

Observations on N. T. Wright's Biblical Theology
With Special Consideration of "Faithfulness of God"

T. David Gordon

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While I have favorably reviewed N. T. Wright's *Climax of the Covenant* for the Westminster Theological Journal (56, no. 1: 197-201), my reflections on his more-recent work, especially his popular work, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?*, are less favorable (though I continue to find his writings utterly lucid, and profoundly stimulating). Specifically, the following three concerns strike me as particularly problematic for understanding Paul's thought.

1. Wright's understanding of the NT is primarily that it is a fulfilment of the promises made to *Abraham* (not a fulfilment of the pledge imbedded in the *Adamic* curse).

"When we ask how it was that Jesus' cruel death was the decisive victory over the powers, sin and death included, Paul at once replies: because it was the fulfilment of God's promise that through Abraham and his seed he would undo the evil in the world."
(48)

"If (conversely) he rose again from the dead, it meant he had indeed dealt with sin on the cross--in other words, that God had achieved at last what he had promised to Abraham

and the prophets.” (49-50)

This explains why some associate “The New Perspective” with the so-called Auburn theology; neither explicates its biblical theology with reference to the Adamic administration. Wright employs a good deal of Adamic christology (especially in *Climax of the Covenant*), but he does not employ the Adamic covenant-*administration* with the same vigor. Thus, especially in his perceiving the phrase “righteousness of God” in Romans 1:17 as God’s *faithfulness* to his covenant, rather than to his uprightness or *justice*, as a Judge, the influence and *tendenz* becomes clear: God is a promise-keeper, not an upright judge.

Much of the present debate in some circles (Wright/Auburn/Norman Shepherd) is not merely, or primarily, about the relation of faith and works in justification, though it has ramifications for that discussion. The present debate is about whether we can properly handle the doctrine of justification apart from juridical categories; apart from God’s right judgment of His creation in terms of its obedience or disobedience to His rule. And this question drives us back to the Adamic administration, with the reality of obedience or disobedience, and God’s judgment. All “promise theology,” if it can be called that, is Abrahamic, and post-Adamic. It construes God’s work in terms of making and keeping promises. Thus, Wright’s overall biblical theology (of Paul, anyway) emphasizes the “seed of Abraham” at the expense of the “seed of the woman;” and this failure to relate the Abrahamic story *back* to the Adamic story renders his view of Paul incomplete at best, and erroneous at worst.

2. Wright’s “*Christus Victor*” language of defeat of enemies does not mention God’s wrath as a

serious threat that has been deflected by the death and resurrection of Christ.

“The cross is for Paul the symbol, as it was the means, of the liberating victory of the one true God, the creator of the world, over all the enslaving powers that have usurped his authority....For this reason I suggest that we give priority--a priority among equals, perhaps, but still a priority--to those Pauline expressions of the crucifixion of Jesus which describe it as the decisive victory over the ‘principalities and powers.’” Nothing in the many other expressions of the meaning of the cross is lost if we put this in the centre....The death of Jesus had the effect of liberating both Jew and Gentile from the enslaving force of the ‘elements of the world’ (Galatians 4:1-11). And, towering over almost everything else, the death of Jesus, seen as the culmination of his great act of obedience, is the means whereby the reign of sin and death is replaced with the reign of grace and righteousness (Romans 5:12-21). ‘The gospel’ is indeed the announcement of a royal victory.” (47)

“At the heart of Paul’s gospel there stands the claim that the death of Jesus the king has defeated evil at its very heart.” (52)

“The word ‘grace’ is a shorthand way of speaking about God himself, the God who loves totally and unconditionally, whose love overflows in self-giving in creation, in redemption, in rooting out evil and sin and death from his world, in bringing to life that which was dead.” (61)

Here again, the absence of the Adamic administration creates the same problem mentioned before. The enemies and powers defeated by Christ do not (for Wright) include God's own wrath or judgment. Though Wright had stimulating thoughts on "propitiation" in *Climax of the Covenant* (and I don't believe he denies the concept), he does not appear to have wrestled with the fact that death, our last enemy, is itself, for Paul, the result of "one man's disobedience" and its penal (itself necessarily judicial) consequences. Thus, when he explains Paul's narrative theology, and the cross and resurrection as the center of that narrative, he is entirely right; but when he explains precisely what Christ therein triumphed *over*, the wrath of God is not among the panoply.

