
N. T. Wright and John Calvin on the Doctrine of Imputation in 2 Corinthians 5:21

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Wright's Exegetical Challenge

Anglican scholar N. T. Wright has suggested that the doctrine of imputation is a Reformation construct having no validity other than its being enshrined in hymns, liturgies, and popular devotionals.¹ Wright's arguments in regard to imputation are not merely *ad hominem* attacks on prominent churchmen and theologians and their exegetical labors. Wright argues his points from Scripture; according to his analysis, 2 Corinthians 5:21² has been traditionally read "as a somewhat detached statement of atonement theology," to wit, as a proof for what Luther dubbed the "wondrous exchange" that takes place between Christ and sinners.³

Wright believes that his conclusions are founded on at least two Biblical arguments. First, for Wright, God's righteousness mentioned in 2 Corinthians 5:21 is not something that "the judge imputes, imparts, bequeaths, conveys or otherwise transfers" across a courtroom; rather, this righteousness is God's faithfulness to His covenant.⁴ Embedded in this assertion is Wright's argument that the righteousness mentioned in 2 Corinthians 5:21 is God's righteousness and not Christ's. This contention opens the way for his second major assertion, namely, that Paul's ministry "is itself an incarnation of the ministry of the covenant faithfulness of God."⁵ Therefore, Wright eliminates from this text any notion of the imputation of Christ's righteousness, or God's for that matter, to His covenant people.

Looking further, Wright's attack is even more devastating than it first appears. According to the Anglican bishop, 1 Corinthians 1:30, the only place where the righteousness of Christ is mentioned, cannot be used to support the doctrine of imputation unless theologians are

¹ See N. T. Wright, "On Becoming the Righteousness of God," in *Pauline Theology*, vol. 2, ed. D. M. Hay (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), 203-204.

² 2 Corinthians 5:21 (ESV): "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

³ Wright, "Righteousness of God," 203.

⁴ N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 98-99.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 104. Here, Wright argues that Paul is not talking about justification in 2 Corinthians 5:21, but rather about his apostolic ministry. Thus, the point at issue is the fact that apostles are ambassadors for Christ, with God making His appeal through them. They are an incarnation of God's covenant faithfulness. Cf. N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 175-192. Richard B. Hays (*Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 171]) attempts the same argument by focusing on Paul's use of Isaiah 6:1-2.

“prepared to talk of the imputed wisdom of Christ; the imputed sanctification of Christ; and the imputed redemption of Christ.”⁶ Yet, as Wright points out, such a notion would make nonsense of the technical way in which the righteousness of Christ is discussed.⁷ Thus, according to Wright, the two texts most often used to substantiate the doctrine of the imputation of Christ’s righteous are rendered invalid on the basis of a plain reading of the texts themselves.

Therefore, Wright asserts that the imputed righteousness of Christ, which is “more often found in post-Reformation theology and piety than in the New Testament”, has no textual basis.⁸ As a corrective, Wright instructs would-be expositors to look at the contexts of texts like 1 Corinthians 1:30 and 2 Corinthians 5:21, in order to avoid the mistakes of others.⁹ Interestingly, Wright argues that the phrase “the imputed righteousness of Christ” is “more often found in *post-Reformation theology* and piety than in the New Testament.”¹⁰ Here, the question must be asked: by attributing this error to post-Reformation theology, does Wright mean to exclude reformers like Calvin and Luther from this supposed misuse of the Biblical texts?¹¹ Is he suggesting that the Protestant scholastics misread and hence misinterpreted Calvin on the doctrine of imputation? If so, what does Wright make of Calvin’s comments in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, which suggest that 2 Corinthians 5:18-21 is the best passage of all on the matter of justification, the forgiveness of sin, and the imputation of righteousness?¹² Moreover, Calvin not only links the imputation of righteousness to justification, but he also encourages the reader of 2 Corinthians 5 to “carefully ponder the whole passage,” the very action for which Wright is calling.¹³

Therefore, in view of Wright’s attack and in an attempt to heed Calvin’s counsel, the remainder of this paper will take Calvin as an exegetical guide to probing the text of 2 Corinthians. In particular, paying attention to some of the more salient themes in this letter will reveal the differences between Calvin’s orthodoxy and Wright’s innovative and problematic views. Consequently, this paper will, first of all, examine the controlling theme of Calvin’s exegesis of 2 Corinthians 5:21: the epistemic failure of man to see the truth of God plainly held forth by God’s ministers in the preaching of the Word. Secondly, this paper will develop Calvin’s understanding of the Spirit’s role in the imputation of this righteousness to the believer’s life. This analysis will lead, finally, to an examination of Calvin’s understanding of the “righteousness of God” in 2

⁶ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 123.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Wright, “Righteousness of God,” 203-204.

¹⁰ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 123 (emphasis added).

