May 2001) pg 129.

⁵ N.T Wright, What St Paul Really Said (Eerdmans, Grand rapids, 1997) pg 154.

⁶ Mark Thompson Personal Assurance and the New Perspective (RTR, 53:2, 1994) pg 83.

context of Paul the Jew wrestling with the question of how Jews and Gentiles stand in relation to each other within the covenant purpose of God now that it had reached its climax in Jesus Christ.”⁷

Clearly then we see that rather than correcting an overemphasis of individualism, the corporate emphasis of New Perspective thought has very little to say on the issue of the individual and the particular salvific implications for the convert.

Moreover, since the gospel is redefined in terms of the Lordship of Christ and the defeat of the powers, it has little to say to the individual who has been made into a “new creature” (2 Cor. 5:17). Particularly, it fails to speak to the purpose and sufficiency of the finished work of Jesus Christ for the salvation of sinners.

Dunn and Wright seem awfully quiet on the question of how an individual might get right with God. Yet surely the witness of Scripture teaches us that the finished work of Jesus Christ is the answer, it is through his life death and resurrection that all who would trust in him will be justified. As Robert Smith as written, “...the message of the gospel... is a call to be reconciled to God on the basis of Christ’s saving work (2 Cor. 5:20). In other words, the first demand of the gospel is not to do as Christ did, but to trust in what Christ did.”⁸

Moreover, the implication of Wright’s emphasis for the Great Commission is that the message seems almost political or geared towards social transformation as opposed to being genuinely concerned with the redemption of individuals.

Having said that, there is no doubt the Great Commission has social and moral implications, but these are best understood as flowing out of the gospel and not confused with the gospel itself. After all, Jesus said he came to seek and to save the one lost coin, the lamb, and the wandering son.⁹ In his ministry his preaching was aimed at individuals as well as the corporate aspect.¹⁰ Paul too, preached a gospel that was fashioned by a concern for both the corporate and the individual concern.¹¹

In summary, we see that the gospel has been redefined to be a declaration of what God has done in salvation historical terms in accordance with his covenant faithfulness. The gospel now is primarily concerned with an

⁷ James G Dunn, Jesus, Paul and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians. (John Know Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 1990) pg 202.
Robert S Smith Justification and Eschatology: A dialogue with ‘The New Perspective on Paul’. (RTR, Supplement Series#1, May 2001) pg 129.

⁹ Lk 19:10, Luke 15

¹⁰ Lk 7:34; 19:1-10

¹¹ Romans 3:23; 10:1

announcement of the Lordship of Christ, which through believing, the Church is created. This corporate emphasis usurps the individual standing before God, leaving them with just the scanty message that they are presently members of the covenant community.

This is not the gospel of the New Testament. It is monolithic in its assertion that through the life death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, there is secured redemption for the elect. The gospel declares with absolute certainty through the finished work of Jesus Christ, he (Jesus) has secured reconciliation between God and sinner, therefore God calls all sinners to repent of their sin (rebellion) and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is particularly telling that in the Churches mission to make disciples, there is a disconcerting silence in Wright of individual repentance and trust in the cross work of Jesus Christ.