

# N.T. Wright Or the Recatholisation of Protestant Thought

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(Translated from the Spanish by Tim Wilder)

## INTRODUCTION

Durham is a small city in northeast England, but it has a great cathedral.<sup>1</sup> This diocese has become one of the most important for the Anglican Church, effectively since February 2003, when the queen of England approved the nomination of Nicholas Thomas Wright as bishop. The nomination is yet another step in the dazzling career of this author, always galloping between the academic world and the life of the Church. Except for his beginning in Cambridge University and a stay in Canada in the early 1980s, the development of Wright's academic career basically unfolded in Oxford University. In the ecclesiastical realm he was distinguished for having been Canon Theologian of Westminster Abbey, the same place where between 1643 and 1649, at the time of an extraordinary political and religious revolution, an assembly of theologians and layman approved a confession of faith that would become the principal monument of Reformed orthodoxy, the Westminster Confession.

Tom Wright currently occupies the highest rung on the world theological ladder. Moreover, Wright is a brilliant communicator, and a prolific writer—at fifty-five years he has published “only” thirty books. Wright has all the qualities of a success: besides his academic qualifications he has an attractive personality, an engaging writing style and an acute sensibility for reaching the contemporary mind. He is still young, theologically and ministerially speaking. One might say, using his own accustomed vocabulary, that Tom Wright is at the *climax* of his career, after reaching a position of great authority in his Church and in the international theological world, even beginning to acquire renown in secular society as an influential figure. Certainly Wright has the doors wide open and the broad world before him.

In our Spanish context this review of achievements is a necessary step before we can understand whom we are speaking of. Tom Wright is quite unknown to us, but doubtless he will become ever less so. Coinciding more or less with his nomination as bishop by Queen Elizabeth II was the publication in Spanish of what may very well be his most daring and controversial book, appearing in our country with the title *El verdadero pensamiento de Pablo*.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Translator's note: On September 4, 2005 the relics of St. Cuthbert were translated to Durham Cathedral and the pre-Reformation name of The Cathedral Church of Christ and Blessed Mary the Virgin of Durham and St. Cuthbert was restored.

2 N.T. Wright, *El verdadero pensamiento de Pablo*, (Tarrasa: CLIE, 2002), a translation of *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Lion Publishing plc: Oxford, UK, 1997;

It must be said plainly from the beginning that this book launches an affirmation that is devastating for the historical evangelical faith. Its principal thesis is that the Protestant Reformation was simply mistaken about what gave birth to it, namely the doctrine of justification by faith.<sup>3</sup> According to Wright, this was a lamentable error concerning the historical heritage of the theological debates of the Christian Church after the New Testament, especially that of Augustine and Pelagius, which had nothing to do with the teaching of Paul.<sup>4</sup> Actually, the apostle (always according to Wright) was not opposed to the moralising efforts of a religion of works, but rather, we might say, to the national exclusivity of the Jews.<sup>5</sup> It is wrong, historically speaking, to think of the Jews of the New Testament as (in the words that Wright constantly uses) proto-Pelagians, since the apostle's criticism could not attribute to them what they were not. On the contrary, Paul's teaching on justification refers more to ecclesiology than to soteriology.<sup>6</sup> Paul, then, according to Wright, teaches that to be justified does not mean to be saved but simply to be a member of the people of God, and that one is no longer justified by clinging to the mark

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Albatross Books Pty Ltd: Sutherland, Australia; Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, USA).

- 3 Cf. especially pages 113–118 [here and afterwards the Eerdmans edition], where Wright collects the criticisms of Protestant soteriology by Alister McGrath and undertakes to ground them in the perspective of Pauline exegesis (p. 116). This implies that the criticisms of Protestant soteriology by McGrath and others had been developing since their origin without an important exegetical foundation. Wright's book attempts to remedy this defect.
- 4 Cf. p. 113, where Wright also mentions the debate between Luther and Erasmus. Actually, to make the debate between Luther and Erasmus the origin of a hypothetical misunderstanding about justification by faith shows a significant lack of rigour, even if this concerns only the dates: the debate took place between September 1524 and December 1525, a number of years after the start of the Reformation. Moreover, the polemic between Luther and Erasmus only indirectly involved the topic of justification by faith, inasmuch as they were debating whether the human will, on account of sin, is or is not free. As much could be said of the polemic between Augustine and Pelagias. Although the Pelagian polemic undoubtedly coloured the Church in the West on the matter predestination, it is questionable that it had direct repercussions on the doctrine of justification. Even in the case of a book directed at the general public, Wright's use of such general arguments, completely lacking documentary foundation, is certainly not conducive to taking his discussion seriously in its initial claims.
- 5 Cf. for example his exegesis of Rm. 10:2–4: "In seeking to establish a status of righteousness, of covenant membership, which will be for Jews and Jews only, she [Israel] has not submitted to God's righteousness. The covenant always envisioned a worldwide family; Israel, clinging to her own special status as the covenant-bearer, has betrayed the purpose for which that covenant was made" (p. 108).
- 6 "But already it should be clear that certain aspects of the post-Augustine debate of what has come to be called 'justification' have nothing to do with the context in which Paul was writing. 'Justification' in the first century was not about how someone might establish a relationship with God. It was about God's eschatological definition, both future and present, of who was, in fact, a member of his people. In Sander's terms, it was not so much about 'getting in', or indeed about 'staying in', as about 'how you could tell who was in'. In standard Christian theological language, it wasn't so much about soteriology as about ecclesiology; not so much about salvation as about the church" (p. 119).

of circumcision or by observing the ceremonial law—which was the great Jewish error that Paul sought to overturn. Following the death and resurrection of Christ one is justified (once again, is a member of the people of God) only by faith, understanding this as a badge or an emblem.<sup>7</sup> In this way faith is not to be understood as confidence in Christ for salvation but as a confession of his lordship. It is this confession of Christ’s lordship that is the true essence of the gospel, not the announcement of the good news of salvation.<sup>8</sup>

According to Wright the Protestant tradition has for centuries prolonged errors about the teaching of Paul that have generated, given that they are errors, pernicious consequences, such as individualism,<sup>9</sup> introspection,<sup>10</sup> evangelism/social action dualism,<sup>11</sup> and ecclesiastical divisions.<sup>12</sup> But now that we know the truth, thanks to our better historical understanding of the Judaism of Paul’s time, all that remains for us to do is to *repent*.<sup>13</sup> We are not told expressly where this repentance ought to lead us, but we need not be. We understand it very well. It is not for nothing that Paul’s doctrine of justification is, according to Wright, an essentially ecumenical doctrine.

“The doctrine of justification, in other words, is not merely a doctrine which Catholic and Protestant might just be able to agree on, as a result of hard ecumenical endeavour. It is itself the ecumenical doctrine, the doctrine that *rebukes all our petty and often culture-bound church groupings*, and which declares that all who believe in Jesus belong together in the one family.”<sup>14</sup>

In this way, Wright concludes that the doctrine of justification is no longer an obstacle to the common celebration of the eucharist by Roman Catholics and Protestants.<sup>15</sup> Leaving aside the

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7 Cf. p. 125.

8 Cf. pp. 39–62.

9 “Tragically, some would-be presentations of ‘the gospel’ have actually bought into this, *by implying that one is justified or saved first and foremost as an individual.*” p. 158, our emphasis.

10 Implicit in his criticism: “Some still use him to legitimate an old-style ‘preaching of the gospel’ in which the basic problem is human sin and pride and the basic answer is the cross of Christ.” (p. 22)

11 “The gospel is the announcement that Jesus is Lord—Lord of the world, Lord of the cosmos, Lord of the earth, of the ozone layer, of whales and waterfalls, of trees and tortoises. As soon as we get this right we destroy at a stroke the disastrous dichotomy that has existed in people’s minds between ‘preaching the gospel’ on the one hand and what used to be called loosely ‘social action’ or ‘social justice’ on the other.” (pp. 153–154)

12 “Many Christians, both in the Reformation and in the counter-Reformation traditions, have done themselves and the church a great disservice by treating the doctrine of ‘justification’ as central to their debates, and by supposing that it described the system by which people attained salvation. They have turned the doctrine into its opposite.” (pp. 158-159)

13 Cf. p. 23.

14 *Ibid.* p. 158. Our emphasis.

