

What's Wrong with Wright? 'Imputation' to begin with...

by David Orton

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Imputation Contended and Defended

Romans 5:12-21 is considered the *locus classicus* for the doctrine of "imputation"; that is, the imputation of Adam's sin, guilt, and penalty to humankind and of Christ's righteousness to the believer. However, the 'New Perspective on Paul' significantly contends against "imputation". For example, as one of the most influential proponents, we will consider several aspects of N. T. Wright's approach.

This assessment builds on and completes our previous discussions around the 'New Perspective' at [2:13](#) and [3:21-31](#) of our Romans commentary. We will consider five aspects of Wright's denial of this doctrine: 1) His *ad hominem* argumentation; 2) It is categorically disallowed; 3) It is invented by medieval reformers; 4) It is not taught explicitly; 5) It is denied by the non-historical Adam.

Imputation contended 'ad hominem'

First, he responds with *ad hominem* rhetoric to those who hold the historic view of imputation when he exclaims somewhat petulantly, "When will it become clear to the geocentrists?", and thus ironically 'imputes' flat-earth obscurantism to them (Wright, *Justification*, p. 95). To engage in fallacious *ad hominem* argumentation – personal affront and mockery – is not worthy of a scholar of Wright's status and does not add to his cause. His body of work is, unfortunately, peppered with it.

Imputation categorically disallowed

Second, and more to the point, he states, that although believers are 'in Christ', "...it is quite illegitimate to seize on that and say that therefore they have something called 'the righteousness of Christ' imputed to them, in the full sixteenth-and-seventeenth century sense..." (*ibid*, p. 133-4). He thus categorically disallows "imputation" and goes on to claim that Paul is not teaching that Jesus perfectly obeyed the moral law so as to possess "moral righteousness" which can then be "credited" to those who are "in Christ" (*ibid*, p. 134). Rather, he claims, through union with Christ, he has become our righteousness only in the sense that God has vindicated him in the resurrection; hence, a *christus victor* view of atonement, of vindication over against his enemies; this supplants any notion of propitiatory atonement based on forensic righteousness and the judicial wrath of God (1:17-18;). The "faithfulness of God" to his covenant is set off against the moral and ethical "righteousness of God", evacuating the Gospel of the need for propitiation and hence the imputation of Christ's moral righteousness to our account (see our comments on the 'pagan' notion of 'propitiation' promoted by N. T. Wright at 3:21-26). Sin and the wrath of God are recast and hence our need for propitiation. Consequently the Gospel as "the power of God to salvation" (1:16-17) is disempowered by the 'New Perspective's' reinterpretation of "righteousness".

Contra to Wright, our exegesis below of 5:12-21 will show imputation, while not using the actual word, as unarguably the Pauline thought. Likewise, our exegesis of the previous four chapters has already conclusively demonstrated man's plight under the judicial wrath of God and thus in need of a righteousness not his own, a forensic transfer of, in Luther's words, "alien" righteousness to one's own account. See 4:1-8 and 3:21-31, *Righteousness Reinterpreted* and *Justification Reinterpreted*, for 'imputation' and the 'New Perspective's' reinterpretation of righteousness as the "faithfulness of God" and justification as "membership of the covenant community". These revisionist pre-commitments require a categorical rejection of "imputation", of Adam's sin to us, our sins to Christ, and his righteousness to us. For Wright's overall project to offer some semblance of coherence his version of "righteousness" and "imputation" cannot co-exist.

Hence, Wright's exegesis of 5:12-21 conveniently ignores the large theological questions provoked by the passage, glossing over questions such as "imputation"—"the mode by which...sin is transmitted" from Adam to all human beings. The "primal sin" of Adam, he acknowledges, "somehow" involves "all subsequent humanity"; but *how*, according to him, is not in the scope of the passage. As Venema points out, "In one of the few places where Wright offers a definition of 'imputation,' he clearly seems to confuse it with what theologians historically termed 'infused' righteousness: 'If we use the language of the law court, it makes no sense whatever to say that the judge imputes, imparts, bequeaths, conveys or otherwise transfers his righteousness

to either the plaintiff or the defendant. Righteousness is not an object, a substance or a gas which can be passed across the courtroom.' [*What Saint Paul Really Said*, p. 98]. This statement not only misrepresents the idea of imputation, but it also leaves unanswered the corollary question, by what means do human beings become guilty of the transgression Adam committed?" (Cornelis P. Venema, *N. T. Wright On Romans 5:12-21 And Justification: A Case Study In Exegesis, Theological Method, And The "New Perspective On Paul"*, MJT 16 [2005], p. 69 n. 46).

