

Conversion Ruined by the New Perspective

Having cleared the decks, we are now ready to explore the devastating effect the New Perspective has on conversion. I do so by reference to Tom Wright's book: *What Saint Paul Really Said*, Lion Publishing, Oxford, 1997, Wright being one of the leading advocates of the New Perspective.

Let Wright set out his stall:

Justification... is not a matter of how someone enters the community of the true people of God, but of how you tell who belongs to that community... not so much about 'getting in'... as about 'how you [can] tell who [is] in'. In standard Christian theological language, it [isn't] so much about soteriology as about ecclesiology; not so much about salvation, as about the church... Justification... is not 'how you become a Christian', so much as 'how you can tell who is a member of the covenant family'... Justification is not how someone *becomes* a Christian. It is the declaration that they *have become* a Christian... The doctrine of justification by faith is not what Paul means by 'the gospel'. It is *implied* by the gospel; when the gospel is proclaimed, people come to faith and so are regarded by God as members of his people. But 'the gospel' is not an account of how people get saved.⁸

This extract, I think, more than amply confirms what I am saying: a wrong view of justification leads to disastrous changes to the biblical doctrine of conversion. And we are talking about an unbiblical view of justification by faith, make no mistake.⁹

⁸ Wright pp119,122,125,132-133, emphasis his.

⁹ I will not further substantiate this here. It has been done times without number. See, for instance, the following articles in *The Banner of Truth*: Kenneth D.Macleod: 'Justification' (07/01/2011); Maurice Roberts: 'A Brief Interview...' (02/03/2007); 'The New Perspective...' (21/03/2006); Ligon Duncan: 'Do we need a new perspective on justification?' (11/08/2005); James W.Galyon: 'Retreating to Rome' (05/12/2003). And there is no end of other works on the subject.

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Wright goes on to speak of those who, as he puts it, are ‘justified without knowing it’.¹⁰ This takes us to the heart of what I am talking about. Justified without knowing it? Reader, glance again at the various passages of Scripture I have quoted. Do they not teach us that a sinner is only justified when he repents of his sin, turns to Christ in faith, and is thus converted? None of this can possibly take place without the sinner ‘knowing it’! I agree, of course, that justification through faith is an act and declaration by the triune God, but the notion that the sinner can be converted, and thus actually justified in experience, while the sinner is in some sort of semi-comatose state, is utterly foreign to the New Testament.

True, God decreed the justification of the elect in eternity. True, Christ accomplished the justification of the elect in his death and resurrection. But equally true it is that the elect are only actually justified as they come to faith in Christ and are united to him. No passage, perhaps, captures all this better than the first chapter of Ephesians:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world... He predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ... In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfilment – to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ. In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. And

¹⁰ Here is a clear link with infant baptism. The sprinkled infant – who can have no possible understanding of what is supposed to be happening – is allegedly regenerated – or at least brought into the covenant (whatever that may mean) – by the act of sprinkling (if not by his birth). As I showed in my *Baptist Sacramentalism*, advocates of the New Perspective see baptism – especially of the infant variety – as a key player in their scheme, especially in their drive for the ecumenical.

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you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession – to the praise of his glory (Eph. 1:3-14, NIV).

Now it is this actual justification by faith that we are talking about. *That* is the issue here. And no sinner is justified by faith 'without knowing it'!

Wright continues: 'One is not justified by faith by believing in justification by faith', he says. I pause. Of course not! This is not the teaching of the Bible.¹¹ One is justified by trusting Christ! But, having got off on that irrelevant foot, it is not at all surprising that Wright ends up at the wrong terminus:

One is not justified by faith by believing in justification by faith. One is justified by believing in Jesus.¹² It follows quite clearly that a great many people are justified by faith who don't know they are justified by faith... Many Christians today may not be very clear about the niceties of doctrine; but, however inarticulately, they hold on to Jesus; and, according to Paul's teaching, they are therefore justified by faith. They are constituted as members of the family. They must be treated as such. This is not to say, of course, that justification is an unimportant or inessential doctrine. Far from it. A church that does not grasp it and teach it is heading for trouble.¹³

I agree with that last understatement! But if we do not appreciate and preach the biblical doctrine of justification by faith, if we do not preach it in a biblical way, and, above all, if we – personally and individually – have not been justified by faith, we are more than 'heading' for trouble; we are in it!

