

N. T. Wright: The Church Continues the Revolution Jesus Started

In his new book, Wright explains that Jesus' death does more than just get us into heaven.

Mike Bird October 13, 2016

A foundational Christian belief is that Jesus Christ died on the Cross for our sins. For many, the most important result of this is that believers go to heaven when they die.

Bestselling author, scholar and bishop, N. T. Wright, thinks we're missing a critical aspect of what Jesus accomplished on the Cross if we limit our understanding just to this explanation. His latest book, *The Day the Revolution Began*, explores the Crucifixion and argues that the Protestant Reformation did not go far enough in transforming our understanding of this event.

Mike Bird, author of *What Christians Ought To Believe*, interviewed Wright about how Christians should view the Crucifixion.

Tom, you describe Jesus' death as the beginning of a "revolution." What was that revolution and why does it still matter today?

Most Western Christians have been taught that Jesus died so that they could escape the results of sin and go to heaven after they die. The New Testament, however, regularly speaks of Jesus' death as the defeat of the powers of evil that have kept the world in captivity, with the implication that the world is actually going to change as a result—through the life and work and witness of those who believe this good news. Think of Revelation 5:9–10. Humans are rescued from their sin so that they can be “a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth.” That began at Easter and, in the power of the Spirit, has continued ever since. Of course, the “reign” of Jesus' people, like that of Jesus himself, is the reign of suffering love . . . but that's a whole other story. Suffice it to say that the vocation of God's people today is to continue to implement that revolution.

Even as Western cultures grow more secular, we still find the Crucifixion presented in art and echoed in music. Plus the notion of sacrifice for others is still very much a Christian theme that novels like Harry Potter seem to borrow from. Why do you think the cross, its image and message, is so captivating?

It seems as though the world knows in its bones that the cross of Jesus was the ultimate revelation of true power and true love. Most people for some of their lives, and some people for most of their lives, nurse sorrows and wounds whether secret or open; and the thought or sight of Jesus on the cross, perhaps particularly when it's painted beautifully or set to wonderful and appropriate music, speaks of the true God not as a distant, faceless bureaucrat, nor as a bullying boss, but as the one who has strangely come into the middle of the pains and sorrows of the world and taken their full force on himself. In a sense, all of Christian theology, certainly theology of the cross, is the attempt to explain, to give a wise and scriptural account of, that very immediate, personal, visceral impact.

We tend to think of the cross as a very churchy or religious symbol, like the Apple logo or the McDonald's sign, but what did the Crucifixion mean for people in the first century?

Crucifixions were common in the first century. It was a fairly standard punishment for slaves or for rebel subjects. It was a way for the Roman Empire to say “We are in power, and this is what we do to people who get in our way.” Crucifixion was unspeakably horrible, with victims often left on crosses for several days, pecked at by birds and gnawed at by vermin. It was deliberately a very public execution, to warn others: When the Spartacus rebellion was put down, roughly 100 years before Jesus’ day, 6,000 of his followers were crucified all along the Appian Way between Rome and Capua, making it more or less one cross every 40 yards for 130 miles. Anybody, and especially any slave, walking anywhere on that road would get the point. But it wasn’t just (what we would call) a “political” point. In Jesus’ day Rome was “deifying” its emperors, at least after their deaths, making the present emperor “son of god.” Rebelling against Caesar’s empire was therefore a kind of blasphemy, and crucifixion a restatement of the theological “fact” that Caesar was “Lord.” That is the context for Mark’s statement that the centurion (a Roman army commander) at the foot of the cross looked at Jesus and said, “Truly, *this* man was the Son of God.”

A lot of preaching and teaching about the cross takes the form of a syllogism along the lines: He is a holy God; we are sinful people; therefore, we need a God-man to die on cross to take our guilt away. However, you suggest that while there is a kind of logic to that, it really misses the main point. The cross is not the resolution of two opposing premises, but rather it is the climax to a grand story. How so?

