

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON PAUL: RECONCILING WRIGHT, SCHREINER AND THIELMAN ON JUSTIFICATION

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The purpose of this paper is to offer an epistemological framework that is suitable for harmonizing differing positions on the nature of justification.¹ The focus here is first, on introducing the framework, and then second, on demonstrating its usefulness in some recent dialogue, namely, the plenary addresses from the 2010 annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society.² Rather than a rigorous exegetical defense, this is a proposal using a tool of epistemology to attempt to solve a theological difficulty.³ While all the different perspectives are not completely resolvable, the three presented at the 2010 annual meeting just might be.⁴

Presuppositions, Language, and Emphasis

Before turning to the framework itself, some groundwork is in order. Consider first the role of presuppositions.⁵ In a recent work on the language of thought, Steven Pinker claims

¹ An earlier draft of this paper was read by Tyler Amburgey, Zach Dewey, Sean Grogan, Matt Moses, and Chris Ngo. They provided helpful comments related to flow and thought, any ambiguities or incongruities remain my own.

² Thomas R. Schreiner, "Justification: The Saving Righteousness of God in Christ," *JETS* 54, no. 1 (March 2011): 19-34; Frank Thielman, "God's Righteousness as God's Fairness in Romans 1:17: An Ancient Perspective on a Significant Phrase," *JETS* 54, no. 1 (March 2011): 35-48; N. T. Wright, "Justification: Yesterday, Today, and Forever," *JETS* 54, no. 1 (March 2011): 49-63. Schreiner's address has been republished with alterations in his most recent book *Faith Alone – The Doctrine of Justification: What The Reformers Taught...and Why It Still Matters* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 239-261. References throughout are from the *JETS* article.

³ For a more rigorous exegetical and biblical-theological defense of a similar conception of justification, see G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 469-526. On the value of philosophy for theology, see John Frame's essay "Why Theology Needs Philosophy" in *John Frame's Selected Shorter Writings, Volume Two* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015), 48-55

⁴ On those other perspectives, see James K. Beilby & Paul Rhodes Eddy, eds., *Justification: Five Views* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011). To cite an alternative three, I do not think this framework could completely resolve the tension between the Catholic view (Gerald O'Collins & Oliver Rafferty), the new Lutheran view (Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen), and the classic Reformed view (Michael Horton) although their different emphases could be plotted triperspectively.

⁵ For our purposes here, a presupposition is defined as "a belief that takes precedence over another and therefore serves as a criterion for another." John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1987), 45.

that “the nature of reality does not dictate the way that reality is represented in people’s minds. The language of thought allows us to frame a situation in different and incompatible ways.”⁶ In the context of discussing how abstract ideas are conceptualized concretely he adds, “Many disagreements in human affairs turn not on differences in data or logic but on how a problem is framed.”⁷ Rather than dissolving to pure irrationality, “different ways of framing a situation may be equally consistent with the facts being described in that very sentence, but they make different commitments about *other* facts which are *not* being described.”⁸ The implication of this is that conflicts in framing a situation arise from unspoken assumptions about things not under discussion. These assumptions, or presuppositions, appear to play a big role in how one constructs an interpretive method. Pinker’s insights help explain how discussions on the doctrine of justification can lead to such radical disagreement amongst biblical scholars and theologians equally committed to the primacy of Scripture.

How one examines a subject like justification is influenced by other theoretical, philosophical, and theological commitments. This is not necessarily problematic, so long as a distinction is made between objectivity and complete lack of bias. In general it is desirable to be objective in methodological treatment of the data, while being realistic about the lenses one is wearing to see the data itself.⁹ As a brief example, N. T. Wright is insistent on reading Paul in light of a certain understanding of the 1st century background in general, and 2nd temple Judaism in particular.¹⁰ Wright lays out his theoretical, philosophical, and theological commitments

⁶ Steven Pinker, *The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window into Human Nature* (New York: Penguin, 2007), 4.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 243

⁸ *Ibid.*, 260

⁹ On this point see the essays of Carl Trueman in *Histories and Fallacies: Problems Faced in the Writing of History* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010).

¹⁰ Perhaps the best succinct summary is in his plenary address at ETS, Wright, “Justification: Yesterday, Today, and Forever,” 52-53. Earlier accounts can be found in N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 25-37; Wright, *Paul*, 3-79; Wright, *Justification*, 55-108. For the most detailed account and defense see N. T. Wright, *Paul and The Faithfulness of God*, Vol. 4 Christian Origins and The Question of God (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 1-

available for scrutiny.¹¹ Much of the discussion surrounding his work regards whether he gets this background right or not.¹² While it certainly plays into his understanding of justification, it would take us too far afield to go into it in detail here.