3. Wright misunderstands "righteousness of God" in Romans by removing it from its forensic/judicial context there.

"That is why, in the great sweeping argument of the letter to the Romans, Paul's exposition of God's faithfulness to his covenant (in technical language, his 'righteousness'), is explained in terms of the fulfilment of the promises to Abraham (3:21-4:25), and then explored in terms of the undoing of Adam's sin (5:12-21) and ultimately of the liberation of the whole creation (8:17-25)." (48)

One must surely object here to the designation of "righteousness" as *technical* language for "God's faithfulness to his covenant." The δικ-group in Paul's day is far from technical. Indeed, if it *were* technical, Wright's point would surely be wrong, for this lexical stock plainly has forensic overtones elsewhere, and the only possibility Wright has to construct it as

“faithfulness” is therefore to argue that it is *not* technical (i. e., that it does *not* always mean “righteousness” or “justice”); that it is a fluid lexical stock with a broad range (i.e., *not* “technical”) in Paul’s thought. The most Wright (or others) could assert is that, in addition to denoting “righteousness” or “justice,” the δικ-group in Paul sometimes has another usage, to denote something like “faithfulness.” Even then, of course, Wright would necessarily accept the burden of demonstrating, in any given context, that “faithfulness” is the preferred denotation because of various contextual considerations. But, in examining Paul’s usage in Romans, one comes to just the opposite conclusion, because the contextual evidence is so consistently juridical. Let us examine that evidence.

Why “righteousness of God” Must be Understood Judicially/Forensically in Romans 1-3

It has been fairly common, since Ernst Käsemann, to understand the phrase “righteousness of God” in Romans 1:17 (and elsewhere) as referring to God’s covenant faithfulness (cf. the respective articles by Elizabeth and Paul J. Achtemeier on righteousness in the Old and New Covenants in *IDB*). N.T. Wright renews and perpetuates this interpretive tradition. What follows are counter-arguments to this thesis, arguments that question understanding δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ in Romans 1:17 as denoting God’s faithfulness. Before listing those counter-arguments, I wish to explain briefly why there appears to be an element of truth in the observation that in the Sinai covenant there is a particular kind of relationship between righteousness and covenant-faithfulness.

The element of truth in the observation.

There are a number of LXX texts wherein the $\delta\iota\kappa$ -group appear to be appeals to God to rescue his covenant people, to vindicate them, on the basis of his “righteousness.”

Jer. 12:1 Righteous are you, O LORD, when I complain to you; yet I would plead my case before you. Why does the way of the wicked prosper?¹

Yet even here, there is a covenantal *context* that makes the matter clearer. The very terms of the Sinai covenant were those of fairly severe justice: six tribes stood on Mt. Gerizim for the blessing; and six on Mt. Ebal for the curses, and the terms of the covenant were conditioned upon the obedience of the people of Israel:

“If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you today, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it” (Deut. 30:16).

Therefore, it is not at all surprising that members of that covenant-administration may rightly appeal to their own national righteousness (especially as personified in the king) or God’s righteousness (as rewarder of obedience) as the basis for appealing for God’s help.

Pss. 7:8 The LORD judges the peoples; judge me, O LORD, according to my

¹ Unless otherwise noted, scriptures are cited in the English Standard Version.

righteousness (κρῖνον με κύριε κατὰ τὴν δικαιοσύνην μου) and according to the integrity that is in me.

Pss. 18:20 The LORD rewarded me according to my righteousness (καὶ ἀνταποδώσει μοι κύριος κατὰ τὴν δικαιοσύνην μου); according to the cleanness of my hands he recompensed me.

Pss. 18:24 Therefore the LORD has recompensed me according to my righteousness (καὶ ἀνταποδώσει μοι κύριος κατὰ τὴν δικαιοσύνην μου), according to the cleanness of my hands in his sight.