¹¹ It is interesting that Wright rarely quotes the Reformers. For example, in his *The Climax of the Covenant*, he refers to Calvin only once (see Wright, *Climax of the Covenant*, 220). In his *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), no mention is made of Calvin. In *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), Calvin is again mentioned but once. In Wright’s article concerning his theological pilgrimage, he makes limited reference to the historic Reformers, though he does mention Charles Simeon and the Reformers in general. See N. T. Wright, “My Pilgrimage in Theology,” *Themelios*, 18, no. 2 (1993): 35.

¹² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960) 1:546-547.

¹³ Ibid.

Corinthians 5:21. The coherence of Calvin's argument in contrast to concerning elements of Wright's presentation will affirm the contention that 2 Corinthians 5:21 does not deny the imputation of righteousness to the believer in Christ, but rather confirms it as Biblical truth.

The Controlling Theme in 2 Corinthians 3:1-5:21

The Commendation Problem

It is certainly the case that a central theme circulating at the heart of this Second Epistle to the Corinthians is the notion of commendation.¹⁴ Apparently, false teachers had claimed a position of superiority over that of the Apostle on the grounds of letters of commendation that they had produced upon their arrival in Corinth. They seemed to expect the Corinthians to give them similar letters upon their departure. The question obviously instigated by the false teachers was (cf. 2 Cor. 3:1-3), "Where were Paul's letters? Who was willing to endorse him?" Those questions continually simmer under the surface of the entire second letter to the Corinthians.

However, a parallel theme alongside these questions is the need for such an endorsement. For the false teachers, these letters seem to be something of a meal ticket. According to the Apostle, any need for these commendatory letters stemmed from man's ineptitude. Early in the Epistle, Paul clarifies the fact that he, as a finite man, was inadequate for the task that God had given him. Some laudatory letter could not make up whatever he was lacking (2 Cor. 2:16). His incompetence was greater than what a letter of commendation could overcome; the same was true of the so-called super-apostles. Therefore, with alacrity, the Apostle to the Gentiles announced that his sufficiency did not come from a letter, from the Corinthian church or anyone else. His sufficiency was from God alone.¹⁵

The Epistemological Problem

Yet, a consideration of Calvin's analysis of 2 Corinthians provides insight into issues beyond the debate between Paul and his agitators. The text reveals something that is true for everyone, an insufficiency which exists in all humanity. Paul's concern is epistemological. According to the Apostle, man's insufficiency is not due to lacking a flattering letter. The problem, the insufficiency, is inherent in mankind. The problem is in man's ability to think and know. And for Calvin, this epistemological deficiency provides the conceptual key for the expositor to lay hold of Paul's overall thrust in the pericope of 2 Corinthians 3:1-5:21.

Commenting on 2 Corinthians 3:5, Calvin alleges that the Apostle left man with nothing. The Genevan explains, "For the smallest part, in a manner, of a good work is *thought* ... Paul does not leave them so much as the power of *thinking* aught!"¹⁶ Interpreting Calvin, T. H. L. Parker says that the knowledge of God begets *pietas* and *religio*. He writes,

¹⁴ cf. 2 Corinthians 4:2, 5:11, 6:4, 10:12, 18, 12:11.

¹⁵ 2 Corinthians 3:5. Cf. John Calvin, *Commentary on II Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996), 169. Calvin writes, "As it was a magnificent commendation, that Paul had pronounced to the honour of himself and his Apostleship, lest he should seem to speak of himself more confidently than was befitting, he transfers the entire glory to God."

¹⁶ Calvin, *II Corinthians*, 170.

Hence no true *pietas* exists in the world, for, as we have seen, *pietas* and *religio* stem from knowledge of God. But surely superstition is a forgivable fault, the faltering steps of simple minds that know no better? Not so; superstition is a blindness, and is nearly always involved with futility (*vanitas*), pride, and stubbornness. It does not apprehend God as he offers himself, but substitutes in his place a humanly imagined something.¹⁷

Thus, Paul's inadequacy, along with everyone else, according to Calvin, rested primarily in his inability to even think, as he ought to think. Calvin writes,

For they think to get off by acknowledging that man is not qualified to form good purposes, while in the mean time they ascribe to him a right apprehension of the mind, which, with some assistance from God, may effect something of itself. Paul, on the other hand, declares that man is in want, not merely of *sufficiency of himself*, ... but also *competency* ... if such a term were in use among the Latins.¹⁸

Calvin almost certainly has the Roman Church in mind in this part of his exposition. Perhaps especially in view is the nature-grace dualism of Aquinas, who argued for, in the language of Van-Tilian apologetics, a "block-house methodology"¹⁹ for understanding the faith. In other words, according to Rome, in the fall, man lost his original righteousness – the upper level of his so-called block house – but not his faculty of rationality or his ability to reason correctly – the base level of the human block house. Accordingly, in Roman theology, man is able to think with clarity because he has "a right apprehension of the mind," to use Calvin's language. Thus, Rome's view of man's intellectual ability was more positive than that of Calvin who clearly argued for man's insufficiency and incompetence.