The second initial consideration is brought up by Frank Thielman's plenary address at ETS. There, he suggests that the phrase "righteousness of God" (δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ) has a polyvalent character.¹³ While not usually applied to things like words and phrases, by "polyvalent," it seems Thielman means that phrases like this in Paul and elsewhere in the biblical literature can have multiple nuances, and may even be intended to be that way by the author.¹⁴ Further, he cites a recent article by F. Gerald Downing¹⁵ who argues that ancient writers thought of themselves "as communicating certain ideas that were then described with a number of different words and figures."¹⁶ If this is true, it would imply that there are perhaps far fewer technical terms within the biblical literature than is usually supposed.¹⁷ In response, Thielman

346. Alternative accounts of Paul, including background and theology can be found in Michael F. Bird, ed., *Four Views on The Apostle Paul* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012). Pertinent to this discussion of justification is the Preston Sprinkle's recent work, *Paul & Judaism Revisited: A Study of Divine and Human Agency in Salvation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), as well as Michael F. Bird, *An Anomalous Jew: Paul Among Jews, Greeks, and Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016).

¹¹ Wright's theoretical, theological, and philosophical commitments are presented in detail in *The New Testament and The People of God*, Vol. 1, Christian Origins and The Question of God (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992). His "Tools for the Task," is Part 2 of that book.

¹² In his response books, Wright spends majority of the space in responding to debate about whether he gets Paul's background right. See especially Parts I and III of *Paul and His Recent Interpreters: Some Contemporary Debates* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015). For critical interactions from the scholarly community, see Part 2 of *God and The Faithfulness of Paul*, Christopher Heilig, J. Thomas Hewitt, & Michael F. Bird, eds. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017). The five chapters in his most recent book on Paul "represent a response to the five most questions elements" in his larger book on Paul. 4 of the 5 touch on background issues. The fifth is on justification. See N. T. Wright *The Paul Debate: Critical Questions for Understanding The Apostle* (London: SPCK, 2016), quote from vii.

¹³ Thielman, "An Ancient Perspective on a Significant Phrase," 34, 47.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ F. Gerald Downing, "Ambiguity, Ancient Semantics, and Faith," *New Testament Studies* 56 (2010): 139-62. Downing uses the word "polysemy" in his abstract, noting that scholars allow it but tend to dislike it. Perhaps that is why Thielman used polyvalent.

¹⁶ Thielman, "An Ancient Perspective on a Significant Phrase," 45.

¹⁷ This is my tentative observation, not Thielman's.

himself presents a tri-fold understanding of righteousness that fits very well into the framework that will be argued below.

The last initial consideration is Tom Schreiner's point about emphasis in his ETS plenary address. Several times he faults Wright for making the wrong emphasis in some of his affirmations. Early on he sets the tone by saying "If we could sum up the problem at the outset, Wright tends to introduce false dichotomies, presenting an either-or when there is both-and instead. To put it more sharply, even when he sees both-and, he at times *puts the emphasis in the wrong place*, seeing the secondary as primary and the primary as secondary."¹⁸ In fact, Schreiner's first main point is a critique of Wright's emphasis of ecclesiology over soteriology in relation to justification.¹⁹

To anticipate a point below, much of the argument hinges on which perspective should be given fundamental status.²⁰ For Schreiner to critique Wright's emphasis, while still affirming (for the most part) both the ecclesiological and soteriological dimensions of justification is not to ask what Scripture says, but is to raise the question of what is the fundamental lens (or we could say perspective) through which to view justification. While this is an important consideration, it shouldn't be reduced to an issue of emphasis. Ultimately, there is no exegetically given fundamental emphasis. As John Frame notes, "It is impossible for theology to have precisely the same 'emphasis' as Scripture does. To do that, theology would have to simply *repeat* Scripture from Genesis to Revelation."²¹ In other words, emphasis is a contextual consideration and varies from presentation to presentation, and from historical situation to

¹⁸ Schreiner, "The Saving Righteousness of God in Christ." 21-22. (Italics mine. The emphasis critique is echoed again on pg. 29).

¹⁹ Ibid. 22-28.

²⁰ "Fundamental" in the sense of the perspective or dimension given the status of "main point" or "primary point" what will be argued shortly is that is like arguing which point of a triangle is more important than the others.

²¹ Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 182-83, 370. Frame is speaking in general terms, not about this argument in particular.

historical situation. As such, it is hard to judge just what would constitute the appropriate level of emphasis for every given circumstance. In some cases, a critique of emphasis can appear like faulting an author, not for saying the wrong thing, but for not saying the right thing in the way which the critic would prefer.²² In other cases, it may be the result of an author choosing to emphasize one facet of a doctrine to the exclusion of the other. This often presents itself as false dichotomies in the way a theological problem is presented and then solved.²³ The proposed framework is useful in avoiding just this type of error, as well as ensuring that multiple perspectives are integrated into a whole presentation of a doctrine like justification without overlooking potentially important elements.

