

Q&A: Are prophets today like those in the OT? How do we weigh prophecy?

Alan asks:

Just read your blog. It sounded very true to life in the church. I have a couple of questions.

Is a prophet under the New Covenant different to one under the Old Covenants? The Old Covenant prophets had the potential to write Scripture. The word of the Lord came to them. In the New Covenant the church is required to weigh prophecy and is not allowed to become Scripture. How do we recognise the genuine prophecy from the mistaken or deliberately misleading. For example, it is easy to find prophecies on the internet about the rightness of Brexit. Given the divided opinion of Christians on this issue, how would the church “weigh” such prophecy?

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Hi Alan, thanks for the question. What I offer here isn't particularly systematic, but it's how I've wrestled with it.



The tricky thing is in the definition of “prophet.” The term can get used very broadly and also very narrowly, and while neither use is improper, we need to understand what is meant. I’m going to work from broad to narrow:

BROADLY SPEAKING a “prophet”...

- speaks *truth*. This is often in adverse circumstances; a prophet often speaks truth to power. The “speech” may not actually be words, e.g. prophetic “speech acts” are recognised in the Bible, but it *does* involve communication.
- guards *values*. There is an idealism in the prophetic, and lip-service doesn’t count. Prophets tend to understand and call-out motivations as well as actions.
- expects *movement* or *change*. Whatever a prophet says has a landing point, a point of application, a place to repent, or from which to be spurred on.

We can refer to “prophetic people” or even “modern day prophets” in this broad sense. Think of the agitators and dissenters in society, the “activists.” Their activism may be misplaced, or not, but they *are* acting “prophetically”; they are guarding values, speaking truth, expecting change. It can look like environmentalism, or speaking out on the

hypersexualisation of society, or civil disobedience against compulsory school curriculum, or any number of things... you know what I mean.

Interestingly, perhaps, recent thinking about the “fivefold” ministry of Ephesians 4 considers the fivefold to be a recapitulation of human gifting more generally. At this broad level we are recognising the prophetic in humanity more generally. This is certainly Hirsch’s position in his exhaustive, although somewhat flawed, 5Q.

Let’s keep **NARROWING IT DOWN**, though.

The Bible recognises, in both the Old Testament and the New Testament, charismatically gifted prophets.

- They speak truth, as some sense of *divine* truth. They bring a “word from God” in some sense.
- They guard values, as some sense of *God’s* values. They often articulate the gap between our wayward hearts and idolatrous attitudes, and God’s call, purpose, and instruction.
- They expect *movement* or *change*. Sometimes encouraging, sometimes warning, always showing the way for people to draw closer to God. Often kind and encouraging, occasionally a tough-love “Stop! Turn around!”

This is where I would locate the exercise of prophetic gifts in today’s world. It is also where I would locate most of the New Testament prophets.

I don’t like demarcating things here at the “Old Covenant / New Covenant” line, though. There are many examples in the Old Testament in which the term “prophets” means what I think it means here. e.g. 1 Samuel 10:10-11 refers to Saul’s Spirit-filled prophesying; in and around Elijah and Elisha there are “groups of prophets” who are clearly prophets of a less authoritative sort (1 Samuel 10:5-6); Ezra 5:2 talks about attempts at rebuilding the temple being supported by “the

prophets of God.”

In the New Testament, we can see people like Paul encouraging God’s people to exercise the gift of prophecy, because “the one who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouraging and comfort.” (1 Corinthians 14:3). Indeed, the meaning of Pentecost in Acts 2 is explained using Zechariah’s words that “in the last days... your sons and your daughters will prophesy” (Acts 2:17-18). Prophecy is not only listed in the fivefold giftings of Ephesians 4, but also within Paul’s gift-lists of 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12; “If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith” (Romans 12:6).

The example I like the most is found in Acts in the person of Agabus. We encounter him twice. The first is in Acts 11:28 where he prophesies (accurately) that a famine would spread over the whole Roman world. This prophecy prompts the Christians in Antioch to “provide help for the brothers and sisters in Judea.” Our second encounter with Agabus is in Acts 21:10 where he binds his hands with Paul’s belt, as a speech-act, and declares “The Holy Spirit says, ‘In this way the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.’” It is an accurate warning, it steels Paul’s resolve, and he sets his face for Jerusalem.

It is this form of prophecy that I recognise today. Some would assert that prophecy of this sort is now only expressed as preaching and exposition of Scripture. I don’t disagree that preaching is often prophetic, but I don’t apply the same restriction. Certainly Agabus was doing something different than delivering a sermon.

What I do see are members of God’s people who are moved in a prophetic way to *speak truth, guard values, and provoke movement*. Oftentimes (but not always) their ministry is exercised through insights, understandings, and knowledge that

are also ministries of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes it is a prophetic word for the whole church or for a congregation. A lot of the time it is for a person or family, and the spiritual insights express a profound and personal care in God's heart for the people who are being addressed.

The thing is, of course, that like every exercise of every gift in the church, it is done by fallible people. I have come across prophetic people (in the broadest sense) whose passion has turned into anger, bitterness, or even self-protective apathy. I have come across prophetic people in this narrower sense, who have acted impulsively, immaturely, and without due care. But I have also come across flawed evangelists, preachers, and pastoral carers!

Sometimes prophets get it wrong. And this informs the second part of your question: How do we weigh prophecy?

Firstly, we must recognise the final step in my movement from broad to narrow. There is one more sense in which we use the word "prophecy" and that is with regard to **AUTHORITATIVE PROPHECY**. This is, as you allude to in your question, related to the authority of Scripture.

In the Old Testament God ordains certain people to act as Prophet (with a capital P) to his people. Like every prophet, they speak truth, guard values, and expect movement. In the sense we mean it here, however, these things come with the weight of divine imprimatur. The truth that these prophets spoke was of such weight, that they came to be recognised as authoritative instruction to God's people, and applicable outside of their original context. Their utterances were proven by accuracy, adversity, and consistency; they were true, they were often true despite the resistance of the people who were meant to hear them, and they were consistently true. Take a look at Elijah and Elisha (in 1 and 2 Kings) and the written-down prophecies of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the rest. You will find a consistent exhortation based on the

promises of God and the identity of Israel as God's covenant people.

Any other form of prophecy that does not heed this authority, therefore, is suspect. Ultimately, such "prophecies" are a rejection of God's promises and the call of the covenant, and end up being a rejection of God himself. I don't mean the sort of times when a "prophetic word" is given and it's a little bit haphazard and not quite holding the sword of God's word by the correct end. I do mean the sort of times when we hear "prophetic" words that seek to place us over and above the Scriptures, rather than under them to be shaped by them. This is not fanciful. I have heard people say "the church wrote the Bible, the church can rewrite it." More gently, but perhaps more insidiously, I have heard people exhort that to step away from the Bible is to embrace a positive trust in the immediate inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Such an exhortation is not only self-defeating and self-serving, (it asserts that we cannot trust the Holy Spirit to talk to anyone else, including those who came before us in the biblical era), but cannot avoid undermining the (historic) promises of God, and our identity in Jesus as God's covenant people. Such things are, by definition, false prophecy.

Beyond assessing prophecy by the authority of Scripture, however, it comes down to common sense. Each of us ministers according to the diverse gifts of the Spirit. Each of us started off immature and green, and (hopefully) we have grown in maturity, capacity, and ability. Young prophets need to be guided, just as new pastoral carers, and apprentice preachers. That guidance is not only about things like technique, but about deeper things of identity: a pastoral carer needs to identify when they are risking codependence, a prophet often needs to discern between godly zeal and the churn of their own brokenness. We give more weight to a seasoned, mature prophet, and generous attention and care to those who are first stepping out in faith to offer a word. We embrace all with a

caring, loving, edifying community which desires everyone to grow in gifting.

For my part, I have appreciated when people have called me out on my own brokenness – it was motivated (usually) by a desire to see me heal and grow. In turn, I always try to keep an open door with prophetic people. Sometimes, having received “a word”, I might even say “I’m not sure you’re right, can you go back to God and seek more insight.” Or I might say, “I think you’re holding some truth there, I wonder if you need to hold it some more until God releases you to speak it, and shows you what to do.” Or I might say, “I think you’re catching a glimpse of something, but you need to go through some of your own fire before you can fully grasp it, or have the authority to speak it.” Hopefully, at the right time, these are constructive things!

