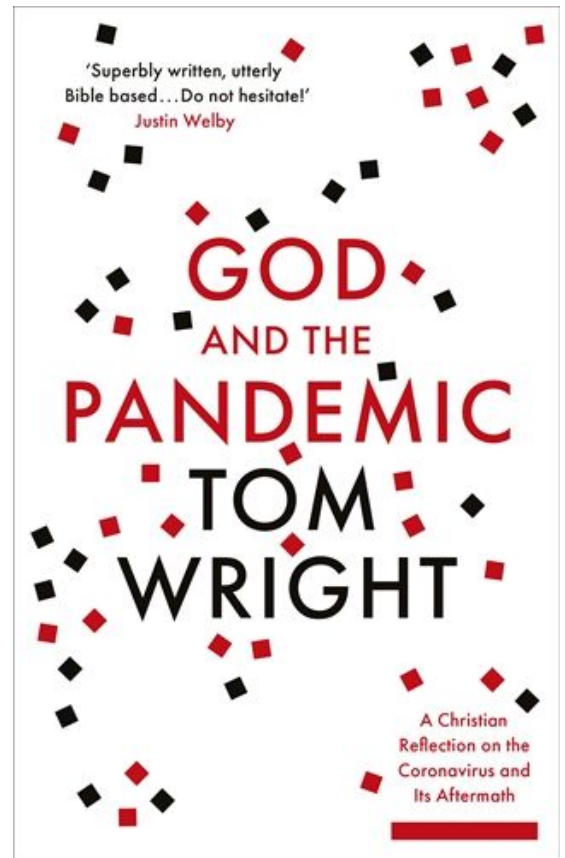


Review: God And The Pandemic

The Christian faith is *relevant*. At least, it's meant to be.



We have, of course, skewed our definition of “relevant” to mean something like “trendy, hip, and attractive to young people.” Relevance is actually deeper than that. It is about being connected, responsive, and impactful with respect to the real moment. 2020 is a very real moment.

In the midst of the pandemic the relevance of following Jesus has been (understandably) questioned. The doors of Christian churches have been shut, our liturgical and summer festivals halted. The rites and rituals for births, marriages, and deaths, have been cancelled, postponed, or severely curtailed. What are we left with?

Some have given a utilitarian defense: We have kept foodbanks open. We have provided meals, and pastoral care networks. We have coordinated volunteers, and generally been facilitators of decent folk. It's true. But others have done that too.

Some have slipped into seize-the-moment optimism: We have expanded our horizons. We've gone online. We're more accessible than ever before. Our viewer numbers are bigger than our former congregations. This is great. We have responded well. But so have others. What makes this distinctively *Christian*?

Real relevance happens at the level of our core message and way of life. For us, it is all about Jesus. If Jesus is relevant, then Jesus makes sense, and Jesus makes sense of life. This is the essence of the Scriptures; the Bible is not some abstract articulation of doctrine, it is *applied* belief which grows from the intervention of God in real times and places. As people devoted to Jesus, our words and actions are meant to be similarly connected, responsive, and impactful. Frankly, we should have something to say.

Many have said things poorly. Leaving aside the ridiculousness of prosperity preachers naming and claiming immunity and right-wing political conservatives anathematising face-masks, even the estimable John Lennox has asked *Where is God in a coronavirus world?* but doesn't do much more than reiterate his defense against New Atheism. Relevance isn't just about seizing a new opportunity to say the same things in the same ways, it's about showing how the same truths are alive enough to connect with, respond to, and impact a new set of circumstances; the gospel is not defeated by shifts in context.

Tom Wright's *God and the Pandemic*, is relevant, properly relevant.

It's short, it's easy to read, and it's substantial. It is simple. Five chapters: Introduction to the context, followed by relevant expositions of the Old Testament, the Gospels, and the rest of the New Testament, and a conclusion asking "where do we go from here?"

And it is not trite. In fact, the essence of Wright's message is to push back at our propensity for platitudes. To read the signs of the times isn't about digging in to the moment to find some hidden "inner cosmic moral mechanism" (p17), as if 2020 locates us on the end-times roadmap for those who are privy to a plan. It's about locating *ourselves* within the revealed heart of God and the divine narrative of his history.