Method²⁴

In the opening of Calvin's *Institutes* he states that all wisdom consists of two parts: knowledge of God and knowledge of self.²⁵ On the one hand, our very being subsists in God, so without the knowledge of self there is no knowledge of God, yet on the other hand he says that, "man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God's face,

²² This is not say I think that Schreiner is doing this in his address.

²³ N. T. Wright has a penchant for this sort of thing. It is evident in his most recent book, *The Day the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of Jesus's Crucifixion* (New York: HarperOne, 2016). There are numerous false dichotomies, as pointed out by Dane Ortlund in his review, "N. T. Wright's The Day The Revolution Began: A Few Reflections," Strawberry-Rhubarb Theology, <http://dogmadoxa.blogspot.com/2017/01/n-t-wrights-day-revolution-began-few.html> (accessed March 14, 2017). This is also present in his most recent book on Paul, which is short responses to various reviews of *Paul and The Faithfulness of God*. See Wright, *The Paul Debate*, 65-71. Also see Schreiner, "The Saving Righteousness of God in Christ," 24-25.

²⁴ An earlier version of this section appeared in Nathaniel Claiborne, "Using John Frame's Triperspectival Theological Method in Film Analysis" (presented at the Southwest Regional Meeting of The Evangelical Theological Society, Dallas, Texas, 2011), which was in turn an abbreviated version of chapters 1 and 2 of Nathaniel M. Claiborne, "Hollywood, Geneva, and Athens: A Reformed Philosophy of Film" (Th.M Thesis, Dallas, Texas: Dallas Theological Seminary, Theological Studies Dept., August 2011). It has been re-worked some to suit this particular paper.

²⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1.1.1.

and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinize himself.”²⁶ While Calvin may not be able to say “which one precedes and brings forth the other,” it is this latter knowledge of God that he makes foundational for his thinking in the *Institutes*. Calvin, following the structure of Paul’s epistle to the Romans, begins his *Institutes* stating that everyone knows God.²⁷ The knowledge of God in Calvin’s thought is a “concept by means of which he intended to bring all of his other concepts into focus, a concept by which he sought to make all his other concepts understood.”²⁸ Since one cannot come to know God without coming to know God’s relations to the world and man, a good theistic epistemology will imply a general epistemology applicable to everything.²⁹ Just as it can be shown through Calvin’s commentaries that knowing God and knowing the world are interdependent;³⁰ when one turns to his *Institutes*, one sees that so are knowing God and knowing the self.³¹

John Frame merely organizes the triad in what he refers to as “generic Calvinism.”³² Commonly known as “triperspectivalism,” what Frame has developed is an epistemological tool that is capable of being used to analyze any object of study.³³ Perspectivalism, as a general

²⁶Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.1.2.

²⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.3.1. “There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity.” This is the same point Paul makes in Romans 1:19. On Calvin following Romans see K. Scott Oliphant, “A Primal and Simple Knowledge (1.1-5),” in *A Theological Guide to Calvin’s Institutes: Essays and Analysis*, Calvin 500 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 16-43.

²⁸ Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 1.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

³⁰ See discussion in “Hollywood, Geneva, and Athens,” 7-8.

³¹ Consider Frame’s comments: “The best way to look at the matter is that neither knowledge of God nor knowledge of self is possible without knowledge of the other, and growth in one area is always accompanied by growth in the other,” *The Doctrine of The Knowledge of God*, 65.

³² *Ibid.*, 90.

³³ The best introduction is “A Primer on Perspectivalism” in *John Frame’s Selected Shorter Writings*, Volume One (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2014), 3-18.

concept is merely an admission of human limitations and a desire to dialogue with other limited perspectives.³⁴ As Frame explains it, “One way to increase our knowledge and our level of certainty is by supplementing our own perspectives with those of others.”³⁵ Often, the approaches from various perspectives will result in an interlinking of the perspectives, which is how the term “triperspectivalism” was coined. For Frame, this system finds roots in the Trinity as well as in his understanding of God’s lordship attributes, which he calls control, authority, and power.³⁶ The result is a triadic approach to knowledge that helps to not only harmonize seemingly divergent views, but to integrate the various facets of a given doctrine or object of study.³⁷

Every epistemological endeavor looks at an object of study, norms of evaluation, and a person doing the study. Looking at an object while focusing on the norms of knowledge, particularly the norm of Scripture, is what Frame refers to as the “normative perspective.” It is focused on emphasizing an object’s character as divine revelation.³⁸ The objects one encounters to study in the world can be classified under what Frame calls the “situational perspective.” This perspective focuses on a particular subject, “emphasizing its character as a fact of nature, history,

³⁴ “A Primer on Perspectivalism,” 4.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ On those, see John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, A Theology of Lordship (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 36-102, and more concisely, Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 15-18. See also his explanation in “A Primer on Perspectivalism,” 8-12. He also notes the triads of Christ’s offices (13-14); human knowledge of God (14-16); and ethics (16-17).

