

Q&A: Can we ignore the pagan background of Lent and its other difficulties?

Sarah asks:

Hi Will,

I have always been muddled by Christian encouragement to observe the man-made tradition of Lent. I have been asked plenty of times over the years what I am giving up for Lent and I have been asked to teach about Lent in Sunday School and declined. I have attended wonderful teaching sessions that have been given the title "Lent Bible School" and I have been to Lent prayer meetings. This year I had a mailing from a brilliant Christian publisher promoting a book called "Lent devotions for the whole family".

I have never been directly taught that I must observe Lent by Christian leaders, but perhaps even more confusingly, I have been encouraged to think about my personal response as if observing Lent is assumed. It obviously retains its place on the church calendar despite the Reformation and my experience is that it is referred to in passing when we are entering Lent, as if we all know what we should be doing with it.

So, my question is can we ignore the background of:

- 1. The paganism at the root of Lent from Christianising pagan traditions;*
- 2. The penance involved in confessing sin to a priest to receive absolution on Shrove Tuesday and be shriven by a sinful man rather than God; and the penance also behind self-denial for 40 days.*
- 3. The debauchery associated with partying before Lent seen in Mardi Gras, and, although not celebrated like Mardi*

Gras in our culture, a feasting before self-denial;

Why are we so casual about all of this? Can we reject what is bad and leave something good? Is it a matter of personal conviction?

Or do we have a duty to actively teach that Christians should avoid anything to do with Lent, to reject the traditions of men?

I'd be really interested to hear what you think. Thank you.

P.S. So you have an idea of where I'm coming from, here is a summary of my concerns (feel free to cut this if you publish my question!) [I've included some of these by referring to them in my answer -Will]

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



My last opportunity to be a part of a pancake race, in 2018, was (ironically perhaps) affected by inclement weather...

Thanks Sarah,

As always, really appreciate your questions. Let me respond to

your questions from the last to first.

First up, can I agree with you that Lent can seem a little weird. In human terms, it's about a big party on a Tuesday, some inconsequential "self denial" for a few weeks, before suddenly being allowed to eat chocolate again! What on earth has this got to do with how I follow Jesus? It's similar to the experience I had as an Australian on my first Christmas in the UK: what on earth does a bunch of sweets stuck into an orange with toothpicks have to do with the birth of this world's Lord and Saviour!? We're a weird bunch, us Christian folk, sometimes.

But to turn to your comments. You conclude by asking the foundational question of whether we should actively avoid Lent because we ought to "reject the traditions of men."

My general response to this general question connects with general idea of whether we take a "proscriptive" or "prescriptive" view of Scripture. (It's actually a false dichotomy, but I'll get to that in a minute). A *prescriptive* view is, basically, "unless the Bible commands it or explicitly allows it, it is wrong." A *proscriptive* view is, basically, "unless the Bible prohibits it or explicitly commands avoiding it, it is fine."

The excesses of the prescriptive view (e.g. not being allowed to sing any other songs except biblical psalms, because anything else is not prescribed) are obvious. When Spurgeon writes (in the supporting material you gave), "When it can be proved that the observance of Christmas, Whitsuntide, and other Popish festivals was ever instituted by divine statute, we will also attend to them, but not until then," he's pushing a prescriptive barrow, at least to some degree. In the end, I find this hermeneutic unhelpfully inapplicable to the real world, and I don't see the New Testament writers, or Jesus himself, treating Scripture (our Old Testament) in this way. **Just because Lent isn't commanded (or even mentioned) in**

Scripture (and therefore, necessarily, derives from traditional and cultural practice alone), doesn't mean it's bad! This is my first point.

We might ask, though, whether there is a *proscription* in Scripture that applies. You refer to “traditions of men” and this phrase connects us to Colossians 2:8 – “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on *human tradition* and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.” (NIV). Paul’s concern here is the *misuse* of human traditions, as a means of mediating God’s favour (“Do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day.” – Colossians 2:16, NIV). If we elevated seasons and traditions to this level of importance, we are, in effect, denying (rather than trusting), Jesus: “These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.” (Colossians 2:17, NIV). **In this regard, any *insistence* on observing Lent is, in my mind, wrong,** it is *proscribed*. This is my second point. If someone doesn’t observe Lent (which, to be honest, has included myself on many a year), that does not mean they are doing anything wrong or “lesser.” Your provided quote from Spurgeon has it right, perhaps: “We ask concerning every rite and rubric, ‘Is this a law of the God of Jacob?’ and if it not be clearly so, it is of no authority with us, who walk in Christian liberty.” We have *liberty, freedom* as to whether or not we observe Lent.

