

Seifrid on Wright: An Inference Based upon an Implication Regarding an Emphasis



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In his article, “(W)right with God?: A Response to N.T. Wright’s Vision of Justification,” published in this issue, Mark Seifrid sought to demonstrate that N.T. Wright’s interpretation of justification leads to a truncated view of atonement that deemphasizes Christ’s substitution for the sinner, while at the same time placing the believer in the position of having to conform morally to Christ through the Spirit in order to be vindicated at the final judgment. This leads, Seifrid contends, to a limited view of justification in which it is understood only as God’s declaration of acquittal of the believer in the present that must be followed by its becoming actual in the believer’s life. The foundation of Seifrid’s argument rests upon the contention that, for Wright, the atonement is primarily an act of representation and not substitution. In Wright’s subordination of substitution to representation, he effectively turns the atonement into a moral transaction.

According to Seifrid, Wright fails to see the drama of redemption, the exchange of our persons with the person of Christ, because this drama can only be appreciated where substitution is not demoted by representation. Wright’s ordering of the relationship between representation and substitution implies that these two dimensions in God’s atoning work in Christ are distinct and separate. Seifrid, to the contrary, argues that they are interwoven and that “Jesus is Israel’s

representative only as its substitute.”¹ He further contends that “Wright in his own way understands Jesus’ death, or rather Jesus’ obedience in the face of death, primarily as a moral example, even if he retains the traditional Protestant understanding of the atonement in his affirmation of its substitutionary dimension.”²

Seifrid contends that because of his emphasis upon the representation of Christ, Wright has a difficult time taking into account our participation in the resurrection of Christ. The new creation that we share in union with Christ is lost on Wright because he understands Jesus first and foremost as Israel’s representative. Because Jesus is viewed as representative, not only does Wright have problems with how we participate in His resurrection, but how we also participate in His death. Jesus loses his identity in his representative role in God’s plan and is depersonalized as merely an image or model of obedience. In short, Seifrid asserts that Wright’s interpretation “of the atonement primarily in terms of Jesus’ role as Israel’s representative thus not only obscures its substitutionary dimension, it obscures the exchange of persons that is at the heart of that substitutionary understanding.”³

Because Wright does not maintain our full participation in Christ and his resurrection, says Seifrid, this necessarily leads to a limited view of Jesus’ work in our justification. Wright holds to a “strict and narrow *ordo salutis*” (i.e., order of salvation) in which justification is the declaration a person has when the court has found in his favor. He thus appears to equivocate in his understanding of justification. Is it the initial declaration of acquittal given at the moment of one’s coming to Christ, or is it the final vindication one receives from God at the judgment? Seifrid argues that Wright’s position that one is initially justified and then final vindication affirms that justification, with the Spirit transforming us between the two events, is “nicely Augustinian and Tridentine, despite Wright’s attempts to distance himself from this theology. An initial vindication and a final vindication hardly differ from initial and final justification, even if Wright varies his language.”⁴

Seifrid further claims that Wright separates us from Jesus by basing

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¹ Mark Seifrid, “(W)right with God?: A Response to N.T. Wright’s Vision of Justification: Atonement and Justification in Biblical Perspective,” *MJT* 8.2/9.1 (2010): 8.

² *Ibid.*, 8.

³ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

our having Jesus as our righteousness here and now on the sanctifying work of the Spirit in the future. For Seifrid, being a part of the family of God is based upon being forgiven and acquitted in Christ. He maintains that, for Wright, it consists of more than being forgiven and acquitted, but of also being morally transformed by the Spirit into the image of Christ. He asserts that Wright has adopted a “fictional” understanding of justification in that the initial declaration given to the believer that he is acquitted must be followed by an “actual rescue” that involves the moral transformation of the believer.

