

1 | The Narrative Substructure of Paul's Thought

If, according to Alfred North Whitehead's bon mot, the Western philosophical tradition is but a series of footnotes to Plato, then Protestant theology is but a series of footnotes to Paul. From Luther's 1515/16 *Scholia* on Romans to Barth's two twentieth-century *Römerbriefe*, Protestant theologians have labored to shape the mind and life of the Christian community in accordance with the writings of the apostle. Reflections on Pauline notions like justification and divine righteousness, law and gospel, and faith and works have decisively formed Protestant piety and liturgy, theology and ethics.

How to read Paul is thus not just an intellectual question but one of existential importance to the Protestant Christian community. Protestant theologians therefore ought to pay close attention to developments in the world of Pauline scholarship. The last few decades have witnessed major, if not paradigmatic, shifts in the way exegetes propose we understand the apostle. Enriched by a deeper understanding of Paul's own Second Temple Judaism, Bible scholars have offered fresh readings of Paul's letters, broadening, challenging, and correcting traditional Protestant interpretations. In doing so, these exegetes claim nonetheless to stay true to the intentions of the Reformers, who did not aim to establish another theological tradition but to guide their communities in reading the Scriptures anew.

In this book I want to start where exegetes usually end and think theologically through the consequences of their findings, offering a theological map of contemporary Pauline scholarship and

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contrasting it with traditional Protestant theology. What theological vision emerges from these new readings of Paul, and how do these readings differ from those of the past? If contemporary Pauline exegetes are right, what would this mean for Protestant theology, piety, and church life? How would it change our ways of conceiving of the relationship between God and God's people, and how might it challenge theological conceptions and practical ways of life handed on to us by our traditions?

To answer these questions, I will continuously move between the fields of biblical studies and theology. My theological reflections will begin with a presentation of the exegetical arguments, showing how they aim to make sense of Paul's texts. Choosing from among the abundance of material itself entails a series of exegetical judgments. Moreover, I would not undertake this project if I were neutral with regard to the work done by the exegetes. I believe contemporary Pauline scholars are on to something important and that their work potentially enriches, rather than threatens, the Protestant community. The goal of this book, however, is not to make an exegetical case but a theological one. I do not aim to prove that these contemporary exegetical proposals are correct, but rather to ask: If they were right, what would this mean for Protestants theologically? This book thus offers a theological reflection on an exegetical hypothetical.

It is surprising how little theological work has been devoted to these matters. There are many biblical scholars who, sensing the theological importance of their work, have tried to draw out the doctrinal consequences. But few theologians have taken the exegetical baton and run the theological race. Moreover, a good number of those theologians who have paid explicit attention to the exegetical debates have done so with the intention of circling the theological and ecclesial wagons and defending traditional Protestant positions. This is not such a book. I believe N. T. Wright is correct when he says that the Reformers were not interested in the Christian community repeating what they said, but repeating

what they did: read Scripture afresh.¹ In this book, I want to see what happens theologically when we do this.

Finally, this book starts at a different place than where the aforementioned theologians have located the central spots of contention. It seems that the theological conversation, as far as it has happened, has focused primarily on the meaning of justification and divine righteousness.² I believe this is a mistake. As I will argue, the real difference between traditional Protestant interpretation and contemporary Pauline exegesis does not primarily concern particular terms, concepts, or isolated ideas: It concerns the assumed narrative substructure of Paul's thought.

Narrative Substructures

According to the stories of Scripture, God relates to what is not God in three distinct but interrelated ways. God relates to what is not God as the Creator: Everything that is not God depends on God for its existence. God relates to what is not God as Consummator: God not only calls into existence what is not God but also leads it to a final goal – to eschatological consummation. And God relates to what is not God as Reconciler: Once creation wanders away from God, God reaches out and draws what is not God back in an act of reconciliation.

These three ways of divine relating to what is not God are distinct but complexly interrelated. They are distinct in that one way of

¹ N. T. Wright, *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 23. Cf. N. T. Wright, *Pauline Perspectives: Essays on Paul, 1978–2013* (London: SPCK, 2013), 424–425.

