This review is on the book, By Faith Alone: Answering the Challenges to the Doctrine of Justification edited by Gary L. W. Johnson and Guy Prentiss Waters. This book is a compilation of contributions from various authors who span a variety of theological disciplines and Pastoral roles addressing various challenges to the traditional Reformed understanding of justification. The intended audience of this book assumes some familiarity with the New Perspective on Paul (NPP), and perhaps some post-graduate theological studies. Though the book is written apologetically from a traditional Reformed perspective, it would be beneficial to anyone interested in the NPP and the various discussions surrounding it.

**Foreword**

The foreword given by Dr. David F. Wells lays out the premise of the book. He begins by recounting the Protestant tradition in terms of the five Solas of the Reformation, which Evangelicalism had broadly followed, then critiques the split which has happened in

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1. Johnson, Gary. L.W. and Guy Prentiss Waters, eds. *By Faith Alone: Answering the Challenges to the Doctrine of Justification*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006. All page references to this work will be included within the body of the text.

2. Its contributors include E. Calvin Beisner, associate professor of historical theology and social ethics and R. Fowler White, professor of New Testament and biblical languages and dean of faculty, both at Knox Theological Seminary, John Bolt, professor of systematic theology at Calvin Theological Seminary, Cornelis P. Vanema, professor of doctrinal studies and president of Mid-America Reformed Seminary, Richard D. Phillips, C. FitzSimons Allison, David VanDrunen, and a few others.
Evangelicalism (15). In doing so, he introduces what will be the main thrust of the content of the book—a critique against the implications of the views of the NPP and Auburn Theology (Federal Vision) on the traditional doctrine of justification by faith alone. He admits candidly, "This desire for doctrinal clarity that I share with all of these authors, this yearning for biblical truth, makes me hopelessly ‘modern’ as it does them" (19).

Introduction to the Issues

Guy Waters’ chapter helpfully summarizes the Reformed Sola Fide position—that justification is both a forensic, legal declaration and also entails the imputation of Christ’s merits to the believer (22-23). In contrast, he outlines the foundations of the NPP. Of note is the contribution of E.P. Sanders who argued that Second Temple Judaism was not a religion of "merit-mongering” but was in fact was thoroughly gracious (24-26). James Dunn’s arguments also summarized that the “works of the law” argued against by Paul were not an effort to earn salvation through obedience to the law but rather "boundary markers”— distinguishing Jews from Gentiles. These and other works have reframed the NPP’s approach to Pauline scholarship by informing the context of Paul’s letters in Second Temple Judaism.

In essence, for the NPP, these discoveries reframe Paul’s doctrine of justification as a matter not primarily of soteriology, but rather of ecclesiology. For Dunn, justification includes the inward transformation of the sinner and is not by faith alone but by faith and works that result from that inward transformation (26-27). Waters points out a possible oversight by the NPP and Federal Vision, that their position actually unwittingly (and perhaps ironically) mirrors the same conflict of the Reformers and Medieval Catholicism

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3 He sees three main constituencies—those still treasuring these historical doctrines, those who see them as an impediment to church growth and a last group which finds the other two groups too extreme. Wells offers sharp and concise critique of the Seeker Sensitive and Emergent Church movements as examples of some threats to historic orthodoxy which are not from outside the Evangelical camp but from within.


5 Waters points out that it is argued that Augustine and Luther had skewed the Western church’s reading of Paul by their own need to assuage a guilty conscience—reading in a forensic nature to justification in Paul.

6 NPP argues that justification was not about how one enters the people of God, but rather a declaration that the believer is already a member of the people of God and the true boundary markers are not the works of the law but faith.

7 Waters also argues that Federal Vision conflates justification and sanctification. Furthermore, that it misunderstands or re-interprets Covenant Theology—and in so doing denies the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to the believer. Instead Jesus’ perfect obedience is said to be the precondition for justification in the believer’s union with Christ whereby they partake of the verdict pronounced over Jesus at the resurrection (28-31). Waters suggests his more in depth elaboration on these points in Waters, Guy P. The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology: A Comparative Analysis. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2006.
between a thoroughly gracious religion and a partially gracious one—one which can be said to hinge simply on the adverb “alone” (32). These helpful summaries by Waters provide a good launching point for the rest of the discussion in the book regarding the NPP and Federal Vision theologies as they pertain to the doctrine of justification.