15 “Because what matters is believing in Jesus, detailed agreement on justification itself, properly conceived, isn’t the thing which should determine eucharistic fellowship.” (p. 159)

sentimental aspects, what the common eucharistic celebration would mean essentially is the *manifestation of the visible unity of the Church*. Or, which is the same thing, it affirms that the division between Roman Catholics and Protestants *would no longer be valid* in the catholic Church (catholic in the sense of universal, i.e. the true Church throughout the ages). The reason is simple: neither of them would be deemed to have fallen into error compared to the other, inasmuch as both would be equally mistaken. There would be total equality between them concerning justification by faith, which is the principal point of difference.

The invitation, then, has been issued. Perhaps for the first time in the history of Spanish Protestantism we hear a call, on the part of a renowned *Protestant* theologian, to put off our doctrinal enmity with the Roman Catholic Church precisely in the name of faithfulness to the truth of biblical doctrine. The consequences of such an action could become truly unforeseeable, as much in the realm of the personal faith of believers as in the institutional and ecclesiastical area. The very publication of this book is indicative of a profound transformation at work in Spanish Protestantism. And the fact that, since its publication, the book has gone without warning, only invites us to think that its ideas have been introduced into the Spanish evangelical world without encountering resistance. With the publication of Wright's book Spanish Protestantism has, definitively, passed into a new era of its existence, characterised not only by an openness to the current of ideas of the international academic world (in which, we recall, the theologically liberal majority colours the agenda) but above all to a relativising of those doctrines considered to be unquestionable up until now.

Therefore it is imperative to begin a debate on Wright's thesis. And it is vital to begin it for motives not only academic but above all ecclesiastical and spiritual: for the love of the Church and for the love of the truth, and foremost for the love of the word of God. We must begin from the starting point that all novelty in doctrine, *by definition*, has to be viewed in the Church with the greatest circumspection and prudence. Furthermore, if the novelty concerns a *fundamental point of the faith*, wherein the Church stands or falls and wherein is found the distinction between the true Church and an apostate Church, which *has been and is the case with doctrine of justification by faith*, every precaution is too little. Is it truly credible that the Church universal throughout two thousand years, and especially during the last five hundred, might have been totally mistaken about such a principal point of the faith? And can such a challenge be offered without there being an evaluation of the arguments and proposals? Moreover, can such a fundamental change in the faith of the Church be proposed without anticipating where the change will lead?

It is of the utmost importance that we evaluate Wright's claims and reasoning from the point of view of the historical evangelical faith. This is precisely what we propose to do in the following essay.

## I. TOM WRIGHT, AN EVANGELICAL THEOLOGIAN?

### 1. *Definition of concepts*

To begin with, this subject has to be positioned in the forgotten terrain where, as the art of propaganda well knows, battles are normally won or lost: semantics. Wright has been published in Spanish in a theological collection which purports to present relevant works, academically speaking, of contemporary evangelical theology. That Wright has been published in this collection has to make us consider the true meaning of the word evangelical. Ultimately, what does the word evangelical mean? It needs to be recognised that the word “evangelical” does not have a clearly defined meaning. Nevertheless, on the whole it refers to the beliefs professed in the Protestant Reformation, the doctrinal content of which has been defined by the historical confessions of faith. Compared to its synonym “Protestant,” the word “evangelical” acquired a more agreeable complexion, given that it indicates the gospel rather than the solemn affirmation of doctrinal truths (in Latin *protestatio*).

Similarly, the word “evangelical” traditionally has acquired a more specific sense. On the one hand, “evangelical” is used to refer not only to a system of beliefs, but also to a spirituality characterised by personal conversion and a life of holiness centred in the Bible, an understanding of the term that is the fruit of the various revivals that Protestantism has known since the Reformation. On the other hand, “evangelical” normally indicates an attitude that rejects biblical criticism, the heterodox academic discourse that has assaulted Protestantism since the so-called Enlightenment. Consequently, in those countries with Protestant tradition there is a classic division between the “liberal” majority and the orthodox or “evangelical” minority.

The question that must be answered, then, is whether Wright is an evangelical theologian. Doubtless, he defines himself that way.<sup>16</sup> Further, Wright enjoys a good reputation among evangelicals as an academic conservative.<sup>17</sup> But someone who denies the central dogma of the Reformation, justification by faith alone, and who systematically criticises (as individualist, introspective, archaic or unhappy, among many other epithets) the proclamation of the good

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16 Among many other things. In some declarations made on account of his nomination as bishop, Wright defined the best of Anglicanism (and, at the same time, himself) as “evangelical, catholic, liberal and charismatic.” For him, to be evangelical is simply to be “tied to the scripture.” But, as we see, this appeal to Scripture is made from the “liberal” perspective, which according to him means “to be ready to think fresh thoughts,” which liberalism has done historically at the cost of the authority of the Bible. In passing, the use of lower case to designate the Holy Scripture is not a typographical error. In fact, Wright customarily uses lower case even to refer to God. This lamentable provocation, we know not whether fresh, but very significant, is without doubt one of his worst contributions in his academic book *The New Testament and The People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992).

17 Cf. for example, M. Wilkins, J. P. Moreland (eds), *Jesus Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), [p. 85 here and following from the Spanish edition from CLIE], in which together with J. D. G. Dunn he is designated as “conservative historian.”

news of salvation through personal faith in Christ, cannot be considered an evangelical; one must say, rather, that such views are contrary to the very essence of evangelicalism.

The fact that Wright enjoys such a good reputation speaks rather of the need of the current evangelical world, in its search for academic respectability, to find adherents who are qualified in the wider theological world. In gaining the esteem of the evangelicals Wright has doubtless benefited from merely coincidental factors, such as having acquired notice for his opposition to the views of the radical critical school of the *Jesus Seminar*. Furthermore, one must also mention Wright's ability, as the great communicator that he is, to speak our own idiom. It is evident that his criticisms aim to capitalise on the nonconformist attitude that was injected into the youth of the evangelical Churches as a result of May 1968.<sup>18</sup> This is the generation that, like Wright, has today reached the administrative ecclesiastical positions that will direct the next generation of Protestantism. But Wright's ability is seen above all when he uses to great effect the key concepts of our apologetics, such as his opposition to the New Age or a constant critique of the philosophical postulates of the Enlightenment.<sup>19</sup> On the whole, it is not credible to take Wright as a traditionalist defender of the theological and philosophical mentality of the Old Regime. Rather, the opposite is true. As we shall try to show, the use of these concepts by Wright follows criteria of convenience, as an instrument that enables him to articulate a novel discourse in the realm of New Testament studies. At bottom, Tom Wright is nothing more than a theological liberal.

## 2. Wright and Biblical criticism

It is simply wrong to think that Tom Wright makes common cause with evangelicals against biblical criticism. Rather, his interest seems to centre on the role that his Anglican communion can play in renewing New Testament studies. In a lecture published by the Anglican Communion Institute of Colorado Springs (USA),<sup>20</sup> Wright supports this role, issuing a call to move forward the investigation of the so-called "historical Jesus" through historical-critical methods. In the introductory sentence of the lecture he makes clear his attitude toward biblical criticism, saying: "I believe that the historical quest for Jesus is a necessary and non-negotiable aspect of Christian discipleship."

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18 Translator's note: The reference is to the French uprising of May 1968, especially in Paris. This has been considered by some commentators to be the most important revolutionary event of the twentieth century because it crossed all economic, class, ethnic and cultural boundaries. That this reference must be explained to American readers reveals the great cultural gulf between the two continents.

19 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 16 where a quotation from Wright is introduced in which he criticises "the cultural imperialism of the Enlightenment." Cf. also *What Saint Paul Really Said*, p. 94, 162f, where Wright critiques Western neo-paganism and the New Age.