Seifrid argues that Wright’s interpretation of 2 Corinthians 5:21, according to which Paul is not talking about all Christians becoming the righteousness of God, but about himself and his apostolic ministry, leads to the conclusion that the embodiment of God’s righteousness through moral conformity constitutes what it means to be truly human, and that, therefore, in Wright’s proposal “all of us are human, but some are more human than others.”⁵ Seifrid further proposes that Wright’s construal of justification in terms of the law court fits well with a modern democracy, but not with the biblical concept of God as a judge, whose judgment effects the declaration that is made. This is what Wright overlooks in his understanding of 2 Corinthians 5:21. When God declares that we are his righteousness, this is accomplished, not by our moral effort, but by the giving of his righteousness to us in Christ. “As the wonder of God’s grace, this communication of God’s righteousness to the human being does not fit into the scene of any human ‘law court,’ and certainly not the one that Wright imagines.”⁶ For Seifrid, justification is a forensic act that brings about a new creation, while for Wright, it is a mere pronouncement of a status to which the believer then has to conform by the Spirit.

I. A TANGLED PLOT LINE: WRIGHT’S READING OF THE BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

According to Seifrid, there are inconsistencies and equivocations that jeopardize the entire structure of N. T. Wright’s understanding of the atonement, and justification in particular. It must be acknowledged on the front end that Wright has mounted a large scale project into which atonement and justification are components, and to fully understand what he is doing, one must be willing to engage the entire scheme. With that said, one must engage it at the rock bottom level of exegesis, which is where Wright consistently sends his readers. Again, it must be stated that

⁵ Ibid., 18.

⁶ Ibid., 20.

Wright is doing his exegesis with his program in mind and his exegesis shapes it. The old hermeneutical spiral comes into play here, and, therefore, it is important to engage Wright with his whole program in mind, while at the same time only focusing on a small part of it. This is what Seifrid has attempted to do in his article, and it is for that reason that his article can appear confusing at times. While he works away at a very small aspect of Wright's scheme, Seifrid is well aware he must keep Wright's big picture in view; but for a reader who has not encountered Wright or who is not familiar with that larger program, it is easy to get lost in the trees by not being able to see where the forest begins or ends.

Seifrid, as was said, acknowledges this large-scale project of Wright's and also that he is not seeking to engage the whole of it. Yet he does address it to some degree in footnote five, which in turn becomes foundational to Seifrid's basic critique of Wright. In this footnote, he does take a shot at knocking the giant off his feet when he claims that "if and only if God's plan is simple and unbroken may one speak of Israel and Israel alone as the vehicle of God's saving purpose. Wright's inconsistencies concerning the identity of Israel and the role of the law call into question his proposal to read the Bible as a straight line narrative."⁷ If Seifrid is correct in his assessment that Wright cannot maintain his meta-narrative of Scripture, then great weight is given to his critique in this article. If, however, he is unable to discount Wright's understanding of the narrative of Scripture and God's single plan through Israel to redeem the world, then his inferences drawn from his implications of Wright's potentially become less powerful.

The first question we must address then is the issue of whether or not Seifrid is able to derail Wright's reading of the single narrative of Scripture in which God works through Israel to redeem the world with Jesus becoming the representative Israelite who both saves the Jewish people who were stuck in the curse of the Torah and brings blessings on the Gentiles by incorporating them into the family of Abraham. Seifrid mounts a three pronged critique of Wright's straight-line reading of the biblical narrative. He first argues that since Jesus had to die for the Jewish people, this introduces discontinuity into the story. He then suggests that Wright's understanding of how Jesus redefined the nation of Israel around "faithfulness and not ethnic boundaries" causes the nation of Israel to lose its identity, and this also brings discontinuity into the story. Finally, he argues that Wright is inconsistent on the purpose of the Torah in Israel, whether it was given as a guardian to watch over the nation until it grew up or to increase the guilt of the nation by exposing its sinfulness. Seifrid does not think that in Wright's reading of Scripture

⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

you can have it both ways, but that Wright nevertheless thinks you can and, therefore, brings about a break in the story. Let us now look at each of these critiques in turn.