Calvin's wording supplies the mind with a plethora of images that might illustrate the distinction that he is drawing between sufficiency and competency. To use a negative example, one might envision an ordinary man carrying a doctor's bag having a complete set of physician's tools. The man's problem is not with the available tools. The problem is that he is unfit – or incompetent – to carry the bag in the first place. Calvin seems to supply his own illustration to differentiate between the concepts when he writes,

Just as old or bleary-eyed men and those with weak vision, if you thrust before them a most beautiful volume, even if they recognize it to be some sort of writing, yet can scarcely construe two words, but with the aid of spectacles will begin to read distinctly; so Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God.²⁰

Thus, because a man has a book in his hands does not mean he can read it.

Therefore, whether the Genevan had the Roman church in mind or not, he effectively strips bare his opponents, the Corinthian believers, and himself of any and every good thing. All are intellectually insufficient and incompetent before God. Yet, Paul is not concerned to leave the

¹⁷ T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin: An Introduction to His Thought* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 17.

¹⁸ Calvin, *II Corinthians*, 170.

¹⁹ See Greg Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1998), 64, 535f, 708f.

²⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:70.

church with a notion of a vague epistemic problem. According to Calvin, intellectual impotence resides in man's inability to receive the ministry of reconciliation in his own power. But Paul goes even further: he makes plain that human inadequacy is not confined to the ability to receive the ministry of reconciliation. For, in addition, the Apostle highlights the inadequacy of the gospel minister to represent the redemptive ministry of Christ. "For who is adequate for these things?" asks the Apostle (2 Cor. 2:15).

Though the notions of epistemic insufficiency and incompetence undergird the entirety of 2 Corinthians 3:1-5:21, Calvin sees the culmination of Paul's point brought to a climax in the final verses of chapter 3. In the Apostle's discussion of Moses and the veil in 3:12-18, there Calvin makes two epistemological points.

Moses and the Veil

First, Calvin argues that Moses, no doubt struggling against the same epistemic inadequacies, did not intentionally make the law obscure, but was obviously "desirous that its true meaning should be apprehended by all."²¹ Here, Paul highlights the fact that the problem with the ability to understand the law rested in the hearers. It was owing to their blindness that they could not understand the law. They were rationally impotent. Knowing this, Moses was content to faithfully discharge his duty to preach the promises and curses of the covenant to dead men. According to Calvin, this deadness is the epistemic state of every unbeliever.

Therefore, the veil that Moses used to cover his face "was an emblem of a stupidity" that would come upon the people as a result of the hardness of their minds, or as Calvin translates it, "their understandings were blinded."²² In other words, Moses' preaching may have been perfectly intelligible, but it would not have mattered, for the people wore a veil over their understanding. Interestingly, Calvin points out that the Apostle picks up this theme once again in 2 Corinthians 4. There, Calvin interprets the Apostle as saying, the "blindness of unbelievers detracts nothing from the clearness of his gospel."²³ Those who are perishing under the gospel clearly preached are those who are perishing because the god of this world has blinded their minds.²⁴ They wear a veil over their understanding.²⁵ They are incompetent to hear even the most lucid preaching.

Christ and Liberty

Second, commenting on 2 Corinthians 3:16, Calvin asserts that only when the Jews or anyone else "seek Christ in the law, the truth of God will be distinctly seen by them, but so long as they think to be wise without Christ, they will wander in darkness, and will never arrive at a right understanding of the law."²⁶ Thus, according to Calvin, Christ is the spirit of the law (3:17),

²¹ Calvin, *II Corinthians*, 182.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, 192.

²⁴ See 2 Corinthians 4:4.

²⁵ 2 Corinthians 4:3.

²⁶ Calvin, *2 Corinthians*, 184.

meaning by this assertion “that it (the law) will be living and life-giving, only if it is breathed into by Christ.”²⁷ Thus, where the Spirit is, there is liberty.

Against Wright’s Epistemological Framework

Calvin’s view of this passage stands in contrast to Wright’s view. Whereas for Calvin, the effect of sin on the *nous* is devastating, for Wright, the epistemological effect is not even mentioned. In fact, Wright rarely deals with sin and its effects on man.²⁸ Wright articulates his view of sin with a bit more clarity in *The Climax of the Covenant* when he writes, “What is envisaged, in other words, is not so much the question of what happens *when this or that individual sins*, but the question of what happens when *the nation as a whole fails to keep the Torah as a whole*.”²⁹ The point for Wright is that whether Deuteronomy 30 or Galatians 3:10-14 are in view, sin should be thought of corporately. There is obviously some truth in such a statement. However, Wright almost continually fails to explain the nature and effects of sin for humanity.

