

Nicholas Thomas Wright—New perspective on St. Paul

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The literature produced by the New Perspective (abbreviated in this paper as NP) is vast. Wright himself has produced more than 30 books and numerous articles. It is also varied. It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine it all. I will make no attempt to deal with all of the exegetical studies the NP or Wright have delivered. For those one might read the Waldschmidt paper and Tackmier's exegesis of 2 Corinthians 5. So this study is not meant to be exhaustive or to cover every aspect of Wright's theology. I will only present that which stands out and which he lays down as central to his theology.

The NP started between thirty and forty years ago. It drew its impetus from three sources. It started in part as reaction against the anti-semitism revealed in its most virulent form in the holocaust. This anti-semitism sprang from within Christianity because many Christians had mistakenly believed that the Judaism of Paul's day was legalistic. The NP was to serve as a corrective to this misunderstanding of Paul. So the NP asserted the Jewishness of Paul over against those who had maintained that Paul had made a radical break with Judaism and turned Christianity toward Hellenism. The NP also reacted against the radical individualism it perceived in the Luther and subsequently in Western Christianity, especially Pietism and evangelicalism. This view was first espoused by Krister Stendahl. Finally NP turned away from the view of the enlightenment which had reduced Christianity to an abstraction with little foundation in history. The NP looked to the new understanding of Second Temple Judaism to provide the historical foundation of the New Testament.

The following gives a brief, but concise summary of the New Perspective:

*What is this new perspective? At its core is the recognition that Judaism is not a religion of self-righteousness whereby humankind seeks to merit salvation before God. Paul's argument with the Judaizers was not about Christian grace versus Jewish legalism. His argument was rather about the status of Gentiles in the church. Paul's doctrine of justification, therefore, had far more to do with Jewish-Gentile issues than with questions of the individual's status before God.*  
<http://www.thepaulpage.com/>

The most prominent proponents of this —new perspective on Paul include a Lutheran bishop (the late Krister Stendahl), a self-described —low-church Protestant (E. P. Sanders), a charismatic Scotch Methodist (James D. G. Dunn), and an Anglican bishop (N. T. Wright). American Catholic scholars such as Frank Matera and Luke Timothy Johnson have made important contributions to the movement. Likewise, Jewish scholars such as Daniel Boyarin, Mark Nanos, and Alan Segal have eagerly participated in the conversation. (Harrington, p.2)

We shall consider Stendahl, Sanders, and Dunn, each in turn as forerunners to the NP and N.T. Wright

Krister Stendhal was a professor, a Swedish theologian and later a bishop in the church of Sweden.

In 1960, Krister Stendhal began a project that might be called de-Lutheranizing Paul.<sup>7</sup> The basis of Stendhal's insight was important to the movement known as the "New Perspective..."(Marshall, p. 2)

The more we consider Paul's writing in this context the less we see the acute psychological dilemma characteristic of the Augustinian-Lutheran interpretation as a whole. Krister Stendahl masterfully explores this in his ground-breaking essay "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West." Paul was certainly aware of his own shortcomings, but, Stendahl asks, "does he ever intimate that he is aware of any sins of his own which would trouble his conscience? It is actually easier to find statements to the contrary. The tone in Acts 23:1, 'Brethren, I have lived before God in all good conscience up to this day' (cf. 24:16), prevails also throughout his letters."<sup>8</sup> Far from being "simultaneously a sinner and a saint" (*simul iustus et peccator*), Paul testifies of his clear conscience: "Indeed, this is our boast, the testimony of our conscience: we have behaved in the world with frankness and godly sincerity" (2 Cor. 1:12a). He was aware that he had not yet "arrived" (Phil. 3:12-14), that he still struggled with the flesh, yet he was confident of the value of his performance (1 Cor. 9:27). He looked forward to a day when "all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil" (2 Cor. 5:10), and he anticipated a favorable verdict (v. 11). He acknowledged that his clear conscience did not necessarily ensure this verdict (1 Cor. 4:4), but he was confident nevertheless. These are hardly the convictions of someone who intends to rest entirely on the merits of an alien righteousness imputed to his or her account.(Mattinson, p. 3)

E. P. Sanders also made a significant contribution to the formation of the NP in his book, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*.

Based in part on the studies of second Temple, Rabbinic Judaism and along with Montefiore and Moore, Sanders argued that the Judaism of Jesus' and Paul's day was not legalistic, but was marked by "covenantal nomism". In other words it is by grace that God grants entrance by faith into his covenant people and that once one has gain entrance then follows the obligation to keep the terms of the covenant.(Mattinson, pp.2,4,5)

Sanders has coined a now well-known phrase to describe the character of first-century Palestinian Judaism: "covenantal nomism." The meaning of "covenantal nomism" is that human obedience is not construed as the means of entering into God's covenant. That cannot be earned; inclusion within the covenant body is by the grace of God. **Rather, obedience is the means of maintaining one's status within the covenant.** And with its emphasis on divine grace and forgiveness, Judaism was never a religion of legalism. (Mattinson, pp.2,4,5)

Similarly, E. P. Sanders concluded that Paul worked backward from solution to plight rather than from plight to solution. If salvation comes to all, both Jews and Gentiles, through Christ, then it cannot come through the law. (Mattinson, pp.4,5)

For Sanders the language of justification is “transfer terminology.” To be justified is to enter into the covenant people. The distinction between “getting in” and “staying in” is important in this regard. **The debate between “faith” and “law,” he writes, is a debate about entry requirements, not about life subsequent to conversion.** The law is excluded as an entry requirement into the body of those who will be saved; entrance must be by faith apart from the law. **Once Gentiles are “in,” however, they must behave appropriately and fulfill the law in order to retain their status.** Elements of the law which create social distinctions between Jews and Gentiles — circumcision, Sabbath-keeping, food laws — also have to be discarded, even though Paul never sought a rational explanation for such a selective use of the law. (Mattinson, pp.4,5)

Thus in Sanders’ view Paul’s letters do not provide a consistent view of the law. Paul’s central conviction — the universal aspects of christology and soteriology, and Christian behavior — led Paul to give different answers about the law, depending on the question. “When the topic changes, what he says about the law also changes.”<sup>15</sup> (Mattinson, pp.4,5)

James D. G. Dunn built on the work of Sanders, but refined it in significant ways. In fact Dunn first used the term NP in 1982 (Mattinson, p. 5)

Dunn demonstrates that the language of justification is not just “transfer terminology.” There are ongoing and future elements of justification as well as the initial act of acceptance. **“To be justified’ in Paul cannot, therefore, be treated simply as an entry or initiation formula; nor is it possible to draw a clear line of distinction between Paul’s usage and the typically Jewish covenant usage.** Already, as we may observe, Paul appears a good deal less idiosyncratic and arbitrary than Sanders alleges.

Also unlike Sanders, Dunn provides a coherent framework for both Paul’s positive statements about the law and his negative statements. **It was not the law itself which Paul criticized, but rather its misuse as a social barrier.** This misuse of the law is what Paul means by the term “the works of the law”:

**‘Works of law’, the ‘works of the law’ are nowhere understood here, either by his Jewish interlocutors or by Paul himself, as works which *earn* God’s favor, as merit-amassing observances.** They are rather seen as *badges*: they are simply what membership of the covenant people involves, what mark out the Jews as God’s people;...in other words, Paul has in view precisely what Sanders calls ‘covenantal nomism.’ And what he denies is that God’s justification depends on ‘covenantal nomism,’ that God’s grace extends only to those who wear the badge of the covenant.<sup>19</sup>

The “badges” or “works” particularly at issue were those of circumcision and food laws, not simply human efforts to do good. The ramifications of this observation for traditional Protestantism are far-reaching:

**More important for Reformation exegesis is the corollary that ‘works of the law’ do *not* mean ‘good works’ in general, ‘good works’ in the sense disparaged by the heirs of Luther, works in the sense of achievement....In short, once again Paul seems much less a man of sixteenth-century Europe and much more firmly in touch with the reality of first-century Judaism than many have thought.<sup>20</sup>**

We should not let our grasp of Paul’s reasoning slip back into the old distinction between faith and works in general, between faith and ‘good works’. Paul is not arguing here for a concept of faith which is totally passive because it fears to become a ‘work’. It is the demand for a *particular* work as the necessary expression of faith which he denies.(Mattinson, pp.5,6)

Before we come to the major emphasis of this paper, the work of Nicholas Thomas Wright, we will pause to review a summary of the main tenets of the NP as characterized by Harrington, a Jesuit scholar. He identifies ten major emphases of the NP.