We can quickly dismiss the second two critiques of the discontinuity in the story. Seifrid suggests that because Israel is redefined around faithfulness and not an ethnic boundary, this introduces discontinuity into the story; and yet it is Wright's contention that Paul goes back to Abraham to show that God made promises to Abraham that would encompass both Jews and Gentiles into the family of Abraham. This is Wright's major contention in his unpacking of Galatians 3.⁸ So while Seifrid sees this redefinition as a break in the story, it is, in fact, the conclusion to which the story was driving all along.⁹

The other critique Seifrid mounts is that Wright only sees the law as being used to keep the nation of Israel on the right path until the Messiah would come. In this sense, the law is like a guardian that is watching a child until that child reaches maturity. This is Paul's description of the law in Galatians 4. The law, however, is also used to reveal the sin and guilt of the people. In Wright's understanding of the Torah, it both locked the Jewish people up in the curse of the Law, while at the same time giving the nation a way to live so that a person did not always expect to keep the Law perfectly. It was the sacrificial system that allowed the Jewish people to continue to strive to keep the Law even after having broken it. Seifrid asserts that Wright's program only allows him to see the Law as a guardian to the nation and not as exposing the guilt of the people, although Wright explicitly affirms both uses of the Law.¹⁰ So, if Seifrid's critique is going to have any impact, he is going to need to show why Wright's program cannot hold to both uses of the Law and not merely assert that it does not, given that Wright clearly argues for and supports both uses of the Law.

Seifrid's first critique of Wright's straight-line story is clearly the most insightful. According to Wright, Jesus is the faithful Israelite who accomplished what the Jewish nation was unable to accomplish because it was itself trapped under the curse of the Law and needed to be rescued. Under this scenario, Jesus comes and redeems the nation from its curse by taking the nation's place under the curse. In so doing, he is the faithful Israelite who fulfills the purpose of the nation. The question that Seifrid asks, and rightly so, is if Jesus is the representative of the nation so that he fulfills the plan God had for the nation, was it God's plan for the

⁸ N. T. Wright, *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 11-140.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 71-73.

nation to be crucified all along, or does the moment of individualism in which Jesus has to die for the nation cause the straight-line story that Wright is espousing to break down. Seifrid has hit upon a question here that Wright will need to answer, but to which I am not aware that he has answered. My conjecture, and it is only conjecture since I would like to hear Wright's response, is that Wright would maintain that while Jesus is indeed the faithful Israelite who fulfills the plans God had for the nation, the nation's own sin has caused the story that is being told in the Bible to be resolved in a rather unforeseen manner, yet in such a way that it makes perfect sense. Jesus is the plot twist in God's redemptive plan in history that no one saw coming, but which was foretold in the Scriptures, so that once it happened, it could be clearly seen how it fits perfectly with what has gone before in the Old Testament. So while Jesus does have to die for the nation, and in that he does something that the nation was never called to do, he still fulfills the representative role of the nation by bringing the blessings of Abraham to the world. This was all along God's intended means to restore the relationship that was broken in the Garden.¹¹ This is of course just my own conjecture, not Wright's, and it would be enlightening to see how he would respond to Seifrid's critique.

II. AN IMPLICATION FROM WRIGHT'S EMPHASIS: REPRESENTATION ECLIPSES SUBSTITUTION

As already shown, the heart of Seifrid's critique of Wright lies in what he sees as a reduction in the emphasis upon the substitutionary element in the atonement compared to the representative element. Wright's strong emphasis upon Jesus as the representative Israelite effectively, if not explicitly, reduces his substitutionary role to nil. While Seifrid concedes in footnote five that Wright does hold to a substitutionary dimension in his understanding of Jesus' atonement, he consistently implies in the heart of his article that Wright cannot hold to substitution given his emphasis upon representation. Despite what Wright says about holding to substitution, it is maintained that his program will not allow him to hold to this dimension of Christ's work and, therefore, Wright gets the gospel wrong.¹² At least that is the inference that Seifrid makes from the implication he establishes based only on the emphasis that Wright holds between representation and substitution. In the first part of the article, Seifrid builds up his case by looking at representation and substitution in both the death and

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 34-35.

¹² *Ibid.*, 106, 207.

resurrection of Jesus. It is to these two areas that we now turn.

