

**N. T. WRIGHT ON  
ROMANS 5:12-21 AND JUSTIFICATION:  
A CASE STUDY IN EXEGESIS,  
THEOLOGICAL METHOD, AND THE  
“NEW PERSPECTIVE ON PAUL”**

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Introduction

IN THE HISTORY of Reformed theology, Romans 5:12-21 is a passage that served as one of the principal *sedes doctrinae* for a certain understanding of Christ's work as Mediator of the covenant of grace. When the Reformed tradition developed its understanding of the relation between the prelapsarian “covenant of works” and the postlapsarian “covenant of grace,” the interpretation of this passage, which draws a sustained comparison between the first Adam and Christ, played a pivotal role.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to say that Romans 5:12-21 constitutes a linchpin of the biblical case for the Reformed view of the way Christ's saving work redresses the problem bequeathed to Adam's descendants.

The importance of this passage to Reformed theology can be illustrated from the Westminster Confession of Faith, which presents a classic exposition of Reformed covenant theology. In the Westminster Confession, Christ's work is understood to fulfill all

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<sup>1</sup> I am using the traditional language for these covenants, though I am aware of the objection that the language of “covenant of works” may downplay the element of God's sovereign favor and initiative in the prelapsarian covenant. Cf. my “Recent Criticisms of the ‘Covenant of Works’ in the Westminster Confession of Faith,” *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 9/1 (Fall 1993): 165-98.

the obligations that were stipulated by God in the original covenant relationship that obtained since the creation of man as God's image-bearer. To paraphrase the language of Chapter 7 of the Westminster Confession of Faith, the original covenant relationship between God and man required that Adam obey God perfectly and thereby enjoy life and blessedness in communion with him.<sup>2</sup> Though the covenant relationship was initiated by way of a "voluntary condescension" on God's part, it did stipulate as its condition "perfect and personal obedience" on Adam's part. By virtue of Adam's sin and disobedience, the way of life and blessedness, which was promised to Adam upon condition of obedience, was closed to him and his posterity. However, in the covenant of grace, God graciously provides a Mediator, Christ as the "second Adam," who fulfills all the obligations of the law of God on behalf of his people. Upon the basis of Christ's righteousness, which consists in his active obedience to the law's requirements and his substitutionary endurance of the law's sanction, believers are justified. Christ's work as the second Adam, accordingly, fulfills the law of God on behalf of believers and thereby restores them to life and blessedness. In this traditional understanding of Reformed theology, Romans 5:12-21 constitutes a key biblical testimony to the nature of Christ's saving work, particularly in the justification of believers through the imputation to them of Christ's righteousness. Whereas condemnation and death come to all human beings through the sin and disobedience of Adam, righteousness and life come to believers who benefit from the obedience and cross of Christ in their place.

During the last several decades, however, this longstanding consensus in Reformed theology regarding the significance of Romans 5:12-21 for our understanding of the work of Christ has been challenged from a number of directions. One of the more significant challenges has surfaced within the orbit of what is

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<sup>2</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 7.2: "The first covenant made with man was a *covenant of works*, wherein life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience" (quoted from *Ecumenical and Reformed Creeds and Confession*, classroom edition [Dyer, IN: Mid-America Reformed Seminary, 1991], p. 96). I am aware of differences of opinion within the orbit of Reformed theology regarding this passage and its interpretation. For our purposes, however, I am speaking of a consensus in terms of the codification of Reformed theology in the official confessions of the Reformed churches.

commonly termed the “new perspective on Paul.” N. T. Wright, perhaps the most influential advocate of a form of this new perspective on Paul, has offered an interpretation of Romans 5:12-21 that illustrates some of the principal differences between the older, Reformation view and the newer view.<sup>3</sup> Wright’s treatment of Romans 5:12-21 provides an interesting case study in the contemporary debate regarding the apostle Paul’s understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ, particularly his understanding of the doctrine of justification. In Wright’s estimation, the traditional Reformed treatment of this passage requires considerable modification.

Due to the importance of this passage to the traditional Reformed view of Christ’s work in the justification of believers, Wright’s revisionist reading presents an illuminating window into the present debates swirling about regarding the doctrine of justification. It will be our purpose in this article, therefore, to examine Wright’s reading of this passage as a kind of test case for some of the claims of the new perspective. By treating Wright’s handling of this passage, we will be able to illumine some of the key differences between the historic Reformed view and some emphases of authors of new perspective. We will also be able to

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<sup>3</sup> Wright, who now serves as the Bishop of Durham in the Church of England, has written a number of substantial volumes in New Testament studies and in the contemporary “third quest” for the historical Jesus: *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991); *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992); *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, (3 vols.; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992, 1996, 2003); *Who Was Jesus?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992). Among Wright’s works that most directly represent his understanding of Paul and the doctrine of justification are the following: *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997); “New Perspectives on Paul,” [http://home.hiwaay.net/~kbush/Wright\\_New\\_Perspectives.pdf](http://home.hiwaay.net/~kbush/Wright_New_Perspectives.pdf); “The Paul of History and the Apostle of Faith,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 29 (1978): 61-88; “The Law in Romans 2,” in *Paul and the Mosaic Law*, ed. James D. G. Dunn (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 131-50; “The Shape of Justification,” <http://www.angelfire.com/mi2/paulpage/Shape.html>; *The Letter to the Romans*, vol. 10 of *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002); and *Paul for Everyone: Romans Part 1, Chapters 1-8* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004).

consider how Wright's exegesis of this passage reflects a number of important features of his exegetical and theological method.

Our procedure in this article will be to begin with an exposition of Wright's interpretation of Romans 5:12-21. After we summarize Wright's handling of this passage, we will offer a series of exegetical and theological observations that illustrate the differences between his reading and that of more traditional Reformed theology.

## I. N. T. Wright's Interpretation of Romans 5:12-21

Before plunging into an exposition of Wright's reading of Romans 5:12-21, we need to prepare the way by noting how Wright understands the theme of Romans and the place of this passage in the flow of the narrative. In his consideration of this passage, Wright insists that it must be interpreted, not in isolation from what precedes and follows it, but in terms of its contribution to the overall argument of the epistle. Furthermore, Wright also maintains that an important key to the interpretation of this passage lies in the traditional understanding of Adam and Israel within Judaism. Biblical theology requires that the Pauline texts be read within the context of their historical setting and Paul's background within the period of Second Temple Judaism. If we are to avoid an unduly abstract and de-contextualized reading of Paul's argument in this passage, these considerations must be borne in mind.

### A. *The Theme of Romans: God's Faithfulness to His Covenant with Israel*

Wright's reading of Romans 5:12-21 assumes a view of the main theme and narrative structure of Romans that differs considerably from the traditional Reformation view. In the Reformation reading of Romans, the theme of the believer's justification by grace alone is typically thought to be its main emphasis. Shaped by Luther's discovery that the "righteousness of God" is not the demand of the law but the free gift of being received into God's favor for the sake of Christ, this reading of the epistle often treats it as a kind of general theological treatise of this and related themes.<sup>4</sup> The opening chapters of the book (1-3)

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<sup>4</sup> *The Letter to the Romans*, p. 403, "Romans has suffered for centuries from being made to produce vital statements on questions it was not written to answer. All that has been said thus far by way of historical and

describe in general terms the predicament of all human beings who have transgressed the law of God and stand under its condemnation. These chapters are followed by a section on the doctrine of justification (chapters 4-5), which provide an account of how believers receive the free gift of justification in Christ by faith. After this section on justification, the apostle Paul moves to a treatment of sanctification (chapters 6-8). The epistle then concludes with a kind of excursus on the subject of election and God's purpose for the salvation of Israel (chapters 9-11), and with an extended series of exhortations regarding the Christian life (chapters 12-16). The governing motif throughout the epistle, however, is the great question as to how an individual sinner can obtain right standing and favor before God.

In Wright's analysis of the theme and structure of the book of Romans, a very different picture emerges. Though Wright grants that the "righteousness of God" is the theme of the book (1:17), he argues that the Reformers misunderstood this language. When Paul speaks of the "righteousness of God," he is speaking the language of a first-century Jew who would understand it to refer to God's faithfulness to his covenant promise to his people Israel. Rather than referring abstractly to God's granting individual sinners a status of acceptance, this language announces the theme of Romans to be the way in which God has in Christ fulfilled his promises to Abraham.<sup>5</sup> The promises of God to his covenant people Israel gave birth to the expectation of a future day of blessing that would follow their exile. In the day of the fulfillment of his promises, God would demonstrate his loyalty to the covenant by restoring his people from exile, and "setting the world to rights" in demonstration of his justice or righteousness.<sup>6</sup> The language of the "righteousness of God" combines these themes of covenant loyalty and restorative justice in a way that, according to Wright, has not often been appreciated in the interpretation of Romans. On the one hand, it speaks of God's faithfulness to his covenant promises to Israel; on the other hand, it speaks of a "vindication" of the cause

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theological introduction will seem strange to those traditions of reading the letter that assume its central question to be that of Martin Luther: 'How can I find a gracious God?'" In the following, I will reference Wright's commentary as *Romans*.

<sup>5</sup> *Romans*, p. 398.

<sup>6</sup> *Romans*, p. 400.

of the righteous people of God in a world that is being corrupted and ruined through human sin and disobedience. Summarizing his understanding of the theme of Romans, Wright notes that

[c]ovenant and lawcourt are far more closely linked than often imagined. Behind both categories there stands a fundamental Jewish self-perception, which, if we grasp it, will enable us to understand things Paul holds together in many passages in Romans, but which interpreters have consistently separated. Through many and various expressions of covenant theology in the biblical and post-biblical periods, a theme emerges that, though by no means central in all Second Temple Judaism, has a claim to represent a deep-rooted and biblical viewpoint. It can be stated thus: The covenant between God and Israel was established in the first place in order to deal with the problem of the world as a whole. Or, as one rabbi put it, God decided to make Adam first, knowing that if he went to the bad God would send Abraham to sort things out. The covenant, in other words, was established so that the creator God could rescue the creation from evil, corruption, and disintegration and in particular could rescue humans from sin and death.<sup>7</sup>

This comprehensive understanding of the theme of Romans forms the background to, and interpretive matrix for, a proper reading of Paul's teaching about the work of Christ in Romans 5:12-21.

#### B. *Romans 5:12-21 in the Narrative Structure of Romans*

In Wright's analysis of the structure of the book of Romans, the theme of the righteousness of God is proclaimed by means of a narrative that recounts how Christ, the Messiah, fulfills Israel's history. Romans tells the story of the way Christ represents Israel and fulfills the covenant promises of salvation for God's covenant people. These promises include not only the vindication of God's people but also the restoration of justice within the whole creation, which has suffered the consequence of sinful injustice and disorder. The challenge that Paul faces in Romans and in his other epistles is to demonstrate how Christ, who suffered the unexpected destiny of crucifixion at the hands of the Roman authorities, fulfills the expectations of Israel and realizes God's covenant purposes through her. Since the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ

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<sup>7</sup> *Romans*, p. 399.

broke the pattern of Israel's common expectation for the triumph of the Messiah and the coming of his kingdom, Paul seeks to demonstrate that this apparent reversal reveals God's covenant faithfulness, though in a surprising and unanticipated manner.

Once a clear picture emerges of the broad theme of the book of Romans, it is not difficult to recognize the place of Romans 5:12-21 within its narrative structure. Wright, like many commentators on the book of Romans, recognizes that the epistle rather easily divides into four sections: chapters 1-4, 5-8, 9-11, and 12-16.<sup>8</sup> However, the more pressing question concerns how each of these sections contributes to the elaboration of Paul's primary theme, namely, the demonstration of God's faithfulness to his covenant in the work of Jesus Christ. Wright answers this question by claiming that the narrative structure of Romans is patterned after the history of God's prior dealings with his people Israel. Indeed, the book of Romans recapitulates the grand narrative of biblical history that is recorded in the Old Testament. This grand narrative begins with the introduction of human sin and disobedience through the first human being, Adam. It then moves to the decisive moment of God's covenanting with Abraham and his descendants, a covenanting that grants to Israel the role of a new Adam through whom God will bring blessing to humanity and restore the world in righteousness. The great redemptive event in this story of the covenant is the event of the Exodus, the paradigmatic act whereby God constituted Israel a people and liberated her from all her enemies. After the event of the Exodus and the giving of the law (Torah), Israel failed to live appropriately before God and eventually suffered the covenant judgment of exile. Within the context of her exile, Israel's future, which was often described in the language of "apocalyptic," held the promise of a restoration to favor with God, vindication in the presence of her enemies, and an entrance into the fullness of her inheritance as a people in a world that has experienced a restoration in righteousness.

According to Wright, this broad pattern of redemptive history is mirrored in the narrative sequences of the book of Romans.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Romans*, p. 397.

<sup>9</sup> For a brief summary of Wright's view of the structure of the epistle as a whole, see *Romans*, pp. 4-5; and his "New Exodus, New Inheritance: The Narrative Substructure of Romans 3-8," in *Romans and the People of God: Essays in Honor of Gordon D. Fee on the Occasion of His 65<sup>th</sup> Birthday*, ed. S.

