

For All the Saints?

Remembering the Christian Departed

N.T. Wright

Review by Barbara Buzzard

Bishop of the Church of England, N.T. Wright tells us in his introductory remarks that he has long seen a *mismatch* between what the early Christians believed about life after death and what most ordinary Christians today believe. “Mismatch” is a kind word, but let it serve as a red flag to us, for unless we line up with Scripture, we are making it up as we go (or following others as they did, much to their own detriment).

“*My fear is that we have been simply drifting into a muddle and a mess, putting together bits and pieces of traditions, ideas and practices in the hope that they will make sense. They don’t. There may be times when a typical Anglican fudge is a pleasant, chewy sort of thing, but this isn’t one of them. It’s time to think and speak clearly and act decisively.*”¹

Churchgoers today seem to have two ultimate destinations — heaven and hell. Bishop Wright says, “Indeed, sometimes the word ‘resurrection’ has even come to be used as a synonym for ‘going to heaven,’ *which is about as misleading as it could be.*”²

In the U.S., where many have personal this and that, have we not even invented a *personal resurrection* where we go to heaven at death (the direct route, so to speak)? In Scripture, the resurrection of the saints is a corporate event, the living not preceding the dead, but all being resurrected together (1 Thess. 4:16-17).

“Purgatory is a Roman Catholic doctrine pure and simple. It is not held as such in the eastern church and was decisively rejected by Protestants at the Reformation. Though some have claimed biblical support for it, the main reasons for holding it were and are theological, and indeed liturgical. (It’s interesting to note how in the earlier periods, as today, liturgical practice has been *used as a lever to adjust the church’s belief.*)” (emphasis mine). While I can enjoy Bishop Wright’s humor and also his sardonic pen, in my desire for clarity I find this outrageous. It seems to be making it up as you go. If it doesn’t fit your system, just adjust to suit.

The Bishop speaks of poems and hymns which resound with this non-biblical picture. He then says, “The reader will deduce rightly that I find all this musically glorious, humanly noble and *theologically intolerable.*”³ I marvel at his capacity for splitting himself up, but where does it leave one in the end? That kindly British term “muddle” comes to mind.

Purgatory, New Style

We used to speak of a sure and certain hope, i.e. “that all believers would share, after death, the glorious life of Jesus Christ.” Bishop Wright feels that this is being soft-pedaled; that we are no longer as definite and confident as we once were. While I would agree with the soft-pedaling aspect, I do not understand what sharing in the life of Christ actually means. Does it mean that he will return (as promised!) so that we can be with him? The sure and certain hope used to be that the dead would be raised at Jesus’ second coming. Worse than soft-pedaling, hasn’t this biblical view been deleted?

Bishop Wright describes a common view today: “The Christians do not go straight to ‘heaven,’ but need to be cleaned up and sorted out.” (Thankfully, he does not think that non-Christians go straight to “hell,” but says that the scope of this book cannot deal with what happens to them.) So then, he describes a sort of post-mortem process going on, a kind of “purgatory-for-all” which

¹ N.T. Wright, *For All The Saints*, p. xiv

² *Ibid.*, p. 2

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 9, 10, emphasis added.

“doesn’t make much fuss of sin,” but downplays it with saints being on a journey but for an undetermined destination. If this leaves you confused – please know that so am I. Only a British clergyman could say “doesn’t make much fuss of sin!”

Questioning the Tradition

Regarding the matters of hell and purgatory: “There are several different ways of questioning this great tradition, which has supplied the mental furniture of millions of Christians, in the west at least, for a thousand years and more. The Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth century, of course, achieved a remarkable coup in abolishing the doctrine of purgatory, but **they left much of the traditional picture of heaven and hell unchallenged, and never really explained how either of them fitted into the New Testament’s language about resurrection.**”⁴ Indeed, they did not explain from Scripture how these elements came to be, but they have become permanent fixtures of “the system.” Why do we permit this? We would not, in any other field of inquiry. And yet, these views hold sway. It is past time to toss what does not stand up to Scripture.

