

(W)right with God?: A Response to N. T. Wright's Vision of Justification

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THE FAITH OF THE COMMUNITY
AND THE COMMUNITY OF FAITH

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I. THE FAITH OF CHRIST—AND FAITH IN THE SPIRIT

In the first essay, we noted the equivocation in Wright's thought as to when and how God savingly "vindicates" fallen human beings. One kind of "vindication" is the initial "status" granted to us within the people of God. The other kind of "vindication" is our resurrection to eternal life. Between the two stands a gap that somehow must be bridged. A similar form of equivocation appears in Wright's understanding of faith. On the one hand, Wright is able to speak in relatively traditional Protestant terms of Abraham's faith as "the sign of a genuine humanity, responding out of total human weakness and helplessness to the grace and power of God."¹ On the other hand, he immediately follows this description of faith with the assertion that God is not an "existentialist" who wants an "authentic" response rather than an "external" one. Faith, "indicates the presence of genuine, humble, trusting, and indeed we might say image-bearing humanity" (p. 209). Here again Wright's moral idealism expresses itself, as becomes apparent in his following statement: "And, within that, 'faithfulness' has all along (so it seems) been the thing that God requires from his people." The divine plan "has been fulfilled by the Messiah's faithfulness (*pistis*)," so that "the badge of the covenant people from then on will be the same: *pistis*, faith, confessing that Jesus

¹ N. T. Wright, *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009), 209.

is Lord”² Despite some ambiguity in Wright’s language, his understanding of faith here becomes fairly clear. “Faith” for Wright serves as a “sign,” “emblem,” or “badge” of another, more fundamental reality. Furthermore, as an external sign, faith includes the faithfulness manifest in the Messiah, indeed, the obedience that God has required from his people all along. The badge of the covenant people *is the same* as the faithfulness of the Messiah who fulfilled the divine purpose (p. 209). Again, while there may be some confusion here—at the very least there is ambiguity—Wright openly states his basic concern. He wants to exclude the thought that faith might be a merely internal act, a view that he quite naturally associates with Bultmannian existentialism.³ What then is the relationship between “faith” and “faithfulness” according to Wright?⁴ Confusion arises because of Wright’s suggestion that the badge of faith is the same as the faithfulness of the Messiah. Is faith then to be *equated* with faithfulness? And if “faith” is to be equated with “faithfulness,” shall we say that we are “justified by faithfulness”? How much “faithfulness” is necessary for us to be justified at the final judgment? Wright plays with reformational questions, apparently without realizing it. Does the tension Wright seeks to maintain between the individual and the corporate, traditional doctrine and personal innovation, confuse him—or does he intentionally equivocate? It is hard to see the difference between Wright’s correlation of “faith” and “faithfulness” and the Thomistic and Tridentine distinction between

² Ibid. On the interpretation of the debated expression *pistis Christou*, I am persuaded that both the objective genitive (“faith in Christ”) and the subjective genitive (“faith/faithfulness of Christ”), favored by Wright, miss the mark. The expression is best understood as containing a genitive of source or possession: Paul speaks of the faith that *comes from Christ*. See Mark A. Seifrid, “The Faith of Christ,” *The Faith of Jesus Christ: Exegetical, Biblical, and Theological Studies* (ed. Michael F. Bird and Preston M. Sprinkle; Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2009/Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010), 129–46.

³ Does Wright imagine that all Protestant theology that does not follow his line of thought is somehow unconsciously Bultmannian? That would be a strange choice—and impossible to sustain.

⁴ At this point Wright’s thought parallels that of Barth, who likewise introduces confusion into the concept of faith by suggesting that the twofold usage of the term *pistis* shows that in faith we have to do with an *imitatio Christi* as an imitation of God (*Church Dogmatics* IV/1, 634-637). Nevertheless, Barth makes a distinction between the judgment of God and the life of the Christian, between “the center” and “the circumference” of faith (CD IV/1, 618), between unqualified justification and our correspondence to Christ (CD IV/1, 645-636). Wright blurs this distinction by making “justification” the mere starting point of salvation.

