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FOUR
VIEWS
ON


THE ROLE OF WORKS AT THE FINAL JUDGMENT



Alan P. Stanley, general editor
Stanley N. Gundry, series editor

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Four Views on the Role of Works at the Final Judgment

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ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
<i>ABD</i>	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> , ed. David Noel Freedman, 1992.
AYBRL	Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library
<i>BBR</i>	<i>Bulletin of Biblical Research</i>
BDB	Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, <i>Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> , 1907.
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
<i>BSac</i>	<i>Bibliotheca sacra</i>
BZNW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
<i>EBC</i>	<i>Expositor's Bible Commentary</i>
ESV	English Standard Version
ETSMS	Evangelical Theological Society Monograph Series
<i>EvQ</i>	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
<i>ExpTim</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>
<i>GNTC</i>	<i>Grace New Testament Commentary</i>
HCSB	Holman Christian Standard Bible
HNTC	Harper's New Testament Commentary
ICC	International Critical Commentary
IVPNTC	InterVarsity Press New Testament Commentary
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
<i>JGES</i>	<i>Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society</i>
<i>JSPL</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of Paul and His Letters</i>
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
NCBC	New Century Bible Commentary
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIV	New International Version
NIVAC	NIV Application Commentary

NovTSup	Novum Testamentum Supplements
NPNF1	Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, series 1
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
PNTC	Pillar New Testament Commentary
RSV	Revised Standard Version
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
SP	Sacra Pagina
TNTC	Tyndale New Testament Commentary
<i>TrinJ</i>	<i>Trinity Journal</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WEC	Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testa- ment
ZECNT	Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testa- ment
<i>ZNW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche</i>

INTRODUCTION

ALAN P. STANLEY

It's the end of time, the place is heaven; the scene resembles a courtroom. Front and center is a great white throne, unapproachable, encircled by a multifaceted display of shining and sparkling jewel-like colors. An exceedingly powerful electrical storm emerges from the throne; flashes of lightning and peals of thunder produce an audio-visual display out of this world. Ineffable heavenly beings surround the throne spellbound, enthralled, fascinated, awestruck, captivated, mesmerized by the holy one seated on the throne. Others too, worship without hesitation, adoring the incomparable worth of God, the King of the universe.

The Judge appears in glorious splendor. He is powerful, majestic, beyond description, awesome, and dressed in a long robe with a golden belt circling his chest; his head and hair are white as snow, his eyes blazing like fire, and his feet shining like fine bronze in a furnace. He speaks. His voice is like the sound of a great waterfall. In his right hand he holds seven stars. A sharp, two-edged sword protrudes from his mouth, and his face blazes like the sun.

Heaven and earth flee from his presence. But the dead, great and small, stand before the throne, where very thick books lie open. Another book, the book of life is opened. And the dead are judged according to the information in the books.

This is the final judgment, commonly known as the Great White Throne Judgment (Rev. 20:11–15). It is the last and final act of history before God dwells with his people forever. We may disagree on other things, but all agree that this is the *final* judgment.

Judgment in Scripture

Judgment in the Old Testament

That God is the rightful “Judge of all the earth”¹ (Gen. 18:25) has been

1. The Bible translation used in this introduction is the NIV 2011. Any italics in the NIV text have been added for emphasis.

a stalwart of the biblical story from the beginning (e.g., 16:5; 31:53). “God will bring into judgment both the righteous and the wicked, for there will be a time for every activity, a time to judge every deed” (Eccl. 3:17). No one will be exempt; “the LORD will judge the ends of the earth” (1 Sam. 2:10; cf. Gen. 18:25; 1 Chron. 16:33) according to people’s works (e.g., Job 34:10–11; Ps. 62:11–12; Prov. 24:12; Isa. 59:18; Jer. 17:10; 32:18–19; Ezek. 24:14; Hos. 12:2), bringing “every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil” (Eccl. 12:14).

“Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (Gen. 18:25). Yes, he will. He will judge with justice and equity (Pss. 9:8; 72:2; 75:2 96:10), which means “the wicked will not stand in the judgment” (Ps. 1:5) and the righteous will “sing before the LORD” (98:9). As for when this will happen, God has chosen “the appointed time” (75:2); “that day belongs to the Lord” (Jer. 46:10). But God will save his people. “For the LORD is our judge, the LORD is our lawgiver, the LORD is our king; it is he who will save us” (Isa. 33:22). Since Israel will sing on “that day,” they could sing in “their day” (Ps. 75).

