

The Faithfulness of God and Its Effects on Faithful Living

A Critical Analysis of Tom Wright's Faithfulness to Paul's Ethics

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The title of N. T. Wright's *opus magnum* revolves around an ethical quality. Wright attributes the virtue of *faithfulness* to God. More specifically, he looks at how Paul uses the term *δικαιοσύνη* with regard to God's salvific engagement with the world. He argues that when a first-century writer in a Jewish context refers to God's *δικαιοσύνη*:

He is speaking ... of the attribute of *covenant faithfulness*. Not just the divine mercy ...; not just the divine 'salvation' ...; not even his 'steadfast love', though that would be closer. The divine *covenant faithfulness* brings all these and more together. (PFG 804)¹

Wright thus interprets the ethical virtue of *δικαιοσύνη*, which is primarily about right behavior in relation to others (PFG 796), firmly within the context of God's covenant with Israel. He agrees that *δικαιοσύνη* is a relational concept but warns that substituting "relation" for "covenant" would mean taking a large step away from its historical moorings (PFG 436). Rather, one needs to add to its broad ethical and "relational" sense the overtones of the law court, give it the extra dimensions of the divine covenant with Israel, and set it within a worldview-narrative that looks ahead to a final judgment in which the creator will set all things right at last (PFG 801). Wright thus presents "covenantal faithfulness" as an overarching term for the story of God's virtuous interaction with his world and his people.

This chapter investigates Tom Wright's portrayal of Paul's ethics. As faithfulness is such a central theme for Wright, we will pay particular attention to the effects on human faithfulness that he attributes to God's faithfulness. Does Wright see a relation between God's covenant faithfulness and human virtue at all? And if yes, how is this spelled out in terms of the ethical values that Paul propounds and in the way in which ethical living is enabled?

Broadly speaking, Wright affirms that there is a close link between divine and human action, between "theology" and "ethics" in Paul. Having set out

¹ Cf. PFG 529–30. All italics in quotations from PFG are those of N. T. Wright.

his primary theological proposals, Paul did not simply shovel in a miscellany of Hellenistic *paraenesis* to give his churches something to be going on with (PFG 1099). Nor would “ethics” ever be for Paul simply a matter of discerning the nature either of the world or of humans and trying to live in accordance with it, though it would always involve that as well. Rather, for Paul ethics always entails “a direct address, a command, from the One God who is not *part* of the cosmos, nor yet detached from it, but remains in sovereign and dynamic relation with it” (PFG 1360; cf. 1371–72). In this sense, Paul’s ethics differs from ancient philosophical traditions where ethics was frequently based on physics.² His understanding of ethics is rooted in Jewish creational monotheism, and he affirms the goodness of creation (hence the strong emphasis on classic Jewish sexual ethics). At the same time, Paul insists that the death and resurrection of the Messiah have dealt with the sin, corruption, and death that were distorting and destroying the old creation (PFG 1508). Paul’s *eschatological* ethics is thus founded on his interpretation of God’s salvific intervention through Jesus (primarily in the past but also by that expected for the future).³

Wright thinks that the word “ethics” is “of course” a problem. Unfortunately, he does not expand on what he thinks is obvious. He just refers to (a somewhat outdated summary of) “the philosophical debates of the last few centuries, which have often been framed in ways that meet Paul only at a tangent.”⁴ Neglecting some of the more recent interactions between current ethical discourses and New Testament ethics,⁵ what Wright seems to have in mind is the Protestant heritage of being afraid of smuggling in “works” to build up again a life of proud (or perhaps anxious) moralism. Wright is right to reject this as anachronistic. He explains that what Paul regarded as the

² PFG 1096n222; however, see also PFG 1097n229.

³ PFG 1098. Cf. the discussion in Volker Rabens, “‘Schon jetzt’ und ‘noch mehr’: Gegenwart und Zukunft des Heils bei Paulus und in seinen Gemeinden,” *Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie* 28 (2013): 103–128.

⁴ PFG 1096, referencing in n222 Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (London: SPCK, 1977), 274.

⁵ See the literature discussed in, *inter alia*, Ruben Zimmermann, “Ethics in the New Testament and Language: Basic Explorations and Eph 5:21–33 as Test Case,” in *Moral Language in the New Testament: The Interrelatedness of Language and Ethics in Early Christian Writings*, ed. Ruben Zimmermann, Jan G. van der Watt, and Susanne Luther, Kontexte und Normen neutestamentlicher Ethik/Contexts and Norms of New Testament Ethics 2, WUNT II 296 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 19–50; Ruben Zimmermann, “Pluralistische Ethikbegründung und Normenanalyse im Horizont einer ‘impliziten Ethik’ frühchristlicher Schriften,” in *Ethische Normen des frühen Christentums: Gut – Leben – Leib – Tugend*, ed. Friedrich W. Horn, Ulrich Volp, and Ruben Zimmermann, Kontexte und Normen neutestamentlicher Ethik/Contexts and Norms of New Testament Ethics 4, WUNT 313 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 3–28.

signs of renewed human life (which were key elements of the symbolic praxis within his worldview)

are not just 'ethics' in the sense often supposed in western thought, to be placed low down on a scale of priority, way below 'theology'. Nor are they 'good works', to be regarded with suspicion on the basis of 'justification by faith alone'. They are part of the worldview which Paul believes must characterize the Messiah's people. (PFG 438; cf. 1096)

There is hence no need to resort to Wright's alternative terminology to "ethics," namely "behaviour" and "action" (PFG 1096). If one employs the term "ethics" in its everyday sense, it is certainly possible to speak of the "ethics" of Paul. The apostle is clearly concerned for the practical conduct of Christ-believers. Although he does not present a systematic exposition of ethics, he explicitly reflects on questions regarding "the enabling and grounds, criteria and content of the early Christian way of acting and living."⁶ His answers are inseparably related to the central themes of his preaching and teaching. We can hence agree with another of Wright's circumscriptions of ethics as *worldview-praxis* (PFG 401, 442, 448, etc.), as this represents the ethical side of Paul's intertwined theology-and-ethics a lot better than the more narrowly focused terms "behaviour" and "action."

As we look more closely at how, according to Wright, worldview and praxis interact in the *Corpus Paulinum*, we will start with Wright's analysis of the human predicament in Paul's theology: Why do people not live a morally good life? Second, we will investigate how people can change for the better. Third, we will explore Wright's version of Paul's ethical vision. In the concluding part we will then return to our above exposition of Wright's concept of God's covenant faithfulness and review its effects on virtuous life in the human sphere.

1. What Wright Thinks is Wrong

Ethics is concerned with what is morally right and good. Discerning the right and good implies the awareness that there is also wrong and bad. Wright points out that virtually all worldviews have some notion that something is seriously wrong with the world, and indeed with human beings, often including one's own self. This is especially true of monotheists of the Second Temple Jewish variety who saw that a) the world is God's creation, and yet there is evil in it; b) humans are in God's image, and yet they rebel; and c) Israel is called to be God's covenant people, and yet they are trodden down by the

⁶ Wolfgang Schrage, *Ethik des Neuen Testaments*, GNT/NTD Ergänzungsreihe 4, 5th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989), 9. *Pace* PFG 1030, ethics also encompasses character formation.

nations.⁷ This description of the human plight, seen from a Second Temple Jewish perspective which Saul of Tarsus would have endorsed, regularly focused on the destructive character of idolatry. Israel did not want to be drawn into the idolatry of the nations. They wanted to avoid this sin lest they would be back in a new slavery – in a new Egypt (*PFG* 744).