Continuing with Wright, where, in his view, does this leave faith? After all, 'faith' is a huge word in the New Testament. So, under the New Perspective, what place is there for faith? What is going on when a sinner believes? When God speaks of faith being essential (Heb. 11:6), what is he calling for? Wright:

¹¹ Although it is not a million miles from Sandemanianism.

¹² This needs spelling out. As it stands, the statement is inadequate. It could be nothing other than Sandemanianism.

¹³ Wright p159. A case of glasshouses and stones?

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Faith... is never and in no way a qualification, provided from the human side... for getting into God's family... It is the God-given badge of membership, neither more nor less.¹⁴

I could not more decidedly disagree. While I do agree, of course, that faith does not earn our place among God's children, it is far, far more than a mere membership 'badge'. It is the way in! Let me stress this. God justifies the sinner when he believes, and through his believing, but he never justifies a sinner because he believes, on account of his faith. The basis, the ground, of the sinner's justification is the finished work of Christ, and that alone; it is not faith! Again, the moving cause of justification is the free grace and sovereign love of God; it is not faith! Nevertheless, until a sinner believes, he is not justified. He is only justified as he trusts Christ and his redeeming work. While faith is not the cause or basis of justification, it most definitely is the means of justification.

Consider just two passages, two out of scores. See if they teach that faith is a 'badge':

By the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in his sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the law and the prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by his blood, through faith, to demonstrate his righteousness... that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith. Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law (Rom. 3:20-28).

Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified (Gal. 2:16).

Faith a 'badge'? Rubbish! Faith is more the door – not the sticker they affix to your lapel at the door, confirming that you are a genuine guest! The wedding garment in the parable (Matt. 22:2-14)

¹⁴ Wright p160.

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represents, not faith, but the perfect justifying-righteousness of Christ, received by faith at conversion, and the subsequent living of it out in a godly life. Unless a sinner trusts Christ for salvation, he is under the wrath of God, under condemnation, outside the people of God, cut off from God and without hope (John 3:18-19,36; Eph. 2:1-3,11-12). He must be converted. And he is converted when the Spirit regenerates him and leads him to repentance and faith.

And what about imputed righteousness (Rom. 5:19; 2 Cor. 5:21)? According to Wright, the traditional view of imputed righteousness is a nonsense, verging on – if not actually getting to be – ‘a legal fiction’: ‘If we use the language of the law court, it makes no sense whatever to say that the judge imputes... his righteousness to... the defendant’.¹⁵ Strong and definite may be his words, but Wright’s sentiment is itself patent nonsense.¹⁶ As the New Testament declares:

But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed... even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by his blood, through faith, to demonstrate... at the present time his righteousness, that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom. 3:21-26).

[Christ] was delivered up because of our offences, and was raised because of our justification (Rom. 4:25).

As by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one man’s obedience many will be made righteous (Rom. 5:19).

God... [sent] his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: he condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us (Rom. 8:3-4).

Christ Jesus... became for us wisdom from God... righteousness and sanctification and redemption (1 Cor. 1:30).

¹⁵ Wright pp98,102.

¹⁶ I will not substantiate my claim here. The arguments have been well-rehearsed and firmly established times without number.

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[God] made [Christ] who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in him (2 Cor. 5:21).

Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (Gal. 3:13).

These passages surely speak for themselves. As really as those in Adam are made sinners in and through Adam, so those in Christ really are made righteous in Christ. This is no ‘fiction’. Fiction, indeed! I stress the ‘really’ or ‘actually’. Men are really made sinners in Adam; sinners are really made righteous in Christ. And sinners are made righteous in Christ because Christ really did take their sin and guilt and punishment, and God really does give them (that is, he imputes to them) Christ’s righteousness. This, I say again, is no fiction. Rather, to borrow Philip Eveson’s use of the phrase, it is ‘the great exchange’.¹⁷ More! It is the *glorious* exchange!

