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## *Wesleyan Soteriology and the New Perspective of Paul: A Comparative Analysis*

### **Abstract:**

This essay offers a comparative analysis of Wesleyan soteriology and Pauline soteriology as interpreted by the New Perspective of Paul (NPP). The analysis unfolds against the backdrop of Wesley's and the NPP's mutual criticism of the reformed tradition's configuration of the forensic metaphor for justification at the center of biblical soteriology. The opening section surveys the various aspects of Wesley's and the NPP's criticism of reformed soteriology, namely, that the overemphasis on forensic justification leads to interpretive conclusions incongruent with an integrated biblical soteriology (i.e., a doctrine of salvation that is informed by the entire Christian canon) and particularly negligent of other biblical metaphors for salvation. The second section surveys key interpretive conclusions of the NPP for its reading of Pauline soteriology. The third section explores various commonalities and differences between Wesleyan soteriology and the NPP. The fourth and final section is a concluding summary of content discussed.

**Keywords:** New Perspective of Paul, soteriology, John Wesley, Kingdom of God, ecclesiology

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## Wesley, The New Perspective of Paul, and the Reformed Tradition

In his book *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace*, Kenneth J. Collins posits that Wesley was not a systematic theologian, nor a historian. Wesley was a practitioner. Collins writes:

...current scholarship suggests that Wesley's practical divinity is clearly a viable way of doing theology in its orientation to the mission of the church, in its attentiveness to the realization of scriptural truth, and in its service to the poor. And so when Outler made the claim many years ago that Wesley was "the most important Anglican theologian in his century," we must not mistake this claim for the assertion that Wesley was a systematic theologian or that he had attempted to synthesize all human knowledge and to demonstrate its unity in Christ in a thoroughgoing way. On the contrary, Wesley's practical divinity, fleshed out in a very Anglican way in sermons, liturgy, prayers, creeds, occasional pieces, journals, and letters had a decidedly soteriological, rather than epistemological, orientation (Collins 2007: 3).

This apt characterization of Wesley as first and foremost a *practical theologian* in no way diminishes the tremendous influence Wesley has had on systematic theologians and more broadly speaking evangelicalism since his time. To this day Wesleyan soteriology stands firm as one of the most consequential polemical partners of reformed theology that characterizes much of contemporary mainstream Protestant evangelicalism. Painting with a broad brush, Wesley developed a soteriology with the risen-ness of Christ—rather than the fallenness of man—at its center. This was a direct result of Wesley's holy love hermeneutical axis for reading NT soteriology.

As is to be expected, Wesley is not alone in his critique of reformed soteriology. In more recent years the movement broadly known as the "New Perspective of Paul" (NPP), or "New Perspectivism", has joined the likes of Wesley in his criticism of reformed soteriology. Affirming Wesley and the NPP's common ground, Michael Bird writes,

The NPP also presents a palpable attempt to better understand the relationship between righteousness and obedience in Paul's letters. By stressing the forensic nature of justification, reformed theology has always had a propensity to bruise the nerve that connects faith with obedience. Catholic and Wesleyan objections to

a strictly forensic definition of justification as fostering antinomianism are legitimate (Bird, 2007: 110).

Even with Wesley's and the NPP's mutual concern for reformed soteriology's biblical in-congruency along with a lack of resonance with the normative Christian experience, the NPP's criticism of reformed soteriology goes well beyond Wesley's concerns for an antinomian proclivity. The NPP claims that the reformed interpretation of Paul reads too much of the sixteenth century European Roman Catholic context into Paul rather than interpreting Paul on his own terms as a first century Mediterranean Jew. In doing such, the reformed tradition, argues the NPP, misses much of what Paul is saying by reading the Pauline corpus within the too-narrow framework of the forensic metaphor.

Broadly speaking, the NPP contends that Paul is not battling works righteousness as much as he is making a case for Gentile inclusion in the Abrahamic family by way of faith in Jesus (more on this below). Soteriology for first century Judaism was not spinning on the axis of works righteousness, but covenantal nomism directly linked to a long-awaited historical-political redemption (a second exodus, this time from exile). This means that covenant-family members are saved by grace but maintain their status as covenant people by way of obedience to the Torah.<sup>1</sup>

While this will be explored in greater detail below, let it be noted here that the NPP argues this more nuanced reading of first century Judaic covenantal nomism has far-reaching implications for understanding Paul and his doctrine of justification. This alleged misstep in the reformed reading of Paul's historical and cultural context results in a considerable lack of explanatory power in substantial segments of the Pauline corpus (as well as for the rest of the Christian canon) and more broadly speaking the gospel itself.