20 N. T. Wright, "Jesus and the Quest," The Anglican Communion Institute. <http://www.anglicancommunioninstitute.org/articles/jesusquest.htm>

Said another way, what distinguishes Wright from Bultmann or the school of the *Jesus Seminar* is not his point of departure or his presuppositions, but his conclusions. It is a matter, then, of two different versions of the same intellectual and theological consensus, taken from the Enlightenment, that *distinguishes between* the historical Jesus and the Jesus of faith offered by the New Testament—with the obligatory conclusion that the biblical text is subject to error or biased, though pious, distortion of the historical truth.

Specifically, Tom Wright is part of one of two main currents in New Testament studies. The principal current has been driven since the nineteenth century by William Wrede and characterised by a profoundly sceptical attitude toward the gospel accounts. This would be the school of Rudolf Bultmann and of the contemporary *Jesus Seminar*. Over against this a second theological current has developed, more an optimistic minority view, begun in the early twentieth century by Albert Schweitzer, who proposed understanding Jesus and the Gospels from the viewpoint of Jewish eschatology. This current has moved forward above all in Anglo-American academic circles, due especially to the impetus given to it in the 1970s by E.P. Sanders, the founder of the so-called “New Perspectives on Paul,” which has now begun to dominate Pauline studies.<sup>21</sup>

It is true that Wright’s conclusions are less radical than those of the majority school, but in practice they fall far from traditional evangelical discourse, which affirms that to know the historical Jesus it is enough to read the biblical account. At times Wright openly and violently attacks this traditional discourse. Here is an example: Wright’s position demands that the historical Jesus be understood in the light of Jewish eschatology, in the light of Qumran and the Essenes in particular. In practice this makes Wright question the presentation in the Gospels, in which Jesus is clearly conscious of his divinity (Lk 13:34; Jn 5:25; 8:24,58; 10:30; 14:9; 17:5; cf. also Lk 11:31-32, where Jesus calls himself greater than wisdom and than a prophet). In the previously cited lecture, Wright says that Jesus was simply a “young Jewish prophet” who identifies himself with Old Testament accounts that speak of the eschatological coming of God to his people. His self-consciousness does not go beyond that of being the Messiah, which for Wright does not mean being divine or pre-existent. Well then, neither does Wright miss a chance to attack with special virulence the traditional evangelical teaching that defends the New Testament’s affirmations of the divine self-consciousness of Jesus. Wright does not hesitate to pronounce them “pseudo-orthodox attempts”<sup>22</sup> or even “idolatrous distortions”<sup>23</sup> of Jesus. Enough said.

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21 As we shall see, the statements in *What Saint Paul Really Said* should be taken completely within the discourse of the new theological perspective, of which Tom Wright, together with J. D. G. Dunn, are the most distinguished representatives.

22 “Forget the pseudo-orthodox attempts to make Jesus of Nazareth conscious of being the second person of the Trinity . . . Focus, instead, on a young Jewish prophet telling a story about YHWH returning to Zion as judge and redeemer,

23 “I believe that Reimarus’ question was necessary. Necessary to shake European Christianity out of its semi-Deistic dogmatism, and to face a new challenge: to grow in understanding of who Jesus actually was and what he actually accomplished. Necessary to challenge bland dogma with a living reality; necessary to challenge

On the other hand, it must be pointed out that these statements by Wright generate *ipso facto* a series of very serious Christological problems—the same problems in which biblical criticism has been enmeshed for more than two centuries. The essential problem is simple: given that Wright affirms the Trinity,<sup>24</sup> how was Jesus God and at the same time not conscious of being so? This position of Wright's goes well beyond the traditional teaching of the Third Council of Constantinople (680–681), which affirmed the *enhypostatic* (that is, personal, not absorbed or annulled) existence of the human nature in the divine person of Christ. In practice Wright's position amounts to affirming that the personality of Christ was only human.

Certainly, it is very difficult to integrate Wright into the traditional heterodox discourses about the person of Jesus, such as Nestorianism or even the kenotic theories. Wright never defines with clarity his thought on the matter, but rather suggests, half explains himself or limits himself to leaving a few tracks. But on reading him it is impossible to avoid the impression that the key word in Wright's Christology is *identification*. Jesus identifies himself with the Old Testament accounts which speak of a God coming to his people at the end of history, and on the cross *God identifies with Jesus*.<sup>25</sup> This divine identification includes the assumption of the person of Jesus, which until then had simply been “a young Jewish prophet,” that is, only a man. Wright's teaching would be, then, a modern form of the heresy of adoptionism. But not only this. The cross would be, moreover, *the moment when a change takes place in God* and, from this, the *climax of history*. We believe that Wright's Christological discourse should be integrated with the contemporary theories which propose the idea of the *mutability of God*, a theological aberration which at bottom is nothing more than a form of pantheism. The God who reveals himself in the Bible says that he does not change and with him there is no variation of shadow due to change (Mal. 3:6; James 1:17).

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idolatrous distortions of who Jesus actually was, and hence who God actually was and is, with a fresh grasp of truth.” Herman Samuel Reimarus (1694–1768) was one of the precursors to liberal biblical criticism. A professor of oriental languages in Hamburg, after his death his writings were published in which he denied traditional beliefs such as revelation, the passage through the Red Sea, the resurrection of Christ, and traditional ideas about Christ and his disciples, which in those days provoked a great scandal.

24 Cf. *What Saint Paul Really Said*, pp. 63–75. Here may be seen the difficulties, for Wright, to trying to explain both the divinity of Jesus Christ and the Trinity from the point of view of monotheistic Judaism, which would be, according to him, the perspective of the apostle.

25 Take this quotation, drawn from the same lecture, as an example: “We still, in our culture, live with the shadow of the old Deist view of God: a high-and-dry God, a God who is so *transcendent* that we find it difficult to think of him acting in the world at all . . . When we address the question, is Jesus God? Is Jesus divine?, we all too often *start with the Deist picture of God*, and then try to fit Jesus into it. As a result, we end up with a docetic Jesus-figure . . . Instead, the whole New Testament invites us—no, urges us, insists to us—that *we should start with Jesus* and rethink our view of God around him. And when we do that, then of course what we find is the Old Testament picture of YHWH with a human face . . . On the cross, *the living God says in action what Jesus said* at his last great symbolic supper: this is my body, given for you.” Our emphasis.



Surely bishop Wright would do well to remove all doubt about his Christology by confessing the traditional doctrine of the Church, to wit, not only that Christ is a concrete *hypostasis* (person), and is *homoousios* (of the same essence with the Father) but that we was so *from eternity*. Indeed, for the good of his Church, he really ought to do it.

### 3. Wright's theological foundations

Wright may not be judged an evangelical theologian, or the idea refuted, without first conducting an evaluation of the foundations of his theology, which has irrupted as a novelty into New Testament studies and therefore has won the recognition of a good part of the international evangelical world. As for these foundations, it must be said that Wright's understanding of Pauline theology is based on two notions, two columns that support the whole of his discussion: *narrative* and *worldview*.

In a voluminous book on the theology of the New Testament Wright devotes more than one hundred pages to deal with these questions.<sup>26</sup> On the one hand, Wright's discussion is the result of the integration of a good part of the post-modernist postulates about narrative, maintaining at the same time a certain optimistic perspective on the possibility of knowing the past by way of historical documents.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, Wright interprets the totality of the religion of Israel through the idea of worldview.<sup>28</sup> Certainly, this is Wright's greatest innovation in the field of New Testament studies. In spite of this theme being based on the works of a variety of authors, the principal inspiration for applying the notion of worldview to New Testament studies seems to be Brian Walsh.<sup>29</sup>

For Wright, the worldview of nations determines all aspects of their expressions: culture, religion, theology, imagination and feeling, mythology and literature.<sup>30</sup> In this way, Jesus and Paul were telling histories current in Judaism, but modifying them in order to alter their worldview and make a new one emerge—behold the combination of the two notions of narrative and

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26 Cf. *The New Testament and The People of God*, pp. 31–144.