Imputation invented by medieval reformers

Third, as to Wright's suggestion that the forensic righteousness of Christ was a "sixteenth-and-seventeenth century" invention is far from the fact (see also comments on the 'New Perspective' under 3:21-31). While the church Fathers were not fully developed in their articulation of the faith nor always consistent in their statements and, equally with Luther and Calvin, not the arbiters of orthodoxy apart from their agreement with God's word, it is imperative that we correct Wright's claim. A mass of testimony to justification by grace through faith and the forensic righteousness of Christ can be adduced from the writings of Clement of Rome, Polycarp, Justin Martyr, the Epistle of Diognetus, Irenaeus, Cyprian, Athanasius, Basil, Ambrose, Origen, Jerome, Chrysostom, and Augustine; I refer the reader to James Buchanan's, *The Doctrine of Justification: An Outline of its History in the Church And of Its Exposition from Scripture*, for a full treatment. Contra to Wright these forensic truths of justification by faith were gradually obscured in the life of the church through the predicted apostasy that materialized in the post-apostolic period, progressively degenerating into the full-blown Romanist doctrines of the medieval period that eventually precipitated reformation.

Imputation not taught explicitly

Fourth, Wright claims that "...if 'imputed righteousness' is so utterly central, so nerve-janglingly vital, so standing-and-falling-church important...isn't it strange that Paul never actually came straight out and said it?" (Wright, *op cit*, p. 30). In other words, Paul would have been far more explicit in teaching it and, also, used the actual word. Nevertheless, if this canon were applied to the biblical teaching of the Trinity, for example, Wright should also disallow it; it is not taught explicitly in the NT nor does it use the word "trinity". But he does not; his hermeneutic is not consistent. Likewise, the Bible's teaching on the 'hypostatic union' of the two natures of Christ in the one person is not taught explicitly in the NT nor is the technical term used.

In this regard, D. A. Carson astutely poses:

Even if we agree that there is no Pauline passage that explicitly says, in so many words, that the righteousness of Christ is imputed to his people, is there biblical evidence to substantiate the view that the substance of this thought is conveyed? And if such a case can be made, should the exegete be encouraged to look at the matter through a wider aperture than that provided by philology [text and language] and formulae?" (D. A. Carson, *The Vindication Of Imputation: On Fields Of Discourse And Semantic Fields*, from "Justification: What's at Stake in the Current Debates", Edited by Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Treier, Downers Grove: IVP, 2004, p. 50).

Here, Carson brings into focus two domains: the exegetical and the theological. Wright, along with many contemporary scholars, bifurcates two valid domains of the hermeneutical process. He asserts that traditional theology is "abstract" and engages in the "de-historicizing" of the text (Venema, *op cit*, p. 4, 5, 9, 16, 18, 28 45, 50), claiming, "We [the New Perspective] have abandoned biblicistic proof-texting, as inconsistent with the nature of the texts that we have..." (Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, pp. 139-40). In other words, "traditional theology" has divorced itself from the biblical narrative producing a "Procrustean bed", and so he promotes the authority of the text's historical context over that of the larger biblical context and, more particularly, its complete data on that particular narrative's subject (theology); what he calls, "biblicistic proof-texting" that diminishes the story-form of Scripture. For example, Paul, as a product of "Second Temple Judaism", interprets the Gospel through a rabbinical Jewish lens and, hence, is *the* key to understanding Paul. This is not to say that Wright dismisses the notion of systematic theology (because he does not), but it is to say that until now, in his opinion, theology has got it wrong (see N.T. Wright, '*Historical Paul and "Systematic Theology": To Start a Discussion*', in 'Biblical Theology', ed. M. W. Elliott. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2016; p. 147-164). In other words, it has not been developed from *his* particular exegetical methodology, that is to say, through the lens of "Second Temple Judaism" allied with *his* particular version of covenant theology (see our comments on 'The New Perspective on Paul' at 3:21-31 for Wright's version of 'covenant').