Prophecy best works when the prophet is in “in the family.” There they have the freedom to speak prophetically, and the context in which it can be weighed up, clarified, and responded to. I have seen big meetings set in one direction, suddenly shift as a gentle but powerful word was shared.

Again, it’s common sense: The mature prophets I know have been through the fire, they have had their edges knocked off, and you can see the fruit of the Spirit in them as well as the prophetic gift. Younger prophets tend to catch the big picture (“God is calling us to love!”) and the more mature prophets begin to get a track record of well-hearted Jesus-honouring specific accurate words.

And this is how I weigh controversial prophecies about things like Brexit and Trump. Is it lined up with Scripture (e.g. are they blessing what cannot be blessed, trying to trump the Bible with their own agenda)? Are they speaking gently, from maturity, or grandstanding out of brokenness? Is the word hope-filled or fear-mongering, even if it is a “hard word”? Is it a word from them alone, or do I see the “family” moved? Is

there accountability and relationship and a willingness to “let it go” and weigh it again? These, I think, are questions of common sense more than anything else.

In the end, which was the point of the original blog post, we need our prophets. We need them in our world and society. We need them in the church. We need them in our lives. We need God’s word.

Q&A: How would you unpack the Bible step by step to show God’s big picture, that grace is a free, unmerited gift?

Sarah asks:

Hi Will,

My Mormon friends believe that they are saved by grace after all that they can do.

One of their former presidents said: “One of the most fallacious doctrines originated by Satan and propounded by man is that man is saved alone by the grace of God; that belief in Jesus Christ alone is all that is needed for salvation”.

How would you unpack the Bible step by step to show them God’s big picture – that grace is a free, unmerited gift? (And importantly doesn’t lead to licentiousness, which is what they have been taught.)

I’ve talked about the purpose of the OT law, that all our

works are like filthy rags, that Jesus takes my sin and gives me his righteousness. But I think I need a logical structure that walks them through it rather than my scatter gun approach. Your thoughts would be much appreciated!

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Hi Sarah,



Intriguing question! A good place to begin our thoughts is in Ephesians 2, especially verses 1-10.

*1 As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins,
2 in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.*

3 All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath.

4 But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, 5 made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. 6 And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, 7 in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and

this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— 9 not by works, so that no one can boast. 10 For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

There are two reasons to ground ourselves here:

1) There's some explicit language about salvation by grace alone. Firstly, the language is about the *necessity* of grace: Verse 5, "...it is by grace you have been saved...", verses 8-9, "...For it is by grace you have been saved... not by works, so that no one may boast." Secondly, the language is about the absolute *extent* of grace, i.e. that grace does more than provide the means for our rescue, the grace of God is what actually does the rescuing. This is found in the depths of our predicament: Verse 1, "...you were dead in your transgressions", Verse 3, "...by *nature* deserving of wrath". It is also found in the *agency* of God: Verses 4-5, "God made us alive with Christ", Verse 6, "God raised us up...", Verse 10, "We are God's handiwork..."

2) The context of this passage connects us with a bigger picture; Paul sees the work of Jesus on the cross resulting in the creation of a "*new humanity*" in which the great "mystery" of the Gospel is the inclusion of all people in the covenant promises made to Israel: that "the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise..." (Ephesians 3:6).

It's this second point that perhaps guides us to a framework for the story of grace: It is best to tell the story of God's covenant; his *promises* to his people, and especially to Abraham. Perhaps it might go something like this, as my own feeble attempt:

1) The human predicament is one of rebellion against the ways of God, and God's response is always both righteous deserved judgement and undeserved gracious

provision. Consider Genesis 1-11; the fall itself, the murder of Abel, the hardness in the time of Noah, the attempted usurpation of God by human empire at Babel. In each part the judgement is obvious, but also consider how God clothes Adam & Eve, protects Cain, puts a rainbow in the sky etc.

2) By grace, therefore, the ultimate provision of God is his intervention in human history. In our historical record, this intervention is grounded in the life of a man called Abram (later Abraham). This intervention is fundamentally *gracious* and it is received by *faith*. There is nothing particularly special about Abraham. He was weak and old. Any righteousness he has derives not from his works or moral fortitude, but as a gift bestowed ("credited") by God and received as Abraham trusted him. Consider Genesis 12 and how God's gracious involvement with Abraham naturally follows from the rebellion at Babel. Consider also Romans 4:1-3

3) By grace, God binds himself to Abraham in a covenant, i.e. a promise. Chief among these promises is that "*in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*" This is the intervention, the promise of salvation; a new heaven and a new earth. Consider Hebrews 11:8-10 and consider Abraham's vision with that of the new heavens and the new earth in Revelation 21

4) By grace, God guides Abraham's children towards this blessing. He protects his chosen people, he saves them from Egypt, and instructs them on how they can be true to the promise: "This is how you embrace this grace! This is how you bless the families of the earth." In this way, the Law itself is grace, and there are times when we get a glimpse of that blessing. But mostly, what we see is the rejection of the promise, a refusal to trust God; the law continues to point to the promise and so reveals how far away God's people are from it. Consider: the entire OT.

5) By grace, God provides a true Son of Abraham; he is not only of Abraham's flesh, but also a Son of the Promise as well; i.e. he has faith after that of Abraham. He takes responsibility for his people; by meeting the just requirement of their transgression he deals with their *separation* from the promise. And he *receives* the fullness of the promise – the renewal of life, resurrection itself. *Consider: John 3:16 and Romans 4.*

6) By grace, the promise to Abraham is now fulfilled. The blessing of salvation now applies to all the "families of the earth." It applies as we all (both Jew and Gentile), dead in our sins, are "raised up with Christ." We are all made heirs of Abraham, children of his promise. *Consider: Ephesians 2-3 (which is where we started).*

It's a narrative of salvation in which the defining agency is God, the defining action is his promise, and the basis on which the promise applies to me is not me and my faithfulness, but Christ and his faithfulness. When we add anything else to this dynamic, we actually disavow it; Embraced by Jesus, I am child of Abraham and so called to live by faith as he did. Any attempt to prove myself worthy is a disagreement that the heart of salvation is promise; and if I do not share in the promise, I am not a child of the promise; I do not share in Abraham, or in the fulfilment of all that God bound himself to do; I do not share in Christ, and I am not saved. In short: *grace is essential, and absolute.* It is necessary for salvation, and cannot be added to.

Does this lead to licentiousness? As Paul would say, "*Absolutely not!*". To deliberately sin is also to depart from the way of promise; how can licentiousness bless all the families of the earth? Grace abounds, I am still raised with Christ; but that grace calls me to holiness.

I hope that helps. Having just gone back and read what I have written, it seems terribly insufficient. In the end, what you

are doing is proclaiming the gospel. Can I encourage you as you take your question to the Scriptures? Have you noticed how many of my references have been to the book of Romans, especially chapters 4-6? It's a good place to begin, and perhaps to take your Mormon friends.

Image credit: NASA/JPL-Caltech/Univ. of Virginia

Q&A: Do we neglect the doctrine of hell?

Sarah asks:

Hi Will,

Do we neglect the doctrine of hell? I recently read Jonathan Edwards' "sinners in the hands of an angry God" and my reaction was:

*To marvel at the magnitude of my rescue;
To be reminded of the urgency of sharing the gospel and my part in that.*

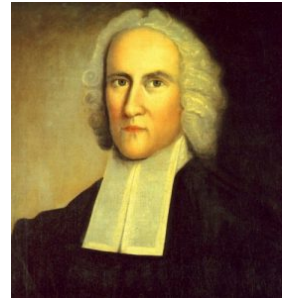
(I also thought you'd have to be brave to talk like that in our generation!)

I understand that Jesus spoke more of hell than heaven. Salvation is a rescue – should we talk more about the reality of hell both to draw people to the Rescuer, and to increase our worship of God and our evangelism, whilst avoiding both the Middle Ages fascination with grisly imagery and the laughed off sandwich board person proclaiming that the end is nigh. If I am honest, (and holding this alongside election) I want to belong to God to escape the horror of hell.

A related question is do we neglect the doctrine of heaven...

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Hi Sarah, thanks for the question.