1. Paul's work and writings must be interpreted in the context of 1st-century Judaism.
2. Jews in the time of Jesus and Paul were not legalists per se. Most observed the Mosaic Law in the context of their covenant relationship with God (covenantal nomism).
3. Paul did not have a tender conscience with regard to his past in Judaism. Rather, his experience of the risen Christ trumped his past in Judaism.
4. Paul's —conversion involved a —call. Paul's —conversion was from one form of Judaism (Pharisaic) to another (Christian). His —call was to bring the gospel (the good news of Jesus Christ) to non-Jews (Gentiles).
5. Paul did not set out to found a new religion separate from Judaism. Rather, he regarded himself as a Jew and viewed Jesus as the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel.
6. The major and most pressing concern in Paul's letters to the Galatians and the Romans was not the theological principle of justification by faith but the ecclesiological-pastoral question about how non-Jews could be part of the people of God.
7. For Paul, the —faith of Christ (Jesus' fidelity to God) came before and provided the basis for —faith in Christ (Jesus as the object of faith).
8. Paul was reasoning from solution (Christ) to plight (all humankind before and apart from Christ was under the powers of Sin, Death, and the Law).

9. For Paul, the —works of the Law were first and foremost the distinctive identity markers attached to Judaism: circumcision, Sabbath observance, and food laws.
10. Paul looked forward to the salvation of —all Israel (Rom 11:25-26).

N.T. Wright is perhaps the most prominent exponent of the NP. Wright belongs to the Church of England. He has served as a pastor, a bishop and at present a theological professor. He is a serious scholar of the New Testament; he claims that his work rests entirely on thorough exegetical study of the New Testament, free from the bias of inherited theological presuppositions. At the same time, however, he claims to have no presuppositions himself. He draws much of his understanding of the Judaism of Jesus' and Paul's time on what is revealed in second temple Judaism. He displays a good understanding of continental philosophy. He also draws widely from modern literary and linguistic studies on the nature of language and narrative. He has written extensively, the author of more than thirty books and many articles. Skillful in the use of metaphor, his writing is filled with powerful images. He is also a proponent of a viewpoint, which he labels as "critical realism". Most recently he has begun a commentary on the entire New Testament.

Wright has engendered a host of critics. Obviously many Lutheran commentators have found significant fault with him. Not entirely surprising, Wright has little direct knowledge of Luther, the Lutheran writers of the period of high orthodoxy, or modern confessional Lutherans. His chief knowledge of Lutheran teaching rests heavily on Rudolph Bultmann and Ernest Kasemann, hardly pillars of confessional Lutheranism. Because he shares Stendahl's view of the role of individualism in Western culture, he also finds fault with modern Pentecostals and Evangelicals and their over emphasis the salvation of the individual and on the role of the subjective and feeling in the life of a believer. Though he stands firmly in the Reformed tradition, he rejects the teaching of Calvin about justification. Against the Reformed tradition he asserts an almost Lutheran view of baptism. Some maintain that he has drifted toward Roman Catholic view of salvation and justification. Others accuse him of post-modernism. This view it seems arises because of his tendency to employ paradoxical statements and the use of understatement as a strategy. I

Some of the confusion grows out of a difficulty of determining Wright's intention. It is hard to tell whether he is advancing an apology or reasoned defense of Christianity or not. I do believe that a reasoned defense of Christianity is part of his agenda. However, that can open one up to questions about the certainty of one's beliefs in the central tenets of Christianity, since he allows the reader to decide in the face of the argument he has presented. Perhaps the difficulty is determining who his audience is.

On the other hand and even conceding that part of Wright's purpose aims at a modern apology for Christianity, the burden lies with the author to make his intention clear to the reader, especially with an author whose mastery of the language is evident. I would compare Wright to an artist. An artist selects the

images in his painting to convey to the viewer the point he wishes to express. He must choose what elements to put in the foreground and what elements which will appear of less importance. In this manner the artist give an overall impression which he intends the viewer take from the painting. Wright does the same thing. There is no mistaking the picture he intends to convey, highlighting what is most important and placing in the background elements of Christian teaching and confession though true and part of the Christian story, but yet placed into the background. He operates in this manner in order to offer a corrective to what he believes has been a long held misplaced emphasis in Christian teaching.

Before we can examine Wright's NP, we need to turn briefly to examine his view of Jesus Christ and the central message of the Gospels. What he asserts is the message of the four gospels becomes later the foundation for what he will claim is the real message of St. Paul about justification and righteousness. I have chosen to draw this material chiefly from his book: *How God became King—the forgotten story of the Gospels*. He has presented the same material in many shorter articles which are listed under references.

I will cover the material under the following headings:

.The perspective Wright takes on St. Paul is mightily influenced by what he asserts is the primary message of the four gospels.

p. 161 Critical biblical scholarship was then nurtured in a world(that of German Lutheranism) where the "two kingdoms" theory, which separated the kind of religion/faith and the kingdom of the state, was all but set in stone. Thus, for philosophical , cultural, and theological reasons, the inner core of the gospels—the message of God becoming king—remained impenetrable.

p.273 My case throughout this book, then, is that we have all misunderstood the gospels. We have either followed the apparent implication of the great creeds and allowed ourselves to tell a pseudo-Christian story from which the story of Israel, on the one hand, and the story of God's kingdom, on the other, have been quietly removed.

p. 274 But if we start with the creeds, granted in the way our Western Christianity, is now more or less bound to read them, we will never understand the gospels, and hence the whole canon itself. If, however, we start with the gospels, which form the heart and balance point of the whole Christian canon, and if we understand them to be telling the story of how God, the creator God, Israel's God, became in and through Jesus the king of the world, then we can return to the creeds and say them in a very different way.

p. 32 The coming of the kingdom is absent not only from the great creeds, but also from "the gospel" as envisaged in the churches of the Reformation.

He confesses his personal faith from his youth though its understand is significantly transformed by his new understanding of the four gospels.

p. 4, ...my earliest memory of personal faith was when, as a small boy, I was overwhelmed reduced to tears, but the thought that Jesus died for me. What the cross says about the love of God has always been central and vital for me.