Necessarily, that centres us on Jesus. "The minute we find ourselves looking at the world around us and jumping to conclusions about God and what he might be doing, *but without looking carefully at Jesus*, we are in serious danger of forcing through an 'interpretation' which might look attractive... but which actually screens Jesus out of the picture." (pp19-20). "If there is one God, and if he has come in the person of his own son to unveil his rescuing purposes for the world, then there can be no other signs, no other warning events, to compare with this one" (p22). "Jesus is already reigning", he assures us, his "rule over this world" is a *present* one, "starting with his resurrection and ending when he has finished the work of subduing all 'enemies' – the last of which is death itself, a very relevant consideration at this time (1 Corin. 15.25-26)" (p24).

If you want to know what it means to talk about God being 'in charge of' the world, or being 'in control', or being 'sovereign', then Jesus himself instructs you to rethink the notion of 'kingdom', 'control' and 'sovereignty' themselves, around his death on the cross. (Page 25)

Wright reaches into the Scriptures and shows how Jesus is *presently present*. That is relevance. He is neither located in the past with dusty words of lore, or waiting in the future with fantastical notions of shallow victory. Jesus is present, ruling, reigning, working, within the broken plagued world.

The demonstration and inauguration of that ruling, reigning

work is the cross. And therefore the victory, the hope, the renewal, and all the other things we're looking for in this present moment, is also found there. Pointing to the episode of Lazarus' death, Wright reminds us how the King brings the Kingdom of God: "He just weeps. And then – *with the authority born of that mixture of tears and trust* – he commands Lazarus to come out of the tomb" (p28, emphasis mine). How much more the authority revealed in the pain of Gethsemane? How much more the authority revealed at Calvary? Christ's power is the form of authority that is made strongest in weakness, and which we discover by *sharing* in the suffering of Christ as we (relevantly!) engage with this world.

The clearest call from Wright, then, in this season, is to *lament*. We weep, we mourn, and we respond as the Holy Spirit empowers us within that helplessness. Isn't that the sort of kingdom that Jesus envisages, inherited by the meek and those who mourn and those who are poor in spirit (crf. the beatitudes)? Isn't that a conceivable *embrace* of the current moment?

...God does send thunderbolts – human ones. He sends in the poor in Spirit, the meek, the mourners, the peacemakers, the hunger-for-justice people. They are the way God wants to act in his world... They will use their initiative; they will see where the real needs are and go to o meet them. They will weep at the tombs of their friends. At the tombs of their enemies. Soem of them will get hurt. Some may be killed. That is the story of Acts, all through. There will be problems, punishments, setbacks, shipwrecks, but God's purposes will come through. These people, prayerful, humble, faithful, will be the answer, not to the question Why? But to the question What? What needs to be done here? Who is most at risk? How can we help? Who shall we send? God works in all things with and through those who love him. (Pages 34-35)

Wright's book, therefore, has a prophetic edge. A lot of our

church energy has gone into shoring ourselves up, battening down the hatches. We are either fearful or comfortable with respect to how disturbed our church meetings and finances are. But those things are irrelevant. We are not about re-spinning our strength for the “new normal”, we are to be moved by lament in the gift of the present time.

We *groan* with all creation, Paul tells us in Romans, as we long for the completion of it all. This is a revelation in *our* Scriptures, the word of the Lord to *us*. Can we not proclaim to this world, by giving voice to this groan? Do we not know the deep joy of meeting the Spirit of adoption, the Spirit of the Father, the Spirit of Jesus, who also groans within us? A happy dapper brave face will just reveal ourselves. But if we groan with his Spirit, we don't just have some sort of chance of experiencing an awareness of Jesus, we find ourselves being sent in the same way he was sent, sharing in his authority, following his commission. “We hold the vision and the reality side by side as we groan with the groaning of all creation, as as the Spirit groans within us so that the new creation may come to birth” (p74).

This, then, is also a *vocational* book. If there is any utilitarian potential in this pandemic it is this: that it may catalyse the church to remember itself, by remembering Jesus and the raw, almost primal nature of his kingdom. The tears of the King are the pathway to a new creation and Wright calls us to it.