I would much rather people believed that God was holy, that they were sinful, and that the cross resolved that problem, than that they either didn’t believe in God or didn’t believe that they were sinful! Let’s be clear about that. But the Bible tells a bigger story. The human problem isn’t just that God set us a moral exam and we all flunked it. It is that God gave humans a *vocation*: to reflect his image, to be (again, as in Revelation) a kingdom and priests, summing up the praises of creation and reflecting the creator’s wise rule into the world. Human rebellion and idolatry, then, doesn’t just mean that we are in trouble (though we are); it means that God’s larger purposes for creation are not going ahead as intended. So the long story of God’s plan to put things right, starting with Abraham, climaxing in Jesus and the Spirit, and looking ahead to the new heavens and new earth, isn’t the story of guilty humans being forgiven so they could go to heaven, but of idolatrous (and yes, therefore guilty) humans being rescued in order to be worshippers and workers in God’s restoration movement, God’s kingdom-project. The problem comes in three stages: 1) We have swapped our biblical heritage of new heavens and new earth for a form of Platonism (“going to heaven”—which you find in the first century in Plutarch, not in Paul!); 2) we have swapped the biblical vocation of humans (to be “a kingdom and priests”) for a moral contract in which the most important thing is whether or not we’ve passed the moral exam, and if we haven’t what can be done about it; and 3) we have therefore swapped the rich biblical account of what Jesus’ death achieved for a slimmed-down version which can easily be heard to say that an angry God took out his bad temper on his own Son . . . which is the sort of thing a pagan religion might say. So, as I say in the book, we have *platonized our eschatology*, as a result of which we have *moralized our anthropology*, and have therefore been in danger of *paganizing our soteriology*. Fortunately, the Bible itself will help us get back on track.

You provocatively say in the book that a lot of Reformation churches, including your own Anglican tradition, have often failed to know what to do with Easter. Well, what are we to do with Easter, in particular, Good Friday?

I’m amused by the way you put that, because clearly you are taking the word “Easter” to mean the whole weekend, whereas I was meaning specifically Easter Sunday! Actually, many churches,

including my own, are quite good at the ways in which they commemorate, and so inhabit once again, the days from Palm Sunday to Good Friday. The various liturgies that have been developed can be excellent ways of slowing us down and enabling us to sense at several levels the dark horror of Jesus' death. My problem comes on the Sunday (I wrote about this at more length in *Surprised by Hope*, by the way.) And actually it isn't just a problem about the Reformation churches; it is a problem for the whole Christian West, Catholic and Protestant, liberal and charismatic, the lot. The Eastern Orthodox do all this much better. (They have other problems, perhaps, but at least they know what Easter is about.)

In the West we have been so seduced by the Platonic vision of 'heaven' that the resurrection of Jesus is seen simply as the "happy ending" after the crucifixion, and as the prelude to his "going to heaven" so that we can go and join him there later. This misses the central point that the resurrection of Jesus is *the beginning of the new creation, in which we are to share already in the power of the Spirit*. This affects everything, from prayer and the sacraments to mission and service to the poor. And yes, it ought to be reflected liturgically in whatever tradition we stand. Playing this back to the meaning of the cross, we realise that new creation is now happening because the dark powers that have kept the world enslaved to sin and death have been defeated. Perhaps there are themes there which could be brought more explicitly into our Good Friday commemorations as well. But the Christian life is meant to be a sustained and focused celebration of that achievement. Present suffering and struggle are held within the narrative of Jesus' victory on the one hand and the final redemption of all creation on the other. That is what climactic passages like Romans 8 are all about. I would love to see churches trying out different ways of embodying all of this in the way we order our public worship.

We often focus on what Paul or John thought about Jesus' death. But what did Jesus think about his approaching death, how was it part of his messianic mission, and what did he think his death would achieve?