Wright claims that there is a great gap in our understanding of Christianity because we have missed the real message of the gospels especially as it is expressed in its great creedal statements.

p.4 But what about that question in the middle—my question? Why did Jesus live? What, in other words, about the bit between the stable and the cross?

p. 5 I had stumbled on a weak spot in the general structure of Christian faith as it has come to be expressed in today's world...

p.10 It isn't just we've all misread the gospels, though I think that's broadly true. It is more that we haven't really *read* them at all

p.16 This is the problem, I believe, with the great majestic creeds, full as they are of solemn truth and supple wisdom. They manage not to mention the main thing the gospels are trying to tell us

p. 20 Have we then, all misunderstood the gospels? Is there an emptiness at the heart of the great cloak of the creedal gospel? I fear the answer had to be yes.

p.235 The four canonical gospels thus demand to be read with their two main themes, kingdom and cross, fully and thoroughly integrated in a way the great majority of the Western church has simply not notice.

p.242 ...the way we have normally listed the options in atonement theology simply won't do. Our questions have been wrongly put, because they haven't been about the kingdom. They haven't been about God's sovereign, saving rule coming on earth as in heaven. Instead, our questions have been about a "salvation" that rescues people from the world. "Going to heaven" has been the object(ever since the middle ages at least, in the Western church); "sin" is what stops us from getting there; so the cross must deal with sin, so that we can leave this world and go to the much better one in the sky or in "eternity" or wherever. But this is simply untrue to the story the gospels are telling---which, again, explains why we've all misread these wonderful texts.

p.257 There is a kingdom-shaped gap at the heart of their implicit story. And the problem with leaving that gap unfilled is t, *ever so slightly but significantly that everything else* in the story changes its meaning.

p.260,261 What many think, then, as they jump from God to Jesus, might go something like this: "Yes, God made the world, but we are sinners, and so God sent Jesus to save us from our sins." Creation, sin, Jesus. That is the implicit narrative of millions of Christians today---and it guarantees that they will never understand the Old Testament or the New.

p.261 *Who was conceived, by the Holy Ghost, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried.*

Here we have the central pair of statements...the virgin birth and the crucifixion with nothing but a comma in between. Sadly, here most modern Christians who say the creed from the heart barely even notice the comma, let alone think about the wealth of biblical emphasis that is thereby dwindled down to nothing. Jesus, for such people, is the miracle man, the supernatural being who came miraculously into the world to save us from our sins....The miracle of the birth and death for sinners—that's the heart of it, think "orthodox" Christians. (The Apostle's Creed does not even mention the purpose of the death....

p.195 We understand, in other words, that the "gap" in the classic creeds---the gap between incarnation and atonement---is filled by the evangelists with their claim that in Jesus, and particularly through his suffering, Israel's God was becoming king of the whole world.

The central and real message of the gospels is

p. 11 In particular, they tell us about what we might call his kingdom-inaugurating work: the deeds and words that declare that God's kingdom was coming then and there, in some sense or other, on earth as in heaven. They tell us a great deal about that; but the great creeds don't.

p. 19 (speaking of the four gospels) This, they would say, is the story of *how God became king of the world*.

p. 32 ...Jesus was talking about God, but talking about God *precisely in order to explain his own kingdom work*.

p.34 *But the whole point of the gospels is to tell the story of how God became king, on earth as in heaven.*

p 37 I find in the four gospels : God really has become king---in and through Jesus!...this message is, however, an *inaugurated eschatological* message.

p. 175 The story [the four gospels] tell is the story of *how God became king---in and through Jesus both in his public career and in his death*.

p. 216 Yes, the gospels affirm Jesus's divine identity. Yes, they affirm his death on the cross as the divine climax of God's age old plan of salvation. But the purpose of God coming incognito in and as Jesus and the purpose of this Jesus dying on the cross was--the gospels are telling us---in order to establish God's kingdom, his justice, on earth as in heaven.

Many inadequate answers have been given as to the real message of the gospels.

He would argue that the gospels are essentially not about these doctrines, not however to deny the truth or importance of these doctrines(pp.41-58):

These are the six inadequate answers he mentions:

1. Going to heaven
2. Gaining eternal life
3. Jesus as religious teacher or moral exemplar
4. His perfect sacrifice or the passive and active obedience
5. They are not written so we can identify with their characters
6. Jesus divinity or God as embodied in Jesus

These inadequacies have led to gross misunderstanding and a flawed "orthodoxy".

p.6 ...there has been an assumption, going as far back as the Reformation, that the "gospel" is what you find in Paul's letters... This gospel consists, normally of a precise statement of what Jesus achieved in his saving death...and how that achievement could be appropriated by the individual("justification by faith"). Atonement and justification were



assumed to be at the heart of the Gospel. But "the gospels" appear to have almost nothing to say about those subjects.

p.9 The puzzle of Jesus' lifetime—what was his life all about?—has crept up on me and become the puzzle of mine....heavily ironic in a tradition...that prided itself on being "biblical".

p.262 But will they understand the incarnation as God becoming human *in order to become king*? Will they understand the cross as *the means by which God completed his incarnate kingdom work*? Pretty certainly not. As I have repeatedly said, it is possible to check all the "orthodox" boxes and still miss the point.

p.267 Wise readers of the creed already know at this point, then that the one who is thus born to Mary is the one who has come to establish the kingdom of the one true God. To make "virgin birth" mean "miraculous divinity" and thereby to screen out "inaugurating God's kingdom is to falsify it--however, "orthodox" it may sound.

Failure to grasp this central message reduces Christianity to a docetic-like Gnosticism, thus leading to a denial of the reality of the incarnation and also to neo-Marcionism.

p. 56 To speak of Jesus's divinity without speaking of his kingdom coming on earth as in heaven it to take a large step toward the detached spirituality—almost a form of Gnosticism...

p.231 Ah, we think, God's kingdom is simply the sum total of all the souls who respond in faith to God's love. It isn't a real kingdom in space, time, and matter. It's a spiritual reality, "not of this world." John, though, will not collude with the Platonic shrinkage

p.256 There are many who would be horrified to have their status as catholic creedal Christians questioned, but in how life, worship, teaching, prayer and Christian thinking the scriptures of Israel play no visible part. The creeds do virtually nothing to challenge this form of truncated quasi-Marcionite Christianity.

The gospels mean the following when they say that the kingdom of God has come in Jesus.

p. 201 Here, the suffering and death of Jesus's people is not simply the dark path they must tread because of the world's continuing hostility toward Jesus and his message. It somehow has the more positive effect of carrying forward the redemptive effect of Jesus's own death, not by adding to it, but by sharing in it... But if they are to bring his kingdom in his way, they will be people who share his suffering.

p.142 Once again, Jesus's embrace of the hideous vocation to die on a cross is seen as the overthrow of the world's powers, the world's way of power.

p.183 ...we should not be surprised to discover that the suffering of Israel and of Israel's supreme is to be understood as part of the long and larger purposes of Israel's God, in other words, the establishment of his worldwide healing sovereignty.

p. 205 [This world's kingdoms are dethroned) in order to replace them with one whose power is the power of the servant and whose strength is the strength love.

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p.208 His victory over them will not be a victory of swords and guns and bombs, but the victory of his people and of their derivative suffering and testimony.

p.215 And this vocation...is not simply to be God's agent in saving people from their personal sin and its consequences(though that remains the heart of it). The vocation of the servant is to bring God's justice into the wider world.

p. 216 Yes, the gospels affirm Jesus's divine identity. Yes, they affirm his death on the cross as the divine climax of God's age old plan of salvation. But the purpose of God coming incognito in and as Jesus and the purpose of this Jesus dying on the cross was---the gospels are telling us--- in order to establish God's kingdom, his justice, on earth as in heaven.

p.230 Part of John's meaning of the cross, then, is ... also *what has to happen* if God's kingdom, which makes its way(as Jesus insists) by nonviolence rather than by violence, is to win the day....The truth to which Jesus bears witness---the truth of a kingdom accomplished by the innocent dying in the place of the guilty.

p.233 We should not imagine that "forgiveness of sins" here is a purely individualistic thing...it seems clearly to extend to the jubilee principle, the release from all debts, the cosmic sigh of relief at God's new exodus achievement, rescuing people from all forms of slavery....to announce to the world that there is a different way to be human.

