

Rethinking Heaven: An Overview Of NT Wright's Book "Surprised By Hope"

FD convo 4/23/2008 by Rev. Kevin Twit (ktwit@ruf.org)

Introduction: Obviously, this outline is a summary of what NT Wright argues in his recent book "Surprised By Hope: Rethinking Heaven, The Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church" (©2008 HarperOne) – these are not my ideas, though at times the wording is my summary of what he is saying. If you find this interesting at all, I urge you to read the book. It is excellent in every way – though there are places where I would disagree with him.

PREFACE: *"What are we waiting for? And what are we going to do about it in the meantime? These two questions shape this book."* He argues that the voice of the early Christians has not been heard in our modern thinking about matters of death and what comes after and says, *"My aim in this book is to bring their beliefs to light, and I hope to life, again in the conviction that they offer not only the best hope but also the best-grounded hope that we have and, what's more, a hope that joins up, as I have said, with the hope that ought to energize our work for God's kingdom in the present world."*

PART I: "SETTING THE SCENE" *"This book addresses two questions that have often been dealt with entirely separately but that, I passionately believe, belong tightly together. First, what is the ultimate Christian hope? Second, what hope is there for change, rescue, transformation, new possibilities within the world in the present? ...As long as we see Christian hope in terms of 'going to heaven,' of a salvation that is essentially away from this world, the two questions appear as unrelated...But if the Christian hope is for God's new creation, for 'new heavens and new earth,' and if that hope has already come to life in Jesus of Nazareth, then there is every reason to join the two questions together. And of that is so, we find that answering the one is also answering the other. I find that to many – not least, many Christians – all this comes as a surprise: both that the Christian hope is surprisingly different from what they had assumed and that this same hope offers a coherent and energizing basis for work in today's world."* (pg. 5)

The Confusion About Hope In Our Culture

"Beliefs about death and what lies beyond come in all shapes and sorts and sizes. Even a quick glance at the classic views of the major religious traditions gives the lie to the old idea that all religions are basically the same." Wright contends that for so many in our culture, their beliefs about life after death are a mish-mash of Christian and Buddhist ideas. Think of how many people believe that the dead can still hear us or are still with us in the wind or the trees – and the large number of people who believe in ghosts, in spite of the best efforts of the secularists!

The Confusion About Hope In The Church

But Wright contends that the confusion among Christians is just as strong! And this is ironic, because among the early Christians there is complete uniformity about the hope that Christians confess – our hope is in God restoring the creation, the new heavens and the new earth, not in God whisking us off to a disembodied eternity on a cloud somewhere! Yet today, among Christians there is a bewildering range of beliefs and practices that have little or nothing to do with this historic Christian understanding. And how can the church be of any hope to a confused world unless we recover the hope that turned the world upside down in the first 3 centuries?

Early Christian Hope In Its Historical Setting

In this chapter Wright summarizes the points he made in his 800 page book "The Resurrection Of The Son Of God." In this book Wright examines every ancient text dealing with life after death, from every religion and philosopher and proves that the early Christian belief in a bodily resurrection does not arise (as many have claimed) from Greek or other pagan ideas floating around at the time of Jesus. There were some who believed in life after death, but none who believed in a bodily existence after death. For the Greeks, death was when you were finally set free from your body, and they contended a bodily resurrection could not happen. Among the Jews, there was the belief in a bodily resurrection among some (though not among the Sadducees), but this was to be a resurrection of all people at the end of time to face judgment. For all ancient peoples the word "resurrection" meant a new body – it never means simply any old kind of life after death.

What the early church claimed, that the bodily resurrection of Jesus had occurred as the beginning of God restoring His creation has no parallels in any ideas before Christianity bursts on the scene. This Christian belief arises from within a Jewish framework, but something has altered the belief in a drastic way – there is no way that we can account for the early church's belief by a process of evolution or borrowing of ideas from the culture. The early church's hope is remarkably consistent and uniform, it centered on resurrection rather than simply life after death. In fact the early church almost never talked about going to heaven when one died and if they did, they taught that heaven was a temporary stop on the way to the new heavens and new earth.