27 *Ibid.* p. 61f. Post-modernism denies the possibility of obtaining objective knowledge of the past; history does not exist, but only histories, or individual and biased discourses on the past. Wright calls his position “a *critical-realist account of the phenomenon of reading*,” distinguishing it from what he calls the “naive realist.” Cf also, *ibid.*, p 81ff.

28 The expression is conversion of the German *Welstanschauung*.

29 Cf., *ibid.*, p. 122, note 3; p. 123, note 6, p. xix. Cf. also B. Walsh and R. Middleton, *La vision chrétienne du monde*, (Méry-sur-Oise: Sator, 1988), of a neo-Calvinist orientation. From these two Wright creates a simplified form of worldview as an answer to the questions: Who are we? Where are we? What is evil? What is the solution? (cf. 123; p. 132f).

30 *Ibid.*, p. 124f.

worldview.<sup>31</sup> As a result, the evolution throughout the Old Testament, and between the Old Testament and the New Testament, is due to the changes in worldview of the collectives to which the writers addressed themselves.

Obviously, this discussion of Wright's does not involve anything other than a *naturalistic vision* not only of religion in general, but above all of biblical religion, of the Old as much as of the New Testament.<sup>32</sup> It is in this sense that we must understand Wright's persistent refusal to consider the biblical texts in what he calls "timeless categories," doubtless referring to their character as the word of God.<sup>33</sup> Consequently, the task of doing theology by expressing the biblical content by means of propositions or timeless truths has little meaning for him.<sup>34</sup>

It is clear that Wright's discourse subjects the very idea of revelation to criticism. It is certain that in an analogous way to what he does in the study of history Wright entertains a *critical idea of revelation*. Well then, Wright does not explain the general idea, confining himself to saying that the language of man about God has a referent, although this referent for him is only metaphorical. Certainly Wright's doctrine of revelation is full of ambiguities, but it cannot be considered orthodox.<sup>35</sup> In fact, Wright even says that his theological focus is a way of dealing appropriately with the questions put by the Enlightenment.<sup>36</sup>

Because of all this one can without doubt conclude that Wright is not an evangelical theologian. On the contrary, Wright rests on the same philosophical and theological principles as does classical liberalism, especially in his naturalistic vision of biblical religion. Wright has not broken at any time with this tradition, rather his discourse presupposes the novel application of the two ideas already mentioned, narrative and worldview.

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31 *Ibid.*, pp. 77–80.

32 A telling example is Wright's interpretation of the system of sacrifices of the Old Testament; cf. *ibid.*, p. 274ff. Wright says: "the sacrificial system functioned as a way of enacting and institutionalizing one aspect of the worldview which we have already studied" (p. 275). Nowhere does Wright say that the system of sacrifice had been instituted by God himself.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 20: "It is very difficult to produce a 'theology' from the New Testament that is couched in 'timeless' categories . . . All of the New Testament is 'culturally conditioned . . .'" In the same way, in the previously cited lecture, Wright says that the fact of the biblical texts having been preached as Holy Scripture had generated "all kinds of misunderstandings" and he goes so far as to affirm that to treat the Gospels as a deposit of true doctrine and ethics is an "oversimplification."

34 In a footnote without any greater quotations or commentary, Wright cites Louis Berkhof and his systematic theology as an example of the way of proceeding that he calls "very sterile" (p. 132, note 16).

35 Cf. P. WELLS, *Dios ha hablado. Debate contemporáneo sobre las Escrituras*, (Barcelona: Andamio, 1999), especially, pp. 223–247.

36 *The New Testament and The People of God*, p. 139.

## II. THE ATTACK ON JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

### 1. The particular portrait of Judaism

If this is so, if Tom Wright is nothing more than a liberal theologian, why then all his criticisms of the Enlightenment, of the God of the deists etc., on account of which he has come to be considered a suffering combatant for evangelical truth in the midst of an eccentric contemporary academic world? As we have already said before, this seems to be no more than a necessary step to articulating his novel discourse about New Testament Judaism, on which in turn he relies in order completely to alter the classic evangelical doctrine of justification by faith alone.

In effect, one of the more outstanding aspects of Wright's work is his particular portrait of Judaism in the time of the New Testament. In general, Wright follows the views set forth by E. P. Sanders, who at the end of the 1970s instigated a true theological revolution while contending that Judaism was not a religion of salvation by works; on the contrary, Judaism recognised the grace of the covenant through which it was bound to God and within which the law had to be kept if they Jews were to maintain their status of people of God. This is, in summary terms, the *covenantal nomism* of Sanders.<sup>37</sup>

Wright's originality resides in his invariable interest in the worldview of Judaism, in particular, in the political dimension of its religious life. It is precisely at the point of fusing these two realms, the political and the religious, that it becomes necessary to critique the post-Enlightenment worldview, which has separated these two realms. The argument is simple: the Jewish worldview was different from ours and therefore we ought not to think of Judaism according to our own modern perceptions. As the result of the exhaustive application of this principle, it is truly difficult to encounter Wright in a religious environment that is not politically interpreted.

In this way, the Judaism of the New Testament believed itself to be still in exile because of its sins.<sup>38</sup> God's forgiveness was seen as a national restoration.<sup>39</sup> For Judaism salvation was also interpreted politically, as liberation from its enemies, the restoration of the national symbols and the enjoyment of a permanent state of *shalom*, in which "every man will sit under his vine or fig-tree"<sup>40</sup> Adherence to the Torah in order to obtain salvation, therefore, had little to do with salva-

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37 All the discussion generated by Sanders' work, known as the "New Perspective on Paul," should be framed in the wider *revisionist* movement of the Churches over the Jewish people. A theological movement of an ecumenical character has unfolded since the end of World War II, not from exegesis or biblical theology, but from the official declarations of the Churches; these declarations have preceded and oriented the work of the theologians in the creation of a practically monolithic consensus; cf. M.-Th. Hoch y B. Dupuy, *Les Église devant le judaïsme. Documents officiels 1948–1978*, (Paris: Cerf, 1980).

38 *The New Testament and the People of God*, pp. 268–271.

39 "This needs to be emphasised in the strongest possible terms: the most natural meaning of the phrase 'the forgiveness of sins' to a first-century Jew is not in the first instance the remission of *individual* sins, but the putting away of the whole nation's sins" (*ibid.*, p. 273).

40 *Ibid.*, p. 300.

tion *post-mortem*, but rather with the preservation of Jewish national identity.<sup>41</sup> In the same way, the resurrection played the role of symbol for the restoration of Israel, for which reason the Sadducee *collaborators* rejected that doctrine.<sup>42</sup> The same thing also happened to the doctrine of providence: the practicality of revolutionary action or inaction was subsumed under the idea of divine sovereignty.<sup>43</sup>

In our opinion this portrait of Judaism is one of the greatest weaknesses of Wright's discussion. Is it possible to present a more schematic and simplified picture of the mentality of an entire people, in which even the resurrection and providence are interpreted politically? At one point Wright recognises the difficulty of obtaining a unified vision of Judaism, but he thinks this can be overcome by means of the notion of worldview.<sup>44</sup> But, frankly, we don't believe that Wright has managed it. In the first place because the idea of worldview, if we truly speak of worldview, is something much more inward, almost ethereal, than the simplified version presented by Walsh, Middelton and Wright: rather than a collection of definite ideas and beliefs, it is a matter of the *most profound* subjective disposition, a fundamental spiritual state, which orients the individual to *perceive* life in a particular way. Therefore we may legitimately be ask this question: What, according to Wright, is the difference, without resorting to nominalism, between worldview and *mentality* and/or *ideology*? We sincerely believe that at the root of Wright's discussion lies this confusion between worldview and *mentality* and/or *ideology*.<sup>45</sup> The repercussions of this confusion are not only semantic, given that in the subjectivity of a collective, if it is not certain that a unique worldview exists, there may certainly be found, both today and in the time of the New Testament, a variety of mentalities and ideologies.

