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*ADVANCING THE
CHRISTIAN TRADITION
IN THE THIRD MILLENNIUM*

VOLUME 15 • NUMBER 2 • 2006

ACT 3 Review (ISSN 1071-7277) (U.S.P.S. 011-791) is published quarterly by ACT 3, Inc., 630 Paxton Place, Carol Stream, Illinois 60188-9244. Periodicals postage has been paid at Carol Stream, Illinois, and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *ACT 3 Review*, P.O. Box 88216, Carol Stream, Illinois 60188-0216.

ACT 3 Review is indexed in *Christian Periodical Index* and *ATLA Religion Database*, published by the American Theological Library Association, 250 S. Wacker Dr., 16th Flr., Chicago, Illinois 60606, E-mail: atla@atla.com, <http://www.atla.com/>.

ACT 3 Review is published four times each year by ACT 3, Inc., a not-for-profit teaching ministry organized in the state of Illinois in 1991. The ministry is committed to the authority of Holy Scripture, the catholic creeds of the early church and the tradition of historic Reformation theology. The purpose of this ministry is centered in its mission statement:

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The conviction of the staff and editors of the *ACT 3 Review* is that the renewal of faith, church, and culture must be deeply rooted in worship, spiritual formation, and mission.

The views expressed in this publication should be considered as the personal opinions of the authors and are not to be taken as an official editorial perspective.



ADVANCING THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION
IN THE THIRD MILLENNIUM

Published by ACT 3

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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editor:

I loved the articles in the journal which featured various reflections on McLaren and then McLaren's response (14:3). That was a great forum. I was disappointed, however, in the next volume (14:4) and the reflection on D. A. Carson's (which included another great forum of articles) book which was absent any opportunity for Carson to respond (as McLaren was given in the previous issue).

Forgive me if I missed some disclaimer comment that you may have published in that volume noting that Carson declined or was not available to interact with the articles published. I would love to have read (just as in the first issue) Carson's reflections on what the brothers wrote about his book. It appeared by virtue of this lack of a forum for Carson's response that your approach was not evenhanded.

Keep going. I like these forums.

—ERIC MOUNTS

Editor: We discussed having Dr. Carson respond to the reviews but decided to treat this simply as a lengthy book review rather than as a new forum as we did in the McLaren critique. We did this for two reasons. First, Carson had *openly critiqued* McLaren in a public setting, since his book grew out of an earlier series of lectures given at Cedarville University. Second, Carson had already received the critique of one of our writers, David Mills, in a different context and various responses were widely published and discussed on the Internet. For this reason, we thought our review of Carson's book should simply be published as a lengthy book review (with four different and unique approaches). Our mistake may have been that we did not set this up as an "open" forum as we had done with Brian McLaren, but we had no other motive.

Some conservative writers have suggested that New Perspective (NP) proponents, and in particular N. T. Wright, are introducing pluralist understandings of salvation and even Unitarian notions of God. If this were true, I would personally urge you to run away as quickly as possible from what the advocates are teaching. A reading of the primary material, however, reveals something very different. The New Perspective does question certain aspects of Reformation thought, but it does so in a manner that seeks to correct historical theology by biblical theology. (Major premise: The NP does question if membership in the Jewish community, or the people of God, was ever based upon earning anything by way of merit!) It seems to me that this approach follows the very truth of sola Scriptura, properly defined and used. The NP does lead to some revision in our thinking, at least in certain areas, but this revision actually leads the church to a fuller and more nuanced view of forensic righteousness as taught so correctly by Protestant tradition. The goal is to teach a better biblical doctrine, and I am convinced this is what is being done.

JOHN H. ARMSTRONG

INTRODUCTION: N. T. WRIGHT AND THE BIBLICAL WORLDVIEW



JOHN ARMSTRONG

Theological controversy has always been at the center of Christian thought. Indeed, controversy has often been used by God to help the church rediscover her identity in times of grave moral and spiritual darkness. I believe that when the skies have become the darkest in human history, especially in the life of the church as God's people, the light of God's truth soon begins to dawn again. This is the way of reformation and church renewal.

The simple truth is that God repeatedly uses human instrumentality to bring fresh light to his people. These instruments are very often exceedingly gifted men and women. But they are what they are—men and women, not gods. These men and women often disturb the peace of Zion, afflicting comfortable people and disturbing the ways they have calmly assured themselves that they understand perfectly well what God is saying in their day.