Now for Wright’s view of conversion. Under the New Perspective, what place for individual conversion? Wright certainly holds to individual conversion: ‘*Of course*’, he says, ‘every single human being is summoned... to respond personally to the gospel. Nobody in their right mind would deny that’.¹⁸ But – and there is a huge ‘but’ – what really matters here is what we understand by ‘response’. We must allow no muddle here. We must be clear about it! The New Testament is categorical: the only saving response to the gospel is conviction of sin leading to repentance and faith. *That* is the response God calls for: trust in Christ. For it is as he trusts Christ, that the sinner is justified. And in no other way. Is this what Wright means by ‘response’. No, it is not!

I will make the point by moving on to yet another massive ‘but’ in Wright’s statement. What really counts for Wright is the ‘community’. The traditional, Reformed, evangelical view – with its emphasis upon individual, personal conversion – is, according to Wright, quite wrong. It is all a question of the ‘community’:

¹⁷ Philip H.Eveson: *The Great Exchange: Justification by Faith Alone*, Day One Publications, Leominster, 2005.

¹⁸ Wright p158, emphasis his. Wright went on: ‘Nobody in their right mind would deny that. But...’.

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If you take the old route of putting justification, in its traditional [Reformed] meaning, at the centre of your theology, you will always be in danger of sustaining some sort of individualism.¹⁹

Do not miss the ‘individualism’. Let me assert at once that I am not saying that there is no corporate emphasis in the New Testament – of course not! – nevertheless, until we have had a personal experience of conversion and justification by faith, talk of the corporate is entirely misplaced. If I may illustrate: if the horse is the personal, the cart is the corporate; to put the corporate before the personal is not only daft – it’s dangerous.

There is a corporate aspect to the gospel, yes, a glorious one at that. God in Christ has established a new Israel, formed out of Jew and Gentile, yes. As Paul, writing to the Ephesians, declared:

Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh – who are called uncircumcision by what is called the circumcision made in the flesh by hands – that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in his flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that he might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. And he came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. For through him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father. Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone, in whom the whole building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit (Eph. 2:11-22).

Clearly, then, there is a corporate aspect to the gospel. I go further. I admit that we evangelicals and Reformed have not made enough of it. We have been guilty of so stressing the individual that we have lost sight too often of the corporate. Yes! To this extent,

¹⁹ Wright pp157-158.

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Wright has a valuable point to make. He has certainly nailed me! And I am grateful for the rebuke, and the reminder that I need to think more of the corporate.

Nevertheless, the corporate is not the be-all and end-all of the gospel. What is more, as I have explained, until we have been personally and individually converted, all talk of the corporate is entirely misplaced. And this is the point! In fact, it takes us to the very heart of the problem or attack we are looking at. Indeed, this is the crunch point for all the threats to conversion that I mentioned earlier. This is the issue infant baptisers have to face. It is the issue Baptist sacramentalists have to face. It is the issue inclusivists have to face. It is the issue to be faced by these who preach salvation by works – whether overtly or by default.²⁰

Sinners are not joined to Christ in a kind of osmosis. Nor is it a kind of mass movement. Every converted sinner becomes a member of the body of Christ in an individual and personal way by conversion. We are not born Christians. We do not drift into Christ. We do not catch justification like the measles! We do not get it by association with believers! We must, as individuals, come to a ‘crisis’ and be converted.

In saying this, I would not be misunderstood. By ‘crisis’ I do not mean something necessarily dramatic. Nevertheless, conversion is not a process. It is a crisis.²¹ There is a before and an after. The New Testament emphasis can only be missed by those who are determined not to see it. While there is a corporate dimension to the gospel, it is personal conversion which comes first, and it is personal conversion which is paramount. Until we have had that experience, all talk of ‘belonging’ is wishful thinking.