Even though people's beliefs about death tend to be very conservative (in the face of bereavement people go back to the safety of what they've been taught), the early church's hope is surprising and new in some very significant ways!

Wright lists 7 surprising alterations in the Jewish belief that Christianity embraces:

- 1. Within early Christianity, which included people from widely varying cultural and religious backgrounds, there are almost no differences of belief about the resurrection.** Everyone believes the same thing – which was not true even among the Jews.
- 2. In Judaism resurrection was important, but not that important – but in early Christianity it is everything!** *"Take away the stories of Jesus' birth, and you lose only 2 chapters of Matthew and 2 of Luke. Take away the resurrection, and you lose the entire New Testament and most of the 2nd century fathers as well."* (pg. 43)

3. **Judaism was rather vague about the kind of bodies the resurrection would bring** – but right from the start in Christianity it is clearly taught that the new body will be physical, but will be a transformed body with new physical properties.
4. **The Jews believed that the resurrection would be one “end-time” event, but the Christians believe it has been spilt into 2 events with Jesus’ resurrection being the first.** *“Resurrection, we must never cease to remind ourselves, did not mean going to heaven or escaping death or having a glorious postmortem existence but rather coming to bodily life again after bodily death. This is why when after the transfiguration Jesus tells the disciples not to mention the vision until the son of man has been raised from the dead, they are... puzzled and wonder what this ‘rising from the dead’ can mean.”* How can they tell people something after the raising from the dead they wonder because in their understanding the raising of the dead happens at the end of time!
5. **The resurrection of Jesus rather than being the end, actually calls His people into action to transform the present.**
6. **Resurrection in Judaism was a metaphor for the return from exile, but in Christianity it now refers to the renewal of all human beings, not just Jews.**
7. **In Judaism nobody expected the messiah to die, and thus nobody expected Him to be resurrected.** Thus in Christianity there is drastic change to the idea of resurrection, but also to the idea of Messiah as well! After all that Jesus suffered, being put to death by the Lord’s enemies etc., no Jew would have ever considered that Jesus could be the Messiah unless the idea of Messiah has been radically altered by something. And furthermore, the resurrection of Jesus is seen as the basis for the astounding claim that Jesus rather than Caesar is Lord.

The Strange Story Of Easter Something must account for the changes within the Jewish belief. Wright contends that it is the combination of the empty tomb and the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus that provide the only plausible explanation for the shape of the early church’s belief.

There are 4 strange features shared by all the resurrection accounts in the 4 gospels that Wright contends compel us to take them seriously as very early accounts rather than later inventions:

1. **The strange absence of quotes and allusions from the Old Testament.** All through the gospels you find the constant refrain “according to the scriptures” – even in the accounts of the crucifixion and the burial of Jesus. But when you come to the resurrection accounts they are almost entirely absent of OT quotes and allusions to explain what has happened. The stories are told in the way they were told before the church had been able to reflect on how this was a fulfillment of the OT. And this is remarkable when we remember that even by Paul’s letters (written 20-30 years after the resurrection) there has been a great deal of theological reflection upon the resurrection and the gospels are written after that – yet maintain the earlier way of telling the story, from the time when the first witnesses had no categories to understand what had happened.
2. **The presence of women as the principal witnesses.** If you wanted to invent a story in the 1st century and convince people it was true, you would not have made women the principal witnesses since their testimony was not even valid in a court of law. And notice that by the time Paul writes 1 Corinthians 15, the role of the women has been downplayed! But all 4 gospels preserve the fact that women were the principal witnesses, even though it makes the story less plausible in their day.
3. **The description of Jesus’ body is mysterious – it has not been smoothed out.** If the stories of the resurrection arose over a period of many years as a fantasy of the early Christians who wanted fervently to believe that Jesus was still alive somehow – we would not expect the kind of tension we see in the description of Jesus’ body. *“[H]e appears as a human being with a body that is in some ways quite normal and can be mistaken for a gardener or a fellow traveler on the road. Yet the stories also contain – and this marks them out as among the most mysterious stories ever written – definite signs that this body has been transformed. It is clearly physical: it uses up (so to speak) the matter of the crucified body; hence the empty tomb. But, equally it comes and goes through locked doors; it is not always recognized; and in the end it disappears into God’s space, that is ‘heaven’, through the thin curtain that in much Jewish thought separates God’s space from human space. This kind of account is without precedent.”* (pg.55)
4. **The resurrection accounts never mention the future Christian hope as the epistles do.** Further evidence that they retain their original form rather than bearing the marks of later theologizing. It is obvious that the resurrection stories are very very early, pre-Pauline accounts that are told pretty much as they were from the very beginning – they are definitely not *“legends written up much later to give a pseudohistorical basis for what was essentially a private, interior experience.”*