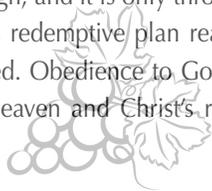
In response to criticism, the reformed tradition posits their concern that Wesley and the NPP threaten the integrity of the theological underpinnings of the corrective theology of the Reformation by putting up sign posts that lead back to Rome and synergistic works righteousness that come with it. Any teaching resembling works righteousness, argues the reformed tradition, is by nature pro-Rome, anti-Reformation, and likely an anathema. For the reformed tradition, any challenge to the reformers is a challenge to the sacred tradition itself. N. T. Wright highlights the rather obvious irony of this line of argumentation:

There is a considerable irony, at the level of method, when John Piper suggests that, according to me, the church has been ‘on the wrong foot for fifteen hundred years’. It isn’t so much that I don’t actually claim that. It is that that is exactly what people said to his heroes, to Luther, Calvin and the rest. Luther and Calvin answered from scripture; the Council of Trent responded by insisting on tradition (Wright 2009: 6–7).

While both Wesley and the NPP put pressure on certain aspects of the reformed reading of Pauline soteriology, they do it with very different orienting aims and methodological frameworks. The NPP, mostly made up of historians and Bible scholars, argues first and foremost from history and the scriptures. The NPP is concerned with “reading the New Testament with first-century eyes” (2009: 21). Wesley, on the other hand, was driven by missional and ministerial concerns as a *practical and missional theologian*. So, what else does Wesley and the NPP have in common? How are they complimentary? How are they different? More specifically still, what do the interpretive results of the NPP’s reading of Paul bring to bear on Wesleyan soteriology and vice versa? In order to answer these questions, we will first go into greater detail on the NPP and its interpretive results.

### **The New Perspective and Its Interpretive Conclusions**

1. *Integration of Old Testament theology.* In support of the claim for covenantal nomism the NPP aims to follow the lead of the New Testament authors’ thinking about salvation in terms of the *Old Testament theological heritage as deliverance from captivity* (first Egyptian captivity, then exile, and universally the tyrannical reign of sin resulting directly from idolatry). This means that the primary emphasis is on the role of the *covenant* and actual moral transformation in salvation (because of covenant being law-oriented) rather than an emphasis on escape from final wrath and judgment. Just as in the Old Testament, the covenant is the means through which God’s plan for redemption manifests in the world. It is only the covenant people of God who live under Yahweh’s reign, and it is only through the covenant and the covenant people that God’s redemptive plan reaches into the world and the new creation is launched. Obedience to God’s covenant code means bringing the Kingdom of Heaven and Christ’s reign back into the (new) creation.



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2. *Ecclesiology: the collective versus the individual.* Once the covenant dimension is properly in place, emphasis on salvation of the individual shifts away from the individual to the collective (elect) people of God. Redemption, argues the NPP, is not as much about the sin crisis of the individual as it is about the tyrannical reign of sin within the creation that manifests as a result of the proclivity of the human heart for idolatry. When configured this way, redemption becomes much more about God fulfilling his promises and filling the creation once again with his glory by way of his image bearers than it is about individuals escaping eternal damnation.

3. *Salvation's eschatological frame.* This shift of emphasis away from the individual to the collective all unfolds within an eschatological framework with the specific aim to move Western Christianity's eschatology out of its reformed platonic underpinnings. N. T. Wright writes,

Election was closely bound up with eschatology: because Israel was the one people of the one creator God, this God would soon act to vindicate Israel by liberating it from its enemies. Different writers drew the conclusion in different ways. Some documents, like the *Psalms of Solomon*, envisaged a fulfilment of Psalm 2, with Israel under its Messiah smashing the Gentiles to pieces with a rod of iron. Others, not least some of the rabbis in the Hillelite tradition, envisaged a redemption which, once it had happened to Israel, would then spread to the nations as well. Both of these represent natural developments of the doctrine of election itself, the point being that because Israel was the chosen people of the one creator God, when God did for Israel what God was going to do for Israel—however that was conceived—then the Gentiles would be brought into the picture, whether in judgment or blessing or (somehow) both. One way or another, God's purpose in election, to root evil out of the world and to do so through Israel, would be fulfilled (Wright 2005: 110).

The NPP emphasizes Paul's conceptualization of time being divided into two eras: (1) the age of the flesh (or, "present evil age" (Gal. 1:4)) and (2) the age of the spirit. The former being characterized by the oppressive reign of Gentiles and sin over the covenant people, and the latter with freedom from such oppression via the righteous reign of King Jesus who is the creation's divine image bearer, in the kingdom that is the new creation (that is unfolding gradually through time). This emphasis for

the NPP means that the primary message of the cross, rather than being *simply* atonement, is *rebellion against the rulers and authorities of the old age so as to overthrow the tyrannical reign in order to launch the messianic kingdom that God had promised.*<sup>2</sup>

4. *Emphasis on the political dimension of salvation.* The NPP, in step with the controlling narrative of the Old and New Testaments, makes the political metaphor for salvation central and dominant. Bringing the political metaphor front-and-center likewise results in the accentuation of the following features of salvation:

a. *Emphasis on kingdom.* The NPP recalibrates the interpretive lens to the central role of the Kingdom of God in the Gospel narratives and to the messianic events (cross, resurrection, and Pentecost) collectively as the climatic redemptive event of scripture. Once again, the concept of kingdom, something that Jesus and the Gospel are much more concerned about than atonement, does not receive due emphasis in the reformed tradition. More than any other motif, the kingship and messianic identity of Jesus is placed at the center of the message of the four Gospels.