Chapters 1-4 describe the world in sin and rebellion before God, and the work of Christ, the Messiah of Israel, who has kept the covenant God made with Abraham and brought salvation to the whole world. Chapters 5-8 recount how God has fulfilled the covenant with Abraham through Christ. The “latent” substructure of this portion of the epistle is the story of Israel’s exodus: just as Abraham’s descendants were delivered from enslavement to sin in Egypt, so God delivers his people from the power of human sin (Adam) through the work of Christ, and leads them “through the wilderness of the present life by the Spirit (not by the Torah)...”<sup>10</sup> This section of the epistle closes with the promise that the new community of Christ’s people will inherit a renewed creation (Rom. 8). Chapters 9-11, which are often read as though they interrupt the flow of the argument of Romans, highlight the particular problem of the failure of Israel to receive the Messiah. Within the overarching purposes of God, however, this failure becomes the occasion for the blessing of the covenant to extend not only to the Gentiles but eventually also to Paul’s fellow Jews. Chapters 12-16 close the epistle by describing the new life in the Spirit to which the community of believers in Jesus Christ are called through the gospel.

Within this architectonic of the epistle, Romans 5:12-21 forms part of a narrative sequence that is governed by the theme of exodus. This passage serves as a kind of introduction to a section that follows the sequence of liberation from exile through the crossing of the Red Sea ((baptism in Romans 6), the arrival at Sinai and the giving of the Torah (Rom. 7:1-8:11), and the ultimate reception of the whole earth as a covenant inheritance (Rom. 8:12ff.). In this passage, the apostle Paul sums up the preceding

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Soderlund and N. T. Wright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 26-35. In his article on the structure of Romans 5-8, Wright acknowledges his indebtedness to the following authors who have suggested a similar view: Frank Thielman, “The Story of Israel and the Theology of Romans 5-8,” in *Romans*, vol. 3 of *Pauline Theology*, ed. David M. May and E. Elizabeth Johnson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), pp. 169-95; Sylvia C. Keesmaat, *Paul and His Story: (Re)Interpreting the Exodus Tradition*, JNSTSup (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999); and Ignace de la Potterie, “Le Chrétien conduit par l’Esprit dans son cheminement eschatologique (Rom. 8,14),” in *The Law of the Spirit in Rom 7 and 8*, ed. L. de Lorenzi (Rome: St. Paul’s Abbey, 1976), pp. 209-41.

<sup>10</sup> *Romans*, p. 405.

sections of Romans and anticipates what is to follow. As Wright understands the place of this passage in Romans,

5:12-21 can then take its place as the overarching narrative through which the whole of 1:18-8:39 is comprehended, summing up what has gone before and laying foundations for what is to come. By means of the faithful obedience of Israel's representative, the Messiah, not only has all the glory, all the inheritance, of Adam accrued to the people of God, as the Qumran sect already claimed for themselves; all the evils that accrued from Adam's disobedience are undone. Within this large-scale historical story, the arrival of the Torah strikes a negative, not a positive, note (5:20, pointing ahead to 7:7-12); the new Exodus is not simply to be a repeat performance of the old, but must itself undo the extra problems that arose through Israel's being "under the law." Through his faithful obedience, the Messiah has brought with him out of the Egypt of sin and death a great multitude who now live under the rule, and in the hope, of grace, righteousness, and life (5:21).<sup>11</sup>

Rather than focusing upon the particular question of individual participation in Christ in Romans 5:12-21, this understanding of the narrative structure of Romans indicates that Paul's interest is in the "large scale" story. The narrative of Romans 5:12-21 is the narrative of the history of redemption, and not that of the way individual believers become beneficiaries of the saving work of Jesus Christ.

### *C. The Background in Jewish Literature*

The preceding summary of Wright's view of the theme and structure of the epistle to the Romans illustrates an important feature of his approach. Unlike the traditional reading of Romans, which tends to abstract its teaching from its setting within the context of Judaism and the history of redemption, Wright's reading proceeds from the conviction that Paul writes as a first-century Jew. The gospel, which is to be preached first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles (1:17), tells the story of how the God of Israel has demonstrated his covenant faithfulness and set the world to right by means of the obedience and cross of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen from the dead. The Jewish background of Paul's articulation of the gospel is especially significant with respect to Romans 5:12-

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<sup>11</sup> "New Exodus, New Inheritance," p. 34.

21 and its sustained comparison between the first Adam and Christ. If we are to understand Paul's view of the role of Adam in the history of redemption, the only relevant background must be found in the literature of Judaism.

In his assessment of this literature, Wright argues that it tends to cluster around one principal theme:

God's purposes for the human race in general have devolved on to, and will be fulfilled in, Israel in particular. Israel is, or will become, God's true humanity. What God intended for Adam will be given to the seed of Abraham. They will inherit the second Eden, the restored primeval glory. If there is a "last Adam" in the relevant Jewish literature, he is not an individual, whether messianic or otherwise. He is the whole eschatological people of God. If we take "Adam" language out of this context we do not merely distort it; we empty it of its basic content.<sup>12</sup>

Both the Old Testament and the inter-testamental literature of Israel represent the covenant people as the new humanity, the people through whom God aims to undo the sin of Adam. Corporately, Israel assumes the place of Adam and is granted the blessing that originally was bestowed upon Adam and Eve in the primal state. The promise that Abraham's descendants will be multiplied echoes the original creation mandate to Adam and Eve. Furthermore, Israel's reception of a land of plenty and her subjection of her enemies fulfill the original circumstance in which Adam was granted dominion under God over the creatures of the earth. Even Israel's exile, which represented a crisis in her history, became the occasion for the drawing together in the language of "apocalyptic" of a future time of blessing, when these purposes for Israel as the new Adam would be fulfilled.

In Wright's estimation, this understanding of Adam and Israel within traditional Judaism shapes Paul's treatment in Romans 5:12-21 of the respective roles of Adam and Christ. The role assigned by God to Israel in the history of redemption, namely, to reverse the consequences of Adam's sin and constitute a new humanity through the restoration of all things takes place, is now assigned by Paul, the

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<sup>12</sup> "Adam, Israel, and the Messiah," in *The Climax of the Covenant*, pp. 20-21. For an extended treatment of Wright's understanding of Second Temple Judaism's conception of Israel as the "new humanity," see *The New Testament and the People of God*, pp. 262-79.

Christian, to Christ. As the Messiah of Israel, Christ representatively fulfills all that was traditionally believed would be accomplished through his covenant people Israel.

D. *Wright's Exegesis of Romans 5:12-21*

Now that we have considered Wright's view of the place of Romans 5:12-21 in the narrative sequence of Romans, as well as the background for Paul's understanding of Christ as the second Adam in the literature of Judaism, we are in a position to take up directly Wright's exegesis of this passage. Like many commentators before him, Wright observes that this passage has a clear shape or structure. Verse 12, which introduces a central point of the passage, is followed by a lengthy parenthetical explanation in verses 13-17, which is itself broken into two parts (vv. 13-14, 15-17). Only in verse 18 does the apostle return to and begin to conclude the point begun in verse 12. One great theme runs throughout the passage like a thread: the contrast between Adam, whose disobedience resulted in the reign of sin and death over humanity, and Christ, whose obedience has brought righteousness and life. Five times Paul uses the verb, βασιλεύω ("to rule as a king"), to emphasize how the kingdom of God prevails through the work of Christ over the principalities and powers of the world, especially those of sin and death. Against the background of the common expectations of Second Temple Judaism, Paul is asserting that Christ, the Messiah of Israel, has representatively fulfilled God's ultimate intention for the human race. The role of Israel within the plan and purpose of God, which as we have seen is that of the new Adam or humanity, has been assumed by Christ and is now being shared with those who belong to Christ.

This paragraph, then, demonstrates that, by fulfilling the covenant promises to Abraham, the creator God has addressed and dealt with the problem of Adam; a new humanity has come into being for whom sin and death have been conquered. "The age to come" has arrived in the present with the death and resurrection of the Messiah; those who belong to the Messiah already share in its benefits. That which Israel, or groups within Israel, thought to gain has been appropriately attained by the true Israelite, the Messiah, the obedient one.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> *Romans*, p. 524.

In order to give an accurate presentation of Wright's handling of this passage, we will provide a verse-by-verse or section-by-section summary of its most important features.

Verse 12: Διὰ τοῦτο ὡςπερ δι' ἐνὸς ἀνθρώπου ἡ ἁμαρτία εἰς τὸν κόσμον εἰσῆλθεν καὶ διὰ τῆς ἁμαρτίας ὁ θάνατος, καὶ οὕτως εἰς πάντας ἀνθρώπους ὁ θάνατος διῆλθεν, ἐφ' ᾧ πάντες ἥμαρτον·

The apostle Paul introduces this passage with Διὰ τοῦτο (“therefore”). Wright notes that this introductory particle shows that Paul is now going to draw a conclusion from what has previously been said in the opening section of Romans 5 (vv. 1-11). This particle joins the paragraph with Paul's preceding description of Christ's death on behalf of the unrighteous. It also points the way forward to Paul's subsequent elaboration of God's deliverance of his people from exile through their participation in Christ. After having detailed the problem of sin and death in Romans 1:18-3:20, and the solution of justification and life that come through the work of Christ in Romans 3:21-5:11, Paul is now going to draw some broad and sweeping conclusions regarding the course of the history of redemption.

The statement of verse 12 introduces the sustained comparison that Paul draws in this passage between Adam and Christ. Following the general consensus of the Judaism of his day, Paul treats the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2-3 in a straightforwardly historical and literal manner. Having violated the specific commandment of God, Adam became the occasion for introducing the “alien powers” of sin and death into God's good creation. Subsequent to Adam's sin, the powers of sin and death have held sway, exercising a kind of tyrannical dominion over human history. In his interpretation of this verse, Wright acknowledges that it “has created huge problems of interpretation for subsequent readers, not least those eager to press Paul for solutions to problems he was not addressing.”<sup>14</sup> Two problems in particular stand out: first, the problem of the character of the history recorded in Genesis; and second, the theological problem of the connection between Adam's sin and the sin of all humanity.

Regarding the first of these problems, Wright observes that Paul clearly believed “that there had been a single first pair, whose

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<sup>14</sup> *Romans*, p. 525.

male, Adam, had been given a commandment and had broken it.”<sup>15</sup> Though Paul was undoubtedly aware of the “mythical and metaphorical” dimensions of this history, he would not have regarded these as inimical to the affirmation of the existence of Adam and Eve as the primal pair of the human race. In Wright’s estimation, however difficult it might be to define the meaning of “sin” in the “early dawn of the human race,” it is plausible to imagine a turning away on the part of humanity “at any stage of anthropoid development” from an earlier “open and obedient relationship with the loving creator.”<sup>16</sup> Nothing that is now known by biblical theology or science prevents this kind of understanding of the introduction of sin and death into God’s good creation through the fall of humanity in Adam. Indeed, the biblical story of redemption requires the affirmation of an original state of integrity enjoyed by the creation as a whole and by humanity in particular. It is helpful to remember, when seeking to explain how this can be, that “death” in Paul’s understanding refers to something “more than simply the natural decay and corruption of all the created order.”<sup>17</sup> The created order was undoubtedly subject to decay and death prior to the introduction of sin through Adam’s disobedience. However, the “death” threatened in the case of human disobedience carries a deeper and richer significance. “This death is a darker force, opposed to creation itself, unmaking that which was good, always threatening to drag the world back toward chaos.”<sup>18</sup> When Adam sinned, what once was a kind of natural sleep of death was transmuted under God’s judgment into something that acquired the further significance of shame and threat.

In Wright’s judgment, the second of these problems is more intractable. In the history of Christian theology, the expression ἐφ’ ᾧ πάντες ἥμαρτον (“in that all sinned”) has been the occasion for ongoing controversy. The principal question that arises regarding this expression is, does Paul have in mind the actual sins of all people? Or, is he referring to the one sin of the one person, Adam, which was in some sense the sin of all people? Wright tilts slightly toward the second view, namely, that Paul is referring to Adam’s particular sin as somehow the sin of all people. One exegetical

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<sup>15</sup> *Romans*, p. 526.

<sup>16</sup> *Romans*, p. 526.

<sup>17</sup> *Romans*, p. 526.

<sup>18</sup> *Romans*, p. 526.

argument for this view is Paul's use of the aorist tense ("because all sinned"), which implies a particular act in the past, rather than the perfect tense ("because all have sinned"), which would suggest the sins of all people in the past and the present. Even though Wright leans toward the second of these views, he also cites the context in which Paul speaks of the actual sins of all humans (cf. Rom. 1:18-3:20; 5:16, "many sins"), and concludes that we probably do not need to affirm one or the other view exclusively. In Romans 3:23 ("all sinned, and came short of God's glory") Paul also uses the aorist tense, though he certainly means to refer to the actual sins of all people. The same could be true in Romans 5:12. Without taking a position on the question, Wright also notes that there has been a long-standing discussion regarding the "mode by which sin is then transmitted," if we assume that the emphasis of this verse is upon the primal sin of Adam, not the particular actual sins of all people.<sup>19</sup>

Verses 13-14: ἄχρι γὰρ νόμου ἁμαρτία ἦν ἐν κόσμῳ, ἁμαρτία δὲ οὐκ ἐλλογεῖται μὴ ὄντος νόμου, ἀλλὰ ἐβασίλευσεν ὁ θάνατος ἀπὸ Ἀδὰμ μέχρι Μωϋσέως καὶ ἐπὶ τοὺς μὴ ἁμαρτήσαντας ἐπὶ τῷ ὁμοιώματι τῆς παραβάσεως Ἀδὰμ ὅς ἐστιν τύπος τοῦ μέλλοντος.