I need not offer a critique of much of what he says. Its significance is obvious to the Lutheran reader. By what he has chosen to highlight he has painted a picture of Christianity which is foreign to us. Even though he confesses much of the truth of Christianity, by his selection of materials and those he places in the foreground, he has proclaimed "another gospel".

p.158 Once you lose the kingdom theme, which is central to the gospels, everything else becomes reinterpreted in ways that radically distort, that substitute a subtly different "gospel" message...

His message is in marked contrast to the Luther's explanation of the second petition of the Lord's prayer.

In addition to what is obvious I offer the following critique.

It is commendable that Wright clearly shows the link between the New Testament and the Old Testament. However, he is mistaken when he claims that the in Christ the Old Testament covenant, how- be-it quite differently, was turned into new covenant in many ways similar to the old one. His approach is squarely rooted in covenant theology so characteristic of Reformed teaching. We enter this new covenant through faith by grace, but once become members of this new covenant, then obedience is required. At least that is what Wright implies. At the very best he uses language that is unclear("in accordance with the life lived") and he thereby blurs the distinction between justification and sanctification.

What he terms "inadequate answers" about the message of the gospels sound loudly and clearly throughout them.

The gap which he perceives in the great creeds, the gap between Jesus birth and his suffering, death and resurrection, is also a gap clearly evident in the epistles themselves. In fact I believe he has the whole matter backwards. For just as the New Testament unfolds and explains the Old Testament so the epistles unfold and explain the meaning and significance of the story about Jesus in the gospels.

The ideal Christian in whom and through whom the kingdom comes or God's sovereign rule is manifested would be someone like Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King or Ghandi if he were a Christian. Their life is marked but the marks of the kingdom as Wright sees them—servant love, suffering, non-violence, justice, and putting things right in the human manner recaptured by Christ and then in God's covenant people.

Wright holds a high view of Scripture. He regards hearing the reading of the word and preaching as fundamental to Christianity. He regards the gospels as foundational documents which present a picture rooted in historical reality. This view falls in line with his apologetic agenda. He also rejects any attempt to put tradition above Scripture, including "Lutheran or any Protestant tradition".

Because the gospels are the foundational charter for the church's life, they must be stories primarily about Jesus; otherwise the church would be rooted in itself. Here we find, in fact, the mirror image of the Bultmanian position: unless the church's life and mission is rooted in the historical accomplishment of Jesus, all "Christian life would be either arrogance or folly, or both. (*When Jesus became king*, p. 119)

However, he does not feel comfortable talking about Scripture as infallible and appears to question whether Paul wrote all the letters attributed to him. He also places the writing of Daniel during the Maccabean period, assuming also that many of the Old Testament books were edited before they reached their final form as we know them today.

Despite his high view of Scripture he commits a fundamental error by which he eviscerates one of the cardinal principles of Christian doctrine and the Lutheran confessions, the principle of *Sola Scriptura*. He develops his understanding of Jesus, Paul and the gospels based on material drawn from Second Temple Judaism, as outlined by Sanders, Dunn and others. When he give insights into the mind of Jesus and Paul, he draws his material from Second Temple Judaism (*Jesus and the identity of God*, pp. 7, 11, 13, 18) . His view of Judaism of that period rests on the assumption that it was characterized by "covenantal nomism". However, as with all conclusions drawn from historical documents, often the picture is far less simple. Other have challenged the conclusions of Sanders and other NP advocates (Das, *Paul the works...*). However, valuable historical insights are for our understanding of Scripture, we always begin with Scripture first, *scriptura interpret scripturas*. This principle is absolutely fundamental . Wright himself rarely refers to the picture of the Pharisees and Jews as the gospels draw it. That error carries over then into his view of Paul's doctrine of justification and the meaning of the righteousness of God.

In his book, *Simply Christian*, described on book jacket as "*Simply Christian* walks the reader through the Christian faith step-by-step and question by question. For anyone

who wants to travel beyond the controversies that can obscure what the Christian faith really stands for, this simple book is the perfect vehicle for that journey". In *Simply Christian* Wright mentions the word salvation only once. In this book and his other writings he rarely, actually I cannot recall a single instance in which he calls, Jesus, Savior.

We now move on to the teaching for which Wright is best known, his NP. We shall see that his NP is a direct outgrowth of his view of the gospels. For this purpose I will use his popular book, *What Saint Paul really said: Was Paul of Tarsus the real founder of Christianity*. What he says in this book he has said in many other places. But his approach in this book is helpful because he lays out his thought in consistent way. I will highlight his teaching in skeleton form.

Wright sets out his goal:

It is an attempt to study Paul in his own terms. It is trying to come to grips with what he really said.(p.23)

He first tells us what Paul is not:

Saul, I used to believe, was a proto-Pelagian, who thought he could pull himself up by his moral bootstraps. I now believe that this is both radically anachronistic(this view was not invented in Paul's day)and culturally out of line(it is not the Jewish way of thinking). (p.32)

According to Wright and this understanding is central to his whole position on justification is that when Paul wrote against "the works of the law", he was not attacking some sort of proto-Pelagianism or a doctrine of 'good works' or 'work-righteousness' whereby one attempts to please God and thereby gain his favor. Paul was not writing against legalism at all. Rather his point was

If we ask how it is that Israel has missed her vocation, Paul's answer is that she is guilty not of 'legalism' or 'works-righteousness' but of what I call 'national righteousness', the belief that fleshly Jewish descent guarantees membership of God's covenant people.(*Paul of history*, p. 3)

Wright maintains this view throughout this work,( cf. also *Paul of history*, pp. 6, 10,11,12)

...[he argues that] the traditional Pauline interpretation has manufactured a false Paul by manufacturing a false Judaism for him to oppose.( *Paul of history*, p.10)

The categories with which we are to understand Paul, and for that matter the whole New Testament, are not the thin, tired and anachronistic ones of Lutheran polemic.( *Paul of history*,p.14)

When Paul writes about the 'works of the law", he means no more than the following:

...the works of the law to which Paul was opposed were those which distinguished Jews from Gentiles---that is Sabbath, food laws and circumcision.(4QMMT, pp.6,18)

Paul's central message or gospel is

... that YHWH, the God of Israel, was the one true God of the whole world, and that in Jesus of Nazareth he overcome evil and was creating a new world in which justice and peace would reign supreme.(p.37)

I am perfectly comfortable with what people normally mean when they say 'the gospel'. I just don't think it is what Paul meant. In other words, I am not denying that the usual meanings are those thing that people out to say, to preach about, to believe. I simply wouldn't use the word 'gospel' to denote those things.(p.41)

It is not, a system of how people get saved. The announcement of the gospel results in people being saved... 'the gospel' itself, strictly speaking, the narrative proclamation of King Jesus. The proclamation is an authoritative summons to obedience—in Paul's case, to what he calls the 'obedience of faith'.(p.45)

'The gospel' is the announcement of a royal victory.(p.47)

The 'gospel' of Paul the apostle was also a message about God, the one God of Israel, the creator of the world. It, too, was a summons to reject pagan idolatry and to turn to the true God, the source of life and all good things.(p.58)

The gospel[Paul], he says, reveals or unveils God's own righteousness, his covenant faithfulness, which operates through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ for the benefit of all those who in turn are faithful... in other words when Paul announces that Jesus Christ is Lord, the Lord of all the world... the unveiling... the great news that the one God... has been true to his word... (p.109)

This does not, therefore mean 'the gospel reveals justification by faith as the true scheme of salvation; as opposed to Jewish self-help moralism'....The gospel—the announcement of the Lordship of Jesus the Messiah—reveals God's righteousness, his covenant faithfulness...(p.126)