What exactly did Jesus accomplish on the cross? Did he take the place of sinners by collecting the wages of sin for them, or did Jesus' obedience to the Father open the way for salvation for people, but without Jesus bearing the sins of the people? In truth, the "or" in the last sentence sets up a false dichotomy, a false dichotomy that Seifrid affirms in his critique of Wright. In Wright's emphasis upon representation, the atonement is reduced to a mere moral transaction in which the Father rewards the obedience of the Son. While Seifrid does not refute this emphasis in and of itself—for he affirms that we must understand the obedience of Jesus as necessary in the atonement as well as in a sense being rewarded—he does claim that Wright has eliminated the substitutionary aspect in the atonement by elevating the representative aspect. In so doing, Seifrid claims that Wright "nearly makes God out to be nothing more than a moral authority who rewards Jesus' heroic performance."¹³ While he is careful to qualify his claim by saying that Wright "nearly" makes God into what he claims, it is the "nearly" that betrays a crack in his argument. It is clear that Wright does not do this explicitly, so the most Seifrid can mount is that the inference to be drawn from Wright's emphasis is that God "nearly" becomes a rewarder of obedience.

In thus reducing the cross to a moral transaction, Wright misses the great pleasure of the cross, which is to be understood as the substitutionary work of Christ. Now this is a fairly strong accusation to level, and in so doing, one would have hoped that Seifrid would have presented a stronger case for how Wright has reduced the atonement to merely a moral transaction. His critique against Wright in this section of the article hangs upon the claim that "the ordering of the relationship between 'representation' and 'substitution' which Wright offers implies that these two dimensions of God's atoning work in Christ are distinct and separate."¹⁴ From this implication of separation, he then reaches conclusions about Wright's elimination of substitution from the work of Christ *in toto*. It is one thing to offer a critique in which one disagrees with a person's emphasis or even shows the possible results of over emphasizing a position, but Seifrid does not do that in this article. Instead, he moves from his implications about an emphasis to arguing that in fact Wright drops substitution from his understanding of the work of Christ. He does this while at the same time affirming that Wright "retains the traditional Protestant understanding of the atonement in his

¹³ Seifrid, "(W)right," 7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

affirmation of its substitutionary dimension.”¹⁵ Seifrid has argued that we must keep the substitutionary and representative aspects of the atonement interwoven, and in this he is correct, but he has not convincingly shown that Wright has failed to do this. All he has shown is that Wright emphasizes representation more than substitution and that because of this it is claimed that he has separated the two and effectively dropped substitution from the mixture. Simply making an inference from an implication about Wright’s emphasis does not make the inference true, it makes it only an inference, and a rather unstable one at that.

III. AN IMPLICATION FROM WRIGHT’S EMPHASIS: REPRESENTATION ECLIPSES RESURRECTION

Having supposedly established that Wright loses the substitutionary dimension of Christ’s work in his crucifixion, Seifrid then moves forward to show how Wright has the same problem with our participation in the resurrection of Christ. Since Christ is only our representative, we cannot be an ontological part of his resurrection, which effectively reduces our union with Christ to an experiential union that leaves little hope of a future resurrection. Seifrid’s critique revolves around Wright’s understanding of Romans 6, particularly in how we are in Christ in both his death and resurrection. He posits that in the book, *The Resurrection and the Son of God*, Wright’s “understanding of salvation is tilted toward Jesus’ obedience, so that he does not appreciate the full significance of Jesus’ resurrection.”¹⁶ It is clear by Seifrid’s language of “tilting” that Wright does not see salvation as only about Jesus’ obedience, but that does not stop Seifrid from moving forward as if he has established the claim that Wright in fact sees no substitutionary dimension in salvation.

In order to defend his critique, Seifrid goes through an exposition about the difference between Wright’s “symbolic appropriation of the Pauline metaphor” of resurrection and his own understanding of Paul’s “realistic metaphor.” He argues that Paul’s realistic metaphor of our resurrection life is “based on the transfer of the *reality* of Christ’s resurrection here and now to those who believe.”¹⁷ In other words, since Christ is our substitute, Paul is able to speak of our being resurrected in Christ now, even though that event awaits a future day. It is this tension between the “realistic metaphor” of resurrection that we have now and the coming real resurrection at the *eschaton* that prevents us from

¹⁵ Ibid., 8.