b. *Emphasis on the messianic office of king.* By thinking in terms of the covenant people of God and the role of the messianic king in leading and redeeming his people, the Israel piece falls naturally into place. The Messiah is the fulfillment of the righteousness of God to Israel (and David in particular) and to the world *through* Israel. This configuration harmonizes much better with the OT's emphasis on the Davidic messianic promise that becomes an essential element especially in the Psalter.<sup>3</sup>

c. *Integration of kingdom and new creation.* New Perspective of Paul proponent N. T. Wright in particular makes the link between the kingdom metaphor and the new creation. He writes,

When human beings come to believe this gospel they are precisely the first-fruits of redeemed creation; the phrase is that of James (1:18), but on this occasion at least the sentiment tallies exactly with that of Paul. Abraham and his seed are indeed to inherit the world, but Abraham's family has been redefined around Jesus as Israel's Messiah.

This hint of creation renewed through covenant renewal bursts out at the end of Romans 11, where Paul echoes some of the Old Testament's grandest celebrations of God as the wise, inscrutable creator [..]. By coming

to a fresh understanding of God's faithful covenant justice, displayed in the story of Israel reshaped around Jesus the Messiah, Paul has arrived back at a primal, characteristically Jewish, praise of God the creator (Wright 2005: 33).

Wright draws together the themes of election, covenant, kingdom and new creation, all by way of Jesus as the Messiah. For Paul, argues Wright, all of the metaphors coalesce and flow in-and-out of one another to constitute the bigger picture. This is distinct from the reformed practice of hinging everything on forensic justification, which for the NPP is a much smaller piece within the bigger picture.

With these interpretive conclusions in place, we can turn to mapping Wesleyan soteriology against Pauline soteriology as interpreted by the NPP. Before jumping right into the comparative analysis, however, two last comments need to be made.

First, comparing Wesley and the NPP, in many ways, is like comparing apples to oranges, because—as mentioned above—each have different orienting aims and methodologies. Wesley, on the one hand, expresses *his* theology as a practical theologian in the Anglican tradition. The NPP, on the other hand, aims to describe *Paul's* theology (and how Paul's theology integrates with soteriology across the Christian canon). In light of this, it could at times seem like one is comparing Wesleyan soteriology with *biblical* soteriology, thereby implying that where Wesley differs from the NPP, he thereby must likewise differ with the scriptures themselves. I believe this is sometimes the case, but certainly is not always the case. It could also be that on certain points Wesley is closer to Paul than the NPP. It could also be that both are wrong about what Paul is saying about salvation and the reformed tradition was correct to begin with. So, for the sake of clarification on this particular point, the aim here is not to discuss which are more faithful readings of Paul and more broadly speaking the scriptures themselves, but simply to compare the respective soteriology of each.

Second, let it be noted that this comparative analysis is by no means exhaustive. Being mindful of this, I have done my best to be concise, yet selective in my choice of areas of comparison within a scope that is appropriate for an essay of this length. This being said, the analysis here limits its comparison between Wesley and the NPP to following points: (1) eschatology (and its impact on Pauline soteriology), (2) ecclesiology, (3)

(monergistic) imputed righteousness, (4) justification, (5) sanctification, (6) the image of God, and (7) glorification and pneumatology.

### **Wesley and the NPP: A Comparative Analysis**

1. *Eschatology and its impact on Pauline soteriology.* Aptly summarizing the broader strokes of Pauline eschatology as interpreted by the NPP, Michael Bird writes,

Paul formerly believed as a Pharisee that God would resurrect all humans at the end of history and vindicate those who had remained faithful to the covenant. Instead, God had raised up one man in the middle of history and vindicated him. Which is why Christ is the one through whom ‘the end of ages has come’ (1 Cor. 10:11), as his resurrection and the bequeathing of the Spirit mark the partial arrival of the future age in the here and now. This is confirmed by his remarks that Christ is the first fruits (1 Cor. 15:20, 23) or firstborn (Rom. 8:29; Col. 1:15, 18) of the new creation, and the Spirit is the deposit of the new age yet to come in its fullness (2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5; Eph. 1:13–14). (Bird 2008: 36)

This eschatological frame for Paul’s soteriology, argues the NPP, is indispensable and must be the starting point for considering Paul’s soteriology. In fact, it is the axis on which Paul’s theology turns. This means that Paul interpreted the culmination of the covenant in Jesus in light of the ongoing metanarrative that begins in Genesis and continues on through the full establishment of the Kingdom of Heaven in the *parousia*. The significance of this is that every aspect of the gospel for Paul is an extension of God’s work and promises in history that began with Israel and ends in the new creation (thereby demonstrating God’s faithfulness to Israel and the creation itself). The death and resurrection of Jesus was, for Paul, above all else the beginning of the new age of God’s re-inaugurated righteous reign through his co-regent and image bearer and the launching of the new creation. Salvation, then, was liberation (escape) not *simply* from the guilt and power of sin in the lives of individuals, but a movement that embodied deliverance from the cosmic-wide tyrannical reign of the evil age of the flesh.