The followers of Jesus are called to be people of prayer at the place where the world is in pain. (Page 42)

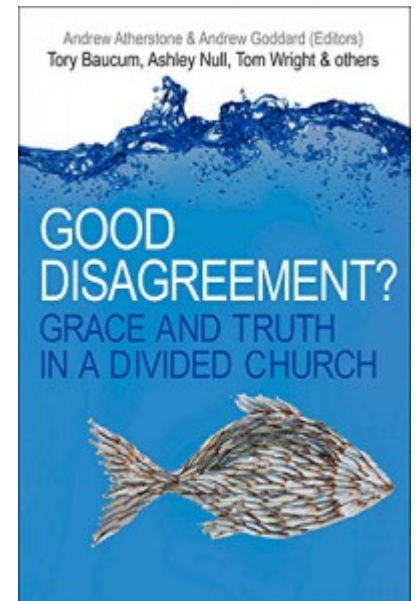
Wright does unpack some of the outworking of it all. He dips into how Christians have turned their groans into actions in the past, willing to care where the state has not, and so showing how God's kingdom is different to the world. He cautions against the privatising of worship through the

prolonged pivot to online services. He warns of following the “secularising lead” – “The sign of the new creation, from the ministry of Jesus forward, has been the healing presence of Jesus himself, and his death and resurrection above all” (p69). There is a necessary place for public worship, public help, public speech as a way to express God’s Kingdom. The world is destabilised, and the “pagan subtexts” (p 72) of our secularised situation will play out in a fight between the gods of money, health, and deadening pleasure.

These are not unprecedented times. But this is a season that is forcing us to be honest. This is the case for the Western world particularly, and the Western church as well. Wright’s book helps express that honesty, and perhaps some repentance. If nothing else, it helps us groan well.

Review: Good Disagreement? Pt. 5, Pastoral Theology for Perplexing Topics: Paul and Adiaphora

I am continuing with my chapter-by-chapter, essay-by-essay review of *Good Disagreement?* Previously:



- Part 1: Foreword by Justin Welby
- Part 2: Disagreeing with Grace by Andrew Atherstone and Andrew Goddard
- Part 3: Reconciliation in the New Testament by Ian Paul
- Part 4: Division and Discipline in the New Testament Church by Michael B. Thompson

N. T. Wright. Big fan. I've been exploring the depths of his perspective for some time now. In this contribution to *Good Disagreement?* he not only delivers his insights into the broader framework for conflict, he actually applies it to the issues at hand. Are sexual ethics a matter for indifference in the church? Wright's answer is a resounding "no".

Wright identifies a "double stress" in the current problems: an apparent tension between "unity" and "holiness." For Wright this is only an appearance because "properly understood, they do not form a paradox, pulling in opposite directions... they actually reinforce one another." (p67). I suspect those who would differ from him on sexual ethics would also resolve the tension; but for a different understanding of 'holiness.' The tension exists when there is need to agree to disagree.

For matters of *adiaphora*, (so-called "things indifferent),

this tension is resolvable in charity – *significant* charity!
Speaking of Paul's appeal at the end of Romans, Wright offers:

He does not here ask the different groups to give up their practices; merely not to judge one another where differences exist. As Paul well knew (though we sometimes forget), this is actually just as large a step, if not larger, than a change in practice itself. ...That is, of course, why the apparently innocuous "live and let live" proposals for reform are the real crunch, as most reforming groups know well. (pp76-77)

I love this summation of how the tensions of adiaphora are to be handled: **"Messiah-people will make demands on one another's charity; they must not make demands on one another's conscience."** (p77). And similarly:

...the subtle rule of adiaphora is about as different from a modern doctrine of "tolerance" as can be imagined. "Tolerance" is not simply a low-grade version of "love"; in some senses, it is its opposite, as "tolerance" can imply a distancing, a wave from the other side of the street, rather than the rich embrace of "the sibling for whom the Messiah died. (p81)

I think I was saying something similar earlier about the danger of mere "conversation" being the stuff of theological strangers.

For issues that are not indifferent, the "live and let live" tension is simply not tenable. They are matters which define and undergird the unity, rather than those which are worked out in the charity of unity. On such matters the difference is not simply a tension, it is a chasm.