Rethinking the Tradition

You will, no doubt, admire N.T. Wright’s talented style of writing. “We should remember especially that the use of the word ‘heaven’ to denote the *ultimate* goal of the redeemed, though hugely emphasized by medieval piety, mystery plays, and the like, and still almost universal at a popular level, is severely misleading and does not begin to do justice to the Christian hope. I am repeatedly frustrated by how hard it is to get this point through the thick wall of traditional thought and language that most Christians put up. ‘Going to heaven when you die’ is not held out in the New Testament as the main goal.”⁵ And so, I would have to ask, is it a secondary or minor goal? Certainly not, according to J.A.T. Robinson: “Heaven is never in fact used in the Bible for the destination of the dying.”⁶

And so where are the dead *now*? This is, after all, our question. Paul uses the expression “sleeping in Christ” frequently; the bishop admits that some understand that this would mean an unconscious state (to be brought back to consciousness at the resurrection) but he does not view it this way. He views the dead as at rest, but conscious. In my estimation he would then have to explain away Daniel 12:2; John 5:28; Ecc. 5:9, 10; John 11:11, 14.

Bishop Wright is at his most clever when he cites the 22nd Anglican Article of Faith: “The Romish Doctrine concerning Purgatory...is a fond thing vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God.”⁷ And about this he says: “These human traditions are not just nice bits and pieces which it does no harm to people to believe. They affect the very centre of Christian faith.”⁸ A brilliant statement, and I would ask, what about the vast numbers of people *put off* the faith by these false inventions? Even though the idea of purgatory has been modernized, it is still an invention of man.

“We have been fooled, not for the first time, by a view of death, and life beyond, in which the really important thing is the ‘soul’ – something which, to many people’s surprise, hardly features at all in the New Testament. We have allowed our view of the saving of souls to loom so large that we have failed to realize that the Bible is much more concerned about bodies — concerned to the point where it’s actually *quite difficult to give a clear biblical account of the disembodied state in between bodily death and bodily resurrection.*”⁹ *There are 55 words in this sentence. Allow me to reduce it.*

⁴ Ibid., p. 18, emphasis added.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 20, 21

⁶ J.A.T. Robinson, *In The End God*, pp. 104, 105

⁷ A “fond” thing?!

⁸ For All The Saints, pp. 28, 29

⁹ Ibid., p. 31

In the Bible, there is no clear teaching that one can be conscious without one's body. And yet, the bishop himself argues for being “at rest,” but conscious, after death.

In an earlier work, Bishop Wright proposes the expression, “life *after* life after death.”¹⁰ He imagines a new bodily life after whatever state of existence one might enter immediately upon death.

Have You Ever Thought of This?

Bishop Wright proposes the idea that it is *this* life that functions as a sort of purgatory. He argues that the gloom and doom of *this* life are the valleys we have to pass through. He maintains that purgatory in the future is a false trail — we are really living it now. Since I know all too well that religious systems have a tendency to get it wrong, this view certainly needs examining.

N.T. Wright's summing up is this: “that all the Christian departed are in substantially the same state, that of restful happiness. This is not the final destiny for which they are bound, namely, the bodily resurrection; it is a temporary resting place.”¹¹ This I find a very difficult view, even to follow, as he has admitted that the clear biblical account of what he is proposing is missing!

The Bishop speaks of “‘conditionalists’ who teach that, since humans are not by nature immortal, only those who are saved are granted immortality, so that all others are simply extinguished.” He opts for a different form of conditionalism which I cannot explain. Nor does he explain how it is that after death everyone is in a happy state, since they are not immortal. (God alone has immortality, 1Tim. 6:16.)