In the second place, in order to understand this unified worldview of Judaism, Wright must generalise partial aspects and achieve great reductions. We simply do not believe that the reconstruction of Judaism made by Wright takes into account the whole diversity presented in the gospels.<sup>46</sup> Reading the eminently political interpretation of the religion of Israel, one can hardly

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41 *Ibid.*, p. 168.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 200.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 200f.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 118f.

45 According to the Spanish Royal Academy, *mentality* is the "culture or way of thinking that characterizes a person, a people, a generation, etc.", while *ideology* is "a collection of fundamental ideas that characterize the thought of a person, collectivity [**society?**] or epoch, of a cultural, religious or political, etc. movement." Consequently, the three concepts clearly form a semantic family. A *worldview* emphasises the aspect of perception and a subjective interpretation of reality; a *mentality* is the way of thinking transmitted by culture; and *ideology* is the discourse based on specific ideas. It seems clear to us that Wright speaks of Jewish worldview when he ought to speak of *mentality* and above all of *ideology*. For this reason, we believe that the conclusions derived by Wright from this starting point are questionable.

46 Salvation in Judaism did not only have to do with the eschatological restoration of the nation, but also with individual salvation and the state of glory *post-mortem* (Lk 16:19-31). The relation between the Jew with the law was not only the medium for maintaining the signs of national identity, but also conceived of with salvific

leave off thinking that Wright in reality is presenting the *zealot interpretation* of the same and elevating it to the category of Jewish worldview.

In the third place, in order establish his interpretation of Judaism Wright must at times carry out some subterfuges that seem to us all too obvious, for example not taking into account, or correcting, the historical sources that do not fit the vision that he offers. Among those we could cite we shall settle for an example that seems to us most important. Contradicting the few facts offered by the New Testament, Wright presents the apostle Paul before his conversion as a Shammaite Pharisee<sup>47</sup> The reason for doing so seems clear. As we shall see below, this step is essential to his interpretation of the teaching of the apostle.

## 2. Pauline theology according to Wright

### 2.1 “*Inclusivity resulting in replacement*”

If we have in mind the particular portrait of Judaism made by Wright, we will see that this fits with his version of Pauline theology. Of great importance to this is the idea that, on account of his conversion, the apostle sees the death *and above all the resurrection* of Jesus in the light of a *vindication*, the restoration that as a Shammaite Pharisee he believed awaited the Jewish people,

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ends (Lk 18:18–20). Forgiveness was not only national, nor was it tied to the future return of Israel from exile (Lk 7:36–50); certainly, it is worth saying that while in the book published in Spanish he says that “the greater part of the Jews” believed that Israel was still in exile (p. 39), in the academic book *The Climax of the Covenant*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), p. 141, the claim is changed to “at least some Jews.” In the same way, the resurrection in the Gospels was not tied at any place to the restoration of the nation; the problems of the Sadducees seemed to be owing rather to the future life that they denied (Mt 22:23–33). The doctrine of providence was not merely a revolutionary tool; it was for the Israelites a sincere belief (Lk 13:1–5; Jn 9:1–3) and was a source of security for pious Jews in the face of the perplexities of life (Lk 12:4–7). The Israelites were not scandalised by the fact that Jesus distinguished between religious and political duty, but rather “*marveled*” (Mt 22:15–22).

47 Cf. *What Saint Paul Really Said*, p. 26. Wright considers that “it simply cannot be the case” that Saul was a Hillelite Pharisee, because otherwise, according to him, the evidence of his persecution of the Christians would have had to have been invented (p. 29). Nevertheless, Paul explicitly affirms having been trained at the feet of the great figure of the Hillelite party, Gamaliel (Acts 22:23) and, what Wright omits completely, that he had enjoyed from birth the rare privilege of Roman citizenship (Acts 22:27–28), which certainly would not be expected in a zealous *Shammaite* patriot. For the rest, it is legitimate to ask whether Wright does not make another great simplification when he presents the *Hillelite* party practically as first century pacifist liberals. In reality recourse to violence in religious issues does not seem to be the exclusive patrimony of the *Shammaite* Pharisees, nor even of the Pharisees taken as a whole, but appears to be current in the Judaism of the New Testament (unless, of course, one wants to see *Shammaites* everywhere, even where Pharisees are not even mentioned; cf. Lk. 4:28–29; Jn 7:1; 8:59; Acts 6:9; 21:30). The high priest Caiaphas is a good example and shows that the recourse to violence in religious matters was not always tied to zealot discourse.

the people of the covenant.<sup>48</sup> In Jesus, then, the covenant is fulfilled. Given that in its origin this covenant has as its purpose the salvation of the whole world,<sup>49</sup> the covenant now is open to the gentiles through the gospel, which in its essence is not an announcement of salvation, but the proclamation of the lordship of Jesus over against paganism and the “principalities” of this world.<sup>50</sup> The apostle then unfolds his critique and relativising of the Torah: the “works of the law” (which are nothing more than the *boundary-markers* of the Jewish people, or ceremonial signs that delimit the people of the covenant, such as circumcision, clean foods, sabbath, etc.<sup>51</sup>) lose all reason for being. The only badge that remains in force to delimit the people of God is faith in Christ, which should be thought of in connection with the gospel, that is, the confession of Christ’s lordship. *Justification by faith is, then, the declaration by God that he who has this faith belongs to the people of the covenant*; it is not a soteriological notion but an ecclesiological one. In this way, the Jewish nation that persists in rejecting Christ is excluded from this new people of the covenant,<sup>52</sup> which is not formed on the basis of race.<sup>53</sup> This is, in summary terms, the teaching of Wright on the covenant, a teaching that we believe justifiably may be defined by calling it *inclusivity resulting in replacement*.<sup>54</sup>

## 2.2. Exegetical problems

This discussion involves serious exegetical problems. One of them, surely the most important, is that of limiting the meaning of the “works of the law” to the *ceremonial* works. This is the view also expounded by J. D. G. Dunn.<sup>55</sup> This point, in itself, presupposes an alignment with exegesis

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48 Cf. *What Saint Paul Really Said*, p. 36.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 33. “The purpose of the covenant was that, through this means, the creator would address and save his entire world.”

50 *Ibid.* p. “The ‘gospel’ is for Paul, at its very heart, *an announcement about the true God as opposed to the false gods.*” p. 59.

51 Cf. *What Saint Paul Really Said*, p. 84f, 132; *The New Testament and the People of God*, p. 238; *The Climax of the Covenant*, p. 240.

52 Cf. *The Climax of the Covenant*, p. 246.

53 *Ibid.*, p. 253.

54 Wright bases this discussion on an important work of exegesis in his book *The Climax of the Covenant*. We cannot here go into detail about this book. Suffice it to say that the dominant idea of the book is to show that Paul in his letters had tried to effect the transformation of the dominant discourse within Judaism, by concentrating in Christ what was currently attributed to Israel. It is a matter, then, of applying Wright’s fundamental notions about the use of narrative in order to change the worldview. The great problem of this book is that it does not deal with the relevant passages in a detailed way, but seeks to find in them novel ideas that sometimes seem to us rather to be imaginative projections of the author. The great fact of this book seems to us to be its exegesis of Romans 11, on account of which it concludes that the “all Israel” of vs 25–26 refers to the new people of God, formed by the believers in Christ, including the Jewish remnant that has believed (p. 249f).

55 J. D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, Series *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 38b, (Dallas: Word Books Publishers,

prior to the Reformation, against which the Reformers already expressed themselves in their day.<sup>56</sup> On the other hand, it seems impossible to consider this exegesis as doing justice to the thought of Paul. It seems evident that these works of the law cannot be considered to be, in themselves, abstracted from the curse that is pronounced against those who do not keep them (Ga 3:10) and this curse would refer precisely to the law as a whole, including its moral aspect (cf. Dt 27:15-26). Moreover, in the perspective of Wright and Dunn, the contrast between the “righteousness of the law” and the “righteousness of faith” is not a *theological antithesis* between two righteousnesses revealed by God (“Moses writes of the righteousness of the law . . . the righteousness of faith says this”) but a distinction between divine righteousness and a human pseudo-righteousness that appeals to Scripture. The purpose of exegesis is to deal with the evident meaning of a text, and the interpretation by Wright and Dunn, in their attempt to present in a coherent way the global thought of Paul on the law, contravenes the plain sense of Rm 10:4-5.