Judgment in the New Testament

The New Testament similarly declares that God has “set a day,” or so variously called (Acts 17:31; cf. Matt. 8:29; Rom. 2:16; 1 Cor. 4:5; 2 Tim. 4:8). It is “the last day” (John 12:48), “the day of judgment” (Matt. 10:15; 11:22; 12:36; 2 Pet. 3:7; 1 John 4:17; cf. 2 Pet. 3:12), when God “will judge the world” (Acts 17:31; Rom. 3:6). But there is an advance on the Old Testament. This day has come closer. “The ax is already at the root of the trees” (Matt. 3:10). “The hour has already come” (Rom. 13:11). “The end of all things is near” (1 Pet. 4:7). Hence, the Lord “is ready to judge the living and the dead” (1 Pet. 4:5).

But there’s more. God has selected *a man* to carry out his judgment, “the man he has appointed.” What’s more, “he has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead” (Acts 17:31). The man is, of course, Jesus Christ. Thus, “the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son. . . . And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man” (John 5:22, 27). “Christ Jesus,” therefore, “will judge the living and the dead” (2 Tim. 4:1), though not independently of the Father (John 5:30). Judgment, therefore, will not be left up to “any human court” (1 Cor. 4:3). We must “wait until the Lord comes”

(4:5). But we must be clear on this: “There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy” (Jas. 4:12).

The appointed day and appointed man are therefore key, nonnegotiable tenets of the gospel. Paul declares, “This will take place on the day when God judges people’s secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares” (Rom. 2:16). Similarly, Peter recalls how Jesus “commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead” (Acts 10:42). This is basic to Christianity (see 24:25; Heb. 6:1–2).

Since judgment is part of the gospel and since the gospel is truth (Gal. 2:5, 14; Eph. 1:13), God’s judgment will also be “based on truth” (Rom. 2:2). Human beings tend to judge by outward appearances (John 7:24; 8:15; 1 Pet. 4:6), but this is not always fair because we lack the full and “true” picture required to make accurate judgments. But God is the “Sovereign Lord” (Rev. 6:10), which means he is able and will judge “people’s secrets through Jesus Christ” (Rom. 2:16) and “will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of the heart” (1 Cor. 4:5). Therefore his judgment will be “true” (John 8:16), “just” (5:30; Rev. 19:11), and “righteous” (Rom. 2:5), for he is “the righteous Judge” (2 Tim. 4:8). He will judge “each person’s work impartially” (1 Pet. 1:17; cf. Acts 17:31; Rom. 2:11; 1 Pet. 2:23). Indeed, the Judge of all the earth will still do what is right (Gen. 18:25).

Who, then, will be judged? “God will judge those outside” the church (1 Cor. 5:13), namely, “the enemies of God” (Heb. 10:27), “the unrighteous” (2 Pet. 2:9) and “the ungodly” (2 Pet. 3:7; Jude 14–15), “the inhabitants of the earth” (Rev. 6:10), who judged Jesus to be unworthy of their worship. Jesus said, “There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; the very words I have spoken will condemn them at the last day” (John 12:48). Clearly then, God will judge those who have refused to receive Jesus Christ.

Who Will Be Judged?

Faith and Grace

So far so good! What about Christians; will they be judged? Christians are defined by their relationship to Jesus Christ, a relationship that they are in by faith on account of God’s grace and Christ’s finished work

on the cross. The devil therefore doesn't try to prevent works; he tries to prevent *belief*: “the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not *believe* and be saved” (Luke 8:12). Those who believe “become children of God” (John 1:12) and are “not condemned” (John 3:18). They “*will not be judged*” for they have “crossed over from death to life” (5:24). One translation captures John 5:24 this way: “They will never be condemned for their sins” (NLT). Hence, “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1). Faith in Jesus Christ, no condemnation; what Christian doesn't know these fundamental truths? And then, of course, there is John 3:16, evidently the most popular verse in the Bible.²

It is a remarkable fact that out of the 155 times the Greek word *charis* (grace) occurs in the New Testament, Paul is responsible for one hundred of them.³ He, himself “once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man . . . [who] acted in ignorance and unbelief” (1 Tim. 1:13), is portrayed in the pages of the New Testament as deeply thankful for God's grace and mercy (1:12; cf. Rom. 7:25; 1 Cor. 15:57; 2 Cor. 9:15). Notice how he lumps himself in with his readers: “At one time *we too* were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures” (Titus 3:3). “*All of us also* lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of *our* flesh and following its desires and thoughts” (Eph. 2:3).