² See in particular: John Piper, *The Future of Justification: A Response to N. T. Wright* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007); J. V. Fresko, *Justification: Understanding the Classic Reformed Doctrine* (Phillipsburg, PA: P&R Publishing, 2008), 211–240; Thomas Schreiner, *Faith Alone: The Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 239–261; Michael Horton, *Justification*, volumes 1 and 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018).

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relating does not have to imply the others. One can conceive of God's act of creation as logically and ontologically independent of an act of eschatological consummation, depending on one's understanding of the divine motives to call what is not God into existence. God does not have to consummate that which God creates. Likewise, while God's acts of eschatological consummation and reconciliation are complexly interrelated, as they are both inaugurated in the selfsame person of Christ, they are distinguishable precisely because God's act of consummation does not presuppose God's act of reconciliation. There is no logical or ontological necessity that what is consummated is also in need of reconciliation.³

Nonetheless, when one tells the larger story of the relationship between God and what is not God, these three ways of divine relating have to be ordered in a certain way. The arc of one's narrative will be shaped by how one understands the complex intertwining of the three ways of divine relating. For example, one can tell the story as simply beginning with creation, moving through the stages of sin and reconciliation, and ending with eschatological consummation. Such is the rhythm of the narrative as suggested by the canonical ordering of Scripture. Alternatively, one can tell the story from the perspective of eschatological consummation, understood as the pre-orderly end of God's acts of creation and reconciliation. Intentions order means and ends. What comes first in the order of execution may nonetheless be last in the order of intention. The narrative could therefore be told from the perspective of its final end, consummation, rather than from its temporal beginning, creation. Or, thirdly, motivated by the notion that God can only be known in Jesus Christ, one could start the narrative in the canonical middle, and from there reach for the stories of creation and consummation.

³ For further reflection on these three ways of divine relating and their connections, see David H. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 120–131.

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Moreover, one must not only choose how to order these ways of divine relating, one must also choose where to locate individual theological loci, concepts, and events. For instance, is the incarnation solely a response to sin, and should it therefore be located in God's relating to what is not God in reconciliation? Or could it be, as a minority theological tradition has it, that God has deeper motives for the incarnation – that the incarnation is the ultimate expression of the relationship God desires with what is not God, and therefore is to be located in God's relating in eschatological consummation? With respect to Israel's election, did God choose Abraham to restore what Adam destroyed, and should Israel's election therefore be located in reconciliation, or was, as some Rabbinic traditions hold, the world created for Abraham, and so Israel should be located within the doctrine of creation? Is the goodness the Scriptures declare to be true about all that God makes something that could already be found in the past, and so located in the doctrine of creation, or is it, as Barth holds, only an eschatological promise, and so located in eschatological consummation? Each of these choices would lead to a different shape and rhythm of the larger narrative.

I contend that when theologians do their constructive work and formulate their proposals on how to conceive of this or that theological topic, the ways they differ from one another in their particular suggestions have to do with differences in the ways they conceive of the larger narrative about the relationship of God to what is not God, and where in that larger story they locate the topic at hand.

Paul was a theologian. As is the case with many theologians, his writings do not offer a systematic account of the larger narrative of Scripture but are famously contingent, triggered by occasional problems and issues. At the same time, as New Testament scholar Richard B. Hays has argued, Paul's letters can be read as resting on a narrative substructure; that is, they presume a story about Jesus and, more extensively, a story about how Jesus' story fits in the larger history of Israel and the narrative about how God relates to

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the world.⁴ Paul does not so much renarrate these stories, in the way the gospels or many of the Old Testament's books do, but alludes to, summarizes, and reflects on them. His letters may be addressing a particular theological issue, but the way he engages the issue and crafts his theological arguments is shaped by the larger story he has in mind.

I believe that the notion of an implicit narrative substructure is extraordinarily helpful in analyzing the different ways traditional Protestant theologians and contemporary exegetes read Paul. The central thesis of this book is that the differences between these readings of Paul do not primarily concern this or that Pauline theme – justification by faith, law and gospel, or divine righteousness – but have to do with the assumed implicit narrative substructure of Paul's thought. In particular, these readings assume the arc of Paul's implicit narrative to be differently shaped, with a different ordering of the three ways of divine relating to that which is not God, and a subsequent different distribution of substories and theological themes over these three ways of divine relating. It is only once we see that different interpretative traditions assume different narrative substructures that we can analyze the particular readings of such theologically laden themes as justification, righteousness, or faith.