That Wright seems to disregard the epistemic problem of sin is seen to an even greater degree when he articulates his epistemological position in *The New Testament and the People of God*.³⁰ There, Wright argues,

Proposing a new epistemology is, in fact, intrinsically difficult, precisely because of the difficulty with empiricism itself. It is impossible to find solid (“objective”) ground to stand on: such a thing does not exist. All epistemologies have to be, themselves, argued as hypotheses: they are tested not by their coherence with a fixed point agreed in advance, but (like other hypotheses, in fact) by their simplicity and their ability to make sense of a wide scope of experiences and events.³¹

Calvin would certainly be in, at least, partial agreement with such a statement. Even though natural man knows nothing truly, from a relative point of view, he knows some things about all things. He knows things after a fashion, and his fashion is best when he deals with earthly things.³² However, Calvin would be quick to add,

²⁷ Ibid. Obviously, there is a quite a difference between the way Calvin understands the reference to spirit in verse 17 and the way in which Richard Gaffin understands it. See Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. *Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Paul's Soteriology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1978), 92-97. However, it must be said that Calvin’s understanding is certainly in keeping with and sustains his overall epistemological understanding of the text.

²⁸ A brief scan of the index in a number of Wright’s books bears witness to the fact that he does not deal with sin and its effects on man. In fact, in his *Evil and the Justice of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006), Wright is just as ambiguous. Twice he mentions sin’s effect on humanity. On page 41-42, he cautions against thinking of all people as equally evil. His point, however, is not so much their sinfulness. Rather he seems to argue that one cannot simply solve the problem of evil by labeling some people as good and some as bad. Also, on page 76, Wright argues what sin cannot be in relation to human beings, but he does not seem to argue for what it actually is, even though he speaks often of individual incidents of evil.

²⁹ Wright, *Climax of the Covenant*, 146. The emphasis in the text is original to Wright.

³⁰ N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 31-46.

³¹ Ibid., 46.

³² Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1978), 83.

In order that true religion may shine upon us, we ought to hold that it must take its beginning from heavenly doctrine and that no one can get even the slightest taste of right and doctrine unless he be a pupil of Scripture.³³

Thus, according to Calvin, Scripture is like a pair of spectacles. If you have bad eyesight, you cannot read even the most legible print. When spectacles are put on, the blurry image becomes clear.³⁴ Or, to use the metaphor of 2 Corinthians 3, if one wears a veil, one will not be able to make out the most readable print but will remain in darkness. For Calvin, the objective ground upon which to begin is the self-authentication of Scripture, which is attested by the Spirit.

However, this Spirit-dependent aspect of the human situation does not emerge in Wright's epistemology and, therefore, does not figure into his exposition of 2 Corinthians 3:1-5:21. This lack obviously affects Wright's view of the Spirit's work in contrast to Calvin's view of the Spirit's work. It is to this topic that this paper will now turn.

The Activity of the Spirit

Christ and the Spirit in the Gospel

For Calvin, man's epistemological failure informs Paul's teaching of reflected glory in 3:12-18. According to Calvin, the veil, which is symbolic of human stupidity, is lifted from the body of the church when the Spirit enables the church to look into the mirror of the gospel, the location of a clear revelation from God.³⁵ According to Calvin, the mirror of 3:18³⁶ is the gospel unveiled by the Spirit in order that its light might transform the believer into the image of Christ.

Further, Calvin notes an epistemological shift in Paul's speech in 2 Corinthians 4:14 that continues into the following chapter. All talk of darkness, veils, and inadequacy are replaced by the strong epistemic affirmation, "We know" (4:14; 5:1, 6, 11). Calvin leaves no room for speculation on the source of this knowledge. He writes, "This knowledge does not spring from the human intellect, but takes its rise from the revelation of the Holy Spirit."³⁷ Thus, adequacy to minister or receive the ministry of reconciliation is not to be found within self; rather, all adequacy comes from God who makes men adequate by the Spirit who gives life.

Hence, this knowledge is peculiar to believers; they alone can affirm this knowledge of God in the ministry of reconciliation. Thus, the context leading up to the latter part of 2 Corinthians 5 seems to be focused, first of all, on the insufficiency and incompetence of human ability. This inadequacy is primarily characterized by the imagery of veiled understanding. The second contextual theme for 2 Corinthians 5 is the need for the Spirit to unveil the mind during the hearing of the gospel, that men and women might have a clear vision of God in Christ. When the veil is lifted, the believer can affirm true knowledge of the gospel of God.

³³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:70.

³⁴ Parker, *Calvin: An Introduction*, 21.

³⁵ Calvin, *II Corinthians*, 187.

³⁶ The concept of mirror comes from the participle κατοπτριζόμενοι. The NJKV draws out the sense of the mirror by using the expression "beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord".

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 216.

Thus, for Calvin, the mirror to be stared into is the gospel, for, in it is seen “the glory of Christ.”³⁸ Moreover, Calvin does not make a clear distinction between the glory of Christ and the glory of God, for in another place, also speaking of the mirror, he writes that when the gospel is preached “we behold God’s glory.”³⁹ The Son shares the Father’s glory. Further, the Holy Spirit seeks to bring glory to the Father and Son through the ministry of reconciliation, that is, through the faithful preaching of the gospel.