This is because, in terms of the Sinai covenant-administration, Yahweh has committed himself to blessing the Israelites if they are obedient.

1Sam. 26:23 The LORD rewards every man for his righteousness and his faithfulness (καὶ κύριος ἐπιστρέψει ἐκάστῳ τὰς δικαιοσύνας αὐτοῦ καὶ τὴν πίστιν αὐτοῦ); for the LORD gave you into my hand today, and I would not put forth my hand against the LORD's anointed.

2Sam. 22:21 "The LORD rewarded me according to my righteousness (καὶ ἀνταπέδωκέν μοι κύριος κατὰ τὴν δικαιοσύνην μου); according to the cleanness of my hands he recompensed me.

Therefore, there is certainly an element of truth, within that Sinai covenant-administration, in saying that God's "righteousness" is associated with his faithfulness to his part of the covenant administration. The question, however, is more precise and lexical: Is this relationship between righteousness and covenant-faithfulness in the Sinai administration due to the reality that δικαιοσύνη means "faithfulness," or is it due to the fact that the covenant-administration itself obliged Yahweh, by his own pledge, to reward the righteous? It is certainly true that for the Israelites, their own national "righteousness" reflected their faithfulness to the terms of that covenant-administration, and it is also true that Yahweh proved himself to be "righteous" when he upheld his pledge to bless them for their obedience. But this is not because the lexical stock *itself* denotes this; it is because the particular covenant-administration pledges rewards for righteous behavior.

Further, even if I am entirely wrong about this, and if there are indeed places where the δικ-group denote a concept such as "covenant faithfulness," in and of itself this would not prove that it *always* denotes such a concept, or that it denotes it *exclusively*. Surely the many passages that use the language in expressly judicial contexts proves that the semantic range is broader than "faithfulness." Thus, some further argument would be necessary in any given context, such as that of Romans 1-3, to prove that it denoted "faithfulness" there.

Having said this, however, note that there still remain a significant number of counter-arguments to the thesis that "righteousness of God" in Romans 1:17 (and similar texts) denotes God's covenant faithfulness. Much of this discussion hinges upon making careful distinctions

between words and concepts; no one disputes that God is faithful, nor that He discloses His faithfulness in each of the respective covenant-administrations He has instituted. Conceptually, there is no dispute about this. The question is: Does the expression “righteousness of God” in Romans 1:17 *denote* this concept, rather than some other?

I will re-iterate what has commonly been stated about the δικ-*group*: That its predominant usage is to denote God’s *justice*, his unwavering commitment to judge his Creation uprightly, without compromise, favoritism, or inequity. Luke observed Paul’s usage in this manner when he recorded Paul’s encounter at Mars Hill, where Paul said: “Therefore He has established a day in which he is about to judge (μέλλει κρίνειν) the inhabited world in righteousness” (ἐν δικαιοσύνη Acts 17:31). This reflects the LXX usage, where the same sentiment is so frequently recorded in the same language (Ps. 9:9; 96:13; 98:9). It also reflects its common usage in secular Greek. When Socrates, for instance, rejects Meletus’s arguments that the laws improve the Athenian youth, and insists that Meletus tell us what *people* improve the youth, Meletus says, “The judges,” which is a translation of οἱ δικασταί (*Apology*, XII). This is why also in secular Greek of the period, a δικανικός is a lawyer, a δική can be a trial, and δικάζω can mean to decide, to judge, or give judgment, cf. (Liddell and Scott, *ad loc*).

A. The *concept* of God’s faithfulness to his covenants (and to his covenant people) is indeed affirmed within Romans 1-3; but Paul uses *other* Greek words to denote it.

Rom. 3:1 Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? 2
Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. 3
What if some were unfaithful (εἰ ἠπίστησάν τινες) Does their faithlessness (ἡ

ἀπιστία αὐτῶν) nullify the faithfulness of God (τὴν πίστιν τοῦ θεοῦ)?

