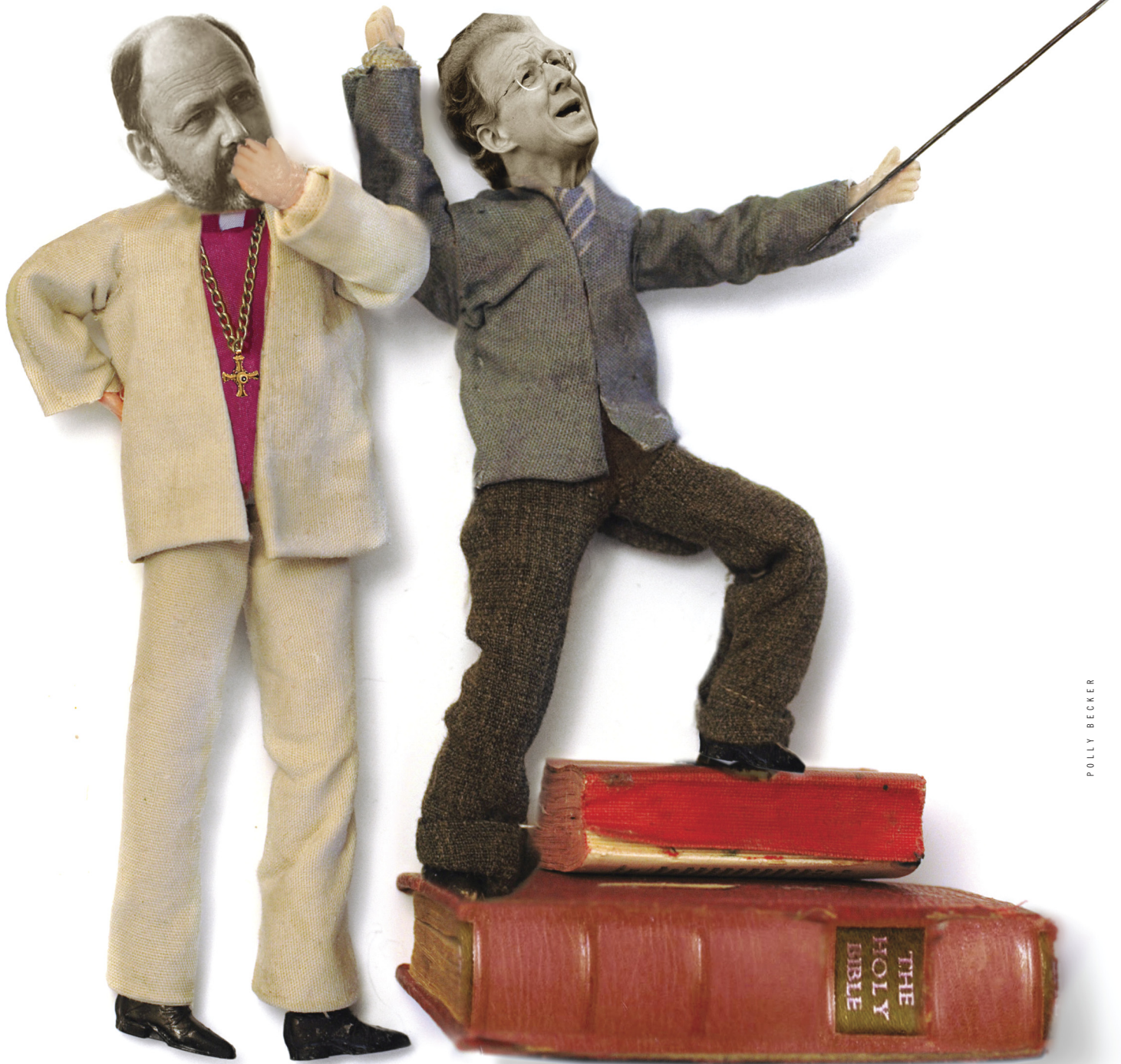


The Justification Debate: A PRIMER

Two of the world's most prominent pastor-theologians on justification—and what difference it makes.