“unformed faith” (*fides informis*) and the “faith formed by love” (*fides caritate formata*) that finally saves. If faith itself is to serve as an emblem or badge, it must be thought to consist in something outward, like the verbal confession of Christ or becoming a member of a church or, more importantly for Wright, doing outward, visible good. As significant as these actions may be, it is hard to see them as the sum and substance of faith, or certain marks of its genuineness. “Faith” is not an outward badge, but an unseen reality that manifests itself in our works, as is apparent in the well-known challenge of the Jacobean interlocutor: “Show me your faith without works, and I shall show you faith by my works!” (Jas 2:18b).⁵ We must not forget, moreover, that the true nature of our “works” will become evident only at the final judgment. Prior to that judgment, outwardly good works remain ambiguous: only when our persons become manifest before the judgment seat of Christ will it become clear whether or not these works are in reality what they appear to be outwardly (2 Cor 5:10). The work of the Spirit is not without outward effect, but the work itself remains hidden until the Last Day. The sheep at the right hand of the throne of the Son of Man remain unaware of the good they have done (Matt 25:37-39). The hidden Jew receives praise, not from people, but from God (Rom 2:29). Not even the apostle Paul is ready to pass judgment on himself and his work before the Last Day (1 Cor 4:1-5). It is the risen Lord alone—with eyes as a flame of fire—who knows and exposes the works of his churches (Rev 2:2, 19; 3:1, 8, 15). Faith is the hidden source of all good works, the secret power that makes them good rather than self-serving: “everything that does not proceed from faith is sin” (Rom 14:23). To make “faith” into an outward emblem is to rob it of its vitality.

It is in the vision of Jesus the Messiah, in whom the faithfulness that God required of Israel has come to reality, that Wright binds “faith” to “faithfulness.” Here, as we have noted, lies the heart of Wright’s program: the image of God and of true humanity had to be embodied in human life, a calling at which Israel failed.⁶ In seeing Jesus our representative, we see the true God and what it means to be truly human. In seeing him we are transformed by the power of the Spirit. As we observed in the previous lecture, Wright thereby renders Jesus generic and thus de-historicizes him. Here, again, is a remarkable irony! Although Wright valiantly, and in many ways brilliantly, defends the

⁵ James does not call his readers to examine their works in retrospect, but to engage in the works of a living faith!

⁶ Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective*, 70. See Mark A. Seifrid, “The Narrative of Scripture and Justification by Faith: A Fresh Response to N.T. Wright,” *CTQ* 72.1 (2008): 28–34.

historicity of the Gospels and of Jesus' resurrection, in his attempt to combat Bultmann's existentialism, he falls into the very problems that are fundamental to it. The earth, it turns out, is round. The great distance that separates Wright and Bultmann serves in the end only to bring them together: "consistent eschatology" in existential mode meets "realized eschatology" in Wright's modification of it.⁷ Bultmann carries out his program of de-mythologizing the New Testament by distinguishing between the natural and the historical. He sets apart the world that is accessible to human investigation from the "historical," namely, that which calls the human being to authentic decision. He, thus, no longer sees the world as creation and transposes all God's works, including the cross and resurrection of Christ, to the inward life and existence of the human being.⁸ Wright does the opposite. Where Bultmann *internalizes*, Wright *externalizes*. As we have seen, "faith" for Wright is finally faithfulness, the outward and visible expression of being truly human, the doing of the will of God, sharing in the covenant faithfulness of God manifest in the obedience of Jesus. As the true human being who is our representative, Jesus remains distant and generic. Otherwise, in what Reinhold Niebuhr calls, "genuine prophetic Christianity" the "moral qualities of Christ" would be "not only our hope, but our despair."⁹ In a way that is remarkably reminiscent of Bultmann, Wright insists on the particularity of Jesus, but cannot, so far as I can see, provide a substantive reason as to why Jesus *alone* should be the representative of God's faithfulness. Could not the saints fill this role? Why, moreover, must this faithfulness be bound to Israel's story? Why not a Gandhi? In this de-historicizing interpretation of Jesus, Wright likewise misses the work of the Creator, who gives himself to us in Jesus and in him makes us into a new creation. As we have seen in the first essay, for Wright it is first and foremost Jesus' *obedience* unto death that saves us, and not his death itself. We do not meet Jesus in "wondrous exchange" as he has come down into the depths of our misery and sin. Indeed, for Wright Jesus does not come down to us. We must first come up to him. Much