To discern, therefore, the scope of what is *adiaphora* we must

come to where Wright begins, to his understanding of Paul's "vision for the church." Here we have straight-down-the-line New Perspectives ecclesiology. In fact, for those getting into the New Perspectives, this chapter is not a bad introduction. The detail does not need rehearsing here and he is explicit about his conclusions:

Certain things are indifferent because...

The divine intervention, as Paul saw it, unveiled in the messianic events concerning Jesus, was to create a single worldwide family; and therefore any practices that functioned as symbols dividing different ethnic groups could not be maintained as absolutes within this single family. (p70)

Certain things are not indifferent because...

This divine intervention.... was that this single family would... embody, represent, and carry forward the plan of "new creation", the plan which had been the intention for Israel from the beginning; and that therefore any practices that belonged to the dehumanizing, anti-creation world of sin and death could likewise not be maintained within this new-creation family. (p70)

And this is where Wright picks his side.

Now, others would use these categories on their side. For some, I'm sure, the church's traditional view of homosexuality is "dehumanizing" and therefore the correction of that through the blessing of same-sex relationships etc. is a matter of necessity, and is not adiaphora. Despite the protestations of some (I think particularly of Loveday Alexander's declared intentions that I heard recently) it is clear that the current disagreements are much more than letting some getting on with what they want to do; it's each side seeing the gospel denied in the other. I cannot see how, if "live and let live" is the

outcome of the shared conversations, we will have done much more than prove the insipidity of the identity we have left in common.

Wright's basis for his position enters right into that ecclesial identity, and the call on the church to embody both new covenant and new creation:

In terms of creation and new creation, the new creation retrieves and fulfils the intention for the original creation, in which the coming together of heaven and earth is reflected in the coming together of male and female. This vision of the original creative purpose was retained by Israel, the covenant people, the "bride" of YHWH, and the strong sexual ethic which resulted formed a noticeable mark of distinction between the Jewish people and the wider world. (p71)

Paul insists that the markers which distinguish Jew from Gentile are no longer relevant in the new, messianic dispensation; but the Jewish-style worship of the One God, and the human male/female life which reflects that creational monotheism, is radically reinforced. (p72)

The line he draws around the adiaphora clearly rebuts the tired argument by which critics of the church's position play the "why aren't you obeying the whole law?" card.

The differentiation he introduces has nothing to do with deciding that some parts of the Torah are good and to be retained (sexual ethics) and other parts are bad and to be abolished (food laws, circumcision and so on). That is not the point... Some parts of Torah – the parts which kept Israel separate from the Gentile world until the coming of the Messiah – have done their work and are now put to one side, not because they were bad but because they were good and have done their work. Other parts of Torah – the parts which pointed to the divine intention to renew the whole creation

through Israel – are celebrated as being now at last within reach through Jesus and the Spirit. The old has passed away; all things have become new – and the “new” includes the triumphant and celebratory recovery of the original created intention, not least for male and female in marriage. (p74)

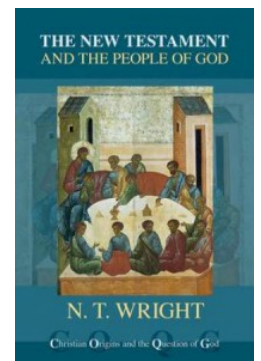
There can be no good disagreement if the scope of *adiaphora* cannot be agreed to. It is the very playing field upon which the charitable and constructive tussle of church life can occur. Wright has provided, here, a thorough and thoughtful determination of the shape of that playing field; but the very same things have also determined which side he is playing on. Those who “play on the other side” must also justify a field of play that is coherent with their position. The danger of course is that the conversation is then cross-purposed: to extend the metaphor to breaking point, one side turns up to play football on a football field, and the other turns up with rugby kit across town; by what rules do the two engage?

Or, with more precision, the ongoing problem is outlined by these concluded remarks from Wright. It’s a problem to which he offers no solution:

We of course, live in a world where, in the aftermath of the Enlightenment’s watering down of Reformation theology, many have reduced the faith to a set of abstract doctrines and a list of detached and apparently arbitrary rules, which “conservatives” then insist upon and “radicals” try to bend or merely ignore. It is this framework itself which we have got wrong, resulting in dialogues of the deaf, or worse, the lobbing of angry verbal hand grenades over walls of incomprehension. (p82)

Next: Part 6: Good Disagreement and the Reformation by Ashley Null

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)

Can the New Perspective be a New Apologia?