²⁰ As for Sandemanians, they do hold to conversion – but they reduce it to a mere change of mind about the facts of the gospel. Before ‘conversion’, you don’t accept the facts of the gospel; after ‘conversion’ you do. This ruins conversion, but not in the same way as the other attacks. Even so, the end result for sinners is the same. Whereas there is only one way to heaven, there are many roads to hell.

²¹ By ‘crisis’ I mean ‘a time when something very important for the future happens or is decided’ (*Encarta*). And by ‘time’ I do not mean ‘process’. I am speaking of an occasion, an event, a juncture, a point in time.

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Let me prove it. Let me prove that the New Testament emphasises the individual. Take the apostle writing to the Ephesians; I have just quoted him, at length, speaking of the corporate. What did he say to them when setting out the corporate? How did the Ephesians become members of this new community? It was as Paul reminded them:

You... were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit... God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast (Eph. 1:13; 2:4-9, NIV).

Peter made the same point when he, mixing his metaphors, likened the corporate body of Christ to a temple and to a nation.²² Notice how the apostle set out the way in which this temple or nation is built – namely by the conversion of individual sinners, they being added as individual ‘stones’ to the temple, or individual ‘citizens’ to the nation:

As newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious. Coming to him as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ... You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, his own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy (1 Pet. 2:2-10).

Wright, however, virtually dismisses the individual experience:

²² Don't worry about the mixed metaphors! The Spirit, inspiring Scripture, did not mind breaking our rules of grammar and linguistic style!

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Tragically, some would-be presentations of ‘the gospel’ have actually bought into this, by implying that one is justified or saved first and foremost as an individual.²³

Note well Wright’s words – emphasising justification by faith as an individual through conversion is ‘tragic’! This is the wrong terminus I spoke of. Tragic? Without individual and personal justification by faith in the Redeemer, the sinner will be damned for ever!²⁴

So what does Wright think of Paul’s conversion? Paul was converted, wasn’t he? Well, what really happened to that rabid Jew on the Damascus road? We know that Saul, as he then was, started the day, as he had for some considerable time past, obsessed with the destruction of Christ and all he stood for, determined to set about it by annihilating Christ’s followers. As Saul came within sight of his destination, the next on his list for carrying out his soul-consuming passion, something happened to him, something which changed his entire life. What? Wright:

Paul’s awareness of Jesus as having been bodily raised from the dead is of paramount importance in understanding the significance of what happened to him on the road to Damascus. It will not do, historically speaking, to spiritualise or psychologise the event, as though (for instance) Saul had been labouring with a troubled conscience for years and suddenly had a great religious experience which enabled him to throw off the burden and enjoy a new level or dimension of spiritual existence. Nor will it do simply to say, as so many have done, (a) that Saul of Tarsus had formerly regarded the crucified Jesus as cursed by the Jewish law; (b) that he then realised that God had reversed the law’s curse; so (c) he realised that the law was now shown up as bankrupt and out of date, and (d) he could begin to announce to the world that there was a way of being the people of God in which the law played no role. Even if any of this carries a grain of truth, it is not central to what was going on.²⁵

‘If any of this carries a grain of truth’? Oh? So, I ask again: What, according to Wright, *did* happen to Paul outside Damascus? Just this:

²³ Wright pp157-158.

²⁴ See above.

²⁵ Wright p36.