It was on this man — “the worst of sinners” no less — that “the grace of our Lord was poured out . . . abundantly” (1 Tim. 1:14, 16). How can this be so? “How can God pour out his grace so abundantly on a vile man like Paul?” The answer in short is Jesus! “Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners — of whom I am the worst” (1:15). But notice again what Paul says: “Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance.” In other words, it “is true, and you should fully accept it” (NCV), it's “a word you can take to heart and depend on” (Message), “This statement is completely reliable and should be universally accepted” (J. B. Phillips). “You can take it to the bank!”

But what relevance does this trustworthy statement have for us? Paul shows us: “I was shown mercy *so that* in me, the worst of sinners,

2. www.christianpost.com/news/most-popular-bible-verses-revealed-29900/.

3. This assumes that all thirteen epistles attributed to Paul are indeed written by Paul.

Christ Jesus might display his immense patience *as an example for those who would believe* in him and receive eternal life” (1 Tim. 1:16). Paul is an example for anyone who feels as though they’re beyond God’s grace. Little wonder, then, that he begins and ends all of his letters with the term “grace.” His last recorded words are, “Grace be with you all” (2 Tim. 4:22).

Case settled then. It is through Jesus Christ *alone* that we “have gained access by faith into this grace” (Rom. 5:2). To “set aside the grace of God” would mean that “Christ died for nothing” (Gal. 2:21). Faith and grace are basic tenets of Christianity (e.g., Heb. 4:16; 6:1; 10:22; Jas. 4:6–10; 1 Pet. 1:3, 5, 9–10, 13; 1 John 5:1, 13). How fitting is it that the New Testament ends with, “The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God’s people. Amen” (Rev. 22:21).

Christians and Judgment

So back to the question: What about Christians, will they be judged? Yes. God is “the Judge of all” (Heb. 12:23). Thus, “the Lord will judge his people” (10:30); “it is time for judgment to begin with God’s household” (1 Pet. 4:17a). Those who teach the Bible “will be judged” (Jas. 3:1). “The one who plants and the one who waters . . . will each be rewarded according to their own labor” (1 Cor. 3:8). In short:

- “Everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment.” (Matt. 12:36)
- “We will all stand before God’s judgment seat . . . each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.” (Rom. 14:10, 12)
- “We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.” (2 Cor. 5:10)
- “Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.” (Heb. 4:13)

Therefore, “speak and act as those who are going to be judged” (Jas. 2:12). “Since you call on a Father who judges each person’s work impartially, live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear” (1 Pet. 1:17).

The Nature of Judgment

This much is clear then: “The coming Lord is also the judge of the Christian.”⁴ But what will this judgment entail? We are told that God will judge those who have hypocritically judged others (Matt. 7:1–2), “the adulterer and all the sexually immoral” (Heb. 13:4), “anyone who has not been merciful” (Jas. 2:13), and those who “grumble” (Jas. 5:9). So are these people saved or not? Could it be that they are saved and will lose their rewards? This leads us to some of the more detailed passages concerning judgment. Matthew depicts the Son of Man coming to judge the sheep from the goats. To the sheep he will say,

Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. (Matt. 25:34–36)

To the goats he will say:

Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat. . . . (Matt. 25:41–42a)

Many problems surround this passage,⁵ but perhaps the most pressing is that in “there is no trace of a doctrine of the forgiveness of sins, or of the grace of God. . . . There is no trace of a saving *faith*. . . . There is no mercy shown to the accursed.”⁶ In other words, doesn’t this look “dangerously like justification by works”?⁷ Craig Keener writes, this “passage explicitly declares that this judgment determines people’s eter-

4. Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 185.

5. See Sherman W. Gray, *The Least of My Brothers, Matthew 25:31–46: A History of Interpretation* (SBLDS; Atlanta: Scholars, 1989).

6. Francis Wright Beare, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 496–97 (*italics original*).

7. Michael Green, *Matthew for Today: Expository Study of Matthew* (Dallas: Word, 1988), 242.

nal destinies.”⁸ Okay, but what exactly is the role of works here? “Does acceptance of Jesus Christ by faith count for nothing at the end?”⁹ Matthew 25 is not alone. Jesus says, in John, “a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done what is good will rise to live, and those who have done what is evil will rise to be condemned” (John 5:28–29).

