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Justification in Perspective: Historical Developments and Contemporary Challenges.
Edited by Bruce L. McCormack. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006, 277 pp., \$24.99 paper.

This work is a collection of papers that were presented at the Edinburgh Dogmatics Conference in the summer of 2003. They have been edited and revised to varying degrees in order to be made available to a wider readership. As the editor states in the preface, no effort was made toward a uniformity of viewpoint on the issues raised, and the result is an immensely helpful and sane treatment of the historical, theological, and biblical issues involved in current discussions of Paul and justification. As is well-known among the readership of this journal, discussions of justification by faith and the so-called “new perspective on Paul” have dominated evangelical theological discourse for at least the last decade, following on from wider scholarly debates in the wake of E. P. Sanders’s work on Judaism. This extended discussion has drawn out the best and worst of evangelical behavior. Some have initiated fresh dialogue and scholarly inquiry, unearthing complex discussions in Paul’s letters along with discovering the rich variety of Pauline scholarship from the past. Others, sadly, have resorted to familiar fundamentalist strategies in efforts to appear relevant or to shore up support among constituencies. For these, the temptation to lay claim to the high ground of orthodoxy through the demonization of others with the harsh rhetoric of glib denunciation has proved too delicious to resist. With all of this in view, what is needed is a vigorous engagement with the actual issues involved in the discussion that is both penetrating and gracious, embodying the very best of evangelical scholarship.

This volume represents a mature work designed to bring clarity to the various debates. McCormack begins the volume with an introduction, which is followed by the conference sermon by Mark Bonnington. Following on from this are two major sections, covering historical discussions of justification by faith, and the contemporary challenges that have arisen. No review, very obviously, could do justice to the entire volume and each contribution, so we will focus on some major highlights.

McCormack, in his introduction, does well to commend Rutherford House, and its outgoing chairman David Searle, for hosting this conference. It is in the truest Reformed spirit to be always reforming, always seeking fresh light from Scripture to inform theological and ecclesiastical debates. The conference was a true embodiment of this spirit as the issues were engaged joyfully and vigorously. Tragically, as McCormack notes, this spirit has not characterized the discussions that surround the issue of justification by faith among those who consider themselves Reformed and/or evangelical. This hardly needs to be substantiated for anyone paying close attention to the debates within the Presbyterian Church in America, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, and among various evangelical communions. Many who have raised questions concerning doctrinal formulations of the past have done so from a desire to be faithful to Scripture, yet they have been demonized as “‘liberal’ Christians or ecumenists with Catholic and/or Orthodox leanings” (p. 8). McCormack is right to call for cautious dialogue as it is the glory of evangelicalism to test all things by Scripture rather than to blindly appeal to past formulations (pp. 8-9).

Nick Needham’s chapter on justification in the church fathers initiates the section covering historical developments. He demonstrates that the range of discussions in the

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fathers exhibits the same flexibility with regard to the usage of righteousness language that is found in Scripture, which accounts for the wide appeal to the fathers by both Roman Catholic and Protestant theological trajectories (pp. 25-26). Most prominent is the use of such language to refer to forensic justification: “a not-guilty verdict, an acquittal, a declaration of righteousness, a non-imputation of sin, an imputation of righteousness” (p. 36). An exception to this is Clement of Alexandria, who, in addition to forensic language, will often utilize justification language to refer to what is typically called “sanctification” in modern doctrinal discussions (p. 37).

There is a very prominent strand in the early fathers denying that initial faith is satisfactory for justification if it is not accompanied by a life of perseverance in good works. Statements in the fathers can be quite bold in this regard, being especially striking to Protestants, who have been trained to protect the pristine character of formulations of justification by faith *alone*. Needham cites Jerome in this regard:

It is of course inquired from this place, if faith alone is sufficient for a Christian: and whether he is not cursed who despises the precepts of the gospel. But faith is effective for this, that it justifies those who approach God in their initial believing, if afterwards they remain in justification: however, without works of faith (not works of law) faith is dead. For he who does not believe the commands, and those who despise the precepts of the gospel, are alike cursed, as the Savior teaches (p. 43).