Therefore, gospel preaching must be accompanied by the power of the Spirit, or it will be nothing but incessant noise.⁴⁰ For this reason, Calvin interprets the use of Spirit in 3:17 to mean that Christ is the spirit of the law, or perhaps better put, “Christ is the life of the law.”⁴¹ Thus, for Calvin, Christ is what gives life to the law. Only in and through His work does the law live. Calvin writes, “Let the soul be connected with the body, and then there is a living man, endowed with intelligence and perception, fit for all vital functions.”⁴² Calvin also used negative imagery to express the state of the law without Christ, saying it would be “nothing but a useless carcass.”⁴³

Interestingly, Calvin notes that Paul’s second use of the word “spirit” in 3:17 does not refer to Christ as the spirit of the law.⁴⁴ Rather, Calvin interprets Paul’s second use of “spirit” to refer to the Holy Spirit who Christ confers upon His people. Thus, Calvin writes, “Christ is the Spirit, because he quickens us by the life-giving influence of His Spirit.”⁴⁵ It ought to be noted that Paul’s confidence (3:12) arises from this work of the Spirit, to wit, his understanding that God will accomplish the work of renewal in the lives of his hearers. In other words, in the same way Moses could not renew the minds of his hearers, so it is the case with the Apostle. Thus, his boldness rests in God’s power to accomplish His purposes.

Though Calvin obviously understands the Son and Spirit to have separate offices in the economy of redemption, the reformer often speaks as though the function of Christ and Spirit are interchangeable. Thus, Calvin can write, “Christ, through our instrumentality, illuminates the minds of men, renews their hearts, and, in short, regenerates them wholly.”⁴⁶ However, Calvin also often attributes the work of regeneration to the Spirit, whereby, through the preaching of the gospel, “God promises the Spirit of regeneration under the reign of Christ.”⁴⁷

³⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:89.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.2.20.

⁴⁰ The Spirit and the Word (even the preached word) cannot be separated. One works with the other. Moreover, it is not as though one were subordinate to the other, because the Scriptures are the Spirit’s words and the Spirit’s words are Scripture. In this manner Calvin’s view of v. 17 may be understood.

⁴¹ Calvin, *II Corinthians*, 185.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 184.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Calvin says, “The term Spirit here has a different signification from what it had in the preceding verse.” *Ibid.*, 185.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 173.

Yet, what may be seen in relation to Christ and the Spirit is characteristic of the way in which Paul deals with many aspects of the ministry of reconciliation. For instance, Calvin understands Paul not simply to see an economic overlap in the second and third persons of the Trinity. Moreover, the Apostle can speak of the gospel being “spirit” because the ministry of the Gospel is life-giving, a work of the Spirit. Not surprisingly, the gospel is also understood to be the “full manifestation of God” and the way in which men and women “behold God’s face.”⁴⁸

This brings the discussion back to a criticism of Wright mentioned earlier (page 1). In chiding those who embrace imputation, Wright argues that 2 Corinthians 5:21 speaks of God’s righteousness and not that of Christ. If Wright’s assertion is true, how can one speak of the imputed righteousness of Christ? In this broader analysis of 2 Corinthians, the answer is found. The ministry of redemption and reconciliation is the work of the Triune God. Though the different offices of the Triune Work are often discussed, one must understand the organic nature of the work that God has done on man’s behalf. Thus, to speak of having the righteousness of Christ is to also speak of having a righteousness that is from God, because the righteousness of Christ that comes by imputation is the righteousness of God.⁴⁹ This observation here only anticipates section three of this paper, which will more fully explore the theme of imputation. For now, notice two already-discernible points of difference between Calvin and Wright on the interpretation of 2 Corinthians 3:1-5:21.

Wright vs. Calvin: The Gospel and the Mirror

Wright and Calvin differ greatly on the mirror-imagery of 2 Corinthians 3:18. Calvin understood the mirror to be the gospel, that is, the clear revelation of God. On the contrary, Wright contends,

There is general agreement that linguistic evidence favours the meaning “behold as in a mirror” for κατοπτριζόμενοι. But the question, the lack of satisfactory answers to which has driven scholars to seek less frequent meanings, is – what is the mirror? I suggest that the “mirror” in which Christians see reflected the glory of the Lord is not, in this passage at any rate, the gospel itself, nor even Jesus Christ. *It is one another*. At the climax of Paul’s whole argument, he makes (if I am right) the astonishing claim that those who belong to the new covenant are, by the Spirit, being changed into the glory of the Lord: when they come face to face with one another they are beholding, as in a mirror, the glory itself.⁵⁰

Hence, Wright objects to an interpretation that equates the gospel to the mirror. Wright claims that such a view does not provide satisfactory answers to the questions raised by the rest of the text. For example, Wright claims that his interpretation makes sense “of the otherwise troublesome phrase τὴν αὐτὴν εἰκόνα, ‘the same image.’”⁵¹ But what does Wright mean by describing this phrase as “troublesome”? He notes at least two reasons.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 182, 187.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 242.

⁵⁰ Wright, *Climax of the Covenant*, 185.