It is clear from all four gospels that Jesus believed, as many Jews believed, that the Jewish people were the bearers of the Creator God's plan to overthrow the evil of the world and make a way through into new creation. It is also clear that he believed, as some other Jews seem to have believed, that this divine plan might come about through the intense suffering of a small number of faithful Jews (look at 2 Maccabees for an example, though the theme goes back into books like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Daniel). I and others have argued in various places, including this new book, that Jesus believed that this intense suffering would be focused on one man; and that he would be that one man. He would take upon himself the suffering, shame and death of the world, in order to overcome the powers of the world and launch God's long-intended project of new creation. Jesus seems to have understood all this as the proper outworking of Israel's whole scriptural narrative, focused particularly on Passover. He chose Passover, after all, as the moment to do what had to be done, the freedom-festival that resonated with the great theme of God's victory over the powers of evil and his rescue of his people to be his "royal priesthood" (Ex. 19.6). The idea of a "new exodus" had been around for a long time, and Jesus seems to have believed that it was his vocation, drawing to a point his announcement and inauguration of God's kingdom, to make it happen, though in a way nobody else had seen coming. This personal Passover-vocation was then given particular shape by scriptural resources such as Isaiah, the Psalms, and Daniel. The Scriptures had to be fulfilled; not in some arbitrary manner, checking off a random list of things to do, but in the sense of a long narrative, much of which had been dark and unpromising, reaching an astonishing, shocking, startling climax. Only in retrospect did Jesus' followers look back and figure it all out; but all the signs are that this was what Jesus had in mind all along.

In particular, the victory which Jesus believed he would win in this way was, in Israel's Scriptures, the victory of God himself. That is a whole other theme, but an important one for us, in case we

should imagine that this human vocation was all about twisting God's arm to do something he might not otherwise have done. Jesus believed that, in being obedient to this human vocation, he was *embodying* or, if you like, *incarnating* the loving, rescuing God of whom Israel's Scriptures had been speaking all along. Jesus' own sense of vocation and (what we loosely call) "identity" lies at the heart of the church's developed belief.

When the early church tried to explain why the Messiah had to die and what his death achieved, they naturally looked to the Old Testament. What biblical images or stories did they rehearse when it came to explaining the significance of Jesus' death?

The early church, exactly in line with Jesus' own vocation and action, developed the theme of Passover, not as a miscellaneous metaphor but as a way of saying that the "new exodus" had now at last come to pass. But, as in Jewish Passover-celebrations, many other scriptural themes clustered around as well, not least the strange sufferings of the psalmists, the dramatic (and royal) image of Isaiah's "suffering servant," the dark figure of Zechariah's dying shepherd, and, not least, Daniel's image of "one like a son of man" who is exalted after the apparent dominance of the "monsters."

All these together generated various major themes. Sacrifice is one; the law-court is another. But these, again, are not just miscellaneous images. They mean what they mean within the larger scriptural narrative in which God's redemptive and restorative purposes for the world are fulfilled at last through Israel's representative. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:3, quoting a very early gospel summary, that "the Messiah died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures." *In accordance with*—in other words, along the line of, as the climax of, in fulfilment of the entire scriptural narrative. We in the West have been in danger of turning that into "The Messiah died for our sins *in accordance with the story we have learned to tell*"—the story, that is, of an angry God and endangered sinners—with a few scriptural proof-texts thrown in. Of course the wise Creator is angry with everything that defaces and destroys his good creation; of course we sinners are indeed endangered if we do not allow the gospel to embrace us. But to reduce the gospel to those two points is like reducing a great four-part hymn simply to the alto and tenor lines. We need the firm bass of the full scriptural narrative, and the glad tune, in the top line, of the kingdom-story told by the four gospels and Acts. We need the harmony of the inner parts, of course; but that means what it means in relation to the larger music.

When we say that Jesus died for us, what does the "for" mean?

