

(Re)reading mission in light of the Bible:

The Bible and the missionary imagination after colonialism.
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Why (re)read missions?

Michael Goheen wrote *Introducing Christian Mission Today: Scripture, History, and Issues*¹ as the outcome of his efforts to find “a new path for mission studies and a new way to structure an introductory course” in missions.² He sought out a “new path” when he recognized how the missiology he used for training new missionaries perpetuated approaches to missions that were developed in the colonial period.³ Colonialism shaped the world so profoundly that it also shaped the missionary imagination. The end of colonialism left intact “a geographical expansionist understanding of mission that highlights sending from one place (Christian West) to another place (pagan nonWest).”⁴

Surprisingly, this situation also revealed flaws in the way contemporary missionary visions interact with the Biblical text. In the words of Goheen, “we did not bring our missionary practice to the Bible to be scrutinized” rather we used the Bible as a proof text so that “familiar endeavors were legitimized by divine authority” (p.36).⁵ The Bible was not meant to be used in that way.

We all know that the Bible is not intended to protect our ways of thinking or living. Rather, the Bible reveals how far we are from God’s purposes and invites us to turn around, enter into new life in Christ, and participate with Him in His mission. Even the disciples, trained by Jesus for mission were surprised with how the story actually unfolded. They

¹ Goheen, M. W. (2014). *Introducing Christian Mission Today: Scripture, History, and Issues (1 ed.)*. IVP Academic. to be published in Brazil, July 2019 por Ed. Ultimato em cooperação com Seminário Teológico Servo de Cristo e Centro de Reflexão Missiológico Martureo.

² *Ibid.* p.11

³ *Ibid.* p. 421 Goheen uses “colonialism” to refer to a period of European expansion that involved conquest by Europeans of territories outside of Europe and subjugation of peoples in those territories as well as migrations forced by Europeans on other peoples that began in the 16th Century (p.137) and is now “collapsed” (p.150).

⁴ *Ibid.* p.35

⁵ *Ibid.* p.36

were often perplexed (Acts 10:44-47) and had to go back to the Old Testament to discover the meaning of the events that unfolded around them (Acts 15:14-21). First, Jesus taught them to re-read the Bible in light of the life, cross and resurrection of the Messiah (Lc 24:44-48). Later on, they would re-read it again in light of the innovative initiatives of the Spirit (Acts 15:12-18). The Bible confronted them with their flawed understanding and implementation of the mission and supplied them with meanings by which they could understand and build upon surprising new experiences from the Lord.

Because this is how the Bible works, Mission theologians like Michael Goheen, David Bosch⁶, Chris Wright,⁷ and others, have called upon the church in mission to (re)read our missionary vision and our practice *in light of the Bible*. We cannot afford to continue to use the Bible as a proof text to support what we are doing and thinking about missions.

N. T. Wright

N. T. Wright also invites us to submit our missionary imagination to biblical scrutiny, though not as a Mission Theologian. Rather N. T. Wright is a *New Testament Theologian* and historian whose in-depth (re)reading of the New Testament led him to recognize mission at the core of the Biblical narrative.

N.T. Wright has stirred up controversy in the North and in Brazil. His many books and articles offer many opportunities to observe interactions with the biblical text that can provoke our own re-examinations of our mission practices and imaginations. Book length critical interactions by other Biblical scholars with him and his work reveal how those controversies have played out in the North Atlantic. Several of his (many) books are available in Portuguese (see [Appendix](#) below for a listing and description). In this paper I will compare the way controversies developed in the North with how those controversies developed when they were imported into Brazil.⁸ An implication of my approach is that I will not focus so much on Wright as an “authority” who might tell us how to think

⁶ Bosch, D. (2002). *Missão Transformadora — Mudanças de paradigma na teologia da missão*. São Leopoldo: Editora Sinodal.

⁷ Wright, C. J. H. (2013). *Missão de Deus, A: Desvendando a Grande Narrativa da Bíblia (Religião ed.)*. VIDA NOVA. Segundo [Cleydson Freitas](#), a obra é “Uma teologia da missão bem ampla e profunda, do Antigo ao Novo Testamento, o autor desenvolve a Missão de Deus o principal assunto da Bíblia.”

⁸ From now on, I will refer to USA and Europe as “the North” as a context in contrast with Brazil as a context.

biblically about mission, though I think he does that. Rather, my attention to the journey of this controversy from the North to Brazil gives us an opportunity to observe whether the lingering frameworks from the colonial period—the ones that affected Goheen’s ability to teach missions in North America—also affect Brazilians in mission. Does the same imagined north-to-south framework still affect Bible-based reexamination of theology/missiology from Brazil?

I was first introduced to N.T. Wright when I read *Jesus and the Victory of God*.⁹ I could not put it down. For about a week, every other area of my life was put on hold as I read all 741 pages! Halfway into my missionary career I felt like I had found a New Testament scholar who, though he did not approach the Bible as a missionary, masterfully revealed its missionary character and message.

I’ve been drawn to read N.T. Wright ever since. His emphasis that the primary storyline of the Scriptures is the proclamation of the Kingdom as fulfillment of God’s promise led me to read the Bible more carefully, nourished my hope in Christ, inspired me to stay engaged in missions during the second half of my career and reconfigured my understanding of what the goal of Christian mission includes.

N.T. Wright is an evangelical Anglican Bishop in the UK who writes and preaches so his readers will pay closer attention to the text of Bible and interact with implications of the biblical narrative for life in the world of today.¹⁰ What emerges is a focus on the role of God’s people in the unfolding drama of salvation as portrayed in the Scriptures. That drama enters the present age in the proclamation of “the gospel of the kingdom as the comprehensive restoration of creation and human life.”¹¹ In other words, Wright demonstrates that the entire biblical record is the story of mission, writ large.