Paul the apostle retained this perspective, but his radical rethinking of creational and covenantal monotheism in light of the Messiah and the Spirit contained within itself both an intensification of the problem and an equally radical solution (*PFG* 746–47). Because the Messiah was and is the crucified Jesus, the “problem of evil” goes much deeper than Paul had previously imagined. The problem is still sin – sin as the deadly disease within all human hearts but (now) also as a cosmic power which holds all humans captive (*PFG* 753). Wright thus identifies two aspects of the human plight, one cosmological and one anthropological. The cosmological side of S/sin seems to be a new aspect introduced by Paul. Wright does not provide many details on how Paul reached this new insight, but he indicates what Paul formerly held in its place:

Both ‘Sin’ with a capital S and ‘the powers’, variously described, and also Death itself, have replaced, in Paul’s mind, the wicked, idolatrous pagans as seen from within his pre-Christian Pharisaism. ‘Sin’ and ‘Death’ are now ‘the enemy’, to be defeated in the final battle; indeed, they have already been defeated on the cross, and will be defeated fully and finally at the *parousia*. This both/and position will ... enable us to avoid the unfortunate either/or into which certain parts of Pauline studies have recently fallen. (*PFG* 756)

Wright thus intends to present a balanced approach to Paul’s view of the human plight – an approach that has the strength of being able to accommodate salvation-historical and apocalyptic interpretations of Paul. This dual perspective should be appreciated. At the same time, it seems that Wright’s emphasis on the “powers” is not consistently followed through, as we will see below, especially when we look at his notion of “flesh.”⁸

How did Paul arrive at this change of perspective? Countering Sanders, Wright maintains that Paul was not confronted with a “solution” for which he felt compelled to cobble together a somewhat random “plight.” Like all other Jews, Paul already had a “plight.” But God had now offered a “solution”

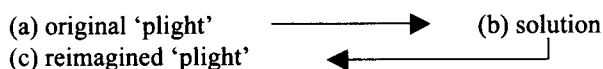
⁷ By way of solution, these problems were addressed “(a) by varied use of the ancient narratives of Genesis and Exodus; (b) by cultic monotheism (especially the sacrificial system; cf. *PFG* 744); and (c) by eschatological monotheism (the hope and promise that one day YHWH would return, would unveil his covenant faithfulness in rescuing his people and renewing all things, and would set up his sovereign rule over the whole world)” (*PFG* 746).

⁸ Also with regard to the solution, Wright rightly attempts to provide a balanced both/and approach that allows for juridical as well as participative categories (*PFG* 1373). In practice, however, he seems to place more weight on the former (cf., e.g., *PFG* 958–61; see also n16 below).

which, at first sight, did not seem to address the “plight” at all. Paul therefore rethought the “plight” around Jesus and the Spirit. According to Wright,

[Paul] was asking himself (scrolling through his well-remembered scriptures as he did so): what does *this* ‘solution’ (the resurrection of the crucified Jesus) have to say to *these* ‘problems’? Paul was like a man who, on the way to collect a prescribed medication, studies the doctor’s note and concludes from the recommended remedy that his illness must be far more serious than he had supposed. (PFG 752; cf. 751)

Wright’s interpretation of Paul’s reinterpretation of the plight in the light of the solution is well illustrated by his graphic on PFG 750:



Wright’s reconstruction of Paul’s change of mind (*μετάνοια*) is comprehensible and logical. However, in light of the little explicit evidence that Paul’s letters provide on this issue, Wright’s confidence in his psychological reconstruction is slightly surprising. It is regrettable that in his discussion of “plight and solution,” Wright does not interact with Paul’s own account of his change of perspective that he lays out in Phil 3.⁹ There Paul indicates very

⁹ Wright is aware that Phil 3 is one of the major texts used in support of Sanders’s “solution to plight” approach (PFG 748; cf. Krister Stendahl, “The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West,” in *Paul among Jews and Gentiles and other Essays*, by Krister Stendahl [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976], 78–96) but looks at Phil 3 only later on in PFG 984–92. Instead, Wright uses mainly Rom 1:18–2:16 in support of his model (PFG 764–71). However, while Rom 1:18–2:16 is an important (though debated) text on the problem of evil, it does not provide any clues on what questions Paul was asking himself prior to and in the aftermath of his encounter with Christ. Rather, Paul starts Rom 1 upfront with a statement of the “solution”: his gospel – which speaks of the saving intervention of God and hence of divine compassion (vv. 16–17). Campbell even thinks that what follows from v. 18 onwards is not Paul describing the plight, but the “bad” justification theory of Paul’s interlocutor in Rom 1–3 (*προσωποποιία*; cf. the diatribal character of 3:1–9, 27–31, etc.). It is a vision of the future wrath of God – of God as retributively just. According to Campbell, Paul does not think that this is the essential nature of the God of Jesus Christ. Paul contrasts his interlocutor’s programmatic theological claim quite deliberately with the initial disclosure of his own position. “Paul is stating here compactly that *fundamentally different conceptions of God are at stake* in these two gospels. Moreover, it is immediately apparent that the Teacher’s conception has no significant input from Christology. The stylistic parallel therefore denotes a deliberate contrast between two quite different theological programs” (Douglas A. Campbell, *The Deliverance of God: An Apocalyptic Rereading of Justification in Paul* [Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2009], 543; see the thorough critique by Robin Griffith-Jones, “Beyond Reasonable Hope of Recognition? *Prosōpopoieia* in Romans 1:18–3:8,” in *Beyond Old and New Perspectives on Paul: Reflections on the Work of Douglas A. Campbell*, ed. Chris Tilling [Eugene: Cascade, 2014], 161–74, and Campbell’s reply in the same volume; see already E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* [London: SCM, 1983], 129).

clearly what he saw as the “problem” and what not: “as to zeal, [I was] a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless” (3:6). It was not Paul who had a problem, but those whom he was persecuting. He was zealous for God, but they had been led astray. It is likely that Saul of Tarsus interpreted the devotion to Jesus of those he persecuted in light of the Torah’s ban on idolatry. This would partly agree with Wright’s delineation of the Jewish version of the “plight.” Paul himself, however, was fine. He does not characterize his identity as that of a desperate sinner unable to keep the law. He had kept the entire law (*κατὰ δικαιοσύνην τὴν ἐν νόμῳ γενόμενος ἄμεμπτος*; cf. Gal 5:3; 1:12–14), not just those parts that were Jewish identity markers (cf. Phil 3:5).¹⁰ And this moral performance has not changed since his encounter with Christ (Gal 3:9; 2:5; 1 Thess 2:10; 3:13; Rom 8:4; etc.). The new thing is his personal alignment with Christ. It is this new relationship that sets everything into a different light (including his persecution of the church: 1 Cor 15:9; cf. 1 Tim 1:13–16; but that is not his point in Phil 3:2–16). Christ has made him his own (Phil 3:12). The problem of the past was simply that he did not have this intimate relationship to Christ, for knowing “Christ Jesus my Lord” surpasses everything (Phil 3:8).

Looking at Paul’s short autobiographical reflection, we can thus say that Paul’s “conversion” was not a move from plight to solution. Wright would probably not disagree with this statement as an interpretation of Phil 3 (and Acts 9). However, his overall interpretation of Paul’s *μετάνοια* is clearly “plight → solution → reinterpreted plight” (*PFG* 750, etc.). Here Wright seems to place too great a focus on his reconstruction of what may have been Paul’s previous understanding of the human plight (as well as his alteration of it). Wright’s contextual reconstruction can help us understand better where Paul was probably coming from, but it needs to be stressed that this is *our* reconstruction whereas Paul remains more or less silent on these issues. The apostle rather emphasizes the intrusive nature of the revelation of Jesus Christ (e.g., Gal 1:11–16).

