



*ADVANCING THE
CHRISTIAN TRADITION
IN THE THIRD MILLENNIUM*

VOLUME 15 • NUMBER 2 • 2006

SIMPLY CHRISTIAN: THE BIBLICAL
PARADIGM OF N. T. WRIGHT



JOHN H. ARMSTRONG

SIMPLY CHRISTIAN: WHY CHRISTIANITY MAKES SENSE

N. T. Wright

San Francisco: Harper Collins (2005)

240 pages, cloth, \$22.95

Tom Wright is a highly trained specialist in New Testament studies. He is also an engaging and effective pulpit preacher. Over the course of three decades he has served the church in a number of different ministerial and teaching capacities, in both North America and England. To the surprise of some, he was appointed the bishop of the historic diocese of Durham in the Church of England in 2003. But, and this is perhaps more important to those who are reading these words, he is a prolific and prodigious writer whose legacy will most surely be linked to the biblical ideas that he has cogently expressed in his published works for some years. This new title, plainly a more popularly written work, may well prove to be one of Wright's most important works, prompting a popular American fiction writer to conclude: "This [book] will become a classic." Sometimes such an

endorsement, especially on the cover of a first edition, proves to be the kiss of death. In this case it will likely prove to be prophetic.

Besides the various academic books that Tom Wright has written over the past two decades or so he has given the church an equally impressive number of readable popular works, bringing his total number of published works to more than thirty at this point. *Simply Christian*, a book specifically designed to explain the Christian faith step-by-step to modern readers, is well developed through the question and answer method. And Wright employs both narrative and apologetic in an effective way, putting the pastor and ordinary reader in his debt.

Modern books often tell you very little about what they will attempt to do in their title. Publishers notoriously want short, catchy, easy-to-remember titles. For this reason a modern subtitle will often reveal the author's true goal. This is certainly the case with *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense*. It would be entirely correct to assume that Wright will show the reader "why" Christianity makes sense, both as a story and as a decisive act in God's redemptive purpose in human history. This, in other words, is biblical theology at its best. And the reader has every reason to believe that Wright will describe what Christianity is all about. I assure you there will be no disappointment if you follow him to the end. Both those outside the faith and those inside will come to better understand what it means to accept the story of Jesus as given in the New Testament record.

A THREEFOLD STRUCTURE

Wright adopts a threefold structure to give shape to his subject. First, he explores four areas in which the world of today can be interpreted as "echoes of a voice." These four are: longing for justice, the quest for spirituality, the hunger for relationships, and the delight in beauty. Each of these, Wright argues, points "beyond itself" yet in a way that is not truly transcendent. Human pursuit of each of these four "echoes"

reveals that the world is "a strange and exciting place" (x). The first of these four themes serves the writer's intention much like "the opening movement of a symphony." Wright wants the reader to hear this theme and then keep it in mind as the work progresses through the second and third parts of the symphony itself. He appeals to the reader to be "patient" on the basis that if you stay with him you will eventually be able to see how the book will tie itself together. I did not find this approach easy to follow in the opening chapters, but I think Wright finally pulled it off by the end of the book.

In the second part of the book ("Staring at the Sun") Wright lays out the central Christian belief about God. He does this by showing how the Jewish understanding of God works and what the hope of Israel really means to the world. This is followed by two chapters on Jesus and two on the Holy Spirit, providing four of the finest descriptions of basic essential (or "mere") Christian theology that you will find anywhere. In this middle section of three, Wright begins to show how the four echoes introduced in the first section function in the way we actually hear God's story.

The story then moves naturally, in terms of Wright's argument, to what it looks like "to follow this Jesus" (x) in practice. This final section is called "Reflecting the Image" and includes chapters on worship (which quite helpfully includes sacramental worship), prayer and the church. He admits that he does not deal with the church as an institution, "but as the company of all those who believe" (xi). The problem with this approach is that most people experience the church first through the institution of the local church. This last section concludes with an excellent chapter on eschatology, understood not so much as "personal" but as corporate and creational. The content of this chapter alone is worth the book. It desperately needs to be worked out in evangelical ecclesial contexts where speculative and highly individualized eschatology has dominated for over a century.