Needham rightly relates this to Turretin’s reminder that what is being emphasized here is that while justification is by faith alone, the faith that justifies is never alone in that it will also produce good works in the life of the believer (p. 43). Needham continues in the remainder of the chapter to point out how often the fathers complement such strong statements with equally solid formulations guarding against any notion of human merit attached to justification.

David Wright’s chapter on Augustine demonstrates that he wrestled with many of the very same tensions with regard to justification language. Though he is often misread by many who seek to mine his writings for use in contemporary debates, Wright shows that Augustine was quite faithful to the biblical use of righteousness/justification terminology and nowhere sought to provide a systematic treatment. He seems to recognize both forensic and transformative aspects of the terminology in Scripture, and does not prioritize one over the other. For Augustine, justification is something that is “already” accomplished, a status that is presently enjoyed by believers, but is “not yet” fully their possession. “*Justificatio* is suggestively portrayed as the spirit’s anticipation here and now of the future resurrection of the body” (p. 62).

Wright goes on to note that Augustine anticipates other developments of the so-called “new perspective,” such as the ethnic component in Paul’s discussion of justification. While Augustine is faithful to the various contexts in which justification language appears, which may account for the variety of Christian traditions that appeal to him as fountainhead, he is always anxious to demonstrate the priority of divine grace and the absence of merit when it comes to justification.

Subsequent chapters on justification in pivotal historical figures demonstrate much the same struggle to capture rightly the various notions emphasized by

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righteousness language in Scripture, and at the same time to synthesize this data theologically.

One of the highlights of the volume is Andrew McGowan's chapter on justification and the *ordo salutis* (order of salvation). It is the shortest chapter in the book, but touches quite helpfully on one of the most controversial elements of current discussions related to "the new perspective on Paul," which is that concerning the nature of imputation and its relationship to justification and the *ordo salutis*. The *ordo* is a post-Reformation development, resulting largely from the effort to relate faith and works systematically and logically. It does not appear in the writings of ecclesiastical figures that predate the Reformation, but was developed on the Continent by Theodore Beza and in England by William Perkins (p. 150).

McGowan notes that in Reformed thought, justification "was defined in forensic terms as the remission of sin and the imputation of righteousness, all of which in later Reformed theology was set in the context of a federal structure including a covenant of redemption, a covenant of works, and a covenant of grace" (p. 153). The Westminster Confession, of course, articulates this in accordance with the active and passive obedience of Christ (ch. 11, sec. 1). According to McGowan, John Owen attempted to strengthen the statement of the Confession on imputation in the Savoy Declaration. The Confession's statement on imputation reads: "but by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them, they receiving and resting on him and his righteousness by faith..." The more explicit statement on imputation reads as follows from the Declaration: "but by imputing Christ's active obedience to the whole law, and passive obedience in his death for their whole and sole righteousness, they receiving and resting on him and his righteousness by faith..." This alteration did not find wide acceptance among Reformed scholars, since it was viewed as an over-precise formulation (p. 154), going beyond what Calvin would have affirmed. This is particularly instructive for debates currently up and running over the imputation of Christ's active and passive obedience in the PCA and OPC communions, among which are many who want to elevate imputation to a position that the tradition already had seen fit to deny to it.

McGowan's discussion on the place of union with Christ and its relationship to imputation and justification makes an excellent contribution to current controversies among these Reformed communions, though it will also be highly instructive for evangelicals. McGowan notes the centrality of union with Christ for Reformed theologians, going back to Luther and Calvin.

McGowan then discusses how the notion of union with Christ has been utilized in two Reformed trajectories; among Barthian scholars and the tradition represented by Westminster Theological Seminary. Among broader Reformed scholars, Barth and others emphasized that union with Christ obviates the need for an *ordo salutis*. Further, a focus on union with Christ ought to lead to reflection upon soteriology from the perspective of Christ, and not from the perspective of "benefits" received. That is, theology ought to be primarily Christological and not anthropological.