Paul wanted believers at Rome to know that “God ‘will repay each person according to what they have done.’ To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life” (Rom. 2:5–7). James warns his readers, “Don’t grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!” (Jas. 5:9). James addresses them as “brothers and sisters,” that is, Christians. There are obviously two alternatives: grumble and be judged, stop grumbling and escape judgment. But what would it mean to escape judgment? One thing James *cannot* mean is that pending their behavior, they can expect to forfeit the judgment process altogether. Obviously James is thinking of the outcome of judgment.

But what are the possible outcomes for Christians? To put it simply, if these readers did not heed the warning, what exactly would judgment entail? Donald Bloesch alludes to the issue, maintaining that believers will be at the final judgment but can rest assured God will be merciful (Jas. 2:12). Thus, “all Christians *who are faithful* to the end can be assured that they are in the hands of a God who is . . . infinite mercy.”¹⁰ But what does this mean then for Christians who are unfaithful?

Justified by Faith, Judged According to Works

Whatever it means, the New Testament ends on a note of expectancy: “Look, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to each person according to what they have done” (Rev. 22:12). Hence the Apostle’s Creed articulates what four centuries of early Christians had come to believe as orthodox: “I believe in Jesus Christ . . . he ascended into heaven . . . from there he will come to judge the living and the dead.”

8. Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 604 (*italics original*).

9. David Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew* (NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 330.

10. Donald Bloesch, *The Last Things: Resurrection, Judgment, Glory* (Christian Foundations; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 70.

It is true that some find the notion of judgment an affront to a loving God. In the late 1960s one scholar wrote, “God is primarily a God who loves, a God who saves. Hence any eschatological statement set in the context of future judgment must take into account the inadequacy of this context and must allow for this inadequacy if conclusions unworthy of God are to be avoided.”¹¹ This attitude still exists half a century on¹² but an honest reading of the New Testament won’t allow it.

So here is the basic tension we have uncovered: the Bible teaches that people are justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ and yet will be judged according to their works. Are we to conclude, then, that the Bible has created for itself an intolerable impasse? Or should we resort to prioritizing doctrines? In particular, for the believer, what role do works play at judgment?

Martin Luther, the New Perspective, John Piper, and N. T. Wright

Martin Luther

Space precludes even the briefest of sketches of church history on this topic, but we should at least consider Martin Luther (sixteenth century).¹³ Luther rejected the Catholic notion of works being meritorious for salvation/eternal life, even if they were preceded by grace, insisting that justification was entirely by faith alone (*sola fides*) apart from works. This is “the true and chief article of Christian doctrine”¹⁴ and is irreversible, continuing until the final judgment.¹⁵ However, Rome was not Luther’s only opponent. If Catholicism was steeped in works, anti-nomians downplayed them altogether. Thus Luther insisted that while works do not justify, they are important for faith—to demonstrate that faith is real.¹⁶ Thus, “if good works do not follow, it is certain that this

11. William J. Dalton, *Aspects of New Testament Eschatology* (Perth: University of Western Australia Press, 1968), 7, cited in Richard H. Hiers, “Day of Judgment,” *ABD*, 2:81.

12. Cf., e.g., Rob Bell, *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived* (New York: Harper One, 2011); Peter W. Marty, “Betting on a Generous God,” *Christian Century* 128, no. 10 (May 17, 2011): 22–23, 25.

13. For a fuller synopsis of Luther’s thinking on the relationship between faith and works, see Alan P. Stanley, *Did Jesus Teach Salvation by Works? The Role of Works in Salvation in the Synoptic Gospels* (ETSMS 4; Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2006), 39–46. For the same throughout church history, see pp. 19–70.

14. Luther, *Works*, 35:363.

15. Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 446.

16. Luther, *Works*, 34:124.

faith in Christ does not dwell in our heart.”¹⁷ Luther wrestles with the tension between faith and works but is careful to give priority to faith. Works are necessary *but* they do not make a person a Christian.¹⁸ For instance, to be without works at the final judgment would be cause for fear (1 John 4:16-18).¹⁹ However, works by themselves will not alleviate fear since salvation is a free gift grounded in “God’s forgiving grace.”²⁰ So yes, works are important, but if one were to appear at the final judgment without them, “we cannot tell anyone in such a situation to do anything else than to believe. If you have no works, then do not be without faith.”²¹

The New Perspective and The End of the Twentieth Century

Fast-forwarding to the latter half of the twentieth century, many have sought to reconcile the juxtaposing themes of justification by faith and judgment according to works. Invariably these studies have tended to focus on Paul for it is there that we see the contrast most starkly. Furthermore, E. P. Sanders’ 1977 watershed book, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*,²² marked a new era in Pauline studies. Arguing that Judaism was not in fact characterized by works-righteousness (i.e., salvation by works), as Martin Luther and most of us had thought from our readings of Romans and Galatians, Sanders’ work inevitably spawned a flurry of literature on Paul in what came to be known as the New Perspective.²³ Since the New Perspective impinges on the role of works at the final judgment,²⁴ much of what has been written has also addressed this issue

17. *Ibid.*, 34:111.