A New Reading of what Paul was saying?

Venema in the second chapter of this book interacts critically by juxtaposing numerous works in response to the NPP. This chapter is helpful in outlining the critical debate between the opposing positions offering the counter-arguments to the NPP at least until 2006. Based on Sander’s studies on Covenantal Nomism, Wright insists that the problem Paul was correcting was not legalism but rather a perverted nationalism. For Wright, the “righteousness of God” is in reference to His covenant faithfulness to His promises to Israel and cannot be imputed to believers nor is it required for God to declare His favour over them. Faith in Christ is the badge of covenant membership (36-49). Venema points out that Wright’s view of justification remains undeveloped when it comes to his understanding of the work of Christ in explaining how his work of atonement relates to the justification of believers (49).

Furthermore, Venema argues that Sander’s view of Second Temple Judaism actually lends credence to the Reformation view since his view of Covenantal Nomism is analogous to semi-Pelagianism. Therefore, Sanders’ study only seems to confirm the Reformer’s parallels between Medieval Catholicism and the Second Temple Judaism (49-52). Venema continues that the NPP has not demonstrated that Paul’s use of “works of the law” refers exclusively to boundary markers of Jews from Gentiles nor does a historically contextualized reading of Paul require Wright’s conclusions. He then goes on to build a positive case for the

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8 Especially of note is D.A. Carson’s dual volume tome Justification and Variegated Nomism—a major work in response to the NPP by various scholars in response to the research by Sanders and Dunn—it is cited throughout this book.

9 Venema cites in defense of this claim that Paul does not restrict “works of the law” to only those provisions which distinguish Jew from Gentile (e.g. Gal. 3:10-14; 5:2-4; 6:13; Rom. 2:6; 3:20, 28; 4:2-4; 9:32) In support of this he cites several works and commentaries by Moo, Cranfield and Silva which make for good follow-up material in defense of a traditional reformed exegesis of these passages. Also, Paul rejects works not simply because it excludes non-Jews but also because no one can perfectly do what it requires, whether Jew or not (e.g. Gal 3:10; 5:3; Rom. 3:19-20; 5:20; 7:5-12) (52-53).
judicial context and definition of the “righteousness of God” (54-55). He states that, “My assessment of the New Perspective suggests that it is neither as new as its proponents claim, nor as capable of providing a more satisfying interpretation of Paul as promised” (59).

Some problems with Wright’s New Perspective

T. David Gordon lays out three main points which he sees problematic. Firstly, Wright’s understanding of the New Testament primarily as fulfilment of the promises made to Abraham instead of the redemptive pledge found imbedded in the Adamic curse (61-62). Secondly, the Christus Victor language employed by Wright downplays the wrath of God as a threat which has been averted by Jesus’ death and resurrection (62-63). And thirdly, that while Wright’s understanding of “righteousness of God” in Romans has an element of truth in the observation, it misunderstands the forensic/juridical context (63-66). Gordon spends the rest of the chapter expositing four points against Wright’s definition of the term. His treatment flows from the exegesis of relevant texts of scripture and analysis of the δικαίος-word- group throughout Romans. NT Wright has made many valuable contributions to theological studies and is fine scholar, however, Gordon also raises the point that, “By excluding the middle, by refuting a view that (to my knowledge) no one has ever held, Wright then jumps to another view of justification” (73).

Answering the Challenges

Richard D. Phillip’s chapter answers some of the specific challenges to imputation. He points out that the objection that Wright makes is based on a category error—where Wright appears to think himself to be correcting a notion that imputation is some sort of substance transfer, impartation or infusion. However, every Reformed definition of imputation denies

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10 He ends off his rebuttal by exploring the nature of justification and how Wright’s position misses the main point of Paul’s doctrine. One of the strongest arguments is mentioned in his footnotes, that if we paraphrase Paul’s teachings on the righteousness of God and justification by substituting the NPP’s new redefinitions of these terms as covenant faithfulness and covenant membership, it generally makes little sense (56). Venema continues with a discussion of the relationship of faith with substitution and imputation, then considers the way in which the NPP talks of final justification on the basis of works as threatening Paul’s central point (57-58)