The Gospel Concerning the Son

While the narrative substructure generally remains implicit in Paul's thought, there are a few places where it comes to the surface

⁴ Hays first presented the argument in his *The Faith of Jesus Christ: An Investigation of the Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1–4:11*, Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 56 (Chicago, IL: Scholars Press, 1983). Very helpful is Hays' essay "Is Paul's gospel narratable?," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 27 (2004), 217–239, which is a response to a collection of essays subjecting the notion of a Pauline narrative substructure to greater scrutiny: Bruce W. Longenecker (ed.), *Narrative Dynamics in Paul: A Critical Assessment* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 2002).

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of his argument. The beginning of the letter to the Romans is one such place. At the beginning of the letter, Paul refers to “the gospel.” This “gospel” is for him, as it turns out, a story – the story of Jesus’ biography. In his argument Paul succinctly offers us the outline of this gospel story as he sees it. He is speaking about the gospel

concerning his Son,
 who was descended from David according to the flesh
 and was declared to be Son of God with power
 according to the spirit of holiness
 by resurrection from the dead,
 Jesus Christ our Lord. (Rom. 1:3, 4)⁵

⁵ Of course, many modern commentators consider Rom. 1:3b–4 to be early Christian confessional material, perhaps even part of a Christian hymn, cited by Paul in order to highlight the content of the gospel and to establish a rapport with his Roman addressees. For recent discussions, see James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8* (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1988), 5–6; Robert Jewett, *Romans* (Minneapolis, MI: Fortress Press, 2006), 97–99; and Richard N. Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 63–64. N. T. Wright, whose exegesis of these verses I will discuss in due course, embraces this interpretation while stressing at the same time “that the reason why Paul quoted things, if he did, was that they expressed exactly what he intended to say at the time . . . 1:3–4 . . . is the careful, weighted, programmatic statement of what will turn out to be Paul’s subtext throughout the whole epistle” (N. T. Wright, “Romans,” in L. E. Keck (ed.), *New Interpreters Bible*, volume 10 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2002), 416–417). According to this line of interpretation, this passage can still count as an expression of Paul’s Christological narrative, even if Paul did not pen these words himself.

The observation that at key moments Paul quoted confessional or liturgical material raises in itself interesting historical and theological questions, which I will have to set aside. If Paul quoted hymns or prayers to establish a common frame of reference with his readers, he assumed this material to be familiar to and, even more, to be authoritative among them. In writing to the Christian community of Rome, he writes to a community not founded by himself. If Paul quotes from an existing hymn, assuming the hymn to be familiar to this community, it suggests that there was at this early stage in the history of the church a body of liturgical texts that was shared across a large geographical area and across cultures. Moreover, it suggests that Paul sees this body of texts as material that can serve to build a theological case.

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Contrasting the ways traditional Protestant theologians and contemporary Pauline exegetes read this passage offers both an introduction to and an illustration of my larger thesis. For clarity's sake it will be most helpful to first engage a contemporary Pauline exegete, N. T. Wright. In his commentary on Romans, he writes:

The introduction (1:1–17) [of this letter] offers a dense statement of the theme: in the gospel announcement of the risen Jesus as Messiah and Lord, the one true God has unveiled covenant faithfulness and justice, God's own faithfulness and justice, for the benefit of all who believe. The whole point of Paul's gospel is that Jesus, precisely as Israel's Messiah, is now Lord of the world . . . God raised Jesus from the dead by the power of the Spirit, in line with Scriptural promises that attributed to the breath, wind, or Spirit of God the promised new life on the other side of death, and more particularly the new hope for exiled and desolate Israel . . . What had happened to Jesus, Paul believed, was the bringing forward into the present of [the] general resurrection, in one particular case, which still belonged organically to, and anticipated, the total "resurrection of the dead" . . . Paul saw the event of Easter as the start and foretaste of God's long-promised new age, "the age to come" that he and many other Jews had been expecting . . . For Paul "the gospel" is not a system of salvation, a message first and foremost about how human beings get saved. It is an announcement about Jesus, the Messiah, the Lord.⁶