18. *Ibid.*, 31:361; 34:165.

19. Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 453.

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Ibid.*, 454–55.

22. E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (London: SCM, 1977).

23. For responses to Sanders’ work and the New Perspective in general, see the two volumes by D. A. Carson, Peter T. O’Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid (eds.), *Justification and Variegated Nomism: The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism* (WUNT 2/140; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001); *Justification and Variegated Nomism: The Paradoxes of Paul* (WUNT 2/181; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004). For an easy to read introduction to the New Perspective, see Simon J. Gathercole, “What Did Paul Really Mean?” *Christianity Today* 51 (Aug. 2007): 22–28, or online: www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/august/13.22.html.

24. See, for instance, Sanders’ section on “Judgment by Works and Salvation by Grace [in Paul],” *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 515–18.

in relation to Paul's doctrine of justification by faith.²⁵ Nevertheless the last century still brought with it no coherent thought on the subject.²⁶

The IVP Bible Dictionaries that came out in the last decade of the twentieth century—and have as their subtitle, “A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship”—confirm this point. In the 1992 and 1993 volumes Stephen Travis argued that at the *final judgment* works provide *evidence* as to whether “the basic direction of one's life” has been toward God or away from him.²⁷ But according to Mark Seifrid, in the 1997 volume, works cannot be reduced to mere evidence. Rather *just recompense* best describes a judgment that is in accordance with each person's works. This does not deny justification by grace since believers must not presume upon grace, for “where saving realities are

25. This is merely a select list of what has been written (given in chronological order): Leon Morris, *The Biblical Doctrine of Judgment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960); Karl N. Donfried, “Justification and Last Judgment in Paul,” *ZNW* 67 (1976): 90–110; T. Francis Glasson, “Last Judgment in Rev 20 and Related Writings,” *NTS* 28 (1982): 528–39; Nigel M. Watson, “Justified by Faith, Judged by Works: An Antinomy?” *NTS* 29 (1983): 209–21; Klyne R. Snodgrass, “Justification by Grace—to the Doers: An Analysis of the Place of Romans 2 in the Theology of Paul,” *NTS* 32 (1986): 72–93; Stephen H. Travis, *Christ and the Judgment of God* (Basingstoke, UK: Pickering, 1986); Don Garlington, *Faith, Obedience, and Perseverance Aspects of Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1991); Thomas R. Schreiner, “Did Paul Believe in Justification by Works? Another Look at Romans 2,” *BBR* 3 (1993): 131–58; Kent L. Yinger, *Paul, Judaism, and Judgment according to Deeds* (SNTSMS 105; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Thomas R. Schreiner and Ardel B. Caneday, *The Race Set before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Assurance* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001); Simon Gathercole, *Where Is the Boasting: Early Jewish Soteriology and Paul's Response in Romans 1–5* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); Christian Stettler, “Paul, the Law and Judgment by Works,” *EvQ* 76 (2004): 195–215; Paul A. Rainbow, *The Way of Salvation: The Role of Christian Obedience in Justification* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2005); Chris VanLandingham, *Judgment and Justification in Early Judaism and the Apostle Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006); Alan P. Stanley, *Did Jesus Teach Salvation by Works?* (2006); Richard H. Bulzacchelli, *Judged by the Law of Freedom: A History of the Faith-Works Controversy, and a Resolution in the Thought of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2006); Kyoung-Shik Kim, *God Will Judge Each One according to Works: Judgment according to Works and Psalm 62 in Early Judaism and the New Testament* (BZNW 178; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011); A. B. Caneday, “Judgment, Behavior, and Justification according to Paul's Gospel in Romans 2,” *JSPL* 1/2 (2011): 153–92.