⁵¹ Ibid., 187.

First, he suggests that the word “εἰκόνα” is introduced suddenly and even though Paul used it just a few verses later (4:4), Wright claims that it is insufficient to provide a reason as to why he brings it up here. For Calvin, it is only natural for Paul to bring the idea of image up at this point, for it is quite natural to think of the renewal process in terms of being transformed into the same image that is seen in the gospel. Calvin argues that by employing “image” terminology, Paul is denoting three things:

First, that we have no occasion to fear obscurity, when we approach the gospel, for God there clearly discovers to us His face; secondly, that it is not befitting, that it should be a dead contemplation, but that we should be transformed by means of it into the image of God; and, thirdly, that the one and the other are not accomplished in us in one moment, but we must be constantly making progress both in the knowledge of God, and in conformity to His image, for this is the meaning of the expression – *from glory to glory*.⁵²

In fact, Paul links the phrase τὴν αὐτὴν εἰκόνα (that same image) (3:18) with the following two phrases, namely, εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ (image of God) in 4:4 and ἐν προσώπῳ Ἰησοῦ χριστοῦ (in the face of Christ Jesus) in 4:6. According to Calvin, “In the same sense in which he had previously said that Christ is the *image of the Father*, (verse 4th) he now says, that the glory of God is manifested to us *in his face*,” that is, in the face of Christ.⁵³ Calvin maintains that the image reveals that man might see God and not that he might search out the secret essence of God.

Second, Wright contends that τὴν αὐτὴν εἰκόνα (the same image) only makes sense if man is changed into the image of one another and not that of Christ.⁵⁴ In fact, according to Wright, “If this exegesis [of mine] is correct ... it raises a possibility for the interpretation of v. 18 which has not, to my knowledge, so far been explored.”⁵⁵ Picking up on the theme of beholding glory in one another, an exegetical conclusion that Wright has not seen before, Wright says,

4.5-6 explains further just what is involved in the “beholding” of 3:18. The creator God has shone “in our hearts” (4.6, picking up 3.3; in other words, the act referred to is that which brings people into the new covenant), with the result that the knowledge of the glory of God, now seen in the face of Jesus Christ, can shine as a light to all around. This in other words, explains the mutual beholding of 3.18: God shines, with the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ, into the hearts of his people, who then reflect his light, becoming mirrors in which others can see God’s glory.⁵⁶

Here, however, is yet another reason why it must be questioned whether Wright has even read Calvin. For, with regard to the interpretation that Wright offers, which, to his knowledge has not been explored, Calvin writes,

I see that this passage may be explained in four different ways. In the first place thus: God has *commanded light to shine forth out of the darkness*: that is, by the ministry of

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., 201.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 188.

⁵⁵ Wright, *Climax of the Covenant*, 185.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 189-190.

men, who are in their own nature darkness, He has brought forward the light of His gospel into the world.⁵⁷

Calvin himself does not develop this understanding beyond this brief comment. However, the seed of Wright's suggestion is certainly there and Wright does not seem to be aware of it. Further, Calvin does not see any inconsistency with his own understanding of the mirror and Wright's (or, more accurately, Calvin's) possible interpretation of 4:6. Thus, for Calvin, as believers gaze into the mirror of the gospel, they see a clear image of God – they behold that which they are becoming by way of the ministry of reconciliation. Further, for Calvin, other believers may see the transformation that is taking place within each believer. The light of the gospel shines out of darkness.⁵⁸

Wright and Calvin: The Role of the Spirit in the Ministry of Reconciliation

There is another point at issue between Calvin and Wright that is more significant than that of the mirror, namely, the role of the Spirit in the ministry of reconciliation. According to Calvin,

We must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us. Therefore, to share with us what he has received from the Father, he had to become ours and to dwell within us ... To sum up, the Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ effectually unites us to himself.⁵⁹

Therefore, Calvin argues that without participation in the Spirit “no one can taste either the fatherly favor of God or the beneficence of Christ.”⁶⁰

Moreover, in keeping with his emphasis on man's epistemic failure, the Genevan reformer writes, “Paul shows the Spirit to be the inner teacher by whose effort the promise of salvation penetrates into our minds, a promise that would otherwise only strike the air or beat upon our ears.”⁶¹ Clearly, according to Calvin, the mind is in desperate need of renewal, thus, “He shines forth, indeed, upon us by His gospel, but, as we are blind, that would be in vain, if He did not at the same time enlighten our understandings by His Spirit.”⁶²

Before going further, it is necessary to pause for an examination of Wright's understanding of the Spirit's role in the argument of 2 Corinthians. Here, Wright differs greatly from Calvin, who sees in 2 Corinthians the functional role of the Spirit in the ministry of reconciliation as the Spirit lifts the veil so that the believer can see the truth of the gospel. According to Wright, the New Testament believer possesses the Spirit *because* he is within the new covenant.⁶³ Thus, in

⁵⁷ Calvin, *II Corinthians*, 199.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 200. Calvin does not adopt this option himself. After listing four different ways in which one may understand the text he says, “Let everyone follow his own judgement.”