The fact that Paul’s theological reasoning thus worked backwards – i.e., reimagining the plight in the light of Christ and the Spirit (to use Wright’s formulation for steps [b] and [c] of his diagram) – does not mean that he could not communicate his theology “forward.” In the light of his new, positive relationship to Christ through the Spirit, Paul identifies human existence without this relationship to be determined by other, negative relationships. In Rom 7–8, Paul starts off by describing this negative state of affairs from the

¹⁰ Cf. Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, BNTC (London: Black, 1997), 202–3. Wright notes that Paul’s point was not the claim to a lifetime of sinless perfection, but rather a status kept “without blame” by the usual Jewish method of repentance and sacrifice (*PFG* 989).

perspective of Adam (and Eve) (Rom 7:7–25).¹¹ By means of *προσωποποιία*, Paul introduces an “I” that in an introspective analysis of his moral dilemma attributes this inability to do good to his own flesh and to the indwelling S/sin. In Rom 8:1–17 Paul looks back at this existence from the perspective of life in the Spirit. He continues with the notion of S/sin as a power (which is personified in Rom 7:7–25; cf. 8:2–3, 10). However, in contrast to the figure-in-speech of 7:7–25 who further attributes the ethical plight to the internal inability of the human flesh (vv. 18, 25), Paul sees the problem in the human slavery to the external force field of the Flesh. This state of affairs is summarized both in Rom 7:5–6 (*ὅτε γὰρ ἤμεν ἐν τῇ σαρκί*), which foreshadow 7:7–8:17,¹² as well as in 8:9a: *ὁμοίως δὲ οὐκ ἔστι ἐν σαρκὶ ἀλλὰ ἐν πνεύματι* (cf. 8:4–8, 12–13).

Wright repeatedly says that Paul reimagined the plight in the light of (Christ and) the Spirit. If the Spirit is thus the solution,¹³ what is the plight in Paul’s theology-and-ethics? Surely one would think of Paul’s Spirit–Flesh antithesis that he unfolds in Rom 7–8 and elsewhere (Gal 3:3; 5:16–25; 1 Cor 3:1–3; 6:16; 9:11; etc.). However, Wright does not give any weight to the role of “Flesh” in his discussion of the human plight (in fact, “flesh” only has two entries in the *PFG* index). Moreover, when he does mention “flesh” elsewhere, it is clear that Wright is committed to the anthropological perspective of the figure-in-speech of Rom 7 (vv. 18, 25). He translates *σάρξ* as “human flesh”¹⁴ and explains that it refers to “flawed human beings” who are “incapable of responding appropriately” to the Law (*PFG* 725). Likewise, he translates the central designation for the human plight – i.e., existence *ἐν σαρκί* – as being “people of flesh” (Rom 8:9 “You’re not people of flesh; you’re people of the spirit”; *PFG* 716, 719). However, this translation is incapable of appropriately transporting the impact of Paul’s formulation. As with Paul’s *ἐν Χριστῷ* and *ἐν πνεύματι* language, Paul is speaking of *relationships* or *realms of influence* in which people exist and by which they are determined. The plight is slavery to the negative force of *σάρξ*, and the solution is the loving relationship to God and the family of faith established by the transferral into

¹¹ Cf. Stanley K. Stowers, “Romans 7.7–25 as a Speech-in-Character (*προσωποποιία*),” in *Paul in his Hellenistic Context: Studies in the New Testament and its World*, ed. Troels Engberg-Pedersen (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 180–202; Hermann Lichtenberger, *Das Ich Adams und das Ich der Menschheit: Studien zum Menschenbild in Römer 7*, WUNT 164 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004); Stefan Krauter, “Eva in Röm 7,” *ZNW* 99 (2007): 1–17; et al.

¹² Cf. Michael Wolter, *Der Brief an die Römer: Röm 1–8*, EKKNT 6.1 (Neukirchener-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2014), 417.

¹³ On Christ as the solution, see our discussion of Phil 3 above, and Rabens, “Schon jetzt,” 105–19, for a broader perspective.

¹⁴ Rom 8:3 “For God has done what the law (being weak because of human flesh [*ἡσθένει διὰ τῆς σαρκός*]) was incapable of doing” (*PFG* 659, 719, 895, etc.).

the realm where the Spirit is the primary influence and power in their lives (cf. the contrast of slavery/fear and sonship in Rom 8:15–16; Gal 4:1–9).¹⁵

So, is Wright's thinking on what is wrong, wrong? No, it is not wrong, but it puts the emphasis in the wrong place. In the theological biography of Paul the apostle, the focus is on the solution as a starting point, not on the plight. And in Paul's retrospective description of the plight, the emphasis is on human enslavement to the external powers of Sin,¹⁶ Death, Flesh, Satan, τὰ στοιχεῖα, "rulers and authorities," etc. – not on internal incapacities.¹⁷ Wright is to be commended for attempting to achieve a balance between the "cosmological" (enslavement under dark powers, *PFG* 480, 896) and anthropological ("human inability and guilt") aspects of the human plight (*PFG* 753, 756, 771, 927). However, what his actual presentation of the problem of evil amounts to is this: "All humans, Jews included, were hard-hearted, in need of renewal in the innermost human depths" (*PFG* 750; cf. 759, 770, 1122).

2. From Wrong to (W)Right: How Change is Possible

Wright thinks that a crucial dilemma of humankind is the desperate need for renewal in the innermost human depths. Without such a renewal, people will continue to incur guilt. According to Wright, however,

Messiah-people must be 'blameless'. They must be different from the world around, not by the 'works' which separated ethnic Jews from the rest of the world but by the change of heart, mind and life to which Torah pointed and which, through the Messiah and the spirit, the one God has now produced. Messiah-people are already in the New Age. Their baptism, justification and spirit-indwelt sanctification give them the platform on which to base this lifestyle. (*PFG* 1111)

Wright here defines the aim of ethical life as blamelessness. We will turn to the aims of religious-ethical life according to Paul in greater detail in the context of our discussion of Wright's concept of Paul's moral vision in the next section. In the present section we will focus on the question of how people can base a pure lifestyle on the "platform" of baptism, justification, and

¹⁵ Cf. Volker Rabens, *The Holy Spirit and Ethics in Paul: Transformation and Empowering for Religious-Ethical Life*, 2nd ed., WUNT II 283, (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 171–73, 209–37, and the literature mentioned there.

¹⁶ In line with his emphasis on the forensic and legal aspects of the "solution" (*PFG* 799, 933, 935, etc.), Wright subordinates the "cosmic power" aspect of Sin to an (anthropological) focus on human immorality and idolatry (*PFG* 843n200). Sin therefore "charges" and produces guilt (*PFG* 752, 777, 888, 947, 969, etc.). However, almost none of this language is dominant in Paul (consider, for example, how infrequently Paul speaks of "forgiveness" and "guilt").

¹⁷ Cf., most recently, Karl-Wilhelm Niebuhr, "Jakobus und Paulus über das Innere des Menschen und den Ursprung seiner ethischen Entscheidungen," *NTS* 62 (2016): 1–30.

sanctification. We will start by looking at divine and human agency in the process of change, and then turn to two different *modi* of transformation: cognitive behavior modification and relational transformation.

2.1 Divine and Human Agency

Wright is clear that moral change does not happen automatically but needs human effort and hard work. Human labor, however, is part of the “fruit of the Spirit” (Gal 5:22–23) which includes self-control (ἐγκράτεια). The energy for ethical action thus comes “from elsewhere” (PFG 1106–7, 1117). The power source is the Spirit. Wright devotes a large part of his chapter “The People of God, Freshly Reworked” (ch. 10) to an in-depth treatment of “Election Reworked around the Spirit” (PFG 912–1038) because he thinks that the place of the Spirit in the reshaping of the people of God – though fundamental for Paul – is often underestimated and misunderstood (PFG 952). If we want to understand Wright’s notion of *divine agency* in moral transformation, we hence need to look at the role that he attributes to the divine Spirit.

Wright defines the Spirit as the phenomenon of people finding themselves given new energy, a new sense of direction, and above all a strong sense of the personal presence of Jesus experienced in the way one might expect to experience the presence of the One God himself.¹⁸ This relational emphasis is to be appreciated. However, when Wright spells out what the work of the Spirit means in practice, he tends to narrow this broad spectrum to the cognitive realm. Wright’s first stage of the work of the Spirit concerns the proclamation of the gospel and the spirit-inspired reaction of confessing Jesus as Lord (PFG 952–53, 956, 959). While it could be argued that the initiatory work of the Spirit in the context of coming to faith has more dimensions than proclamation and confession,¹⁹ what concerns us here is Wright’s second stage of the work of the Spirit. Wright explains that the activity of the Spirit during the first phase is different in character from all “subsequent development”:

¹⁸ Wright maintains that Paul seems to have chosen to continue using the potentially confusing word (πνεῦμα) because of its biblical roots, believing that what he and the other followers of Jesus were experiencing was the inauguration of the promised new covenant (PFG 1370). On this issue of interpretation, see the discussion in Volker Rabens, “Power from In Between: The Relational Experience of the Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts in Paul’s Churches,” in *The Spirit and Christ in the New Testament and Christian Theology: Essays in Honor of Max Turner*, ed. I. Howard Marshall, Volker Rabens, and Cornelis Bennema (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 138–50.