Wright’s four-volume work, *Christian Origins and the Question of God*,¹² focuses on the Biblical story of the faithfulness of God, and of Jesus his Messiah and on Paul. The

⁹ Wright, N. T. *Jesus and the Victory of God*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996.

¹⁰ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/april/surprised-by-n-t-wright.html> e <https://www.ultimato.com.br/conteudo/superlativos-de-n-t-wright>

¹¹ Goheen, M. W. (2014). *Introducing Christian Mission Today: Scripture, History, and Issues*. IVP Academic. p.305

¹² *Origens Cristãs e a Questão de Deus*. Série de 4 tomos grandes, com rumores de um quinto tomo em preparação. O terceiro volume já foi traduzido ao português e publicado como Wright, N. T. (2013). *A Ressurreição do Filho de Deus*. Paulus Editora.

Messiah's claim on the nations (gentiles) is not simply about saving people to make them Christians but it asserts God's claim on all of creation and mobilizes the people of God to enact the restoration of all that sin has destroyed.

Wright finds a soteriology¹³ in the Biblical story that energizes the mission of the church.¹⁴ As historian and New Testament scholar, he is able to draw out the real historical drama as it unfolds—the dramatic enactment of the reign of Israel's Messiah by Jesus, Paul and us. Jesus calls and forms the people of God, deploying them as coworkers with Him in His mission to bless humanity for the sake of all creation (Acts 3:21, Rom. 8:19-23). We see Jesus' faith and make it our own (Heb. 12:1-3). The faith that took him to the cross for us calls us to a faith whereby we give our lives for the salvation of all (Gal 2:20). He redeems us from lawlessness and purifies us for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works (Tit 2:14).

Debate with N.T. Wright in the North

What follows is an analysis of how controversies about Wright's work have unfolded and how they have traversed borders. Controversy is a form of interaction. In order to observe the interaction itself, I will include some terms used by critics who interact with Wright. I will identify some of the people who engage him, but I will not fully represent their theological opinions. I have endeavored to provide complete footnotes for those who are interested in studying the content of the controversies more fully and more directly. Many resources are available in multiple languages at <http://ntwrightpage.com>. For this purpose, I also provide, at this end of this article, an [Appendix](#) listing N. T. Wright books published in Portuguese, with English equivalents and a thematic description of the issues they raise.

A coleção completa, em inglês consiste dos seguintes tomos:

Wright, N. T. (1992). The New Testament and the people of God Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Wright, N. T. (1996). Jesus and the victory of God. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Wright, N. T. (2003). The resurrection of the Son of God. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

Wright, N. T. (2013). Paul and the Faithfulness of God. Augsburg Fortress, Publishers.

¹³ *Def. Soteriology here refers to the terms that are used to understand the meaning of salvation from God and the process by which God produces and delivers that salvation.*

¹⁴ <https://vimeo.com/74166436> beginning at minute 22

Controversy with John Piper about justification and about the New Perspective on Paul

I became aware of controversy around N.T. Wright when I saw John Piper's book-length critique (or should I say "criticism") of NT Wright.¹⁵ John Piper has been a hero to me. His efforts to break the traditional resistance of Reformed Theology to intentional mission outreach offered a sustained reply to pastor John Ryland Sr. (1723-1792) who famously objected to William Carey's (1761-1834) call to missions, "Young man, sit down! You are an enthusiast. When God pleases to convert the heathen, he'll do it without consulting you or me."¹⁶ I bought Piper's book and tried to read it. I thought I should not continue enjoying N.T. Wright without considering Piper's critique. But when I read *The Future of Justification*¹⁷ I had trouble. I struggled with Piper's tone.

Piper says N.T. Wright has "redefined justification"¹⁸ and his "portrayal of the gospel—of the doctrine of justification in particular—is so disfigured that it becomes difficult to recognize as biblically faithful."¹⁹ He suggests that Wright's is "an *innovative* interpretation of the biblical story of redemption that breaks with traditional and "ordinary reading of many texts."²⁰ Wright's effort to read biblical authors in terms familiar to their moment in history "can be used (inadvertently) to distort and silence what the New Testament writers intended to say,"²¹ (suggesting that Piper does know what the New Testament writers intended to say!).

Piper associates Wright with a group of theologians in the New Perspective on Paul (NPP). The NPP is a circle of scholars who discuss reading the text of New Testament in light of newly discovered ancient documents. Wright is part of that circle. Sometimes he agrees with other participants and often disagrees. Piper does not engage with NPP, but

¹⁵ Piper, J. (2011). *Futuro Da Justificação, O - Uma Resposta a N. T. Wright*. Editora Tempo de Colheita, RJ, veja também <http://monergismo.com/john-piper/o-futuro-da-justificacao/>

¹⁶ veja <http://perspectivasbrasil.com/william-carey-1761-1834/>

¹⁷ Piper, John. *The Future of Justification: A Response to N. T. Wright*. Crossway Books, 2007.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p.23

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 15 ou "seu retrato do evangelho – e especialmente da doutrina da justificação – está tão desfigurado que fica difícil reconhecê-lo como biblicamente fiel" em p.17 de Piper, John. *Futuro Da Justificação, O - Uma Resposta a N. T. Wright*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Tempo de Colheita, 2011.