26. Rainbow, *The Way of Salvation*, 17, notes that at the beginning of the twenty-first century the issue of how to reconcile justification by faith and judgment according to works was an “unresolved problem.” Similarly VanLandingham, *Judgment and Justification in Early Judaism*, 11: “Nothing close to a consensus exists among scholars about how to reconcile judgment and justification in Paul,” and Michael F. Bird, “Judgment and Justification in Paul: A Review Article,” *BBR* 18/2 (2008): 299: “no solution has won a consensus . . . and the tension between justification by faith and judgment according to deeds has continued to perplex commentators and preachers.”

27. S. H. Travis, “Judgment,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 408–11; idem, “Judgment,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 516–17; idem, *Christ and the Judgment of God: Divine Retribution in the New Testament* (Hants, UK: Marshall Pickering, 1986), 169.

present they manifest themselves in persevering faith and obedience, which secure the believer in the final judgment.”²⁸

Admittedly, this is a simplified portrayal of things. The reality is that while there are a limited number of ways of explaining the role of works at the judgment, there are many nuances.²⁹ Others view the final judgment as the place where divine commendation will be given or withheld. Either way, the believer is saved (e.g., 1 Cor. 3:10–15),³⁰ and a passage like Romans 2:5–16 is theoretical/hypothetical rather than actual.³¹ For others, while rewards and not eternal life is the issue, believers will not be at the final judgment.³²

John Piper and N. T. Wright

However, many of these debates have occurred in scholarly journals and monographs. This doesn't mean they are not accessible, of course, but generally speaking they have remained in scholarly circles. Yet as one of my former students, now a pastor, said when hearing about this book, “This is not just a scholarly debate . . . to get this wrong is serious.” Indeed. True, blogs are undoubtedly making a difference, yet most Christians I know are completely unaware of the issues. However, two prominent figures in evangelicalism have brought these issues out into the open in recent years. I am referring to British New Testament scholar N. T. Wright and American pastor John Piper. While the role of works at the final judgment was not the main point of disagreement between the two, it was indeed a major one.³³ The problem was that

28. M. A. Seifrid, “Judgment,” in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Development* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 623–24.

29. Dane C. Ortlund, “Justified by Faith, Judged according to Works: Another Look at a Pauline Paradox,” *JETS* 52 (2009): 324–31, lists fourteen “nuanced” views grouped under four general headings. For recent surveys on approaches to reconcile justification by faith and judgment according to works (mostly limited to Paul), see Rainbow, *The Way of Salvation*, 16–19; VanLandingham, *Judgment and Justification in Early Judaism*, 11–15; Kim, *God Will Judge Each One according to Works*, 5–13.

30. E.g., Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 276–77.

31. E.g., George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 611.

32. E.g., Samuel L. Hoyt, *The Judgment Seat of Christ: A Biblical and Theological Study* (Milwaukee, WI: Grace Gospel, 2011), who sees as many as five eschatological judgments.

33. See Michael F. Bird, “What Is There between Minneapolis and St. Andrews? A Third Way in the Wright-Piper Debate,” *JETS* 54 (2011): 299–309.

Wright, one of the leading proponents of the New Perspective,³⁴ kept on saying—or at least we all thought he did—that at the final judgment the believer’s final justification will be *on the basis of the whole life lived*³⁵ or something to that effect (e.g., “Justification, at the last, will be on the basis of performance”).³⁶

Piper tackled Wright head-on in *The Future of Justification: A Response to N. T. Wright*. One of Piper’s central concerns was that “Wright makes startling statements to the effect that our future justification will be on the basis of works.”³⁷ Piper believed that

our deeds will be the public evidence brought forth in Christ’s courtroom to demonstrate *that our faith is real*... Our deeds are not the basis of our salvation, they are the evidence of our salvation. They are not foundation, they are demonstration. All our salvation will be by grace through faith... So when Paul says (in 2 Corinthians 5:10) that each “[will] be recompensed ... according to what he has done,” he not only means that our *rewards* will accord with our deeds, but also our *salvation* will accord with our deeds.³⁸

So what was Piper’s beef with Wright? Actually, it was more that Wright was simply ambiguous on the issue of “faith alone,” (pp. 130–31), leaving the door open for a “Catholic” interpretation of justification.³⁹ (p. 183). According to Piper, “it may be that Wright means nothing more here than what I mean when I say that our good works are the necessary evidence of faith in Christ at the last day. Perhaps. But it is not so simple.” Thus, “I would be happy,” wrote Piper, “for Wright to clarify for his reading public that this, in fact, is *not* what he believes.” Piper, as we have seen, does not have a problem with

34. See, e.g., N. T. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005). It is actually more accurate to speak of New Perspectives (plural).