¹⁹ See, e.g., the exposition in Volker Rabens, “1 Thessalonians,” in *A Biblical Theology of the Holy Spirit*, ed. Trevor J. Burke and Keith Warrington (London: SPCK, 2014), 199–201.

Everything that comes later, the hard moral work of producing ‘the fruit of the spirit’, the putting to death of the deeds of the body and so forth – all that has a very different character from this initial ... gospel-driven confession that the crucified and risen Jesus is lord. (PFG 954–55).

What is the character of this subsequent work of the Spirit? Wright stresses the continuity of the sovereignty of the Spirit (PFG 954, 960). However, he does not explicate what is different about the work of the Spirit during this second stage. It rather seems that what is new is Wright’s stronger emphasis on the human involvement in the course of the “subsequent development.” The first step of human cooperation with the Spirit was a mere “helpless trust” and confession of the lordship of Christ (PFG 954). Now, however, believers have to put to death the deeds of the body by the Spirit (Rom 8:13; cf. PFG 955, 957) and engage in “the hard moral work of producing ‘the fruit of the spirit’” (PFG 954).

Wright’s unfortunate formulation that it is the believers who produce the “fruit of the Spirit” (despite Paul’s insistence that the fruit is that of the Spirit, *καρπὸς τοῦ πνεύματός*, Gal 5:22)²⁰ moves us on to looking at Wright’s view on *human agency* in the course of ethical life. How can people base a pure lifestyle on the “platform” of baptism, justification, and sanctification? Wright’s answer places the two moments of the moral life side by side:

The new *status* must be the basis for new *behaviour*, which is to be achieved by implementing the death-and-life of the Messiah, and which can be spoken of in terms both of a *new human nature* and of ‘putting on the Messiah’ like a suit of clothes. (PFG 1103, referring to Rom 6:12–13; Col 3:1–11)

Wright understands the new life both as new status and as a new nature. The relation of the two to one another as well as their relation to human behavior is usually left open by Wright (as it is in Paul, as he would probably argue). Practically speaking, Wright often seems to appeal to a new mindset that results in a strong will-power: “Those who have died and been raised with him have a new identity; patterns of behaviour which belong with the old life must simply be killed off.”²¹

Wright is thus not afraid to attribute an important role to human effort. He shakes off potential accusations of “synergism,” for “Paul himself uses the very word in a positive sense in 2 Cor 6.1 (‘as we work together [with God]’, *synergountes*)” (PFG 956). While this word alone certainly cannot prove

²⁰ Wright’s rendering would only make sense if he not only reads *σάρξ* (cf. section 1 above) but also *πνεῦμα* in Gal 5:19–24 as anthropological. However, this would fly in the face of Paul’s usage of *πνεῦμα* in Gal 5:5–6:8.

²¹ PFG 1103. In the same context, we also catch a glimpse of a more relational version of transformation which Wright could have unfolded in greater detail: “Paul believed that in baptism one entered a new reality, a new family, a new version of the human race, in which all sorts of things were possible that previously had not been” (PFG 1103).

Wright right, his general point seems to provide an accurate reflection of this aspect of Paul's theology-and-ethics: The gospel brings about a confluence between the divine and the human life (PFG 956).

There is a to-and-fro implied here [i.e., in Col 3:1–11] between what is already true at one level ('you *have* stripped off the old human nature')²² and what must become true by sheer, new-creational moral effort ('you *must* kill off ...'). (PFG 1103)

The tension between "is" and "ought" that Wright describes here has traditionally been called that of "indicative and imperative." However, supporting some recent criticism of this terminology,²³ Wright wants to discard it and speak instead about *παράκλησις*, encouragement,²⁴ in the context of the eschatological tension (PFG 1099). As I have discussed in detail in a recent volume co-edited by Wright, a number of points of the critique of the "indicative and imperative" terminology are justified, particularly if one uses this as the only approach to Pauline ethics. However, with some refinement and embedding in the broader picture of Pauline ethics (which also includes the aspect of "worldview" singled out by Wright), it is not necessary to dispense with this terminology altogether.²⁵

Looking at Wright's approach to Paul's ethics, we observe that he places a (too) strong emphasis on the "imperative." The escape from the old, Adamic humanity "must become true by sheer, new-creational moral effort." In a somewhat Bultmannian fashion, Wright explains that individuals always have to "make real for themselves" that which their membership in the Christian community indicates (PFG 423).²⁶ "Making real" could suggest a reductionist reading of Paul in which the spiritual reality of the apostle's audience is primarily constituted by what people achieve (or don't achieve) – in a similar manner as *ἀπεκδυσάμενοι τὸν παλαιὸν ἄνθρωπον σὺν ταῖς πράξεσιν αὐτοῦ* (Col 3:21) according to Wright is only "true at one level" and has to be made "re-

²² Once again, Wright's translation reveals his focus on the (individual) human nature. See our discussion in section 1, and on Col 3:9 see Marianne Meye Thompson, *A Commentary on Colossians and Philemon*, Two Horizons New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 77–78.

²³ Particularly Ruben Zimmermann, "Jenseits von Indikativ und Imperativ: Zur 'impliziten Ethik' des Paulus am Beispiel des 1. Korintherbriefes," *TLZ* 132 (2007): 260–84.

²⁴ Following Udo Schnelle, *Apostle Paul: His Life and Theology*, trans. M. Eugene Bor-ing (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 556.

²⁵ Volker Rabens, "'Indicative and Imperative' as the Substructure of Paul's Theology-and-Ethics in Galatians? A Discussion of Divine and Human Agency in Paul," in *Galatians and Christian Theology: Justification, the Gospel, and Ethics in Paul's Letter*, ed. Mark W. Elliott, et al. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 285–305. Cf. PFG 447.

²⁶ Cf. Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, vol. 1 (London: SCM, 1952), 336. See already Albert Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, 2nd ed. (London: Black, 1953), 168, 301, and the critical examination of Schweitzer's and Bultmann's positions in Rabens, *Spirit*, 269–82.

ally”(?). “true by sheer, new-creational moral effort” (PFG 1103). Alternatively, Wright may have used this formulation as a reference to cognitive realization (“making real *to* themselves,” cf. PFG 18n51 for both renderings), thus pointing to his preferred method of ethical transformation, namely the renewal of the mind. He exhibits this emphasis very clearly when he says (also on PFG 423) that “Paul appeals for a genuine, thought-out faith on the basis of baptism: now you are baptized, figure out what it means!” It is this cognitive aspect of human agency in moral transformation to which we now turn.