In response, not only does Wright's approach evidence a low view of God and the divine inspiration of Scripture – that

revelation is culturally bound – but his particular exegetical method, severed from systematic theology, is inevitably atomistic, isolating the text from the rest of Scripture and absolutizing the part over the whole. Rather than the *whole-of-Scripture* context informing the text, it is made captive to the *historical* context (e.g. in Paul's case, rabbinical Judaism) and must then be interpreted exclusively through the lens of that culture. This is not to deny the significance of historical background – understanding NT cultural context is a given, principally, but not exclusively, to elucidate authorial intent – but it must come under the authority of the rest of Scripture in the interpretive process. Otherwise, both first or twenty-first century worldviews and sensibilities are projected onto the text, controlling its interpretation. All human culture, whether ancient or contemporary, stands equally under the judgement of the Word of God. As the sovereign creator-God, his Word is not trapped within space-time, held captive by the created order, by human culture; rather, he rules over all and through all, speaking without let-or-hindrance through men as men. The doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture, thus, underlines its inherent clarity for the reader aided by the illumination of the Holy Spirit, whether learned or unlearned. In this way, the plain reading of the text must stand. Otherwise, a new cabal, a caste of priest-scholars, will control biblical interpretation, and if Wright had his way, only those who adopt his "new perspective" on Paul.

Moreover, to claim the imprimatur of *sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone), as Wright does, in the name of philology or narrative pre-eminence is, in fact, to obfuscate the principle of *sola Scriptura*. In recovering *sola Scriptura*, the authority of Scripture over that of church tradition, the Reformers advanced the hermeneutic of "Scripture interprets Scripture" (i.e. the analogy of faith), the whole-of-scripture context, and the lighter text shining on the darker and, thus, moving the interpreter from the known to the unknown. Hence, Scripture interprets itself. While underscoring the importance of the grammatico-historical context of the text, *sola Scriptura* was never pitched, by the Reformers, against *regula fidei* (the rule of faith), Scripture as a coherent whole (i.e. theology). In his strict adherence to the pre-eminence of narrative and his allergic reaction to traditional theology, Wright exposes a pre-commitment to the tenets of Postliberal theology. His scheme is not free of its own theological formulae (N. T. Wright, *Reading Paul, Thinking Scripture*; Originally published in 'Scripture's Doctrine and Theology's Bible', 2008. Baker Academic: Grand Rapids, MI, pages 59-71).

Additionally, Wright also subtly sets the authority of the Word of God *incarnate* (Jesus) over against that of the Word of God *inscripturate* (the Bible) as incompatible in some way:

But I've been trying to stress that the risen Jesus does not say to the disciples, "All authority on heaven and earth is given to the books you chaps are going to go off and write." He says, "All authority on heaven and earth is given to Me." So that if we say that Scripture is authoritative, what we must actually mean is that the authority which is vested in Christ alone is mediated through Scripture.

That's a more complicated thing than simply having a book on the shelf, full of right answers that you can go and look up. It's more a way of saying that when we read Scripture and determine to live under it, we are actually saying we want to live under the sovereign lordship of Jesus mediated through this book. (*Wright On Sola Scriptura*; The Gospel Coalition, November 19, 2007; <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/wright-on-sola-scriptura/>; accessed 16/10/2018).

How can this not diminish the propositional objectivity of Scripture, resulting in gnostic subjectivism? Or, on the other hand, if the Bible is abstracted from Jesus, how can it not lead to "bibliolatry" and pharisaism, a sterile scholasticism. It is not an either/or choice, as Wright seems to suggest. Moreover, the Bible does not merely "mediate" God's Word or Christ's authority, as he claims; it *is* God's Word and, hence, God's authority.