³⁷ Because of the recently published Festschrift for Frame, there is a definitive collection of his ideas and triads in Appendix A and B of John J. Hughes, ed., *Speaking the Truth in Love: The Theology of John M. Frame* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009). For Frame’s own account of the development of his thought, see John Frame and John J. Hughes, “Backgrounds to My Thought,” in *Speaking the Truth in Love*.

³⁸ Or on the methods of knowing. See John M. Frame, “Glossary,” in *Speaking the Truth in Love: The Theology of John M. Frame*, ed. John J. Hughes (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 1002-28. For extended discussion and development see Frame, *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*. 62-75, John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, A Theology of Lordship (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 33-37; 131-238

or both.”³⁹ Lastly, the “existential perspective” emphasizes the object’s character as part of human experience and an aspect of human subjectivity.⁴⁰ Since the objects of knowledge remain unchanged (God, the world, ourselves) a triperspectival epistemological method will seek to do justice to the whole field of knowledge related to whatever subject of study one is pursuing. In this sense, an exposition of a doctrine in Scripture should do justice to (justify?) how it teaches us about God, our world, and ourselves.

Application of Method

This general explanation of triperspectivalism as an epistemological method still needs specific application to a doctrinal discussion. One might note that when asking theological questions about what Scripture teaches, we are working within the larger field of Frame’s normative perspective. The debate over justification is precisely over what Scripture says about that topic and in particular what St. Paul really said about it. In that sense, to apply this method to justification one would need to parse out a further triperspectival analysis within the normative perspective itself.⁴¹ To do so, one would need to consider which elements of the doctrine of justification are best viewed within which perspective. There is a certain amount of flexibility in how one does this, as triperspectivalism is not so much a definitive distribution of ideas as it is

³⁹ Or also the aspects of an object that change in different situations, see Frame, “Glossary.”

⁴⁰ It can also focus on the person doing the knowing, see *Ibid.*

⁴¹ If you are familiar with Christopher Nolan’s 2010 film *Inception*, this is not unlike the dreams within dreams plot framework. It can easily become complicated trying to keep track of where one is, as the levels increase. Ultimately, this structure goes to three levels with the largest perspective being union with Christ, within that, a parsing of justification down to two levels. The chart at the end helps to organize the proposal.

an epistemological tool that helps to integrate differing perspectives into a whole and give an account for all the elements in a given field of knowledge.⁴²

In his short systematic theology, Frame has actually starts the process for us by putting justification itself into a triad with adoption and regeneration which are all perspectives on the larger field of knowledge concerning our union with Christ.⁴³ Justification is the normative perspective on union with Christ because it is an authoritative, legal declaration made by God that changes the believer's status.⁴⁴ Adoption is the situational perspective on union with Christ because it places us in a new environment, no longer in the family of Satan, but now in the family of God. Lastly, regeneration and its progressive outworking (sanctification) is the existential perspective on union with Christ because it is how God makes us alive, giving us a new heart, new dispositions, and new desires to obey him. When the different elements in a traditional *ordo salutis* are plotted out in this way, as perspectives on union with Christ, the result is a more fruitful framework for integrating different theological emphases.⁴⁵

⁴² It can also be useful for balancing out emphases within certain schools of thought. See "A Primer on Perspectivalism," 18.

⁴³ For an exegetically thorough treatment of this topic in Paul, see Constantine R. Campbell, *Paul and Union With Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012). Other recent works of interest are J. Todd Billings, *Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011); Robert Letham, *Union with Christ: In Scripture, History, and Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2011); Marcus Peter Johnson, *One With Christ: An Evangelical Theology of Salvation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013); and Robert A. Peterson, *Salvation Applied by The Spirit: Union with Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015). Respectively, Billings work sits in the nexus of orthodoxy and orthopraxy; Letham's is latently triperspectival and includes historical considerations in the Reformed tradition; Johnson's configures soteriology around union with Christ; Peterson's is an exhaustive biblical theology of the subject.

⁴⁴ These categories are from John Frame, *Salvation Belongs to the Lord: An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg N.J.: P&R Publishing, 2006), 200-221. He expands and rearranges this discussion in *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013), 913-917; 944-994.