I must stress again that the doctrine of justification by faith is not what Paul meant by 'the gospel'. It is implied by the gospel; when the gospel is proclaimed, people come to faith and so are regarded by God as members of his people.. But 'the gospel' is not an account of how people get saved. It is....the proclamation of the lordship of Jesus.(p.132)

In and through the gospel, Paul confronts the imperial cult and all world powers with the truth that Jesus is Lord and King.(pp.44,89)

Paul's mission to the gentiles based on events of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the coming of the Spirit, was that "the promises of Israel's restoration had in fact been fulfilled".(p.82) Unfortunately Israel had failed in her role as the covenant people and the message of Jesus because

...it challenges that which has become her all-consuming interest: her relentless pursuit of national, ethnic and territorial identity. She is, Paul reckons, in danger of making herself simply a nation 'like all others.' Blood and soil were the mark of pagan nations; Israel was using the Torah and circumcision to emphasize those things.(p.84)

Yes, reply many of the Jews of Paul's day...in our present loyalty to the covenant obligations laid upon us by our God, Our 'works of the law' demonstrate in the present that, when God acts, we will be seen to be his people. Thus there arises that theology of 'justification by works' which Paul was at such pains to demolish.(p.99)

The fulfillment of the covenant in Jesus Christ created a whole new reality for the Jews. The badges or marks of those who belong to the covenant people was no longer going to be the outward marks of the old covenant(circumcision, etc.), but faith

Rather, now the great act had already occurred, the way you could tell in the present who belonged to the true people of God was quite simply faith; faith in the God who sent his Son to die and rise again for the sake of the whole world.(p.93)

So one enters the new people of God by faith or to be more precise one is recognized as belonging to the new people of God on the basis of faith. This privilege is extended because of the righteousness of God which Wright defines quite differently from the classic view of the reformers(*Justification: yesterday*,p.57).

But the key point is that, within the technical language of the law court 'righteousness' means, *for these two persons, the status they have when the court finds in their favour*. Nothing more, nothing less. To imagine the defendant somehow receiving the judge's righteousness is simply a category mistake. That is not how language works.(p.98)

*But the righteousness they have will not be God's own righteousness*. That makes no sense at all, God's own righteousness is his covenant faithfulness.(p.99)

Notoriously, Luther grew up believing that God's righteousness was his 'distributive justice', that is God's moral activity of punishing evil and rewarding virtue. (p.102)

The righteousness of God must refer to God's own righteousness(p.103)

'The faithfulness of Jesus'(which later, in Romans 5, Paul can also refer to as 'the obedience of Jesus')is thus *means whereby the righteousness of God is revealed*. ... God's righteousness is God's own righteousness.(p.107)

The gospel, he says, reveals or unveils God's own righteousness, his covenant faithfulness, which operates through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ for the benefit of all those who now in turn are faithful('from faith to faith'). In other words Paul announces that Jesus Christ is Lord of the world...(p.109)

Wright rejects the traditional and Scriptural view that God imputes his righteousness as result of the death of Jesus on the cross. Therefore when Paul writes that we are justified by faith, he really means to say that because of the covenant faithfulness of God(his righteousness) as revealed in the faithfulness of Jesus and on the basis of faith we are recognized as the people of God.

...this popular view of 'justification by faith', though not entirely misleading, does not do justice to the richness and precision of Paul's doctrine, and indeed distorts it at various points.(p.113)

...the normal Christian, and especially Protestant, readings of Paul were seriously flawed.(p.114)

In terms of the place of justification within Paul's thought, I have already indicated that it cannot be put right at the center, since that place is already taken by the person of Jesus himself, and the gospel announcement of his sovereign kingship. But this does mean that justification becomes a secondary, still less an inessential matter.(p.114)

Justification in this setting, then, is not a matter of *how someone enters the community of the true people of God*, but of *how you tell who belongs to that community*...(p.119)

...it has to do quite obviously with the question of how you *define the people of God*; are they to be defined by the badges of the Jewish race, or in some other way?... (p.120)

...(interpreting Galatians 2) the burning question is Who is a member of the people of God? Are ex-pagans, converts full members or not?...the context is irrevocably covenantal.(p.121)

...(writing on Galatians 3)...'justification ' language... refers to the status of covenant membership; it is the gift of God, nothing something acquired in any way by the human beings involved; and this gift is bestowed upon faith. Faith is the badge of covenant membership, not something one 'performs ' as a kind of initiation test.

Clearly Wright does not understand faith or righteousness in the same way Lutherans do or more importantly in the way Paul has written about it in Romans and Galatians. Again and again he asserts:

The(the people of God) are demarcated by faith—specifically, by their believing of the 'gospel' message of the sovereignty of Jesus Christ. This is the meaning of the crucial term 'justification apart from the law.'

...[writing about Romans 3:21] therefore read v 21 not as a statement of God's righteousness, still less of Christ's righteousness, being imputed, or imparted or otherwise transferred to the believer, but as a statement of God's own covenant faithfulness ...(*Redemption...*, p. 20)

To understand Paul we must understand his eschatology:

...when Jews and early Christians used "end-of-the-world" language to describe this phenomenon they didn't mean it literally. They did not suppose that the world and history were actually going to come to an end. The used "end-of-the-world" language to invest major and cataclysmic events with history with(as we might say) 'earth-shattering' significance.(p.34)

As far as Paul was concerned, the most important eschatological event, through which the living God has unveiled(or, if you like, 'apocalypsed') his plan to save the whole cosmos *has occurred when Jesus rose from the dead*. He wasn't just living in the last days. He was living in the first days—of a whole new world order.(p.50)

It meant that the Gentiles were now to be summoned to join Israel in celebrating the new day, the day of deliverance.(p.51)

...the Age to Come... was arriving in two stages. The end is still to happen(when all Jesus' people are raised to life).(p.51)

It is in connection with his statement about eschatology that Wright makes some of his more troubling and provocative statements about justification.

...the word *forensic*...is also especially, eschatological. It can be used in both past and future as well as present, and indeed the past justification and the future justification determine the meaning of the present...'justification' in the future is to be seen as 'justification', that is God's final declaration that they are his people....It is the event which he can sum up as the 'act of obedience' of Jesus Christ, or as his 'faithfulness'(*Redemption*, p, 18)

...triple tense of justification... Paul can speak of past justification; he can speak of it as present reality; and he can speak of it in some sense future.(*Justification: yesterday*, p. 1)

...one of the key charges against me... is that I have said that final verdict, *as opposed to the present justification, which is pronounced over faith alone*, will be pronounced over the totality of the life lived. It will be in other words, *in accordance* with "works", with seen as whole—not that such life will be perfect(Phil. 3:13-14) but that it will be going in the right direction, "seeking for the glory and honor of immortality(Rom 2:7. I have not at all mean by that to suggest that this is an independent basis from the finished work of Christ and the powerful work of the Spirit, but that within that solid and utterly-of-grace structure the particular evidence offered on the last day will be the tenor and direction of the life that had been lived.( *Justification: yesterday*, p.60)

For Paul future justification will be in accordance with the life that has been lived. He does not say we will earn it. He does not say that we will merit it. He says we have been "seeking for it" by our patience in well doing. (*Justification: yesterday, p.61*)

...this future justification, though it will be in accordance with the life lived, is not for that reason in any way putting in jeopardy, the present verdict issued over faith and faith alone. (*Justification: yesterday, p.62*)

Though Wright asserts that judgment in the future will according to the life lived under the **structure of grace**, his position leads him to define faith more in terms of obedience than trust. In fact, I can not recall very often in what I have read that he calls faith trust.