BY JOHN PIPER AND N. T. WRIGHT
COMPILED BY TREVIN WAX



Since CHRISTIANITY TODAY's August 2007 cover story, "What Did Paul Really Mean?" Piper and Wright have taken the debate on justification from the academy to the masses. Here is where the two evangelicals differ.

| | JOHN PIPER | N. T. WRIGHT | |
|-----------------------|--|---|-----------------------|
| | Pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis. Author of <i>The Future of Justification: A Response to N. T. Wright</i> . | Bishop of Durham, Church of England. Author of <i>Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision</i> . | |
| THE PROBLEM | God created a good world that was subjected to futility because of the sinful, treasonous choice of the first human beings. Because of this offense against the glory of God, humans are alienated from their Creator and deserve his just condemnation for their sins. | God created a good world, designed to be looked after and brought to its intended purpose through his image-bearing human beings. This purpose was thwarted by the sinful choice of the first human beings. Because of human sinfulness, the world needs to be put to rights again and its original purpose taken forward to completion. God's purpose in putting humans "right" is that through them, the world can be put to rights. | THE PROBLEM |
| THE LAW | God revealed himself through the Law, which pointed to Christ as its end and goal, commanded the obedience that comes from faith, increased transgressions, and shut the mouths of all humans because no one has performed the righteousness of the Law so as not to need a substitute. | God made a covenant with Abraham in order to set in motion his plan to rescue his world through Abraham's family. God gave his people the Torah, his holy Law, as a pedagogue—a way to keep Israel, God's wayward people, from going totally off track until the coming of the Messiah. Israel was supposed to embody the law and thus be a light to the nations. But Israel has failed at this task. | THE COVENANT |
| GOD'S RIGHTEOUSNESS | The essence of God's righteousness is his unwavering faithfulness to uphold the glory of his name in all he does. No single action, like covenant keeping, <i>is</i> God's righteousness. For <i>all</i> his acts are done in righteousness. The essence of human righteousness is the unwavering faithfulness to uphold the glory of God in all we do. The problem is that we all fall short of this glory; that is, no one is righteous. | God's righteousness refers to his own faithfulness to the covenant he made with Abraham. Israel has been unfaithful to this commission. What is now required, if the world's sin is to be dealt with and a worldwide family created for Abraham, is a faithful Israelite who can be faithful to the covenant in Israel's stead. | GOD'S RIGHTEOUSNESS |
| FIRST-CENTURY JUDAISM | Many Jews in Jesus' day (like the Pharisees described in the Gospels) did not see the need for a substitute in order to be right with God, but sought to establish their own righteousness through "works of the Law." Whether keeping Sabbath or not committing adultery, these works became the basis of one's right standing with God. The inclination to rely on one's own ceremonial and moral acts is universal, apart from divine grace. | Jews in Jesus' day believed that the Law was given to them as people who were already in covenant with God. Therefore, the Law was not viewed as a way to earn God's favor, but as a sign that one was already in covenant with God. The "works of the Law" are not ways to earn favor with God, but badges of covenant identity by which one determines who is in the covenant and who is not. Many Jews in Paul's day were clinging to these identity markers (Sabbath, circumcision) in a way that made their Jewish identity exclusive. Therefore, their exclusivism was keeping the promise of God from flowing to the nations. | FIRST-CENTURY JUDAISM |
| THE GOSPEL | The heart of the gospel is the good news that Christ died for our sins and was raised from the dead. What makes this good news is that Christ's death accomplished a perfect righteousness before God and suffered a perfect condemnation from God, both of which are counted as ours through faith alone, so that we have eternal life with God in the new heavens and the new earth. | The gospel is the royal announcement that the crucified and risen Jesus, who died for our sins and rose again according to the Scriptures, has been enthroned as the true Lord of the world. When this gospel is preached, God calls people to salvation, out of sheer grace, leading them to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ as the risen Lord. | THE GOSPEL |
| HOW THIS HAPPENS | By faith we are united with Christ Jesus so that in union with him, his perfect righteousness and punishment are counted as ours (imputed to us). In this way, perfection is provided, sin is forgiven, wrath is removed, and God is totally for us. Thus, Christ alone is the basis of our justification, and the faith that unites us to him is the means or instrument of our justification. Trusting in Christ as Savior, Lord, and Supreme Treasure of our lives produces the fruit of love, or it is dead. | God himself, in the person of Jesus Christ (the faithful Israelite), has come, allowing the continuation of his plan to rescue human beings, and, through them, the world. The Messiah represents his people, standing in for them, taking upon himself the death that they deserved. God justifies (declares righteous) all those who are "in Christ," so that the vindication of Jesus upon his resurrection becomes the vindication of all those who trust in him. Justification refers to God's declaration of who is in the covenant (this worldwide family of Abraham through whom God's purposes can now be extended into the wider world) and is made on the basis of faith in Jesus Christ alone, not the "works of the Law" (i.e., badges of ethnic identity that once kept Jews and Gentiles apart). | HOW THIS HAPPENS |
| FUTURE JUSTIFICATION | Present justification is based on the substitutionary work of Christ alone, enjoyed in union with him through faith alone. Future justification is the open confirmation and declaration that in Christ Jesus we are perfectly blameless before God. This final judgment accords with our works. That is, the fruit of the Holy Spirit in our lives will be brought forward as the evidence and confirmation of true faith and union with Christ. Without that validating transformation, there will be no future salvation. | Present justification is the announcement issued on the basis of faith and faith alone of who is part of the covenant family of God. The present verdict gives the assurance that the verdict announced on the Last Day will match it; the Holy Spirit gives the power through which that future verdict, when given, will be seen to be in accordance with the life that the believer has then lived. | FUTURE JUSTIFICATION |