35. *Ibid.*, 57, 121, 148.

36. N. T. Wright, “Romans,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 10:440.

37. John Piper, *The Future of Justification: A Response to N. T. Wright* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 22.

38. John Piper, *The Purifying Power of Living by Faith in Future Grace* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1995), 364–65 (*italics* original). Watch Piper discuss the role of works at judgment at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ZQjP-5ce6Q.

39. Piper, *The Future of Justification*, 130–31, 1830

judgment and even with works being necessary for one's final salvation. His central concern was that for Wright the ultimate *basis* or *ground* of final salvation appeared to be works rather than faith alone in Jesus Christ and his finished work on the cross.⁴⁰ For Piper, "Christians are free from law-keeping as the *ground* of our justification" (italics mine).⁴¹

Wright responded with *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision*, and he qualified that he didn't mean salvation is earned or that a perfect life was required. What he did mean was that because of our union with Christ (Rom. 6:1–11), the presence of the Spirit (2:25–29) and God's work in us, we are now able to live a new life (6:6–11), obey the law (8:4), put to death the misdeeds of the flesh (8:13), and live eternally (8:13).⁴² Hence, "humans become genuinely human, genuinely free, when the spirit is at work within them so that they choose to act . . . in ways which reflect God's image, which give him pleasure, which bring glory to his name, which do what the law had in mind all along. That is the life that leads to the final verdict, 'Well done, good and faithful servant!'"⁴³ This is not to do away with faith for "if God justifies people in the present, ahead of the final judgment, faith must be the characteristic of those thus justified."⁴⁴

Wright's response, however, was not enough to stave off his critics.⁴⁵ Still ambiguous was the *ground* of final salvation. Wright and Piper were then scheduled to go head to head as plenary speakers at the 2010 Evangelical Theological Society's annual meeting in Atlanta. Piper couldn't make it and Tom Schreiner, the second contributor in this volume, took his place. Schreiner called for a more thoughtful explanation on this issue:

40. For the quotes in this paragraph, see Piper, *ibid.*, 22, 43, 88–90, 103, 113, 116, 128–31, 143, 146, 171, 182, 184, 217, 221, 224–25. "The crucial question for the final meaning of justification is: *What will be the final ground of our acceptance in the presence of God?*" (p. 101, italics original).

41. *Ibid.*, 221.

42. N. T. Wright, *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision* (London: SPCK, 2009), 167, 205–9.

43. *Ibid.*, 168, cf. 198.

44. *Ibid.*, 183.

45. As is clear, for example, from the subsequent panel discussion to Wright's response between Tom Schreiner, Mark Seifrid, Brian Vickers, and Denny Burke at Boyce College: www.dennyburk.com/schreiner-seifrid-and-vickers-assess-piper-wright-debate-at-boyce-college/.

I think what Wright says about justification by works or judgment according to works could be explained in a more satisfactory way since he occasionally describes good works as the final basis of justification. On the other hand, Wright reminds us of a critical theme that is often ignored in evangelical circles. Paul does teach that good works are necessary for justification and for salvation, and Wright rightly says that those texts are not just about rewards.⁴⁶

Wright helpfully clarified that “justification is anchored firmly and squarely in Jesus the Messiah, the crucified and risen Lord, who is the same yesterday, today, and forever.”⁴⁷ More specifically, “When I,” says Wright, “have spoken of ‘basis’ . . . I have not at all meant by that to suggest that this is an independent basis from the finished work of Christ and the powerful work of the Spirit, but that within that solid and utterly-of-grace structure the particular evidence offered on the last day will be the tenor and direction of the life that has been lived.”⁴⁸ And again:

The future justification, then, will be in accordance with the life lived, but the glorious conclusion of [Rom.] chapter 8 makes it clear that this is no ground for anxiety. “If God be for us, who can be against us?” This is looking to the future, trusting that the Jesus who died, who rose, and who now intercedes for us will remain at the heart of the unbreakable bond of love with which God has loved us.⁴⁹

Thus, “the final, future justification, then, is assured for all who are ‘in the Messiah.’” As a result, “this future justification, though it will be in accordance with the life lived, is not for that reason in any way putting in jeopardy the present verdict issued over faith and faith alone. . . . All that I have said looks back to the finished work of the Messiah.”⁵⁰

Tom Schreiner responded:⁵¹ “I am delighted that Tom [Wright] now speaks of the final judgment as one that will be in accordance with

46. Thomas R. Schreiner, “Justification: The Saving Righteousness of God in Christ,” *JETS* 54 (2011): 20–21.

47. N. T. Wright, “Justification: Yesterday, Today, And Forever,” *JETS* 54 (2011): 49.

48. *Ibid.*, 60.