I must admit, I've never read this sermon from Edwards, (which was penned in 1741, and now available online for those who are interested). He is preaching on Deuteronomy 32:25 :- *To me belongeth vengeance, and recompence; their foot shall slide in due time...* (to use Edwards' probable translation). I haven't been able to look at it in depth, but there are a couple of things to note that can help us here:

Firstly, Edwards gets the *audience* right, at least initially. The text is not so much about God raging against the world, it is about God's broken heart about *his own people*! Edwards describes them as "wicked unbelieving Israelites, who were God's visible people, and who lived under the means of grace; but who, notwithstanding all God's wonderful works towards them, remained... void of counsel, having no understanding in them."

In this he is, indeed, reflecting the focus of judgement language in the New Testament. e.g. Jesus uses language such as "hypocrites" and John talks about "a brood of vipers", referring to his own people. Similarly, it is the *temple* which will have no stone left on top of another. It is a message, first and foremost, *to the people of God*, including the church.

This understanding locates judgement in the midst of grace. Jesus is no Pharisee, loading down but not lifting a finger to help. No, he is the good shepherd, reflecting the heart of his Father. He has *come* to his intransigent people, to take responsibility for them if they would have him.

You ask “should we talk more about the reality of hell?” If we do, we need to take heed; we can’t preach judgement without going through our own refining fires. And sometimes I see a whole bunch of tinder-dry unChristlikeness amongst those who take Christ’s name. I fear it needs to be a great conflagration, and I am well and truly including myself in this brood.

Secondly, Edwards asserts that the wrath of God is real and present, withheld only by his grace, and he is right about this. This is hard for people to hear, (we are understandably uncomfortable with divine anger!), and it should always be communicated clearly. But it must be, and can be, communicated:

After all, the wrath of God is simply an aspect of his justice. It isn’t fickle, or out-of-control. It is the appropriate response to wrongdoing. We are bland and apathetic, God is not. We harden our hearts and walk past injustice, God does not. There are times we should be more *angry* at the unchecked sin in the world, and certainly at the unchecked sin in our own lives. The fact that there are homeless people on the streets of my otherwise middle-class town, is an injustice, it should *move* us. The tears of a teenager misused by her porn-addicted boyfriend, should induce something in us; a cry for justice at the least, the power to act if we can. Those who don’t want God to be wrathful shouldn’t also ask us to care about #metoo. God is not #meh about this world.

Similarly, the wrath of God is never disconnected from his righteousness and his grace. We sometimes have this image

of God as someone caught in an internal battle “Do I love them, or do I hate them?” No, God is love in all things. “Making things right” through bringing justice in judgement is an act of love. Withholding judgement as an act of grace is love. When we face analogous issues – say, perhaps, in our parenting – we often experience conflict because we lack the wisdom, or the security, or, indeed, the affection to do it well. God does not lack those things.

So should we talk about these things? Yes. In fact, our current series at the St. Nic’s evening service is looking at the foundations of faith, drawing on the list in Hebrews 6:1-2 as an inspiration. “Eternal judgement” is one of the topics we will be looking at. The application will likely include those things that you mention: gratitude about the grace of God, and urgency about declaring the gospel. It will also include the imperatives that relate to pursuing God’s the Kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven.

But your question is not just about judgement, it is about the concept of hell. And this is where you’ll probably find that I differ from Edwards. I push back at the caricature of “total eternal torment”, for I find little, if any, of it in the Bible. If anything, the *exact nature* of the final state after judgement, is a second-order issue for me; I won’t go to the stake for it.

My eschatology (my understanding of “the end”) looks to the renewal of this earth as the gospel hope. I’ve talked about this in my review of N. T. Wright’s excellent *Surprised By Hope*. Wright draws on C. S. Lewis with regards to the outcome of judgement, and speaks of a final state of “beings that once were human but now are not, creatures that have ceased to bear the divine image at all.”

Wright’s view has merit. My own take is closer to *annihilationism*, that the outcome of eternal judgement is either eternal life (for those in Christ), or simply ceasing

to exist (you can't get more eternal than that). I've written about this before, and I won't reiterate it here.

So yes, we should talk about these things more. But here's my final thought: You say "I want to belong to God to escape the horror of hell" and I get that. But I don't think I would quickly, if ever, say it that way. I *would* say this: I want to belong to God, because he is the most holy, delightful, awe-inspiring, identity-giving, glorious One. He is my eternal Father, and I love him.

Q&A: How should I understand (theophanies and) christophanies?

Sarah asks:

Hi Will,

How should I understand Christophanies? I've been pondering Jesus appearing bodily in the Old Testament and his incarnation in the New Testament

In the OT is he:

- 1. God appearing in the form of a (sometimes glorified human body?) but not human in any way other than physical;*
- 2. Not appearing as a man in these Christophanies anyway, but something else we can't define;*
- 3. Appearing as fully God and fully man before the incarnation;*
- 4. Or something else!*

I'm asking this question to better understand how Christophanies relate to / contrast with the uniqueness, cosmic significance and humility of the incarnation where Jesus became forever the man who is God.

What can I understand about God and what can I understand about the Bible being all about Jesus, through Jesus walking on our planet before Bethlehem?

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Thanks for the question, Sarah.
There's a lot in here.



Firstly, to clarify some language. "Christophany" means "appearances of Christ" and my understanding of that term is that it is about post-incarnation post-ascension appearances of Jesus. Paul on the road to Damascus appears to have had a christophany. The account of John in Revelation can be thought of as a christophany, depending on how you take the narrative and the genre; simple visions or dreams of Jesus don't usually count as a full-bodied appearance!

In my mind, manifestations of God *before* the incarnation are more properly described as "theophanies" – i.e. "appearances of God." Some people would still use the word "christophany", arguing that they are manifestations of the Son of God, the Divine "Word" or "Logos" (referencing John 1). I'm unconvinced. In my mind, the word "Christ", meaning "Anointed

One", is entirely adhered to Jesus' messiahship; it is a *human* title and therefore makes no sense apart from (or before) the incarnation.

Similarly, while our understanding of the Trinity can be unearthed in the Old Testament, that understanding is grounded in our understanding of Jesus in the New Testament. The thrust of the Hebrew Scriptures is that "the Lord our God, the Lord is *one*." Whatever we see in the Old Testament should firstly be taken as a manifestation of the one true God.

So "theophany" is, I think, the better term. And I'm not just quibbling about terminology. I hope I have also begun to answer your question about the unique significance of the incarnation; let's not use incarnational language to describe pre-incarnational phenomena. The Son of God (fully divine) may have appeared to his people in some form, but *Jesus* (fully divine, fully human) never walked on our planet before Bethlehem.

But what are we actually talking about? By way of example, some events that are considered to be theophanies are:

1. God "walking and talking" with Adam & Eve at creation (see Genesis 3 in particular).
2. The Lord "appears" to Abram (later called Abraham) in Genesis 12 and then later as a covenant-making "smoking fire pot" in Genesis 15.
3. Abraham famously had three divine visitors (Genesis 18)
4. Jacob wrestles all night with a man (Genesis 32) and is then told that he has wrestling with God.
5. The Burning Bush of Moses (Exodus 3).

Clarity does not quickly come:

Even in compiling this list I was running into ambiguity of category. Should the "pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night" (Exodus 13:21) be considered a manifestation of God, or simply a manifestation of his *glory*, a

physical *symbol* of his presence? If so, would Abraham's smoking fire pot and Moses' burning bush also be in the same category? Where do we draw the line?

There are also literary questions to ask. Old Testament imagery is full of anthropomorphisms of God. e.g God has a "mighty arm," or "comes down to see" etc. These are appropriately considered to be metaphors. Is that what's happening with Adam & Eve? Perhaps. I don't think we could argue that Jacob's wrestling was merely metaphorical; metaphor usually doesn't lead to a limp!

And so there's some ambiguity, but I think it's an ambiguity of our own making. In all these cases, the *story* is clear, and doesn't depend on who or what is appearing and how. e.g. in Abraham's encounter with his visitors, the point of the story, the essence of Abraham's experience revolves around his conversation... and it makes sense irrespective of whether or not the visitors were divine, human, or angelic. **But when it comes to Jesus there is no ambiguity.** In the birth narratives, the gospels, and all that follows, **the incarnation of God** as fully human and fully divine **is entirely the point.**

So I'll stand firm on the incarnation, but I'll allow some ambiguity about the exact nature of the OT theophanies, *because the Bible allows it*. And so my answer to the first part of your question is to allow all of your suggestions, except for 3); God is not incarnate before Jesus.