Something must have happened that accounts for the belief of the early church! (pg. 58) *“[I]n order to explain historically how all the early Christians came to the belief they held, that Jesus had been raised, we have to say at least this: that the tomb was empty, except for some graveclothes, and that they really did see and talk with someone who gave every appearance of being a solidly physical Jesus, though a Jesus who was strangely changed, more strangely than they were able to fully describe. Both the meetings and the empty tomb are... necessary if we are to explain the rise of the belief and the writing of the stories as we have them. Neither by itself was sufficient; put them together, though, and they provide a complete and coherent explanation for the rise of the early Christian belief.”* pg. 59

The main alternative accounts and revisionist proposals lack all explanatory power: For example the theory of cognitive dissonance – the idea that the disciples wanted so badly to believe Jesus had risen from the dead that they actually began to believe it had happened when, in fact, it had not, fails to work because *“the disciples were emphatically not expecting Jesus to be raised from the dead, all by Himself in the middle of history.”* And to say that the early disciples had a new experience of grace and feeling forgiven does not account for them claiming that Jesus was raised from the dead. Judaism already had a way of expressing that and would never have used the word resurrection for this. Wright goes on to deal with other alternative accounts and theories:

1. **Jesus didn’t really die; someone gave him a drug that made him look dead, and he revived in the tomb.** Answer: Roman soldiers knew how to kill people, and no disciple would have been fooled by a half-drugged, beat-up Jesus into thinking that he’d defeated death and inaugurated the kingdom.
2. **When the women went to the tomb they met someone else (perhaps James, Jesus’ half-brother, who looked like him), and in the half light they thought it was Jesus himself.** Answer: They would have noticed soon enough.
3. **Jesus only appeared to people who believed in him.** Answer: The accounts make it clear that Thomas and Paul do not belong to this category; and actually none of Jesus’ followers believed, after his death, that he really was the Messiah, let alone that he was in any sense divine.
4. **The accounts we have are biased.** Answer: So is all history, all journalism. Every photo is taken by somebody from some angle.

5. **The began by saying, “He will be raised,” as people had done of the [Jewish] martyrs, and this quickly passed into saying, “He has been raised,” which was functionally equivalent.** Answer: No, it wasn't.
6. **Lots of people have visions of someone they love who has just died. This is what happened to the disciples.** Answer: They knew perfectly well about things like that and they had a language for it, they would say “It's his angel” or “It's his spirit” or “his ghost.” They wouldn't say “He's been raised from the dead.
7. **What actually happened was that the disciples had some sort of rich spiritual experience which they interpreted through Jewish categories. Jesus after all really was alive; spiritually, and they were still in touch with him.** Answer: That is simply a description of a noble death followed by a Platonic immortality. Resurrection was and is the defeat of death, not simply a nicer description of it.

In addition, we should consider 3 often-overlooked points:

1. **Jewish tombs, especially those of martyrs, were venerated and often became shrines.** There is no evidence whatever of that having happened with Jesus' grave.
2. **The early church's emphasis on the first day of the week as their special day is very hard to explain unless something striking really did happen.**
3. **The disciples were hardly likely to go out and suffer and die for a belief that wasn't firmly anchored in fact.**

Wright argues that it is no use arguing that science has “proved” that the dead don't rise – everyone in the 1st century knew that too – but with the resurrection of Jesus we are talking about new creation and we better be humble in what we think we understand.