With these verses Paul offers the first of two parenthetical statements that elaborate upon the opening statement of verse 12. In this first part of his extended parenthesis, Paul addresses the question concerning the generations of human beings between the time of Adam and Moses. In this period, which antedates the giving

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<sup>19</sup> *Romans*, p. 526. Wright concludes his treatment of this verse by commenting unfavorably upon a recent translation of this phrase offered by Fitzmyer ("The Consecutive Meaning of ἐφ' ᾧ in Romans 5,12," *New Testament Studies* 39/3 [1993]: 321-39). Fitzmyer suggests that it be translated "with the result that" rather than "because," a translation that allows for a kind of "secondary causality" that is based upon the actual sins of all people and their consequent liability to death. Wright judges this suggestion to be "at best not proven" and adds that "Paul's meaning must in any case be both that an entail of sinfulness has spread throughout the human race from its first beginnings and that each individual has contributed their own share to it. Paul offers no further clue as to how the first of these actually works or how the two interrelate" (*Romans*, p. 527). We will return to this claim in our critical evaluation of Wright's exegesis of this passage.

of the Torah or law through Moses at Mt. Sinai, there would not be any law by which to measure human obedience or disobedience. Though this might appear, Wright acknowledges, to be a kind of “abstruse question”—after all, the patriarchal generations seem to have had little difficulty knowing right from wrong—Paul may be addressing it in order to avoid the implication that sin is tied too closely to the Torah or law. Since the Jews typically thought of sin in terms of any violation of the Torah, Paul wishes to offer an explanation as to how even the Gentiles, who were not the recipients of the Torah of Moses, could nonetheless be regarded as sinners. Paul answers this question simply by noting that, because death was there, sin must also have been present. Even though these generations did not sin after the likeness of Adam’s trespass, they were subject to the rule of death. The implications of this, according to Wright, are evident in a negative and a positive manner. Negatively, Paul denies that the generations between Adam and Moses were sinless, even though they were without the law. Positively, Paul implies that those who came after Moses, and to whom the law was given, were in some sense imitating Adam by sinning against a known commandment of God (cf. 5:20; 6:14-15; and chapter 7).

One important feature of this parenthetical statement is the introduction of a comparison between Adam and Christ. Noting that this is one of only two places where the apostle Paul uses the term τύπος (“type”) in a technical sense, Wright observes that Paul is underscoring that Adam “prefigured the Messiah in certain respects . . . , notably in this, that he founded a family that would bear his characteristics.”<sup>20</sup> Christ is introduced for the first time in this passage, the remainder of which will develop a sustained comparison and contrast between him and Adam.

Verses 15-17: Ἄλλ’ οὐχ ὡς τὸ παράπτωμα, οὕτως καὶ τὸ χάρισμα· εἰ γὰρ τῷ τοῦ ἑνὸς παραπτώματι οἱ πολλοὶ ἀπέθανον, πολλῷ μᾶλλον ἢ χάρις τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ ἡ δωρεὰ ἐν χάριτι τῆ τοῦ ἑνὸς ἀνθρώπου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ εἰς τοὺς πολλοὺς ἐπερίσσευσεν. καὶ οὐχ ὡς δι’ ἑνὸς ἀμαρτήσαντος τὸ δῶρημα· τὸ μὲν γὰρ κρίμα ἐξ ἑνὸς εἰς κατὰκριμα, τὸ δὲ χάρισμα ἐκ πολλῶν παραπτωμάτων εἰς δικαίωμα. εἰ γὰρ τῷ τοῦ ἑνὸς παραπτώματι ὁ θάνατος ἐβασίλευσεν διὰ τοῦ ἑνός, πολλῷ μᾶλλον οἱ τὴν περισσεΐαν τῆς

<sup>20</sup> *Romans*, p. 527.

χάριτος καὶ τῆς δωρεᾶς τῆς δικαιοσύνης λαμβάνοντες ἐν ζωῇ βασιλεύουσιν διὰ τοῦ ἐνὸς Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ.

These verses introduce a second explanatory aside. After addressing the question how sin can be acknowledged where there is no law, Paul offers an extended comparison between the reign of sin on account of the disobedience of Adam and the reign of grace on account of the obedience of Christ. The main point of this aside is that there is a dissimilarity and an “imbalance” between God’s gift of grace in Christ and the trespass of Adam.

Wright notes that this imbalance between sin and grace is illustrated in three distinct ways in these verses. First, there is an imbalance between the progression from sin to death, and the “astonishing reversal” in which the grace of God in Christ “flourishes in what had seemed a hopeless situation.”<sup>21</sup> Second, in a “torturous” sentence, the apostle Paul declares, “and not ‘as through the one man sinning, the gift’” (καὶ οὐχ ὡς δι’ ἐνὸς ἁμαρτήσαντος τὸ δῶρημα). By means of this language and its subsequent elaboration, the apostle aims to underscore the imbalance in the “judicial result” of the disobedience of Adam and the obedience of Christ. This imbalance is one between sin that brings condemnation and death and grace that brings righteousness and life. Though these two consequences may appear to be simple opposites, the language Paul uses intends to underscore the radical implications of the imbalance between them in the lives of the people concerned: “the one a denial and ending of life itself, the other an affirmation, opening up new possibilities.”<sup>22</sup> And third, in the closing part of these verses, Paul offers a striking picture of the imbalance between the two “reigns” of sin and death, on the one hand, and of believers who reign in life, on the other. The imbalance Paul describes at this juncture is not between two abstract realities: sin and grace. Rather, the imbalance is between the reign of sin and death in the lives of all humans and the reign of righteousness and life in the lives of all believers who acknowledge the gospel of Jesus the Messiah. When the apostle Paul speaks of the believers’ reign in life, he is thinking in terms of the apocalyptic tradition that promised “that God’s final rule would be exercised through God’s people.” “Here, as throughout this passage, Paul is

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<sup>21</sup> *Romans*, p. 528.

<sup>22</sup> *Romans*, p. 528.

thinking in terms of the promised blessings that Israel hoped for in the age to come being achieved by the Messiah and shared with his people.”<sup>23</sup>

Verses 18-19: Ἄρα οὖν ὡς δι' ἑνὸς παραπτώματος εἰς πάντας ἀνθρώπους εἰς κατάκριμα, οὕτως καὶ δι' ἑνὸς δικαϊώματος εἰς πάντας ἀνθρώπους εἰς δικαίωσιν ζωῆς· ὡς περ γὰρ διὰ τῆς παρακοῆς τοῦ ἑνὸς ἀνθρώπου ἁμαρτωλοὶ κατεστάθησαν οἱ πολλοί, οὕτως καὶ διὰ τῆς ὑπακοῆς τοῦ ἑνὸς δίκαιοι κατασταθήσονται οἱ πολλοί.

After the extended parenthesis of verses 13-17, Paul returns in these verses to the argument that he introduced in verse 12. This is evident from the opening phrase, “Ἄρα οὖν” (“so then,” not simply, “therefore”). By this phrase, Paul indicates that he is resuming the argument where he left it off, and at the same time is drawing the consequence that follows from what he had previously stated regarding the sin of Adam. Just as the disobedience of Adam brought sin and death upon all, so the obedience of Christ brings righteousness and life to all who benefit from it.

Whereas the previous verses stressed the imbalance between the respective “reigns” of death and life, these verses begin with an emphasis upon the balance between the “universality” of the condemnation that falls upon all on account of the disobedience of Adam and of the righteousness that is extended to all on account of the obedience of Christ. For the apostle Paul, the only way of escaping the condemnation and consequence of sin is through faith in Christ. The themes of “condemnation” and “judgment” that play such an important role in the comparison of these verses are important to the whole argument of the opening chapters of Romans. “Paul here, as usual, refers to the final coming judgment, the time when there will be wrath for some and life for others (2:5-11). The theme remains central in the coming chapters, reaching its dramatic climax in 8:1 . . . and 8:33-34. . . .”<sup>24</sup> In the middle of history, Christ’s δικαϊώμα (“act of righteousness/acquittal”) constitutes the basis for God’s eschatological verdict of “righteous,” which he pronounces with respect to all who are in Christ. With “audible overtones of Isa 53:11,” Paul is announcing that “as Adam’s disobedience gave ‘the many’ the status of being ‘sinners’

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<sup>23</sup> *Romans*, p. 528.

<sup>24</sup> *Romans*, p. 529.

... so Christ's obedience has given 'the many' the status of being 'righteous'.<sup>25</sup> Even though what Paul means by "sinner" extends beyond the notion of "mere status," clearly this is the point of emphasis in these verses: through the disobedience of Adam, the many are regarded to be in the status of sinner. Contrariwise, what Paul means by "righteous" is also governed by the notion of a person's status: "[j]ustification, rooted in the cross and anticipating the verdict of the last day, gives people a new status, ahead of the performance of appropriate deeds."<sup>26</sup>

In his closing comments on these verses, Wright addresses the way in which the "obedience" of Christ is understood within "one strand of Reformation thought."<sup>27</sup> According to this understanding, the obedience of Christ, which constitutes the basis for God's declaration of the believer's right standing before him, consists of Jesus' perfect obedience to the law. Wright regards this understanding, however, to be mistaken.

Powerful though this thought is, and influential though it has been (even in liturgy, where "the merits and death of Christ" are sometime mentioned in this double sense), it is almost certainly not what Paul has in mind here. The Isaianic servant, to whom reference is being made, was obedient to the saving purpose of YHWH, the plan marked out for Israel from the beginning but that, through Israel's disobedience, only the servant, as an individual, can now accomplish. The "obedience" of the Messiah in 5:19 therefore corresponds closely to the "faithfulness" of the Messiah in 3:22. It refers to his obedience to God's commission (as in 3:2), to the plan to bring salvation to the world, rather than his amassing a treasury of merit through Torah obedience.<sup>28</sup>

The obedience of Christ, which was effected by means of his cross, was an obedience to God's particular plan and purpose to bless all through the Messiah of Israel. It does not refer to a general or abstract obedience to the law of God, which is then granted or imputed to those who believe.

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<sup>25</sup> *Romans*, p. 529.

<sup>26</sup> *Romans*, p. 529.

<sup>27</sup> *Romans*, p. 529.

<sup>28</sup> *Romans*, p. 529.

Verses 20-21: νόμος δὲ παρεισῆλθεν, ἵνα πλεονάσῃ τὸ παράπτωμα· οὐδὲ ἐπλεόνασεν ἡ ἁμαρτία, ὑπερπερίσσευσεν ἡ χάρις, ἵνα ὡς περ ἐβασίλευσεν ἡ ἁμαρτία ἐν τῷ θανάτῳ, οὕτως καὶ ἡ χάρις βασιλεύσῃ διὰ δικαιοσύνης εἰς ζωὴν αἰώνιον διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν.

In these verses, Paul concludes with a remarkable interpretation of the work of the Messiah in fulfilling God's purposes for Israel. Contrary to the expectations of many of his fellow Jews, Paul declares that the Torah or law of God, far from serving as a means of blessing and salvation for his people, served to "increase transgression" (πλεονάσῃ τὸ παράπτωμα). Indeed, Paul goes so far as to declare that this was God's purpose in granting the Torah (ἵνα is used to express "purpose," and not simply "result"). In the traditional Jewish narrative of redemption, the Torah was thought to be the means whereby God would enable his people Israel "to escape the entail of Adam's sin, to be different from the pagan world around."<sup>29</sup> Israel's role as the new Adam, as a people through whom the sin of Adam and its consequence would be reversed, would be fulfilled by means of her obedience to the Torah. Paul's Christian reinterpretation, however, teaches that Christ has assumed the role of Israel's representative. By means of his obedience to God on the cross, Christ "offered to Israel's God the faithful obedience that Israel had not. In Christ, God has come to where the Torah has magnified sin, and has dealt with it."<sup>30</sup>

In the climactic closing statement of these verses, the apostle Paul summarizes once more the great contrast between the two kingdoms of sin and grace. Though death reigned through sin on account of the trespass of Adam, grace reigns through righteousness on account of the obedience of Christ. When Paul speaks of the "righteousness" of Christ, he is referring to the "covenant faithfulness of God," who has fulfilled his promise to Abraham that he would be the source of blessing for all the peoples of the families of the earth. "Eternal life" or the "life of the age to come," which had long been anticipated by God's people Israel, has now come through the obedience of the Messiah, Israel's representative. The traditional expectation that Israel would be the new humanity, whose obedience would reverse the consequence of

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<sup>29</sup> *Romans*, p. 530.

<sup>30</sup> *Romans*, p. 530.

Adam's sin and bring the blessings of the age to come, is now being realized through Christ.