²⁰ *Ibid.* p.25. On p. 37 (English version), he also asserts that, "N. T. Wright is explicitly energized by finding "new" and "fresh" interpretations of Paul. But one does not find in Wright an appreciation and celebration of the insights of older interpretation that glows with similar exuberance."

²¹ *Ibid.* p. 35 (English version)

rather disqualifies it. He says it disregards theological conclusions that have prevailed for the last 500 years. Piper asserts that NPP fails to give God glory for Christ's substitutionary atonement whereby we can know that God is "totally on our side."²² Piper draws on 16th Century reformers whose exegesis produced Protestant Confessions (Augsburg, Swiss, 39 Articles of the Church of England, Westminster) when their pastoral concerns led the people of Northern Europe out of Roman Catholicism.²³

I was overwhelmed. The confessions speak strongly to me and I have no reason to doubt that they do the same for N. T. Wright, perhaps more so. I struggled to understand if there was any real disagreement. It would take a tremendous amount of work to figure out who is right. I would have to read the arguments of each side by side, along with the Old and New Testaments in the original languages and also examine the 16th Century confessions. I would rather read them devotionally. So much work to figure out who is right and who is wrong! Theology students often face this very daunting task as part of their preparation for ministry. Daniel Waldschmidt, a 2016 student at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School did an excellent job of identifying some of the issues, but only managed to scratch the surface.²⁴ Meanwhile the challenge to live out and communicate the gospel of Jesus Christ adequately among people shaped by 21st Century cultures awaits!

I could not, however, simply ignore Piper's critique just because it required work. Friends within the Neo-Reformed movement in the USA had found the time to enter the debate and draw their conclusions.²⁵ Respected theologians such as D.A. Carson (Trinity Seminary)²⁶, Thomas Schreiner (Southern Baptist Theological Seminary)²⁷, and Trevin

²² See <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/interview-with-john-piper-about-the-future-of-justification-a-response-to-n-t-wright> and Dunn, J. D. G. (2007). *The New Perspective on Paul* (2 ed.). Eerdmans

²³ Piper, Futuro, pp. 111-115

²⁴ https://www.academia.edu/30882027/The_Hermeneutics_of_the_New_Perspective_on_Paul

²⁵ From the neo-Reformed movement: <https://derekzrismawy.com/2013/09/27/why-im-excited-about-n-t-wrights-big-new-book-paul-the-ot-theologian-greek-culture-and-the-roman-world/> and <http://news.sbts.edu/2009/09/04/wrights-view-of-justification-is-defective-and-unbiblical-sbts-panelists-say/>

²⁶ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/course/justification-faith-biblical-theological-perspective/#course-introduction>

²⁷ Report from a panel of Southern Baptist Theologians: <http://news.sbts.edu/2009/09/04/wrights-view-of-justification-is-defective-and-unbiblical-sbts-panelists-say/> or an audio recording of the panel at: <https://youtu.be/tA-2PjalU6E>

Wax (The Gospel Coalition)²⁸ and others share Piper’s concerns that NPP and Wright sow confusion about Reformed doctrine. N.T. Wright took them seriously enough to write a book length (re)examination of biblical teaching on justification in light of their critiques. Wright’s book has recently become available in Portuguese.²⁹

More controversies in the north

The issues about ‘justification and “works of the law” in Paul are not the only controversies that N. T. Wright has provoked among theologians in the North. I don’t have room to discuss each of the controversies but I have listed the published interactions so as to note how controversies contributed to interaction (or not) with the biblical text among scholars and lay people, engaging them in the mission of Christ.

First interaction: about the historical Jesus.

The second volume of Wright’s *Christian Origins* series appeared in 1995. At a time when much New Testament scholarship questioned the historical accuracy of the gospel accounts, Wright’s *Jesus and the Victory of God* offered a multi-disciplinary review of Jesus research concluding that the New Testament accurately portrays Jesus’ life and message. The gospel portrays Jesus’ interactions with first century Jews over issues important to them, and Jesus enacts the Kingdom of God and inaugurates fulfillment of God’s promised blessing to all the families of the earth.

Jesus and the Restoration of Israel appeared in response, in 1999. In it 11 prominent (and mostly) conservative New Testament scholars from the North Atlantic (mainly USA)³⁰ identified weaknesses in Wright’s approach and invited Wright to respond. He did respond, contributing “In Grateful Dialogue: a response” as a chapter in the book itself. The book demonstrates interaction with each other and participants gave the greatest importance to their interaction with the biblical text. Alistair McGrath commented:

Wright’s project...is a stimulus that demands we reexamine our ways of thinking and interpreting scripture...the Reformed church must be *ecclesia semper reformanda*...Reformation is not a once-for-all event whose ideas are to be set in stone but an ongoing process of re-

²⁸ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/trevin-wax-interview-with-nt-wright-full-transcript/> veja a apresentação em português <http://sunhojd.blogspot.com/2010/09/justificacao-nt-wright-e-nova.html>

²⁹ Wright, N. T. (2018). Justificação: O Plano de Deus e a Visão de Paulo (M. Elias, Trans.). Maceió: Editora Sal Cultural. Wright, N. T. Justification: God’s Plan and Paul’s Vision. InterVarsity Press, 2009.

³⁰ Newman, Carey C. (1999), Jesus & the Restoration of Israel, (InterVarsity Press).

examination and reinterpretation forced on us by the priority of the biblical text over our provisional interpretations of that text. Wright obliges us to read the New Testament again and to take the profound risk of allowing our most settled ideas to be challenged in light of the biblical witness.³¹

Second interaction: a new reading of the gospel, not about apologetics, but about mission.