One such instrument, in our time, has been Nicholas Thomas ("Tom") Wright, the bishop of Durham of the Anglican Church and a leading British New Testament scholar and

writer. Born in 1948, Tom Wright has written more than thirty books and is undeniably a frontline New Testament scholar. He is presently completing the fourth book in a projected six-volume *magnum opus* titled *Christian Origins and the Question of God*. This series alone is one of the most widely discussed series of its kind in decades. But many Reformed and conservative readers only know of Wright's work because of the controversy that surrounds his teaching on justification in Paul. This was, in my own case, how I first encountered Wright's thought. And my first reaction was not very favorable.

My own story is really very simple. I was an ardent defender of what I believed to be the biblical truth of *sola fide*. I had even entered into some of the popular controversies in the United States (during the 1990s) that related to this subject, especially as these related to the much debated series of documents, books, and articles surrounding the Evangelical and Catholics Together initiative.

I had also done a good bit of reading in the primary sources of Reformed and Lutheran theology. I had taught Romans and had read it with my "Luther glasses" firmly in place for several decades. What Wright said about Paul's theology troubled me very deeply, since I saw him attacking this article by which "the church stands or falls." All of this made me nervous about Wright and frankly, if truth be told, unwilling to hear him out. But into this context a friend, who still remains a true friend, told me that I should read Tom Wright for myself before I continued going off half-cocked, especially in public settings, about his errors. Because my friend can, and does, speak very bluntly to me, I decided he just might be right, and thus I should listen to his reasonable appeal.

It didn't take me long, after I began to read N. T. Wright, to realize that he was one of the truly brilliant biblical thinkers of our time. And I soon came to see how his thought and biblically informed worldview could be a powerful instrument to open minds and hearts in a fresh new way. Again and again, reading Tom Wright sent me to my Bible, forcing me to think as I had never thought and to worship like I had never worshiped. I soon realized, though I still did not

agree with Wright on several points, that he was teaching me like few theologians had taught me.

My mistake in all of this was really quite simple. I felt my friends would all welcome these new insights. How wrong I was. For sure, some did welcome them. Many, however, not only rejected N.T. Wright but me as well. I am still amazed, frankly, at the level to which this debate has risen in the past five years. Entire sub-groups of conservative Christian ministers and schools have taken Wright's challenge to common ideas in our ranks as a call to speak out against the man and his theology. This has also included speaking against me, and a number of people far more important than me, who likewise appreciate his work and find immense value in his way of reading Scripture. If you want to see just how wide this controversy has become, you should do an Internet search with the name N. T. Wright. You can begin, if you really want to read Tom Wright himself, by going to the N. T. Wright website at www.ntwrightpage.com. There will you find a plethora of articles, audio files, lectures, reviews, and criticisms. There is enough to keep you busy for several days. Then you should begin reading Wright books, of which four recent ones are reviewed in this issue.

If you have never read Wright, I hope that you will begin. If you are an ordinary Christian reader, then start with his newest book, *Simply Christian*, which I personally review in this issue. If you want to struggle with his most basic thought on the theology of Paul (including the issue of justification), then take up *Paul*, a book also prominently reviewed by associate editor Thomas N. Smith in this issue. It is not an easy book, but it is an important one and is based upon lectures Wright gave in the United States in 2004–05. If you want to understand how Tom Wright understands the authority of Scripture, read the new book *The Last Word*, also reviewed extensively in this issue by associate editor P. Andrew Sandlin. Finally, if you are a scholar and want to read the finest treatment of Jesus and the resurrection, then you must procure the magisterial *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, which receives a short review in this issue by New Testament scholar Walter M.

Dunnett, who was my first New Testament professor in college back in 1969.

Tom Wright is a true churchman, a first-class scholar, and a wonderful preacher of the gospel. He is personally warm, genuinely self-effacing, and very approachable. He is also a writer that every serious Christian writer ought to engage in some way, if they love the story of the Bible. Time will tell just how important his contribution will be to the whole church, but I am of the impression that, generations from now, people will likely still read his work and profit from it, seeing it in the historical context as groundbreaking New Testament scholarship in a number of important ways.

The only true criterion of a Christian culture is the degree in which the social way of life is based on the Christian faith. However barbarous a society may be, however backward in the modern humanitarian sense, if its members possess a genuine Christian faith they will possess a Christian culture—and the more genuine the faith, the more Christian the culture.

Christopher Dawson