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The significance of Jesus' resurrection, for Saul of Tarsus as he lay blinded and perhaps bruised on the road to Damascus, was this: The one true God had done for Jesus of Nazareth, in the middle of time, what Saul had thought he was going to do for Israel at the end of time.²⁶

Let me reply. Wright's estimate of Paul's conversion is woefully at odds with the weight of scriptural evidence. Let me summarise Wright's view: Saul, before the Damascus road experience, was personally right with God because he was in covenant with God by being a member of the nation of Israel. It is just that he did not understand God's purpose in sending Jesus as the Messiah. He did not realise that when Jesus died and rose again, he ushered in a glorious future for Israel, a future that had been so often promised in the Old Testament, and for which Saul himself was longing. While he himself was right with God – certainly, he was not labouring under any sense of sin, or doing all he could to get right with God – he *was* labouring under a gross misunderstanding about Christ. It was all a question of misunderstanding, you see. When Christ confronted him on the way to Damascus, this was changed, changed dramatically, and changed irreversibly. Saul came to realise that the one he was persecuting was in fact the very one who had brought about the thing he most desired – the glorious age for Israel. Saul saw the light! He came to see how utterly stupid he had been. Here he was, reading the Old Testament, poring over it, longing for the fulfilment of the promises of a glorious future for Israel – so often spoken of by the prophets – and now, right under his nose, the Messiah had come, accomplished God's purpose, and was fulfilling those promises, and yet he, Saul, had failed to spot it! The one he was trying to destroy was the very one who was fulfilling his every hope! How wrong could one be! What a fool he had been! *That* is what Saul came to see when Christ confronted him on the road to Damascus.

Saul's conversion was *not* a change of status before God! Not at all! It was a change of viewpoint. Christ cleared out the clutter in Saul's mental baggage. So much so, Saul could now see Christ for who and what he really was – the one who had accomplished

²⁶ Wright p36.

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God's purpose for Israel. Indeed, he now realised that it was even greater than he had ever imagined. He could now see that God's purpose was not confined to Israel. It dawned on him that the Gentiles, too, were included. And these two – Jews and Gentiles – under Christ were to form the new man, the new Israel, the new community of God. But this new Israel would be very different to the old Israel. In the new Israel, there would be no place for those old separating laws which were so important in Judaism – laws concerning circumcision, diet and days. All that was gone, gone for ever, swept away by the Messiah. And his (Saul's) job from now on was not to persecute Christ, but to bring Gentiles to see what the Messiah had accomplished in setting up the new Israel. Not only that: his job was to urge them not to stand aloof, but to come and join the new community. *That*, from now on, was to be Saul's consuming passion – the encouraging of Jew and Gentile to enter the one new community under Christ. It was nothing to do with personal conviction of sin and trusting Christ and all that. Not at all! It was a question of getting people to recognise this new Israel, and to want to come and join it – a new Israel with none of the old restrictions of the law, all of which had been fulfilled and abolished in Christ. And if only the people would come to recognise this, if only they would come and join this new community and 'hold on to Jesus',²⁷ then they would be justified!

So much for Saul (Paul) – whose name (as so much else) was changed by his encounter with the risen Christ that day. But what about us? What bearing, according to Wright, does this have on us?

It has a tremendous bearing on us. You see, according to the New Perspective, for centuries we evangelicals and Reformed have been labouring under a dreadful misapprehension – rather like Saul, himself, come to think of it. We have been obsessed by the notion – the false notion – that justification by faith means a conversion, a conversion that involves personal and individual conviction of sin, repentant trust in Christ, and the beginning of a new life of progressive holiness. This, however, misses the mark by a mile! It

²⁷ Wright p159. I have changed Wright's words from the past tense.

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is all a dreadful misunderstanding – nothing but a throwback to the bad old days of Martin Luther. We need our Damascus road experience. What we must do is this: we must rid ourselves of Luther’s rigmarole about personal justification and imputed righteousness. We have to realise that it is all a question of belonging to the community of God’s people. Justification is to do with God being faithful to his covenant people, the new Israel. It is the community that counts. It is all a question of recognising this new community and our part in it. We must divest ourselves of all this Reformed emphasis on the personal and individual, get rid of this regrettable left-over from poor old Luther, crippled as he was with his psychological neurosis. We must get it into our heads that it is all about the community, belonging to the community, recognising that we belong to the community. Moreover, we have to see this New Perspective for what it is: the great hope, especially in the ecumenical world. After all, this new view of justification, according to Wright:

Is not merely a doctrine which Catholic and Protestant might just be able to agree on, as a result of hard ecumenical endeavour. It is itself the ecumenical doctrine... [This new] doctrine of justification is in fact the great ecumenical doctrine.²⁸

Well, this has let the cat out of the bag, good and proper! Now we know.