In 2010, Nicholas Perrin invited N.T. Wright to interact with nine other prominent biblical scholars from the North Atlantic at Wheaton College to discuss Wright's reading of Jesus and Paul for the sake of lay people and pastors who might wonder what difference Wright makes. They produced *Jesus, Paul and the People of God*.³² Wright called it a meeting with "personal friends" and he wrote individual responses to each. They affirmed Wright's work but did not avoid controversy. Wright had good reasons, by the end of the gathering, to remember that Paul faced riots wherever he went. Wright left aware of exegetical work to be done for the sake of mission:

what about fresh readings of the Gospels in the service of the church?
... This, I believe, is not basically about apologetics...but about mission. Somehow, the whole complex of kingdom, cross and resurrection must play out into a full-orbed gospel-rooted mission which will be significantly unlike the social gospel mission that forgot about the cross, or the "Jesus died for you" mission that forgot about the kingdom.³³

Third interaction: is Wright's methodology adequate?

N.T. Wright's monumental book on Pauline Theology, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* appeared in 2013.³⁴ It is possibly the longest book ever written about Paul and his theology by a single author—1700 pages in two volumes. It represents a lifetime of exegetical, historical and pastoral research by N. T. Wright and is a landmark that will be discussed and debated for years to come. Prominent Pauline scholars, from the North Atlantic, Australia and South Korea wasted no time. They responded critically in a book of their own in 2017. *God and the Faithfulness of Paul* focuses specific critiques on specific

³¹ *Ibid.* chapter 9, McGrath, Alistair "Reality, Symbol and History: theological reflections on N.T. Wright's portrayal of Jesus." Pp.178, 179

³² Perrin, Nicholas and Richard B. Hays (2011), *Jesus, Paul and the People of God*, (InterVarsity Press).

³³ *Ibid.* p.151

³⁴ Wright, N.T. *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013.

methodologies Wright used and how they affect his conclusions.³⁵ N.T. Wright contributed the last chapter in which he interacts with his critics.

Fourth interaction: Is Wright a spokesperson for the New Perspective on Paul?

Exile: a Conversation with N.T. Wright was published in 2017 as well. James M. Scott organized a diverse group of biblical scholars from both sides of the North Atlantic whose critique of Wright focused on one particular issue of importance within the New Perspective on Paul discussions: did first century Jews see themselves as still in exile in the first century, and was this perspective a factor in Jesus and Paul's ministry? This book should be of particular interest for the Brazilian debate since Scott's introductory essay suggests that the book came about, in part, because James D.G. Dunn, the main thinker behind the New Perspective on Paul, had *critiqued* Wright vociferously for "spoiling" their partnership in the NPP. Some Brazilian critics might be surprised that Dunn does not necessarily consider Wright to be a voice for the New Perspective on Paul.³⁶

A characterization of the controversy as it played out in the North

Each of these book length controversies engages N.T. Wright personally with his critics. The controversies are not limited to a one-issue focus like the one with Piper, Carson, Shreiner and The Gospel Coalition. His interactions with multiple scholars over multiple issues address methodology and conclusions. It is difficult to miss Wright's constant invitation to pay attention to what the Bible says about the redemption of all creation as the measure of the breadth and extent of Christ's faithful obedience or what he says about effective faithful actions by all who embrace Christ's work and participate with Him in His mission.

I conclude this section by reiterating the chapter title "The Challenge of Dialogue" by Wright and directed to his critics.³⁷ The title attests to controversy as a form of productive interaction that involves the text of the Bible and each other. Defensiveness gives way to a shared calling to testify to the story of the Messiah, to announce victory over sin, death, principalities and powers, and to extend the invitation to become disciples. The

³⁵ Heilig, Christoph, J. Thomas Hewitt, and Michael F. Bird. *God and the Faithfulness of Paul*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017.

³⁶ Scott, James M. (2017), *Exile: A Conversation with N. T. Wright*, (InterVarsity Press).

³⁷ Heilig, et.al. *God and...p. 711-767*

Word of God remains free to examine participants (Heb. 4:12,13), draw us to Christ, take over our destiny (Jer. 15:16-18) and produce both endurance and fruitfulness (Psalm 1).

Debate about N. T. Wright travels to Brazil

N.T. Wright and other biblical scholars in the North Atlantic have a lively dialogue among themselves about Jesus and Paul as they (re)read the New Testament for the 21st century in light of new discoveries about the first century Jewish context. When this conversation traveled to Brazil, it put some pastors on edge. They were concerned that Wright's work reinterpreted the doctrine of justification and undermined biblical authority.

I have personal reasons for my interest in how this controversy came to Brazil. The influence of this controversy flows toward Brazilian evangelicals. It flows in the opposite direction of the influence of Brazilian evangelicals on my life. I was shaped more by interacting with Brazilian pioneers of a new missionary movement from Brazil in the late 1970's than by Wright or any of the theologians above. I learned as I rubbed shoulders with early pioneers of the Brazilian Missions Movement: Jonathan Ferreira dos Santos, Lídia de Almeida, Décio de Azevedo, Barbara Burns, Eude Martins da Silva, Orivaldo Lopes, Jr., Carlos Siepierski, Neuza Itioka, Valdir Steuernagel, Paulo Moreira Filho, Timóteo Carriker, Guilherme Kerr Neto, Edison Queiroz, Key Yuasa, Waldemar Carvalho, Marcos Amado and others. They foresaw a move of the Spirit of God. We were all driven to our knees, reread our Bibles to understand this new work by God for his mission. He would now align 20th and 21st Century Brazilian evangelicals to take a new role in the further unfolding of the story of the gospel for all peoples that begins in the Bible. We had to change our missionary imagination enough to pray for Brazilian laborers to enter the harvest.