## II. An Assessment of Wright's Interpretation of Romans 5:12-21

Though there are undoubtedly features of Wright's handling of Romans 5:12-21 that we have overlooked or treated inadequately in the foregoing, our summary of his interpretation of this passage should provide us a sufficient basis for raising a number of questions regarding his exegesis and theological method, particularly its significance for his understanding of justification. Like other authors within the field of biblical studies who advocate a new perspective on Paul, Wright offers a reading of this passage that is, as we noted at the outset, at considerable variance from the traditional reading of Reformed theology. To use language borrowed from the title of a popular presentation of his views, Wright is not bashful in claiming that his reading of this passage within the framework of the narrative structure of Romans as a whole offers a more contextualized and exegetically warranted interpretation of "what Saint Paul really said" than the one offered in the tradition of the Reformation. The sweeping nature of this claim, and the boldness with which it is executed, challenges Reformed theologians to examine carefully Wright's exegetical and theological arguments.

In the following assessment of Wright's reading of this passage, we will evaluate his interpretation at three distinct levels. First, we will make several preliminary observations about general aspects of Wright's approach to and exegesis of the passage. Second, we will examine critically especially those aspects of Wright's understanding of this passage that relate to the doctrine of justification. And third, we will briefly explore the way Wright's theological method is illumined by his handling of this passage.

### A. *Some Preliminary Observations*

Before we consider directly the significance of Wright's handling of Romans 5:12-21 for his understanding of justification, we wish to begin with some observations regarding general features of his exegesis of this passage that are open to dispute. Much of

Wright's exegesis of this passage is not objectionable, nor does it directly relate to our interest in what it tells us about his understanding of justification. This holds true especially for his observations regarding the structure of the passage (verse 12 states the first part of the argument; verses 13-17 form an extended parenthesis; verses 18-21 resume and conclude the argument), and its place within the outline of the book of Romans. However, there are some features of Wright's treatment of this passage that require comment before we turn to the question of its implications for the doctrine of justification.

When we make these observations, it should be understood that we are not taking exception to a fundamental assumption of Wright's reading of Romans 5:12-21, namely, that the biblical text must have priority over the exegetical conclusions of the past. We do not raise questions about Wright's exegetical conclusions simply because they are at variance with a more traditional reading of this passage. Despite Wright's disagreement with the more usual Reformed reading of Romans 5:12-21, he does regard himself to be a true heir of the Reformation in his commitment to the principle of *sola Scriptura*. The final determination of the meaning of a passage of Scripture may not rest upon a simple acceptance of the interpretations of the past, even those sanctioned by a long history and consensus of opinion. One of the attractive features of Wright's theological work is his deep interest in a fresh interpretation of the Scriptures that will undergird a contemporary proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Even though Wright clearly believes that the older, Reformation reading of the apostle Paul is in need of significant revision, he considers himself to be in the line of the Reformation by virtue of his deep commitment to the principle of the authority of Scripture for Christian theology.

### 1. Misconstruing the "righteousness of God"

The starting point or premise for Wright's reading of Romans 5:12-21 is his understanding of the main theme of the book of Romans. In the tradition of exegesis stemming from the Reformation and particularly from Luther, Romans has been read as an extended theological exposition of how individual sinners can obtain favor with God. This Reformation reading of Romans treats the theme of the "righteousness of God," which is announced in the prologue of Romans (1:17), to refer to the way God grants the

righteousness of Christ to individual believers in order that they may be justified. Wright, as we have seen, challenges this reading of Romans and argues that the “righteousness of God” refers comprehensively to God’s covenant faithfulness to his people Israel. The gospel of Jesus Christ, which is articulated in the narrative of Romans, is all about how through Christ the promise originally made to Abraham (and through him to Israel as a people) is being fulfilled. Even though Wright derives this understanding of the theme of Romans from other parts of the epistle and Paul’s writings generally, it is evident that it shapes his reading of Romans 5:12-21.<sup>31</sup>

Due to the shaping influence of Wright’s understanding of the “righteousness of God” for his reading of Romans 5:12-21, it is necessary to raise the question whether it is an adequate representation of the theme of the epistle. In my judgment, it is not. Wright’s understanding of the language of the “righteousness of God” is much too general and vague to capture some of the more important levels of meaning of this language in the epistle to the Romans. That the “righteousness of God,” which is revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ, has something to do with God’s work of salvation in faithfulness to his covenant with Israel, seems too obvious and general a point to require emphasis. Nothing in traditional Protestant exegesis would deny it. The writings of the apostle Paul, not to mention the claims of the New Testament writings generally, confirm how all the promises of God have their “yes and amen” in Christ (2 Cor. 1:20). What remains to be seen is whether the “righteousness of God” speaks of something more specific with respect to the way God’s saving work is accomplished.

This question has recently been addressed by Mark Seifrid and other critics of the new perspective.<sup>32</sup> Contrary to the claim of

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<sup>31</sup> Wright is actually reflecting a widespread opinion among biblical scholars regarding the meaning of the language of the “righteousness of God.” This view is associated with prominent biblical theologians of the Old Testament (Gerhard Von Rad) and the New Testament (Ernst Käsemann), and has become a kind of working assumption among contemporary biblical scholars. For a fine summary of the discussion, which includes some pointed criticisms of this view, see Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 79-89.

<sup>32</sup> Mark A. Seifrid, “Righteousness Language in the Hebrew Scriptures and Early Judaism,” in *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, vol. 1: *The*

Wright that the “righteousness of God” refers simply to God’s covenant faithfulness in granting salvation to his people, Seifrid has demonstrated that this language more closely conforms to the claims of traditional Reformation exegesis. In the writings of the Old Testament, the terms “covenant” (ברית) and “righteousness” (צדקה) seldom occur together. The particular nuance of the term, “righteous” (צדיק), and its cognates, as most traditional lexica will confirm, is the idea of conformity to a norm or law (cf. Lev. 19:36). When this term or its cognates is used verbally, it is most commonly used to refer to the exercise of judgment on the part of those in positions of authority. A ruler in Israel is primarily someone who renders judgments and secures the rule of law by punishing the wicked and vindicating the righteous. A basic substratum of meaning in many passages that speak of an earthly judge or of God, the divine Judge and Lord of all creation, is the notion of punishment or retribution that must fall upon those who disobey the Creator and violate his norms for human life. One of the most frequently-met themes in the Old Testament Scriptures is the theme of God’s just punishment of those who sin against him.<sup>33</sup> The same Lord who upholds and advocates the cause of those who do the right, is the One who puts down and exposes to punishment those who do the wrong. In conformity to the pattern of the divine Lord and Judge, it is the duty of human judges to execute justice by condemning the guilty and declaring innocent the righteous. Within the context of this kind of understanding, the “justification” of the righteous is an act of vindication on the part of a judge, who declares the righteous to be innocent of a charge of wrongdoing and thereby upholds the cause of righteousness.<sup>34</sup>

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*Complexities of Second Temple Judaism*, ed. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O’Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), pp. 415-42. See also Peter O’Brien, “Was Paul a Covenantal Nomist?,” in *Justification and Covenantal Nomism*, vol. 2: *The Paradoxes of Paul*, ed. D. A. Carson, Peter O’Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), pp. 274-6; and Henri Blocher, “Justification and the Ungodly (*Sola Fide*),” in *Justification in Variegated Nomism*, 2: 473-8.

<sup>33</sup> Blocher, “Justification and the Ungodly,” cites the following passages as a sampling: Deut. 32:35; 2 Sam. 3:39; Job 34:11; Ps. 31:23; 91:8; 94:2; Isa. 34:8; 35:4; 40:10; 62:11; 65:6; 66:6; Jer. 16:18; 25:14; 50:29; 51:6; Ezek. 7:2-9; Hos. 12:2; Obad. 15.

<sup>34</sup>See Exod. 23:7; Deut. 25:1; Prov. 17:15; Isa. 5:23; Isa. 53:11.

When Wright maintains that Paul identifies the “righteousness of God” with his covenant faithfulness, he fails to do justice to this Old Testament background and usage. For our purpose, it is especially noteworthy that he does not appreciate the extent to which this biblical idea of the righteousness of God, which especially emphasizes the theme of God’s just retribution upon those who disobey his law, informs the argument of Romans 5:12-21.<sup>35</sup> Because of his prior commitment to the notion that the “righteousness of God” means God’s faithfulness, Wright cannot do justice to the way this passage makes use of such broad themes as: the obligation of all human beings to obey the norms of God’s law; the just consequence of disobedience to the law of God in the way of condemnation and death; the provision for the satisfaction of God’s justice through the obedience of Christ, especially his death upon the cross on behalf of believers; and the granting of the gift of righteousness to those who belong to Christ, which enables them to enter into the blessing of righteousness and life. We will have occasion in what follows to illustrate how Wright’s treatment of this passage, because of the assumptions he makes about the meaning of the “righteousness of God, cannot adequately represent what it teaches about the doctrine of justification.

## 2. An Imbalance between *Historia Salutis* and *Ordo Salutis*

One striking characteristic of Wright’s interpretation of Romans 5:12-21 is his emphasis upon its place within the narrative sequences of the epistle to the Romans. This epistle has usually been read as the most theological of Paul’s writings, and the broad narrative framework of Paul’s argument throughout has seldom been given its due. Wright, who seeks to read Paul’s epistle against the background of his acquaintance with Judaism and the Old Testament, insists that Romans be read as an extended re-telling of the story of God’s dealings with his people Israel. This story, now told from Paul’s vantage point as a preacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ, is all about how God has fulfilled his covenant with Israel by means of the representative life, death and resurrection of the Messiah. As we noted in our summary of Wright’s treatment of

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<sup>35</sup> In his *What Saint Paul Really Said* (p. 103), Wright dismisses the idea that retributive justice belongs to the meaning of “the righteousness of God” by calling it a “Latin irrelevance.”

Romans 5:12-21, Wright views it as a kind of summary narrative, which recapitulates the preceding narrative of Romans 1-4 and anticipates the subsequent narrative of Romans 6-8. Paul structures the sequence of the story in Romans according to the pattern of the history of redemption in general.

Wright's emphasis upon the importance of the history of redemption to our reading of Romans is a commendable reminder that *historia salutis* (the history of redemption) is basic to *ordo salutis* (the order of redemption, as it applies to the believer). However, though Wright properly emphasizes the importance of *historia salutis* to the structure and themes of the book of Romans, he tends to overstate its importance and to downplay those elements of Paul's argument that seem to address more directly the traditional topics of *ordo salutis*. Throughout his commentary on Romans, including his treatment of Romans 5:12-21, Wright consistently focuses upon the broad panorama of God's purpose for and through Israel within the scope of the history of redemption. The big theme of the book is that God keeps his covenant promise to Abraham and brings redemption through Israel's Messiah to Jews and Gentiles alike. The actors on the stage of the history of redemption are not individuals, whether Jews or Gentiles, who believe or do not believe. They are not particular sinners who know personally that they have sinned and fallen short of God's glory, and who can only be restored to favor with God through faith in Jesus Christ. These customary and directly *ordo salutis* implications of the story of salvation are diminished in Wright's commentary.

Admittedly, Wright's almost exclusive focus upon the broad themes of *historia salutis* rather than of *ordo salutis* does not create, when applied to a passage like Romans 5:12-21, the kind of obvious problems that it does with respect to other parts of the epistle. After all, in Romans 5:2-21 Paul is deliberately summarizing the whole history of redemption in terms of two respective heads, Adam and Christ, and in terms of two humanities, the old and the new. This passage provides a kind of summary sketch of the great developments in the development of the plot of the entire history of redemption. In other parts of the argument of Romans, however, Wright's emphasis upon the history of redemption compels him to downplay a number of rather transparently personal dimensions of

God's work of redemption through Jesus Christ.<sup>36</sup> Though Wright's view of the historical-redemptive structure and underpinnings of the book of Romans may be closer to the truth of the matter than the popular "Roman road" approach of evangelical piety, it does seem that the proverbial pendulum swings too far in his case in an overreaction to traditional Protestant exegesis. When we take up Wright's handling of the doctrine of justification in the light of the argument of Romans 5:12-21, we will see how this kind of exaggerated emphasis upon the history of redemption skews Wright's interpretation of justification.

### 3. Adam, Christ, and the Question of History

One of the more significant components of the narrative that is assumed in Romans 5:12-21 is the historical identity of the two key figures whom the apostle Paul compares and contrasts. The argument of Romans 5:12-21, as Wright acknowledges, focuses upon the comparison/contrast between the first Adam whose disobedience is associated with the tyranny of the powers of sin and death over the human race and creation, and the Messiah of Israel whose obedience is associated with the liberating powers of righteousness and life over those who share in his victory. These two figures, who represent fallen and redeemed humanities, are determinative for the whole course of the narrative of the history of redemption that is detailed throughout the book of Romans.