⁴⁵ This is in harmony with the recent proposal in Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Wrighting the Wrongs of the Reformation? The State of the Union with Christ in St. Paul and Protestant Soteriology," in *Jesus, Paul and the People of God: A Theological Dialogue with N. T. Wright*, ed. Richard B. Hays and Nicholas Perrin (Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 235-259. Vanhoozer's article is approved by Wright in his plenary address from ETS: Wright, "Justification: Yesterday, Today, and Forever," 62. For different reasons, Wright agrees with this

Now within any one of these perspectives on union with Christ, one could further parse out normative, situational, and existential perspectives.⁴⁶ For our purposes here that will be done with justification. As mentioned above, an exposition of a doctrine in Scripture should do justice to how it adds to our knowledge of God, our world, and ourselves. In that light, the normative perspective on justification would look at what that doctrine reveals about God. Justification then tells us about God, and specifically about his righteousness, and how he demonstrates it.⁴⁷ The situational perspective on justification would look at what the doctrine reveals about our situation, particularly our new environment within the people of God. Justification then tells us also about the creation, and specifically new creation.⁴⁸ Lastly, the existential perspective on justification would look at what the doctrine reveals about ourselves, specifically what it says about us as persons now declared righteous. Justification then tells us about ourselves in light of our faith in Christ.⁴⁹

On occasion, some analyses focus on one perspective to the unfortunate exclusion of the others. As a brief example, when discussing union with Christ, justification takes the center

plotting when he says, “Schweitzer was correct (and so were those Reformers, including John Calvin, who made the same point): in Paul’s own exposition, ‘*being in the Messiah*’ is the larger idea, and ‘*justification*’ is found within it,” *The Paul Debate*, 90. He echoes this claim in *Paul and His Recent Interpreters* (119), drawing support from Richard Gaffin and John Murray. Cf. also with the recent work of Matthew W. Bates, *Salvation By Allegiance Alone: Rethinking, Faith, Works, and the Gospel of Jesus the King* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017). He expresses concern over typical *ordo salutis* and says, “For even when such systems employ biblical terms as conceptual categories or organizational rubrics, they tend to foist alien concerns onto the biblical text rather than allowing the biblical narrative to supply the framework, and this leads to skewed emphases,” 169. Frame’s triperspectivalism bypasses this difficulty in my estimation.

⁴⁶ This is not peculiar to a triperspectival approach. In Michael Bird’s most recent book on Paul, he affirms forensic, apocalyptic, covenantal, and transformative elements to justification. Specifically, he says, “Justification issues forth in a divine verdict that believers are part of God’s forgiven family; the verdict is one of acquittal; they are in the right before God and can’t be any ‘righter,’” *An Anomalous Jew*, 140.

⁴⁷ This is the focus of Thielman, “An Ancient Perspective on a Significant Phrase.”

⁴⁸ This is the focus of Wright and his ecclesiological emphasis that Schreiner dislikes, Wright, “Justification: Yesterday, Today, and Forever.”

⁴⁹ This in the focus of Schreiner, “The Saving Righteousness of God in Christ.”

stage (at least since the Reformation), often with adoption being left behind or at least marginalized.⁵⁰ While adoption was rather foundational in Calvin's understanding of soteriology as well as the subsequent Christian life,⁵¹ somewhere along the way, the doctrine of adoption ended up in the theological orphanage.⁵² With union with Christ rather than a strict *ordo salutis* becoming more prominent, it seems that subsequent discussions include more space for adoption,⁵³ and sometimes under the rubric of "participation" in Christ.⁵⁴ In much evangelical theology, regeneration has never fallen into disregard like adoption has, but union with Christ, considered as a whole, helps anchor discussions on adoption.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ This is pointed out as a deficiency in both Wright's writings and the writings of Reformed systematians by Vanhoozer, "Wrighting the Wrongs of the Reformation," 255. Wright though is in agreement with Vanhoozer's proposal and says that "incorporation and adoption are key categories with which we might effect a reconciliation between the different 'perspectives'" "Justification: Yesterday, Today, and Forever," 62.

⁵¹ For Calvin on adoption see Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.12-15 and 3.6-10. For discussion of Calvin on adoption see Derek W. H. Thomas, "The Mediator of the Covenant," in *A Theological Guide to Calvin's Institutes*, 209-10 as well as William Edgar, "Ethics: The Christian Life and Good Works According to Calvin," 323ff in that same volume.

⁵² Adoption when treated is usually tucked into a larger discussion of justification. As an example see Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996). The topic of justification is treated in chapter IX of Part 4 (510-525), with adoption occupying a brief sub point on 515-516. Slightly better is Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), who devotes three pages (642-45) after an in-depth discussion of justification. Better still is Frame's theology teacher, John Murray in *Collected Writings of John Murray, Volume 2: Systematic Theology* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 223-234. He treats it alongside justification and regeneration, before chapters on faith.

⁵³ E.g. Frame's treatment of it in *Systematic Theology*, 975-979. For a more recent systematic treatments of adoption, see David B. Garner, *Sons in the Son: The Riches and Reach of Adoption in Christ* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2016).