One of the inherent reasons for Wright's popularity among thoughtful Christians is his willingness to be radically faithful to the Bible while he engages passionately and

honestly in “the glorious complexity of life” (48). Simply put, Wright says we must ask, “What is true?” Fundamentally related to this bottom line question, he adds, “How do we know?” (48). Even the ordinary reader can appreciate the fact that these very questions lie at the heart of every serious attempt to explain life (philosophy). Today, we would go even further when we ask what you actually mean by the words “true” and “know”? If the truth we claim to know in Christ is of a different sort than other truth claims then there might well be a different sort of knowing that Christians are called to embrace in following the biblical revelation. This “glorious complexity” is what many of us find missing in the kind of conservative theology that we were taught by the previous generation of evangelicals. This is one of the important reasons for why Wright speaks to us as he does.

Wright observes that “people often grumble as soon as a discussion about the meaning of human life, or the possibility of God, moves away from quite simple ideas and becomes more complicated” (49). His observations about complexity and simplicity are well worth pondering by all Christians.

Any world in which there are such things as music and sex, laughter and tears, mountains and mathematics, eagles and earthworms, states and symphonies and snowflakes and sunsets—and in which we humans find ourselves in the middle of it all—is bound to be a world in which the quest for truth, for reality, for what we can be sure of, is infinitely more complicated than simple yes-and-no questions will allow. There is appropriate complexity along with appropriate simplicity. The more we learn, the more we discover that we humans are fantastically complicated creatures. Yet, on the other hand, human life is full of moments when we know that things are also very, very simple (49).

Wright further shows how we honor and celebrate this complexity and simplicity through doing five things: “We tell stories. We act out rituals. We create beauty. We work in communities. We think out beliefs. . . . And if there’s any such thing as ‘truth,’ in some absolute sense, it must relate to, and make sense of, all this and more” (49). The Christian

story is addressed to a very complex world, thus “within that complexity, we should be careful how we use the word truth” (50). This is, at the heart of the matter, what many evangelical leaders and teachers in my generation did not understand, and this is precisely why Bishop Wright is profoundly respected by younger church leaders who want to bring back the “mystery” of truth lived in both complexity and simplicity.

Wright explains what has happened in a way that I can’t improve upon, so again I allow his words to make the important point here. He writes:

Over the last generation in Western culture, truth has been like the rope in a tug-of-war contest. On the one hand, some want to reduce all truth to “facts,” things which can be proved in the way you can prove that oil is lighter than water, or even that two and two make four. On the other hand, some believe that all truth is relative, and that all claims to truth are merely coded claims to power. Ordinary mortals, dimly aware of this tug-of-war, and its social, cultural, and political spin-offs, may well feel some uncertainty about what truth is, while still knowing that it matters. (50)

This speaks, so simply and yet so profoundly, to my own personal spiritual quest for certainty. And it does so in a way that satisfies my deepening thirst for a spirituality that is Christ centered *without* the philosophical foundationalism poured into my early life by evangelical theologians and logicians. And Wright further explains how we “know” truth. He writes:

To “know” the deeper kinds of truth we have been hinting at is much more like “knowing” a person—something which takes a long time, a lot of trust, and a good deal of trial and error—and less like “knowing” about the right bus to take into town. It’s a kind of knowing in which the subject and the object are intertwined, so that you could never say that it was either purely subjective or purely objective. (51)

The conclusion to this whole business of life's complexities is stated simply: "One good word for this deeper and richer kind of knowing, the kind that goes with the deeper and richer kind of truth, is 'love'" (51). The way we begin to plunge into this story, Wright tells us, is to approach our human longing, as revealed in the four echoes, by talking about God. But this, he adds, is like saying "we must learn to stare at the sun" (51), thus the name of his middle section, which deals with the great theological verities of the Christian story in the chapters that constitute the core of Wright's book: "God" (chapter 5), "Israel" (chapter 6), "Jesus and the Coming of God's Kingdom" (chapter 7), "Jesus: Rescue and Renewal" (chapter 8), "God's Breath of Life" (chapter 9) and "Living by the Spirit" (chapter 10). There is much to commend in these chapters and a lot that will stretch the reader beyond the typical ways that orthodox Christianity has been presented by some conservatives in our time. But make no mistake about it; the material is faithful to orthodoxy in every possible way, both creedally and historically. The notion, among some conservative critics of Bishop Wright, that his theology is somehow less than orthodox is completely preposterous. A full reading of Wright himself, and not of the wannabe theologians who write their silly blogs and commentaries about his work, will reveal this to any fair-minded reader. Personally, there is no need to defend Wright at this point at all, just the continual question I put to the critics: "Have you read him for yourself, or are you simply taking the critics at face value without investigating?"