⁷ In his interpretation of Jesus' parables and apocalyptic, Wright clearly stands in the interpretive tradition of C. H. Dodd—and yet reacts against it by attempting to draw a straight line from the present age into the age to come. See C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (New York: Scribner's, 1961), 20–84, 157–69.

⁸ See Oswald Bayer's important critique of Bultmann, which unfortunately does not appear in English translation, *Theologie* (Handbuch systematischer Theologie 1; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlag, 1994), 475–84.

⁹ R. Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (New York: World, Meridian 1956), 73.

like Bultmann, then, Wright turns “faith” into a moral demand. Neither of them has a taste for the cross as the “great pleasure of our existence.”¹⁰ Of course, their differences remain. While Bultmann understands “faith” as the call to authentic decision, Wright understands “faith” as the call to authentic action. Paul, in contrast to both of them, understands faith as the new creation, Christ present within the heart through the Gospel: “I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. What I live . . . , I live by the faith of [i.e. given by] the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself up for me” (Gal 2:20).¹¹

In Wright’s program, then, a gap stands between us and Jesus. With that gap the pressing question arises: Is it possible to *trust* in Jesus, if we regard him first and foremost as the representative bearer of the divine image? Wright himself has difficulty in doing so and, thus, speaks of trusting in the Spirit, who transforms us into that divine image that Jesus embodies (pp. 107, 188). Jesus appears for Wright *primarily* as the manifestation of a moral ideal—a moral ideal to which we cannot of ourselves attain. The Spirit therefore necessarily becomes the object of faith alongside Jesus. No longer does the Spirit do anything other than make known the mysterious cross-words of Jesus (John 14:15-21, 25-26; 15:26-27; 16:7-15). No longer does the Spirit come as a polemicist who wages war against the world and the flesh (John 16:8-11; Gal 5:17).¹² No longer is the presence of the Spirit the life of the resurrection given to faith here and now (Rom 8:1-11). No longer does Christ come to us and dwell in us by the Spirit (“I will not leave you as orphans, I will come to you”; John 14:18; cf. Rom 8:9-10). Rather than bringing Christ down to us, the Spirit must lift us up to Christ, and that in a nearly mystical manner. The Spirit is thus robbed of the task of communicating Christ and his benefits through the Gospel, and must instead bring unnamed benefits of his own. “Faith” consequently becomes divided and diffused in Wright’s program. Wright appeals to the creeds in support of his urging that we should place our trust in the Spirit, and thereby confuses the content of faith (*fides quae creditur*) with the act of believing (*fides qua creditur*). If, following Wright’s appeal to the creed, we place our

¹⁰ We have already pointed to this reflection of Johann Georg Hamann. See Bayer, *Theologie*, 479; Oswald Bayer and Christian Knudsen, *Kreuz und Kritik. Johann Georg Hamanns Letztes Blatt: Text und Interpretation* (BHT 66; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1983), 111.

¹¹ On “faith of Christ” as a genitive of source see Seifrid, “Faith of Christ,” in Bird and Sprinkle, *Faith of Jesus Christ*, 129–46.

¹² See Ernst Käsemann, *Perspectives on Paul* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1971), 71.

trust in the Spirit, shall we then not also place our trust in the Church?¹³ Indeed, above all else with Wright, confusion remains as to where we should place our trust. In what measure shall we place our trust in God's work in Jesus? In what measure shall we place our trust in God's work in us by the Spirit?