And so, Wright avers the text's historical context over all else. Consequently, in applying his historical-critical method, he adopts the modernist presupposition of Higher-Criticism, that everything that is raised above historical conditions must be removed (truth as absolute and eternal), thus, precluding the hermeneutic of the whole-of-Scripture and excluding any movement from exegesis to theology, including any on-going symbiotic interaction between the two. In this way, both the unity of God and the unity of Scripture – the revelation of God's one mind and purpose – are diminished, if not denied, despite Wright's attempt to promote it through the meta-narrative of Abraham (his version of covenant theology). In the end, his historical-critical project over-plays the situatedness of Scripture, interpreting them through the lens of an apostate religion – "Second Temple Judaism" – and thus extra-biblical texts (again this is not to deny the helpful, but subservient, role of historical background); hence, the full inspiration, perspicuity, and authority of Scripture are precluded. In the end God is trapped in history. Wright's claims to orthodoxy are proven facile and only serve to obfuscate his actual theological agenda.

As mentioned above, our exegesis, despite Wright's protestations to the contrary, will demonstrate that "imputation" is unarguably the apostle's thought in 5:12-21.

Imputation denied by a non-historical Adam

Fifth, by denying the historical Adam, Wright must also logically deny imputation. For Wright there is two "theological drivers" behind belief in the historical Adam: 1) The authority of Scripture, and 2) The doctrine of salvation (soteriology).

In chapter 2 – 'Do We Need a Historical Adam?' – of his book, *Surprised by Scripture: Engaging Contemporary Issues* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014), Wright dismisses the traditional view on the authority of Scripture as primarily a "sociocultural" phenomenon and then proceeds to caricature it as treating them like a collection of "true but miscellaneous information" or "an early version of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*." He asserts that this is not the Scripture's kind of authority. Wright continues, "The risen Jesus doesn't say, 'All authority in heaven and earth is given to... the books you chaps are going to go and write.' He says, 'All authority has been given to *me*.'" It would cause some logical consternation to say that the Bible authoritatively claims that all authority lies somewhere else! So, he claims, "The phrase authority of scripture can only, at its best, be a shorthand for *the authority of God in Jesus, mediated through scripture*" (*ibid*, p. 28 [his italics and ellipsis]). Moreover, the authority of God is about reclaiming his proper lordship over all of creation. The Bible's role in this is to point us to Christ and to equip us as the royal priesthood charged with "bringing the saving rule of God in Christ to the world" (*ibid*, p. 29). That is what the Bible does authoritatively. In Wright's estimation it is not a collection of timeless truths to which all people everywhere and every time must intellectually assent in order to be saved. In fact, he claims, "it simply won't do to check the boxes of the traditional dogmas", caricaturing the handling of the Scriptures, by the Reformed tradition, as abstracted from reality and divorced from the renewal of creation. He sees all this as Gnosticism.

In prosecuting his agenda, Wright has set up here a series of false dichotomies: of the Bible's factuality versus the Bible's spirituality; of the Bible's authority versus Jesus' authority; of the Bible versus Christ's lordship over creation; and, of the Reformed tradition versus the renewal of creation. However, none of these are either/or options as perversely postured by Wright. They are all to be held in balanced tension, with each contingent upon the other; one unable to function without the other, they go hand-in-glove. In a full-blooded, orthodox, Reformed theology they are not mutually exclusive. This then is a rhetorical strategy, setting up a straw man so as to set a torch to it with his own 'theological' brilliance. A trap for the untaught or unwary.

Paradoxically, despite his voluminous published prosecution of his own interpretation, Wright's goal doesn't seem to be to uncover the one correct interpretation of the text that must be imposed on everyone. He says, "No, the Bible seems designed to challenge and provoke each generation to do its own fresh business, to struggle and wrestle with the text" (*ibid*) and "Each generation must do its own fresh historically grounded reading, because each generation needs to grow up, not simply to look up the right answers and remain in an infantile condition" (*ibid*, p. 30). In this vein, so it goes, Paul routinely reinterpreted Old Testament texts, infusing them with new meaning which the original audience would not have understood. His rereading of the Adam story into his own context of first century Judaism is a prime example. In so doing, did Paul establish that as the normative context for all future Christians? Or did he model for us what we should do too—reread the Adam story in our context, which means we do so in light of discoveries that God has allowed about genetics, prehistoric human beings, and our relatedness to (and distinction from) the rest of created life? Those are hard questions. They could have implications, so the argument goes, for how we interpret other parts of Scripture too. We should have confidence, though, that the "authority of Scripture" to do what God intended it to do is not in question.