¹⁶ Ibid., 9.

¹⁷ Ibid., 10.

following the “Corinthian error” in which we subsume the resurrection life into the present age as if it was fully completed. Seifrid then assumes that since Wright does not hold to substitution that he cannot follow this same path, but we have already shown that Seifrid’s basis for saying that Wright rejects substitution is based upon an inference from an implication about his emphasis. Thus, Seifrid does not feel compelled to establish that Wright cannot follow this path, all he has to do is fall back upon his previous claim as if it was true, and then read Wright within this pre-established paradigm.

According to Seifrid, “It is not clear that Wright’s symbolic appropriation of the Pauline metaphor sufficiently guards against such a totalizing approach: ‘building for the kingdom’ may well displace the hope of the kingdom breaking in upon this world.”¹⁸ Of course, when one reads Wright it is obvious that he does not subsume the resurrection into the present life of the believer in the manner that Seifrid suggests.¹⁹ In fact, it would seem that Seifrid might be making this accusation, not based upon Wright’s exegesis of the passage in Romans, but because of Wright’s eschatological views on other issues and his willingness to be involved in various political works in the world.

Seifrid concludes his discussion on the resurrection in Wright by stating that “the reality of the new creation in which we share in Christ goes missing in Wright’s work, because Wright understands Jesus first and foremost as Israel’s representative.”²⁰ I would suggest that, in fact, Wright clearly argues that in the Spirit we participate in the new creation in Christ. Our union with Christ in the power of the Spirit is one of the major themes of Wright’s book, *Justification: God’s Plan & Paul’s Vision*. Furthermore, a major argument he raises against some of his critics is that they completely leave the Spirit out of the discussion, but it is by the Spirit that we are placed in union with Christ so as to be able to share in the reality of the new creation that was effected by his death and resurrection.²¹

IV. AN IMPLICATION FROM WRIGHT’S EMPHASIS: REPRESENTATION ECLIPSES JESUS

Next, Seifrid suggests that in Wright’s plan “Jesus loses his

¹⁸ Ibid., 11.

¹⁹ N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection and the Son of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2003), 248-259.

²⁰ Seifrid, “(W)right,” 11.

²¹ Wright, *Justification*, 10, 188-193.

individual identity and becomes generic.”²² It is for this reason that he claims that Wright’s Jesus cannot utter the cry of dereliction of Psalm 22. Since Jesus is the representative of the nation of Israel and fulfills the single-plan-of-God for the nation of Israel, he must then die as the nation and, hence, cannot utter that God has forsaken him. This gets back to the break in the story that Seifrid alleges that Wright makes. Since we have already dealt with that issue earlier, here we will only say that if one rejects Seifrid’s claims about there being a break in the straight line narrative then there is no reason to accept his claim here that Jesus could not make this cry himself or that Wright “dehistoricizes” Jesus.

From this statement that Wright dehistoricizes Jesus, Seifrid then posits that “in a way that transcends Wright’s proposal, Jesus appears in the New Testament not merely as the Suffering Servant who fulfills the divine purpose, but also as the one human being *who acts as God*.”²³ In footnote 20, Seifrid says that Wright’s Christology might be described as Eutychian. He does not give any support for this claim directly from Wright’s work, but only points the reader to an article that he himself wrote. If one is going to apply the label of a major Christological heresy to a person, common courtesy should at least compel him to cite in detail how that person’s Christology is heretical.

V. AN IMPLICATION FROM AN EMPHASIS: SANCTIFICATION OVERSHADOWS JUSTIFICATION

In the second section of Seifrid’s article, he addresses the controversy that is raging over Wright’s redefinition of justification. According to Seifrid, it is Wright’s loss of perspective in our full participation in Christ that leads him to a flawed understanding of justification. He suggests that Wright is confusing on his use of the word justification. On the one hand it represents a part of the *ordo salutis* in which justification is the status of “not guilty” given when a court finds in a person’s favor, while on the other hand justification and the righteousness for which people hope is their final vindication. It is because Wright sees the initial status of not guilty that is given in justification as entailing the forgiveness of sins and the giving of the Spirit that he can thus speak of this initial justification as a vindication. Within this understanding, Wright argues that righteousness in law court imagery is not a reference to the moral quality of the person who receives the declaration of not guilty, but it is instead about the position into which the verdict places the person. Wright clearly rejects the idea that justification means that

²² Seifrid, “(W)right,” 12.