Missions from Brazil are rooted in how these pioneers read their Bibles. When they read (*leram*) their Bibles, their ideas changed so they could understand what God wanted them to do in cooperation with Him! The Bible, interpreting the missionary initiatives of the Spirit, was the source book for mobilizing, teaching and training many thousands to bear witness to Christ and to all his teachings to the ends of the earth and close to home. By (re)reading their evangelism in light of the Bible, they put an end to colonial imaginations that retained Brazil as a mission field for the North and controlled how the Bible was read

in Brazil during the previous 500 years. Acting from Biblical faith, they overcame the geographical frame for “missions” that imagined a movement from the North into Brazil. They overcame a flawed approach to the Bible 35 years before Goheen would also have to overcome it so he could teach missiology biblically in a seminary in North America.³⁸

The controversy focuses on Wright’s relationship to the New Perspective on Paul

Wright’s work did not arrive in Brazil in this way. It arrived wrapped in pastoral concerns by Brazilian leaders about the New Perspective on Paul (NPP).

The original exchanges in the USA between Piper and Wright had been about the meaning and means of justification. In the process, Piper suggested Wright was leading an attack on Reformed doctrine in association with other scholars in the NPP. Pr. Augustus Nicodemus Lopes echoed Piper’s concerns in 2006 when he published an article to warn readers about the New Perspective on Paul and in 2011 claimed that Wright was promotor of: “the ‘New Perspective on Paul’ a *movement* that is nearly 20 years old and only recently arrived in Brazil, especially in the writings of N. T. Wright,”³⁹ in an “effort to *redefine* the doctrine of justification by Faith.”⁴⁰

Linguistic and geographic constraints forced him to first describe concerns about NPP in his own words for his Brazilian audience. His critique could make sense only after describing a doctrinal threat, which turned NPP into a theological position rather than the space for controversy that it actually is. It is a space where New Testament scholars interact, and students observe the effect of new discoveries on meanings of New Testament texts.

His 2006 article directed his readers to the biblical text and makes the case that readers should follow the Scriptures. However, he did so only after disqualifying the New Perspective on Paul because “it ends up attacking the authority of scripture.”⁴¹ Even though this is not how the controversy in the North actually unfolded, he was free to control

³⁸ See pg. 1 of this paper: *A colonial imagination of missions had a flawed geographical vision about the source of mission and a flawed relationship with the Bible that used it as a proof-text to defend mission and failed to submit missionary vision and practices to examination by scripture.*

³⁹ Nicodemus Lopes, Augustus (2006), ‘A Nova Perspectiva sobre Paulo: Um estudo sobre as “Obras da lei” em Gálatas’, *Fides Reformata*, 11 1.

⁴⁰ <http://tempora-mores.blogspot.com/2011/02/nova-perspectiva-sobre-paulo.html> (my emphasis)

⁴¹ Nicodemus Lopes, Augustus. “A Nova Perspectiva Sobre Paulo: Um Estudo Sobre as “Obras Da Lei” Em Gálatas.” *Fides Reformata* 11 (2006): p.93

the narrative in this way because he was not interacting directly with Wright or with the proponents of NPP. The theologians he described are not in a position to hear, respond to his accusation, or demonstrate their commitment to Biblical authority.

Because he is trying to bring his readers up-to-speed, Nicodemus Lopes' interaction is structurally not the same as the interactions among the scholars who responded to Wright in books that critique his work. He is not being deceptive. His space of interaction is limited to his readers who depend on his own representation of Wright and NPP.

The structures of controversy

This is a structural problem. The structure is this: Brazilians have been consumers of most theological debates in the North, and not contributors. The critical books and essays about N. T. Wright listed above do not include critiques from any Brazilian theologian. The structure of global theological discussion skews northward and this skewed structuring is not limited to this one set of controversies. The structure assumes theological discussions in the North are pertinent to Brazil and that Brazilian engagements in those controversies are not pertinent to the North.

Franklin Ferreira also wrote about the New Perspective on Paul. In order to offer his Biblical argument and invite readers to interact, he first had to describe NPP to his readers. He described Sanders, Dunn and Wright as “biblicists” who radically changed “the interpretation of several Biblical texts, especially ones written by Paul.” As a result, he also controls the narrative about NPP and its proponents so he can defend the “traditional interpretation.”⁴²

I want to say this again: Nicodemus Lopes and Ferreira are not acting irresponsibly. One has trust that they did good exegetical work before exercising their pastoral calling and warning their readers about ideas they consider unbiblical. The problem is that a structural effect, left over after the colonial period, shaped the trajectory of these controversies when they imported them. Through no fault of the authors, readers are given opportunity to interact only with the pastors' ideas.

This structured relationship is one reason why theologies formed in the North continue to validate (or not) theological orthodoxy in Brazil—far more than theologies

⁴² *Veja <https://teologiabrasileira.com.br/a-nova-perspectiva-de-paulo/> e <https://teologiabrasileira.com.br/a-nova-perspectiva-de-paulo-2/> my translation.*

formed in Brazil play a role in validating American or European orthodoxies. The Brazilian theological community still finds it important to align (or not) with theological formations that come from the North. It is thus that the “structural effect” that carries over from the colonial relationship continues to reproduce flaws in the relationship with the biblical text and fails to “bring missionary practice to the Bible to be scrutinized.” And mission suffers.