⁵⁴ On this, see R. Michael Allen, *Justification and The Gospel: Understanding the Contexts and Controversies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 33-70.

⁵⁵ From a triperspectival framework, I would agree with Michael Bird's conclusion that problems arises when one makes either regeneration or justification the basis of the other, see Michael F. Bird, *The Saving Righteousness of God: Studies on Paul, Justification, and the New Perspective*, Paternoster Biblical Monographs (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007), 103. He lays out his own systematic understanding of justification in *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 559-568.

This is worth noting because it is the situational perspective that is in general the point of contention brought up by those associated with the New Perspective on Paul.⁵⁶ In regards to justification the situational perspective would be the social and ethical dimensions of justification, particularly in Paul. This is often highlighted in different ways by the different scholars associated with the New Perspective.⁵⁷ It is argued that these dimensions were “thought to have been insufficiently attended to by traditional interpreters.”⁵⁸ When one evaluates the writings of Wright, it is easy to see that these dimensions are on the forefront of his thinking.

Going back a bit to look at his *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, one sees that the second half of the book is parsing out structures of Paul’s thought.⁵⁹ Wright does this using the larger categories of monotheism, election, and eschatology, which could be thought of as normative, existential, and situational, respectively. Monotheism clearly has to do with the normative perspective since it is unpacking the doctrine of God. Election, while ecclesiological in Wright’s emphasis is existential in a perspectival analysis since it details the fundamental change of persons chosen by God. Eschatology is situational in the sense that is the larger narrative

⁵⁶ I’ve generally avoided bringing this term in until now. While a hotter topic several years ago, the discussion now seems to have moved beyond the New Perspective on Paul. Wright himself gets into this in chapters 3 and 4 of *Paul and His Recent Interpreters*. In a recent multi-view book by Zondervan, there is no actual New Perspective advocate, but rather someone deliberately beyond it: Douglas A. Campbell, “Christ and The Church in Paul: A ‘Post-New Perspective’ Account,” in *Four Views on The Apostle Paul*, 113-143. Also significant is Garwood P. Anderson’s recent monograph, *Paul’s New Perspective: Charting a Soteriological Journey* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016). The opening chapter begins with an assessment of the New Perspective on Paul before raising the question in chapter 3 of whether or not we’ve moved beyond it. Referring to the New Perspective and the Traditional Perspective, he says that “in what follows I argue for a both/and by means of a ‘something else’” (152).

⁵⁷ The literature is vast and hard to keep up with at times. In *Paul and His Recent Interpreters* (107n3), Wright approvingly cites Bird’s bibliography from *The Saving Righteousness of God*, 196-211 as fairly up to date.

⁵⁸ Stephen Westerholm, “What’s Right About The New Perspective on Paul,” in Matthew S. Harmon & Jay E. Smith, eds., *Studies in the Pauline Epistles: Essays in Honor of Douglas J. Moo* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 240. He is particularly referring to James D. G. Dunn.

⁵⁹ N. T. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005). While older, this more concise treatment is perhaps easier to follow than the massive expansion of it in *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 619-1265. This is the third and longest part of the book.

framework that controls where the story (the situation) is going. To the extent that Wright parses out these categories to help read Paul more authentically, he is employing, in my view, a type of triperspectival epistemology for his biblical studies.⁶⁰

This can be seen as well in his address at ETS when he speaks of justification in three tenses.⁶¹ In a way, this is the crux of the contention with Wright, since some have understood him to be arguing a future justification on the *basis* of works.⁶² In his presentation, Wright clarifies that while he may have used language of “basis,” he has meant and does mean “in accordance with.”⁶³ He then repeats what he has always said, “the final justification, that is the final verdict, *as opposed to the present justification, which is pronounced over faith alone*, will be pronounced over the totality of the whole life lived.”⁶⁴ He then goes a great way to clarify this statement by pointing out that when he has used “basis” in that connection it was never referring to a basis independent of the work of Christ and the Spirit.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ And because this structure has proven to not be unique to the older work, I would suggest Wright sees the need for over-arching perspective linking tools.

⁶¹ Wright, “Justification: Yesterday, Today, and Forever.” 49-50. Bates does this as well in *Salvation by Allegiance Alone*, 166.

⁶² The language in earlier works doesn’t help. This is particularly acute in *What Saint Paul Really Said* and was a big driver in the debate with John Piper. Piper responded to this book primarily in his *The Future of Justification: A Response to N.T. Wright* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), which was backhandedly responded to by in Wright in *Justification: God’s Plan & Paul’s Vision* (Downers Grove Ill.: IVP Academic, 2009). Wright’s language about “basis” was clearer, but the tone was somewhat exasperated and at times condescending to those who disagreed with him.