II. THE LAW, GUILT, AND THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS

As with "faith" and "justification," there is an inconsistency within Wright's thought as to whether or not the law serves merely to keep sin in check or to expose human guilt. This uncertainty on his part entails an underestimation of the reality of guilt and its effects. One of the reasons that Wright has such difficulty in understanding the law in Scripture is that he fails to see that the law is not the cause of our fallen condition, but the means by which it is brought to light. This condemning work is not a misuse of the law, as Wright—in line with a Barthian approach—seems to say at one point.¹⁴ According to Scripture, it is a fundamental purpose of the law (e.g. Rom 4:15; Gal 3:12, 19-22; 2 Cor 3:6). There is a large difference between the reality of our guilt, and the small measure of it of which we are aware. Most of us do not live with a tormented conscience. It is the hearing of the demands of the law from without—often through the voice of another—that reveals to us the reality of sin and guilt that is present in our hearts. The encounter with the law is no mere moment of intellectual illumination. It is a deadly engagement in which our whole person is captured afresh by sin and brought into guilt. The "knowledge of sin" that comes through the law is an experiential knowledge: tragically, all of us know both the reality and guilt of coveting (Rom 3:19-20; 7:7-13). In this concrete and personal way, as Paul says, "through the commandment sin becomes utterly sinful." In the face of the law's demands, we find ourselves simultaneously guilty and powerless. The commandment, which we and all human beings agree is "holy, righteous and good," exposes our desire to do away with the God who gives the commandment and to take for ourselves that which belongs to our neighbor. Unable to remove from our heart either our recognition of the good or the reality of evil, we live in the constant need to justify ourselves and our life. We no longer are able to see the world

¹³ The Apostolic Creed: *Credo in Spiritum sanctum, sanctam ecclesiam catholicam . . .* ; The Niceno-Constantopolitan Creed: *pisteuomen...kai eis to pneuma to hagion...eis mian hagian katholikēn kai apostolikēn ekklesiam.* (*Credo . . . Et in Spiritum Sanctum . . . Et unam, sanctam, catholicam, et apostolicam Ecclesiam.*)

¹⁴ Wright, *Justification*, 73.

as *creation*, in and through which our Creator not only promises to give us “all that we need to support this body and life,”¹⁵ but also to rectify its wrongs and to triumph over its evils. Consequently, we either deify or objectify God’s creatures—including our fellow human beings—either worshipping them and expecting from them that which we can receive from God alone, or manipulating them and exploiting them in so far as they fall within our powers. Rather than joyfully assuming our God-given roles as stewards and servants, we seek to possess and dominate. We are no longer able to see *ourselves* as God’s creatures. We have forfeited our life as an unconditioned, unmerited gift from God.¹⁶ In setting aside the justifying word of the Creator, who pronounces *us* along with all that he has made as “very good” (Gen 1:31), and in taking on the burden of “knowing [and thus determining] good and evil” (Gen 3:5), we must justify ourselves and give meaning to our existence in the midst of the chaos and disorder of the fallen creation. We have traded the grace of bodily existence in the midst of all created things for the impossible burden of *self-justification* in the midst of vanity, emptiness, and death. We have forfeited the glory of God that was ours in thanksgiving and praise of our Creator. It has departed from us: Ichabod (Rom 1:23, 3:23) “Justification” thus does not merely have to do with our sinfulness, but with our creaturely existence, as Oswald Bayer, drawing upon Luther, especially has made clear.¹⁷ As is already apparent, while the justifying event of the cross bears an unmistakably individual dimension, it does not further an isolated individualism. Just the opposite: it frees us from it by restoring us to a right relation with our Creator and all creatures. Conversion, which, despite its decisive beginning includes every day of this earthly life, is nothing other than what has sometimes been called a “conversion to the world.”¹⁸

¹⁵ As Luther confesses concerning the first article of the Apostles Creed.

¹⁶ Wright’s insistence that we orbit around God, *and not God around us* (*Justification*, 23-24), is misguided. Naturally, if God is reduced to the projection of our desires, Wright’s warning has its point. Nevertheless—and the Copernican revolution notwithstanding—the wonder of the grace of creation is that God causes the sun to shine on us and the rain to fall on us, and that whether we are good or evil (Matt 6:45). All appearances to the contrary, all things serve us, not, of course, so that they feed our egoistic desires, but so that we find our heavenly Father, and as God’s children serve our fellow human beings (Rom 8:28). The alternative that Wright offers, it seems to me, is a utilitarian God, who does not want us so much as he wants what he can get from us.

