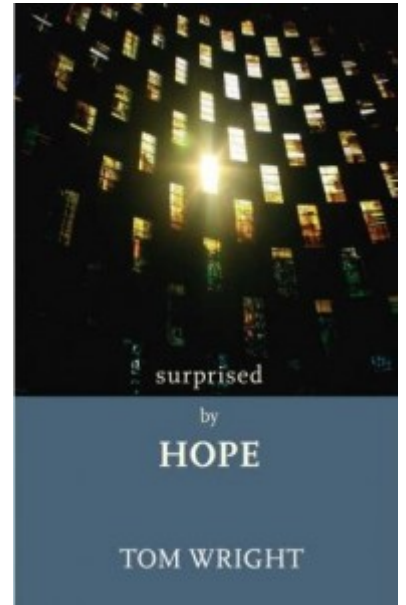


Review: Surprised By Hope

I used to think it was my own little heresy – that the gospel was all about the Lordship of Christ and the fulfillment of his Kingdom *here on earth* when he returns, more than any possibility of being raptured into an ethereal eternity. My “heresy” has found a harbour. Tom Wright’s *Surprised by Hope* unpacks an eschatology that brings forth the foundation of the biblical narrative. Not only is it hermeneutical framework changer (or strengthener) but completes the circle by dealing with the putting of gospel into practice.



The book is quite simple in essence. Wright seeks to answer two questions: “First, what is the ultimate Christian hope? Second, what hope is there for change, rescue, transformation, new possibilities within the world in the present?” (Page 5). And he insists that these questions be asked together, for the Christian hope is not about escaping an evil creation, but about “God’s new creation.. that has already come to life in Jesus of Nazareth.” (Page 5)

“I find that to many – not least many Christians – all this comes as a surprise: both that the Christian hope is surprisingly different from what they had assumed, and that this same hope offers a coherent and energizing basis for work in today’s world’ (Page 5)

Wright then proceeds, to unpack these two issues – the Christian hope, and it’s application.

To the first issue he brings his skill as New Testament scholar and general theologian to bear in a knowledgeable and astute way. His touchstone is the resurrection and ascension

of Jesus, a topic that is poorly handled (if considered at all) in many of the systematic theologies I've read. The historicity of Christ's resurrection is a deliberately aberrational impact of God's purposes into the world. People simply do not rise from the dead, so that fact this man has inaugurates something profound. First, it places Jesus higher than all – as the one in whom the Kingdom of God is inaugurated he is Lord of all. And, secondly, upon his return, as the early Christians cry Maranatha!...

"They believed that God was going to do for the whole cosmos what he had done for Jesus at Easter." (Page 104)

Before he gets to the practical implications Wright unpacks the theological ones. He sets this expression of the gospel against insidious platonism and an assumed dualism that is prevalent in liturgical and spiritual language. I particularly enjoyed how he pulls apart some of our hymnody.

"While we're on Christian carols, consider 'Away in a manger', which prays, 'and fit us for heaven, to live with thee there.' No resurrection; no new creation; no marriage of heaven and earth. And when we find in the hymn book the blatant romantic nature-religion and universalisms of Paul Gerhardt...

*But when life's day is over
Shall death's fair night discover*

Death in the New Testament is never a 'fair night'. It is an enemy, conquered by Jesus but still awaiting its final defeat."

There are theological corollaries to his framework, and he also unpacks these. It could be here that some controversy might lie for some, although it needn't for I think he draws a line between what is necessary and what is speculative.

Some examples of his thinking includes the necessity of an intermediate state of paradise ahead of the coming of Christ – which means the many rooms prepared by Jesus for his disciples (John 14) are temporary. He also looks at judgement and justification. His view of hell, rather nicely, is not annihilationist, but somewhat Narnian, where hell is for *“beings that once were human but now are not, creatures that have ceased to bear the divine image at all.”* (Page 195)

One aspect I need to put some more thought into is the notion that the creation of Genesis, while definitely *good*, is not necessary *complete*. Rather, creation itself is eschatological (crf. Romans 8), designed as a vessel to receive the fullness of God himself so that the glory of the Lord covers the earth as the waters cover the sea.

“It looks as though God intends to flood the universe with himself; as though the universe, the entire cosmos, was designed as a receptacle for his love. We might even suggest, as part of a Christian aesthetic, that the world is beautiful, not just because it hauntingly reminds us of its creator, but because it is pointing forwards: it is designed to be filled, flooded, drenched in God; as a chalice is beautiful not least because of what we know it is designed to contain...”