2.2 Cognitive Behavior Modification

Paul’s ethics is not just made up of lists of bad behaviors to avoid. Rather, the apostle regularly sets forth what a positive lifestyle looks like (cf. section 3 below: “Paul’s Ethical Aims and Aspirations”). Wright is right to point out that in Paul’s letters such expositions are usually not simply followed by single commands like “don’t do this; do that!” According to Wright, Paul rather explains to his readers that there are two things which enable them to escape from the slavery of negative lifestyles:

First, remember who you are in the Messiah, where you are in the eschatological narrative: already released from slavery and ‘sanctified’ by the spirit, declared to be ‘in the right’ on the basis of faith, promised the ‘inheritance’. Second, *work it out*. Think it through. At the centre of Paul’s vision of a renewed humanity is the renewed *mind*. (PFG 1114)

The underlying presupposition of these two steps towards improved ethical living is that our behavior is determined by our thinking (thinking → behaving). While Wright admits that it can also work the other way round (behaving → thinking) (PFG 27), his dominant position is that right thinking effects right behavior (e.g. PFG 1104, 1114, 1122). An unfit mind is at the core of the human problem.²⁷ The last element in the chain is feelings. Emotions tend to get neglected or played down by Wright (see below). When he speaks about love, for instance, Wright first makes clear that this is not about feelings but about something you do. He then explains that Paul “no doubt ... hoped that feelings of mutual affection would follow, as they often do, but the practice must lead the way” (PFG 429). Although Wright seldom approaches religious-ethical life “holistically” (if that would encompass at least

²⁷ PFG 1122. In accordance with his emphasis on the anthropological side of the human plight, Wright stresses God’s giving of a *new heart* (which he predominantly understands as cognitive transformation) as the central part of the solution (building on Deut 30:6 and its echoes in Qumran literature; PFG 759, etc.). However, as we will see below, this is only one of many aspects of ethical renewal in Paul, and together with the giving of the Spirit promised in Ezek 36–37 and related early Jewish traditions, it is placed within the context of renewed *relationships* (cf. Rabens, *Spirit*, chs. 4–6).

these three components), when he does so his system of how humans work is this: thinking → behaving → feeling.

Wright's model of ethical transformation calls to mind the psychological approach to behavior change called Cognitive Behavior Modification (CMB). CMB comprehends modified thinking (e.g., replacing dysfunctional self-talk with constructive thoughts) as the basis for a change in behavior and feelings.²⁸ I am not suggesting that Wright applies CBM in the technical sense to Pauline ethics. However, he does share the fundamental presupposition that a cognitive reconstruction is at the heart of all ethical transformation. A key verse on which Wright calls for support for his theory is Rom 12:2. He comprehends "the renewing of your minds" to be about "learning to think straight" (PFG 1123). While focusing on the cognitive aspects of moral transformation sits well with this passage,²⁹ one nonetheless needs to be careful not to build an entire framework on this basis and project this on other contexts which do not evidence this notion. For example, Wright thinks that a legitimate summary of Paul's praise of Abraham's faith and trust in God (Rom 4:19–21) would convey that "Abraham had learnt to think straight about the creator God; that he had grasped the truth; and that his mind, rather than being 'unfit', was doing its proper job."³⁰ Unfortunately, this summary

²⁸ See, e.g., Raymond G. Miltenberger, *Behavior Modification: Principles and Procedures*, 6th ed. (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2015), 509–24.

²⁹ Wright places a lot of weight on "working out what God's will is" (12:2c). He even thinks that "'working out', *dokimazein*, lies at the heart of Paul's vision of Christian freedom: it is not only freedom from the deadly constraints of sin and death, but also freedom for the multiple and varied styles of service to which one may be called" (PFG 1123).

³⁰ PFG 1122. "Learning to think straight" also includes adjusting one's worldview. Wright has helpfully integrated the notion of narrative in this context, when he paraphrases Paul as saying "remember ... where you are in the eschatological narrative" (PFG 1114). Narratives shape moral seeing, feeling, imagining and acting (cf. Brent D. Laytham, "Narrative Ethics, Contemporary," *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics* 538). On the whole, however, Wright's concept of worldview transformation is dominated by cognitive and behavioral categories: basic beliefs, consequent beliefs, aims, actions, words, etc. (PFG 29, 64). A more encompassing model has been developed by Hiebert, who draws on the work of other cultural anthropologists (Opler, Shils, Parsons, etc.) to include the affective dimension in his concept of worldview (next to the categories of cognitive and moral). He provides a graph that demonstrates the formative force of experiences. Beliefs and feelings are here placed side by side (Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008], 26):

distorts the broader relational nature of faith and trust (πίστις) by focusing exclusively on its cognitive aspect.

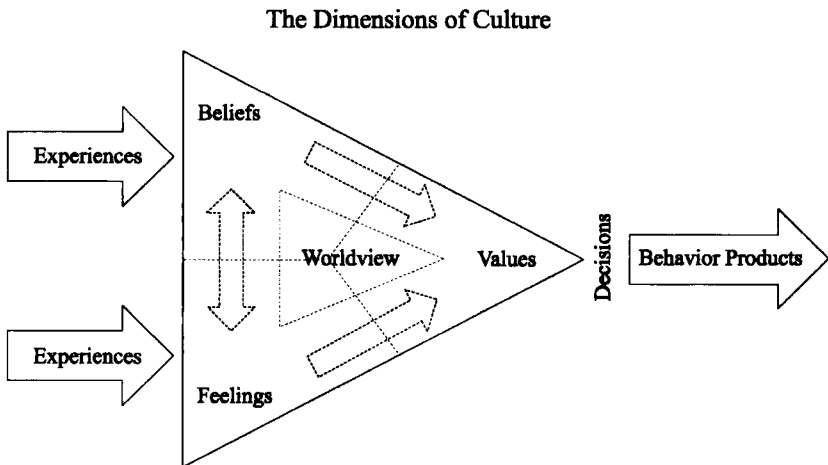
Somewhat surprisingly, towards the end of *PFG*, buried in the middle of an extensive engagement with modern approaches to Paul from the perspective of ancient philosophy, one reads that Wright criticizes Engberg-Pedersen for constantly speaking of cognitive awareness, of knowledge, as the center of what Paul thinks is important, whereas

Paul himself explicitly deconstructs that notion by saying that (a) what matters is God's knowledge of us, not ours of him, and (b) knowledge will puff you up, but love builds you up. (*PFG* 1403–4)

The up-building nature of love is a welcome perspective that seems to be under-developed in *PFG*. How does it integrate with Wright's vision of moral transformation?

2.3 Relational Transformation

The heart of Wright's model of ethical transformation is cognitive behavior change. The renewed mind helps believers on the way to living the holy life that they are called to. It helps them build up a loving community. However, does love also have a place in empowering moral transformation? At least



Cf. James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, Cultural Liturgies 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 63: "My concern is that worldview-talk ... retains a picture of the human person that situates the center of gravity of human identity in the cognitive regions of the mind rather than the affective regions of the gut/heart/body ... The result is a narrow, reductionistic understanding of the human person that fails to appreciate the primarily affective, noncognitive way that we negotiate being-in-the-world." See *PFG* 28n80 for a short reply.

two peak statements in Wright's *opus magnum* suggest such a role of love. First, in the context of his exposition of 2 Cor 5:14, Wright points out that "The Messiah is both the model and the means of love" (PFG 431). Christ is both – through his example and through the effects of his self-giving to death (which is an expression of God's covenant faithfulness: PFG 529). Second, when he speaks about Paul's encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus, Wright adds a further dimension: What happened to Paul contained at its core

a *personal meeting* involving a real 'seeing' of the risen Jesus; a *cognitive awareness* that the resurrection had declared Jesus to be Israel's Messiah ...; and a *personal transformation* such as love regularly effects, in which the heart itself was ... enabled at last to love the One God with a spirit-given love. (PFG 1426; cf. 1111n284, 1489)

Wright is to be commended for including in his account of Paul's encounter with Christ the transforming effect of love. The experience of love is the basis for being able to love others.³¹ This critical exegetical and psychological insight should be a key element of any discussion of moral transformation in Paul. In Wright's exposition of Paul's moral vision, the virtue of love does play an important role (PFG 1111, 1356, 1371, etc.). However, in the context of moral transformation Wright hardly attributes any importance to the experience of love. All three of the elements mentioned in the quotation above (personal encounter, cognitive awareness, and personal transformation through love) would integrate well in the category of *relational transformation and empowering* (which I have developed in previous publications).³² For Wright, however, the cognitive aspect is the key concept. This can be easily demonstrated by his exegesis of Phil 2:1–5. He says with regard to v. 5:

It is a matter of the 'mind of the Messiah' which they already possess ..., and of them allowing this shared and transformed 'mind' to work out into actual patterns of thought and then behaviour (as in 2.1–4). (PFG 1104; cf. 1121)

³¹ Cf. Daniel Day Williams, *The Spirit and the Forms of Love*, Library of Constructive Theology (Digswell Place: Nisbet, 1968), 120: "The discovery that we are loved does have a causally efficacious power which creates through that experience the transformation of the self. This is one of the most important themes in the psychoanalytic doctrine of love The attitudes and responses which the self finds in others are powerful factors in moving the self. Being loved creates a new person. We can make the general statement that inter-personal relations constitute a field of force in which action in any part of the field alters the structure of the field and all the elements within it." Cf. Joel B. Green, *Body, Soul, and Human Life: The Nature of Humanity in the Bible*, STI (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008), 116: "we must speak of personal (trans)formation in relational terms. Our autobiographical selves are formed within a nest of relationships, a community" (cf. 120–21).