Timóteo Carriker disagreed with Nicodemus Lopes that Wright is promoting a new heresy. In his blog at *Ultimato* on-line⁴³ Carriker interacts with Nicodemus, presents a clear defense of Wright, and points out how he feels that Nicodemus failed to represent Wright or the NPP adequately. He encourages readers to examine the Biblical text and decide for themselves who is right. Carriker is well known for his consistent commitment to submitting missionary ideas to the scrutiny of scripture. He has written extensively about a biblical theology of mission. As Editor in chief of the *Bíblia Missionária de Estudo*⁴⁴ he has recognized that the Bible is God’s tool for examining our practice of mission and leading us away from being only consumers and toward a practice of producing good missiology. Nevertheless, his critique of Nicodemus Lopes does not escape the structural effect that continues to reproduce the North-South geography of mission even after colonialism has ended and leads to controlling the narrative. When he posts in his blog: “the critics of NPP do not distinguish well the differing currents within NPP,” it is clear that the controversy changed when it entered Brazilian territory. It became more about who could describe Wright and the NPP correctly. A comment from one reader confirms that Carriker has, unwittingly, controlled the narrative: “Thank you, and I hope you will continue to comment about NPP to help those of us who (still) are not capable of analysis at a global level (because of language differences and because of the limited literature available in Brazil.”⁴⁵ The reader chooses to trust Carriker to give him the full and correct picture about NPP. Others might choose to trust Nicodemus Lopes or Ferreira. But none of them dialogue with N. T. Wright and his interlocutors or (re)read the Bible with him about following Christ into His mission.

⁴³ <http://ultimato.com.br/sites/timcarriker/2011/09/26/uma-nova-heresia/> veja também Carriker, Timóteo. “Heresia: Uma Palavra Que Não Combina Com N. T. Wright.” *Ultimato Novembro-Dezembro* (2011):

⁴⁴ *Sociedade Bíblica do Brasil* (2014), *Bíblia Missionária de Estudo*, ed. Carriker, Timóteo, (Barueri/SP: Sociedade Bíblica do Brasil) 1472.

⁴⁵ Michael Douglas de Sousa Lopes [27 de dezembro de 2014](#)

As the debate travels to Brazil it gets out of sync with the interaction between Wright and his critics.

Since Brazilian critics need to describe NPP or N. T. Wright to their readers they find themselves importing their own description of the controversy. But the controversy they describe is an ongoing debate, so descriptions are out of date by the time they go to print. And books are not necessarily published in Portuguese when the discussion is ongoing, nor do they appear in the same order that they are published in English (see Appendix below).

Brazilian readers are left interacting with snapshots of controversies that take place outside their space of interaction. The snapshots they get are static representations of particular exegetical and theological positions. The photograph is visible, but not the activity outside its frame nor the interaction that placed people together in it.

On the surface, controversy in Brazil about N.T. Wright may not appear to be very different from in the North. The challenge to respond to the gospel, understand it and adopt it as our language that testifies about Christ's victory that brings salvation, is the same. The difference is that almost no Brazilian theologians interact with N.T. Wright. Not only are Brazilian theologians, like Nicodemus Lopes, not likely to see a response from Wright about their articles, they also encourage others to *avoid* the discussion.⁴⁶

At best, when there is discussion it turns out to be a dialogue about a dialogue. Leaders like Nicodemus Lopes, Ferreira and Carriker are left controlling the narrative whether they want to or not. The doctrinal memory of the Reformers is brought to the center while the story of the gospel in and from Brazil is marginalized. Wright's invitation into a discussion about the Biblical text is lost—as is the biblical story of God on mission.

When the debate was imported, it got out of sync and became a dialogue about a dialogue. The narrative was controlled by its interpreters. These lingering structural

⁴⁶ <http://www.icp.com.br/df91materia9.asp> because NPP and Wright “defende(n) que desde a Reforma protestante nós temos lido as cartas de Paulo de maneira errada.”

This characterization of the New Perspective on Paul as a heretical theological position is sustained by more than just Augustus Nicodemus when they write about the debate, in a tone of warning, to inform the Brazilian evangelical public. Gaspar de Souza claims that “a NPP parte de uma base ex scripturae para examinar a teologia paulina” rather than an approach to the scriptures in search of better understanding. <https://teologiabrasileira.com.br/introducao-a-nova-perspectiva-paulina-um-ensaio/>

effects, left over from the colonial period, continue to sustain the power of the North over biblical interpretation from Brazil.

Breaking out of structures that limit effectiveness in mission.

Those who would follow in the footsteps of Brazilian pioneers who found a new path that bypassed the north-south structure of mission can also search the Scriptures and interpret new missionary initiatives of the Spirit today and subject old patterns to biblical scrutiny. It is a daunting but rewarding task. Theology students can examine the controlled narrative and identify what they need to do to move beyond it as Tiago Rossi Marques did when he was a student at Seminario Martin Bucer in São Paulo. He read enough of NPP to recognize his need to dig deeper into the biblical text.⁴⁷

The publishers of the Portuguese translation of *Justification: God's plan and Paul's vision*, N. T. Wright's response to John Piper, believe that the relationship of believers to the Bible is at stake.

N.T. Wright is a modern-day prophet. Even though some readers accuse him, unfairly, of theological liberalism, nothing could be further from the truth. His thoughts are always based in biblical exegesis and from understanding the text within its context in light of what the biblical author understood about the plan of God for humanity.