¹⁷ See Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation* (trans. Thomas H. Trapp; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 95–119.

¹⁸ Yet not in the sense of a second conversion.

This exposure of our guilt, painful though it is, therefore turns out to be an advantage (cf. Rom 3:1-2). Just as the law does not create our fallen condition, the purposes of God are not exhausted in it. The condemning work of the law merely prepares for the word of the gospel: where the letter has put to death, the Spirit makes alive; where the law has brought condemnation, the gospel brings righteousness (2 Cor 3:4-11). This twofold work of God is anything other than automatic. As Paul himself knew, it is quite possible to be deaf to the voice of the law, to regard its fulfillment as first and foremost a matter of performing outward deeds, and not a claim upon our whole person and life (Gal 1:13-14; Phil 3:4-6). It is also possible to hear the condemning voice of the law as the last word, and to despair in the face of it, as in the stark example of Judas: "I have sinned in betraying innocent blood!" (Matt 27:4). In either case, whether one lives in *superbia* or in *desperatio*, in pride or in despair, one lives *in one's self*, in isolated self-absorption and self-justification.¹⁹

Whether pride or despair rules in the heart, the deliverance of the human heart comes by a word from without. The law is *given* and therefore comes as a word from without, especially to those who live in *superbia*: through Moses, through the prophets, through John the Baptist. The gospel, too, comes as a word from without, to those who through the law know their guilt, delivering them from despair: according to the Gospel narratives Peter is given the Lord's word of promise, which apart from any virtue in Peter brings him forgiveness in his failure: Judas hanged himself, but Peter wept. No one comes to the gospel through reflection. All of us must be told and repeatedly reminded of the gospel by the word and voice of another: *fides ex auditu*, faith comes by hearing (Rom 10:17).²⁰ Consequently, although the forgiveness of sins comes to us as individuals, it is no individualistic experience.²¹ It takes place within and through the community where the Gospel is announced. Conversely, self-justification necessarily makes use of and exploits community—always the community of persons *like us*—to further its own individualistic ends: we seek glory from one another, rather than

¹⁹ Luther repeatedly describes fallen human beings as turned in on themselves: *cor incurvatus in seipsum*. See Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 182–4.

²⁰ Admittedly, *akoē* in this context signifies the "the message given for hearing," or proclamation. But the point stands.

²¹ See Eberhard Hahn, "*Ich glaube . . . die Vergebung der Sünden*": Studien zur Wahrnehmung der Vollmacht zur Sündenvergebung durch die Kirche Jesu Christi (Forschungen zur systematischen und ökumenischen Theologie 92; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999), 46–8.

seeking the glory that comes from God alone (cf. John 5:44). In this respect, our acknowledgment of guilt and confession of sin is the moment of individuation, in which we—like the prodigal son—come to ourselves and tell the truth about ourselves in the presence of God: *tibi soli peccavi* (“Against you alone I have sinned!”; Ps 51:6).²² At the same time, just as the gospel is announced in and through the community of forgiven sinners, those who receive the forgiveness of their sins are placed within that community. God’s word as law and gospel individuates, but it does not isolate.²³ As his very words reveal, the older son in the parable of the prodigal is after all—in his mind and in heart—the brother of the younger son.²⁴ Had he turned, he would have recognized his brother. We, who are many, are one in Christ (cf. 1 Cor 12:12-13). God’s justifying work in Christ is the deliverance of our persons from the community of manipulation and lies and our transfer to the community of forgiven sinners, where the truth is spoken and confessed in freedom (Col 1:13-14; Eph 4:4-16). In his concentration on the redemption of community, especially as it is expressed in his construal of the story of Scripture as Israel’s return from Babylon, Wright forgets that the outward evil that expresses itself in the structures of this present world has its root in the human heart:

Our towns are copied fragments from our breast;
And all man's Babylons strive but to impart
The grandeurs of his Babylonian heart.²⁵

Rightly understood, therefore, the question, “How can I find a gracious God?” is no hindrance to a proper concern for the redemption of creation. Quite the opposite: it is the only doorway to it. It is the proper, initial response to the reality of guilt that the law exposes in us. In asking this question, we ask how we can be set free from all the ways in which we exploit others and misuse the Creator’s gifts to us. The psalmist’s confession *tibi soli peccavi* (“Against you alone I have sinned!” [Ps 51:6]) is no attempt to evade responsibility for harm done to others. It is rather a full facing of responsibility: in the presence of God there is no room for excuse (cf. Luke 15:18, 21). The question, “How can I find a gracious God?” is not the question of the introspective soul, or at least

²² Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 38.

²³ *Ibid.*, 245.

²⁴ He thus envies his younger brother’s whoring and wantonness, and wishes for a celebration, not with his father, but with his own friends (Luke 15:29-30).

²⁵ Francis Thompson, “The Heart Sonnet,” 2.12-14.

need not be. It is not restricted to the young Luther, nor is it confined to the Middle Ages. We find it in the Synoptics—admittedly in a corrupted and introverted form that Jesus corrects—on the lips of the rich young ruler who asks, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Mark 10:17-22; Matt 19:16-22; Luke 28:18-23).²⁶ If we do not ask how we might find a gracious God, it is either because we are content to live in the abuse of God’s creatures, or because we imagine in blind *superbia* that we have transcended such failures: “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8). Until our final deliverance arrives at the last judgment, the need for the forgiveness of sins remains as much a part of our life as our daily bread. Granted, in the modern world and especially in the West, there are many who do not feel the need to find “a gracious God.” This tendency is not a mark of greater sophistication, but of increasing superficiality, as Karl Barth observed more than a half-century ago.²⁷ It is largely the result of our prosperity and the corresponding loss of the horizon of final judgment from our sight. No matter, however, how we try to suppress this question, we cannot remove it from our hearts. In our creatureliness we cannot sustain our life and our future, and, thus, are bound to have a god to whom or to which we look for help and deliverance in all our troubles—as Luther profoundly observes.²⁸ The search for a gracious God is inherent to us, whether we are aware of it or not. The only question is whether we find the true God or place our trust in idols.

It is in this context that we are to understand the “good works,” which contrary to Wright, the Reformation certainly did not “love to hate” (p. 117). Whatever aberrations may have been and may still exist in Protestant thought, one need only read Luther’s 1520 “Sermon on Good Works” to realize how this judgment is fundamentally misguided and unfair. Luther and other Reformers by no means rejected “good works;” they only offered a sober realism about their place and value.²⁹ The human problem is not with the good works to which we are called, but

²⁶ Along many with others, Wright radically underestimates the individualism that had penetrated Jewish life in the time of Jesus, as is reflected, for example, in the practice of individual burial in either a wooden coffin or an ossuary that came to replace familial burial, and the earlier biblical concept of “being gathered to one’s fathers.” See Rachel Hachlili, *Jewish Funerary Customs, Practices and Rites in the Second Temple Period* (JSJSup 94; Leiden Boston: E. J. Brill, 2005), 512–4.

²⁷ Barth, CD IV/1, 531.

²⁸ See Luther *WA* 30:132,32-133,8 (Exposition of the First Commandment in the Large Catechism).