PART II: “GOD'S FUTURE PLAN”

What The Whole World's Waiting For: *“The early Christians did not believe in progress. They did not think the world was getting better and better under its own steam – or even under the steady influence of God. They knew God had to do something fresh to put it to rights. But neither did they believe the world was getting worse and worse and that their task was to escape it altogether. They were not dualists. Since most people who think about these things today tend toward one of other of these two points of view, it comes as something of a surprise to discover that the early Christians held a quite different view. They believed God was going to do for the whole cosmos what he had done for Jesus at Easter. This is such a surprising belief, and so little reflected on even in Christian circles, still less outside the church...”* (pg. 93) The whole creation as Romans 8:19 says is *“on tiptoe with expectation, longing for the days when God's children are revealed, when their resurrection will herald its own new life... when what happened to Jesus happens to all Jesus' people.*

The Bible does not teach that the end of the story is that Christians go off to heaven as naked souls. Rather the Bible teaches that the new heavens and new earth come down to earth. *“So far from sitting on clouds playing harps, as people often imagine, the redeemed people of God in the new world will be the agents of his love going out in new ways to accomplish new creative tasks, to celebrate and extend the glory of his love.”* (pg. 106)

Jesus, Heaven, and New Creation: In this section Wright explores the idea of the ascension of Jesus and asks why this doctrine has not been given the attention it deserves by many Christians. He concludes that one of the reasons is that we are confused about how heaven and earth relate to one another. *“The idea of the human Jesus now being in heaven, in his thoroughly embodied risen state, comes as a shock to many people, including many Christians... because our culture is so used to the Platonic idea that heaven is, by definition, a place of ‘spiritual’, nonmaterial reality... the ascension invites us to rethink all this; and after all, why did we suppose that we knew what heaven was.”* (pg. 111)

“The early Christians, and their fellow first-century Jews, were not, as many moderns suppose, locked into thinking of a three-decker universe with heaven up in the sky and hell down beneath their feet. When they spoke of up and down like that they, like the Greeks in their different ways, were using metaphors that were so obvious they didn't need spelling out... The mystery of the ascension... demands that we think what is, to many today, almost unbelievable: that when the Bible speaks of heaven and earth it is not talking about two localities related to each other within the same space-time continuum or about a non-physical world contrasted with a physical one but about two different kinds of what we call space, two different kinds of what we call matter, and quite possibly... two different kinds of what we call time... God's space and ours interlock and intersect in a whole variety of ways even while they retain, for the moment at least, their separate and distinct identities and roles. One day... they will be joined in a quite new way, open and visible to one another, married together forever.” (pg. 115-116)

Wright completely rejects the popular dispensational view of the rapture and the 2nd coming as taught in the Left Behind books.

When He Appears: The final redemption will be the time when we get the personal presence of Jesus as opposed to his current absence. *“Jesus' appearing will be, for those of us who have known and loved him here, like meeting face to face someone we have only known by letter, or perhaps email.”* (pg. 123)

Jesus The Coming Judge: *“The picture of Jesus as the coming judge is a... vital and nonnegotiable Christian belief: that there will indeed be a judgment in which the creator God will set the world right once and for all. The word ‘judgment’ carries negative overtones for a good many people in our liberal and postliberal world. We need to remind ourselves that throughout the Bible, not least in the Psalms, God's coming judgment is a good thing, something to be celebrated, longed for, yearned over. It causes people to shout for joy and the trees of the field to clap their hands. In a world of systematic injustice, bullying, violence, arrogance, and oppression, the thought that there might come a day when the wicked are firmly put in their place and the poor and weak are given their due is the best news there can be. Faced with a world in rebellion, a world full of exploitation, and wickedness, a good God must be a God of judgment.”* Pg. 137

The Redemption of Our Bodies: The Bible and all of the early Christians were in absolute agreement about this point. *“The clearest and strongest passage, often ignored, is Romans 8:9-11. If the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Jesus the Messiah, dwells in you, Paul says, then the One who raised the Messiah from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies as well... God will give life, not to a disembodied spirit, not to what many people have thought of as a spiritual body in the sense of a non-physical one, but to your mortal bodies.”* (pg. 149)