Another exegetical problem that seems important to us is the definition that Wright makes of the word “gospel” according to Paul. In order to give his definition of gospel as an announcement about the lordship of Christ against the pagan gods, Wright relies fundamentally on the extra-biblical testimony of the Greco-Roman world, with which he juxtaposes the vision of the prophetic announcements of Is 40:9 and 52:7. Certainly, to consider the wider use of a word can be of some exegetical use, but it is wrong to establish the meaning of a word exclusively in this way. On the contrary, the most natural way to understand the meaning of the words in any literature is to begin with the literary corpus that they belong to, in this case the biblical literature, attending primarily to the use given by the same author. If Wright had regarded this elementary norm of exegesis he would be forced to recognise that the New Testament does not support his claims: specifically, Paul does not separate the gospel from the announcement of salvation (cf. Acts 20:24; 1 Cor 15:1–2; Eph. 1:13; 3:6). Wright commits the incredible mistake of forgetting that, in the same letter to the Romans, Paul defines the word “gospel,” calling it the *power of God for salvation to everyone who believes*”.

### 2.3 Theology of the covenant

At the margin of these exegetical problems, Wright expounds, at bottom, something like a modern version of the theology of the covenant, given that the covenant is surely the most important theological concept in his discourse, as we shall see when dealing with justification by faith. Someone might associate Wright’s theology in this way with classic Reformed theology, also called federal or covenant theology, given that the latter has been derived from the biblical idea of the covenant. Nevertheless, not even the presence of an acceptable variant of this Reformed theology of the covenant can be recognised in Wright’s writings.

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1988), p. 593.

56 Cf. M. Lutero, *Comentarios de Martín Lutero. Gálatas*, (Tarrasa: CLIE, 1998), p. 55f, especially 99f. J. Calvino, *Epístola a los Romanos*, (Grand Rapids: Desafío, 1995), p. 102.

It is true that, as in Reformed theology, Wright presents a Christological focus on the covenant that allows speaking of a “replacement” of the Jewish people who have rejected Christ. But the fundamental problem resides in Wright’s separation of two ideas that in the Bible are inseparable: covenant and election. By making of the covenant an *instrument* in the service of the inclusion of the entire human race, the only thing he achieves is to distort seriously the *intimate union that exists in the Bible between covenant and election*. Wright only conceives of the latter from the communal perspective of the nation, and that is because it is in the service of the salvation of the whole world.<sup>57</sup>

This is, without doubt, the key point in the theology of Wright. Nevertheless, this understanding loses sight of the fact that even if the covenant with Abraham contemplated the salvation of the gentiles (Gen. 12:3) the covenant as such presupposed an election in the midst of the nations, involving, then, the rejection of other nations (Dt. 7:6–8; Ps. 147:19–20). Furthermore, the principle of election is also at work within the very covenant (Rm 9:6ff). Surely, taking this fact into account relativises Wright’s and Dunn’s entire discourse about the “works of the law.” In the biblical perspective of election, although this grates on our modern sensibilities, to cling to the signs instituted by God in a covenant that presupposes a separation within the nations, is not, in principle, a culpable action.

Certainly, Wright loses all perspective on the *particularist* aspect of the covenant. That implies an added problem: the replacement of the Jewish people in the covenant without further speaking of the *current* relation of the Jewish people with this covenant. Wright has reason to avoid the contemporary idea of a *double covenant* that God would maintain simultaneously with the Church and with the Jewish people.<sup>58</sup> But the unconditional aspect of the covenant would hardly have fit into his theology. The reason for this is his rejection of individual election. In this way, it seems clear that Israel following its replacement finds itself *totally* separated from the covenant in Christ. Nevertheless, Reformed theology has always affirmed not only the replacement of the Jewish people, but also the hope and the certainty that the unconditional promises given to Abraham are fulfilled in the elect Jews. Consequently, the Jewish people now participate in the covenant in Christ in the persons of these elect who will come to faith in Christ in the course of history, beginning with the state of hardening of the nation. Therefore, because of these elect, God maintains a mysterious relationship with this hardened people. This understanding of covenant theology is completely absent from the writings of Wright.

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57 “the call of Israel, the purpose of election, always was, as far as God was concerned, undertaken for the salvation of the whole world” in *What Saint Paul Really Said*, p. 148.

58 Cf. *The Climax of the Covenant*, pp. 253-255. In this Wright distances himself from Sanders, who affirmed that had Paul lived today he would have adopted a theology of a double covenant (*ibid.* p. 232, note 7).



### 3. Justification by faith according to Wright

#### 3.1 *Principal affirmations*

Wright's teaching on the covenant leads us to his statements concerning *justification by faith*, which are, without any doubt, the most troubling aspect of his entire discussion.

Justification by faith is, for Wright, essentially a covenantal doctrine. His fundamental starting point is his interpretation of the expression "righteousness of God" in Romans. Wright claims that this means "God's own faithfulness to his promises, to the covenant . . . is that *aspect of God's character* because of which he saves Israel, despite Israel's perversity and lostness"<sup>59</sup> and appeals to the Septuagint to support this claim. According to Wright's definition, then, this righteousness would be one of the attributes of God. He appeals to the Septuagint by quoting, in a very general way Isaiah 40–55 and Daniel 9. For Wright the fact that in the Greek Old Testament the expression "righteousness of God" has this meaning is a fact so evident that it does not admit of any discussion.<sup>60</sup>

Beginning from this fact, Wright expounds the nature of the judicial idea of "the righteousness of God," but in a new perspective that corresponds to the Jewish worldview that he has described. Instead of a judgement in which the sinner stands accused and emerges absolved—the traditional evangelical teaching—the righteousness of God consists in the judgement that God makes between his people, Israel, and the *other pagan nations*.<sup>61</sup> The judicial nature of the term excludes, according to Wright, the idea of its being communicated to man.<sup>62</sup> The "righteousness of God" then, is a covenantal and judicial term that requires a future *eschatological* fulfilment.<sup>63</sup>

In pursuit of conceptual clarity, Wright expounds different interpretations of the expression "righteousness of God," an expression that he understands as a subjective genitive. This means it should be considered as a work of God, as the creative power of salvation; but Wright's peculiarity is that he also includes the idea of righteousness as a moral quality or attribute of God—that is, his faithfulness to the covenant.<sup>64</sup> In order to justify this interpretation Wright refuses to consider the righteousness of God of Romans 3 and the "righteousness that is from God" of Philippians 3:9 as synonymous, given that the former would speak of the justice proper to God,

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59 *What Saint Paul Really Said*, p. 96. Our emphasis. This is, then, an affirmation of the unconditionality of the covenant. On the use of the word "unconditional" cf. *ibid.*, p. 75.

60 *Ibid.*, p. 105.

61 *Ibid.*, p. 105ff.

62 "If we use the language of the law court, it makes no sense whatever to say that the judge *imputes, imparts, bequeaths, conveys or otherwise transfers* his righteousness to either the plaintiff or the defendant" in *ibid.* p. 98. Our emphasis. Wright's enumeration of the possible modes of the communication of the righteousness of God is not in any way casual. Thus, in this way so brief and expeditious, Wright has resolved the entire dispute between Roman Catholics and Protestants concerning justification by faith.

63 *Ibid.*, p. 99.

64 *Ibid.*, p. 100–103.

while the latter would be man's own state of righteousness.<sup>65</sup> In the same way, he offers a somewhat strange interpretation of "the righteousness of God" in 2 Cor 5:20–21, namely as an incarnation by the apostles of the faithfulness of God.

Wright then applies the idea of justification present in Qumran, (in particular 4QMMT) to argue that justification in Paul (in Romans, Galatians and Philippians) is the eschatological definition by God of the true Israel, i.e. as a vindication of the faithful.<sup>66</sup> This is, in summary terms, Wright's doctrine of justification by faith.