For Wright, the issue at stake in Paul's Letter to the Romans is God's righteousness, which, according to Wright, is not so much an ethical but a relational category in biblical parlance. The issue is whether God will be true to the promises made in God's covenant with Israel: to bless this people and, through them, to set the world aright and to bring God's eschatological justice and peace to the world. God's righteousness – that is, God's faithfulness to the

⁶ Wright, "Romans," 413–419.

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covenant – was especially called into question through the Exile and the centuries of foreign rule that followed.⁷ Would God still do what God had promised? On Wright’s reading, according to Paul, “the gospel,” and, at the center of that, Christ’s resurrection, is God’s response to *that* question. In his resurrection, Paul says, Jesus is declared to be – that is, marked out as – the son of God. Wright does not read this phrase “son of God” in a Chalcedonian sense; not because Wright does not believe in Chalcedon’s stipulations about Christ being both human and divine, but because that is not what Paul meant by the term. In Jewish theological language, “son of God” can refer to a multitude of entities, including very common human beings. It is an expression of divine favor or, as in this case, divine vindication. In his resurrection Jesus is declared to be God’s son, that is, Jesus is vindicated.⁸ The one who had claimed that God was about to make good on God’s covenantal promises, the one who had announced that God was about to reclaim God’s creation, rescue Israel, and bring justice to the world, had been crucified. In the eyes of Israel, crucifixion marked Jesus out as a failed Messiah, and a failed Messiah is a false Messiah. But in the resurrection God reverses this judgment because in Jesus’ resurrection God inaugurates the very thing that Jesus had said was coming near: the Kingdom of God. Jesus’ resurrection is not simply one coming back to life but the beginning of the transformation of all things. It is, as Paul says elsewhere, the first fruit of the eschatological harvest (1 Cor. 15:20).⁹ It is therefore telling, as Wright underscores in the passage quoted above, that Paul’s quick outline marks Christ’s resurrection as an act of the Spirit; just as the Spirit once hovered over the waters and called creation out of chaos, so too it

⁷ See Wright, “Romans,” 397–406; cf. N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (London: SPCK, 2013), 795–804.

⁸ N. T. Wright elaborates on this in *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 690–701.

⁹ N. T. Wright has offered further theological reflection on this in his *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of God* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2008).

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would be the Spirit who, according to Israel's eschatological expectations, would recreate all things.

On Wright's reading, the gospel is an eschatological narrative. It is the story of the life of Jesus, in whose resurrection that which he had proclaimed has now been inaugurated and received a foothold in history: God's eschatological reclaiming and transforming of all things.

Now let us turn to an exegete who gave shape to traditional Protestant readings of Paul, John Calvin. In his commentary on the same passage he writes:

This is a remarkable passage, by which we are taught that the whole gospel is included in Christ . . . It is . . . a definition of the gospel . . . Two things must be found in Christ, in order that we may obtain salvation in him, namely divinity and humanity. His divinity possesses power, righteousness, life, which by his humanity are conveyed to us. Hence the Apostle has expressly mentioned both in the summary he gives of the gospel, that Christ was manifested in the flesh – and that in it he declared himself to be the Son of God . . . He [says that he was descended from David] according to the flesh [so] that we may understand that he had something more excellent than flesh, which he brought from heaven, and did not take from David, . . . [namely] the glory of the divine nature . . . The power, by which he was raised from the dead, was something like a decree, by which he was proclaimed the Son of God . . . Christ was declared the Son of God by openly exercising a real celestial power, that is, the power of the Spirit, by which he rose from the dead . . . Because he rose by his own power, as he had often testified.¹⁰

Here we find a different story. The gospel, Calvin holds, is a story shaped by Christ's two natures – interpreting Paul's notions of Christ's "descending from David" and being "son of God" completely in a Chalcedonian sense. The gospel is a narrative of one

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, translated and edited by John Owen (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 43–46.