²⁹ So, for example, Luther’s “Treatise on Good Works,” LW 44:17-113 = *WA* 6:202-276.

with our false estimation of them, the imagination that our works might make us pleasing to God, or that they may serve as certain marks of our progress and spirituality. We Christians must maintain a healthy suspicion about our works. We cannot take them at face value. Even when our works seem outwardly good and beneficial to others, they are not truly good unless they are done freely and without self-seeking or pride. Otherwise we are no longer serving our neighbor, but serving ourselves, no matter what the outward appearance might be. If, on the other hand, as Wright argues, my standing in the final judgment is contingent on my works, I am no longer free to serve my neighbor, but in one way or another must and will seek my final justification in my works even if I suppose that I accomplish them by the Spirit's help. I serve myself and not my neighbor. Works and faith, faith and faithfulness must not be confused with one another. The failure to distinguish between them is the death of both. Faith is nothing other than the finding of a gracious God in Jesus Christ. With that discovery comes both the unmerited justification of my life now and the assurance of that same justification at the final judgment. Out of this assurance that in Christ we are pleasing to God—and only out of his assurance—we are set free from our self-seeking so that we may serve our neighbor. Our works are truly good only to the extent that they are done in this faith. These are old, reformational insights that should hardly need to be repeated.

III. CREDO IN . . . SANCTORUM COMMUNIONEM

As we have repeatedly observed, Wright's program takes its material orientation from his corporate conception of salvation. The substitutionary dimension of the saving event, God's justifying work in Christ, as well as Jesus' individual identity itself are all overlooked or given diminished scope while "representation" and membership in the people of God are accorded primary and fundamental status. This new *ordo salutis* not only introduces the equivocations and ambiguities that we have considered above, it also brings with it a new form of individualism—one of which Wright himself seems unaware. As we have seen, although for Wright, "justification" establishes our "status" within the people of God, the people of God is that community marked by the badge of faith(fulness). We must become in "reality" what we are by "declaration."³⁰ As we observed in the first lecture, Wright strangely, yet happily embraces the caricature of a divine fiction, of which the

³⁰ It is reflected in Wright's illustrative depiction of marriage as a mere change of "status" that must be followed by a "steady transformation of the heart" (p. 91). Do the two become one only at the end of this transformation?

Reformers often have been accused! Of course, Protestant theology is well familiar with the call to “become what you are!” This relation, however, between the “indicative” and the “imperative,” between what God has done and what we must do, is a paradox. We are to take hold of that which already has been given and done for us in Christ (cf. Rom 13:14). In contrast, Wright restricts the effect of justification to a “status” that must be followed by an “actual rescue” in order for us to stand at judgment, so that our “status” seems to be nothing other than a legal fiction. As we again have repeatedly observed, he dissolves the biblical paradox and assigns final significance to a moral ideal. As a result, the gap between us and Jesus necessarily becomes a gap between us and others. The inevitable differences between Christians in virtue, godliness, and outward standing take on fundamental significance. All of those who have “the faith of Jesus” are human, but some of us are more human than others. As we have seen in the first lecture, that is clearly the case with the apostle Paul over against the Corinthians according to Wright’s own reading of 2 Cor 5:21 (pp. 162-165), even if Wright would be unwilling to admit it. Ironically, with Wright an absolute and, therefore, destructive individualism takes the place of the biblical form. Within the Scriptures, our individual differences are limited by the unqualified character of our very existence as a gift (1 Cor 4:7), by our standing as sinners *coram Deo* (the ground is level at the foot of the cross) and by the oneness in Christ that transcends all earthly differences and outward marks of spirituality (Gal 3:28). The opponents of Paul in Galatia were seeking by the grace of God, through Christ, to build a single humanity marked by faithfulness, a faithfulness in which outward progress was the measure of spirituality (cf. Gal 1:14; Luke 18:11). Shall we follow their example?

Rightly understood, the message of justification encompasses the whole of Christian existence. The forgiveness of sins is not merely the entry point into the Church, as Wright imagines, but that which makes its corporate life realistic and vital. Justification is not merely a matter of a personal relationship with God, it is the presence of the new creation in the midst of the fallen world that opens the world to us afresh as creation in its dynamic life of receiving and giving.³¹ The forgiveness of sins and the free justification of our existence, grounded in the first and last word of the Creator, sets us free from the reality of our guilt as well as from our sense of shame and inward need to justify ourselves. Through it we are set free to serve our neighbor with all that we are and have. That freedom includes the freedom of forgiveness. As the Lord’s Prayer