In our opinion, Wright's discussion presents such great difficulties that it is impossible to accept it as valid. We cannot attend to all the details of his exegesis, but will only concentrate on the greater problems that we find in it.

### 3.2 The "righteousness of God" in the Septuagint

In the first place, Wright's idea of the "righteousness of God," contrary to what he affirms so confidently, is based on an idea that does not have solid support in the Septuagint. It is simply not true that in the Greek Old Testament the "righteousness of God" means "the faithfulness of God to the covenant".

One must begin from the principle of regularity with which Hebrew terms are translated in Greek. The sense of the terms in Greek, then, should follow that of the terms in Hebrew. The semantic group in Hebrew that expresses the idea of righteousness (*yšr* especially *tsdq*) is regularly translated in Greek by the root *dik-*, so that this latter is used on rare occasions to translate the Hebrew term *hesed*, which is the one that expresses *par excellence* the idea of the "faithfulness of God to the covenant"—otherwise it is almost always translated by *eleos*. We have found only four examples of the translation of *hesed* by *dikaïosuné*, which is why it can be considered an irregularity (Gen. 29:13; 21:23; 24:27; 32:11). It is evident that this usage is not significant and that, consequently, one cannot abstract from the Hebrew to speak of the "righteousness of God."

In this way, it is interesting to adduce that in Hebrew the word "righteousness" (*tsedaqá*) has a very marked judicial sense, given that it appears virtually as a synonym for "judgement" (*mišpat*). In a total of 155 appearances of the former, the two terms form a synonymous parallelism on 39 occasions. According to Richard Schultz *tsedaqá* indicates the fact of acting in conformity with the norm, while *mišpat* emphasises the act itself.<sup>67</sup> David J. Reimer affirms that the terminology *tsdq*, both in the interpersonal and in the theological contexts, indicates upright behaviour in relation to certain accepted norms in the community and, what is more important,

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65 *Ibid.*, p. 104f.

66 *Ibid.*, p. 118–120.

67 Cf. "Justice" in *The New International Dictionary of the Old Testament Theology & Exegesis* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1997), vol. 4, p. 838.

that the covenant is never invoked as a basis for *tsdq*.<sup>68</sup>

Consequently, *the idea of righteousness in the Old Testament appears indissolubly tied to that of law* (Dt. 6:25). Righteousness, for Paul, cannot be anything other than the righteousness of the law (Rom. 3:20, 10:5) or the righteousness of God, which is the righteousness realised by Jesus Christ and which man receives by faith (3:21–26; 10:6); both ideas of righteousness appear together in Philippians 3:9. Yet in Wright’s discourse, *law has no instrumental role in justification*.

Given all these facts Wright’s argument that the “righteousness of God” in the Septuagint means faithfulness to the covenant, and his very general allusions to Is 40–55 and Daniel 9, seem very weak to us. The claim that in Hebrew or in Greek the word “righteousness” has the meaning of “fidelity to the covenant” because this word appears in Isaiah 40–55, where the return from the exile is predicted, appears to be a very great simplification of the facts regarding the Old Testament.<sup>69</sup> This idea needs much more precision. While in Isaiah righteousness is never found to be parallel with *hesed*, it appears very frequently with “salvation” (45:8; 46:13; 51:6–8; 54:17; 61:10). Therefore, in Isaiah it does not designate so much the character of God as God’s work.

Of course, Wright rejects the validity of those exercises that he might call “timeless theology.” His interest is centred exclusively in locating the thought of Paul in the flow of history, in its historical context (*Sitz im Leben*), which means for Wright that it must be related as much as possible to Jewish eschatology, the Essenes in particular. That explains why he basis his arguments on Daniel 9. Nevertheless, it appears very daring to claim that in this chapter the idea of the righteousness of God means “fidelity to the covenant.” We believe that the only support for Wright’s argument is the divergence of the Greek text from the Hebrew—and, consequently, from our modern Bibles—when translating verse 9 as “righteousness and mercy.” But two facts weigh against this and so we should not attribute too much importance to this. In the first place, this reading is present only in one of the two versions of the book of Daniel in the Septuagint. It appears to be, then, a pointing anomaly. In the second place, *dikaïosunê* does not translate the word that expresses the idea of “fidelity to the covenant” (*hesed*) but *rahamîm*, which has rather the idea of compassion. In this passage, then, the righteousness of God does not seem to have the meaning claimed by Wright. And concerning Paul’s thought, which Wright relates to Jewish eschatology, as we have tried to show before, both his portrait of Paul as well as that of the Judaism of the first century appear to us to be very distorted. Paul’s thought and the historical context offer better ways of integrating the data of the Old Testament in a more natural manner.

### 3.3 The “righteousness of God” in Paul

In the second place, Wright’s treatment of the Pauline passages on the “righteousness of God”

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 750–754.

<sup>69</sup> Into which New Testament specialists appear frequently to fall; cf. K. Kertelge, “*dikaïosunê*” in *Diccionario exegético del Nuevo Testamento*, (Salamanca: Sígueme, 1996), vol. 1, col. 902s.

does not present any lesser problems. We agree with Wright when he interprets the “righteousness of God” in Romans as a *subjective genitive*, which designates the saving power of God. This amounts to saying that the “righteousness of God” is a work of salvation of which God is the author. Nevertheless, Wright is not consistent with this conclusion and practically equates the “righteousness of God” with the divine will in order to be able to interpret it in this way from the perspective of the covenant (God is righteous because, in spite of the sin of Israel, he remains faithful to his promises in the covenant). Wright does all he can to distinguish this righteousness of God from the *righteousness as condition* that man receives from God, which would justify not speaking of the means of communicating the righteousness. In particular, Wright separates the righteousness of Romans from that spoken of in Philippians 3:9, on the basis that the former speaks of God’s own righteousness and the latter of man’s own state of righteousness.

Nevertheless, we are not sure that such a separation can be made, and even Wright does not seem completely convinced. In one place *Wright even admits that the idea of the “righteousness of God” has a double aspect*: on the one hand, according to him, the faithfulness of God, and on the other, the state of righteousness in man—which, according to Wright, belongs to the people of the covenant.<sup>70</sup> It is evident, then, that Wright cannot maintain with coherence his definition of the term righteousness, by which he justifies separating Philippians 3:9 from Romans. Perhaps Wright has attempted a theologically impossible exercise. If the righteousness of God is the righteousness of which God is the author and, for this reason, belongs to him, it is necessarily the case that when it is administered to man it is a state which man enjoys. Otherwise, the righteousness of God would be totally incommunicable to us, as is, for example, the attribute of divine omniscience. Nevertheless, given that we do not speak precisely of the attribute of righteousness, but of the saving work of God, it is all the more necessary to speak of the means of communicating this righteousness to man. On that account, the debates about impartation and imputation, which divide Catholics and Protestants, are not for Paul a luxury nor a betrayal of the Church, but a necessity and an act of theological responsibility.

### 3.4 From the Reformation to the Counter-Reformation

As we have seen, for Wright the law does not play an instrumental role either in defining the righteousness of God or in regard to justification. The work of Christ in relation to sin is emptied in this way of content, being described by Wright only in a very vague and general way—e.g. that God “dealt with sin” on the cross. In reality, the work of Christ has for Wright only the value of renewing the covenant. Given that Wright equates the righteousness of God with the covenant, the relationship of God to his people is presented by Wright, *prima facie*, under the aspect of divine unconditionality. But the conclusions at which one arrives beginning from Wright’s position—which is also that of Dunn, Sanders and the “New Perspective on Paul”—can only modify this initial impression.