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<sup>36</sup> A remarkable example of this tendency is the way Wright treats the first person pronoun, "I," in Romans 7:7-25. Throughout this passage, Paul is employing "I" as a "rhetorical device" to refer to the people of Israel corporately. Though Wright acknowledges that contemporary biblical commentators on Romans, including such noteworthy figures as C. E. B. Cranfield (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Roman* [ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975], pp. 342-47) and James D. G. Dunn (*Romans 1-8* [WBC vol. 38a; Dallas: Word, 1988], pp. 387-99), take a different view, he insists that we must "rule out any possibility that Paul might here [Rom. 7:7-25] be referring to the 'normal Christian'" (*Romans*, p. 551). Though this is not the place to engage Wright's treatment of this passage, his exclusion of the personal dimensions of Paul's argument illustrates the point: he plays the history of redemption off against the personal appropriation of redemption in an unnecessary and unhelpful way.

An irony of Wright's interpretation of Romans 5:12-21 is that, in spite of the determinative role of these two figures, he leaves the question of the identity and historicity of the first Adam somewhat obscure. In his comments on the important question of the "historical nature" of the narrative in Genesis that Paul obviously references in this passage, Wright properly notes that Paul would have assumed the essential historicity of the Genesis narrative. As a first century Jew, Paul undoubtedly believed that God had created a first human pair, Adam and Eve, and that the sin of Adam (and Eve) introduced sin and death into the human race (and, for that matter, brought chaos into the creation itself) for the first time. Moreover, Wright insists that the transition from an original state of integrity to one of fallenness belongs necessarily to the biblical story, and is not contradicted by any theological or scientific axiom. Death in the human sphere, for example, has come by virtue of human sin to refer not only to the natural process of decay and dissolution that is an ordinary feature of human creatureliness, but also to a situation of being-under-the-judgment of God. Wright affirms a kind of "historical fall" into sin at an earlier stage of "anthropoid development." But, in spite of these positive affirmations about a historical fall into sin, and of an integral connection between human sin and (spiritual) death, Wright stops short of an unequivocal affirmation of what, as he himself acknowledges, belongs to the apostle Paul's teaching in this passage. Unlike the traditional reading of Romans 5:12-21, which affirms the original creation of Adam in a state of integrity and his subsequent fall into sin, Wright equivocates on the identity and historical nature of the first figure in the passage. What seems to belong integrally to the history Paul recites, namely, the real existence of a particular person, Adam, in whom the whole human race was organically joined, is left open to reinterpretation in Wright's exegesis. Though Paul may have understood the narrative of creation in Genesis in a way that was characteristic of a first century Jew, the meaning of the story he recounts does not necessarily require that we embrace the same understanding.

#### 4. "*In that all sinned*": An Exegetical Crux

A disappointing aspect of Wright's comments on Romans 5:12-21 concerns his handling of the phrase, "in that all sinned," with which Paul concludes verse 12. The meaning of this phrase within

the larger context of Paul's argument in Romans 5:12-21 has compelled Christian (especially Reformed) theologians to address the question of the union between Adam and his posterity, and the implications of this union for the way Paul connects Adam's sin with its consequences for all human beings. Wright's exegesis of this passage hardly begins to address some of its most important features so far as the subject of "original sin" is concerned. As we observed in our summary of his exegesis, Wright glosses over some of the important questions that this passage raises by suggesting that they are not Paul's questions, but the "abstract" questions of traditional theology. Though we are not able to provide here a full treatment of this phrase in verse 12, or to explore adequately the implications of the broader context for an understanding of the connection between Adam's sin and his posterity's guilt, we do want to summarize what seems to be the most likely reading of the passage.<sup>37</sup> The key question that needs to be answered is, what does Paul mean when he says, "death came to all men, because all sinned?"

Though Wright does not identify any theologians by name in his comments on this phrase, he does acknowledge that there are, broadly speaking, two ways theologians have historically interpreted it. One way is to take the "all sinned" as a reference to the actual sins of all human beings who have copied or repeated the original sin of Adam. This way of interpreting the phrase, which has historically been associated with the name of the British monk, Pelagius, denies that Paul is speaking of Adam's particular (primal) sin, on account of which death reigns over all his posterity. Paul is using the language, "all sinned," in a manner that parallels the language of Romans 3:23; "all sinned" means simply that all human beings, starting with Adam, have committed transgressions that render them culpable and liable to condemnation. Advocates of this

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<sup>37</sup> For a more fulsome statement of the position I will summarize in what follows, see Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (reprint; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950 [1886], pp. 142-191; John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 1 (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), pp. 178-210; idem, *The Imputation of Adam's Sin* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1959); John Stott, *Romans: God's Good News for the World* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1994), pp. 148-62; and John Piper, *Counted Righteous in Christ: Should We Abandon the Imputation of Christ's Righteousness?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002), pp. 90-114.

interpretation maintain that it not only adequately explains the meaning of Paul's phrase and its parallel in Romans 3:23, but it also resolves a difficult theological problem, namely, how all human beings could be regarded by God as guilty for a sin that they did not commit. A second way of interpreting this phrase maintains that Paul is referring to the direct participation of all human beings in the original or primal sin of Adam. This way of interpreting the phrase, which is historically linked with the name of Augustine, Pelagius' arch opponent, appeals to Paul's use of the aorist tense.<sup>38</sup> The aorist tense suggests a particular act of Adam in the past, not the actual sins of all his posterity. As we have seen in our summary of Wright's comments on this verse, Wright admits that the second of these two interpretations is the more likely, but he nonetheless declines to rule the first out altogether or to explore further the implications of these divergent interpretations for an understanding of the broader argument in Romans 5:12-21. By declining to do so, Wright's handling of Romans 5:12-21 fails to examine a pivotal part of Paul's argument, which, as we shall see below, is of special importance to the issue of Paul's understanding of justification and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ to believers.

If Paul's language in verse 12 is interpreted in the light of the broader context of the concise argument of Romans 5:12-21, Wright's caution at this point appears unnecessary.<sup>39</sup> There are, broadly speaking, at least three important considerations that contribute to a more definite interpretation of Paul's language, "in that all sinned." These considerations demonstrate that Paul is not referring to the actual sins of all men, but to the original sin of Adam. They also show that Paul views Adam on analogy to Christ as the covenant head or representative of his posterity.

The first consideration relates to Paul's parenthesis in verses 13-15, which is appended to the statement of verse 12 as a kind of

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<sup>38</sup> Augustine's understanding of the final phrase of verse 12, ἐφ' ᾧ πάντες ἥμαρτον, was influenced by the Vulgate's (mis)translation, *in quo omnes peccaverunt* ("in whom all sinned"). See Murray, *The Imputation of Adam's Sin*, p. 9.

<sup>39</sup> The context is decisive to the interpretation of the concluding phrase in verse 12. As Murray observes (*Romans*, 1:182-3), "verse 12 of itself is compatible with a Pelagian interpretation, and if Paul had entertained the Pelagian view he could have stated it admirably well in these terms."

elaboration or, as Wright terms it, an “explanatory aside.” In these verses, Paul makes three distinct but related points, each of which argues for an interpretation of “all sinned” as a reference to the original sin of Adam and the participation of all human beings in that sin. First, Paul observes in verse 13a that “sin indeed was in the world before the law was given” (ἄχρι γὰρ νόμου ἁμαρτία ἦν ἐν κόσμῳ). Long before God gave the law or Torah to his people Israel through Moses, indeed from the time of Adam onward, sin or disobedience to God as Creator was an incorrigible feature of human life. Second, Paul also notes in verse 13b that “sin is not counted where there is no law” (ἁμαρτία δὲ οὐκ ἔλλογεται μὴ ὄντος νόμου). So long as the law had not been given in the specific form in which it was given by God through Moses at Sinai, the “counting” or “reckoning” of sin did not occur by the measure of God’s revealed law. And third, Paul utilizes these two points in a remarkable statement about Adam’s sin and its consequence for his descendants: “Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come” (ἀλλὰ ἐβασίλευσεν ὁ θάνατος ἀπὸ Ἀδάμ μέχρι Μωϋσέως καὶ ἐπὶ τοὺς μὴ ἁμαρτήσαντας ἐπὶ τῷ ὁμοιώματι τῆς παραβάσεως). The force of this third point is that the reign of death held universal sway over all human beings, not by virtue of their actual sins against the measure of the law of God that was given to them, but by virtue of Adam’s transgression. The language Paul uses to describe those who are subject to the reign of death might be translated, “those who did not sin by breaking a specific/explicit command, as did Adam.” Whatever difficulties this may present for Christian theology and its understanding of Adam’s original sin, the language Paul uses in this “explanatory aside” seems undeniably to point in the direction of direct connection between Adam’s sin and the reign of death over all his descendants.

The second consideration is the larger context of verse 12, especially verses 15-19. In these verses, Paul states no less than on five distinct occasions that the sin or trespass of the one man, Adam, brought condemnation and death upon all human beings. The implication of this context for the interpretation of verse 12 seems clear: all are subject to condemnation and death *on account of the sin of Adam, the head and representative of fallen humanity*, not on account of their actual sins. Though it is certainly true that all human beings disobey the law of God—a point Paul labors to make throughout the early chapters of Romans—the specific burden of

Paul's understanding of the role of Adam in Romans 5:12-21 points in a different direction. Paul is connecting in a direct and immediate way the sin of Adam and the consequence of that sin for his posterity. Though Wright declines to appeal to this context when he dismisses the question of the connection between Adam's sin and the guilt of his posterity, the language Paul uses in verses 15-19 seems clearly to point in the direction of an understanding of Adam as the covenant or representative head of the human race.

The third consideration has to do with the sustained comparison or analogy that Paul draws throughout this passage between the respective roles of Adam and Christ, particularly in terms of the implications of these roles for those who are joined with them. We will have occasion to return to this consideration when we take up the subject of the implications of this passage for an understanding of justification and the idea of "imputation" that it entails. What is remarkable about Wright's handling of Romans 5:12-21 is that he studiously avoids entering into a discussion of what Paul's argument presupposes regarding the similarity in relationship between Adam and his posterity, and between Christ and his beneficiaries. If we were to interpret Paul to be teaching that death reigns over all human beings because they all have sinned, we would seem to be compelled by Paul's argument in this passage to say that life reigns over all believers because they all have obeyed like Christ. Nothing is more obvious in this passage than that there is a similar *modus operandi* in terms of the way human beings become guilty by virtue of the disobedience of the one man, Adam, and the way believers become righteous by virtue of the obedience of the one, Christ. The apostle Paul is maintaining that the justification of those who belong to Christ is based, not upon their own works of obedience, but upon the obedience of Christ. The analogy that this passage assumes between Adam and Christ would be violated, were the condemnation of those who are in Adam based not upon the disobedience of Adam but upon their own works of disobedience. To quote an apt summary by Charles Hodge of the nature of Paul's argument in this passage,

Paul has been engaged from the beginning of the Epistle in inculcating one main idea, viz. that the ground of the sinner's acceptance with God is not in himself, but the merit of Christ. And the correspondence between Christ and Adam must preserve, not destroy this truth. It should read, therefore: "As we are condemned

on account of what Adam did, (so) we are justified on account of what Christ did.”<sup>40</sup>

Wright’s unwillingness to enter into a more full discussion of the implications of Paul’s argument in Romans 5:12-21 for our understanding of original sin and its consequence, as well as the connection between Christ’s obedience and the believer’s justification, constitutes an important reason for his failure to do justice to what this passage teaches about justification. Now that we have offered these preliminary observations about general aspects of Wright’s interpretation of Romans 5:12-21, the time has come to address directly the way he handles the subject of justification in his comments on this passage.

### B. *Wright’s Treatment of Justification in Romans 5:12-21*

In our introduction, we noted that Romans 5:12-21 has played an important role in the formulation of traditional Reformed theology and its understanding of the doctrine of justification. In Reformed theology, this passage provides a comprehensive statement of the comparison/contrast between the first Adam, whose one act of disobedience resulted in the condemnation and death of all men, and the second Adam, Christ, whose act of obedience resulted in righteousness and life for all believers.<sup>41</sup> In the covenant or “federal” theology of the Westminster Confession of faith, Romans 5:12-21 is a key biblical testimony to the doctrine of justification through the imputation of the righteousness of Christ to those who are united to him by faith. In the construction of covenant theology, this passage depicts two humanities in terms of their judicial relationship to God: fallen humanity, which lies under the sentence of condemnation and death on account of the

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<sup>40</sup> *Romans*, p. 142.

<sup>41</sup> Paul uses the language of “all” in verse 18, which some interpreters have taken to teach a “universalism” in which all human beings are now saved in Christ as they once perished in Adam. There are contextual considerations in the book of Romans, however, that clearly show that only believers, that is, those who are united to Christ by faith, are saved. It should not be overlooked that Paul speaks in this passage of the “many” who will be made righteous (v. 19) and insists in chapter 6 that baptism into Christ is necessary to participate in the benefit of his death and resurrection.

disobedience of the first Adam as its covenant head or representative; and redeemed humanity, which has been constituted righteous and heir of eternal life on account of the obedience of Christ, the second Adam and the covenant head or representative of all who share in him through faith. With respect to the doctrine of justification, this passage provides a comprehensive witness to the acceptance of all believers who are recipients by faith of the free gift of righteousness in Christ. The traditional reading of Romans 5:12-21 finds in it a clear and ringing testimony to several key elements of the Reformation doctrine of justification. Among these elements, Romans 5:12-21 especially illustrates the nature of God's righteousness as that which is freely granted and imputed to believers, and the nature of justification as a judicial act whereby sinners are declared acceptable to God on the basis of Christ's work on their behalf.