At the most basic level the gospel is power to liberate—to cleanse from sin guilt and to neutralize the power of sin—for both Wesley and the NPP. Wesley—with the reformed tradition—however, does not take this further step of framing salvation eschatologically this way nor of placing

the emphasis on the historical-political deliverance-from-exile component of salvation. The question is, what happens when the eschatological framework for thinking about sanctification is not properly in place? What damage is done if we lift salvation out of the context of Pauline eschatology?

First, and most important, missing this framework means the loss of the dominance of the political metaphor for salvation that is the primary metaphor creating cohesion across the entire Christian canon.<sup>4</sup> In other words, neglecting the political dimension of salvation means missing the Kingdom (combined with covenant) as the *dominant* metaphor for salvation holding the metanarrative together. At the very least, losing the dominance of the political metaphor means losing sight of Paul's view (and the Gospel writers' view) of the story. With the eschatological frame in place, however, the *political and covenantal aspects* of salvation rise to the top thereby displacing atonement theology as the central axis for biblical soteriology.

More specifically still, with the proper eschatological frame in place, one can land on a bit of a different reading of the relationship between justification and sanctification. Yes, justification is the forgiveness of sins. Justification is manifest both now and at the final judgment. Sanctification as the actual conforming of the heart of the believer to the image of Jesus is evidence of who in the future will be vindicated in final judgment. Yes, sanctification is impartation (Wesley), but taking this further still, sanctification is the mark of Christ's reign in the new age of the Spirit that is manifest in his covenant people, both Jew and Gentile (NPP). It is precisely here, within the dominant political metaphor and the proper eschatological frame that sanctification and *ecclesiology* find their strongest point of connection.

2. *Ecclesiology: corporate vs. individual salvation.* One of the greatest disparities between the NPP and Wesley is Wesley's emphasis on individual salvation. This is not surprising. Once again, the *political* metaphor for salvation (i.e., salvation means becoming a citizen in the Kingdom) lends itself more to the collective aspect of salvation than the forensic metaphor (i.e., forgiveness of sins of the individual). For the NPP, salvation is not nearly as much about how individuals make it to heaven as it is about re-establishing the reign of God in the creation through his co-regent who reigns over the creation and the *people of God*.

3. *Imputed righteousness.* The NPP is notorious in its criticism of the reformed doctrine of monergistic imputed righteousness and NPP sympathizers have drawn much criticism as a result.<sup>5</sup> Wright in particular

contends that the Reformed view of imputation is unbiblical and that the internal logic of the metaphor imagining that the judge both declares the accused innocent *and also* bestows his own righteousness upon the accused is unsound. Michael Bird summarizes Wright's position with this:

N. T. Wright advocates that justification is juridical (in a Jewish sense), covenantal and eschatological. Furthermore it is not about getting in but telling who is in. Thus justification is more about ecclesiology than soteriology (bearing in mind that Wright does think that justification confers a positive status of "righteous" on the believer). According to Wright it makes little sense to say that God, "like a judge, imputes, imparts, bequeaths, conveys or otherwise transfers his righteousness to either the plaintiff or the defendant." (Bird 2007: 66)

Dunn adds to this by arguing that the implications of the doctrine of imputed righteousness fail to harmonize with much of Paul's teaching about final judgment (Rom. 2:6–11; 2:13; 11:19–22; 14:10–12; 1 Cor. 3:8, 14; 9:24–25; 2 Cor. 5:10; Gal 6:8; Col. 3:24–25; Phil. 2:12–13; 2 Tim. 4:8). Dunn writes,

Could Paul ever have agreed that to live as a Christian requires no effort or self-discipline, no hard work, from the individual Christian? And if he expected such, would it not follow that he fully expected that such effort, such work would be among the works to be judged on the day of the Lord? (Dunn 2013: 134–135)

Dunn highlights here the awkward gap in reformed soteriology and Paul's clear teaching on synergistic obedience. Accentuating the awkwardness is that few within the reformed tradition would affirm that the Christian life requires no effort or self-discipline. On this particular dynamic Dunn comments that inherent to imputation is "a danger of subtly magicking away what for Paul was an important emphasis" (Dunn 2013: 134). Dunn says,

Paul's ethical teaching consistently assumes that his readers were responsible people, who should be making effort—enabled by God's Spirit, of course—but nevertheless having the responsibility to walk by the Spirit, to be led by the Spirit, with the express corollary that failure to do so would have severe and possibly damning consequences. (Dunn 2013: 134–135)

But what about Wesley and imputation? It is well known that Wesley, like the NPP, drew criticism for allegedly denying imputation based on his concern for antinomianism along with its lack of congruency with much of the New Testament's teaching. Wesley, however, denied that he rejected the doctrine in "The Lord Our Righteousness." Wesley writes, "Neither do I deny imputed righteousness: this is another unkind and unjust accusation. I always did, and do still continually affirm, that the righteousness of Christ is imputed to every believer. But who do deny it?" (Outler 1991: 388). He goes on to add,