In my current role I get to spend a lot of time at the interaction between public discourse, the thought-life and momenta of culture, and the application of Christian theology and devotion. It's a muddled space to play with a lot of speaking at cross purposes and a fast reducing amount of common ground.



I've reached a point of both frustration and passion.

The frustration comes from the level of misunderstanding and presumption that exists, particularly about how others view Christians and Christian thought. Our philosophical framework is ignored, our motivations are questioned, and our ambitions rejected. This is very understandable. As a friend of mine articulated to me recently "We Christians are like bad students. The world is asking the same questions, and being frustrated by its same lack of answers, and we come along and say 'The answer is JAY-sus.' And we don't bother to show our working."

"We don't bother to show our working." Yep. And ouch.

Over the ages there have been those that seek to show our "working out." These are the *apologists* (from the word *apologia* which means 'a formal written defense of one's opinions or conduct' which is synonymous with *apology* but you can't use that because it sounds like you're sorry for something...) And so the "first" apologist, Justin Martyr, showed his "working out" of the reasonableness (in both the moral and logical sense) Christianity in a context while defending against some common misunderstandings of Christians.

Many centuries later on we have those that defend against the rationalism and modernist experiment of the Enlightenment.

And more recently some engagement with postmodernity (although I find many of these are delivering an apology for modernity, not Christianity, but that's another topic...)

I am simply not satisfied with the depths of our current *apologia*. A *defense* is a *responsive* exercise that is necessarily shaped by the context and the audience. We either ignore that context and audience and do the stereotypical bible bash; or we misunderstand our context and audience to the point of being rendered irrelevant.

So I am thirsty to *understand* our context. I've been reading some books that have engaged with philosophical theories that were fomenting in the mid 20th Century. The little I could quickly grasp gave me that "aha" moment: "*This* is where they are coming from, this is why they are saying, doing, teaching this and that. *This* is how they hear us when we say..." etc. etc.

So my resolution is this: **To learn more.** I want to join in with the unpacking of the Western World philosophically (and perhaps sociologically). I want to read a book a week from the ***top ten primary sources that have shaped or describe the Western World.***

Any recommendations?

Similarly, the passion, derives from an utter commitment that the gospel is, well, good news. And remains so. I have always aspired to be as kerygmatic (from the word *kerygma* which means 'proclamation') as possible. The gospel is gospel only when it is proclaimed. The gospel demands kerygma.

Effective kerygma is thus a combination of hermeneutic, homiletic, and applied ethics in which the gospel connects and enlivens the surrounding context.

In recent times the best kerygma I have witnessed (in my slight reading) has come from the school of thought that has been tagged as the "New Perspectives on Paul." This is the stuff of Krister Stendahl and N.T. Wright and in my mind speaks to a framework that is high levels of realism. It emphasises community and activity, not simply as conceptual responses to revelational truth, but as innate fundamentals of divine historical interaction with the world.

My hunch is that there is an apologetic connection between New Perspectives and the currents of Western thinking which has not yet been fully explored – but could bear fruit if it was.

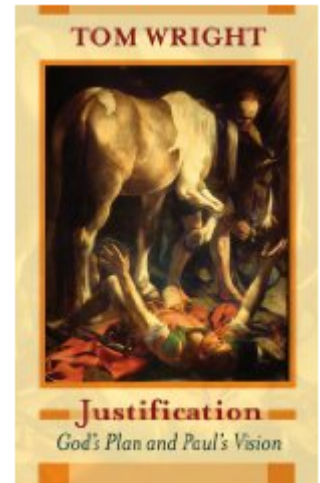
I want to see if this is true. **I want to learn more.** I want to read a book a week ***from the top ten expositions New Perspectives commentary.***

Any recommendations?

I'll let you know how it goes.