49. *Ibid.*, 61–62.

50. *Ibid.*, 62.

51. I am grateful to Tom Schreiner’s thoughts on what I have written here. They have proved helpful in what follows.

our works instead of on the basis of our works. I think this adjustment and clarification is exactly right. . . . I am in full agreement with his formulation: we are judged according to our works, but not on the basis of our works.”⁵²

However, Wright wrote into one blog cautioning such excitement:

. . . don't get too excited. I haven't retracted anything that I meant in my many, many earlier statements on this subject. How could I, since I was simply stating what Paul states rather than trying to squash him into a dogmatic framework? . . . Clearly I did say “basis.” But . . . I have always made it clear . . . that I did not mean or intend the kind of thing that clearly some theologians think that word “must” mean. Since the word “basis” is not itself a biblical word I'm not claiming any great status for it. Obviously people have read it without reading the other things I say and then jumped to conclusions which are not warranted by the fuller exposition I give. . . . Let me say it again: all I am saying is what Paul says in Romans 2 (and elsewhere). Our own technical terms (“basis,” etc.) are fluid and flexible in our discourse and, like all summary terms, need to be teased out in terms of the larger discourse—Paul's, and mine. . . . The point, again, is that by the Spirit those who are already justified by faith have their lives transformed, and the final verdict will be in accordance with that transformation, imperfect though it remains.⁵³

The Four Contributors

This book comes, then, on the heels of these debates, and I hope will serve to make this subject more accessible to the wider church public. The four essays that follow will show that there are indeed things for us to consider that perhaps many of us have not. While there are many scholars that could serve these views well, the four are leading proponents. The first contributor, Bob Wilkin, is the Executive Director

52. “Tom Schreiner's Response to N.T. Wright,” in the plenary discussion that followed Wright's presentation, can be found at <http://schreinerpatrick.wordpress.com/2010/11/23/tom-schreiners-response-to-n-t-wright/>.

53. N. T. Wright responding on Denny Burke's blog, 11/20/2010: www.dennyburk.com/n-t-wright-on-justification-at-ets/.

of the Grace Evangelical Society. Bob has devoted his life to this and related subjects, writing and speaking around America.

Second is Tom Schreiner, one of the world's leading New Testament Pauline scholars. Having written often on faith's relationship to works, Paul and the law, not to mention commentaries on Romans and Galatians, it is difficult to think of anyone more qualified to represent the second view.

The third contributor is James Dunn, a leading British New Testament scholar and widely known for his work on Jesus and Paul. As the one who coined the term "New Perspective," he too is particularly suited to represent the third view.

Finally, Michael Barber is Professor of Theology, Scripture, and Catholic Thought at John Paul the Great Catholic University. As the author of several books and host of *Reasons for Faith Live*, a radio show heard weekly across America, Michael presents the Catholic view on the role of works at the final judgment.

Finally, this subject does tend to generate a lot of emotion.⁵⁴ There's nothing wrong with passionate debate, of course, but regrettably the Internet has become a place where people can hide behind their computers and serve ad hominem arguments back and forth to people they don't even know. We need to learn how to discuss these issues with the same grace we have received (Rom. 15:7; Eph. 4:1–3; 5:1–2; Phil. 2:5). What's more, at times there is power in remaining silent (Prov. 17:28). Ultimately it's our love for one another that will speak volumes to a lost and watching world (John 13:35; 17:21, 23). Darrell Bock helpfully reminds us:

Surely our disputes and a multiplicity of approaches to each problem will always be with us. But clarification and better movement toward mutual understanding are realistic goals. Let's be sure to remember the world and pursue our larger mission. . . . Let's debate fairly, fully and with a dignity that reflects respect for our fellow brothers and sisters in the Lord, until glory comes.⁵⁵

54. Cf., e.g., some of the comments to this brief clip by Piper explaining the role of works at the final judgment: [//www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ZQjP-5ce6Q](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ZQjP-5ce6Q)

55. Darrell L. Bock, *Purpose Directed Theology: Getting Our Priorities Right in Evangelical Controversies* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 114.