Note that Paul manifestly indicates an awareness of faithfulness and unfaithfulness to the Sinai covenant-administration; whether the unfaithfulness of Israel or the faithfulness of God. But he does not use the δικ-language to denote this concept; he employs πιστ-language. In my estimation, this evidence alone is sufficient to challenge the notion that in the verses prior to this, Paul has used *different* language (δικ-language) to denote this concept; not because people cannot employ terms flexibly or synonymously, but because it would have obfuscated the logical and rhetorical power of his argument to have done so in this context. His reasoning is fairly tight in these chapters, and there would be no reason for him to risk his readers' losing the train of his thought by shifting his vocabulary at this point.

Far more likely, as we shall see below, is the likelihood that Paul uses the δικ-group here to refer to righteousness in its moral/ethical (and consequently juridical) sense: as a reference to God's inflexible commitment to the integrity of his own holy and upright character, which then becomes the basis and criterion of the *judgment* he exercises over the creature made in His image.

B. The pervasive and enduring concern in Romans 1:18-3:26 is the forensic/judicial reality of the judgment of God.

The language of the judgment and wrath of God pervades the entirety of this section of Romans. Here, at least, the issue is *not* whether God will be faithful to his covenant or not; here

the issue is whether he will judge the earth in righteousness. What is revealed is the fulfilment of the psalmist's hope: "for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity (δικαιοσύνη)" (Psa. 98:9). Note some of the references to God's judgment in this passage:

-1:18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

- 1:24 Therefore God gave them up (παρέδωκεν) in the lusts of their hearts to impurity,

-1:26 For this reason God gave them up (παρέδωκεν) to dishonorable passions.

-1:28 And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up (παρέδωκεν) to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.

- 2:1 Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things. 2 We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who do such things.

-2: 3 Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God?

-2: 5 But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.

- 2:6 He will render to each one according to his works: 7 to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; 8 but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury.

- 2:12 For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law.

-2: 16 on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.

- 3:9 What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin,

Contextually, even if we concede that the δικ-group is fairly flexible, denoting somewhat different things in different semantic contexts, the context of Romans 1:16-3:26 is profoundly juridical. Its language and imagery are that of the great tribunal of God, in which he will render to each according to his deeds (2:6). In such a context, the δικ-group presumptively has its ordinary juridical meaning: God will judge the earth in righteousness (ἐν δικαιοσύνη).

C. Romans 1:18 serves as the initial explication (continuing through chapter 11) of the thesis stated in Romans 1:16-17.

The revelation of the “righteousness of God” in Romans 1:17, is explained by the revelation of the “wrath of God” in verses 18 and following. The γὰρ that connects 18 back to 17 can only be dismissed at great peril, especially since the conjunction conjoins the identical verb (ἀποκαλύπτεται), repeated in each verse. God’s righteousness is revealed when his judicial *wrath* is revealed; even in the inexplicably mysterious transaction whereby the righteous Son of God bears that wrath as a substitute, to propitiate it. One might say that, if 1:17 mentions

that God has revealed his righteousness, 1:18ff. disclose *how* he has revealed it. He has displayed his *righteousness* by displaying his *wrath*; inflexibly, justly, impartially, upon all who do evil, whether Jew or Greek. And the gospel reveals God's righteousness because only by the substitution of Christ can God be both "just and justifier." Any justifying, apart from substitution and propitiation, questions whether God is truly just. But when the sin-bearer bears that wrath, God's justice is established beyond question.

In this particular context, God's "righteousness" is revealed because God will judge with perfect impartiality all men, Jews or Greeks, according to what each has done. His "righteousness" here is the righteousness of a judge, who with unmitigated impartiality (2:11) renders a verdict of guilt upon those who do evil. And the wrath of God, as the evidence and consequence of his inflexible justice, is only mitigated for anyone, Jew or Gentile, through the propitiation of that wrath by Jesus Christ the righteous (3:25). God is "righteous" (of unimpeachable moral integrity) because he judges the earth with equity, rewarding equally the upright Jew or Gentile (2:7), and expressing wrath equally upon unjust Jew or Gentile (2:8). This inflexible righteousness is revealed historically when even the Son of God quakes and falls beneath that wrath as sin-bearer. Not only will the Jew not escape the wrath of God; even God's Son, if he covenants to redeem the elect, will not escape this wrath. This wrath, poured out upon the propitiatory sin-bearer, reveals the pervasive, comprehensive justice/righteousness of God.