⁶³ This is similar to the view put forward by Tom Schreiner in “Justification Apart From and By Works: At The Final Judgment Works Will Confirm Justification,” in *Four Views on The Role of Works at The Final Judgment*, Alan P. Stanley, ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 71-98. Specifically, he says, “works are necessary for justification, but they should not be considered the basis or foundation of justification. Instead, they constitute the necessary evidence or fruit of justification,” 73. Note that James Dunn is an opposing contributor in that same volume (“If Paul Could Believe Both in Justification by Faith and Judgment According to Works, Why Should That Be a Problem for Us?” 119-141).

⁶⁴ Emphasis Wright’s in “Justification: Yesterday, Today, and Forever,” 60.

⁶⁵ Ibid. Cp. with Schreiner who says “works are necessary for justification, but they should not be considered the basis or foundation of justification. Instead, they constitute the necessary evidence or fruit of justification,” “Justification Apart From and By Works: At The Final Judgment Works Will Confirm Justification,”

In a way then, what Wright argues for concerning justification is a more fully fleshed out Trinitarian basis.⁶⁶ Normatively, on the basis of the Father’s graciousness and love, we are declared righteous giving us a new norm in the present tense. Existentially, the Father makes this declaration on the basis of the work of Christ which we have placed our faith in. Situationally, on the basis of the Spirit’s work in our lives, we are declared righteous in the final day in accordance with the works that the Spirit has produced in our lives which leads to the ultimate change in situation, entrance into the new creation.⁶⁷ Or, one could use Wright’s language and see this is as a monotheistic perspective on justification, a soteriological (electoral) perspective on justification, and an eschatological perspective on justification. In pursuing a vision of justification like this, one will be able to reconcile passages that seem to imply justification in the last day is on the basis of Spirit produced works, justification in the present is based on the grace of God, and justification in the past is based on faith in Christ’s completed work.

While many advocates of what is either called the Old Perspective on Paul, or the Traditional Perspective on Paul, are willing to reconsider justification, it is not usually drastically modified. Stephen Westerholm concludes part of his discussion in a recent work saying, “The upshot of our discussion is nonetheless that Paul’s doctrine of justification *means* what Augustine, Luther, and others have long taken it to mean: only by faith in Jesus Christ can

in *Four Views on The Role of Works at The Final Judgment*, Alan P. Stanley, ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 73. Elsewhere, he says “It is probably best to say that good works constitute the necessary evidence that one is justified,” “Paul: A Reformed Reading,” in *Four Views on The Apostle Paul*, 40.

⁶⁶ This came through to me in the reading of Wright, *Paul*. What follows though is my parsing of the declaration of justification, which has seemed to be what stimulates the most arguments.

⁶⁷ Beale (*A New Testament Biblical Theology*, 517-522) and Schreiner (*Faith Alone*, 199-206) are conceptually similar on this point to what is argued here, and what Wright argues elsewhere (in detail in chapter 10 of *Paul and The Faithfulness of God*).

sinner be found righteous before God.”⁶⁸ Elsewhere, Richard Gaffin will confess that even in light of New Perspective conclusions, “I remain unpersuaded that the Reformation and the Reformation tradition have gotten it wrong and that, for Paul, justification is at least primarily, if not entirely, about ecclesiology rather than soteriology.”⁶⁹ Even so, one is able to acknowledge that the fundamental reading of Paul’s doctrine of justification is correct while following what even James Dunn advocates when he says, “The new perspective by no means replaces the old perspective, but the debate it has fostered cleans the lenses of both and allows the Pauline perspective to be seen in more of its idiosyncratic fullness.”⁷⁰

In some ways, we see this approach taken in Schreiner’s plenary from ETS, and his writings on Paul in general.⁷¹ After wrestling with Wright’s writings, he concluded in that plenary, “Wright helpfully reminds us of the ecclesiological implications of justification, but in the process he wrongly downplays the essential and fundamental soteriological dimensions of justification which Paul emphasizes in these key texts.”⁷² More so than other Reformed Pauline

⁶⁸ Stephen Westerholm, *Justification Reconsidered: Rethinking a Pauline Theme* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 74, emphasis original.

⁶⁹ Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *By Faith, Not By Sight: Paul and The Order of Salvation, 2nd Edition* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013), 51. In defense of his point, see the recent monograph by Aaron O’Kelley, *Did the Reformers Misread Paul? A Historical-Theological Critique of the New Perspective*, Studies in Christian History and Thought (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), as well as the recent collection of essays edited by Michael Allen and Jonathan A. Linebaugh, *Reformation Readings of Paul: Explorations in History and Exegesis* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015).