The world is created good but incomplete. One day, when all forces of rebellion have been defeated, and the creation responds freely and gladly to the love of its creator, God will fill it with himself, so that it will both remain an independent being, other than God, and also will be flooded with God’s own life.” (Pages 113-114)

The key value of this book however lies in Wright’s attempt to complete the circle from theology to practicality – the intertwining of gospel with mission. 1 Corinthians 15 is a key passage as Wright engages with Paul’s vision of our future

in the resurrection and reflects on Paul's application of this hope: "Therefore, my beloved ones, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labour is not in vain."

"The point of the resurrection, as Paul has been arguing throughout the letter, is that the present bodily life is not valueless just because it will die. God will raise it to new life. What you do with your body in the present matters, because God has a great future in store for it... What you do in the present – by painting, preaching, singing, sewing, praying, teaching, building hospitals, digging wells, campaigning for justice, writing poems, caring for the needy, loving your neighbour as yourself – all these things will last into God's future. They are not simply ways of making the present life a little less beastly, a little more bearable, until the day when we live it behind altogether... They are part of what we may call building for God's kingdom." (Page 205)

The basic sense is knowing the Kingdom of God in part here and now what we will know in fullness when Jesus returns. It's a life that prays "Your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven" and builds *for* that kingdom. Wright unpacks kingdom tasks around the categories of working for justice, beauty and evangelism (chapter 13).

When talking about mission it is hard to get the balance right between our obligation and the sovereign work of God. I like Wrights' God builds the kingdom, we build *for* the kingdom phrasing. But I'm not sure whether describing our missions as "seeking... to implement the achievement of Jesus and his resurrection" (Page 245) is helpful. Jesus "achieves" and we "implement" – I'm not sure if this hits the balance. Perhaps it's my cynicism – many of the examples Wright gives of mission in action seem simply too bureaucratic. Part of me is discontent with welfare programs or even "Truth and

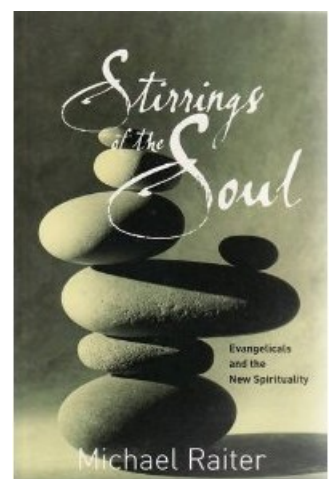
Reconciliation Commissions” as an outworking of the gospel. They seem doable without Jesus and thus devoid of power. I want to see miracles as the Kingdom of God comes near to those who are bound by sin and the world, just as it did for Jesus. Perhaps this is eschatological angst on my part.

I did appreciate Wright’s last two chapters, however, where he goes where my heart always goes – the reshaping of the church for mission. The message for a church which has lost its hope is “It’s time to wake up!... Come alive to the real world, the world where Jesus is Lord, the world into which your baptism brings you, the world you claim to belong to when you say in the creed that Jesus is Lord and that God raised him from the dead.” (Page 265) Such a message can and must reinvigorate our worship, our prayer, our attitude towards life.

In all this Wright has let down a bucket into the depths of the gospel water from which I have not drunk for a long time. The bucket is imperfect for sure. But the water is oh so sweet.

Review: Stirrings of the Soul

Mike Raiter is someone I, and many others, would place in the extreme upper echelons of biblical exegetes and expositors. A book by Raiter that deals with spirituality therefore grabbed my attention. I was expecting something that interacted with my two passions of studying the things of God and experiencing the things of God. With *Stirrings of the Soul* I was not disappointed.



I will therefore begin by dealing with the three annoyances of this book so I can finish with the good stuff.

1. It's an Australian book, by an Australian author, based initially on lectures to an Australian audience. The adaption of it to a British audience is obviously forced and looks like it's been done by an editor with search-and-replace "Australian" with "British" functionality on their word processor. I'm all for adapting to market contexts, but...
2. Don't be put off by the beginning. Yes, working from the ground up is good. And yes, it was written in 2003 when 'The Internet' wasn't yet broadbandy, let alone all 2.0-ish. But the first couple of chapters talking about the "spirituality explosion" and the outlining of postmodernity have dated significantly – it presumes a naivete about such things that has long since passed. Persistence through these chapters is worthwhile because the strength of the book lies in its dealing with more eternal concepts.
3. The structure of the book moves from New Age spirituality to Mysticism-in-general to Christian Mysticism to an Evangelical Response to Christian Mysticism. What you don't get is the completed circle (or the finished return journey) of an Evangelical Response to New Age spirituality. How does a Christian respond to a New Age mystic? I don't know if this book fully answers that. I think it does more to protect against New Age infiltration into the Christian world than it does to help the Christian world to outreach to the New Age. In this way it is typical Matthias Media and can come across on occasion as an extended *Briefing* article.