³² See esp. Rabens, *Spirit*, ch. 4.

However, the priority of the mind in Phil 2:1–5 is less obvious than Wright thinks. For one thing, v. 2 mentions “having the same attitude” (*Gesinnung*, τὸ αὐτὸ φρονῆτε) and “one mind” (ἐν φρονούντες) in the same breath (without any hierarchy implied) as “having the same love” (τὴν αὐτὴν ἀγάπην ἔχοντες) and “being in full accord” (σύμψυχοι). What is more, Paul’s “chronology” in Phil 2:1–5 does not start with the renewed mind. Rather, Paul starts in v. 1 with other experiences and qualities which shall be complemented by further virtues (vv. 2–5), of which τὸ αὐτὸ φρονῆτε is just one. Verse 1 demonstrates that the apostle comprehended intimate and loving relationships to be empowering: “If then there is any encouragement in Christ, *any consolation from love*, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy.” The fact that he describes love as providing incentive encouragement and comfort (*παραμύθιον*) shows that Paul feels strengthened by the love he experiences in the relationships with Christ and fellow believers (cf. 1 Cor 8:1–3: “Knowledge puffs up, *but love builds up*. ... But anyone who loves God is known by him”; 2 Cor 1:3–5: we can console because we have been consoled by God; 1 Thess 3:12–13). If Paul wants to imply any causality at all, it is these experiences and qualities in v. 1 that form the basis for the ethical attitudes that he calls for in vv. 2–5.

That Paul understands believers to be empowered by divine love can also be seen in other key passages. For instance, in Rom 8:35, 38–39 Paul praises the intimacy of Christ’s love. No one and nothing can separate “us” from it. Paul says this in the face of persecution. On the basis of this love, the church is able to persevere in adverse situations: “in all these things we are more than conquerors *through him who loved us*” (8:37;³³ cf. 5:5;³⁴ 15:30: “I appeal to you ... by the love of the Spirit, to join me in earnest prayer to God ...”; 2 Cor 2:14; 4:6–8; 5:14).³⁵ Moreover, Paul also knows the empowering im-

³³ Christ is here presented as *the loving one*. There is hence no need to discuss whether it is Christ or love that transforms. Cf. James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, WBC 38A (Texas: Word, 1988), 512.

³⁴ In agreement with my thesis above, with the majority of interpreters, and with the context of this passage (Rom 5:8: *ἐαυτοῦ ἀγάπην εἰς ἡμᾶς ὁ θεός*), I interpret the Spirit to convey God’s love to us (as a starting point for our love of him and others). Wright, however, reads ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ θεοῦ ἐκκέχεται ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις ἡμῶν διὰ πνεύματος ἁγίου (Rom 5:5) as the pouring of God’s love for himself. “It is not clear ... what sense it would make to see God’s love for his people located in their hearts” (*PFG* 722). However, it is not surprising that God’s love meets people at the center of their being. Moreover, aspects or character traits of God are frequently “poured” in the Hebrew Bible and early Jewish literature (see references and discussion in Rabens, *Spirit*, 40–54; cf. Wright’s own metaphor of God’s “outflowing love”: *PFG* 1371). Apart from that, on Wright’s reasoning, τῆς ἀγάπης τοῦ πνεύματος in Rom 15:30 would have to refer to love towards the Spirit – a notion that neither fits neither the context nor Paul’s pneumatology elsewhere.

³⁵ Negatively speaking, the influence of relationships on people’s lives can also be seen, for instance, from the adverse effects of the dislocated relationship to God (and others) in

pect of loving relationships on an interpersonal level. For example, Paul says in Rom 1:12 that he longs to meet up with the Romans “so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine.” Paul thus trusts that he and his fellow believers are strengthened through meaningful encounters with others in the faith community (cf. 2 Cor 2:2–4; 3:2–3; Phlm 20).³⁶

The realization that the experience of love and fellowship is a life-transforming event is certified by modern psychological research³⁷ and has a broad foundation in biblical literature.³⁸ Wright, however, remains particularly suspicious of the aspect of emotions that is involved in this mode of transformation. We have already seen that in the context of his discussion of the Christian *κοινωνία* (“partnership/fellowship”), Wright stresses that love is something you do. Feelings will hopefully follow, “but the practice must lead the way” (PFG 429). Likewise, he explains that “when Paul tells the Thessalonians to love one another more and more, he is most likely referring not to emotional feelings but to practical financial help” (PFG 1118). This either/or (rather than both/and) approach to the different aspects of love and relationships, as well as his preference for the cognitive realm comes more critically to the fore when Wright outlines the work of the Spirit in the context of salvation. He emphasizes the declarative nature of adoption as God’s children. Although he laments that some scholars remove participationist aspects from the panorama of salvation and favor juridical categories (PFG 476), his own stress on the character of adoption as *declaration* has not really escaped such a limited perspective either (PFG 958–59). It reduces Paul’s multidimension-

Rom 1–3. Wright typically tends to reduce the problem described in Rom 1:20–28 to an “unfit” mind (PFG 1122).

³⁶The impact of interpersonal relationships can be observed further from the way in which Paul suggests that religious-ethical life can be shaped, namely, by looking at the apostle’s example and imitating him. See 1 Cor 4:16; 11:1; Phil 3:17; 1 Thess 1:6; 2:14; etc.

³⁷See, e.g., Robert A. Hinde, *Towards Understanding Relationships*, EMSP 18 (London: Academic Press, 1979), 4, 14, 273, 326; John Bowlby, *A Secure Base: Parent-Child Attachment and Healthy Human Development* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 119–36; Hugh LaFollette, *Personal Relationships: Love, Identity, and Morality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 89–90, 197–99, 207–209; Ludwig Stecher, *Die Wirkung sozialer Beziehungen: Empirische Ergebnisse zur Bedeutung sozialen Kapitals für die Entwicklung von Kindern und Jugendlichen* (München: Juventa, 2001), 249–50; Phillip R. Shaver and Mario Mikulincer, “Attachment Theory, Individual Psychodynamics, and Relationship Functioning,” in *The Cambridge Handbook of Personal Relationships*, ed. Anita L. Vangelisti and Daniel Perlman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 251–71.

³⁸Cf. the overviews in Reinhold Boschki, “Beziehung” als Leitbegriff der Religionspädagogik: *Grundlegung einer dialogisch-kreativen Religionsdidaktik*, *Zeitzeichen* 13 (Ostfildern: Schwabenverlag, 2003), 239–60; Rabens, *Spirit*, 133–37.

al usage of *υιοθεσία* to its declarative and cognitive aspect at the outset of Christian life.