Review: Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision

I remember when I first began studying at College. We were taught exegesis of the Bible – applying literary and historical analysis, asking that all important question of “What did the text mean for the original hearers?”, and all that sort of thing. Many students who are used to a more devotional reading of Scripture find themselves stumbling. More than once I would read a passage, consider it's meaning as reasonably obvious, and then second guess myself: Have I been truly considerate of the context? Do I have a prejudicial hermeneutic that's getting in the way? The vast majority of the time my initial conclusion was right – the meaning was plain.



It is in this light that I find myself describing N. T. Wright's *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision* as an *exegetical* book. Firstly, because it is a book that requires two hands – book in one, Bible in the other. Secondly, because its unpacking of the New Perspectives has the same effect as the experience of novice exegetes. As I read Scripture from that perspective I get the mixture of “Isn't that obvious?” with “Am I reading that right?” with “It's not that controversial really is it?”

Apparently it is controversial. This book is a parry-riposte to John Piper's *The Future of Justification* which is itself “A Response to N. T. Wright.” Not having read Piper I can only infer from Wright's response that there are some theological differences surrounding some nuances of justification – for instance, what it means to be “righteous” before God (Piper wants an imputation of merit, Wright prefers the sense of legal acquittal), and the means of being made right (Piper

elevates the salvific efficacy of faith in Christ, Wright elevates the covenantal consequences of the faithfulness of Christ).

I find myself very sympathetic to Wright and the New Perspective (if “New” is the right word). The applicable heart of it all is the sense of “God’s-single-purpose-through-Israel-for-the-salvation-of-the-world.” It is a cohesive framework which draws the key aspects of the Christian kerygma into a God-honouring hermeneutic. Those theological things that are normally underdone or unsatisfyingly shoehorned in when needs must, instead find a full and fruitful place – the role of the Holy Spirit in salvation, for instance, and the salvific inherence of the resurrection, or the continuity of covenants old and new.

Wright is quite polemic in the early chapters when he clarifies his framework and negotiates the sticking points. He is less so when he gets to the more beneficial Part 2 which covers exegesis in Galatians, Philippians, Corinthians, Ephesians and Romans. This is where I found the book most enjoyable, almost devotional in its usefulness.

In the end, in application (and proclamation?) the debate ends up being about nuances and emphases more than anything else.

Wright admits that “we begin to realize at last how the emphases of the old and new perspectives belongs so intimately together” as he summarizes a section of Romans:

(a) The overarching problem has always been human sin and its effects – idolatry, pride, human corruption and ultimately death.

(b) God launched a rescue operation, the single plan, through Israel, to save the world.

(c) But Israel, too, is part of the original problem, which has a double effect:

(i) Israel itself needs the same rescue-from-sin-and-death

that everyone else needs;

(ii) Israel, as it stands, cannot be the means of the rescue operation that God's plan intended.

(d) therefore the problem with which God is faced, if he is to be faithful to his own character and plan in both creation and covenant, is

(i) he must nevertheless put his single plan into operation, somehow accomplishing what Israel was called to do but, through faithlessness to his commission, failed to do;

(ii) he must thereby rescue the human race and the whole world from sin, idolatry, pride, corruption and death;

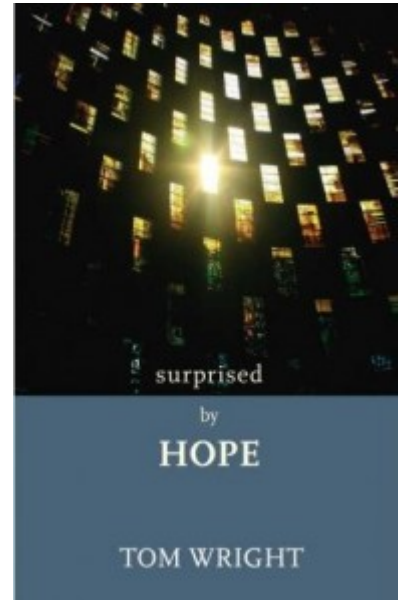
(iii) he must do this in a way that makes it clear that Israel, though still of course the object of his saving love, is now on all fours with the rest of the world.

In other words, God must find a way of enabling 'Israel' to be faithful after all, as the middle term of the single plan; God must thereby deal with sin; and God must do so in such a way as to leave no room for boasting...

As the first year College student might say, "Isn't it obvious, or am I reading it wrong?"

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 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.