The Westminster tradition has focused on union with Christ, but has not solved the tension involved in holding also to forensic categories. McGowan suggests that this is a tension that was noted by the great Westminster theologian John Murray, along with Norman Shepherd. The resulting difficulties have not yet been thoroughly worked out, as

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is obvious, and as we have noted above, in the many rather unpleasant controversies that have erupted over imputation in the PCA and OPC.

The cash value of this discussion for evangelicals—almost all of whom do not explicitly submit to any of the great Reformed confessions of faith, such as the Westminster Confession—is a recognition of the priority of union with Christ for thinking soteriologically. Union with Christ has always been at the very heart of Reformed soteriology, reflecting its place in NT theology, and the notion of the imputation of Christ's righteousness is necessary only if a covenant of works is affirmed as part of a soteriological system, as many Reformed theologians have recognized. Those evangelicals who depend upon the Reformed tradition(s) in order to articulate a coherent soteriology must recognize that if one does not affirm a covenant of works (and not even all Reformed thinkers affirm such), then there is no need to include imputation along with union with Christ. The inclusion of imputation leads to nothing other than a bevy of systemic problems, not least of which is the prospect of antinomianism, long recognized in Reformed theological discussions.

One of the highlights of the Edinburgh conference in 2003 was the debate between N. T. Wright and Simon Gathercole over the "new perspective." This was carried out in a room with about 60-70 people and was fairly direct and animated, but also very collegial. It is slightly disappointing that the spirit of that interchange isn't captured so well in the subsequent edited contributions to the volume, but these closing chapters go quite some ways toward demonstrating what is in play in the current debates.

Gathercole covers several basics of justification in Paul before turning to critique some "new perspective" writers in their own formulations of this issue in Paul. He does well to place rightly the notion of the imputation of Christ's righteousness (pp. 222-23). As an exegete, Gathercole is aware of how slim is the evidence in the New Testament speaking of the transfer of Christ's righteousness to believers. Very simply, there is no mention that it is specifically Christ's righteousness that is the possession of Christians, and it is never spoken of as being "transferred" to believers. While Gathercole does not reject this formulation, and while it very well may be an acceptable way of construing how believers come to possess righteousness, Paul stresses God's reckoning believers as righteous based on their having been united to Christ by the Spirit. That is, for Paul, believers become the very righteousness of God by virtue of being "in Christ" (2 Cor 5:21).

Regarding the contentious phrase "the righteousness of God," Gathercole views this as involving something more than merely an attribute of God—"God's own righteousness." There is something active going on, especially when one considers texts in Romans such as 3:25-26, where God is "just and the justifier," along with 10:3 (p. 223). The activity of God in such passages, however, for Gathercole, is God's reckoning righteousness to believers, rather than, as Martyn and others, such as Leander Keck, have argued, God's rectification of creation in Christ—God's program of conquering and defeating sin to set the world right and restore the created order for the glory of God's name. Gathercole does attempt to expand the sense of justification language to include items such as forgiveness of wrongs, covering sins, and not reckoning sin, but it seems that he has narrowed the cosmic scope of justification language to merely the personal, perhaps failing to heed the warning of Barth, mentioned by McGowan, of conceiving of justification anthropologically rather than Christologically.

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Gathercole again deals with the sense of justification on pp. 225-29, and he attempts to navigate a sort of middle way through the extreme alternatives of a merely declarative sense of justification and justification as moral transformation. After quoting Cranfield on the several senses of justification, Gathercole states that he does not want to be seen as articulating a Roman Catholic view that comes close to an infusion of righteousness. But he also wants to avoid shrinking justification in Romans down to a merely forensic concept, since there does seem to be some sense in which justification is transformative in Paul, or at least ontologically determinative. This is set over against a quote from N. T. Wright who supposedly has a minimalistic view of justification, proven by Gathercole's citation of Wright as claiming that justification is merely the recognition of who is in the covenant. This is a bit puzzling, however, since throughout his writings Wright has stressed the effective or transformative aspects of justification, noting that righteousness language in Paul has to do with God setting right all of creation. For Wright, however, the scope of God's transformative work is cosmic, whereas for Gathercole, it is personal or individualistic. Gathercole is right to note that Wright has a very covenantal vision of justification in general, and this may indeed be problematic, but it simply isn't fair to claim that Wright does not adequately account for Paul's transformative aspects of justification.