Not an Academic Question Pastors tell how

WHICH IS MORE SCANDALOUS? The multitudes of Christians who think they need to earn their salvation by being good? Or the throng of Christians who think that holy living doesn't matter so long as they have prayed the sinner's prayer? Pastors' answers will largely indicate how they feel about the justification debate, even if they haven't fully read the newest books from two of the debate's main players: John Piper's *The Future of Justification* and N. T. Wright's *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision*.

"Justification is central to what I do," said Ryan Fullerton, pastor of Immanuel Baptist Church in Louisville. "Justification is part of the air we breathe as a ministerial staff." Fullerton says the debate has strengthened his commitment to the traditional Reformed understanding, not only because of his reading of the biblical text but also because of his congregants' struggles.

"I believe that ultimately, the central problem on every human mind is guilt, and this problem is only remedied through justification by faith alone," he said. "I once sat down with our counseling pastor to discuss a number of diverse counseling situations. We found that the root problem in each was a misunderstanding or failure to apply this doctrine. I am trying to help guilty sinners know how they can have a right standing with God."

Unfortunately, "front-loading 100 percent assurance of heaven when you die based on an assent to Reformation doctrine hasn't

created a vibrant, revolutionary Christian community," said John Frye, pastor of Fellowship Evangelical Covenant Church in Hudsonville, Michigan. "As a pastor, I believe Wright's perspective puts teeth in the New Testament exhortations to stay true to an authentic following of Jesus Christ and persist to the end."

The doctrine can sound like bad advice, said Kevin DeYoung, "but I look at Galatians and Romans and think, 'If people hear us talking about justification and don't almost think that we are giving them license to sin, we aren't preaching grace strong enough.'"

DeYoung, senior pastor of University Reformed Church in East Lansing, Michigan, wonders if justification as identity in a community would be seen as good news.

"I may not be doing justice to Wright's position, but I know that if I tried to explain justification as Wright does, very few people in my congregation would understand it, and few would take real comfort in it," he said. "Whenever I nail a strong justification sermon and emphasize that nothing we do provides any ground for our right standing with God, I'll get e-mails thanking me for such a freeing message."

Piper's extended focus on God's sovereignty can be very difficult to present as good news too, said Michael Spencer, campus minister at a large Christian boarding school in Oneida, Kentucky. "Wright, on the other hand, has greatly helped me be able to use the concept of the lordship of Jesus as the central point in ministry, without

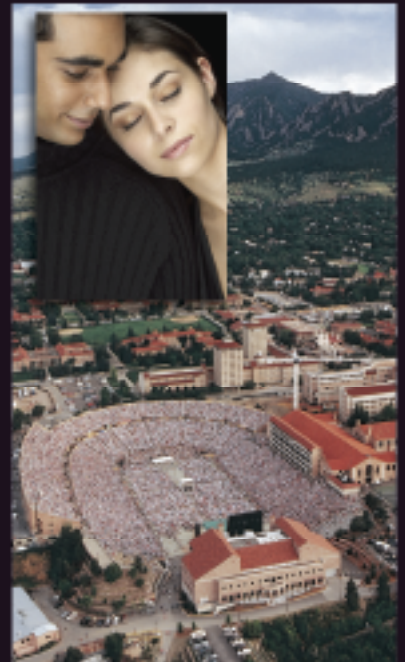
Theology

**THIS SUMMER IN BOULDER, COLORADO
THOUSANDS WILL RAISE ONE VOICE
THAT WILL ECHO WORLDWIDE...**

On July 31 - August 1, 2009, thousands will gather once again in a landmark event at FOLSOM FIELD in BOULDER, COLORADO. It will be a reunion celebration like never before,
HONORING WOMEN • HONORING THE POOR • HONORING THE FATHERS OF OUR FAITH
For the first time in Promise Keepers history, **WOMEN ARE INVITED** to attend the conference.
IT'S TIME TO HONOR.