The "for" is itself explained by "in accordance with the Scriptures." In the Bible, Israel is God's chosen people for the sake of the world; then various people, like prophets, priests, and kings are chosen for the sake of Israel; then, at the time of the exile, the remnant was chosen as a kind of "true Israel"—a concept we find in many writings of the time, such as the Dead Sea Scrolls. The point is that what happens to this group—and, in Jesus' own vocation and the church's perception, to this one man—happens on behalf of the whole world. So, as Paul puts it in Romans 8:1–4, there is "no condemnation" for those who are "in Messiah Jesus"—those who belong to him by faith and baptism—because in his death God "condemned sin in the flesh." The millennia-old representation had narrowed down to one point, and the punishment of Sin itself—the dark force behind all our actual sins—took place once and for all. That is what we ought to mean when we say, as of course I do, that he died "in our place and on our behalf." We should, however, beware of shorthand formulations (including my own!). In good biblical theology, the summaries mean what they mean within the larger story of the Bible as a whole and, not least, the Gospels as a whole.

There is a great hymn called “In Christ Alone,” which says that on the cross “the wrath of God was satisfied.” But you argue that we must not forget the love of God here either. So what does the cross have to do with the love of God?

I have often said that if a church wants to sing that hymn—and I agree that it is a great hymn in most other respects—then at least every second time they sing it they should sing “the *love* of God was satisfied” instead at that point. There is a deep and dark truth under what the writer said, and it’s the truth I just mentioned, as set out in Romans 8:1–4 and elsewhere. But people can all too easily hear that and sing it with a very different narrative in mind: the narrative according to which, in a parody of John 3:16, God so *hated* the world that he *killed* his only son. Yes, God hates sin. Yes, the death of Jesus is—because of his representative messianic role—the moment when sin is condemned. But the way most people hear it is taking a large step towards a pagan idea which, frankly, not only puts a lot of people off Christianity but quietly hints at a license for other forms of anger and brutality. From the very beginning, Jesus’ followers insisted that his crucifixion was the personal expression of the ultimate divine *love*: “the son of God loved me and gave himself for me,” said Paul in Galatians 2:20, and he and John return to this theme again and again (John 13:1 says “having loved his own in the world, he loved them to the uttermost”). Romans 8 is the great climax: Nothing in all creation shall separate us from the love of God in the Messiah, Jesus our Lord. To understand this, you need (of course) at least the beginnings of a doctrine of the Trinity, so that what the Son does is the full expression of the Father’s love and purpose. That is why—to revert to an earlier question—many people simply sense, whether they can articulate it or not, that the cross is the effective sign that the God who made the world is the God of powerful, rescuing love, a love that has come down to share the very depths of human tragedy and, by taking its weight on himself, to rescue us from it and enable us by his Spirit to share in his new creation as a result. This is a love that goes to work; a love that will not let us go.

Finally, if you had to preach one biblical text on the cross, what would it be, and roughly what would you say?

An impossible question, of course, but though I might well have gone for one of the Pauline texts I have quoted above, or indeed for Revelation 5:9–10, I would want to come back to the Gospels; and, despite strong claims from the other three, I would go for John’s story of the cross. One could focus on the final word, “finished,” in John 19:30. Many have expounded that in terms of a bill being “paid”; but the whole of John’s gospel is framed by the prologue, which looks back to Genesis 1, so that I think we must take it, at least primarily, in terms of the finishing of God’s work of redemption, parallel to the finishing of God’s work of creation in Genesis 2:2. It all fits: Jesus dies on the Friday, the sixth day of the week; on the seventh day he rests in the tomb; and on the eighth day . . . new creation begins.

Depending on how long the sermon was to be, I might well want to pan back a little to include two other themes from John 19. First, the almost unbearably tender moment with Mary and John in verses 25–27, expressive of the love spoken of in 3:16, 13:1, and elsewhere. Second, Pontius Pilate saying “What I have written I have written” in verse 22, expressive—after Jesus’ long argument with Pilate earlier on!—of the way in which Caesar’s official representative, rather like Caiaphas in John 11:49–52, was telling a truth far more than he knew when he wrote “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.” Jesus was dying as Israel’s representative Messiah, doing for Israel and the world what Israel could not do. And here is Caesar’s official representative recognizing, despite himself, the truth which will relativize Caesar and all other earthly rulers.

Of course, there is much more. There always is. But this would be enough for, perhaps, a 20-minute sermon at least. If it had to be shorter, I’d probably just stick with the Genesis echo.