⁵⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:537-538.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:539.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 1:541.

⁶² Calvin, *II Corinthians*, 200.

⁶³ Wright, *Climax of the Covenant*, 184.

keeping with Wright's broader theology, any notion that the text may be teaching some kind of *ordo salutis* has been seemingly disregarded.⁶⁴

As a result, Wright understands the indwelling Spirit in at least two ways. First, Wright conceives of the indwelling Spirit in terms of evidence that the covenant has been renewed.⁶⁵ Thus, for Wright, references to the Spirit in 2 Corinthians do not allude to a new dimension of religious experience. Instead, they indicate realities of covenantal renewal and inaugurated return from exile.⁶⁶ Thus, from Wright's perspective, the Spirit's indwelling is not about getting into the covenant.⁶⁷

Second, Wright considers the indwelling of the Spirit in a redemptive-historical sense. For instance, he highlights the parallels between the Spirit indwelling His people as the temple of God and the corresponding themes in the Old Testament.⁶⁸ Now, Calvin would certainly not deny this imagery that Wright observes in the Old and New Testament. However, Calvin would argue that Wright has left out the component that is essential to the imagery: the regenerating work of the Spirit which makes him or her a believer. As has been shown, this issue of the Spirit's indwelling reveals a crucial difference between Calvin and Wright. It is at this point that the fundamental difference on the issue of imputation may now be examined more fully.

The Imputation of Christ's Righteousness

According to Wright, it is now generally agreed that an overall theme in 2 Corinthians is "Paul's defence, not of his apostolic ministry in itself, but of the particular style or character of that ministry."⁶⁹ For Wright, these arguments concerning the nature of Paul's ministry form the basic structure of the argument of the book. Again for Wright,

Paul's defence of his style of ministry includes as one important feature the demonstration that the human weaknesses and frailties which characterize it do not undermine its credibility but, on the contrary, reveal precisely its Christlike character (4:7-12, 16-18; 6:3-10). This theme is strengthened further by Paul's emphasis that he is not sufficient of himself to be a minister of Christ, and that his "sufficiency" is from God (2:16, 3:5-6).⁷⁰

⁶⁴ According to Wright, in, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 39, the gospel is not simply to be thought of in terms of an *ordo salutis*.

⁶⁵ Wright, *Climax of the Covenant*, 154.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Part of the problem with Wright is nailing him down. He will deny an *ordo salutis*, but in other contexts at other times, he will give what appears to be one. In *What Saint Paul Really Said*, he seems to argue that, through the preaching of the gospel, the Spirit works on the hearts of the hearers which leads to the birth of faith. However, in his comments in *Climax of the Covenant*, there is little or no indication of such a thing.

⁶⁸ N. T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 129-133.

⁶⁹ Wright, *Climax of the Covenants*, 176. It is interesting that Wright only mentions two recent commentaries.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

The implication of understanding Paul to be defending his “style or character” of ministry rather than the apostolic nature of it opens the door for Wright to claim that Paul, in 2 Corinthians 5:18-21, is speaking of his own style of ministry as an incarnation of God’s covenant faithfulness.

In other words, far from being a text teaching the imputation of righteousness to the believer, 2 Corinthians 5:18-21 simply teaches that in and through his human frailties, God has made Paul the embodiment of His own covenant faithfulness. Thus, Paul is God’s object lesson in order to encourage other believers. According to Wright,

This in turn should play back into our understanding of chap. 3: the paradoxical boldness which Paul displays in addressing the Corinthians is organically related to his self-understanding as the “minister of the new covenant,” the one who has “become the righteousness of God.” Indeed, we can now suggest that those two phrases are mutually interpretive ways of saying substantially the same thing.⁷¹

Wright argues that such a notion should not be a surprise, especially since God is making his appeal through the apostle as an ambassador, who functions as an agent through whom the sovereign speaks.⁷²

With this last point Calvin agrees. Paul is an ambassador and has said so repeatedly. Calvin writes, “When, therefore, a duly ordained minister proclaims in the gospel, that God has been made propitious to us, he is to be listened to just as an ambassador of God.”⁷³ But what is it that God has committed to his ambassadors? According to Calvin, the answer is the gospel. But what is the gospel?

According to Calvin, Paul says it well in 5:19.⁷⁴ The gospel is God reconciling himself to the world in Christ. Thus, for Calvin, the statement that “God was in Christ” simply expresses the fact that, though God has “withdrawn to a distance from us, he has drawn near to us in Christ, and thus Christ has become to us the true Emanuel, and his coming is God’s drawing near to men.”⁷⁵ However, the second part of the verse – referring to God reconciling the world to Himself – explains more about Christ, namely, the office of Christ.⁷⁶ Christ is the mediator between God and man. Through Christ comes the divine reconciliation.