However, as something of a post-post-modernist (read that carefully!), I’m wary of the propositionalism behind the proscriptive-prescriptive dichotomy. Applying Scripture is not so much about distilling it down to clinical propositions, it is about being caught up into the narrative of God’s action in the world. Unlike a postmodernist, I don’t hold that this narrative is ultimately determined by my own experience of it, which locates truth in myself. Rather, God, the foundational

“Other”, has acted in this world, has spoken his Word of Truth, ultimately in Jesus, as recorded in Scripture, and the history of our planet is moved along according to his story. This connection with divine narrative has both proscription (so that I don’t set my course against the movement of Jesus) and prescription (it compels me to seek the face of Jesus and follow him actively). It doesn’t work if I don’t trust him. It’s into this mix that I look at Lent and wonder if it is cutting across God’s story, or getting me closer to the current, so to speak. Most human traditions do both in some way, and we must exercise discernment.

Which brings me to your next questions (as I work through them backwards). You ask “Why are we so casual about all of this? Can we reject what is bad and leave something good? Is it a matter of personal conviction?” **To which I say yes, it is a matter of personal conviction. And yes, there is some good that we can accept amidst the bad that we must reject** (I’ll unpack that below). This is my third point.

As to why we are so casual about it... well, in my experience I find that the Christian propensity to be casual about much of what we do is, sadly, not to be underestimated. I long for us all to long for more depth, more truth, more awareness of God (crf. Ephesians 1:17). Regrettably, most church dynamics reward exploration of the stable shallows of human experience rather than the rocky, lively, depths.

Let’s conclude, then, where you begin, by looking at Lent itself.

Firstly, I’m not surprised that there is an intermix of Christian with pagan themes in the tradition. Following the kenotic dynamic of Jesus himself (Philippians 2:1-11) – i.e. the mode in which God *comes to us* – at our best we have always gone *to* others. At our best, we bear witness to Jesus in, with, and through the language and culture of those to whom we go. Of course, this doesn’t mean an unquestioning embrace of

all that is around us, but it does mean speaking into it, reinterpreting it, turning its witness towards Jesus. Paul's use of the "Unknown God" in the pagan tradition of the Athenians is the sort of thing I'm talking about (Acts 17:16-34). The fact that Lent, connects with Easter, connects with Passover, connects with lunar calendars, connects with Spring and fertility (Lent literally means the season in which the days LENGTHen) doesn't surprise me, or overly concern me. As with each season, moment, or event in the world around us, our job (and our joy) is to discern how it can best bear witness to the new life of Jesus.

Secondly, I'm not surprised that there are connections within the tradition related to Roman Catholicism, in both its pre- and post-reformation forms. Lent is part of the liturgical calendar that is embraced by a number of traditions. And yes, there are connections with some Catholic practices which I, personally, don't find helpful. I agree that "use up all the food before Lent, have a party, and then make sure you go get your forgiveness from the priest" is both real in folklore, and unedifying for the gospel. But the question is whether these unedifying things are integral to the tradition, or simply misuses of it, and I lean towards the latter. Every generation must discern when its traditions still hold positive meaning, and when they must be allowed to fade away. In the history of Protestantism, many traditions have been done away with, but Lent has (by and large) persisted, and that gives at least some indication that it can have some positivity for the gospel when not misused.

For myself, I find Lent helpful. The aspect of the tradition I draw upon is twofold:

- 1) The tradition in the early Church was to have baptisms on Easter Day. The candidates were led through a season of catechism (teaching about faith in Jesus) and this culminated in a season of fasting before the day of celebration. I therefore use this season to be deliberate about catechesis,

both for myself (I hope to reinvigorate a discipline of personal bible study) and for my church (where I might often offer a course or sermon series that is designed to dig a little deeper).

2) The tradition is that Lent is a season of *fasting*, and in this way it is *penitential*. This doesn't mean *penance* in the sense of alleviating guilty, but it does mean renewing and reflecting upon my *posture* before God. Have I become self-confident, worrisome, fearful; have I excused my own sin, rather than dealing with it? This is not dour or morose, although it can be solemn and sometimes painful; it is a desire to be deepened, stretched, extended. It's a desire for growth. It's a season for finally dealing with stuff that should have been dealt with before. Psalm 139:23-24 says the following, and it is the essence of what I use Lent for. I put aside the distractions and anesthetic practices (this year, it is giving up the netflix binge!) which I hide behind, and ask Jesus to continue to deal with me and sanctify me:

*23 Search me, God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.*

*²⁴ See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.*

Of course, this could be done at any point in the year, but here is a season which not only acts as a reminder and stimulus, but helps me share that journey with my brothers and sisters as we coordinate the rhythms of our year. There is no compulsion (there is freedom), and it is in accord with the "Lenten tradition" in its best sense, serving gospel purposes. I "do" Lent.