So, in summary, the "authority of Scripture" is recast by Wright to mean its power to inspire Christians "to bring the rule of God to the world". Suggesting implicit elements of the Higher-Critical school (or more specifically, Neo-orthodoxy), the Bible's factuality in relation to history and the cosmos, to the space-time world, is divorced from its spirituality. This is not to deny the necessary role that textual and historical criticism play in the interpretative process. Unlike Higher-Criticism (i.e. the higher-critical method), they, however do not necessarily come with an inbuilt presupposition that Scripture is merely a human text. While on one hand affirming a kind of "inspiration" and "authority", on the other, Wright overplays the historical and the human element of Scripture (e.g. recasting Paul as a product of first-century Judaism, explaining his misplaced belief in the historical Adam), thus diminishing the Bible's inspiration and, hence, authority. Ironically, he has used the study of historical context, infused with Higher-Critical assumptions (i.e. the historical-critical method), to deny the historicity of Adam. Consequently, how then is Wright not falling into the Enlightenment fact-value abyss; and, hence, into the Kantian fact-faith dichotomy and, inescapably, Kierkegaard's resultant religious existentialism? Ironically, Wright falls into the very ditch he

seeks to escape, Gnosticism.

Now, to Wright's treatment of the second "theological driver": Adam's role in the story of salvation. In his telling there is a commonly held approach – Catholic and Protestant – to salvation which holds that a perfect creation was marred through Adam's sin, and Jesus came to pay the penalty for sin, thereby allowing us to go to heaven when we die. Adam's role in that story is crucial: "no Adam" means "no reason for Christ to come." But according to Wright, that is not the story that Paul tells, and is a distortion of the Gospel. In fact, at this point he puts forward another false dichotomy: a choice between "traditional soteriology" and the kingdom of God. Paul, instead, connects our salvation to the story of Israel: their being placed in the Promised Land, given a commission to bless all nations, then breaking the Law and being exiled. Paul uses Adam to retell Israel's story: "placed in the garden, given a commission to look after it; the garden being the place where God wanted to be at rest, to exercise his sovereign rule; the people warned about keeping the commandment, warned in particular that breaking it would mean death, breaking it, and being exiled. It all sounds very, very familiar" (*ibid*, p. 37). On this account not much hinges on the literal historicity of Adam. Other Jewish authors around the time of Paul also appropriated Adam for their theological agendas. Moreover, the genre of the Adam story was not historical journalism.

Predictably, Wright posits a form of theistic evolution in this book. He suggests the possibility that God chose one pair from the rest of the early hominids "to be the representatives of the whole human race". God's purpose was to take place through them but they failed and "abdicate[d] their image-bearing vocation and follow[ed] the siren call of the elements of chaos still within creation" (*ibid*, p. 38). Instead of reflecting the glory of God back to creation, through their worshiping created things, they reflected death back to it, failing in their vocation "to make the whole world a place of delight and joy and order". Enter Abraham through whom this vocation was to be fulfilled. Paul merely uses the Adam story to retell God's purpose through Abraham whose descendent, Jesus, "does for Israel what Israel couldn't do for itself, and thereby does for humans what Israel was supposed to do for them, and thereby launches God's project of new creation, the new world over which he already reigns as king" (*ibid*, p. 39).