Several comments must be made here. In a number of ways, the complexities and tensions involved in this broader discussion come to a head at precisely this point. First, tension arises here because of the different approaches of systematic theology and biblical exegesis. As Gathercole notes, Paul uses justification language in a variety of ways in his letters, covering both a forensic sense and a transformative sense. The gulf between systematics and biblical theology lies at the heart of so many of the issues in play today since evangelical theology in general is far more comfortable with the clear categorization of theological concepts inherent in systematic theology than with the subtleties of biblical theology. Rather than recognizing, along with Luther and Calvin, that Paul utilizes both transformative and forensic imagery and language, and both a cosmic and individual scope of vision, some demand an "either/or" answer to these questions, bracketing out the complexity of Paul's language, ignoring the categories he supplies to the discussion for ones supplied by the demands of contemporary doctrinal debates.

Second, Gathercole wants to be understood at this point, and it is only right that all who read him work hard to grasp precisely what he is and isn't saying. But this is where it seems appropriate to ask whether he has treated Wright fairly, or if he has failed to understand Wright for what he is and isn't saying. Quite frankly, it is difficult to see where Gathercole differs from Wright when the two chapters are set side by side, but Gathercole manages both to criticize Wright and then to articulate a view of Paul's thought that seems it could be coming from Wright's own pen! While Gathercole is hardly the most egregious example of an unfair dialogue partner, one begins to wonder if critics of the "new perspective" are trolling through Wright's many works in search of any phrase or sentence they don't like in hopes of highlighting something with which to disagree in the name of defending orthodoxy.

Third, and briefly, readers of Gathercole's essay who are inclined to be critical of Wright and others for their emphasis on the eschatological component of justification will need to consider that the same notes are sounded by Gathercole. Frankly, this is true also

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of nearly all Pauline scholars who are honest with the texts of Paul's letters. Since this is the case, the "already/not yet" dimensions of justification in Paul ought to be taken off the table as a "new perspective" issue, since it is one thing upon which nearly all NT scholars agree.

Overall, these essays demonstrate at least two major points with regard to significant issues in play in current debates. First, theologians from the earliest centuries of Christian history have recognized the multifaceted nature of Paul's righteousness language, covering both individual and cosmic components, both present and future aspects (the "already/not yet"), and the forensic and transformative/effective elements. Those who are currently clamoring for action that marginalizes or brackets out other scholars who recognize aspects of Paul's thought that have been relatively neglected over the last generation or two of evangelical theology do not realize how their efforts both betray their Christian theological heritage and treat Scripture with a great lack of respect.

Second, while Reformed articulations of justification typically involve some account of the imputation of Christ's righteousness, this notion is only necessary where there is a prior commitment to a federal or covenantal framework of theology. Further, the notion of imputation is not without problems and very well may be dispensable given the absolute priority of union with Christ in Reformed theology since Luther and Calvin. If it is the case that even in Reformed circles there are discussions that union with Christ obviates any need for imputation, surely in broader evangelical theological circles where there is no prior commitment to a covenantal framework the demand for a critical analysis of imputation ought not to be heard as a threat to orthodoxy.

This volume of essays is an excellent contribution to the discussions of justification by faith and the "new perspective" on Paul currently up and running in evangelical circles. Its historical and theological discussions provide a rich array of perspectives that have been sorely lacking to this point. It is the hope of many that the increased clarity and sense of historical proportion will be accompanied by a renewed commitment to Christian charity in theological discussion. If this hope goes unrealized, the blame for such a tragedy can in no way be put to the account of McCormack and the contributors to this volume.

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