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Paul: In Fresh Perspective (Book Review)

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who have been my teachers. I found little with which I disagreed, but for me little was new. Still the articulation was helpful. I think that the book is a worthy contribution to the discussion in at least focusing some of the basic perspectives of Christian education and issues within the academy. For those who teach in systemic Christian schools, this book should be helpful in clarifying their own perspective and approach. For those who do not teach

in such institutions and some who may be suspicious of them, this book may help them understand the approach more fully. Yet I fear that it will not fully convince them or answer many of their questions, and it may even confirm some suspicions of the way Scripture and theology are used. This book should help the discussion, but there is still much to address.

Paul: In Fresh Perspective, by N. T. Wright, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005, 195pp. Reviewed by Dr. Thomas R. Wolthuis, Associate Professor of Theology, Dordt College.

N. T. Wright is a significant force in New Testament scholarship. His three large and highly detailed volumes, in a project he entitled “Christian Origins and the Question of God,” are on Jesus’ reconstitution of the People of God, the death of Jesus and the victory of God, and the resurrection of Jesus. These works, along with many other smaller books, have stimulated a great deal of discussion within New Testament scholarship. Wright has challenged the so-called “historical” reconstructions of Jesus with one of his own, which is much more amenable to traditional Christian perspectives yet which also challenges these perspectives to see Jesus in his real historical situation. Yet Wright’s scholarly beginnings were in Pauline Studies, to which he has now returned in his new book, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*.

This book is a reworking of Wright’s 2004 Cambridge University Hulsean Lectures and still retains significant aspects of this origin. Wright divides the book into two parts: themes and structures. He defines the themes in the light of recent scholarship on Paul and the structures as “a miniature systematic account of the main theological contours of Paul’s thought” (xi). This arrangement and perspective make it clear that this work is meant to address the scholarly debates about Paul, the background of whom is often assumed.

In the first chapter Wright seeks to locate Paul in both his historical world and the world of scholarship. Wright sees Paul as rooted in Judaism but seeking to address a Hellenistic world in the face of Roman domination. He advocates the “New Perspective” on Paul, both in terms of Paul’s Jewishness and his concern for how God has fulfilled his promises in Jesus the Christ, contrary to ahistorical, individual, and Hellenistic approaches to Paul.

The second chapter develops Pauline themes of creation and covenant based in the Hebrew Scriptures. Wright explores three fundamental Pauline passages—Colossians 1:15-20, 1 Corinthians 15, and Romans 1-11—in the context of the Hebrew background and expectations met in Jesus, the Messiah. He summarizes the problem as the fracturing of human community and creational relationships based in the human failure to trust and praise God. Jesus overcame this problem through perfect obedience

and returned the people of God to the original covenantal purpose of a worldwide mission of light.

Wright develops Paul’s view of Jesus, the Messiah, in the third chapter in the light of apocalyptic expectations. Here much of Wright’s work on Jesus rings through, but the main thrust is to advocate the redefinition of apocalyptic as “inaugurated eschatology,” that God’s ultimate future has come forward into the middle of history. The implications of this in Paul’s setting in Roman Empire are developed in the fourth chapter. Fundamentally, Jesus is Lord and Caesar is not. Here again Wright’s strong political perspective on the implications of Jesus and the Christian message comes through.

In the “Structures” section, Wright returns to themes from his earlier work on Jesus. In the fifth chapter he explores how Paul’s Christology and view of the Spirit could fit within Jewish monotheism. The sixth chapter looks at Paul’s view of the People of God in continuity with Jewish views and Jesus’ and the Spirit’s **reworking of those views** in the church. Here Wright restates his position that “justification” addresses who belongs to the people of God and how one can tell, not how someone becomes a Christian. Then, in the seventh chapter, Wright returns to understanding Jesus, the Spirit, and Paul in the context of eschatology, again advocating the expressions and implications of the presence of the future.

In the last chapter, Wright addresses the old question of the relationship among Jesus, Paul, and Christianity. He argues that Paul stood in a different place within God’s purposes and work and in a different cultural context than did Jesus. Paul clearly saw his unique role within God’s purposes in the world, and Wright briefly presents how the church is to carry out its role in its place in God’s purposes and its present cultural setting.

I approached Wright’s work as a teacher of biblical studies, a preacher, and a believing Christian. In all these roles I found the book stimulating and at times disappointing. The form of the book raised some frustrations. The length is more manageable than many of Wright’s books, but it still reads like slightly reworked lectures. At times one needs to picture a lecture setting to catch the flow of a section, to understand the hidden humor, or to translate

British styles. The references to previous works of Wright and the works of other scholars with whom he is directly and indirectly in dialogue would have been more helpful as more detailed footnotes than as brief endnotes. There are many assumptions about scholarly backgrounds and debates within the text. Even Scriptural referencing could have been clearer. Some less-informed readers could find these formal elements very frustrating.

Wright's positions are always stimulating, well-supported, and fairly presented, but I often wished that the arguments had gone further. This is a tribute to their stimulating nature and yet a frustration, perhaps based in my own desires and interests. Wright is clearly presenting a theology of Paul. He places more emphasis on Paul's reworking of his Jewish background in the light of Jesus and the mission of the church than on explaining exactly how Paul does this within his own life and historical context. On the other hand, Wright's work is tantalizing when it addresses the implications of his view of Paul for the church today. Wright's perspective on the people of God and

the church's relationship with Judaism today is pregnant with possibilities. Still, Wright's redefinition of justification needs further discussion. I often agree with Wright's brief challenges to ahistorical, individualistic views of Christianity, but I find the challenges underdeveloped and the practical implications lacking. Wright is doing what he sees Paul and the New Testament doing. He is challenging his readers to continue the story and the mission.

This book is a helpful contribution to discussions of Pauline theology in scholarly circles, although it does not advance the discussion as significantly as Wright's books on Jesus have done. A teacher at an undergraduate level will find this book stimulating but probably not useful for most students. I plan to use Wright's earlier book, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, for a college-level New Testament Epistles course. Pastors and preachers will find this work helpful in providing context for preaching on individual texts in the Pauline writings and for leading people to understand the Christian faith and mission.