This is my take on it: in pre-incarnation theophanies, we are seeing God taking a *form*, but not taking *on* the essence of that form. e.g. The most we can say for Moses' experience is that God took the *form* of a burning bush, he certainly did not *become* one. It is likely that this was a ministry of God the Son, the Word of God. After all, these forms are aspects of God's *communication*, his *revelation* of himself and his purposes.

God spoke “in many different ways”, we read in Hebrews 1:1-3, and these manifestations were some of those ways. But the point Hebrews makes is the point we should end with: Now God has “spoken through his son”, he has revealed himself ultimately by becoming *one* of us. He has not just taken on the form, but the substance of who we are.

Hope that helps. Thanks for the question.

Q&A: What do we learn from the use of “saying” and “breathing” to describe creation in Genesis 1 and 2?

Dave0 asks:

Will, looking at creation accounts a Gen 1 & 2. In Gen 1 in various English translations it is ‘And God said...’ In Gen 2 God’s creative act (in English translation at least) becomes ‘breathed’.

Is this nuance there in the original Hebrew or is it the same word with a sense of say/breath and translators have followed precedent with said in the G1 and breathed in G2.

John picks this idea up and plays with word/life, at the start of his gospel.

I have some vague recollection of the idea that when we ‘speak’ this difference in our living being from the other creatures is this free will act of God emulating (in a very small way) speaking and changing, stewarding his creation.

Thanks, Dave0

[This is a Q&A question that has been submitted through this blog. You can submit a question (anonymously if you like) here: <http://briggs.id.au/jour/qanda/>]

Oh I do miss your questions, Dave0.
Forgive some interesting tangents in what follows!



Some interesting thoughts to think about here. Three parts to my answer

1. Let's look at the original text.
2. What does the story tell us about human distinctiveness?
3. Let's think about that in terms of creativity.

Part 1 – Original Text

(Intended for the technically minded; feel free to jump to the next heading)

I'll start with a big caveat – I am nowhere near being a Hebrew scholar! In all that follows, I'm relying on internet tools, interlinears, and Strong's numbers etc! I know from my (slightly greater) NT Greek work that such tools can give a good beginning, but are sometimes a false path.

In Genesis 1, there is indeed a series of places where "God said." It begins in Genesis 1:3 with the famous:

And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light

Eventually we get to the creation of the man and the woman 1:26 and following. Here we have (I'm using the ESV as it

tends to have some lexical precision) this, with some highlighting from me:

26 Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

27 So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

28 And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

29 And God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. 30 And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. 31 And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

In each place, this speaking ("said") is described using the Hebrew root word, *amar* (אמר) which simply means to "utter" or "say." What God says he wishes to do is "make" (Hebrew *asah* (עשה) meaning "do" or "make") and it is the same word used for the making of the various animals etc.

Here, however, in verse 27, when it comes to describing what God actually *does*, the word is *bara'* (ברא) meaning to "create", "fashion", "form", "choose". It's the same word used to describe creation of the heavens and earth in verse 1. But while it is used *distinctively* here, it is not unique; *bara'* is also used, for instance, to describe the creation of the sea creatures in verse 21.

There is a sense of breath/breathing which in the English in verse 30 with the reference to the “breath of life” but (and I found this surprising) this appears to be overplaying the “breath” imagery. The *Complete Jewish Bible* (which tends to get its Hebrew nuances right) simply renders it as “everything... in which there is a living soul.” The Hebrew is more literally “everything with a living life” where “life/living being/soul” is *nephesh* (נֶפֶשׁ). There is some connection with the verb “to breathe” (*naphach* (נָפַח), see below) but this link is *not* emphasised. Nor is it particularly connected with the speech-acts of God in this context; it is language that simply seems to be a descriptor of all of the living and breathing creatures – human and animal alike.

The Genesis 2 parallel hones in on verse 7 (in the ESV):

*...then the Lord God **formed** the man of dust from the ground and **breathed** into his nostrils the **breath** of life, and the man became a **living creature**.*

Here “formed” is *yatsar* (יָצַר) meaning “to form” or “to fashion” and is used exclusively of the man and woman in this context.

“Breathed” is *naphach* (נָפַח) which is close to *nephesh* (נֶפֶשׁ), which we saw above relates simply to the liveliness of animal creatures. It is interesting that the ESV has deviated from its earlier rendering, using “living creatures” rather than “everything that has the breath of life”. It is forced to do so because there is an explicit reference to the “breath of life” here that uses *neshamah* (נֶשְׁמָה). This does seem to emphasise the breathing as part of God’s act of forming the man. In my mangled grammar, the dynamic it’s like this: God forms by breathing (*naphach*) the breath (*neshamah*) of life so that the man becomes a living (i.e. “breathing” *nephesh*) creature. That

is, there are three “breathing” words in the sentence – verb, noun, and adjective.

However, I don’t think this emphasis alone would make us consider that this “breathing” creative dynamic is unique to the creation of humanity here, differently to the creation of the other animals. If there is any difference at this level of analysis between the creation of animals and the creation of the man, it is one of “more so” rather than “differently to”.

To draw a conclusion then, I would argue that while there is a contextual link between words relating to “creating”/“making”/“forming” and those relating to “breathing” and those related to “saying” this link is attached to the lexical choices, rather than derived *from* them.

Which is to say, that we’re on pretty safe ground with the decent English translations; there doesn’t appear to be anything of significance in the Hebrew that is particularly hidden or skewed by the translation choices. And so:

Part 2 – What does the story tell us about human distinctiveness?

Clearly, the creative acts of God are preceded by his *speaking*, and *saying*, his intent. There is no narrative that expands this causation (e.g. we could imagine a mythology in which God makes his orders known and some minions carry it out). Rather, as we see from 1:3 – God says and then something simply is: *God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light*. It is right to think of creation as a speech-act of God, an outworking of triune communication (as I alluded to in a previous post), which, as you point out, is later picked up in passages such as John 1.

It is also clear that there is both a similarity and a distinctiveness between the creation of the man and woman and

the creation of other animals. The similarity is clear as the word *nephesh* – “life”/“soul”/“existence” with a nuance of “breath” – is applied to all living things. And there is nothing theologically wrong with this – we *are* of the same category as animals for some sense of it, and it is right to affirm this. Much gospel imagery, particularly when it derives from the concept of animal sacrifice, hangs on this point. But I’ll leave it to others to unpack the implications of animals having *nephesh*, which can have the sense of a “soul”!

But there is also a distinction. It is only of human creatures that God declares them to be “made in our image, in the likeness of ourselves” (1:26). It is only the human creatures that are delegated dominion over the other living things. There are little phrases that emphasise the distinction: For the other creatures, God decrees “let the earth bring them forth” (1:24) almost as natural outworkings of the creation at that point, but for the man God himself “forms him from the dust of the earth” (2:7); there is something much more intimate and “hands on” – the man and woman don’t just have the *nephesh* (life-breath) of the other creatures, but receive the very breath of life itself (2:7).

The speech-act of God with regards to the creation of humanity does indeed *breathe* something into us that makes us unique. The narrative makes this clear.

Part 3: Let’s think about that in terms of creativity.

Clearly there are ways in which we can be creative that is similar to the animals. Across the animal kingdom, not only is there reproduction and procreation, but degrees of communication, and even emotion.

But your point, I think, is about how humanity operates creatively in our unique divine image? Particularly, can we do *speech-acts*, can our speaking also be *breathing* something

new?

The answer, I think, is in the affirmative.

To limit ourselves to Genesis, we see that Adam speaks things into existence. In 2:19 it is the man who *names* the animals and in 2:23 Adam's *declaration* over Eve is almost a consummation of God's creative act, i.e. it *does* something.

Even the concept of sexual intercourse and conception as the man *knowing* his wife (4:1) is not some euphemism (have you known the Bible to be squeamish?) but a connection of the creative act with knowledge/understanding and the *intercourse* (defined in its broadest sense) of the couple. The ultimate "speech"/communication is the intimate sharing of oneself with another – no surprise that it is also creative!

We see it also in the concept of "blessing" – of speaking words over others, particular offspring. God continues his speech acts, over, for instance, Noah, in 6:1. Noah then himself speaks over his sons (positively *and* negatively) in 9:25. It is also interesting that when the Lord wants to frustrate humanity's creativity (with good reason!), he does it through confusing *language* (11:7).