'But do not you believe *inherent* righteousness?' Yes, in its proper place; not as the *ground* of our acceptance with God, but as the fruit of it; not in the place of *imputed* righteousness, but as a consequent upon it. That is, I believe God *implants* righteousness in everyone whom he has *imputed* it...They to whom the righteousness of Christ is imputed are made righteous by the spirit of Christ, are renewed in the image of God 'after the likeness wherein they were created, in righteousness and true holiness.' (Outler 1991: 388)

Wesley's view of imputation, then, took on a slightly different shape than that of the reformed tradition in light of his sensitivity for antinomianism. In addition to this, the doctrine itself was a square peg for the round hole that was Wesley's way of conceptualizing salvation. Whidden states,

For Wesley, the reality of imputation dealt mainly with the sins of the past: sinners are reckoned to be something which in reality they are not, i.e., in Christ they are counted sinless, though their records testify otherwise. Thus imputation is a reckoned reality; but imputation is not a reality that may be viewed as a cover for attitudes and dispositions *that would tolerate sin in any form*. (Whidden 1997: 68)

Imputed righteousness, then, is yet another area of disagreement between the NPP and Wesley. The major difference between the NPP and Wesley on the issue of *actual righteousness* in the life of the church (individually and collectively) is that the NPP's read of it is much more *Judeo-eschatological* than Wesley's. Wesley's orientation to actual righteousness is driven by his concern for the personal experience of sanctification in the life of the believer. It is, for Wesley, a *pastoral* concern first and foremost.

For the NPP, however, sanctification leading to actual righteousness should be as *evidence of the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel and the manifestation of the righteousness of God in the creation.*

4. *Justification.* Having been influenced by continental Europe's reformed doctrine of justification *via* Peter Böhler and Martin Luther, Wesley squares with the traditional reformed view of justification. Wesley did not start out this way. Wesley initially inherited a two-fold justification from his Anglican tradition. Kenneth Collins writes,

Since the notion of a twofold justification had been a part of the Anglican witness, in the writings of Bull and Tillotson, for instance, Wesley made it clear in a letter to Thomas Church a few years later in 1745 "that the justification which is spoken of by St. Paul to the Romans and in our Articles is *not twofold*. It is one, and no more. It is the present remission of our sins, or our first acceptance with God." By making this distinction Wesley underscored the graciousness of God and maintained that the forgiveness of sins received by sinners is nothing less than a sheer, unmerited gift, and therefore could never be on the basis of their own working in the least. (Collins 2004: 184)

The issue that the NPP raises with the traditional reformed doctrine of justification is not at a point of disagreement over the fact that justification is certainly a forensic metaphor and present in Paul's writings. The place of protest for the NPP is regarding *where* and how *the reformed tradition finds proof for it in Paul*. The NPP argues that the reformed reading unduly reduces all of Paul into the forensic metaphor, which has devastating effects on a proper reading of Paul. Related to this is the critique of the reformed reading of "in Christ" passages. Dunn, speaking for the NPP argues that "in Christ" is not just another way of saying "imputed righteousness." He says,

But "in Christ" is a far more varied motif and gives more substance to the participationist way of reading Paul [...]. It is here I would again press for the relational dimension of the righteousness that is at the center of Paul's gospel. When the forensic imagery is stressed too much or given the sole role in understanding Paul's gospel, then it leaves itself too much open to the criticism of "legal fiction." Whereas a righteousness that does not count sin, embraces the lawless, gives the Spirit of adoption to those who simply trust, moves beyond the limitations

of the legal metaphor. We should never forget that Paul uses the forensic imagery to highlight how much the mercy of God upsets the legal process (he justifies the ungodly!) and transcends its logic. (Dunn 2011: 184)

Dunn further states,

The problem with pushing all of Paul through the narrow gauge of a strict forensic reading of justification is that it strips off so much of the fuller richness of the diversity of images and metaphors on which Paul draws to expound his gospel—including the “in Christ” language, the gift of the Spirit theme, and all that is involved in them. (Dunn 2011: 120–121)

The question, then, is what dimensions of Paul have been missed that need to be reintegrated? To start, the connection between justification (imputed righteousness) and sanctification (imparted righteousness). When one liberates Paul’s writing from the strict confines of the forensic metaphor, room is created for clarity over how Paul’s concern for transformed living empowered by the Holy Spirit fits into the bigger picture.

For the NPP, then, forgiveness of sins is the means to the larger goal of establishing the new creation/Kingdom of God through the resurrection. This is a dominant feature of biblical soteriology for the NPP. For the NPP, the doctrines of justification and sanctification are inextricably linked to eschatology and ecclesiology. Wesley no doubt connects these as well, but not in the same robust and nuanced manner as the NPP. In sum, Michal Bird, once again, describes the NPP’s take on justification: “Paul articulates his understanding of justification that accentuates the facets of divine vindication and covenant inclusion: God creates a new people, with a new status, in a new covenant, in the wake of the new age” (Bird 2007: 152–153).