However, in Paul the individual as well as communal experiences of being (a) child(ren) of God are much broader. In Rom 8 the apostle explains that the Christians in Rome were pulled out of slavery and fear and were moved into the family of God through the Spirit of the Son (8:9, 15). In this way, the work of the Spirit of “sonship and daughtership”³⁹ not only marks the initiation into (“adoption”) and the finalization of Christian life (“glorifying” and “revealing,” 8:17–27), but determines all of Christian spirituality in the present. The new identity as children of God has, on the one hand, a cognitive dimension in the sense of a new self-understanding (as emphasized by Wright). On the other hand, however, it is shaped by the continual experience of the Spirit-wrought outcry “Abba! Father!”⁴⁰ And “it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (8:16). These Spirit-induced experiences also include emotions. This is conveyed through the notion of “crying” (*κράζομεν*) and through the contrast with fear (8:15). The relational experiences described here are thus characterized by love and intimacy (cf. Rom 5:5; Eph 3:14–19; see already Hos 11:1, 3–4; Isa 49:15–16; Jub. 1:23–25; Jos. Asen. 12:8, 15; 1QH^a XVII, 35–36; Philo, *Sobr.* 55–56).⁴¹ This is significant because it indicates that Paul’s answer to the question of this section (“how is change possible?”) is not CBM but transformation through intimate relationships shaped by the Spirit. This comes evidently to the fore when we see how Paul in Rom 8 and elsewhere⁴² builds his ethical imperatives on the empowering and transforming nature of intimate relationships – to God and fellow believers. The apostle grounds his implicit request in 8:13 to put to death through the Spirit the “deeds of the body” (*πνεύματι τὰς πράξεις τοῦ σώματος θανατοῦτε*) in the experiential reality of the Spirit leading (8:14), freeing from fear, enabling to cry “Abba” (8:15), and bearing witness to one’s being a child of God. This line of reasoning is indicated by Paul’s employment of the causative conjunction “because” (*γάρ*) at the beginning of both vv. 14 and 15. Paul can describe the Spirit in v. 13 as an instrument (*πνεύματι*) for fighting temptations, because the Spirit’s relational work unfolded in the following verses enable (and require) such ethical behavior. Thus, we can conclude that the quality and character of the Spirit-

³⁹ In 8:15–16 Paul moves explicitly from *υιοθεσία* (v. 15) to *τέκνα θεοῦ*, thus including women.

⁴⁰ Cf. Gal 4:6, where it is the Spirit himself who “calls” (*κράζον*).

⁴¹ On this early Jewish context, see Rabens, *Spirit*, 163–67, 216–28; and Volker Rabens, “*Pneuma* and the Beholding of God: Reading Paul in the Context of Philonic Mystical Traditions,” in *The Holy Spirit, Inspiration, and the Cultures of Antiquity: Multi-disciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Jörg Frey and John R. Levison, Ekstasis: Religious Experience from Antiquity to the Middle Ages 5 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014), 293–329.

⁴² Cf. Rabens, *Spirit*, ch. 6.

wrought experiences of love and fellowship function as empowerment as well as criteria for living as children of God (cf. 2 Cor 3:18).

In sum, the “platform” on which Wright bases moral life is established by God through Christ and the Spirit as well as by human effort. Divine agency has changed things “at one level” at conversion-initiation, but believers have to make this real for themselves through the renewal of their minds. However, Wright’s model somewhat diverges from Paul’s own description of the new state of affairs. The narratives of Rom 6 and 8 (etc.) do not present a state that would still need to be actualized in some way. Rather, Paul’s communities truly participate in the life of Christ and the Spirit. By the relational dynamics ἐν Χριστῷ/ἐν πνεύματι they are transformed and empowered to live in accordance with these new realities. I have argued that this cognitive “mechanism” of change presents only one of several aspects of moral transformation in Paul and puts too little trust in the empowering dynamics of Spirit-shaped intimate relationships evidenced in Paul’s letters. Moreover, while Wright gives a detailed explanation of what “thinking straight” may entail (including a change in worldview), his instructions on ethical action through a (renewed) human will boil down to a mere “get your act together!” *PFG* sporadically mentions further aspects of what I have called “relational transformation” such as the transformative power of love. However, as these are not given adequate space in Wright’s treatment, I have filled in some of the missing pieces in my brief discussion above.

3. Paul’s Ethical Aims and Aspirations

“Messiah-people must be ‘blameless’” (*PFG* 1111). At the outset of section 2 above we have seen that Wright puts forward that Paul expects moral perfection from his converts. Wright is aware, however, that Paul’s ethical aims are broader than that. In this section we will look at Wright’s version of Paul’s moral vision and briefly engage with his key points of reconciliation, virtues, and fulfilment of the Torah. We should note at the outset that Wright understands all of Paul’s ethical aims and aspirations to be embedded in an eschatological framework that places moral transformation in the “gap” between Christ’s resurrection and that of believers. God’s purpose for this gap is, according to Wright, “to enable the humans who would share in the running of his new creation to develop the character they would need for that ultimate task” of perfection (*PFG* 1098; cf. 1048, 1113).

Following an established line of scholarship, Wright argues that Paul’s aims and intentions can be summarized with the word *reconciliation*

(καταλλαγή).⁴³ For Paul, reconciliation encompasses “politics,” “religion,” and “philosophy” (PFG 1488; cf. 1510). While Paul was a messenger of this reconciliation, Wright notes that there is surprisingly little evidence that he wanted his communities to be energetically outgoing in their own propagation of the faith. For the moment it seemed enough that they should be united (Jew and Gentile, etc.) and holy (PFG 1492–95). In this way Paul’s communities present the ultimate symbol of Paul’s worldview – an alternative world (μικροκόσμος) in which the Jewish Messiah-message brought to birth a quasi-empire rivaling Caesar’s and a quasi-cult to give it expression, thus providing a fresh and previously unimagined coherence of gospel, politics, and religion.⁴⁴

The church can be the ultimate symbol of Paul’s worldview that embodies reconciliation because it leads a life of *virtue*. Broadly speaking, Wright says that the center of Paul’s ethics is

a kind of Christian transformation of the ancient traditions of virtue, of character-development. This, indeed, is the point at which his ethical teaching is at the same time closest to, and most interestingly distinguished from, that of the world around. (PFG 1115)

Wright feels justified to call Paul’s moral vision a “virtue ethic,” and for evidence he refers to his popular book *Virtue Reborn*.⁴⁵ As useful as such a much more accessible study on character transformation based on numerous biblical books as well as contemporary questions may be, dependence on a work of this nature will leave many strands of critical scholarship on Paul somewhat disappointed.⁴⁶ Nonetheless, Wright’s general point still stands, namely that at many points Christ-followers are called to walk the path of genuine humanness that others have sketched before – and perhaps to do so more effectively.⁴⁷ Paul has reworked ancient philosophical traditions on

⁴³ PFG 12, 1487–89. See the literature cited in Eckhard Schnabel’s chapter on mission in this volume. In PFG 1492 Wright has a similar statement, but somewhat surprisingly the focus is here on the new temple: “Paul’s aims and intentions could be summed up as the vocation to build and maintain the *new Temple*” (cf. PFG 1517).

⁴⁴ PFG 1507; cf. 1492, 1505, 1514. On “Paul and empire” see the chapter of Seyoon Kim in this volume.

⁴⁵ N. T. Wright, *Virtue Reborn* (London: SPCK, 2010). Published in the USA as N. T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (New York: HarperOne, 2011).

⁴⁶ While the majority of the Scripture references in Wright, *After You Believe*, chs. 5–6, on which he usually draws in PFG (e.g. 1115n305, cf. 1106, 1120, etc.), are taken from the thirteen-letter *Corpus Paulinum*, these chapters also build on non-Pauline literature such as 1 John, Hebrews, and Acts.

⁴⁷ PFG 1377, 1374–75. See the critical discussion of attempts to comprehend the moral vision of the NT as virtue ethic in Friedrich W. Horn, “Tugendlehre im Neuen Testament? Eine Problemanzeige,” in *Ethische Normen des frühen Christentums: Gut – Leben – Leib – Tugend*, ed. Friedrich W. Horn, Ulrich Volp, and Ruben Zimmermann, Kontexte und

virtue into a Christian key. At the top of his list of virtues he regularly places *ἀγάπη*, the “love” which he has seen revealed in the Messiah. He adds three other virtues which, like *ἀγάπη* itself, were more or less unknown in the world of “paganism”: patience, chastity, and humility (PFG 1374–75, cf. 1116n307). We have already observed this emphasis on love in the last section. Wright points out that love “was there in the ancient scriptures, but it emerges in a new way as a result of the work of the Messiah and the gift of the spirit” (PFG 1119).