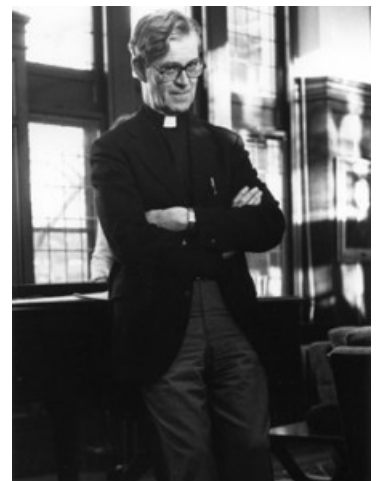
What disheartens me the most is not that Lent exists as a season, nor some of the bad things that have attached to it; rather it is when we use it to dive into the shallows of popular Christianity and play the game of mere lip-service:

The giving up of chocolate, “because it’s Lent”, rather than for any deeper engagement with our walk with the Lord; the use of Ash Wednesday as an excuse for a party the night before. Shallow Christians do that, and shallow churches promote it that way. It’s at that point the tradition becomes an idol – the use of God to worship an empty practice, rather than the use of the practice to worship God. Maybe, at that point, the prophetic act is to give up the tradition totally; I think you are alluding to this, and it is entirely valid. As for myself, at this point, I’d rather capture it for Jesus, and have it speak again of the deep work of Word and Spirit that is so needed in the hearts of his people.

Thanks for the question.

W.

Review: Stendahl’s The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West



I have embarked on a self-imposed project to explore the links between the New Perspective and a new apologia.

It seemed good to begin with Krister Stendahl's 1963 classic article, The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West. It's a short piece that is a good insight into the beginnings of the New Perspectives movement. It raises the basic questions pertaining to the disparities between the Pauline, Reformation and modern milieux and chases these down some hermeneutical rabbit holes.

Not that Stendahl goes too deep. It's a pleasant read which gives the broad brushstrokes and only glimpses of the obvious academic rigour that lies underneath.

It suits my purposes to summarise and condense his argument, codifying and storing away the framework as I continue my wider exploration.

Point #1 – The modern world wrestles with matters of introspection and individual conscience. This is not what Paul-the-fomer-Pharisee wrestles with.

Stendahl uses the psycho-social term "introspection" and "introspective conscience." It is crucial but short-hand language and he never unpacks exactly what he means by it.

Here is a connection point between Pauline hermeneutic and the modern world which is at the heart of my project. The hermeneutical end of this connection is Stendahl's phrase "Pauline awareness of sin" for which, Stendahl suggests, we have a primarily Lutheran and Augustinian lens that is not entirely aligned with Paul's concerns.

Stendahl's insistence is that Paul has had no real problem with law keeping; after all, the Law includes elements of grace despite the Lutheran law-grace dichotomy. Paul's concern is with the Law itself, not with the keeping of it.

It was not to him a restoration of a plagued conscience; when

he says that he now forgets what is behind him (Phil 3:13), he does not think about the shortcoming of his obedience to the Law, but about his glorious achievements as a righteous Jew, achievements which he nevertheless has now learned to consider as “refuse” in the light of his faith in Jesus as the Messiah. (200-201)

Yes, there is an impossibility about keeping the law. But the real issue is that even when Paul is righteous ‘according to the Law’ it is nothing to the grace now revealed in Jesus.

The communal & covenantal emphases of the New Perspective is apparent here. For Stendahl, Paul’s concern is not to assuage individual conscience but to demonstrate that the two communities – those who have lived under the old covenant of Law, and those who have been a Law unto themselves – now must approach God in the same way, through Christ.

Point #2 – Paul-the-Christian’s introspection is not shaped around a personal wrestle with sin.

A comparison is made here between the Pauline world and the world of the Reformation in which Luther stood firmly on the legacy of Augustine, who was the “first modern man” (205) who “may well have been one of the first to express the dilemma of the introspective conscience” (203).

“It is in response to their [the Augustine/Lutheran milieu] question, “How can I find a gracious God?” that Paul’s words about a justification in Christ by faith, and without the works of the Law, appears as the liberating and saving answer... (203)

Augustine and the Church was by and large under the impression that Paul dealt with those issues with which he actually deals: 1) What happens to the Law (the Torah, the actual Law of Moses, not the principle of legalism) when the Messiah has come? – 2) What are the ramifications of the

Messiah's arrival for the relation between Jews and Gentiles? For Paul had not arrived at his view of the Law by testing and pondering its effect upon his conscience; it was his grappling with the question about the place of the Gentiles in the Church and in the plan of God... (204)

Paul's chief concern was about the inclusion of the Gentiles into Christ-centred grace, not the exclusion of sin-wracked Jews from grace because of their Law. Paul's own "conversion" is not so much an individual relief of conscience, but a prophetic (and very Jewish) call to be the Apostle to the Gentiles to gather those who are now included.