²³ *Ibid.*, 12.

the righteousness of Christ is imputed to the believer. He argues that this way of conceiving of justification does not do justice to the biblical imagery that Paul uses, but it does seek to capture what Paul means by our being “in Christ.”²⁴

The link between the initial declaration that we are not guilty and the final eschatological vindication of the believer is the Spirit. Wright wants to argue that it is the Spirit who guarantees that we are what we have been declared to be. The question that Seifrid rightly raises is how the post-conversion works of the believer factor into the initial declaration that is given in justification. In the Roman Catholic system, a person is initially justified, but then his works complete his justification, and if he does not work then his justification is not complete. Seifrid acknowledges that Wright has directly refuted this charge against his system, but Seifrid still sees Wright as on a road to Rome, even if it is a road that might not be the most well traveled one. The underlying critique that Seifrid sees in Wright’s program is that the status of those who are God’s is thrown into question. Is a person part of God’s family based upon the forgiveness of his sins or is his transformed life necessary for this membership? And if his transformed life is constitutive of his membership on some level, how much transformation is enough? The question we must ask Seifrid is has he correctly understood Wright’s presentation, especially as it regards the Spirit’s role in guaranteeing the believers final vindication in light of the initial declaration given in justification?

Seifrid advances his critique of Wright by looking at two passages: Galatians 2 and 2 Corinthians 5:21. He begins his case, however, in Romans 3 where he agrees with Wright’s language of justification in traditional terms.²⁵ When Wright talks about justification and/or righteousness in Galatians 2, however, he highlights that for Wright we are now at the dinner table and the issue is about who is a part of God’s family. In Galatians, justification does not mean “free forgiveness of your sins” but instead it means “to be reckoned by God to be a true member of his family, and hence with the right to share in table fellowship.”²⁶ From these two uses of the word justification, Seifrid asserts that Wright has a dissonant reading of Romans and Galatians. I would posit that Wright is simply trying to be faithful to the surrounding context in which the words appear and that it is the immediate context of the passage that has the greatest bearing on how a word is to be understood. Regardless of this small issue, Seifrid makes the contention

²⁴ Wright, *Justification*, 95, 135, 206, 231-33.

²⁵ Seifrid, “(W)right,” 15-17.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

that Wright goes further than seeing a nuanced use of the word justification between the two books, but that, in fact, he plays off membership in God's family against forgiveness and acquittal. Seifrid contends that our membership in the family is nothing other than our forgiven status, and he asserts that for Wright it is "contingent upon the faithfulness and true humanity effected within us by the Spirit?"²⁷

Wright does not argue that our membership in God's family is predicated upon our faithfulness, but upon the faithfulness of Christ.²⁸ By faith a person is joined to Christ and it is Christ's faithfulness to God that makes the person righteous. It is in union with Christ through the Spirit that a person is in the family of God, that a person appropriates the faithfulness of Christ. Wright does make a concerted effort to hold together a judgment according to works in Romans 2:6-11 with the eschatological renewal in Romans 8. He does this by an appeal to the Spirit. Once a person is in union with Christ, that person is then empowered by the Spirit to live in such a manner as to reflect Christ and his faithfulness. Wright rejects the idea that the moral transformation brought about by the Spirit earns final salvation, but he does argue that if a person does not show the fruit of the Spirit that his salvation stands in question. When a person is in Christ in the present, it is the Spirit who guarantees that the person will be vindicated at the final judgment in the future.²⁹