Wright's handling of this passage, especially with respect to the doctrine of justification, is quite different. Because the "righteousness of God" refers to God's covenant faithfulness, Wright rejects any idea of the granting or imputing of this righteousness to believers. The righteousness of God is simply his faithfulness in fulfilling his covenant promise to Israel through the death of the Messiah. When Paul speaks in this passage of the granting of righteousness to those who share in the work of Christ, he is identifying those who are now recognized by God to be members of his covenant family, whether Jews or Gentiles. In Wright's exegesis of this passage, little or no consideration is given to the "imputation" of Adam's guilt to his posterity or of Christ's righteousness to believers. The legal transaction that was so integral a part of the historic Reformed reading of this passage is reduced to a declaration that those who share in Christ are in favor with God and acknowledged members of his covenant people (their status). However, the righteousness of God is not something that can be granted or imputed by God to believers. Wright also expressly repudiates the older Reformed view that the obedience of Christ includes comprehensively his positive fulfillment of the demands of God's law and his endurance of the law's sanction, which is granted and imputed to believers as a free gift of God's grace. This older view, which Wright characterizes as a doctrine of accruing a "treasury of merit" that is apportioned to believers, is summarily rejected. In its place, Wright argues that the obedience of Christ is his "faithfulness" in fulfilling the calling of Israel in the history of

redemption, namely, to secure the blessing of salvation for the new humanity and obtaining its inheritance of a renewed cosmos.

Without pretending to address all of the facets of Wright's newer view of the doctrine of justification, there are three significant weaknesses in his approach that become apparent in the way he interprets Romans 5:12-21. These weaknesses have already surfaced in part in the preceding, but now require more direct comment in terms of their significance for the doctrine of justification.

### 1. The "Righteousness of God" Revisited

In an earlier section of this article, we noted that Wright's understanding of the theme of Romans, "the righteousness of God," follows an emphasis in more recent Pauline studies that identifies it with God's faithfulness to his covenant. The older themes of God's righteousness as his conformity to and administration of his own law, both in terms of its demand upon humans and its sanctions in the case of disobedience, are treated by Wright as largely "irrelevant" to the biblical usage. Unlike the older view, which took the "righteousness of God" that is revealed in the gospel to refer to the work of Christ in obeying the law and suffering its curse, Wright's view stresses the motif of God's acting to secure the promise to Abraham and his descendants. Since the "righteousness of God" refers to God's saving action in Christ, which calls a worldwide covenant community into existence that is composed of Jews and Gentiles alike, it does not refer to the demands or sanctions of the law of God, who as the Creator and Judge rules and judges all creatures. Because the "righteousness of God" means something like God's faithfulness in action, it can hardly be said to be imputed or transferred from Christ to those who are joined to him by faith.

If we consider the argument of the apostle Paul in Romans 5:12-21, however, it seems undeniable that the older view captures much more fully Paul's understanding of the "righteousness of God" than Wright's view. Remarkably, Wright's own exposition of this passage utilizes language that frequently belies his own claims regarding the meaning of God's righteousness. The thrust of Paul's argument in this passage seems transparently to be that all human beings are regarded by God to be sinners because of the disobedience of the first man, Adam. The reign of sin and death

over human life throughout history—from the time of Adam’s transgression until the present, even in the case of those generations who were not given the law of God as it was given to Israel through Moses—testifies to the fact that God holds all accountable and liable for their sin *in Adam*. Paul’s emphasis throughout is upon the *one* man, Adam, whose *one* act of disobedience has brought the judgment and wrath of God upon all his posterity. What is particularly important to our interest is that Paul focuses especially upon *the explicitly legal or judicial consequences of Adam’s sin*: all human beings are subject, he declares, to “condemnation” and “death.” Within the setting of the opening chapters of Romans, especially the preliminary conclusion in Romans 3:19-20 that all human beings are accountable before God for their sin and have nothing to present in their own defense that would exonerate them in God’s court, the implications of this focus are clear. Paul is talking about the human situation in the court of heaven (*coram Deo*); and he is insisting that all human beings are liable to the exposure and sanction of the law of God, the Creator and Judge of all creatures. Though there are undoubtedly other facets of the human predicament in sin, particularly the inheritance of what Christian theologians have called a “sinfully depraved or corrupted nature,” Paul’s interest in this passage remains fixed upon the explicitly *legal* dimension of human sinfulness to which the doctrine of justification alone provides a remedy.

In a similar way, Paul’s description of the work of Christ in this passage is particularly aimed to address the legal dimension of the problem of sin. Just as the sin, condemnation, and death came through the transgression of the one man, Adam, so righteousness, acceptance with God, and life have come through the obedience of the one man, Christ. All who have a share in Christ, who are *judicially implicated* in his saving work of obedience, now are granted a new status of being acceptable to God and in right standing before him. Paul, in other words, is providing a concise elaboration of the respective relationship of all human beings to Adam and to Christ, in order to provide a comprehensive account of how the gospel provides the only remedy for the radical predicament of all human beings before God, whether Jews or Gentiles. It doesn’t matter whether the Gentiles were given the law through Moses or not; they are still subject to the law, have violated its demands, and stand liable to its sanction. Nor does it matter that the Jews have apparently enjoyed a distinguishing privilege as recipients of the law

through Moses; the law of Moses, which the Jews thought would serve them instrumentally as a means of maintaining favor with God, only aggravates the problem by exposing and increasing their sinfulness. Only through the person and work of Christ, whose obedience contrasts with the disobedience of Adam, can Jews and Gentiles alike be constituted righteous and become heirs of life in communion with God.

A brief rehearsal such as this of the argument of Romans 5:12-21 confirms that it presupposes and elaborates upon Paul's (and the Scriptures') understanding of the "righteousness of God." That understanding cannot be reduced to something like God's faithfulness to his promise. To be sure, the gospel of Jesus Christ reveals God's faithfulness and confirms his promise to Abraham. But if we ask, how does it particularly reveal God's righteousness, then we are left with something like the older Reformed view. What commends the love of God in the gospel is not only that it displays God's undeserved goodness to sinners who are altogether unworthy (cf. Rom. 5:1-11). What commends the love and grace of God in Christ is that it answers to and fulfills all the demands and sanctions of God's holy law. God, who is just and the One who justifies *the ungodly* (Rom. 4:5), has provided for the salvation of his people in a way that wondrously illumines both his love and his justice, his grace and his holiness. In all of this, the conception of the "righteousness of God" that seems to leap from the page is precisely that conception that is historically identified with the Reformation doctrine of justification. One element of this view remains to be considered, namely, the gracious granting and imputing of what Christ has accomplished to those who belong to him by faith. We will reserve our consideration of this element, however, to our discussion below of the theme of "imputation" in Romans 5:12-21. What seems clear enough at this point is that Wright's definition of the "righteousness of God" misses key elements that belong to it and are present in the argument of Romans 5:12-21.

## 2. The Nature of Justification

In Wright's conception of Paul's doctrine of justification, it is admitted that the idea of justification finds its home in the legal sphere. According to Wright, the language of justification for Paul and Judaism plays upon a legal metaphor in which there are three

principal figures: a judge, a plaintiff, a defender. What matters in the court is that the judge declares in favor or vindicates a defendant against charges. To be justified in this context is simply to be in favor with the court, to be in the status of innocence or without guilt. Justification is not a process of moral transformation or renewal, as in some traditional Roman Catholic formulations, but it is an act or verdict that the judge pronounces in court that vindicates a defendant. Within the setting of the gospel's revelation of the "righteousness of God," Wright consistently argues that justification therefore refers to God's identification of those who belong properly to his covenant family. To be justified within the context of God's faithfulness to his promise to Abraham and his descendants, is tantamount to being numbered among the people of God. To be righteous is to be acknowledged a member of God's people, a beneficiary of God's covenant promise to Abraham. Justification by faith, which Wright terms the "badge" of such covenant membership, is Paul's doctrine of how God's world-wide covenant family is to be identified. Justification, though not the principal theme of the gospel, is an ecclesiological doctrine that answers the problem as to whether Gentiles are also to be included within the covenant people of God, even though they were not recipients of the Torah through Moses nor obedient to its particular "markers of identity" that distinguish God's people, Israel, from others. Because justification is all about the status of those whom God identifies as properly members of the covenant community, it should not be regarded, as in the older Reformation view, as Paul's conception of how believers "enter into" favor with God. When Paul speaks of entry into company of God's covenant family, he identifies this with baptism (Romans 6) or "calling" (Rom. 8:29).<sup>42</sup>

When this conception of what Paul means by justification is compared to the argument of Romans 5:12-21, it appears to be unnecessarily reductionistic, perhaps even misguided. Though Paul undoubtedly affirms the evident ecclesiological implications of the doctrine of justification—that Jews and Gentiles alike belong to God's covenant family through faith in Jesus Christ, apart from the works of the law—this is not the way justification is primarily defined in this passage. Though Paul does not expressly use the

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<sup>42</sup> This summary of Wright's understanding of Paul's doctrine of justification in Romans and the other Pauline epistles reflects his discussion in *What Saint Paul Really Said*, pp. 113-33.

verb, “to justify,” in this passage, he does use the noun, “justification,” and obviously speaks in terms that are directly relevant to and explanatory of what it is to be justified. The antonym of justification is “condemnation” (vv. 16, 18; cf. Rom. 8:31). All who are “in Adam” stand under the condemnation of God and are liable to the consequence of their sin in the way of death. All who are “in Christ,” however, are now the recipients of “justification and life.” Those who have a share in Christ are, according to the apostle Paul, “made righteous” (δικαιοι κατασταθήσονται).<sup>43</sup> To return to the distinction between *historia salutis* and *ordo salutis*, which we have discussed above, it seems undeniable that Paul is speaking in a way that addresses the theme of salvation at both levels. Undoubtedly, the broad comparison/contrast between Adam and Christ that dominates the argument of Romans 5:12-21 represents an all-embracing panorama upon the history of redemption. The history of redemption is dominated by these two figures and the two humanities whom they represent. The question of justification, therefore, can be expressed in redemptive-historical terms as the question of the identity of the covenant people of God. But this question is also a question that comes to its sharpest expression in terms of the patently *ordo salutis* question, do I belong by faith to Christ and accordingly have a share in the benefits of his saving obedience? Even though Paul does not expressly address the *ordo salutis* question in the compass of his argument in Romans 5:12-21, one can hardly read the book of Romans without noticing that the question of faith and unbelief is a matter of supreme interest to the apostle throughout. For example, whatever one makes of the place of Romans 9-11 in the overall structure of the epistle to the Romans, it is clearly addressing the problem of unbelief on the part of some of God’s covenant people, Paul’s kinsmen according to the flesh.

To put the matter in bold relief, Wright’s insistence that justification is primarily an ecclesiological issue for Paul shipwrecks rather patently upon the hard rock of a passage like Romans 5:12-21. It is neither exegetically defensible nor theologically necessary to

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<sup>43</sup> For a brief discussion of the “forensic” meaning of Paul’s language in verse 18, see Albrecht Oepke, s.v. καθιστημι, in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 3:445-6. Paul is speaking of a declaration or pronouncement of innocence that properly takes place in a court of law.

play off ecclesiology against soteriology in Paul's understanding of justification. Justification, among other things, undoubtedly identifies those who properly belong to the number of God's covenant people through faith in Christ. But it does so because justification has everything to do with the soteriological question of how any sinner can stand before God in spite of his or her evident sinfulness. Justification answers the profound *ordo salutis* question that played such an important role at the time of the Reformation, namely, how can I get right with God when I am clearly exposed by the law of God as someone who is worthy of condemnation and death? No useful purpose, certainly no exegetically necessary purpose, is served by opposing *historia salutis* to *ordo salutis*, or ecclesiology to soteriology, in the manner in which this is done by Wright. Romans 5:12-21 constitutes a strong argument for the older view of justification, which emphasized its forensic nature as a judicial act in which God declares sinners to be righteous before him. The Reformation view, which was compelled to address the issue of justification in terms of the *ordo salutis* questions posed by medieval Roman Catholic teaching, did not fail at the same time to recognize the basis of salvation in the objective history of God's action on behalf of his people in Christ.<sup>44</sup> No Reformation theologian, including the much maligned Luther, would have denied the priority of the history of redemption and the objective work of Christ *extra nobis*, when it comes to the subjective benefit of this history for the believer in Jesus Christ.