There is plenty of good stuff. Raiter achieves his aim of not pulling apart one form of mysticism in depth but looks at the forest more than the trees. What he slowly reveals is that

this spiritualistic forest is very human shaped. Raiter lists the following characteristics within the appeal of spirituality:

- 1. Hunger for relationship (p75)*
- 2. Thirst for experience (p80)*
- 3. Non-rational (p84)*
- 4. Non Judgmental (p86)*
- 5. Inclusive (p89)*
- 6. Everyday Spirituality (p92)*
- 7. Market Place Spirituality (p95)*
- 8. Therapeutic (p98)*
- 9. An Immanent, Inner-directed Spirituality (p99)*

Not only are these found across the breadth of (post)modern spiritualities of today but also across history. The point is that the appeal of spirituality is a common thread in the human fallen predicament. Not only the God-shaped hole, but also the methods of spiritual enlightenment that rely on human endeavour or self-focussed technique, are indicative of human pride and self-realisation.

By this means Raiter brings Scripture to bear on these spiritualities and this is where his exegetical mastery kicks in. And he is somewhat no-holds-barred in doing so. I delight in the application of Romans that acknowledges that the base state of the human person is not to seek truth but “in their wickedness, suppress or restrain or hold the truth back.” (p109) and he concludes...

“As we live in a society of so many competing spiritualities we desperately need to hear Paul’s words on the human condition. We need to listen to God’s diagnosis of the real character of people’s spiritual motivations. We can be tempted to look at the new spirituality... and see it as the genuine longing of sincere spiritual seekers... People are looking for God and longing to get in contact with the One

they know is there... There is, of course, an element of truth in all that. The phenomenal growth of the new spirituality does point to people's awareness of the presence of God. But, says Paul, such movements are not the signposts of spiritual seekers. They are in reality, the hallmarks of spiritual hiders, of religious runaways, of deniers of the Divine." (p118, emphasis mine)

It may seem harsh, but this attitude of Paul (both a "passion" and a "revulsion", p130) is at the heart of Paul's evangelistic zeal and his desire to connect with, but not commend, those who build spiritual idols but need Jesus.

Here Raiter's engagement with the world outside of the Christian sphere ends. The second half of the book looks at spirituality (in the guise of mysticism) within the church. He presents something of an overview and introduces some key figures (Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Avila etc.). He considers ascetism, quietness and other spiritual disciplines. He looks at the philosophical foundations in neoplatonism. His critique is helpfully Christocentric

"If the Lord has told us about himself and how he wants us to relate to him, then we will want to listen to him, and listen to him carefully. We will want to respond to him in the way that best pleases him, and therefore in the way which will both change and transform us, and bring us the most God-honouring joy... Yet here are mystical classics where the Lord of glory is barely mentioned, and the benefits of his atoning death are misunderstood or marginalised." (p174)

I appreciate that he does not ignore the over-reactions to spirituality. In the last chapter he critiques evangelicalism and the tendency to reject emotion, not just emotionalism, and to glorify gospel more than Jesus. The balance that Raiter strikes is commendable – it hits the truth point between the two reactive edges of charismania and dry

dogmatism (for whom the chief end of man is to “read the Bible and study it forever”! – p224). In the second last chapter Raiter paints a picture of Christian Spirituality as portrayed in Romans 8. It is a piece of exegetical wisdom which seems good to conclude with:

“Firstly, the spiritual life is intimately related to the saving work of God in Christ...

Secondly, for Paul spirituality, or life in the Spirit, was much more about living a life of righteousness, than performing personal and private acts of devotion...

Thirdly, Christian spirituality recognises the importance of the mind in pursuing a life pleasing to God...

Fourthly, there is a deeply experiential dimension to an encounter with the Spirit of God...

Fifthly, suffering is the context in which Christian spirituality is lived out...

Sixthly, frustration will be one aspect of life in the Spirit for each and every believer.” (pp203-208)