D. Elsewhere in Rom. 1:16-4:6, the $\delta\iota\kappa$ -group are incontestably forensic.

Again, the issue is the semantic use of "righteousness of God" in Romans 1:17, and the

resolution is determined, in some measure, by the use of the lexical stock in the context at hand. Therefore, if the use of this lexical stock is prevailing (if not exclusively) juridical in the context, we must take the expression in 1:17 the same way.

-1:18 The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness (ἀδικίαν) of men

-1:29 They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness (ἀδικία)

-1:32 Though they know God's decree (τὸ δικαίωμα τοῦ θεοῦ; AV "judgment of God") that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

-2:5 You treasure up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and of revelation of the just judgment (δικαιοκρισίας) of God

-2:8 and who are persuaded of unrighteousness (πειθομένοις δὲ τῇ ἀδικίᾳ)

-2:13 for the doers of the law will be justified (δικαιωθήσονται)

-3:5 but if our unrighteousness (ἡ ἀδικία ἡμῶν) serves to show the justice of God (θεοῦ δικαιοσύνην), what shall we say? That God is unjust (ἄδικος) to inflict wrath upon us?

-3:8 Their condemnation is just (ἐνδικόν).

-3:10 as it is written: "None is righteous, no not one (Οὐκ ἔστιν δίκαιος οὐδὲ εἷς).

-3:19 Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable (ὑπόδικος) to God.

-3:20 For no human being will be justified (οὐ δικαιωθήσεται) in his sight by works of

the law...

-3:21 ff. But now the righteousness of God (δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ) has been manifested apart from law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, the righteousness of God (δικαιοσύνη δὲ θεοῦ) through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction; since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified (δικαιούμενοι) by his grace...

Note the special difficulty posed by this text. The language of God's δικαιοσύνη being manifested recalls surely the similar statement in 1:17. And yet is it at all likely that the twice-repeated noun here has a fundamentally different denotation than does the verbal form in the context (δικαιούμενοι)? Is it not far more likely that God's *justice* is manifested when he *justifies* by grace? And this holds true also for the following verses: -3:25ff. whom God put forward as an expiation (sic, it should undoubtedly be translated "propitiation" here) by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness (τῆς δικαιοσύνης αὐτοῦ), because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies (εἰς τὸ εἶναι αὐτὸν δίκαιον καὶ δικαιοῦντα) him who has faith in Christ Jesus.

Here again, the notion that δικαιοσύνη means "God's faithfulness" requires us either to translate nonsensically ("that he himself is faithful and that he renders faithful"), or to translate the same lexical stock differently within the same sentence.

-3:28-29 For we hold that a man is justified (δικαιοῦσθαι) by faith apart from works of the law. Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one; and he will justify (δικαιώσει) the circumcised on the

ground of their faith and the uncircumcised through their faith.

-4:2 For if Abraham was justified by works (ἐξ ἔργων ἐδικαιώθη), he has something to boast about...

-4:3 For what does the scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness (καὶ ἐλογίσθη αὐτῷ εἰς δικαιοσύνην).

-4:5 And to one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness (ἐπὶ τὸν δικαιοῦντα τὸν ἀσεβῆ λογίζεται ἡ πίστις αὐτοῦ εἰς δικαιοσύνην).

-4:6 So also David pronounces a blessing upon the man to whom God reckons righteousness (λογίζεται δικαιοσύνην) apart from works...

Note here again Wright’s fundamental lexicographical failure: He takes the one otherwise-potentially-ambiguous expression (θεοῦ δικαιοσύνη) and renders it in a manner that is *unlike* its unambiguous usage in the very same context. One of the most basic of lexicographical conventions is this: That one may employ a potentially-ambiguous term unambiguously, if in the context unambiguous uses are also employed. At best, we might concede that, in the context of the Sinai covenant-administration (which administration obliges God by his own commitment to reward the righteous) “righteousness” could plausibly refer to God’s faithfulness to maintain his duty to reward the righteous. However, another usage is equally plausible, and also consistent with the lexical stock in its context.