5. *Sanctification*. The NPP links together sanctification and Passover within Paul’s eschatological frame. N. T. Wright in particular makes the connection between the Passover meal that Jesus shares with his disciples as a crucial element of the climactic messianic sequence of death, resurrection, and Pentecost. He writes, “First, the new Passover has occurred; therefore you are now living in the Spirit-driven ‘age to come’ and must, of course, behave appropriately. The ‘works of the flesh’ belong

in the ‘present evil age,’ so they must be left behind” (Wright 2018: 244). In discussing the moral pattern for living described in Galatians, Wright goes on to say,

All this, it seems, is once again in the service of what we think of as “ethical” imperatives, but that are perhaps better seen as “eschatological” instructions. Now that the “ends of the ages” have converged upon them, now (in other words) that the “present evil age” has been condemned and the “age to come” has been inaugurated, they must learn what it means to live in the latter rather than the former. (Wright 2018: 244)

Even within this eschatological frame, Wright still holds to the standard definition of sanctification as he says, “‘sanctification’ is in one sense their status as God’s holy people, but is also, and more particularly, their *actual* life of holiness through the power of God working in them by the Spirit” (Wright 2009: 156; emphasis added). Furthermore, in commenting on sanctification as one of the four different kinds of things being predicated of Jesus, and in Jesus, of believers, Wright writes,

He has become “sanctification”: at a guess, based on several other passages, Paul means by this that God has put to death all that is “fleshly” in him, and has raised him up in a new body which sin and death cannot touch, so that those who are “in him” now possess, as a reality and a possibility, the putting-to-death of sin and the coming-alive-to-God which plays such a strong role in the letter, not least in 1 Corinthians 6. (Wright 2009: 157)

Paul Ziesler too makes the connection between sanctification, the Passover, and final judgment. He writes,

When Paul in 1 Cor. 8:5f talks about ‘many gods and many lords’ he may be thinking of these cults, and the Christian sacraments of baptism and the eucharist may possibly indicate their impact. Above all it has been argued that in speaking of dying and rising with Christ, as in Rom. 6, he is presenting Christianity as such a cult. Yet the parallels are not as close as they at first seem. Unlike the cults, Paul mostly speaks of resurrection rather than rebirth. Unlike them, he invites participation in a real event of the recent past, not in a timeless-but-ever true death and rebirth. Above all, the basic orientation is

different. In baptism, the fundamental thing is entry into the New Age inaugurated by the death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah, meaning that those who belong to him are already tasting in advance the powers and reality of that New Age. Similarly, while the eucharist could be seen as a ritual sharing in the cult deity, it is more plausibly to be interpreted as a foretaste of the messianic banquet, the feast of the New Age, which is enjoyed by those who renounce the old age ('dying') and embrace the new by anticipation ('rising'). Rom. 6 on baptism and 1 Cor. 11 on the eucharist both fit more naturally into an eschatological and Jewish framework than into one derived from the Hellenistic mysteries. (Ziesler 1990: 15)

But what about Wesley's doctrine of Christian Perfection? N. T. Wright says this of Romans 6:6–11:

This has often been seriously misunderstood. People have sometimes supposed that Paul was referring to a fresh leap of faith, a leap by which we might attain a new kind of holiness, beyond the reach of temptation and sin. That might be very desirable for anyone—one hopes, most Christians—who, still troubled by sin, is eager to leave it behind. But this is not what Paul is talking about. (Wright 2004: 105)

While one cannot be certain, it does seem as if Wright is making a case against a Wesleyan reading of the passage. At the same time, Wright's comments elsewhere on Romans 6 seem a bit more harmonized with the victorious life in the Spirit. Commenting on Romans 6:1–5, he writes, "in becoming a Christian you move from one type of humanity to the other, and you should never think of yourself in the original mode again" (2004: 101). About the same passage, he adds, "[l]iving in accordance with a change of status requires that you recognize it and take steps to bring your actual life into line with the person you have become" (2004: 102).

Ultimately, one could guess that Wright's central argument would be that Wesley's doctrine of "total death to sin and a restoration of the image of God in the heart" is beside the point that Paul is making in terms of Christian maturity and putting sin to death (Peterson 1995: 51). Wesley's argument for the maturation of the believer through sequences of crises very well may be true, but that is not what Paul is talking about in the passages that the Wesleyan holiness tradition typically point to in support

of the doctrine. What Paul is addressing, however—argues Wright—is the story of Israel being freed from the exile—the story of those in Christ being delivered from the tyranny of sin in the world precisely by being in Christ and coming under the reign of a new master. Once again, Wright reads Paul to be arguing for the very real moral transformation in the lives of believers, but not having the question of entire sanctification as Wesley sees it in his purview. He writes, “The spirit works in the hearts of believers, to generate faith itself through the preaching of the gospel, then to generate the kind of life described in the second half of verses 4, 5 and 6, and then to work powerfully the other side of death to give new bodily life” (2004: 142).