Let me say at once how much I admire Wright’s clarity; he is perceptive, acute; indeed, he is spot on! And I am glad he states the position so clearly. As he observes, this is where the New Perspective is making such a valuable contribution in the quest for the great ecumenical Church. This newly-defined justification – both in its doctrine and practice, especially its practice – ‘is itself the ecumenical doctrine... the great ecumenical doctrine’. Of course it is! For those who want it, that is!

This is the crux. This is where the New Perspective, infant baptism, Baptist sacramentalism, inclusivism and the preaching of salvation by works come together. It’s all leading to one end. I have no doubt about it myself. I can see it in my mind’s eye. Once

²⁸ Wright p158.

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the master-cooks have gathered all their ingredients, thoroughly mixed and baked the dough, then, with a suitable flourish, they will be able to present us with the great ecumenical cake. Conversion? No need of conversion, then! All talk of conversion will be a thing of the past. In this coming utopia, if you are curious about that old-fashioned thing called ‘conversion’ – that which those suppressed fuddy-duddies used to talk so much about in the bad old days – well, you’ll just have to trot along to the museum and stare at it. There it will be, pinned to its card, grinning helplessly at you through the plate glass. Have no fear: you will be quite safe; it will be securely locked in its cage. And for those who are really determined to learn about ‘conversion’, no doubt there will be the virtual-reality experience to enjoy – much as we today can go to the medieval castle to wander through the dungeons and gawk at all the grisly apparatus of torture: nice for a diversion on a wet afternoon, of course, but how glad we are when we get out of the gloomy cavern, and escape once more into the fresh air! We can sigh with relief, and congratulate ourselves that we today have grown up – and grown out of it all!

Nonsense! Diabolical nonsense!

The point is, of course, the ‘grain of truth’ which Wright dismissed is, in fact, the biblical reality. Saul *had* been labouring under a guilty conscience, zealously doing what he thought was God’s will, and doing it to try to stifle his nagging doubts – ever since, if not before, he witnessed Stephen’s death by stoning (Acts 7:58; 8:1). In truth, the more he did, the busier he was, the less time he had to think.²⁹ But all that was changed in that dramatic encounter with the risen Christ. When Christ confronted Saul on the road to Damascus, and later in the city itself, he brought home to him his sin, reminding him of his pricking conscience (Acts 26:14), thereby convicting him of his personal guilt in his sin. More than that, the Lord dealt with Saul’s sin in an individual way. Saul was brought, as an individual, to submit to Christ as Lord. And as Saul experienced the forgiveness of his sins, he was filled with the

²⁹ It seems to me that Saul’s enforced three-day (lonely and frightening) blindness (Acts 9:9) played its part in making him stop and think.

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Spirit. Furthermore, Christ as Lord told him that his future work was to preach the gospel – the message of the forgiveness of sins, and all the rest, through repentance and faith in Christ. See, for instance, Acts 9:1-22; 22:1-21; 26:1-29. From that time on, Paul was a man under authority, the authority of the Lord Christ. As Paul himself testified:

For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it. And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers. But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb and called me through his grace, to reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the Gentiles... (Gal. 1:13-16).

We are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh, though I also might have confidence in the flesh. If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being conformed to his death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me (Phil. 3:3-12).

The glorious gospel of the blessed God which was committed to my trust... I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me, because he counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry, although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus

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Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on him for everlasting life (1 Tim. 1:11-16).

For a commentary on all this, I can only suggest a thorough reading of the letters of Paul. In light of which I further suggest a candid assessment of Wright's position must lead to only one conclusion. Wright gets it wrong, woefully so!

How does Wright view the rest of Paul's life, after his conversion?