THE EVENT IS FILLING FAST SO REGISTER TODAY.

WWW.PROMISEKEEPERS.ORG
866.PROMISE



IGNITE & UNITE
PROMISE 1990
KEEPERS 2009
A Time to Honor

the justification debate has changed their ministry. BY TREVIN WAX AND TED OLSEN

making the sovereignty of God a constant bar that must be met.” The idea of being declared right with God is central to justification, he said. But so are the implications of a new King and a new kingdom. “Wright has helped me integrate discipleship more clearly into my presentation of the gospel offer.”

Yes, both messages are central to the gospel, said Mark Driscoll, pastor of Mars Hill Church in Seattle. But that doesn’t mean both are what’s meant by the term *justification*. Discipleship is best talked about in terms of regeneration or sanctification, he said. “Together, justification and regeneration explain both our legal standing before God and lifestyle with God.”

But even those two concepts do not adequately describe the Christian gospel, said Derek Leman, rabbi of a Messianic Jewish congregation in Atlanta. “The issue is God redeeming and bringing to perfect consummation all things and calling us to be part of it, a process which begins with justification. Justification is entering school, not graduating from it. I do not make the focus of my teaching how to be justified, a point I regard as elementary and to be moved far beyond,” he said.

Additionally, Leman said, “as a Messianic Jewish leader, it is important to me to keep issues of Jewish and Gentile identity in the New Testament at the forefront—something I feel Wright does far better than Piper.”

While several pastors praised Wright’s and Piper’s books as

models of civil theological debate, David Swanson says Piper and his supporters have come across as “less generous and humble than I’d hope. On an emotional level, this makes Wright’s view more intriguing. But I’ve tried not to dismiss the traditional Reformed view of justification out of hand because of the rhetoric.” Swanson, pastor of community life at Chicago’s New Community Covenant Church, said the debate has changed his ministry mostly in that “I’m more convinced of the mysterious nature of atonement and justification. I’m grateful that Scripture gives us ways to talk about it, but I’m hesitant to explain the mystery in too much detail.”

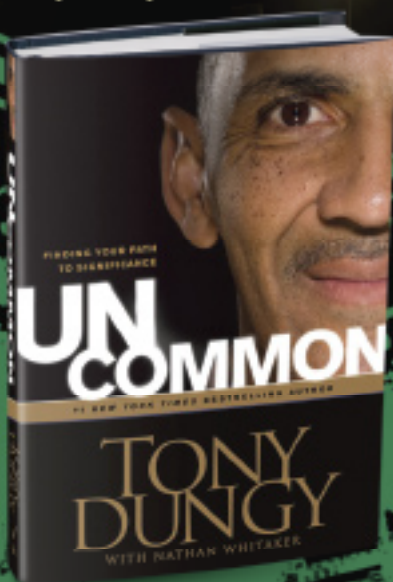
The debate has provoked precisely the opposite response from Hershael York, pastor of Buck Run Baptist Church in Frankfort, Kentucky. “I find myself emphasizing these themes of God declaring us righteous, even though we are not, and imputing his own righteousness to us,” he said. “Knowing that the dear people to whom I preach may hear this challenged by voices that have been otherwise trustworthy makes me a wary shepherd on watch against anything that would disturb the safety and security of my sheep.”

Trevin Wax is associate pastor of First Baptist Church in Shelbyville, Tennessee, and author of *Holy Subversion: Allegiance to Christ in an Age of Rivals*. He blogs at *TrevinWax.com*. **Ted Olsen** is *cr*’s managing editor, news and online journalism.

You were created for more... Find your path to significance.

When success is measured by how rich, famous, or important you are, life soon rings hollow. In *Uncommon*, Tony Dungy reveals a better way. From wisdom learned in

childhood to his years of coaching and mentoring in the NFL, Coach Dungy’s personal stories and valuable life lessons map out the less traveled path to real significance. Turn your life into something truly meaningful.



UNCOMMON™ DARE TO BE
www.DareToBeUncommon.net