To extend beyond Genesis, consider, of course, Jesus. His speech is powerful, but not just in terms of his teaching. Most of his miracles attend to a declaration, an imperative, or even a rebuke. The Kingdom of God comes near, in a real and material sense, through speech. And the imagery comes full circle when Jesus *breathes* on the disciples as an act of imparting that same hovering Spirit of creation and re-creation. It is by that same Spirit that we *pray*, which is truly creative speech, resonant with intimate communion between our maker and ourselves.

The biblical narrative brings speech, breath, spirit, and creativity together as a powerful dynamic. And I don't think this is something strange within the general human experience:

it derives from our roots as created beings.

I think, then, that we can generalise: Human creativity rests on our speech, and in a much more deeper sense than the mere passing on of information; our speech is creative, and unique amongst the animal kingdom. It literally “puts ourselves out there” expressing ideas, imagination, hopes, dreams, and so forth. It externalises our intent, our will, our purpose, our self-understanding. Its initial effect is relational (speech requires a speaker and a listener), but also sociological, and even material.

It also grounds the gospel in our createdness: it makes absolute sense that the gospel turns on the God who *reveals* himself to us still, who *speaks* to us, and would have us speak to him. It is the basis of our mission, that would have us *speak* to the world, discipling and baptising nations in the name of the one who is the Word of God.

Q&A: Do you believe in Soul Sleep after death?

Megan asks:

Do you believe in soul-sleep after death, where we will awake at the second coming, or that our spirits will be with God immediately after our death? I Googled this the other day, and found scriptural foundation for both answers. What does the church teach? What do you believe?

[This is a Q&A question that has been submitted through this blog. You can submit a question (anonymously if you like) here: <http://briggs.id.au/jour/qanda/>]

Thanks for the question, someone asked me something very similar a number of years ago: Q&A – As an Anglican, what do you believe [about the intermediate state]? and I still agree with the substance of my answer. The focus of that answer is the “What does the church teach?” question and goes to some of the doctrinal formularies, with some of my personal conclusions. My position is that after death we will be “with God” in some way, and this is prior to the Lord’s return and the time of *general resurrection*.



Turning to the “scriptural foundation” that you explored – there isn’t an absolute-proof-text to turn to. The difficulty is, of course, that the focus of the gospel has more to do with our *present* state and our *final* state. The question of any *intermediate* state is a technical question that isn’t precisely addressed.

There are, of course, many biblical references in which those who have died are referred to as *sleeping* – e.g *Psalms 13:3, 1 Kings 2:10, John 11:11* etc. etc. I am unable to find any reference, however, that suggests that this is anything more than imagery. In fact, it is powerful imagery – *sleep* as an image of death, from the point of view of those left behind, speaks of both the *absence* of a person in death, and also the *temporary* nature of it in the gospel scheme of things. It is the sense of “they are gone, but we will be reunited one day.”

On the other hand, there are other descriptions of post-death experiences that make very little, if any, sense if that experience is limited to a form of slumber. Jesus’ *assurance* to the thief on the cross, that “today, you will be with me in paradise” is the famous example. Similarly, in Revelation 6 we hear the voices of those who have been martyred, *crying out in a loud voice*, “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true,

until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" Clearly, this presumes a post-death, pre-resurrection-and-judgement, conscious existence!

Of course, one of the conceptual problems is as to what this non-sleeping intermediate state is actually like. This question goes to *theological anthropology*, i.e. what is a human being after all? Are we soul, spirit, and body, and what does that mean? Where is our *personhood*? After all, Christian thought emphasises the value of the *embodied* self.

We affirm, for instance, that a violation of someone's body is not just the wounding of flesh, it is an injury done to *their person*. It is why we (along with *Jesus*) *mourn death*, which is (at the very least), the ending of bodily function. In the final state we are looking forward not towards an eternal disembodied state, but towards an *immortally glorified* bodily existence, an "*eternal house*". Moreover, this is exactly what we understand of Jesus' current existence as a physically resurrected human being: he has a human body that is real and glorified, and the first fruits of our final eternal life.

So how do we conceive of ourselves in a disembodied state, if this is what happens immediately after death? This is where I don't have a complete answer. Some resolve it by suggesting that there is no intermediate state at all – sleeping or otherwise – and it's just that time works differently in paradise and our experience of death is to jump ahead to the general resurrection. I'm not convinced. Others suggest (and I lean this way) that it is possible to conceive of personhood without physical referent, especially in an interim or temporary sense. We *are* much more than our bodies: Close your eyes and imagine someone who is very close to you... you will be thinking of and "experiencing" them as much more than just the recollection of their physical face, you are touching upon a deeper sense of who they are.

The biggest question, however, (as it is for many theological

things), is “so what?” What difference does it make to the gospel itself, to our proclamation of the gospel, or to our experience of living out the gospel? In my reflection I am taking to think about how, while this world is our home, being with Jesus is even more so. Our “enduring city” is not here.

As Gill and I pass through more and more seasons of life, especially difficult ones, we get a growing sense of what Paul alludes to in *2 Corinthians 5*. We are of “good courage” and make it our purpose to please Jesus in our earthly life. Yet, we “long to be at home with him” even if that is “absent from the body.”

So here is good news to me (although it is not the whole of the good news): I know that, when I die, I shall be at home with the Lord. And it is hard to think of such a joyous existence being of nothing but sleep.

Q&A: Should we make more of Baptism in the Holy Spirit?

MK asks:

It's taken me an age to get to this point, but certainly for some, baptism is just the start. Simply recognising another broken person wants to be fixed. Sometimes, of course, a recognition that parents see their child needs to be fixed which the child confirms later. There is another baptism we need, that from the Spirit. This one must necessarily come later as our brokenness is being mended. Nonetheless it seems crucial. We don't seem to make too much of this in 'official' church, but should we?

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blog. You can submit a question (anonymously if you like) here: <http://briggs.id.au/jour/qanda/>

This is an interesting question, and it goes where angels fear to tread... to some of the most precious parts of our Christian experience, and the words that we use to describe them. As a church we *should* be making more of these experiences, but we often struggle for the language, and the courage.



There is a pastoral dilemma, you see. In our insecurities, often the exuberant expression of one person's testimony can feel like an invalidation of our own. And "Baptism in the Holy Spirit" is fraught in this regard. I think what you have described is an excellent expression of the Christian journey, but we must be careful in how we talk about it... but sometimes we are too careful and we avoid the difficult conversation.

Here's the problem: the word "Baptism" is being used in multiple senses – to speak about both the *beginning and promise* of the Christian journey, and also for the ongoing *experience* of the Christian journey.

Baptism rightly describes the beginning. Baptism with water in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is a sacramental *beginning* of the Christian journey – it so symbolically embraces the promises of salvation and covenantal inclusion that we can look upon it as the foundation on which our faith experience is built. It incorporates a "fixing" as you say, either for ourselves or as an embrace of our children.

That "fixing" includes the understanding of being "born again" (Baptism symbolises a dying and resurrection), of having the Holy Spirit come and dwell within us (an important declaration in the act of *confirming* one's Baptism), of being

regenerate by the grace of God, and of taking our place within the Body of Christ.

Our Baptism with water is therefore much more than “John’s Baptism” of repentance only. Yes, it is a sacramental symbol of repentance, but it is also a baptism *into Christ*. John himself says “I baptised you with water; but He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit” (*Mark 1:8*), and he is referring to the new *beginning* that Jesus will bring about.

Similarly, in Acts we see a couple of occasions when new Christians had only received John’s Baptism. Paul’s experience in Ephesus in *Acts 19:1-6* describes this:

While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples and asked them, ‘Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?’

They answered, ‘No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.’

So Paul asked, ‘Then what baptism did you receive?’

‘John’s baptism,’ they replied.

Paul said, ‘John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus.’ On hearing this, they were baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied.

Paul baptises them “in the name of Lord Jesus”, as the foundation and beginning of their faith, and the Holy Spirit coming upon them is part and parcel of that. Amongst the baptised people of God there are no gradations, and no one is a second class Christian needing another dose of God’s grace, if you know what I mean.

It’s in this sense of beginnings that I prefer the use of the word “Baptism.” The “official church” does talk about this

lot, and usually reasonably well.