6. *The image of God.* The concept of the image of God in salvation is crucial for both Wesley and the NPP. It is on this point that Wesley and the NPP have most in common. For Wesley the restoration of the image of God in humanity is the ultimate objective of salvation. This is not *altogether* different than the NPP. Dieter writes,

Wesley declared that the supreme and overruling purpose of God’s plan of salvation is to renew men’s and women’s hearts in His own image. It is a teleological theme, for he believed that all the grand currents of biblical salvation history moved toward this one end and had, in a restricted but definite manner, a fulfillment and perfection in this life. (Dieter 1987: 15)

It is well known that Wesley differentiated between three aspects of the image of God in humanity: (1) natural, (2) moral, and (3) political. It is Wesley’s political image of God that resonates quite well with the NPP’s concept of the image as relates to salvation. On the political image of God in humanity according to Wesley, Collins writes,

In defining and explaining the nature of this [political] aspect, Wesley appeals to the language of the Bible, the book of Genesis in particular, and observes that humanity was given “dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.” Describing the order and government established in creation, Wesley writes that “Man was God’s vice-regent upon the earth, the prince and governor of this lower world.” This means, interestingly enough, that although God is the Governor of the earth *par excellence*, the supreme Being has not claimed exclusive prerogatives here, but has graciously allowed humanity to share in this rule and to exercise

an authority over the lower creation. Here humanity is distinguished in certain aspects from the rest of creation and a hierarchy of sorts is established. God as Governor does not rule in isolation, but governs through His appointed vice-regents. (Collins 1997: 23)

Wesley extends his theology of the political image beyond mere hierarchy and dominion to also include the *way in which* the world is to be governed according to the generous, kind, gracious, and merciful character of God. Wesley, like the NPP, clearly posits that the human regency is the means through which God's goodness is channeled into the world. Wesley writes,

As all the blessings of God in paradise flowed through the man to the inferior creation; as man was the great channel of communication between the Creator and the whole brute creation; so when man made himself incapable of transmitting those blessings, that communication was necessarily cut off. (Outler 1985: 442)

The aspects of the political image of God that Wesley identifies are in many ways synonymous with what N. T. Wright designates as the vocational aspect of the image of God. Wright states rather comprehensively:

If the story stretches forwards from Abraham to David, to the promised return from exile and the 'new Exodus', and ultimately not only to the Messiah himself but to the extension of his rule across the world, then it also stretches back behind Abraham to Adam himself. Romans 5:12–21 is of course the classic passage, but we should not miss the point. Adam is not merely an example, or (as it were) a detached primal sinner. Genesis itself links Adam to Abraham through the words of command to the former and vocation to the latter. The Psalms, by implication at least, link Adam to the Messiah, through Psalm 8 in which the *image-bearing vocation* of Genesis 1 is repeated in relation to the 'son of man', a phrase whose residual indeterminacy cannot mask its use, in the first century at least, in relation to the long-awaited king. So when Paul strings together Adam and the Messiah in 1 Corinthians 15:20–28, drawing in Psalm 110:1 as well by means of its own echo of Psalm 8:6 ('he has put all his enemies under his feet' being picked up by 'he has put all things in order under his feet'), these are not just 'proof-texts'. Nor can one say that, because of the unsophistication of the Corinthian

audience (a point which could itself be challenged), Paul cannot actually intend to shower them with Genesis and the Psalms, and perhaps Daniel as well, in quite this way. Paul is expounding his central *messianic eschatology*, the point of which is precisely that the scriptural narrative is fulfilled in the new creation which *has* happened in Jesus' resurrection and *will* happen through his messianic reign. (Wright 2013: 1455)

And,

They [Christians] will be signs and foretastes of the new world that is to be, not least because of their unity across traditional boundaries, their holiness of life, their embracing of the *human* vocation to bear the divine image, and particularly their suffering. As in Romans 8, the renewal of humans is the prelude to, and the means of, the renewal of all creation. (Wright 2013: 1491)

Here Wright suggests that the purpose of humanity being created in the image of God is to function like an angled mirror that simultaneously reflects the love of God into the world (*via* humanity) and the love and worship of the world back up to God. Wright also makes the connection (and distinction) between God's people as image bearers and Jesus as The Image Bearer. Conforming to the character of Christ is to put on the image of God, to share in the co-regency over the creation, and to bring glory to Jesus and God as image bearers throughout the new creation. In short, putting on the character of Christ means fulfilling the righteousness of God in the world as walking testimonies of God's redemptive power made possible through his faithfulness to Abraham, David, and all of the creation.