⁷⁰ James D. G. Dunn, “What’s Right about the Old Perspective on Paul” in *Studies in the Pauline Epistles: Essays in Honor of Douglas J. Moo*, 229. For his particular understanding of justification, see James D. G. Dunn, “New Perspective View,” in *Justification: Five Views*, 176-201.

⁷¹ Most recently, see his section on Paul in *The King in His Beauty: A Biblical Theology of The Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 543-580. In addition, see *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 339-379, as well as *Paul, Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006).

⁷² “The Saving Righteousness of God in Christ,” 28.

scholars, Schreiner seems willing to acknowledge some of the emphases Wright brings to the conversation, yet is not willing to follow Wright wherever he goes.⁷³

Finally, we should take into account Frank Thielman's position on justification. As noted above, his focus was on what would be considered the normative perspective of justification, or what the doctrine of justification tells us about the doctrine of God, specifically his righteousness. In a way, the doctrine of justification, focused as it is on righteousness could be parsed out as the righteousness of God (normative), the righteousness of God's people as a whole (situational), and the righteousness of the individual (existential). When it comes to dealing with the normative aspect, there are few people who seem to be openly debating whether or not God is righteous, or whether Christ was declared righteous in the vindication of his life and work at his resurrection.⁷⁴

In his paper, Thielman argues for what amounts to a triperspectival understanding of the phrase *δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ* stemming from his ideas of polyvalence mentioned above and based on what the original audience would have understood it to mean.⁷⁵ Specifically, in Romans 1:17, Thielman sees Paul intending to refer existentially to the "gift of righteousness that comes from God to the one who believes in the gospel."⁷⁶ Situationally, he sees the phrase referring to "the powerful activity of God, so prominent in Isaiah and the Psalms, by which God saves his people

⁷³ For example, Schreiner commends Wright's view of exile ("I want to say that I think Wright is fundamentally right in what he says about the exile," "The Saving Righteousness of God in Christ," 19), yet is not willing to abandon imputation and concludes in *Faith Alone* that "in my judgment, Wright's view of justification needs to be both clarified and corrected," 261.

⁷⁴ For a brief defense of the latter point, see Bird, *The Saving Righteousness of God*, 118-119, as well as Brian Vickers, *Justification by Grace through Faith: Finding Freedom from Legalism, Lawlessness, Pride, and Despair, Explorations in Biblical Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013), 31-50.

⁷⁵ Thielman, "An Ancient Perspective on a Significant Phrase."

⁷⁶ Thielman, "An Ancient Perspective on a Significant Phrase." 47. The usage of existential, situational, and normative in the following parsing is my addition. The following quotations are all *Ibid*.

from wicked oppressors.” Normatively, he sees the phrase referring to “the fairness and equity of God as Origen, the first extant interpreter of Romans maintained.” God is considered fair because “he makes the good news of salvation by faith available to everyone, without regard to their social standing.” In this way, Thielman, while not explicitly affirming a triperspectival epistemology, is parsing out God’s righteousness (the normative perspective of the doctrine of justification) in a way that falls right in line with how someone explicitly working within that kind of epistemology would do so.

Conclusion

While more could be said, it seems best to present the theological data in a synthetic chart. As it stands, the chart attempts to capture the various emphases from Wright, Schreiner, and Thielman. Not everything within the chart comes from their writings, but the different emphases related to justification (soteriology, ecclesiology, and doctrine of God) are represented below.⁷⁷ More work could be done to validate the plotting at the exegetical level, but that is outside the scope and purpose of this paper. In the end, triperspectivalism is useful epistemological tool that can aid theological discussion. I would hope that as John Frame retires this May, his work would be carried into new areas and this paper represents a modest attempt to do just that.

⁷⁷ For another more recent attempt to harmonize similar data, see Bates, *Salvation By Allegiance Alone*, but also Tom Schreiner’s review, “Saved by ‘Allegiance’ Alone? On a New Attempt to Revise the Reformation,” The Gospel Coalition, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/book-review-salvation-by-allegiance-alone> (accessed March 17, 2017).

Justification is	Normative	Situational	Existential
An action of God (Normative, but can be parsed 3 ways)	Demonstrating the fairness of God to all people equally. (attribute)	Demonstrating the powerful activity of God in saving people through history. (activity)	Demonstrating the grace of God in giving it to all who believe. (appropriation)
Incorporating the Believer (Situational, but also can be parsed these 3 ways)	Into God's own righteousness as displayed in His Son. (monotheism)	Into a corporate display of God's own righteousness in the world through the body of Christ. (ecclesiology)	Into the new creation in advance, awaiting future fulfillment. (eschatology)
Into his own Righteousness (Existential, but also can be parsed out 3 ways)	On the basis of the Father's grace and love.	On the basis of the Spirit's work throughout the believer's life.	On the basis of the completed work of Christ trusted by faith.