So, if you are someone, Christian or not, who is unwilling to compare your current understanding, or creed, with the entirety of scripture, not just with proof-texts, and see whether it makes more sense than what its authors are saying—if you are not willing to do this, this book is not for you. In this case, maybe even the Bible is not for you.⁴⁸

In early 21st Century Brazil, musicians influence evangelical belief and are listened to more than theologians. Musicians Leonardo Carvalho e Gabriel Coutinho recommend reading *The Resurrection of the Son of God* by N. T. Wright as one of “The twelve books that Christians should read in 2013...you may not like all the ideas, maybe feel offended impacted, out of your comfort zone, stimulated, excited, horrified, but you will not be able to remain indifferent to them. These are books that make us think, reflection on our

⁴⁷ https://www.academia.edu/33355232/A_NOVA_INSTIGANTE_E_CONTROVERSA_PERSPECTIVA_PAULINA_Um_ensaio_sobre_a_Nova_Perspectiva_de_Paulo_e_seus_desdobramentos_na_Teologia_Contemporânea

⁴⁸ http://www.salcultural.com.br/lojasal/index.php?route=product/product&product_id=75

convictions so we can alter them or change them.⁴⁹ Perhaps artistic openness is difficult for theologians whose role has traditionally been to make sure people believe what is true.

Guilherme Piton took a different path and found a way to interact directly with N.

T. Wright, from Brazil, introducing Wright to the Brazilian version of the controversy:

Guilherme: Here in Brazil, some discussions involving what is called "new Perspective on Paul" have been gaining a certain breath due to the curiosity of several brothers and little material has been translated and produced in Brazilian soil.. [your] work has been mentioned and criticized by [reformed] and more "conservative" sectors... They accuse [you] of denying the doctrine of justification by faith as a soteriological aspect, as if there were no imputation of God's righteousness in the sinner. They accuse [you] of defending a justification in the ecclesiological context and that this resembles Roman Catholic theology. How do you understand the doctrine of justification and receive these accusations?⁵⁰

Wright: the task facing us is not to go on giving nineteenth-century answers to sixteenth-century questions... imagining that we have to escape the world and go to 'heaven' – something the Bible never says. We need to believe more firmly in Jesus' resurrection as the start of the new creation which will one day renew the whole world, and us along with it.

The rest of the interview can be found in Portuguese, on the internet. In it we can observe how Wright clarifies his theological agenda:

Guilherme: what is the legacy you intend to leave for future generations of Christians?

N. T. Wright: I would love to leave a legacy of people who were reading the whole Bible and understanding the whole Gospel, committed to the whole Jesus – Israel's Messiah and Lord of the World – in the whole power of the Spirit.

⁴⁹ <https://reformandoconceitos.blogspot.com/2013/12/os-12-livros-de-2013-que-os-cristaos.html> (my translation)

⁵⁰ <https://medium.com/@quipiton99/precisamos-ler-a-b%C3%ADblia-com-a-ótica-do-primeiro-século-551ff43b7bbd>

Where to next?

N. T. Wright wrote, early in his career, that “A story, with its pattern of problem and conflict, of aborted attempts at resolution, and final results, whether sad or glad, is... universally perceived as the best way of talking about the way the world actually is.”⁵¹

The story I have told here is about writings by N. T. Wright and about theological controversies that traveled to Brazil and changed. I avoided arguing about doctrinal formations, methodological approaches, and conclusions. I focused instead on the nature of the interactions (or lack of interaction) between all the scholars and pastors with N. T. Wright, with their readers, and with the biblical text.

I found a lingering structural effect, left over after colonialism ended, that limits what Brazilians are expected to do in the story of the gospel. The effects is invisible because it is embedded in the story that writes us and it circumscribes our place in the world. It deters our participation in the story of the gospel by making it feel normal when doctrine is produced in the North and consumed in the Brazil. However, God is writing another story that expands our world and our contribution to it as followers of Christ. The Spirit and the Word (re)read us and make it possible to overcome the structures that limit us. ns. A theology student at Seminário Martin Bucer, a couple of artists and a blogger in Bahia bypassed that structure, initiated theological conversations *from* Brazil, and (re)read our place in the biblical story.

Brazil’s mission pioneers also (re)read our places in the story and overcame structural effects that North-South colonialism had imposed on our participation with God in His mission. Thirty-five years later, this time from the North, Goheen followed the same path these Brazilians had blazed. Both stories are testimony that the Bible is not so much about apologetics as it is the first chapters of a story about how God involves His people in His mission.

From within that story I read N. T. Wright, John Piper and others, heeding the call to (re)read the Bible once again. I am discovering biblical soteriology is not static doctrinal statements but rather an unfolding story of salvation in which God fulfills His promises,

⁵¹ Wright, N. T. *New Testament People God* (p. 40). 1992. Fortress Press. Kindle Edition.

mobilizes his people to do good and energizes the mission of the church, showing us our place in it.

I make it my pursuit to find ways to renew and deepen my knowledge of the story that is the message of the text from beginning to end. I pray we can discern together what this moment in the story requires of us all.

Apendice:
Os livros de N. T. Wright em Português
com seus originais correspondentes,
em ordem das edições em português, com descrição.