The appropriate response to the gospel can be stated in terms of "belief": the announcement included in the claim that the true God had raised Jesus from the dead. Or it can be stated in terms of "obedience": it was a direct summons to abandon allegiances and give total loyalty to Jesus....Paul speaks, without feeling the need to cover his back against misinterpretation, of "the obedience of faith." (*Paul's gospel, p. 3*)

Dunn: I just have to say, there is this emphasis in Paul on judgment accord to works. He expects his converts to do good, to produce the fruit of the Spirit, the harvest of righteousness....If your only theology is that the believer is a sinner, as much a sinner until the day he or she dies as from the day of conversion, you're missing out that whole dimension...we always remain sinners, but there is this other dimension of Paul. Wright: because the point of justification by faith in the present is that it is the anticipation in the present on the basis of faith, of the verdict which will be issued in the future on the basis of the entirety of the life led....the basic thrust is that at the last day, all will be judged according to the totality of the life they have led (*An evening conversation*).

Wright's assertion that the heart of what mean by the gospel is that Jesus is king. Jesus has come to transform the world, he is in the world and **for the world**. So it is misplaced to hold to a doctrine of two kingdoms. Rather the message both Jesus and Paul was political. We therefore ought not to be hesitant to insist on that meaning.

...the Isaianic message always was about the enthronement of YHWH and the dethronement of pagan gods; about the victory of Israel and the fall of Babylon; about the arrival of the Servant King and the consequent coming of peace and justice. (*Gospel and theology, p.4*)

The idea that the early preaching of the Gospel carried no particular political implications only shows, I think, how far we have gone in projecting the privatized nature of western Christianity back onto Paul (*Gospel and theology, p.13*)

The second movement which must be factored in to any fully reading of Paul is the new awareness of the political dimension of all his thought....for Paul it was central that if Jesus were 'Lord', then Caesar was not. (*Redemption, p.7*)

...this forgiveness will not mean simply that individuals can now enter into a happy and intimate relationship with their heavenly Father, true again though that is. The point is that, if their sins are forgiven, exile will be over, the rule of the evil powers will be broken and Israel—and the rest of the world—will be summoned to enjoy, and take part in God's renewed world. (*Redemption, p.13*).

Even as the understanding of the political dimension of Paul blurs the distinction between the two kingdoms, so also his view of the covenant, i.e. that on the basis of faith one is marked out as a true member of the people of God, so also it follows that church practices and too much emphasis on doctrine will set up artificial boundaries



never intended by Paul. In this sense then 'justification' becomes an ecumenical doctrine.

Wright: ...for Paul, justification in *the* ecumenical doctrine....the point about justification is not "this is how I get saved," it's 'this is how you and I sit at the same table even, though we come from different sides of the great cultural divide.(*An evening conversation, p.9*)

Dunn: So this first formulation of 'justification by faith(Gal. 2:16) is actually a protest against any attempt to require more from other believers than justification by faith, than the fact the God has accepted us. That's a very fundamental, ecumenical position to take up.( *An evening conversation, p.10*)

Wright: I am totally in agreement...it is the doctrine which says we are one in Christ, that all those who believe in Jesus belong at the same table...I see it as necessary step on the road of ecumenical endeavor...( *An evening conversation,p.10*)

Dunn: There is only one thing necessary for us to worship together, to work together, to mission together, and that is that God accepts us, has accepted us, and accepts others on the same terms, by grace through faith.( *An evening conversation,p.10*)

Wright : Yes

Dunn: And to make further requirements before we can work together, can come together as churches, before we can work together in mission, is actually to destroy the fundamental character of justification by faith, to call into question what Paul calls "the truth of the Gospel"(Gal 2:5,14)( *An evening conversation, p.10*)

Wright : Yes

This is in no way to advocate doctrinal indifference. Precisely I take doctrine, and particularly justification by faith, with utmost seriousness, I long to see evangelical, and the Church as whole becoming in that way a living embodiment of the Gospel.(*Justification: the biblical, p.9*)

Our prevailing postmodern mood in general is intolerant of religious exclusivism. In the face of imposing challenge from secularism and naturalism, N.T. Wright's proposal to undercut the central Catholic-Protestant debate on justification, as a peripheral issue of ecclesiology is attractive to sensitive believers who long for unity in Christ's body(*Dave Chang evaluate, p.4*)

Though he affirms the divinity of Jesus in many places, still he does write some very strange statements.

If we ask the question of how this particular human being is the instrument of salvation and do not say as our first answer, "because in God's Israel-shaped plan to save the world came to fulfillment," then we leave a huge vacuum in our thinking(and in our reading of scripture). I believe it is because of this vacuum that people have elevated minor themes, such as the sinlessness of Jesus, to a prominence which, though not insignificant, they do not possess in the NT itself.( *An evening conversation Jesus and the identity, p.11*)

...to look at this Jesus and to say with awe and wonder and gratitude, not only "Ecce homo", but "Ecce Deus."( *An evening conversation, p.18*)

Forget the titles, at least for a moment; forget the pseudo-orthodox attempts to make Jesus of Nazareth conscious of being the second person of the Trinity; forget the arid reductionism that is the mirror-image of that unthinking would-be-orthodoxy... The picture I have drawn is not obviously what the early church believed...I suggest that we think historically about a young Jew, possessed of a desperately—indeed apparently crazy—vocation, riding into Jerusalem in tears, denouncing the Temple, dining once more with his friends, and dying on a Roman cross, and that

we somehow allow our meaning for the word "God" to be re-centered around that point. (*The Historical Jesus, p.5*)

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Statement such as this and others have led some to question Wright's view on the person of Christ and the doctrine of the Trinity. Some question his views on the atonement and other central doctrines in view of his 'justification teachings.' Those are fuel for another, future look at Wright.

A few other observations about Wright's teaching are in order. There is no law-gospel dynamic at all. He rarely uses the law in its first and primary sense. This leads people to question whether he really understands the nature and depth of sin. He rejects the idea of 'simul iustus et peccator'. His entire interpretation rests as far as I am concerned on a very narrowly and artificially constructed view point which rests on Romans 3 & 4 and Galatians 2 & 3. Philippians 3, 2 Corinthians 5 (especially verse 21), and Romans 7 pose significant problems for his interpretation. The conclusion of Paul's sermon in Acts 13:38, 38, "Therefore, my friends, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you.<sup>39</sup> Through him everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses." (NIV) seems fatally to undercut his position, not to say what the rest of Scripture says. He rejects the doctrine of the two kingdoms, he seems not to recognize the two righteousnesses of the Christian (active and passive), and he fails to grasp the Scriptural concept of vocation.

His influence is substantial. He does contribute some positives. His apologetic agenda tackles the modern where he lives and shows him that by using the canons of modern thought in language and history, Christianity has reasonable argument to be made on its behalf. He extolls the value of Christian worship and the reading of Scripture. He confesses both the divinity (there might be some question here), the bodily resurrection of Jesus and the bodily resurrection of believers on the last day. He holds to a Scriptural view of marriage and homosexuality. He rejects the gnostic gospels as fantasy.

In the end Wright claims that what he teaches, he draws directly from Scripture. He argues that his interpretation of the gospels and Paul is correct. So once again the challenge now and always remains the same: back to the Scriptures. They alone guide and teach us. For all doctrine ultimately hangs on what Scripture says. In this manner we will take up the challenge of N.T. Wright.