To illustrate this basic principle, let us use another example, using another word. Our English word “reformed” is used with some variety. We can use it to designate a person as

Augustinian/Calvinist, or to designate a former juvenile delinquent as no longer behaving in a delinquent fashion, or to designate a Jew as being within the liberal Jewish tradition, or to designate a former alcoholic as being now “on the wagon.” Now, suppose someone reads Wright’s popular book on Paul and then utters this sentence: “N.T. Wright is reformed.” Is there any likelihood that this would mean that Wright is no longer painting graffiti on public buildings, or that he is now a liberal Jew, or a recovering alcoholic? Of course not; contextually, a Christian theologian’s theological writing is being assessed; and not one in a thousand people would interpret the term in any way other than to designate Wright as an Augustinian or Calvinist.

Similarly, Paul’s use of the δίκ-group in the first four chapters of Romans is incontestably juridical/forensic, as Paul employs the term in his discussion of God’s righteous judgment. In light of the pervasiveness of the forensic/judicial concern, and of Paul’s repeated employing of the δίκ-group in a juridical manner here, any suggestion that it means “faithfulness” in this context, is simply a repudiation of the importance of immediate context for making lexical determinations. If Wright is permitted to violate so cardinal a principle here, then I suppose we are free to use “reformed” to describe Wright as a no-longer-drunken, no-longer-delinquent liberal Jew.²

Additional Observation on Wright’s Construal of Justification

² Just as I was completing these thoughts, John Yenchko called my attention to the very helpful article, “N. T. Wright on Justification,” by Prof. Charles Hill of Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, that can be found at the website, www.thirdmill.org. Dr. Hill’s thoughts are very similar to my own, and I refer the reader to them.

Unwittingly, Wright appears to exclude the middle in his discussion of Paul's understanding of justification. He argues that in the first century, justification is *not* about an individual's relationship to God, but about membership in the covenant community. This may be true, in and of itself (at least on the negative side), but I'm not aware of any significant Protestant theologian who has ever argued that justification was/is about a "relationship with God," in any ordinary sense. Justification is about how an individual stands before the judgment seat of God; it is about whether the person will be declared righteous or unrighteous before the bar of God's judgment. Adoption may genuinely be, in some senses, about sustaining a filial relation to God; but justification is not about a relationship, it is about a judicial standing: guilty or innocent. Note Wright's language:

"Justification" in the first century was not about how someone might establish a relationship with God. It was about God's eschatological definition, both future and present, of who was, in fact, a member of his people." (119)

"Despite a long tradition to the contrary, the problem Paul addresses in Galatians is not the question of how precisely someone becomes a Christian, or attains a relationship with God." (120)

But where, in the history of Protestant thought, has anyone argued what Wright here denies? Did Calvin, Turretin, Witsius, Hodge, or Warfield define "justification" as how one attains a relationship with God? Where is the "long tradition" that defines "justification" as "how...someone becomes a Christian, or attains a relationship with God"? I myself have argued that Protestantism has largely misunderstood the problem at Galatia, so I don't object to Wright's suggestion that the historic Protestant view of the letter is wrong; but it is wrong in a far different way than Wright suggests.

By excluding the middle, by refuting a view that (to my knowledge) no one has ever held, Wright then jumps to another view of justification, whose only merit is that it is not the refuted (though never-actually-propogated) view. The real issue we wish Wright to address is whether “justification” is a term that ordinarily denotes a *judicial* (not a relational) reality, a forensic standing; or whether it is about defining the people of God. He will have grave difficulty arguing his point, if he ever attempts to do so. Israel was, by God’s election, God’s people. But through most of her history, she was *not* justified; to the contrary, she was judged to be in violation of God’s law and covenant, again and again by the prophets, beginning with Moses. Thus, Israel can be and was (at least during the Sinai administration) the *unjustified* people of God. This strikes me as virtually irrefutable, yet if Wright’s definition is correct (to be justified is to be God’s people) this plain, generations-long reality in Israel’s life is an impossibility.