Moreover, in this same verse, Paul explains the way in which men are reconciled to God in Christ, namely, by God not counting their trespasses against them. Here, the Apostle turns once again to the task committed to him as ambassador. The gospel is the substance of God’s message, and God makes His gospel appeal through Paul, God’s ambassador. Therefore, Paul pleads that all might be reconciled to God.

⁷¹ See Wright, “Righteousness of God,” 205-207.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Calvin, *II Corinthians*, 237.

⁷⁴ 2 Corinthians 5:19 (ESV): “In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.”

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

For Calvin, in 5:21, Paul returns to the thought he developed in 5:19, that is, “he now teaches us more clearly what we adverted to above – that God is propitious to us, when he acknowledges us as righteous.”⁷⁷ But how can God not regard men and women as sinners? More than that how can a righteous God not count transgressions against men? In 5:21, Paul answers the question: God made Christ “who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf” (5:21 NASB). Calvin says, “sin here denotes an expiatory sacrifice for sin.” However, the thrust of the statement is “better understood from a comparison of both parts of the antithesis.”⁷⁸ Thus, says Calvin, “Sin is here contrasted with righteousness, when Paul teaches us, that we were made the righteousness of God, on the ground of Christ’s having been made sin.”⁷⁹

But what does Paul mean when he writes “we become the righteousness of God” (5:21)? According to Calvin, “Righteousness, here, is not taken to denote a quality of habit, but by way of imputation, on the ground of Christ’s righteousness being reckoned to have been received by us.” Commenting on Paul’s use of the righteousness of God in the book of Romans, Calvin writes, “Notice further, how extraordinary and valuable a treasure does God bestow on us through the gospel, even the communication of His own righteousness.”⁸⁰

Thus, when Calvin speaks of God’s righteousness reckoned to us, the Reformer is speaking of the forensic act of justification. Thus, the righteousness of God, Christ’s righteousness, is reckoned, or imputed, to man by God’s sovereign judicial declaration. This blessing comes by virtue of union with Christ. Thus, Calvin would argue that union with Christ is the ground of being reckoned righteous. For Calvin, the two happen simultaneously.⁸¹

Wright would strongly differ with this viewpoint, however. He argues that union with Christ makes imputation redundant.⁸² However, Calvin’s exegesis raises a serious question for Wright in regard to verse 21. Wright’s argument has been that “it is misleading [for commentators] to treat 5:19 as though it were the conclusion of the long preceding argument and 5:20 as though it were the start of the new one.”⁸³

Clearly, this bifurcated approach that Wright critiques is not the way Calvin treats this passage. In fact, Calvin argues for an interpretation which sees 5:18-21 as a unit that complements the

⁷⁷ Ibid., 241. Strikingly, Wright argues in “Righteousness of God” (p. 205) that v.18-19 are the “focal point to which the long argument has been building up.” However, he says little or nothing about them. Perhaps he is so focused on Paul being the incarnation of God’s covenant faithfulness that he cannot see the text before him.

⁷⁸ Calvin, *II Corinthians*, 241. It is interesting that Wright claims to have come to a new conclusion in reading sin as a “sin – offering” based on his “context-specific reading” of the text. Here again is proof that Wright is not familiar with Calvin, cf. Wright, “Righteousness of God,” 207-208.

⁷⁹ Calvin, *II Corinthians*, 241-242.

⁸⁰ Calvin, *Romans*, 64.

⁸¹ For insight into the doctrine of union with Christ in Calvin’s theology – and how union relates to justification – consider Mark Garcia, *Life in Christ: Union with Christ and Twofold Grace in Calvin’s Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008).

⁸² The obvious reason for this assertion is that Wright has redefined the doctrine of justification. In other words, he has made justification pertain more to ecclesiology than to soteriology.

⁸³ Wright, “Righteousness of God,” 208.

proceeding section. However, this interpretation is not necessarily the case for Wright, who suggests that 5:21 may be nothing more than a pithy phrase to draw together a complex line of thought.⁸⁴ Thus, it seems that Calvin argues for more than Wright. Rather than treating 5:21 as a pithy phrase, Calvin uses the text to explain the ground for Paul's ambassadorial office.

Conclusion

A study like this one has surely touched on some topics that beg for more consideration. One topic would be Calvin's contemporary situation that gave rise to his exegesis and doctrinal formulations. A more detailed comparison of Calvin's view of the righteousness of God over against contemporary views might also be in order. In addition, a paper on why Wright draws upon Calvin so infrequently might bear some interest. However, the thesis of this paper has been demonstrated, namely, that in opposition to the arguments of N. T. Wright, Calvin's exegesis of 2 Corinthians upholds the doctrine of the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer.

Throughout the paper, it has been shown that Calvin worked with an architectonic theme which enabled an understanding of the renewing work of the Spirit. In addition, the paper has demonstrated the clear differences that exist between Calvin and Wright on issues of soteriology. These differences are crucial and must be carefully considered. May God grant that the church will be able to discern between them that Christ might gain the glory for Himself.

⁸⁴ Ibid.