Nevertheless, “Baptism in the Holy Spirit” describes a genuine experience, which I share and affirm, even if I might use slightly different language. And, yes, it’s usually something we don’t talk about well at all. Indeed, often we prefer stability and order, and so we inhibit new experiences, misconstrue and misunderstand them, or seek to restrict them to controllable structures and programs. In so doing, even when well-intentioned, we discourage growth and maturity.

The genuine experience that we’re talking about here takes many forms. It invariably involves a sense of God being closer than he has before, of being filled, touched, moved, even overcome by the Spirit of God. It often comes with a sense of freedom, restoration, healing, and sometimes an increase in boldness and courage. I think this is the sense of “being mended” that you are talking about.

It’s an experience that for some can be almost spontaneous and unexpected, for some it comes as an answer to prayer in the midst of trauma or darkness, for some it’s because someone has laid hands on them, others have experienced it in ecstatic worship, others have found an encounter in times of deep contemplation. It is an experience that is often accompanied by the manifestations of the Spirit that we see in Acts and read about in places like *1 Corinthians 12* – tongues, interpretations, prophesying and all the other sorts of gifts of the Spirit.

For some it is a unique one-off phenomenon, for others it’s like a new chapter in their “deeper walk with thee.” It is not wrong to call it a “baptism” with the Holy Spirit, in the broad sense of an “immersion” in the Holy Spirit, a filling up, an overflowing etc. But I try to avoid the “baptism” language so as not to confuse with Baptism as the sacrament that speaks of being included in Christ.

The two senses come close together sometimes though. I have observed that an experience with the Holy Spirit can feel like a fundamental new beginning. I observe this in three ways:

1) Sometimes, in people's experience, their actual Baptism was not a matter of faith. It had meaning, but it was the meaningfulness of ritual, social expectation and so on. In experiential terms, their Baptism was akin to "the Baptism of John." The subsequent encounter and "Baptism with the Holy Spirit" coincides with a coming to faith. They have an experience of regeneration and renewal and the presence of God. Theologically, I would affirm this as a "coming to life" in faith of what was previously done in ceremony. In experience, it would feel like a new beginning, an initiation in itself.

2) Sometimes, it is an experience that precedes receiving Baptism in water. People come to faith, and encounter the Holy Spirit in a real and tangible way. In this experience the encounter is a new beginning, and the sacrament is a means of catching up to what God is doing, just like in *Acts 10:47*.

3) For others the experience so marks a significant step in their walk with God, that it feels like a new beginning, a refreshing, revitalisation of faith. This is especially so if there had previously been resisting of the work of God in their lives, or if they had received a fundamental shift in their understanding of God through the reading and hearing of Scripture, prayer, or prophetic word. This sense of a new beginning can also come with the "laying on of hands" in a commissioning into a ministry (e.g. *Acts 13:3*) or to impart a spiritual gift (e.g. *2 Timothy 1:6*). In all these cases, the encounter with the Spirit is a *significant moment*, and precious, but it's a part of the journey, a fresh chapter in something already begun. Something broken has become significantly, experientially mended.

In all of these experiences I don't *mind* if people call it a

“baptism in (or of/with/by) the Holy Spirit” but often I find other language to be more helpful.

But your question is a necessary provocation. Whatever language we use, we *must* make more of these experiences. We must talk about what’s it like to journey with Jesus through the realities of life. This *experience of God*, as opposed to the mere theory, must be part of our preaching and teaching, our praying, our sharing, our testimony, our pastoral care, our intercession etc. We must be willing to pray for and help people encounter the Holy Spirit in their lives in real and substantial ways, and help provide the language to describe it.

Instead, it seems to me, that our tendency as the church at large is to practise a form of ongoing abandonment as we act more like a boarding school than the family of God: We’ll give you some rites of passage, teach you some theory, and expect you to act your part – but for everything else you’re on you’re own. “Discipleship” in this caricature is a classroom, and “vocation” is about appointment to house captain or something.

Rather the Holy Spirit calls us to an intimacy with God and a vulnerability, a depth that can we come to share with one another. As we receive him, are “overcome” by him, and yes, in that sense “baptised” in the Holy Spirit, we come to see God, and see one another. We walk with each other, share those experiences of brokenness and restoration (this is discipleship), and we call out to one another what we can see the Holy Spirit is doing and gifting in us and through us (this is vocation).

So yes, we should make much more of these experiences, providing the context, the space, the protection, the understanding, the language, and the simple *care* for people to grow and encounter God. Sometimes I think we would rather be organised, but at what cost?!

Thanks for the question!

Q&A: Can we call the Holy Spirit the Spirit of Jesus?

SA asks:

Hi Will,

Can we call the Holy Spirit, Jesus' Spirit? What do you think? Clearly he isn't Jesus because he is the third person of the trinity, but I am a bit muddled as we sometimes say Jesus is with us by his spirit. What do we mean by that? Do we mean Jesus? Do we mean the Holy Spirit? Or are we meaning specifically the Holy Spirit but also Jesus and the Father as our God is one?

For example, when Jesus said he would be with us until the end of the age did he mean himself or the Holy Spirit? In John 14 Jesus promises "another Counsellor to be with you forever, the Spirit of truth" but also that the Father and he (Jesus) will make their home in the believer.

And then I look at Romans 8:9 where Paul talks about the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and calls him both the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ in quick succession and then says that "if Christ is in you..."

And Galatians 2:20 "Christ who lives in me..."

I'm not sure if I've even articulated my question clearly!

[This is a Q&A question that has been submitted through this blog. You can submit a question (anonymously if you like) here: <http://briggs.id.au/jour/qanda/>]



Thanks for the question. It takes us into the area of trinitarian theology, which is notoriously brain-bending, but is also deep, profound, and joy-bringing.

The short answer to your question is yes, we can (and must) understand that the Holy Spirit is Jesus' Spirit.

The longer answer means exploring the conundrum that you have described. Your exploration is great. You've quoted the verse that I would have gone to as a way into it: In *Romans 8:9-11* the Holy Spirit is referred to in the following ways:

1. "the Spirit"
2. "the Spirit of God"
3. "the Spirit of Christ"
4. "the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead"

This passage also has a close correlation between "the Spirit" and "Christ" with regards to the one who dwells "in you."

You've also rightly picked up other places where this is implied – *Galatians 2:20* – and also *Matthew 28:20* where Jesus says "I am with you always", *just before he leaves!* Of course, the Spirit is subsequently present.

It can be a bit of a brain twister, so what do we do with it?

We can get a little bit **theological**: What is being emphasised here is the *unity* of the Trinity. We cannot separate Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Spirit reveals the Son, and if we

see the Son we have seen the Father (that's *John 14* again). This unity is at the heart of the gospel: Jesus is not one third of God of with us, he is *truly* God with us. As Paul assures us in *Colossians 2:9*, in Christ "all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form."

We can even get a bit metaphysical about it. My tentative exploration begins with thinking of God as a relational dynamic, and I start by looking to God the Father [As an aside, the Orthodox emphasis on the Father as the "Fountain of Deity" got me thinking here]: The Father perfectly and eternally pours himself out into the Son. We call this "begetting" and think of the way in which a parent desires to pour themselves – their character, wisdom, understanding, etc. – into their children and extrapolate from that. This is so eternal and perfect that the Son isn't just a reflection of the Father, the Father is pouring out his very being, and so the Son is of the same dynamic essence. The Son therefore pours himself back towards the Father, in response, agreement, and self-giving.

The Son's eternal and perfect "pouring back" is an eternal and perfect "Yes and Amen" to the self-giving of the Father. This eternal and perfect outpouring perfectly and eternally manifests not just the power and character of the Father and the Son, but the very substance of who they are. This mutual outpouring manifests perfectly and eternally in the person of the Holy Spirit, proceeding from the Father's eternally begetting love and the Son's eternal returning joy.

Take any aspect of this away and then the dynamic is not eternal or perfect, and therefore not God. That is, if the Spirit is not totally the Father's Spirit, or the Son's Spirit, or the Spirit of God Almighty, then God is not God.