Since Wright's view of Scripture is more directly addressed in *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture* (San Francisco: Harper, 2005), and reviewed in this issue by P. Andrew Sandlin, I will say little about this subject in this present review. Chapter 13, in *Simply Christian*, is titled: "The God Breathed Book." Wright has complete confidence in Scripture, but his explanations will not satisfy some critics. What he does do, in abundance, is show us how we have marginalized the Bible's influence by using it to reinforce our own agendas (174). He gives an adequate

and clear explanation of "inspiration" (180–84) and concludes that "the Bible is there to enable God's people to be equipped to do God's work in God's world, not to give them an excuse to sit back smugly; knowing they possess all God's truth" (184).

In chapter 14 we are directed to the subject of the Bible's authority. His definition of authority is one of the best simple explanations I know from a modern writer. He writes: "What we're saying by calling the Bible 'authoritative' is that the Bible, somehow, becomes an *authoritative instrument of what God accomplished through Jesus—particularly through his death and resurrection*" (emphasis original, 185). The death of Jesus must be communicated with the world, and that communication comes through the "word" of the gospel, thus the Bible is "an *authoritative description* of a saving plan as though it were an aerial photograph of a particular piece of the landscape. It is *part of the saving plan itself*. It is more like the guide who takes you around the landscape and shows you how you can enjoy it to the full" (emphasis original, 186). The Bible works, not like the rules in a game, but as a story, a grand epic, a narrative. And it is a "love story, albeit with a difference" (186). In this story we are invited to "take part" (186). Other analogies include a dance in which we take part, a novel in which though the scene is set, the plot well developed, and the ending in sight, we are directly invited into the drama as decision-making characters within the story (186). This explanation will forever mark my own life and impact my preaching of the gospel. And the book literally brims with such insightful analogies and human stories. It thus becomes, in the best sense of this homiletical observation, a "preacher's goldmine." It will improve communication skill even though it was not written for this purpose, I feel sure.

The comedienne, Lilly Tomlin, has noted that if a person speaks to God, we call it prayer, but if they say God speaks to them, we call it schizophrenia. Wright develops his view of Scripture by showing how we should "listen for God's voice" (187). There is no radical mysticism here, but one does encounter the ancient practice of *lectio divina*, or sacred

meditative reading. Again, Wright demonstrates a creative use of the ancient church writers while he stays rooted in the modern concern for hearing the message of the Bible. This hearing is not, he adds, a “matter of precise, technical expertise. It’s a matter of love—which, as I have already hinted, is the mode of knowing required for living at the intersection between heaven and earth” (189). The primary difference between the Bible and other religious books is that they do not offer a “controlling story within which the readers are summoned to become characters” (190). Unlike the Koran, which Wright calls a “hard-edged ‘authoritative’ book,” the Bible invites us into the story so that we might know God and his love (190). The problem with much conservative use of the Scriptures, in my own experience, has been that the Bible has been treated by Christians as if it were more like the Koran than what it really is.

So, how do we interpret the Bible? We must begin with the realization that the Bible is more than information, albeit true information.

It is . . . part of the means by which, in the power of the Spirit, the living God rescues his people and his world, and takes them forward on the journey toward his new creation, and makes us agents of that new creation even as we travel (191).

Wright proceeds to explode the false dichotomy created by asking the question: “Do we interpret the Bible literally or metaphorically?” Truth, he argues, is more complicated, and more interesting, than this question allows (193). The interpretation of the Bible, then, is a “huge and wonderful task” (197). This is why we need to engage it both individually and corporately. If this book is part of God’s answer to the four ancient quests (justice, spirituality, relationship, and beauty) then we must read it and listen to it much more carefully.