Saul's vision on the road to Damascus thus equipped him with an entirely new perspective, though one that kept its roots firm and deep within his previous covenantal theology.³⁰ Israel's destiny had been summed up and achieved in Jesus the Messiah. The Age to Come had been inaugurated. Saul himself was summoned to be its agent. He was to declare to the pagan world that YHWH, the God of Israel, was the one true God of the whole world, and that Jesus of Nazareth had overcome evil and was creating a new world in which justice and peace would reign supreme.³¹

I can only say that my reading of the New Testament shows Paul engaged in a very different ministry to that envisaged by Wright. It can be summed up – it ought to be summed up – in the commission that Christ gave him on the road outside Damascus:

Rise and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to make you a minister and a witness both of the things which you have seen and of the things which I will yet reveal to you. I will deliver you from the Jewish people, as well as from the Gentiles, to whom I now send you, to open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in me (Acts 26:16-18).

Paul never forgot those words! They were burned into his very heart and mind! They were burned into his very soul! And he acted upon them – at once! What is more, he never stopped! We know this because, when addressing Agrippa, immediately after quoting Christ's commission, the apostle went straight on to assert:

³⁰ That is, Jewish – not Reformed – covenant theology!

³¹ Wright p37.

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Therefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance (Acts 26:19-20).

Indeed, that was precisely the reason why the Jews hated him so deeply: ‘For these reasons the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me’ (Acts 26:21). Undaunted, the apostle was determined to carry out Christ’s commission to the letter, and to his last breath (2 Tim. 4:6-7):

Therefore, having obtained help from God, to this day I stand, witnessing both to small and great, saying no other things than those which the prophets and Moses said would come – that the Christ would suffer, that he would be the first to rise from the dead, and would proclaim light to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles (Acts 26:22-23).

And, lest there should be any doubt – but read the New Testament and see – Paul spent his life fulfilling Christ’s final command to all his people, and doing so with all the ramifications and nuances intended by the Lord:

All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age (Matt. 28:18-20).

Let me quote one passage to prove it. Paul, in a hurry to get back to Jerusalem, desperately longed to address the Ephesian elders just once more. He knew that serious danger was threatening the Ephesian church, and he wanted to do all he could to prevent it. Torn between his desire to get to Jerusalem and the urgent need at Ephesus, he sent for the elders, and they came to meet him at Miletus. It was the apostle’s last anxious throw.

Let us hear part of what the apostle left ringing in the ears of the elders that day. Thankfully, the Holy Spirit recorded these words through Luke, and they have not been lost in the wind. In our degenerate day, we, weltering under attack after attack on the conversion of sinners, must heed the apostle’s appeal to the men of Ephesus. This is what he said then, and this is what he says today:

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You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia. I served the Lord with great humility and with tears, although I was severely tested by the plots of the Jews. You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus. And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me – the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace. Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again. Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God (Acts 20:17-27, NIV).

Paul uttered those words long ago to the leaders at Ephesus. And he says it today to us.

I cannot resist quoting just a little more from the apostle. In light of what I have been saying, it seems to me most apposite:

Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears. Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified (Acts 20:28-32, NIV).

I appeal to you, reader, compare the apostle’s words with the claims of the New Perspective. I appeal to every elder or preacher who reads this book of mine to heed Paul’s plea to the Ephesian elders in the face of error. May all of us who profess the name of Christ not only defend the biblical doctrine of conversion, but do all we can to call as many sinners as possible to obey the command of Christ. This is how he preached; this is what he declared: ‘Repent and believe the good news!’ (Mark 1:14, NIV).

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This, then, should be our settled aim and determination. Mark recorded Christ's words, not as a one-off, surely, but as a succinct summary of the substance of the Saviour's constant preaching. May it be ours! As Agrippa felt the force of Paul's words – 'I would to God that not only you, but also all who hear me today, might become both almost and altogether such as I am' (Acts 26:29) – may those who hear us know that we, in our turn, have longed for *their* conversion.