Phew. That's a bit heady. But can you see the passion and joy of it all? At the beginning of creation, the Father pours out in creative fervour – "Let there be light!" – the Son

receives and responds in a “Yes and Amen” and from the power and joy of their agreement, the Spirit proceeds to hover over the waters of creation. Their unified love *creates*. It’s not like there’s some committee discussion in the Godhead about weighing up the pros and cons of creating the universe, rather the creative love and joy of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit simply brings it about. After all:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. (John 1:1-3)

And here is the **joyous gospel** part of it. We know that “*God so loved the World*”. At some point the heart of the Father pours out in grace and love – “Let us go to our broken children” – the Son responds with a “Yes and Amen” and the Spirit manifests that loving purpose, hovering over the womb of a young woman. And now the eternally, perfectly begetting God and Father, pours himself out, eternally, and perfectly, into a human child. The eternal, perfect dynamic that is God, can incorporate, does incorporate, and still incorporates a human being, Jesus.

The Father pours himself out into Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The Son’s response now has human voice: “Whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise” (*John 5:19*), and the Spirit manifests that desire as healings and miracles happen.

And then at some point it looks like the Father’s heart to save – “Let us take responsibility for our children” – and the Son, knowing exactly what that means, says “let your will be done” and enters into cruelty and injustice and forsakenness, until the sky goes dark and we hear “It is finished” and “Into your hands I commit my Spirit.” And then the self-giving, outpouring, justice-loving, fierce joy of God is truly made manifest, and we *really* see the Spirit of the One who raised

Jesus from the dead!

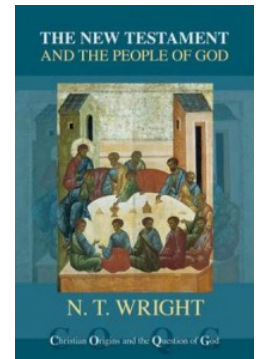
All the time, at every moment, the purposes of God occur from and within this dynamic of creative thought, creative response, creative power. Every aspect of God is like this – saving thought, saving response, saving power; healing, restoring, convicting, providing etc. etc. Every time we see the heart of the Father, grounded in the Son, manifest in the Spirit.

And then, lastly, **the profound realisation** of it is this, if we return to Romans 8:9 – embraced as we are by Jesus, we are “in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells within you.” This tells me that we are not meeting God from the outside, as if we might occasionally have an audience with the Holy Spirit, or with Jesus, or (if we’re really lucky) the Father. No! In Christ, we have been caught up into the dynamic of God himself. We don’t pray from the outside, we pray from the inside. We seek to discern the will of the Father, we seek to respond with “Your will be done” and we find, amazingly, that the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of God, the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead, the Holy Spirit, manifests the will of God, in, with, and through us.

So yes, we can call the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus – we must! If we can’t, then Jesus is not really God incarnate, and we’re not really abiding in the Father. And there’s less gospel (if any) in that.

Review: The New Testament and

the People of God (N. T. Wright)



The work of N. T. Wright has become a defining marker for the thoughtful Christian. Whether that be as an exemplar of a supposed soteriological heresy, or as an expositor of a refreshingly dynamic eschatology, Wright is now a centre, a touchstone of theological thought. To go to *The New Testament and the People of God*, the first volume in Wright's definitive multi-volume multi-decade opus *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, is therefore a valuable exercise. This volume lays the foundations.

The key to the volume is in the title. This book is about *The New Testament* as both literature and history. And it is about the *People of God* and the interwoven historical worldviews that both distort and reveal the depths and power of the Christian identity in this real world.

My own motivation in reading it stems from something of a working hypothesis: that the Jewish roots of Christian spirituality, articulated through the so-called New Perspectives framework in particular, are a solid base on which to construct an effective contemporary apologia. Which is to say: As a Christian community we need to explain (and defend) both *how* and *why* we follow Jesus, to an audience that is increasingly sceptical of both our explanation and our motivation; the language and ideas of Wright's project are not

simply helpful, but *essential*, to this task. To defend and disciple we must know who we are; and before we are grounded in *ideas*, we are grounded in *history*; before personal *introspection*, communal *experience*; and at the centre of that historical experience is a Jewish Messiah.

We need to do both history and theology: but how? Ultimately, the present project is part of the wider task— which I believe faces modern Western culture in its entirety, not only theologians or Christians— of trying to rethink a basic worldview in the face of the internal collapse of the one which has dominated the Western world for the last two centuries or so. (Kindle Location 960-962)

I think Wright can assist us in this task. But, in this volume in particular, we need to put the work in. This is a dense book. Even in ebook format, it is a weighty volume.

Wright is laying foundations for his later volumes and all foundations are both heavy and precisely calculated. Here Wright is interested not only in telling us his thoughts, but justifying his thinking. This volume is therefore, in part, a philosophical treatise, arguing points of epistemology and historiography as much as communicating what he knows and how he knows it.

There is every danger that the reader could get lost in the trees and not see the beauty of Wright's forest. To that end let me give a word to the wise: he does provide a map! It's just that he gives it to you at the end, in the concluding "Part VI."

Parts I and II are about philosophical fundamentals, an explanation of what he means by "worldview," and hermeneutics:

I argued in Parts I and II of this book for a holistic reading of the New Testament that would retell its stories faithfully, that would allow its overtones as well as its fundamentals to be attended to. (Loc. 13750-13752)

...the New Testament can only properly be understood if we recognize that it is a collection of writings from precisely this community, the subversive community of a new would-be 'people of god'. (Loc. 13758-13759)

It is not simply, like so many books, a guide for private spiritual advancement. To read it like that is like reading Shakespeare simply to pass an examination. The New Testament claims to be the subversive story of the creator and the world, and demands to be read as such. (Loc. 13799-13801)

Parts III and IV uses these tools to consider the overlapping and interlocking worldviews of God's People in 1st Century Judaism and early Christianity.

We must ask: why did this Jewish sect, out of all the other groups and movements within the first century, develop in this way, so strikingly different from all others? And, whenever we approach the early Christian writings with this question, we have a strong sense that it was not simply a matter of the sect's early corporate decisions, enthusiasm, shrewd planning or anything else. It was something to do with Jesus... Jesus stands between the two communities, living and working within that first-century Judaism which we mapped out in Part III, and being claimed as the starting-point of the community we mapped out in Part IV. (Loc. 13733-13742)

It is not possible in a short review to do justice to the detail. Moreover, it is the sort of detail that needs to be mulled over and digested; it's impact sometimes only being noticed in hindsight as you find yourself cogitating on Scripture with different questions than normal, or frustrated by niggling misinterpretations and misapplications that could otherwise be avoided, or approaching a pastoral or ecclesial problem from a slightly different perspective. For my own benefit, if nothing else, I have included below something of an appendix with some snapshots and highlights.

What is certain is that this tome has emboldened and encouraged me in my project: to know and tell the story of the God who has moved definitively in this world, and certainly in history; the New Testament story that defines, shapes, and moves us as the people of God.

APPENDIX:

Preparatory Work (Parts I and II) – Epistemology, Hermeneutics and History

Wright's **epistemology** is *critical realism*. He critiques enlightenment positivism and phenomenism and asserts

Over against both of these positions, I propose a form of critical realism. This is a way of describing the process of 'knowing' that acknowledges the reality of the thing known, as something other than the knower (hence 'realism'), while also fully acknowledging that the only access we have to this reality lies along the spiralling path of appropriate dialogue or conversation between the knower and the thing known (hence 'critical'). (Loc. 1241-1244)

Critical realism paves the way for a consideration of worldview in terms of symbols and story, ("Human life... can be seen as grounded in and constituted by the implicit or explicit stories which humans tell themselves and one another." Loc. 1302-1303), which provides the eventual connection point with Biblical content and the self-understanding of the people ("Our task, therefore, throughout this entire project, will involve the discernment and analysis, at one level or another, of first-century stories and their implications." Loc. 2283-2284) . In short: Wright's epistemological (and therefore hermeneutical) toolbox has us delving into narrative, but not in a disembodied sense. We examine narrative that is both in and of community.

History, then, is real knowledge, of a particular sort. It is

arrived at, like all knowledge, by the spiral of epistemology, in which the story-telling human community launches enquiries, forms provisional judgments about which stories are likely to be successful in answering those enquiries, and then tests these judgments by further interaction with data. (Loc. 3114-3117)

This is the basis for Wright's framework for distinguishing and describing **worldview**:

There are four things which worldviews characteristically do, in each of which the entire worldview can be glimpsed.

First... worldviews provide the stories through which human beings view reality. Narrative is the most characteristic expression of worldview, going deeper than the isolated observation or fragmented remark.