## Addendum one—Wright quotes about Luther and Lutheranism

I am saddened that many have imagined they have nothing to learn from Sanders's massive scholarship and have run howling back into the arms of Luther. In some cases—these are I think, the saddest of all—they have been reduced to appealing over the head of the New Testament to the tradition of the sixteenth century, which is all the more ironic when we reflect that Luther...and the rest would certainly have advised us to read the New Testament even better than they did, not to set up their own work as new authoritative tradition (*Redemption*, p. 5)

...I think, both that the New Perspective, by highlighting key aspects of second Temple Judaism and by loosening the grip of a wooden Lutheran-style analysis, has opened up all kinds of new possibilities... (*Redemption*, p. 22)

...exegesis of Bultmann... runs quite counter to Paul. It is this: that in order to preserve the doctrine of justification by faith in its Lutheran purity, as a theology of the Word and as a *theologia crucis*, faith must be cut off from history and must stand by itself. (*The Paul of history*, p. 7)

...and answering 'by faith', Luther not only confused justification and regeneration but consequently put faith into the position of work, the one thing which God requires as a condition of grace. Third, because Luther at the same time realized that justification belonged to the language of the law court, his statement of the doctrine could easily be misunderstood as legal fiction, in which God declared people to be something they were not. (*Justification: the Biblical basis*, p. 7)

Part of the problem is that Luther's question was conceived in thoroughly medieval terms about God, grace, and righteousness. Put the question that way, and Luther's answer was the right one. The fact that the words are biblical words does not mean that theologians in 1500 meant what writers in AD 50 meant by them, or rather their Greek antecedents. (*Justification: yesterday*, p. 52)

The mainstream of the New Testament studies from the Reformation until very recently—certainly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—was led by German Lutherans who had a very definite law-gospel antithesis. Had it instead been led by people in the Reformed as opposed to the Lutheran tradition, the new perspective would never have been necessary. (*An evening conversation*, p. 2)

## Addendum two

Wright sermons—a sampling

Incarnation and Establishment

*Isaiah 52.7–10; John 1.1–18*

sermon at the Eucharist on Christmas Morning, 2008  
in the Cathedral Church of Christ, Blessed Mary the Virgin and St Cuthbert of  
Durham

All these themes rush together at key points of the Old Testament, particularly in relation to the King from David's house, the coming Messiah. He would be equipped with God's Spirit to bring God's judgment to the world, speaking words of power, teaching and embodying wisdom, upholding the Law, and building or cleansing or rebuilding the Temple. That's how it works in John's

gospel, too. 'The Word became flesh and *tabernacled* among us', with the word in question echoing both the Greek and the Hebrew for Tent: the Tabernacling or Tent-pitching of God, the glorious presence of God with his people, like fire itself, dangerous yet full of delight. And the Word-made-flesh is then introduced to us as the true King, the Messiah, Jesus.

All of this, every single bit of it, would be anathema to the kind of modernist liberalism that used to rule the roost theologically and is now trying to make a late run politically. Incarnation is a nuisance because it implies that God wants to make his presence felt around the place, and he may well want to do so especially where people are trying to run things their own way and making a mess of it. We live today amid the flotsam and jetsam of the failed liberal project – the deregulation of sex giving us AIDS and a nation of confused young people and lonely old people, the deregulation of power giving us atom bombs, Guantanamo Bay, Iraq, Darfur and the Congo, and the deregulation of money giving us loadsamoney one minute and market meltdown the next – and we who know these things, and yet resist fresh regulation because we like our freedom even if it's the freedom to go to Hell in a Hedge Fund, we resist the message of Incarnation, of God being around the place, and we invent excuses to say it's a bad idea all round, lest the fire consume us or the cloud confuse us and we have to admit we don't know who we are or why we're doing things the way we are .

### **Let Beauty Awake**

*Acts 10.34–43; John 20.1–18*

a sermon at the Eucharist in Durham Cathedral on Easter Day 2009

by the Bishop of Durham, Dr N. T. Wright

Now all of this would make, and indeed I hope does make, an appropriate reflection as we come to worship this Easter morning. But what has it got to do with beauty?

Everything. Perhaps surprisingly, the word 'beauty' occurs very seldom in the Bible. When it does, there are two main focal points; human beauty (often with a health warning; this doesn't last!) and, particularly, the beauty of the Temple. If this is the place where the living God is to dwell, against the day when he will flood the whole of his beautiful creation with his presence, then the Temple must be made, and was made, as a supreme object of beauty. Josephus says that if you hadn't seen the Jerusalem Temple you didn't know what beauty was. When the ancient Israelites thought of the Temple, they thought of beauty, and vice versa.

The church, at its best, has always known and celebrated that. One of the things that strikes you when you go to a city like Rome is that so much of the great art is found in a context of prayer and worship. Paintings which in this country would by now be in a secular museum are still there in churches, with people saying their prayers not of course *to* the paintings but through them. Part of the irony of the great Byzantium exhibition in London this spring, as the catalogue admits, is that those massively beautiful works are meant, not to be hung up in a

gallery, but to stand on the iconostasis as a sign of the heavenly realms beyond. The same is true of music: I love our many musical traditions, secular though they are, and I would not choose to be without Brahms and Schubert, Elgar and Vaughan Williams. But something different happens, as indeed sometimes though not always with all four of those composers, when they write for worship, standing in the great tradition of Bach and others, who themselves stood in an unbroken though rapidly developing tradition of the most beautiful music being written not just to adorn but to express, appropriately to express, the love of God the creator and the answering love of humble and worshipping hearts. The reason 'aesthetics' was created as a separate subject in the time of the Enlightenment was that God had been banished to a far-off realm with nothing to do with our present world. For a while art continued, like the empty tomb, to reflect the fact that He had lain there. But then, discovering its independence, it began to do what politics did, and lurch to and fro between ugly extremes. The results, and the various counter-movements which have protested against them, are written into our cultural history. That is where we now start.

Power to Become Children , Isaiah 52.7-10; John 1.1-18, Christmas Morning 2007

The real objection to the virginal conception is not primarily scientific. It is deeper than that. It is the notion that a new world really might be starting up within the midst of the old, leaving us with the stark choice of birth or death; leaving us, like the Magi, no longer at ease: leaving us, in other words, as Christmas people faced with the Herods of the world.

Because the second example, that of God in public, comes bang into focus as soon as the authorities in Jerusalem get wind that there may be a royal baby around somewhere. The Herods of our day, too, scream blue murder at any suggestion that God would break out of his 'religious' box and challenge the actual powers of the world, whether the politicians or the media or the high priests of scientific materialism. I find it strangely comforting, actually, that people like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens take the trouble to attack us so viciously: it shows that, like Herod, they are rattled, they know their number is being called, their power base is being challenged. Good: that is how it should be. But there are all kinds of objections raised, too, to the suggestion that God might be interested in, let alone might act freshly within, the public world, the political world. When I preached here last night at the Midnight Communion I drew out from the Christmas story a little of what seem to me the rather obvious meaning in terms of God's care for the vulnerable; and I mentioned, along with the hill-farmers, the asylum seekers who are being hounded by the government in an arbitrary and inhumane fashion. Though many people thanked me for what I said I was confronted at the back of the cathedral by one man who told me to stick to the script, to keep religion and politics separate, and who said in particular that asylum-seekers have nothing to do with Christmas. Well, sorry, but if you read Matthew 2, let alone Matthew 25, I think you'll find that political realities in general and asylum-seekers in particular leap off the page at you as the Holy Family seek refuge in Egypt and as Jesus speaks of welcoming the stranger and discovering that you have been welcoming him in person.

The things our old world sneers at, then, hang together. Our entire culture simply doesn't want to know about a God who does something new. Christmas as nostalgia: that's fine, it's part of the old world that makes us feel at home. Christmas as shopping bonanza: that's fine, too, because again we have subsumed the message back into the old world of getting and spending.

Christmas as family time; well, that's OK, though it is now routine to sneer at that too, perhaps because families, warts and all, can actually be a sign of God's grace and new life. But Christmas as the living God doing a new thing under the nose of Herod, doing a new thing within the womb of Mary, and even, shock horror, doing a new thing within our own hearts and lives: that is so threatening that it's best, so our culture thinks, to sneer at the very mention.