Seifrid contends that Wright does not see what God did for us in Jesus as a single, undivided reality, but that Wright parcels out Christ's work into an initial declaration and a final rescue. On one level, I get the impression that Seifrid and Wright are talking past each other on this issue. Wright is working within a historical-redemptive context and Seifrid is working within a more systematic theological context, and as such it is difficult to bring the language of the two together. Seifrid willingly admits that Wright's view of salvation is not Pelagian, but he questions whether it is biblical, while clearly declaring that it is not reformational. Wright would agree with the statement that it is not reformational, but he would also hold that his loyalty is not to the Reformation, but to the Reformation tradition of *sola scriptura*. While we owe a great debt to the Reformers, and we do ourselves a disservice not to listen to their voices, they are not our basis for authority, that position is held by Scripture. It is for this reason that the repeated accusations that Wright is not reformational tend to ring a bit hollow, in that being biblical is more important than being reformational, and I

²⁷ Ibid., 16.

²⁸ Wright, *Justification*, 117-118.

²⁹ Ibid., 235-40.

think this is something that the Reformers would endorse. This is not to argue that Wright is correct over the Reformers, but only to highlight the truth that merely showing that the Reformers held a certain view does not make that view correct.

When it comes to 2 Corinthians 5:21, there is a sharp disagreement between Seifrid and Wright over the meaning of God's righteousness. For Wright, this phrase refers to God's faithfulness to his covenant, while for Seifrid this is about the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer. Wright is clear in his work that he is not following the traditional reformational reading of this verse. It is, therefore, difficult to enter into a critique of Seifrid's position against Wright because Seifrid does not so much refute Wright's interpretation of 2 Corinthians 5:21 as he just reasserts the traditional reading and then shows how Wright's position does not fit with that reading. It would be more helpful to show why Wright's reading is wrong first before highlighting the mistaken positions that flow from his reading. Since Seifrid does not do this, we will have to content ourselves with seeing if his implications about Wright's position are correct.

The question again revolves around the issue of substitution, in that according to Seifrid "Wright misses the exchange of persons and its effective character. He instead understands Christ as a visible representation of God's righteousness that morally transforms the apostle and keeps God's righteousness entirely separate from justification. What God has given as an unqualified gift in Christ, Wright would like to attain by the power of the Spirit."³⁰ At the root of the problem with this statement is that Seifrid is talking past Wright in many ways. Wright argues that this verse is not about the imputation of Christ's righteousness, but he also argues that the idea that imputation seeks to address is found in other places. Seifrid does not address the point from Wright, but forges ahead as if he never said it. He, thus, gives the implication that Wright does not hold to substitution, with all the results that such a position would entail. He also claims that for Wright God's righteousness morally transforms Paul and that this keeps righteousness separate from justification. According to Wright, God's righteousness is his covenant faithfulness, and in Christ God keeps his covenant with Abraham. Because God keeps his covenant in Christ, Paul then says that as an apostle he has become the righteousness of God in that he is now proclaiming the faithfulness of God in Christ. I am not sure that Wright treats this idea as a moral transformation. Paul's being the righteousness of God is not about his moral transformation, but about his gospel proclamation.

³⁰ Seifrid, "(W)right," 18.

From his conclusion that Wright understands God's righteousness as moral transformation, Seifrid makes the odd assertion that according to Wright some followers of Christ are more human than others. We need to unpack this assertion for a moment before we move on. Here is how I understand Seifrid on Wright: Since God's righteousness is moral transformation into the image of Christ, who is himself the true measure of what it means to be human, the more one is transformed morally into the image the more one is human. While the argument makes logical sense, I do not think it makes sense of what Wright is saying. Wright argues that we are members of God's family based upon the faithfulness of the Messiah. It is Jesus' faithfulness, his obedience, which is the basis for God's declaration of not guilty upon a believer. Having been incorporated into God's family through Christ, the believer is then transformed by the power of the Spirit into the image of Christ.