³¹ See Oswald Bayer, “Ethik der Gabe” (paper presented at Die Gabe-ein ‘Urwort’ der Theologie? Ein systematisch-theologisches Symposium; Katholisch soziale Akademie, Münster, 5 April 2008).

teaches us, forgiveness truly received, *necessarily* goes forth to others: “forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven our debtors” (Matt 6:12).³² The entire dynamic of the common life of the disciples appears here, since the fifth petition presupposes that disciples who have received the forgiveness of their sins and have already given it forth to others, must themselves come again and again to receive it afresh from God (cf. Matt 18:21-35). The Christian community, in both its vertical *and* horizontal dimensions, exists in the constant receiving and giving of the forgiveness of sins. Jesus’ disciples love one another as he has loved them not only in the sharing of material goods, but also in washing one another’s feet (John 13:12-17).³³ It is only through this vehicle of forgiveness received and given forth that “the glory of God returns to the (fallen) world” and that the world and those who dwell in it receive healing.³⁴ No measure of material progress or sharing of earthly goods can remove the need for this healing. What would it have profited the paralytic of the Gospel story to have received the power to walk, but not the forgiveness of his sins? As Miroslav Volf has argued, final judgment itself includes the mutual justification and reconciliation of all God’s people with one another—as it must so long as the fifth petition of Lord’s Prayer still addresses us.³⁵

This matter of forgiveness touches upon a fundamental concern of the “new perspective” and of Wright in particular. The giving and receiving of forgiveness entails receiving one another as forgiven and justified sinners in Jesus Christ, *apart from all outward differences*—differences which invariably are mistaken as marks of faithfulness and piety. When believing Jews accepted believing Gentiles in the earliest Church, they confessed that they themselves were *and remained* nothing more than justified sinners alongside their Gentile brothers and sisters (Gal 2:15-21). When, later in Rome, Paul called upon believing Gentiles to accept those Jewish believers in the Messiah who retained their

³² Luther likewise understands the “blessed exchange” between Christ and the believer to overflow into the life of the church, so that, “the virgin must place her crown on the harlot, a faithful wife must place her veil over an adulteress” (*WA* 10.3, 217,11-218,16).

³³ Miroslav Volf recounts powerful examples from the experiences of his own family. See M. Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) 121–6.

³⁴ See Cristoph Gestrich, *The Return of Splendor in the World: The Christian Doctrine of Sin and Forgiveness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 14–35, 263–337.

³⁵ See M. Volf, “The Final Reconciliation: Reflections On A Social Dimension of the Eschatological Transition,” *Modern Theology* 16.1 (2000): 91–113.

conservative “boundary markers,” he was calling them to the same confession (Rom 15:1-6). Indeed, this changing call to the accepting embrace of the other flows out of the dynamic of God’s dealings with humanity, according to which God shuts up first one and then the other under disobedience, so that he might have mercy on all (Rom 11:28-36). In this way, God’s justifying work in Christ remains integral and vital to the building up of the body of Christ. As the Scriptures make clear, this dynamic of exchange is not new, but was always part of Israel’s history. God’s choice to bless the world through Abraham in no way does away with the regular, and yet ever-surprising reversal of roles: Melchizedek is greater than Abraham, Pharaoh, and Abimelech more pious than he; Ruth, the Moabite, is the model of *hesed*; Job, the Gentile, the model of patience; the pagan Cyrus is the Lord’s messiah; the name of the Lord of which Israel is weary “is great among the nations” where incense rises and pure offering is made (Mal 1:11). Israel’s role in the world is not that of a moral beacon, but that of the object and model of the forgiving grace of its Lord. The same is true of and within the Church, as already becomes clear in the book of Acts. The *sanctorum communio* is not visible in its outward works, but must be confessed in faith. Its fellowship does not consist in an outward badge or emblem—God save us from such saints!³⁶—but in the crucified and risen Lord who is its righteousness, from whom it continues to receive the forgiveness of its sins, through which forgiveness it makes its progress. In this respect, more than all the others we have considered, Wright has not succeeded in communicating the apostolic vision of God’s justifying work in Christ.

³⁶ See Luther *WA* 46:583,10-17.