Because what we are promised, in that strange phrase at the heart of John's prologue, is a new kind of power: to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God. Power to become children! There's a paradox for you: power to become powerless, authority to be under authority. Ah, people will say, but children *of God*; yes, but the meaning of the word 'God' is now being redefined, in this very paragraph, so that we only really discover who God is when we look at Jesus, Jesus the helpless baby, Jesus the one who reveals God's glory when he dies on the cross, Jesus the only begotten Son who has revealed the invisible God. And when we hear that gospel word, and discover that something new is happening within us, something is stirring which feels very like faith, and hope, and love, we know that a new kind of life has taken hold on us, meaning that we have indeed been born again, whether a moment before or a lifetime before, have been made new with a life which death cannot touch, a life which will lighten our path through whatever darkness lies ahead, a life which doesn't spring from mere human possibilities – born, says John, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. Power to become children: that's the promise of new birth, full of grace and truth.

Part of the art of listening to scripture is learning to hear the multiple overtones in a single, simple phrase. *And the Word became flesh and lived among us*, says John: and we learn, and learn again, every Christmas, to hear in that great and simple statement all the glory of the new world, with its new possibilities: new life in Mary's womb, new life within the increasingly dangerous public world which does its best to squash the rumour, and new life, please God, in our own hearts and lives and families and work. *And the Word became flesh and lived among us*. That is what we celebrate today: the new reality which leaves us no longer at ease in the old dispensation, but determined to live and rejoice and be part of his transforming work of new creation, so that though the world declares that it can't see God and doesn't know who he is we may declare, in what we are as well as what we say, that God the only Son, the Word made flesh, close to the Father's heart, *has* made him known and *will* make him known. May that be true in us and through us this Christmas time and always.

God's Future in Person

*Romans 6.3–11; Luke 24.1–12*

a sermon for the Easter Vigil, with Baptism and Confirmation, April 8 2007

at the Cathedral Church of Christ, Blessed Mary the Virgin and Cuthbert, Durham

That, of course, is part of what the gospel writers were trying to tell us with their stories about very early morning, and people running to and fro, and discovering that something had happened which they weren't

expecting, for which they weren't ready, and which both fulfilled their wildest dreams and turned those same dreams inside out and upside down in the process. And unless you're prepared to have something like that happen to you, you'd be better off staying in bed instead of coming here at crack of dawn to have the water of Jesus' victory over death splashed over you, to watch God's new fire and to pray for that fire to be lit by the Spirit inside you.

But what is God's new world? What is this great future we're talking about? What does it mean to say that Jesus is coming to us from that future? How does it work to say that we can be part of it already, in advance, and live in New Time while the Old Time is still going on all around us?

God's future is, quite simply, his new heavens and new earth. The Bible doesn't speak, as so many Christians imagine, of a disembodied heaven, but rather of new heavens and new earth. And the point about God's future world is that it will be *more* real, more solid, more tangible and visible and tasteable than the present world. And that for a good reason: the present world is full of corruption and decay, of violence and sorrow and sin and death. But the whole point is that what God has decided to do about all this, precisely because he's the creator who loves the world he made, is to do away with all that corruption and sorrow and death and so leave the way clear for the world to be renewed from top to bottom, so that everything that's pure and lovely and beautiful and noble and wise will shine out all the more brightly. That is the future world which we are promised – which the ancient Jewish people were already promised in their scriptures; all because God is the good creator who has promised to set his world right in the end.

And what Jesus did was to bring the plan forward so that instead of it happening at the end of history, it happened, decisively, in and through him, in the middle of history. He took all the corruption and decay, all the violence and evil and betrayal and sorrow and agony and death itself, on to himself. He went to the place where it would do its worst, and it did. That's what Good Friday is all about. But precisely because he did that, he has made a way through, and has left the way clear for the world to be renewed from top to bottom – which is precisely what began to happen on the first Easter morning, starting with Jesus' own physical body itself. The resurrection is the sign, among many other things, that God's new creation has begun, that the future has come bursting into the present like someone phoning from Australia when it's two in the morning, or like someone who we thought was in India suddenly showing up on the doorstep.

But if God's future has arrived in Jesus, how do we get in on the act? From the very beginning, the church has answered: baptism and faith. (Confirmation, as I expect most of you know, is how people who were baptised as infants make the baptismal promises good for themselves.) Sometimes people worry about baptism because it involves a very physical act, of splashing someone under water, and they wonder, How can something spiritual, something about our hearts and our true selves, be brought about by an outward physical act like that? The answer, or part at least of the answer, is that God's new world is going to be robustly physical, and, just as the bread and wine at the Eucharist come to us as gifts from God's future world, as bits of creation already transformed and filled to the brim with the glory of God, so the water of baptism, and the act and fact of someone going under it and coming up again, is also part of the future reality – of God's future overcoming of death and establishing of new creation – coming rushing forward into the present for *this* person, *now*, and all because of Jesus himself. Baptism is therefore a coming true for them, body as well as spirit, of the new creation in which evil and death are conquered by the death of Jesus and in which the new life of Jesus' resurrection becomes real for them through the Spirit. That's what St Paul was talking about in our Epistle. And Christian faith, which together with baptism is the badge of membership in God's people, is what happens when someone looks at Jesus and recognises who he is and what he's done. The two go closely together. Baptism *re-enacts* Jesus' death and resurrection and therefore *pre-enacts* our own sharing in God's future world. Faith looks with gratitude on Jesus' death and resurrection and rests all its weight on him, and on those events, for its own present and future rescue and glory.

That is why Easter on the one hand, and baptism on the other, are the launching-pads for the church's mission. Let's be quite clear. The church's mission isn't about telling more and more people that if they accept Jesus they will go to heaven. That is true, as far as it goes (though we ought to be telling them about the new heavens and new earth rather than just 'heaven'), but it's not the point of our mission. The point is that if God's new creation has already begun, those of us who have been wakened up in the middle of the night are put to work to make more bits of new creation happen within the world as it still is. And that is why we need to leave behind on the cross all the bits and pieces of the old creation that have made us sad, that have drawn us, too, down into evil, into lying and

cheating and greed and selfishness, that have blighted our lives and the lives of others around us. Paul is quite crisp about this: all that stuff must be left behind in the deep water of baptism, in other words, on the cross of Jesus Christ. Instead, we are given a new life, with a new purpose: to be part of God's new creation, already here and now; to be people of the light, even though the world still seems dark; to be people who live by New Time even though Old Time is still rumbling on. And that means not only becoming new people ourselves, as we keep in step with the Spirit and learn how to be the people God made us to be and longs for us to be. That's important, and it will take a lot of prayer and work and thought and determination. But it also means becoming part of God's greater, much greater, purposes for his world. Part of the challenge of Easter, and part of the particular challenge of Baptism, is to pray for wisdom and vision to see where God can and will make new creation happen in our lives, in our hearts, in our homes and not least in our communities. That, quite simply, is what the mission of the church is all about, and every baptized Christian is called to be a part of it.

So this morning we celebrate God's future arriving in the present, and our call to be part of it. Just one final thing: remember that the women were scared stiff when they found the tomb empty, and that the disciples reckoned their story was just stupid, idle talk. You are going to hear voices whispering, either in your head or from people not far away, telling you much the same thing: don't be silly, it can't be true, and if it was it would be so scary it would hurt. Well, yes, it is scary, but it isn't an idle tale. It's the sober, daytime truth. Don't look for the living among the dead. Jesus is risen; he's on the move; and he's calling you to join him in making God's new creation happen, right here and right now.



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