One final note on this section involves Seifrid's critique of Wright's use of law court imagery. This is one of the foundational points of Wright's work, and if Seifrid can undermine Wright's position then much of what Wright has proposed might collapse. The problem is that Seifrid merely asserts that Wright envisions a modern democratic law court, and then he proceeds to show how this makes Wright's position wrong. It would have been beneficial if Seifrid would have shown from Wright's own work how he gets the law court imagery wrong, since in his most recent book, *Justification*, Wright explicitly lists Seifrid as a critic who has made this charge, but has shown no evidence to support it.³¹

Seifrid concludes his article with a comment on how the nation of Israel was to be a light to the nations. He argues that the nation was to be a light not by morally imitating God but by being rescued by God. "The Servant's active role of bringing justice to the nations is subordinate to the Servant's passive role as the *recipient* of justice."³² According to Seifrid, the idea of being a light to the nations is about the nation reflecting the saving work of the creator. In this way, Israel, in so far as the nation is included in the Servant, does not fail to be a light to the nations, as Wright asserts, because its light shining was never about moral acts, but about being rescued. It is not the nation's moral efforts that make it shine, but precisely the rescue that God effects for the nation. It is the glory of the Lord that shines from the midst of misery and degradation that is the light that shines forth. The Isaianic language of light (40:1-11, 60:1-3, 42:12, 49:3, 49:6-13, 42:6, 45:7) stands in stark contrast to Wright's moralistic understanding of light, according to

³¹ Wright, *Justification*, 68

³² Seifrid, "(W)right," 22.

Seifrid.

Seifrid posits then that those who are a light to the nations, à la 2 Corinthians 5:21, are not those who emulate a moral ideal, but those who are delivered by God. This deliverance makes them children of God who are then to imitate the God who is already their father. In 2 Corinthians 6:2, Paul clearly aligns Jesus with the Servant. Christ's suffering and deliverance is now Paul's who communicates this comfort given to him with the sufferings of Christ to the Corinthians. It is, therefore, not only the apostle but also the Corinthians who are made the righteousness of God.

In this argument, and especially the issue regarding how the nation of Israel is to be a light to the nations, Seifrid has offered a major critique to Wright's reading of the narrative of Scripture. How exactly was the nation of Israel to be a light to the nations? Seifrid maintains that it would be a light, first and foremost, by being rescued by God. It is the rescue that shines forth the glory of God, the light of God, to the nations. In that understanding, Israel, in so much as the nation is in the Servant, has not failed to be a light. In fact, the nation must be rescued in order for the light to go forth. I am not aware that Wright has addressed this issue directly, but I can see how Seifrid's reading could fit into the overarching narrative that Wright construes. The understanding that the nation needed to be rescued fits in neatly with the two-pronged emphasis of Wright's reading in which Jesus is both the representative of the nation (i.e., the Servant) and a substitute for the nation. It is because Jesus is the substitute for the nation that he can be the representative, and in fact, by being the substitute, by bearing the curse of the law, he is able to be rescued from death and, thus, fulfill his representative role.

VI. CONCLUSION

It is Seifrid's contention that "Wright's interpretation of the atonement primarily in terms of Jesus' role as Israel's representative thus not only obscures its substitutionary dimension, it obscures the exchange of persons that is at the heart of that substitutionary understanding."³³ As such, "Wright's commitment to the priority of corporate categories leads him, in contrast, to a moralistic—and, indeed, rationalistic—conception of the atonement."³⁴ The two preceding statements sum up nicely Seifrid's critique of Wright in which he argues that he gets the gospel horribly wrong.³⁵ It is one thing to argue that a person's emphasis could

³³ Ibid., 13.

³⁴ Ibid., 13.

³⁵ While the article never uses the phrase that Wright gets the gospel

lead someone to miss something that is a part of the atonement, but it is quite another to argue that an inference drawn from implications about an emphasis in one's treatment of the atonement entails that a portion of the atonement, in this case substitution, is completely missing from one's project. While Wright does not speak in the traditional language of the systematic theologian, and he indeed does have an emphasis upon the representative role of Jesus, it is uncharitable to accuse him of dropping substitution from his program based only upon implications drawn from his emphasis when he has asserted that he has not dropped substitution from his understanding of the atonement.

horribly wrong, this position was espoused during a Q&A that took place before the Sizemore lectures were delivered.