Wright concludes by inviting the reader to “Believing and Belonging” (chapter 15). He shows that the church exists to be a missional community (204) and how we are awakened to the good news. This happens as the Bible “makes sense” to us. But

this kind of “making sense” is, as Wright has already hinted at in previous things we have noted, “much more like falling in love than like calculating a bank balance” (207). This happens when we have faith, and this is what Paul means by “the obedience of faith.” “Indeed, the word the early Christians used for ‘faith’ can also mean ‘loyalty’ or ‘allegiance’” (208).

Wright’s treatment of the language of justification has raised more opposition to his teaching than any single subject, at least in some conservative circles. In *Simply Christian*, Wright provides as good a paragraph explaining what he does mean by justification as you will find in his large corpus of written works. For the sake of allowing him to speak for himself, I include the entire paragraph:

To believe, to love, to obey (and to repent of our failure to do those things): faith of this kind is the mark of the Christian, the one and only badge we wear. That is why, in most traditional churches, the community declares its faith publicly in the words of one of the ancient creeds. This is the stamp of who we are. When we declare our faith, we are saying yes to this God, and to this project. That is the central mark of our identity, of who and what the church is. This, by the way, is what St. Paul meant when he spoke of “justification by faith.” He intends to put the whole world to rights; he has already begun this process in the death and resurrection of Jesus, and in the work of his Spirit in the lives of men and women, bringing them to faith by which alone we are identified as belonging to Jesus. When people come to Christian faith, they are “put in the right” as an advance sign, and as part of the means, of what God intends to do for his whole creation. (209)

CONCLUSION

Wright ends this magnificent book with a quote that will rightly jar some people: “Despite what many people think, within the Christian family and outside it, the point of Christianity isn’t “to go to heaven when you die’” (217). The Bible’s message is really quite clear if you follow the story line:

"God intends, in the end, to put the whole creation to rights. Earth and heaven will be made to overlap with one another, not fitfully, mysteriously, and partially as they do at the moment, but completely, gloriously, and utterly" (217). This promise runs from Genesis to Revelation. The end, seen in Revelation 21:3, is not about "saved souls" going up to heaven "but with the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven to earth, so that 'the dwelling of God is with humans'" (217). That heaven and earth will become one is the rest of the story, the part neither discussed nor preached in the modern church. Wright is surely correct in calling us back to this biblical emphasis.

This biblical emphasis means that we presently live between heaven and earth. We are on the road from creation to new creation. This is also the "already-and-not-yet" emphasis of Reformed biblical theology. After showing why the option of pantheism cannot work with the biblical story, Wright also shows why most evangelical understanding fails as well. This view is the option that sees this world and God as "a long way apart." Wright explains:

Many today, faced with the question of Christian ethics, assume this model, taking it for granted that if this distant God wanted humans to behave in particular ways he would give them instructions. The idea of an overarching moral law, common to all humankind, written perhaps within human consciences but also needing to be thought out, argued through, and taught, has been extremely common in Western society for the last two-hundred years at least. Indeed, many people have supposed that when St. Paul was talking about "the law," he was referring to that sort of overarching moral system. Christian ethics then becomes a matter of struggling to obey a somewhat arbitrary code of law promulgated by a distant deity. Within that struggle, "sin" is seen in terms of breaking laws conceived in that fashion; and "salvation" is the rescue of human beings from the punishment that this deity would otherwise inflict on those who disobey his decrees. Again, though this has some echoes of Christianity, it isn't in fact the Christian way (220-21).

In my copy of *Simply Christian* I wrote in the margin, "This is the modern evangelical option!" But Wright shows why this option is both incorrect and unsatisfying. It is incorrect because it fails to do justice to the biblical story and text. It is unsatisfying because the real story is much more interesting and fruitful for joyful living.

In Wright's thinking the third option for how to see the world and the new creation is that we must see that God and the world are "different from one another, but not far apart" (221). This is the very place where Wright's understanding shines through in all its biblical glory. He suggests that early Christians saw that the Temple, Torah, and Wisdom had all "come together in and as Jesus of Nazareth, Israel's Messiah, God's second self, his 'Son' in that full sense" (221). With this event, of the incarnation, God's future arrived in our present, in the person of Jesus Christ. This is the future hope for all creation. Thus having arrived in the now, the forces of evil have been exposed and openly defeated. Heaven and earth overlap and interlock, as do both the future and the present. "And the way that interlocking becomes real, not just imaginary, is through the powerful work of God's Spirit" (222).