To break into commentary for a second – this is a useful consideration. I recognised many years ago that the great evangelistic sermons of Acts do not accord with the evangelistic shape of the modern age. Here I see in Stendahl an exploration of why this is so.

Point #3 – The Introspective Conscience framework gives rise to hermeneutical difficulties.

This section is the most valuable part of the article. Stendahl unpacks some considerable implications. The launching point is this:

Where Paul was concerned about the possibility for Gentiles to be included in the messianic community, his statements are now read as answers to the quest for assurance about man's salvation out of a common human predicament. (206)

Paul's concern is to demonstrate that

Once the Messiah had come, and once the faith in Him – not "faith" as a general religious attitude – was available as the decisive ground for salvation, the Law had done its duty as a custodian for the Jews. (206)

But

In the common interpretation of Western Christianity, the matter looks very different. One could even say that Paul's argument has been reversed into saying the opposite to his original intention. (206)

The Law, which was for Paul an obsoleted custodian *for the Jews* until the coming of Christ (in which Christ himself is prefigured in the gracious aspects of the Law), has become the tool of introspection – a custodian that takes *each of us individually* to Christ by crushing us with its righteousness.

There is a true disparity here and Stendahl helps us know what is at stake. It is the shape of the gospel of itself, and certainly the defining points of an effective kerygma.

Paul's argument that the Gentiles must not, and should not come to Christ via the Law, i.e., via circumcision etc., has turned into a statement according to which all men must come to Christ with consciences properly convicted by the Law and its insatiable requirements for righteousness. (207)

Point #4 – Modern introspective exegesis can be rebutted.

Stendahl finally gets to his positive consideration of the matter and gives a quick rendition of the New Perspective lens (and, yes, he does use the term “new perspective” in passing (214)). My summation is this:

1) Sin is real. “Rom 1-3 sets out to show that all – both Jews and Gentiles – have sinned and fallen short of the Glory of God.” This is properly conceived as covenantal sin of peoples, not the travailing conscience of individuals. (208)

2) Paul's personal awareness of sin is not a present wrestle of conscience, but a past fact of his persecuting actions against the people of God. Paul uses this to speak of the

covenantal inclusion of the godless – as a rhetorical device, not a conclusion. If “Paul’s enmity to Jesus Christ and the church” can be “gloriously and gracefully blotted out”, how much more can God justify the “weak and sinful and rebellious” (209)

3) Paul’s consideration of present troubles is one of “weakness” and attack from the enemy. When it comes to matters of conscience he more readily speaks of victory in Christ and “his good conscience before men and God.” (210)

4) Romans 7, which is meant to be the epitome of introspection is actually an “acquittal” of the Christ-focussed ego, “not one of utter contrition.” This is because Romans 7 is an argument in which good (but ineffective and obsoleted) Law can be made distinct from “bad Sin.”

“If I do what I do not want, then it is not I who do it, but the sin which dwells in me.”... This distinction makes it possible for Paul to blame Sin and Flesh, and to rescue the Law as a good gift of God.” (212)

We should not read a trembling and introspective conscience into a text which is so anxious to put the blame on Sin, and that in such a way that not only the Law but the will and mind of man are declared good and are found to be on the side of God. (214)

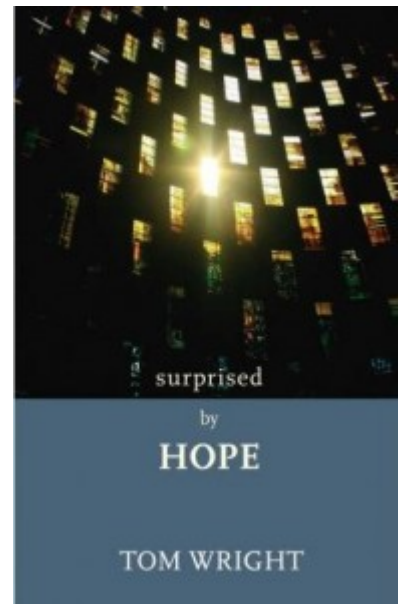
Stendahl’s considerations are not without difficulty, both exegetically and practically. I am driven to read Romans in particular and to weigh Stendahl up against Scripture. I am concerned practically in the downplaying of present sin in terms of weakness and enemy attack; it seems but a variation on “the devil made me do it.”

Nevertheless, this has been an intriguing and enjoyable beginning to my little project. I will move from here either backwards to Augustine, or forwards to Dunn and Wright and

others who have progressed the New Perspective. I'll probably do both.

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.