Second, from these stories one can in principle discover how to answer the basic questions that determine human existence: who are we, where are we, what is wrong, and what is the solution?

Third, the stories that express the worldview, and the answers which it provides to the questions of identity, environment, evil and eschatology, are expressed... in cultural symbols...

Fourth, worldviews include a praxis, a way-of-being-in-the-world.

(Loc. 3576-3598)

There is some application even at this base level: "in principle the whole point of Christianity is that it offers a story which is the story of the whole world. It is public truth. Otherwise it collapses into some version of Gnosticism." (Loc. 1383-1385) In a postmodern world events, even objects, *things*, can be construed as embodied stories.

Symbolism and narrative *matters*, connects the ancient to the now, and, most importantly, *moves* people. Understanding of

narrative in worldview prevents talking at cross-purposes and avoids stalemate (see Loc. 3645). It aides apologetic.

Applying the Tools (Parts III & IV) – First Century Judaism and Early Christianity

These sections are all about applied critical-realism.

My aim is... not to project non-Jewish ideas on to Judaism, but to achieve a critical-realist reading of first-century Judaism, including its beliefs and aspirations, in its own terms, which will then shed unexpected light on the rise of Christianity. This, as I argued earlier, is what history is all about. (Loc. 4187-4189)

The object of the application is Wright's wealth of historical knowledge. Taking us back to the exile he builds the narrative through the intertestamental period. He outlines political currents, the rise of the Jewish sects (Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes), allowing each to contribute to the worldview-scape that comes together at the time of Jesus. There is too much to precis but Wright himself summarises:

Story, symbol and praxis, focused in their different ways on Israel's scriptures, reveal a rich but basically simple worldview. We can summarize this in terms of the four questions which...are implicitly addressed in all worldviews.

1. Who are we? We are Israel, the chosen people of the creator god.

2. Where are we? We are in the holy Land, focused on the Temple; but, paradoxically, we are still in exile.

3. What is wrong? We have the wrong rulers: pagans on the one hand, compromised Jews on the other, or, halfway between, Herod and his family. We are all involved in a less-than-ideal situation.

4. What is the solution? Our god must act again to give us the true sort of rule, that is, his own kingship exercised through properly appointed officials (a true priesthood;

possibly a true king); and in the mean time Israel must be faithful to his covenant charter. (Loc. 6872-6879).

Alongside the Jewish worldview, particularly at the point of it's eschatology, Wright connects (juxtaposes?) a similar analysis of the early Christian worldview. His methodology is to consider the "kerygmatic" church at certain extra-biblical "fixed points" in it's early history. This frustrates those who are keen for some biblical interpretation, but it is a necessary step which strengthens the historical/literary basis of later chapters (and New Perspectives exegesis in general).

Beyond the crucifixion itself we are taken to the martyrdom of Polycarp, the correspondence of Pliny and other familiar primary sources. He summarises the defining narrative:

These events form a chain stretching across a century in which, time after time, the Roman authorities found the Christians (as they found the Jews) a social and political threat or nuisance, and took action against them. The Christians, meanwhile, do not seem to have taken refuge in the defence that they were merely a private club for the advancement of personal piety. They continued to proclaim their allegiance to a Christ who was a 'king' in a sense which precluded allegiance to Caesar, even if his kingdom was not to be conceived on the model of Caesar's. This strange belief, so Jewish and yet so non-Jewish (since it led the Christians to defend no city, adhere to no Mosaic code, circumcise no male children) was, as we shall see, a central characteristic of the whole movement, and as such a vital key to its character. (Loc. 10373-10378)

The juxtaposition with Judaism is found in the basic questions. Compare this with the list I quoted earlier:

***Who are we?** We are a new group, a new movement, and yet not new, because we claim to be the true people of the god of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the creator of the world. We are*

the people for whom the creator god was preparing the way through his dealings with Israel...

Where are we? We are living in the world that was made by the god we worship, the world that does not yet acknowledge this true and only god. We are thus surrounded by neighbours who worship idols that are, at best, parodies of the truth, and who thus catch glimpses of reality but continually distort it. Humans in general remain in bondage to their own gods, who drag them into a variety of degrading and dehumanizing behaviour-patterns. As a result, we are persecuted, because we remind the present power-structures of what they dimly know, that there is a different way to be human, and that in the message of the true god concerning his son, Jesus, notice has been served on them that their own claim to absolute power is called into question.

What is wrong? The powers of paganism still rule the world, and from time to time even find their way into the church. Persecutions arise from outside, heresies and schisms from within...

What is the solution? Israel's hope has been realized; the true god has acted decisively to defeat the pagan gods, and to create a new people, through whom he is to rescue the world from evil. This he has done through the true King, Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, in particular through his death and resurrection. The process of implementing this victory, by means of the same god continuing to act through his own spirit in his people, is not yet complete. One day the King will return to judge the world, and to set up a kingdom which is on a different level from the kingdoms of the present world order. When this happens those who have died as Christians will be raised to a new physical life. The present powers will be forced to acknowledge Jesus as Lord, and justice and peace will triumph at last. (Loc. 10804-10824, *emphasis mine*).

Finally, with his well-founded hermeneutical lens, he can

consider the New Testament through a standard systemic consideration: the synoptics, Pauline writing, Johannine writings, and so forth. For instance,

All three synoptic gospels, we have seen, share a common pattern behind their wide divergences. All tell the story of Jesus, and especially that of his cross, not as an oddity, a one-off biography of strange doings, or a sudden irruption of divine power into history, but as the end of a much longer story, the story of Israel, which in turn is the focal point of the story of the creator and the world. (Loc. 11516-11519)

Slowly but surely it all comes together as Christian worldview is placed alongside and drawn out from the Jewish narrative.

It is not simplistic considerations of propositional continuity and discontinuity, but fulfillment and development in the same narrative arc. Consider this snippet from his treatment of Paul [with its wonderful gem highlighting that “taking every thought captive” is not introspection but missional intellectualism!]

These major features of Paul’s theology only make sense within a large-scale retelling of the essentially Jewish story, seen now from the point of view of one who believes that the climactic moment has already arrived, and that the time to implement that great achievement is already present... Because this story is the story of Israel understood as the story through which the creator god is restoring the creation, and with it the race of Adam and Eve, it addresses, confronts, and attempts to subvert the pagan world and its stories. We therefore often see Paul, as he says himself, ‘taking every thought captive to obey Christ’, meeting pagan ideas coming towards him and, like Jehu, bidding them turn around and ride in his train .(Loc. 11754-11768)

Missional Eschatology Before Breakfast

There are these words:



*Fearless warriors in a picket fence,
reckless abandon wrapped in common sense
Deep water faith in the shallow end
and we are caught in the middle
With eyes wide open to the differences,
the God we want and the God who is
But will we trade our dreams for His
or are we caught in the middle?*

*Somewhere between my heart and my hands,
Somewhere between my faith and my plans,
Somewhere between the safety of the boat and the crashing
waves...*

That things are both “now and not yet” is a fundamental part of Christian spirituality.

It locates us in history: The Kingdom of God is **now**, for Christ is Risen! The Kingdom of God is **not yet**, for we look ahead to when Christ brings renewal and rightness to the groaning of all creation. We are “in the middle” in the opportunity to share in God’s loving purposes, his *mission*. We are not too early nor too late to the dynamic plans of God. This is what *eschatology* and talk about the end of all things

means for the Christian.

It locates us in ourselves: “**Now** we are children of God, but what we will be has **not yet** been made known.” (1 John 3:2). In the middle, we “work out our salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and act in order to fulfill his good purpose.” (Phil 2:12-13). We know now, whose we are, for certain. But we are incomplete, and we must have growth, refinement, maturation, strengthening.

“Now and not yet” therefore both *grounds us* and *stretches us*.

- We delight in what we have, but holy discontent with ourselves and the world spurs us on.
- We rejoice in where we have come to, but plans and ambitions must be abandoned as shallow and small as God’s perspective invades.
- We have the peace of present rest, but the constant call makes us face our fears and turn away from the control and comfort that would placate them: “Your journey is not yet done, continue, walk this way with me.”

The opposite of “now and not yet” is terrible. It’s “this is all there ever was, and it’s all there ever will be.” In such things we are both rootless and directionless, simply adrift. Rather, lead me through the tensions and pains of the now and not yet, so that, being alive, I may live!

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