### 3. What about "Imputation"?

In his treatment of Romans 5:12-21, Wright gives only short shrift to the subject of "imputation" and the manner in which believers come to have a share in Christ and his righteousness. Though he acknowledges the essential place of the idea of imputation in the older Reformation view of this passage and the doctrine of justification, Wright strongly denies that Paul, here or elsewhere, ever teaches that something like imputation occurs in the act of justification. Since Wright is quite emphatic in his rejection of the idea of imputation, it is disappointing that he largely glosses

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<sup>44</sup> This is the significance of such traditional distinctions as that between Christ's work *pro nobis* ("for us") or *extra nos* ("outside of us") and *in nobis* ("in us").

over those elements of Paul's argument in Romans 5:12-21 that speak directly to the subject. The closest Wright comes to addressing the question that the idea of imputation historically answered is his backhanded repudiation of any attempt to explain "the mode by which ... sin is transmitted" from Adam to all human beings. The "primal sin" of Adam, Wright acknowledges, "somehow" involves "all subsequent humanity," but how this is so lies outside the purview of Paul's argument in Romans 5:12-21. When it comes to the parallel question as to how believers come to have a share in the "representative" work of Christ, Wright is just as non-committal. Though he emphatically rejects the idea of imputation as a way of explaining this participation in the representative work of Christ, he does acknowledge that believers do "share" in the work of Christ and enjoy a new status on this account.<sup>45</sup>

At the risk of repeating some points that we have previously argued, the failure on Wright's part to address directly the question that imputation historically answered must be judged untenable. Readers of Romans 5:12-21 can scarcely gloss over the fact that Paul seems to be arguing that all human beings are guilty before God on account of the one act of the one man, Adam. Nor can they overlook the evident connection that Paul makes between Adam's sin, on the one hand, and the universal reign of condemnation and death over all human beings, on the other. Similarly, it is evident that Paul parallels this argument concerning the first Adam with a comparable argument concerning Christ. Perhaps the most important point in Romans 5:12-21 is Paul's claim

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<sup>45</sup> Due to the focus of our article on Wright's handling of Romans 5:12-21, we are not able to evaluate critically his understanding of the role of faith in justification. Wright generally rejects the idea of faith as an "instrument" by which the righteousness of God is received for justification, despite Paul's association of the righteousness of God or justification by grace with its reception "by faith" and "not by works" (see e.g. Rom. 1:17; 3:22; 25,28; 4:16; 5:1; 10:30,32; 10:6; Gal. 2:16,20). Consistent with his understanding of the righteousness of God, Wright also argues that passages like Romans 3:22 (διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ) and Galatians 2:16 (διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ) be translated "by the faithfulness of Christ." For a recent critical assessment of this translation, which enjoys considerable popularity among contemporary biblical scholars, see Moisés Silva, "Faith Versus Works of Law in Galatians," in *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, 2:217-48, esp. pp. 227ff.

that all who have a share in Christ are righteous by virtue of his one act of obedience on their behalf. There is an immediate connection between Christ's obedience on the one hand, and the justification and life that come to believers on the other. The judicial implications that Paul maintains (whether of condemnation or of justification) are entailed by the actions of the first Adam and of Christ. They suggest that the verdict pronounced in God's court requires something like the constitutive acts of granting/imputing the guilt of Adam or the granting/imputing of the righteousness of Christ to their respective beneficiaries.

Perhaps to appreciate this, we need to revisit the idea of imputation, not as Wright and others sometimes misrepresent it,<sup>46</sup> but as it has been understood historically by Reformed theologians. In the instance of the imputation of the guilt of Adam's sin to his posterity, the older view understood this to mean that, though Adam personally disobeyed the commandment of God, God reckoned or attributed the guilt of this offence to his posterity or those whom he represented. In terms of the consequence of this imputation or reckoning, all Adam's descendants are thereby guilty, under condemnation and subject to death. The great objection, of course, to this explanation of Paul's argument in Romans 5:12-21 is that it attributes guilt to human beings who were not personally culpable for a sin committed by another. This is what is known in theological shorthand as the problem of "alien guilt." On the other side of the comparison, this problem is alleviated somewhat by the awareness that something similar happens in the case of Christ's obedience and the share others have in it. In the language of the traditional view, God attributes or reckons—or, to put in the terms of Romans 5:19, "constitutes the many righteous"—the obedience of Christ to believers so that it is truly their own. What distinguishes

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<sup>46</sup> 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. Cf. *What Saint Paul Really Said*, p. 98: "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." 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?

the act of imputation is that it maintains the *judicial* emphasis that is essential to Paul's argument in Romans 5:12-21, and to his understanding of justification in this and other passages. If justification has everything to do with what God pronounces or declares persons to be in his court, then imputation is precisely the proper category to account for the respective judgments God makes regarding all sinners in Adam and all believers in Christ. When God declares a person guilty in Adam and liable to condemnation, he does not do so by a procedure that makes him or her an actual perpetrator of the transgression of Adam. Rather, Adam's guilt is attributed or reckoned to those whom he represented within the ordinance and purpose of God as Creator. Because God (presumably) ordered his relationship with all human beings by constituting Adam the head of humanity in its original state, the act of imputing the guilt and liability of his sin to his posterity expresses the Creator's administration of this relationship in a manner that accords with his own righteousness.<sup>47</sup>

The importance of the idea of imputation becomes most apparent in terms of the way believers benefit from the obedience of Christ. Though Wright caricatures the idea of the imputation of the righteousness of Christ to believers, Paul's explanation of the justification of believers in Romans 5:12-21 seems clearly to affirm it. What else could be entailed by Paul's language that Christ's "one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men?" Or by his language that by "the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous?" Doesn't this language affirm that God freely bestows on believers a gift of righteousness that is received by faith and that is the basis for their justification? In a way that strikingly parallels God's reckoning of guilt to all human beings on account of

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<sup>47</sup> Since Paul does not explicitly use the language of "reckoning" or "accounting" in Romans 5:12-21, we will not address directly the significance of this language (or its Old Testament background). Clearly this language belongs properly within the framework of a courtroom where a judicial pronouncement is the most important thing that occurs. Such a pronouncement tells its recipients what the court "reputes" a person to be, whether innocent or guilty. For a more extended discussion of the explicit language of "imputation" in Paul's epistles, see D. A. Carson, "The Vindication of Imputation"; John Piper, *Counted Righteous in Christ*; James R. White, *The God Who Justifies* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2001), pp. 111-18; and James Buchanan, *The Doctrine of Justification* (reprint; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1959 [1867]), pp. 314-38.

the transgression of Adam, Paul affirms God's granting and reckoning of righteousness to believers on account of the obedience of Christ. Believers are justified, not because they have become righteous in themselves or by their own act of obedience, but because God has attributed to them the righteousness of Christ. In the court of heaven, the obedience of Christ, which is manifestly not an obedience rendered by believers themselves, is reckoned to believers so that it becomes truly their own. Though this idea of imputation may often have had to suffer the complaint that it is a kind of "legal fiction," Paul's argument amounts to the claim that it is anything but fictional. It may be an "imputed" righteousness, but it is a real righteousness that really justifies.

The obscurity and inadequacy of Wright's handling of the connection between the work of Christ and believers who come to share in it is illustrated by his preference for the language of "representative" to describe Christ's obedience and death. By this language, Wright seems to want to affirm that Christ's work is also somehow the work of believers. Because Christ is Israel's representative, all who believe in him can be said to obey and suffer "in" and "with" him. Christ's obedience and death are, in some sense, truly theirs as much as his. This is all well and good, of course, but it leaves some questions unanswered, most specifically the question to which imputation historically provided an answer. How do we get from Christ's work "outside of us" to ourselves in such a way that we can meaningfully say "what he did, we have done?" Here Reformed theology has insisted that the language of "representation" can be adequately employed only when it includes and rests upon the idea of a *genuine substitution*.<sup>48</sup> Because Christ acts

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<sup>48</sup> It is not clear why Wright prefers to speak of Christ's work for his people as a "representative" work. Whether he wishes to exclude the idea of substitution by doing so is open to debate, though there is a tendency in modern theology to prefer the language of "representation" to that of "substitution" for this very reason. See e.g. James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 386. For a critical discussion of this tendency in modern theology, see Leon Morris, *The Cross in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), pp. 407-19. For a recent discussion of the necessary connection between the themes of substitution and imputation in Paul's understanding of justification, see D. A. Carson, "The Vindication of Imputation," pp. 46-78, esp. pp. 64ff. Cf. D. A. Carson, "Atonement in Romans 3:21-26," in *The Glory of the Atonement: Essays in Honor of Roger Nicole*, ed. Charles E. Hill and Frank A.

as a representative substitute in all of his atoning work, his work is in the most profound sense our work. Because Christ died in the place of his own people, God accepts his death in lieu of theirs. Because Christ obeyed in the place of his own people, God accepts his obedience in lieu of theirs. *This is the exact meaning of the language of “imputation” in traditional Reformed theology: believers who are united to Christ, their substitute, are reckoned by God to have performed all that he performed in their place.* On account of Christ’s obedience and death, God regards believers to have fulfilled all righteousness. For this reason, believers who are in Christ are the recipients of justification and life. To put the matter in a backhanded fashion, any denial of the reality of Christ’s substitution and representation on behalf of believers will necessarily and inevitably entail a denial of imputation. Or to put the matter straightforwardly, only an affirmation of imputation can do justice to Paul’s teaching that believers are “constituted righteous” on account of the obedience of Christ.<sup>49</sup>

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James III (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2004), p. 134, fn53, who makes a similar point to mine: “Part of the contemporary (and frequently sterile) debate over whether or not Paul teaches ‘imputation,’ it seems to me, turns on a failure to recognize distinct domains of discourse. Strictly speaking, Paul never uses the verb λογίζομαι to say, explicitly, that Christ’s righteousness is imputed to the sinner or that the sinner’s righteousness is imputed to Christ. So if one remains in the domain of narrow exegesis, one can say that Paul does not explicitly teach ‘imputation,’ except to say slightly different things (e.g., that Abraham’s faith was ‘imputed’ to him for righteousness). But if one extends the discussion into the domain of constructive theology, and observes that *the Pauline texts themselves* (despite the critics’ contentions) teach penal substitution, then ‘imputation’ is merely another way of saying much the same thing.”

<sup>49</sup> It may be admitted that Romans 5:12-21 does not offer a complete answer to some of the questions that have arisen in the history of theology regarding the nature of the righteousness that God grants and imputes to believers. Even though I am convinced that there are good exegetical and theological arguments for insisting that the righteousness imputed consists of both the “active” and “passive” obedience of Christ, to use the traditional categories of theology, we will not seek to make that case here. However, even were we to grant a minimalist view of Paul’s language in this passage regarding Christ’s “one act of obedience” (the “passive” obedience of Christ upon the cross) we would still have a fairly clear statement of imputation as the *constitutive act* whereby believers are justified. For an exegetical and theological case for the idea in this passage of an imputation of Christ’s righteousness, which comprehensively includes all

C. *A Concluding Excursus on Wright's Theological Method*

A critical assessment of Wright's interpretation of Romans 5:12-21 can hardly remain within the parameters of exegesis and biblical theology. Some readers of our evaluation of Wright's exegesis of Romans 5:12-21 and its implications for Paul's doctrine of justification, might be tempted, for example, to ascribe this evaluation simply to the work of a systematic theologian. If I were to limit my comments to what can be determined from the passage within the constraints of biblical studies, then many of the more explicitly theological aspects of my evaluation would be seen as an illegitimately "abstract" and "de-historicizing" handling of the text. As we noted in our introduction to Wright's interpretation of this passage, he insists as a biblical theologian that the passage be read in its first century context and from the conviction that Paul writes as a Jew who has become convinced that Jesus Christ is Israel's Messiah. The problem with the traditional Reformation handling of Romans 5:12-21 and related passages is that the concerns of a later period in the history of Christian theology are often imported into the text. In the traditional interpretation, questions are asked and answered that are not the apostle Paul's. A historically contextualized exegesis of Romans 5:12-21, however, will seek to understand Paul's argument as that of a Christian apostle, who writes as a first century Jew from within the framework and in terms of the categories of Second Temple Judaism.

This brings us to make some remarks regarding Wright's theological method, especially as it comes to expression in his reading of Romans 5:12-21. In the introduction to this article, we noted that Wright's handling of this passage may be viewed as a kind of "test case," not only for the exegetical conclusions he draws regarding Paul's doctrine of justification, but also for some of the methodological strictures that he advocates in his approach to the Pauline epistles and other biblical texts. Though some students of the new perspective are tempted to view Wright's work as a simple matter of straightforward exegesis of the biblical texts, it is apparent that much more is at stake in the discussions regarding his claims and those of other authors of the new perspective. Without

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of his (active and passive) obedience, see John Murray, *Epistle to the Romans*, 1:200-202; and John Piper, *Counted Righteous in Christ*, pp. 110-15.

attempting to be exhaustive or to do much more than take note of some issues that require further exploration, we wish to identify several important elements of Wright's theological method. If these components are clearly recognized and evaluated in terms of their implications for Christian theology, it should become apparent that they largely preclude the possibility of any legitimate movement from exegesis to the traditional topics of systematic theology. Indeed, Wright's theological method would seem to rule out from the beginning the kinds of questions and answers that traditional Christian theology has addressed in the context of its reading of passages like Romans 5:12-21.

The three components that form an important methodological basis for Wright's work as a biblical theologian are: a theological epistemology that he labels "critical realism"; the primary role of narratives in mediating worldviews; and the authority of Scriptural narratives for Christian theology.