Exercising love is also a way of *fulfilling the Torah*. Wright affirms that “again and again Paul speaks of the work of the spirit as enabling people to fulfil Torah in a way previously impossible” (PFG 1037). Wright’s general point is to be welcomed. However, his assertion that Paul says this “again and again” seems slightly exaggerated.⁴⁸ Wright continues that this leads to the transformation not only of the heart but of the entire life. Paul even thought about

a fuller range of ethical behaviour as a new form of Torah-keeping. The spirit produces *agapē*, and this *agapē* is the fulfilling of Torah – though we note with interest that certain aspects which would have maintained Jew/Gentile separation, such as the sabbath, are never mentioned in this connection. (PFG 1037, referencing Rom 13:8–10; Gal 5:14)

Wright is right to draw attention to the fact that Paul does not exhort his Gentile readers to conform to the Jewish identity markers (cf. PFG 1048, 1109–10, 1125), although he wants them to maintain a thoroughly Jewish ethics. However, when Wright continues with more sophistication that Paul “wants them to do this *without becoming ethnically Jewish*, without circumcision, the food taboos and the sabbath” (PFG 1108), his notion of “ethnic” Judaism seems slightly muddled. Neither early Judaism nor Paul limit grace to race or biological kinship. The issue is rather that Paul speaks against the necessity of Gentile observation of circumcision, food, and Sabbath laws. Nevertheless, we can agree with Wright’s more general statement that “Paul’s ‘ethic’ is ... both a redefined and intensified version of the Jewish way of life” (PFG 447), as long as one keeps in mind that this intensification is based on the Spirit-enabled love of God and neighbor mentioned above.

Wright reasons that “Paul’s practical aim was the creation and maintenance of particular kinds of communities” (PFG 1476). Wright has managed well to describe Paul’s overarching ethical vision as that of reconciliation, virtuous living and keeping (a redefined version of) the law. However, when

Normen neutestamentlicher Ethik/Contexts and Norms of New Testament Ethics 4, WUNT 313 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 417–31. Wright has been careful to avoid many of the pitfalls pointed out by Horn as he does not primarily focus on the individual’s happiness, but on the ethos of Paul’s assemblies.

⁴⁸ Of the references that he lists, Rom 2:26–27 has this point only implicitly, and 3:31 does not mention the Spirit; the most fitting text is 8:3–4.

it comes to the *practical* aims of Paul's morality, Wright's lengthy volume falls short. Wright aptly identifies two areas in which Paul calls for differentiation from Gentile practices: angry speech and behavior on the one hand, and sexual malpractice on the other need to be avoided (*PFG* 1117). However, when it comes to spelling out what this (and other issues such as worship, valuing spiritual gifts, eating food offered to idols, etc.)⁴⁹ means in praxis, Wright's highflying study fails to touch ground.

4. Faithfulness: God, Human Beings, and Tom Wright

It is not surprising that "A Critical Analysis of Tom Wright's Faithfulness to Paul's Ethics" contains some points of criticism. However, throughout this review essay I have also tried to shed some light on the positive achievements of Wright's weighty volumes on Paul. One of these regards Wright's awareness of the need in Pauline studies to strike a balance between the various approaches to the theology-and-ethics of the apostle. Whether it is promising to achieve this via a single, integrating concept as Wright has attempted to do with the notion of "covenant faithfulness," will remain debatable.⁵⁰ Wright certainly manages to bring the many approaches to Paul (such as salvation-historical, apocalyptic, anthropological, theological, Old and New Perspectives) into play in his study. One of the consequences of Wright's particular way of trying to reach his goal of providing several "both-and interpretations" is that one finds different statements suitable to each of these approaches scattered throughout the two volumes. As a reader, one almost feels like being presented with the same breadth of divergent statements as one finds them in the letters of Paul himself – only that they are here presented not in the form of seven to thirteen (shorter) letters, but in that of two heavy volumes at the length of the entire bible. This has partly to do with the fact that Wright integrates his exposition of Paul with broader philosophical and *forschungsgeschichtliche* questions. For example, he endeavors to uncover Paul's meta-perspective by looking at early Jewish worldviews and at Paul's redefinition of it. This approach is helpful (although it somewhat neglects the issues of practical ethics). However, it is not surprising that such an endeavor is tainted by one's own worldview, and Wright appears to be no exception.

In our discussion of Wright's analysis of the human plight we have discovered that he has a tendency to localize "the problem" in the human interi-

⁴⁹ On which, see, e.g., Richard A. Burridge, *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 116–38.

⁵⁰ See, e.g., the critique of this point in Martinus C. de Boer, "N. T. Wright's Great Story and Its Relationship to Paul's Gospel," *Journal for the Study of Paul and his Letters* 4 (2014): 51, 55.

or (“an unfit mind”) rather than in exterior forces such as the Flesh. Correspondingly, Wright sees the solution in the cognitive renewal of the mind (and not so much in the transforming and empowering transferal by the Spirit into loving relationships to the divine and the community of faith). Wright does not totally discredit the relational and participative dimensions of ethical transformation that I have unfolded above. For example, in his exposition of 2 Cor 5:13–14, Wright explains that Paul is basically saying that the apostles are

being overmastered by a love which makes [them] act in a different way, seeing everything in a new light, claiming that a new world has been born, claiming even to be embodying the divine covenant faithfulness. (*PFG* 1489; cf. 529, 796)

This is one of the very few places where Wright hints at the transforming power of love and even connects this to the covenant faithfulness of God. However, generally speaking, Wright hardly provides any insights on how God’s love and covenant faithfulness may effect human faithful living, even though the ethical quality of “faithfulness” is at the heart of his study. It seems, then, that faithfulness mainly plays a role in Wright’s soteriology but not so much in his ethics.⁵¹ Also in the example given above, Wright does not continue on the theme of love, but enlarges on the topic of cognitive change by explaining that Paul in 2 Cor 5:13–14

whips off his worldview-spectacles and describes the lenses. *This is how I look at the world; this is how the things I do make sense within that worldview ...* This is one of Paul’s central statements, if not the central statement, of his aims and intentions. (*PFG* 1489)

Paul’s aim is that far more people come to know the reconciliation achieved by the Messiah (cf. section 3 above), and this means being confronted by the truth and changing one’s worldview (cf. *PFG* 1519).

A key question of our investigation of Wright’s *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* has concerned the relationship of the covenant faithfulness of God to human faithfulness (i.e., ethical life). While Wright’s treatment remains largely silent on this matter and instead appeals to “thinking straight” and to hard work when it comes to ethical life, there is a great body of evidence both in early Judaism and in Paul indicating that the human covenant partner can hardly fail to be transformed by a living relationship with the faithful and

⁵¹ These two areas should not be torn apart, as Wright would agree. However, when one looks at the weight of the evidence in *PFG*, this is the picture that emerges. This has partly to do with the fact that Wright’s starting point is a particular word, *δικαιοσύνη*, and not the vibrant relational dynamics of transformation that come to the fore upon a broader look at the Pauline corpus.

loving God.⁵² In Paul, these dynamics are animated by the Spirit. One of the central passages on divine and human agency in Paul's ethics (Gal 5:25, which is not discussed by Wright), could hence be paraphrased like this:

Because we experience the transforming and empowering dynamic of the Spirit in our lives – by the Spirit's creation of filial intimacy with God and the family of faith – we can and should orientate our lives toward precisely those values that are manifested among us through the expressions of life that the Spirit inspires.⁵³

Integrating this experience of love and faithfulness into our picture of Paul's moral vision will neither open the door to moral passivity nor to individualistic piety – two issues that Wright rightly warns of (e.g. *PPG* 796). On the contrary, it brings into focus the neglected link between divine and human faithfulness that any exposition of Paul's theology-and-ethics that wants to be faithful to the apostle needs to appreciate.⁵⁴

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⁵² Cf. James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 344, and the literature mentioned in section 2 above.

⁵³ Cf. Rabens, "Indicative and Imperative," 302–3.

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