In an article in which he clarifies his position on justification by faith in reply to the criticisms of

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<sup>70</sup> *What Saint Paul Really Said*, p. 152.

another Anglican bishop, Paul Barnett, Wright affirms that justification has a triple aspect: *past*, in the resurrection of Christ; *future*, in the last resurrection; and finally, *present*, which, in spite of its not being affirmed without ambiguities, is produced in *baptism*.<sup>71</sup> Therefore, if baptism is the declaration of belonging to the people of God, then, for Wright, this is the means through which the righteousness of God is communicated to believers—and in the covenantal context, it ought to include the children of believers on account of the faith of their parents.

For Wright present justification is nothing more than the anticipation of the true justification, which is future, eschatological, and in which God vindicates those who have been his true servants. Given that the gospel for Wright is not the announcement of salvation, but the proclamation of the lordship of Christ, and that faith, such as he understands it, is just a badge, the objective and intellectual is accented to the detriment of the subjective and personal aspect of confidence and assurance (*fiducia*), and one must thus necessarily conclude that Wright's salvific scheme presents a *salvation totally conditional within the covenant of grace*, and consequently a *synergistic* salvation. Said another way, the salvation that Wright presents is not a salvation from God to man, but a salvation that man has to secure for himself, by his own works, in the context of a gracious relationship established by God.

Consequently, in spite of his occasional denials of this criticism, Wright's discourse converts justification into a *process*, exactly like that which the Roman Catholic Church declared in its day in the *Council of Trent*, in its *Decree on Justification*. In view of this, Wright may well downplay the importance of justification through baptism, saying that this is not the salvific order but the ecclesiological, or insist that baptism really effects justification, at which, considered in itself, the latter leaves off being a process. But this last alternative is impossible, given that, according to Wright, the true act of justification is eschatological, and that baptism is its announcement. As for the first possibility, which is the one Wright seems to argue for, neither does it make much sense to loosen soteriology too much from ecclesiology, given that, in the last analysis, the goal of the Church is to obtain salvation. Be that as it may, we must conclude that, according to Wright's scheme, initial justification may be lost or made null by the infidelity of man.

As if this were not enough, for Wright's scheme to be theological valid it must be postulated that on the last day God will vindicate those who have shown themselves faithful in their works, that is to say, they will be vindicated on the basis of their *merits*. Moreover, given that the law is not conceived of in antithesis to the gospel—cf. the whole discussion of Wright and Dunn on the “works of the law”—then it must be concluded that the gospel is no more than a *new order of the law* which has been opened to all nations. In other words, Wright's theology is, under a supposed

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71 N.T. Wright, “The Shape of Justification,” in the April 2001 column of *Bible Review*, <http://www.the-paulpage.com/Shape.html>. “The event in the present which corresponds to Jesus' death and resurrection in the past, and the resurrection of all believers in the future, is baptism into Christ (Gal. 3.26–9; Rom. 6.2–11). Baptism is not, as some have supposed, a 'work' which one 'performs' to earn God's favour. It is, for Paul, the sacrament of God's free grace. Paul can speak of those who have believed and been baptised as already 'saved', albeit 'in hope' (Rom. 8.24).”

agreeable and “fresh” aspect, a form of hard *neo-nomiansim*.

In view of all that, is it still possible to deny that Wright’s theology introduces us fully into Roman Catholic theological parameters?

One of the more disagreeable characteristics of the “New Perspective” and of Wright in particular is the constant accusation that the Reformation falsified the Judaism of the New Testament in its polemic against medieval Catholicism. They insist on the discourse about grace current in Judaism, which they have called, *covenantal nomism*. Well, even if they are not conscious of it, they could not have found a more apt name to describe both mediaeval theology and the Judaism contemporary to Paul. At bottom, both the apostle, on the one hand, and Luther and Calvin, on the other, maintained the same polemic on the same topics, but in different ecclesiastical contexts and with a different theological language. Our illustrious authors are not interested in these matters of “timeless theology,” which they nevertheless do not abstain from making impudent judgements about. Had they the necessary humility to study it before merrily criticising it, they would have to recognise that they are completely mistaken on this point. They do not seem disposed to do so. Therefore, it is foreseeable that, to general applause and recognition, they will continue forward, inducing into error the next Protestant generation which, due to such error, in this era of accelerated universal fusion, might very well be the last.

## CONCLUSION

As we have seen, Tom Wright’s claims presuppose a devastating attack on the very heart of the historical evangelical faith; justification by faith alone. The force of the attack we do not believe to lie in the solidity of his arguments. Sometimes their weakness is surprising. Its power resides, instead, in other factors.

First, in the *powerful personality of the author*. No one but he allows himself to say the things he says the way he says them. Wright’s persuasiveness lies above all in his capacity for seduction, of which he is well aware and knows how to exploit.

Second, in the fact that the teachings of Wright are an expression of the *spirit of our age*—characterised by globalisation, Europeanism, cultural mixing, ecumenicism, etc. Nothing is more appropriate, then, for the contemporary mentality than to hear that justification by faith, which in olden days had created profound divisions in a Europe that is today united, is God’s designation for the abolition of all human differences within the Church. Wright preaches in the direction that the wind is blowing; his voice, then, will go far.

In the third and last place, we greatly fear for the *spiritual state* of the evangelical churches. In a time when all the boundaries are falling, in which all limits are exceeded, we simply dislike feeling held back by ties owing to a past with which, moreover, we do not feel identified.

In this sense, the appearance in our Spanish context of the teachings of Tom Wright, however

attractive they may be, surely does not auger any good. Lacking, as we are, historical roots and being orphans, in the great majority of cases, of the clear and precise Reformed Confessions of faith, it is very possible that the Wrightian attack on the doctrine of justification by faith alone, instead of a stimulus to theological reflection, will become in the end the *coup de grâce* that was all that we lacked to completely delude ourselves. Surely, before the spectacle of the great attraction for such critiques among evangelicals, we should ask ourselves a few questions: Why are we, Spaniards of the twenty-first century, so distant historically and ecclesiastically speaking from the Reformation of the sixteenth century, Protestants and not something else? Why Protestants, and not another liberal version of Roman Catholicism, for example? And surely the key question: Are we conscious of being Protestants because we believe and confess what in other countries the Protestants have historically believed and confessed, that is, the evangelical faith?

The interest in the new ideas speaks of the seriousness of our spiritual problem; it denotes an entire spiritual condition. Wright's works show an evident disinterest for understanding the work of Jesus Christ. The perspective of eternal life is likewise totally absent from them. On the contrary, they present us with what has to be a worldview, or better an ideology, that is politically correct. To apply this is the salvation of the world. The world, then, is waiting for us to do something for its salvation; it depends on us, if only we could shake the Church out of its old habits, out of its old mental frameworks. Is it not so? How many times have we not spoken in this way? At bottom, all these discussions involve a specific vision of God and of man. Indeed, at bottom, such discourses blossom where they find great aversion to the idea of a truly sovereign God, in their relation to the world and in salvation (or, what is the same thing, where there is little fear of God); where there is confidence in man fallen into sin (or in other words, where there is little consciousness of sin); where there is a process of secularisation in the Church and a total disinterest in salvation and in the eternal Christian hope (or, said plainly, worldliness). It is a small step from all this to embracing a doctrine of justification by faith that "liberates" us from having to depend on God to be saved. By taking this step, we would then be free to call ourselves "only Christians" and be able to promote the final approach to the Roman Catholic Church, which allows us to reach everything that today is not permitted on account of our being Protestants.

Nevertheless, as we have seen in this article, the reasons given by Wright continue to be insufficient to solve the profound differences with Roman Catholicism in regard to justification by faith—among many others things. Separation for the sake of truth goes on. In the present article, we believe ourselves to have demonstrated that Wright's theology is, in many respects, totally antagonistic to evangelical theology. Furthermore, it presupposes a return to an exegetical and theological position that predates the Reformation. Consequently, it is legitimate to consider it as *a recatholisation of Protestant thought*. Wright's errors are of such a calibre and magnitude that is justifiable to rate his teaching as "another gospel," distinct from that of Paul, Luther and Calvin. Because of that, it must be said that to embrace such a view is, simply, to depart from the gospel and, consequently, to put oneself in a condition of schism in relation to the universal Church, the true communion of believers in Christ. **CM**