In the most extended statement of his theological method and epistemology, Wright describes his theological epistemology as a form of "critical realism."<sup>50</sup> The task of Christian theology is to seek to know something of the reality of what it describes and interprets. In this respect, Christian theology aims to describe "what is known" in a way that genuinely conforms to the nature and character of what it describes. The knowledge that theology mediates is not subjective in the sense that it says more about the knower or theologian than it does about what is known. The term "realism" indicates that the task of theology is to ascertain what is genuinely the case in respect to its peculiar subject-matter. There is a true correspondence in theological knowledge between the knowledge of reality and the reality that is known. At the same time, Wright acknowledges that there is an element of the knower's interpretation of reality that contributes to the enterprise of theology. Theologians do not simply describe the "brute facts" or the simple, objective reality of what they claim to know about God, the world, and the relations between them. Theologians must recognize that they enter into a conversation with other theologians when they are engaged in the task of theological inquiry. They also recognize that there is a measure of "provisionality" to their conclusions and descriptions of this or that theological topic. Wright employs the language of "critical realism" to describe

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<sup>50</sup> *New Testament and the People of God*, pp. 32-37.

theological knowledge in order to steer a course between the extremes of “naïve realism” or objectivism on the one hand, and “subjectivism” on the other. Theology is a disciplined academic exercise in which the theologian, who studies the Scriptural texts, aims to reflect in his or her critical knowledge a measure of conformity to what can be known of theology’s object.<sup>51</sup>

A second component of Wright’s theological method is his assertion that narrative or story is the primary medium for the articulation and expression of distinctive worldviews. Though we have a tendency to disparage stories as an inadequate means to express our basic convictions about the world, about ourselves, and about those things that are of greatest value to us, Wright insists that the distinct worldviews of diverse faith communities are principally (and invariably) represented in the form of narratives or stories. Indeed, the more articulate a worldview becomes, the more sophisticated and complete its “meta-narrative” becomes. Such a meta-narrative is a story that embraces the totality of the world in a coherent and all-inclusive manner. The pre-eminence of narrative as a means to communicate a worldview is of particular importance to Christian theology. The Scriptures, which constitute a kind of authoritative telling-the-story that expresses a Christian worldview, are cast largely in the form of narrative or story. The literary and theological reading of the Scripture narrative, accordingly, is the basic task of Christian theology. By following the narrative of Scripture, the Christian theologian seeks to uncover the answers to such questions as: who are we? where are we? what is wrong? what is the solution?<sup>52</sup> The answers to these worldview questions are not provided by means of a systematic distinguishing between and defining of theological topics or subjects. Rather, they are provided by means of a careful study of the biblical texts in their own historical context, a study whose aim is to uncover the worldview that is mediated by the Scriptural narrative.

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<sup>51</sup> *The New Testament and the People of God*, p 35: “I propose a form of *critical realism*. This is a way of describing the process of ‘knowing’ that acknowledges the *reality of the thing known, as something other than the knower* (hence ‘realism’), while also fully acknowledging that the only access we have to this reality lies along the spiraling path of *appropriate dialogue or conversation between the knower and the thing known* (hence ‘critical’)” (emphasis Wright’s).

<sup>52</sup> *The New Testament and the People of God*, pp. 132-3.

A third component of Wright's theological method is his claim that the Scriptures, which articulated the grand narrative that mediates the distinctives of a Christian worldview, must be acknowledged as the primary norm or authority for Christian theology. As a biblical theologian in the Protestant tradition, Wright wishes to uphold the classic principle of *sola Scriptura*. The Christian theologian's great task is to engage in a careful, historically and literarily contextualized, reading of the biblical texts. The Scriptural narrative or narratives have a normative authority for Christian theology, even though Wright recognizes that the reading of Scripture inescapably occurs within the framework of our present world and its presuppositions. Though Wright sounds almost "pre-critical" at times in his assertion of the normativity and authority of the Scriptural narratives, he hastens to note that a "critical" realist reading of Scripture is not to be confused with a "pre-critical" one. As he describes his approach, "[t]his is not to go back to pre-modernism. We have abandoned biblicistic proof-texting, as inconsistent with the nature of the texts that we have. . . ."<sup>53</sup> If we are to grant the proper place to Scriptural authority in contemporary theology, we must do so in a way that honors the historical context in which they emerged and the narrative structure of its literary forms. Any reading of the Scriptures that treats them as a collection of timeless theological doctrines, which are cast in the form of topics that are grist for the mill of systematic theology, will inappropriately diminish the story-form of the biblical texts. Additionally, any reading of the biblical texts that superimposes upon them the questions and answers of a different period in the history of theology will risk the temptation to wrest the Scriptural texts from their original historical context and their distinctive narrative structures.

Much more needs to be said about these and other characteristics of Wright's understanding of the proper method for contemporary Christian theology. Our brief synopsis of these important components of his method, however, should be sufficient to establish a connection between Wright's underlying theological and methodological principles and his interpretation of a passage like Romans 5:12-21. Each of these components of Wright's method is not difficult to detect in the way he reads this passage. In conformity to his commitment to "critical realism,"

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<sup>53</sup> *The New Testament and the People of God*, pp. 139-40.

Wright does not read this passage naively or pre-critically. He recognizes that Paul writes as a first-century Jew, and that he tells the story of the gospel from within the framework of the Scriptural narrative he has inherited, which includes elements of a “mythical and metaphorical” nature. Though the aim of the Christian theologian is to know the reality that is mediated by means of the biblical text, Wright acknowledges that the elements of the worldview that are reflected in the text are not given in the form of an “objective” presentation of the facts. Furthermore, Wright, consistent with his understanding of the nature of narrative and the Scriptural texts, regards the book of Romans in general, and this passage in particular, to form part of a narrative sequence that constitutes a kind of substratum or deep-structure for the epistle. Contrary to the tendency of Christian theology to treat Romans as the most “theological” of Paul’s epistles, Wright treats it as a narrative that mediates Paul’s worldview. In his handling of Romans 5:12-21, Wright resists the temptation to cast its narrative into the forms of systematic theology, or to treat its argument as an occasion for exploring its implications for the traditional topics or categories of systematic theology. Many of the topics of theology that historically have occupied the attention of readers of Romans 5:12-21 are simply bypassed or shunted aside in his interpretation. These topics include the historicity of the first human being, Adam, and the importance of the organic unity of the human race to Paul’s argument; the debate regarding the nature of the union between Adam and his posterity, and between Christ and those who are united to him; the manner in which the guilt of Adam is communicated to his descendants; the “imputation” or granting of the righteousness of God to those who are justified, etc.

Though Wright’s theological method requires more careful and thorough study than we can give it here, we would observe that it necessarily undermines and calls into question the enterprise of systematic theology, at least as it has historically been conducted in the Christian tradition. Though I would not wish to quarrel unduly with Wright’s argument for what he calls “critical realism,” I do believe he seriously overstates the significance of narrative for the enterprise of Christian theology. The obvious fact that the Scriptures consist primarily of narratives or stories does not preclude the legitimacy of a systematic and coherent treatment of the distinct topics or subjects that interpret the meaning of these stories. Nor does it preclude a consideration of the universal and

categorical significance of the theological topics that interpret the biblical stories. Not only do we find many instances in the Scriptures themselves where a rudimentary form of Christian doctrine or teaching is present, but we are also inescapably constrained to ask questions of a systematic and universal nature when we read the Scriptures. Any coherent or systematic explanation of the history of redemption, which is narrated for us in the Scriptures, will have to “connect-the-dots” between the various parts of Scripture. Indeed, the possibility of Christian theology depends upon convictions, not only about the authority of the Scriptural narratives, but also about the coherence and consistency of its teaching. Reading the biblical texts is more than an historical exercise in seeking to discover the worldview of first century Christians, for example, who happen to have cast their views on great questions in the form of a grand narrative. Inevitably, the biblical texts will prompt questions of a systematic nature. These questions have preoccupied exegetes and theologians throughout the history of the church. The task of theology, if we assume that the biblical texts do cohere and present a consistent set of teachings regarding God, the world, sin, Christ, etc., cannot be restricted to a biblical-historical investigation of what Paul, a first century Jew and Christian, for example, communicates to us by means of the story he inherited and reinterpreted.

Another way of making this point would be to note that there is something fundamentally “biblicistic” about Wright’s method. Wright’s reading of Romans 5:12-21 largely ignores, as we have seen, the usual questions and answers of historic Christian theology. In the name of biblical theology, Wright frequently caricatures the concerns of systematic theology as being “abstract” and “de-historicizing.” He is also very critical of any interpretation of the biblical text that approaches it from the standpoint of the history of Christian doctrine, and the implications—inferentially, deductively, inductively, or adductively—of the biblical texts that are in view. Perhaps Wright thinks it is possible to leave aside the questions that theology has historically addressed in the context of reading a passage like Romans 5:12-21. But, unless one stays within the guild of biblical scholars who are primarily interested in what Paul expresses in his retelling of the narrative he inherited from his Jewish past, it does not seem that his handling of the text goes far enough. Christian theology, at least in its usual historical practice, asks questions that move from the text to its implications for an

articulate and coherent statement of Christian teaching. A passage like Romans 5:12-21 naturally prompts a treatment of a variety of topics that express, in a categorical and universal form, what is to be believed by all regarding such themes as the creation of Adam and Eve in God's image; the obligations of the creature to serve the Creator in accord with the norms of God's righteous law; the universal sway of sin and death on account of the one act of Adam; the inability of the law of Moses, which in its peculiar historical form reiterated the righteous obligations of God's image-bearers to their Creator and Redeemer, to provide for the justification and life of its recipients; the obedience of Christ, the second Adam, that is the sole basis for the justification of believers to whom it is granted as a free gift, etc. The limitations and inadequacies of Wright's interpretation of Romans 5:12-21 are the direct result of deficiencies in his theological method, particularly the relation between biblical and systematic theology.<sup>54</sup>

### Conclusion

In our treatment of Wright's interpretation of Romans 5:12-21, particularly in terms of its significance for the way he understands Paul's doctrine of justification, we have seen that Wright's view is considerably at odds with traditional Reformed theology. Though we have not attempted anything like a comprehensive study of Wright's contribution to the new perspectives on Paul, we have argued that his interpretation of Romans 5:12-21 constitutes an important testimony to his approach and theological method.

In our view, Wright's claims regarding Romans 5:12-21 and its relationship to the doctrine of justification do less justice to this passage than the traditional view. Though Wright wants to view the "righteousness of God" in Paul's epistle to the Romans as God's

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<sup>54</sup> For two helpful discussions of the relation between biblical and systematic theology, one an older, the other a more recent contribution, see D. A. Carson, "Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: The Possibility of Systematic Theology," in *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), pp. 65-95; and David VanDrunen, "A System of Theology? The Centrality of Covenant for Westminster Systematics," in *The Pattern of Sound Doctrine: Systematic Theology at the Westminster Seminaries*, ed; David VanDrunen (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2004), pp. 195-220.

covenant faithfulness, he neglects to give proper due to the specific manner in which Paul emphasizes God's just vindication of his holy law. The righteousness of God that is revealed in the gospel includes the elements of God's maintenance of the requirements of his law for all human beings, and the consequence in the way of condemnation and death upon all who have transgressed the law of God in Adam. The most disappointing feature of Wright's treatment of Romans 5:12-21 is his failure to do justice to the force of Paul's comparison or analogy between Adam and Christ as the respective covenant heads or representatives of two distinct humanities, the old and the new. We have argued that the older, Reformation tradition of exegesis not only properly insists upon the full historical character of the trespass of the one man, Adam, in which all human beings participate by virtue of God's ordinance, but also offers a more exegetically credible account of the judicial implications of Adam's disobedience for the imputation of guilt to his posterity. Similarly, the older view, which has usually been articulated in terms of a doctrine of a prelapsarian covenant of works and a postlapsarian covenant of grace, better accounts for the way Paul understands the connection between Christ's obedience and the way believers are constituted righteous and become heirs of life in communion with God. Contrary to Wright's redefinition of justification as identity language, which declares Jews and Gentiles alike to be members of God's covenant people, Paul assumes an understanding of justification that explains how otherwise guilty human beings can be restored to right standing before God. In this connection, Paul, though he does not expressly use the language of "imputation" in this passage, clearly teaches that believers are granted the free gift of righteousness in Christ in order that they may rightly be received into favor with God. Romans 5:12-21 provides a clear testimony to the Reformed view of justification as a soteriological as well as an ecclesiological theme in Paul's writings. It also confirms the theological appropriateness, even necessity, of the idea of imputation. Adam's sin is attributed or imputed to his posterity, just as Christ's obedience is attributed or imputed to believers. Imputation is not a kind of theological addendum to Paul's argument in Romans 5:12-21, but a necessary implication of the basic argument of this passage.

Before contemporary Reformed theologians embrace Wright's doctrine of justification over the view articulated in the confessions of the Reformed churches, they need to evaluate critically his

exegetical and theological method, which is illustrated by his handling of a passage like Romans 5:12-21. More is at stake than simply the exegesis of this passage and others. Wright's interpretation of this passage reflects as much his theological methodology as it does the straightforward findings of exegesis. This theological method is one that proscribes the kinds of theological questions that inevitably arise out of a consideration of a passage like Romans 5:12-21.