PRACTICING THE TUNES OF THE NEW WORLD

Again and again Wright uses language to drive home his point with such utter clarity that it is hard to miss what he seeks to make clear. He steadfastly shows that we do not do human works to earn God's favor or to merit salvation. (Again, *contra* many silly suggestions to the contrary, Wright nowhere suggests that we earn or merit salvation in the slightest sense!)

What Wright does conclude is far more interesting and suggestive of a richly textured basis for living life for the glory of God. He writes: "It is not about trying to obey dusty rule-books from long ago or far away. It is about practicing in the present, the tunes we shall sing in God's new world" (222). I can live that type of theology. I can practice my singing in the present and see the reason why the entire new creation is

unfolding (now in mystery to some extent) in a way that fills all of life with wonder, love, and praise.

And living out the Spirit-empowered life is not about a list of do's and don'ts, but rather about working out "which styles of life and behavior belong with the corrupting evil which must be rejected if the new creation is to emerge, and which styles of life and behavior belong with the new creation which must be embraced, struggled for, and celebrated" (224). This is a view of Christian ethics that is rooted in the Christian reality of the new creation. It takes "nerves of steel, and a careful searching after wisdom" to live it. We are fundamentally equipped to live this life by being fully informed by the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus. This reality comes to us in our baptism and by the work of the Spirit, always in the fellowship of other Christians and always by listening to the wisdom of the entire Christian tradition. Thus, Wright says: "Part of the art of being a Christian is learning to be sensitive to all of them, and to weigh what we think we are hearing from one quarter alongside what is being said in another" (224).

Even the rules God does give us, and they are there for sure, are "signposts to a way of life in which heaven and earth overlap" more than they are ethical hoops we jump through to reach God. When the future breaks into our present, when God's promises and law become ours in Christ, "we discover what genuine humanness looks and feels like in practice" (225).

In light of the above paradigm one would be warranted to ask, "How do we address the modern problems of sexuality in a fresh and thoroughly biblical way?" Wright answers this one without flinching, but again not in the way most moral arguments are made by conservatives in our time. He says that, because "sexual activity has become almost completely detached from the whole business of building up communities and relationships, and has degenerated simply into a way of asserting one's right to choose one's own pleasure in one's own way," we must move away from sex as "a toy" and recover it "as a sacrament" given to us by God. We are thus called by

God in Jesus Christ "to live in our bodies *now* in a way which anticipates the life we shall live *then*. Marital fidelity echoes and anticipates God's fidelity to the whole creation. Other kinds of sexual activity symbolize and embody the distortions and corruptions of the present world" (232–33).

The appeal to the church with which Wright ends his conclusion, is to "reawaken its hunger for beauty at every level" (235). The world is broken, but beautiful. It is rather like "a violin waiting to be played" (235). The artist can help us see the beauty and hear the music. Sin is not just the breaking of a law but "the missing of an opportunity" (236). And, "Christian holiness is not (as people often imagine) a matter of denying something good. It is about growing up and grasping something even better" (237).

The publisher advertises this wonderful book as "exciting and accessible prose." I concur, at least on one level. It is now one of those books I would take with me to the deserted island if I could take only a small handful with me. But I am also quite sure ordinary American Christian readers will not be able to follow Wright's profoundly nuanced theology as easily as the book jacket suggests. This is the sad fact of the matter. The church needs Wright's book, but most, I fear, are not ready for it. Perhaps a few wise pastors and seriously hungry lay men and women will make the effort. I predict that they will be glad if they did. But I do not think the book will become another *Mere Christianity* as Anne Rice suggests in her zeal for the book. It requires much more orientation to the biblical world than does that marvelous little book, and the general Christian reader is in far worse shape now than when Lewis wrote his classic. This, however, should not keep you from Wright's fine book, which should be treasured in its own way. Read it and mark it, and *then read it again*. I am already on my second reading and expect there will be several more to follow.