11 Gordon ends with the point that Israel was God’s people by election. However, they were judged to be in violation of God’s law and covenant repeatedly by the prophets and were thus unjustified although they were God’s people. However, if Wright’s definition is correct, that to be justified is to be God’s people, it would seem that this “generations-long reality in Israel’s life is an impossibility.” (73)
such an equation.\textsuperscript{12} C. FitzSimons Allison continues the analysis of imputation in the next chapter by looking at some of the historical debates surrounding it by Catholicism and other objections to Reformed teaching (99-109).\textsuperscript{13}

David VanDrunen in his chapter builds a defence of the active obedience of Christ in light of recent criticisms (127-133). He goes on to consider the challenge to the requirement of perfect obedience posited by E.P. Sanders (134-139). He ends off his chapter with a discussion of the righteousness of God and the active obedience of Christ (139-146). The chapter by R. Fowler White and E. Calvin Beisner was particularly helpful in expounding the interconnectedness and importance of a proper understanding of Covenant Theology in this debate on justification (160-170). John Bolt’s follow up chapter on the necessity of the doctrine of the Covenant of Works is also helpful in addressing the critique and objections against the Reformed position (171-189).

The last chapter by Gary L.W. Johnson is helpful in bringing the discussion, which can tend to be very abstract, to bear on its implications and application to Evangelicalism today. He asks the question of what defines an Evangelical and how this term has lost some of its distinctiveness. This discussion of what justification means is central to questions of salvation with a wide range of implications into various other aspects of theology including our ecclesiology and approach to ecumenism. Our understanding of justification also greatly influences our methods of ministry, proclamation of the Gospel and Biblical counsel.\textsuperscript{14}

Final Thoughts

I would have loved to have seen some more interaction with the positive contributions of the NPP and discoveries of studies in Second Temple Judaism and Covenantal Nomism. However, that was out of the scope and focus of this book. Also, it would have been

\textsuperscript{12} Phillips makes the point that if Wright’s argument were true, then one could equally say the same of adoption—that we cannot be adopted into God’s family because ‘sonship’ is not a substance or quality that can be passed to another. However, adoption does not involve the passing of anything but rather a new way of looking upon someone (90).

\textsuperscript{13} Allison also takes a look at some of the barriers to an appreciation of imputation in our current cultural climate and how those factors may also influence the discussion (110-112).

\textsuperscript{14} Another book I’m currently reading (which is a bit more up-to-date) on the implications of the NPP view on our understanding of the Gospel and contemporary ministry is Barclay, William B. and Ligon Duncan. \textit{Gospel Clarity: Challenging the New Perspective on Paul}. Welwyn Garden City, UK: Evangelical Press, 2010. It is (so-far) helpful in understanding some of the important implications those opposed to the NPP see and offering further critique on the NPP as it has been developing within contemporary Evangelicalism.
interesting to see how the authors would interact with N.T. Wright’s newer works such as *The Day the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of Jesus’s Crucifixion*, where he offers critique to the method of some Evangelicals in defending substitutionary atonement in a way that reduces Christ’s work to only penal substitution.\(^{15}\) I think that Wright and other proponents of the NPP offer a good corrective against certain imbalances, also their insights into Covenantal Nomism are helpful in better nuancing the context of Second Temple Judaism. At the same time the critics of the NPP have been helpful in pointing out imbalances in the other direction and showing how Covenantal Nomism was not a monolithic view within early Judaism but that there existed a more complex and richly varied spectrum.\(^{16}\)

While I remain unconvinced of the NPP view on justification, I don’t consider it totally unprofitable and look forward to learning more from Wright and others. Overall I enjoyed this book’s critical interaction with the NPP, although the *Afterword* felt a bit polemical. The chapters were well footnoted and the arguments were direct and well thought out. I would recommend it for anyone who is interested in reading some of the counter-points to the NPP.

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\(^{15}\) See Wright, N.T. *The Day the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of Jesus’s Crucifixion*. New York, NY: HarperOne, 2016. From its reviews, Wright begins to respond to some of the critiques the NPP has faced. I have not as yet read this book—but it is one I’ve marked for further study. See https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/book-reviews-the-day-the-revolution-began

\(^{16}\) For further research on this I’d like to read more of volume 1 of Carson, D.A., et al. *Justification and Variegated Nomism: The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism*. Volume 1. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001—which seems to be one of the most important works in response to the work by E.P. Sanders upon which much of the NPP rests.