Edição em Português	Livro. Editora	Original em inglês	Enfoque (segundo editora)
2008	<i>Paulo: novas perspectivas.</i> Loyola	Wright, N. T. <i>Paul: In Fresh Perspective.</i> Fortress Press, 2005.	Um retrato de Paulo que examina o pano de fundo da sua formação e conversão para entender os temas sobre os quais escreveu.
2008	<i>Simplesmente cristão.</i> Ed. Ultimato	Wright, N. T. <i>Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense.</i> HarperSanFrancisco, 2006	Livro apologético que convida homens e mulheres pós-modernos a esperar na vitória de Cristo.
2008	<i>Judas e o evangelho de Jesus.</i> Loyola	Wright, Nicholas Thomas. <i>Judas and the Gospel of Jesus.</i> Baker Publishing Group, 2006.	Reflexões sobre o descobrimento e publicação de um manuscrito antigo “O evangelho de Judas”. Embora esse “evangelho” não revele nada novo sobre o Jesus histórico, revela a falência do “Cristo alternativo” dos gnósticos, deixando mais clara e atrativa a verdadeira fé cristã do Novo Testamento.
2009	<i>Surpreendido pela esperança.</i> Ed. Ultimato	Wright, N. T. <i>Surprised By Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church.</i> HarperOne, 2008.	A centralidade da ressurreição do corpo no ensino cristão, o testemunho bíblico ao respeito, e as implicações para a missão da igreja no mundo.
2009	<i>O mal e a justiça de Deus: Mundo injusto, Deus justo?</i> Ed. Ultimato	Wright, N. T. <i>Evil and the Justice of God.</i> InterVarsity Press, 2011.	Como reconhecer, no presente século mal, sinais da vitória de Deus sobre o mal e viver vidas baseadas na cruz de Cristo e no poder do Espírito?
2011	<i>O caminho do peregrino.</i> Ed. Palavra	Wright, Tom. <i>The Way of the Lord.</i> Lancashire, UK: Triangle, 1999.	Preparação para confissão pública de fé. Imagina a o discipulado evocando experiências de ser peregrino visitando lugares na terra prometida.
2011	<i>Seguindo Jesus.</i> Ed. Palavra	Wright, Tom. <i>Following Jesus.</i> Londres: SPCK, 1994.	A mensagem de Hebreus, Colossenses, Mateus, Marcos, e Apocalipses e de quatro temas: ressurreição, novo Nascimento, tentação, inferno, o céu, e vida nova num mundo renovado. A significância de tudo isto na vida cotidiana do discípulo de hoje.
2012	<i>Eu Creio. E Agora: Por que o caráter cristão é importante.</i> Ed. Ultimato	Wright, N. T. <i>After You Believe.</i> New York: Harper Collins, 2010.	Segue <i>Simplesmente Cristão</i> e <i>Surpreendido pela esperança</i> . Como viver à luz da expectativa de um novo céu e uma nova terra, a nova criação de Deus? Como essa esperança motiva a viver responsavelmente no mundo e para o mundo—com olhos fitos na razão por que Deus nos fez e Cristo nos redimiu.

Edição em Português	Livro. Editora	Original em inglês	Enfoque (segundo editora)
2012	<i>Os desafios de Jesus</i> : Ed. Palavra	Wright, N. T. <i>The Challenge of Jesus</i> . InterVarsity Press, 1999.	A vida, morte e ressurreição de Cristo são realidades fundamentais para que saibamos viver no Reino de Deus agora e no futuro.
2013	<i>A ressurreição do filho de Deus</i> . Paulus Editora	Wright, N. T. <i>The Resurrection of the Son of God</i> . Fortress Press, 2003.	Livro 3 da série de 4 livros <i>Origens Cristãs e a Questão de Deus</i> (este é único a ser editado em Português). Um estudo exaustivo da narrativa bíblica sobre a ressurreição de Jesus em contraste com outras crenças e mitos sobre a vida depois da morte.
2015	<i>Surpreendido pelas escrituras: Questões atuais desafiadoras</i> . Ed. Ultimato	Wright, N. T. <i>Surprised By Scripture</i> . Harper Collins, 2014.	Uma coleção de artigos sobre diferentes questões práticas e teológicas enfrentadas pelas igrejas na atualidade. O leitor que se deixa examinar pelas escrituras desenvolverá fé e o engajamento com o mundo mais profundos e frutíferos.
2016	<i>Simplemente boas novas</i> . Chara Editora	Wright, N. T. <i>Simply Good News</i> . Harper Collins, 2015.	Como é que o evangelho continua sendo boas novas 2000 anos depois de Cristo; qual é o seu poder para nos transformar; como aplica às nossas vidas e mundo de hoje?
2017	<i>O dia que a revolução começou</i> . Chara Editora	Wright, N. T. <i>The Day the Revolution Began</i> . HarperCollins, 2016.	Quando Jesus morreu na cruz não só absolveu os nossos pecados pessoais. A cruz foi ponto de partida, comissionando cristãos à vocação de sermos um sacerdócio real, responsáveis por restaurar e reconciliar toda a criação de Deus.
2018	<i>Justificação: O plano de Deus e a visão de Paulo</i> . Editora Sal Cultural	<i>Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision</i> . InterVarsity Press, 2009.	Wright responde a John Piper e outros críticos que o acusam de minimizar o papel da fé e desviar o foco da obra de Jesus na cruz. Escreve réplicas específicas a críticas específicas. Afirma que os críticos entenderam incompletamente a mensagem de Paulo sobre o papel central de Jesus na história mais ampla que a Bíblia relata.
2019	<i>São Paulo—A biografia</i> . Publicações Dom Quixote (Portugal)	Wright, N. T. <i>Paul: A Biography</i> . HarperCollins, 2018.	A vida de Paulo, a sua formação judaica, encontro com Jesus, e o fruto da sua vida e ministério.
2019	<i>Paulo: Uma biografia</i> . Thomas Nelson Brasil (Brasil)	Wright, N. T. <i>Paul: A Biography</i> . HarperCollins, 2018.	A vida de Paulo, a sua formação judaica, encontro com Jesus, e o fruto da sua vida e ministério.