So, how do we assess Wright's reinterpretation of Adam's soteriological significance? *First*, the story of Adam then, according to Wright, is not about salvation but rather vocation, yet another false binary choice offered by his scheme. Contra to Wright's representation, the Reformed tradition, especially, lays emphasis on Adam's calling to subdue the earth as God's vice-regent, his subsequent failure but final fulfilment through Christ's perfected humanity as the "last Adam" and the "second man" (Rom 5; 1 Cor 15). *Second*, as previously noted in this commentary (see 3:21-31), Wright's overall project is reductionist as it telescopes the Adamic covenant into the Abrahamic, thereby reducing the full import of Adam's sin; and, hence, the nature of that sin from an ethical category to a metaphysical. Instead of ethical and intellectual rebellion against God in man's pursuit of autonomy (per Genesis 2-3), sin becomes a metaphysical force to overcome. This then leads, despite Wright's qualifications, to yet another false binary option: the *christus victor* version of the atonement over penal substitution. In this scenario, imputation of Adam's sin or of Christ's righteousness is defunct. Wright then, instead, represents the cross as "the subversion of all human power systems" and, thus, by default, ultimately externalises and politicises the kingdom of God, returning us to the statist project of salvation through politics. This would explain Wright's political commentary and promotion of the socialist state as a Christian commitment, and this, despite his regular posturing as the *via media* in most debates, the all so reasonable and balanced third way. His promotion of interventionist economics clearly places him somewhere left of centre on the political spectrum. Ideas always have consequences. *Third*, because Adam is put forward as only a "representative" and not as the "federal [covenant] head" of the race, the Adam story becomes merely paradigmatic of Israel's story, a literary teaching device, an illustration (per H. M. Kuitert, successor to G. C. Berkouwer as professor of systematic theology at the Free University of Amsterdam, in a little book entitled, *Do You Understand What You Read?*). However, contra to Wright, Paul under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, in Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15, presents both Adam and Christ as the covenant heads of two humanities, as our exegesis will demonstrate. The parallel between the two is contingent upon the literal historical fact of Adam, not as merely a "representative" for man, but as its covenant head and sole progenitor. As Wright champions the historical-critical method, of all people, he should be familiar with the structure of the Ancient Near Eastern suzerainty treaties and, especially, the covenantal solidarity of ancient societies. This solidarity – forensic and social – via covenant heads and natural descent is evidenced, not only in reference to Adam, but throughout Scripture. This precludes any theistic-evolutionary schemes.

Concluding remarks

In conclusion, Wright's flawed critique is animated by his extreme caricatures and false dichotomies, thereby intentionally damning whole traditions and, thus, promoting his project as *the* new canon. He ignores the full range of scholarship within

those traditions – especially the Reformed – that actually advance his same emphases on the redemptive-historical, the covenant, the kingdom of God, and the renewal of creation, and this was centuries before he was ever a twinkle in his parent's eyes. They can be found in the Reformed and Puritan writers. Furthermore, these emphases have been more recently expanded by the likes of Gresham Machen, Cornelius Van Til, Geerhardus Vos, Herman Ridderbos, Rousas Rushdoony, and others. Following hard on his rhetorical caricatures, consigning whole theological traditions to oblivion, he then presents these same elements in his scheme as if they were his own. One cannot help but wonder if it springs from mere ignorance or something worse. Nonetheless, Wright's caricatures do gain traction because they pick up the more obvious deficits of popular evangelicalism and, especially, of Dispensationalism, although the latter is more a total system failure than a mere deficiency. And so, yes, he is addressing not so much a *distorted* gospel, as he claims, but rather a *truncated* one, a presentation of the gospel that overemphasises personal salvation and, hence, overshadows its cosmic implications. This is not error by creedal belief but error by emphasis. Error is always the razor edge of truth. Seemingly paradoxical truths must be held in balanced tension, not cynically exploited as a binary choice for rhetorical purposes. This principle applies equally to Wright's targets as it does to Wright himself. While his project is subliminally infused with the Higher-Critical presupposition, interpreting history from within, and hence fatally flawed, he does present some emphasises that are valid. Even so, the useful elements only serve to seduce the unwary. The proverbial warning from Virgil's *Aeneid* concerning the Trojan Horse is apt: *Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes*—"Beware of Greeks bearing gifts".

In view of his overall project of reinterpreting Paul's Gospel, and so turning justification by faith on its head, he has placed himself under the apostolic anathema: "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed." (Gal 1:8).

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