While having much in common, the key difference between Wesley's political image and the NPP's vocational image is that for the NPP, this understanding of the image of God creates the crucial link for a *biblical soteriology* within Paul's worldview and compositional arc of the grand salvation narrative. That is, thinking of the image of God as *vocational* links NT soteriology with the narrative as it reaches back to Genesis; God's original intentions for humanity to have dominion over the creation, the fall, and God's strategy to rescue, redeem and return the creation to this model through co-regency with humanity, namely the Davidic Messiah. In other words, the NPP's reading of Paul demonstrates a more profound and nuanced iteration of the connection between the concepts of Messiah, New Creation, and *cosmos* rescue all within the eschatological framework.

Wesley's understanding of sanctification does not feature this. Wesley understands sanctification as the restoration of the image of God in humanity. This is undoubtedly true and the NPP does not reject such a claim. At the same time, the NPP's more robust doctrine of the image of God is couched in the broader biblical soteriology framework. That is, for the NPP, Paul is constantly thinking about justification, sanctification, and glorification in light of God's covenant faithfulness to both Abraham and all of the creation. Any talk of salvation that does not include these elements falls short of Paul's more robust and nuanced soteriology.

7. *Glorification and pneumatology.* Describing these very dynamics of first century Judaic eschatology and the hope for the coming of a new era of righteousness, Ziesler writes:

One regular element was the hope of resurrection. Those who believed in life after death at all, tended in the Palestinian tradition to believe in a general resurrection at the End, a resurrection to Judgment, when God would make his decisions on human beings. Thus anyone reared in this tradition who heard of the resurrection of Jesus would be apt to conclude that the general resurrection had begun and that the End was on the doorstep. The gift of the Spirit of God was another mark of the age: God would breathe not just on a few special servants, but on all his people. To talk as Christians did about the presence of the Holy Spirit implied at least the beginning of the new age. Again, although the Messiah belonged more naturally to the simpler nationalistic hope than to the cosmic apocalyptic one, he too could represent the End time. All together, these central elements in the Christian message must be understood in this eschatological or apocalyptic setting. (Ziesler 1990: 10)

Linking directly to eschatology and the resurrection is glorification and pneumatology. For Paul, the age of the spirit begins now *via* baptism in the Holy Spirit and the regeneration of the believer. This means freedom not only from the guilt of sin but also the power of sin. The age of the spirit will come to a climax with the resurrection of believers. In the same way that Jesus rose by the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom 1:4), believers will be raised, and the age of the spirit will have come in full force. This means that glorification is deeply eschatological in a way that is similar to Pentecost. Pentecost was the beginning of the End with the initial giving of the Spirit and the glorification of believers will mark the end of the end and the final

and most glorious stage of the establishment of the New Creation/Kingdom of God.

## Conclusion

While Wesley and the NPP share some commonalities, their differences prevail. Wesley's Anglican background paired with the influence of Peter Böhler and others championing essential doctrines of the (continental European) Reformation makes him a unique hybrid characterized by a combination of spirit of the *solas* and the practice of Rome. Such a description is not too far a cry from the NPP and its concerns for Paul's clear teaching on impartation and its impact on how the normal Christian life is expected to be lived out according to the scriptures. As such, Wesley and the NPP both emphasize Paul's understanding of the agency of the Holy Spirit in bringing about the new creation in the lives of the believers, which translates into freedom of sin, even if both come at the issue from different angles.

The tension between the NPP, Wesley, and the reformed tradition is a fruitful one. It forces us back into the scriptures to ask, "what *is* Paul saying?" Wesley in particular reminds us that the spiritual growth of the church and real change in the world through the righteousness of Christ in the people of God is always to be an orienting aim for reading Paul. Wesley's missional concern in particular, one could argue, makes him more like Paul than the others. This is where Wesley likely has a finger on the spiritual pulse of Paul more so than his counterparts. This, a Wesleyan could argue, is where the NPP and the reformed tradition do not go quite far enough—the very practical missional aspect of the righteousness of God in the world.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> E. P. Sanders' *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, is typically identified as the seminal work on proposing covenantal nomism in place of works righteousness for first century Jewish soteriology.

<sup>2</sup> N. T. Wright's, *The Day the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of Jesus's Crucifixion* (NY: HarperOne, 2016) is dedicated to expounding this interpretation of the cross.

<sup>3</sup> For a strong exposition on the case for the eschatological motif as the organizing feature of the canonical Psalter, see David C. Mitchell, *The Message of the Psalter: An Eschatological Programme in the Book of*

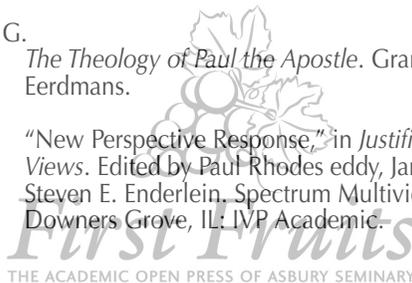
*Psalms*, vol. 252 (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplemental Series; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> For an exposition on covenant as the cohesive device for the canonical message of salvation, see Sandra Richter, *Epic of Eden: A Christian Entry into the Old Testament* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> For a robust rebuttal to the NPP's criticism of imputed righteousness, see John Piper's, *Counted Righteous in Christ: Should We Abandon the Imputation of Christ's Righteousness?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002).

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