And for Paul the fact of our future resurrection does not leave us saying “So that’s all right; we shall go at the last to join Jesus in a nonbodily Platonic heaven” but (in 1 Cor 15:58) “So then, since the person you are and the world God has made will be gloriously reaffirmed in God’s eventual future, you must be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the Lord’s work, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.” Belief in the bodily resurrection includes the belief that what is done in the present body, by the power of the Spirit, will be reaffirmed in the eventual future in ways at which we can presently only guess... Why will we be given new bodies? According to the early Christians, the purpose of this new body will be to rule wisely over God’s new world. Forget those images about lounging around playing harps. There will be work to do and we shall relish doing it. All the skills and talents we have put to God’s service in this present life... will be enhanced and ennobled and given back to us to be exercised to His glory. This is perhaps the most mysterious, and least explored, aspect of the resurrection life. But there are several promises in the New Testament about God’s people ‘reigning’ and these cannot just be empty words. If, as we have already seen, the biblical view of God’s future is of the renewal of the entire cosmos, there will be plenty to be done, entire new projects to undertake. In terms of the vision of original creation in Genesis 1 and 2, the garden will need to be tended once more and the animals renamed.” pg. 161

Purgatory, Paradise, and Hell: I don’t have time to get into this unfortunately.

PART III: “HOPE IN PRACTICE: RESURRECTION AND THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH” *“The point of this final section of the book is that a proper grasp of the (surprising) future hope held out to us in Jesus Christ leads directly and, to many people equally surprisingly, to a vision of the present hope that is the basis of all Christian mission. To hope for a better future in this world – for the poor, the sick, the lonely and depressed, for the slaves, the refugees, the hungry and the homeless [etc.]... is not something else, something extra, something tacked on to the gospel as an afterthought...It is a central, essential, vital, and life-giving part of it... The whole point of what Jesus was up to [in His healings etc.] was that he was doing, close-up, in the present, what he was promising long-term, in the future. And what he was promising for that future, and doing in that present, was not saving souls for a disembodied eternity but rescuing people from the corruption and decay of the way the world presently is so they could enjoy, already in the present, the renewal of creation which is God’s ultimate purpose – and so they could thus become colleagues and partners in that larger project.”*

“What you do in the present – by painting, preaching, singing, sewing, praying, teaching building hospitals, digging wells, campaigning for justice, writing poems, caring for the needy, loving your neighbor as yourself – will last into God’s future. These activities are not simply ways of making the present life a little less beastly, a little more bearable, until the day when we leave it behind altogether ... They are part of what we may call building for God’s kingdom.” pg. 193

Building For The Kingdom: According to 1 Corinthians 15:58, *“You are not oiling the wheels of a machine that’s about to roll over a cliff. You are not restoring a great painting that’s shortly to be thrown on the fire. You are not planting roses in a garden that’s about to be dug up for a building site. You are – strange though it may seem, almost as hard to believe as the resurrection itself – accomplishing something that will become in due course part of God’s new world... what we do in Christ and by the Spirit in the present is not wasted. It will last all the way into God’s new world. In fact, it will be enhanced there. I have no idea what precisely this will mean in practice. I am offering a signpost, not offering a photograph of what we will find once we get to where the signpost is pointing.”* pg. 209

Wright points out how the belief in a bodily resurrection was a threat to those in power – the Gnostics who didn’t believe in a bodily resurrection and physical future in which justice would reign were never persecuted. He also considers the implications for rethinking our idea, and hope for, beauty, and our understanding of evangelism.

Reshaping the Church for Mission: Living the Future: *“Mission must urgently recover from its long-term schizophrenia. As I have said before, The split between saving souls and doing good in the world is a product not of the Bible or the gospel, but of the cultural captivity of both within the Western world. We return to the themes of two chapters ago (justice, beauty, evangelism) with hope renewed precisely because of the promise of space, time, and matter renewed. The world of space, time and matter is where real people live, where real communities happen, where difficult decisions are taken, where schools and hospitals bear witness to the ‘now, already’ of the gospel, while police and prisons bear witness to the ‘not yet.’ ...And the church that is renewed by the message of Jesus’ resurrection must be the church that goes to work precisely in that space, time, and matter and claims it in advance as the place of God’s kingdom, of Jesus’ lordship, of the power of the Spirit.”*