There's a Cake in the Larder

For non-Brits, a larder is a pantry. Bishop Wright's point is that although salvation is spoken of as being “kept in heaven for you,” this does not mean that you must “go to heaven” to receive it. Likewise, the fact that there is a cake in the pantry doesn't mean that that is where you must eat it. A wonderfully practical and profound insight.

The Kingdom of God

Bishop Wright sees Jesus' public career as being all about God's Kingdom, and he notes that Jesus taught us to pray for that Kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven. What that means to the Bishop is that this Kingdom “was the new fact about the world, the ‘age to come’ that would break into ‘the present age’ and inaugurate a new world, not far away in a disembodied ‘heaven’ but right here on this earth.”¹² “But the ultimate future, as chapters 21 and 22 (Rev.) make clear, is not about people leaving ‘earth’ and going to ‘heaven’, but rather about the life of ‘heaven,’ more specifically the New Jerusalem, coming down *from* heaven to earth — exactly in line with the Lord's Prayer.”¹³

While Bishop Wright stresses correctly that it is the earth which is given to man, he thinks that the Kingdom began with Jesus. This view, while somewhat popular, seems at variance with some of the facts of the Kingdom: Jesus ruling from his throne in Jerusalem with his saints, Satan being bound and not deceiving anyone, peace and justice the order of the day. The bishop is extremely exercised about an innovation which the Church of England has included in its prayer book, dividing the church year into seven, the seventh being “the Kingdom Season.” What this does, it seems, is to “unscramble” the eschatological teaching, and insert a very different scheme in which the saints have gone to heaven before us. He says, “This is precisely what the New Testament does *not* teach.”¹⁴ He is upset with the storyline of the New Testament being thrown out of kilter,

¹⁰ N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, p. 151

¹¹ *For All The Saints*, pp. 36, 37

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 58, 59

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 59, 60

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 62

creating a wrong narrative; and he strongly rejects the implication that Jesus becomes King at the *end* of the sequence, as in his thinking Jesus' Kingdom has already begun.

By contrast, a professor of Missiology sees the centrality of the Gospel of the Kingdom in Jesus' teaching and its absence from popular evangelism: "We seem to be faced with an eclipse of the Kingdom of God from the apostolic age to the present particularly in our theology of evangelism. The Kingdom of God is God's own dream, His project for the world and for humanity. He makes us dreamers and He wants us to be seduced by his dream. It is not we who dream but God who dreams in us."

"When I left the seminary I had no clear idea of the Kingdom of God and I had no place in my theology for the Parousia (Second Coming). I had no concerns about the future. Thousands of books are printed and circulated every year on evangelization; most of these fall into the category of 'how to' manuals for churches (devising plans, strategies, methodologies, goals)... Our traditional mini-theologies — 'the plan of salvation,' 'four spiritual laws' — do not do justice to the *whole* Gospel. Not all this activity or activism is a sign of health or creativity. The Good News of the Kingdom is not the usual way we describe the Gospel and evangelization. The Kingdom of God has practically disappeared from evangelistic preaching and has been ignored by traditional evangelism."

"The evangelistic message has been centered in personal salvation, individual conversion, and incorporation into the church. The Kingdom of God as a parameter or perspective or content of the Gospel has been virtually absent. Those interested in evangelism have not yet been interested in the Kingdom of God. Why not try Jesus' own definition of his mission — and ours? For Jesus evangelism was no more and no less than announcing the Kingdom of God."¹⁵

Praying for and with the Dead?

It is noteworthy that the main reason that Protestants opposed prayers for the dead was because of purgatory. The giving up of that belief meant that prayer was no longer necessary to release loved ones from purgatory. However, Bishop Wright gives honor to the practice of praying for the dead. He refers to the prayer, "And may the souls of the faithful departed rest in peace and rise in glory" but, paradoxically, is concerned that it may be misleading: "If we believe in the resurrection of the body, then it is the body, not specifically or uniquely the 'soul,' that is resting at the moment... Even more important, the resurrection is not, of course, the resurrection of the soul, but of the body, of the whole person."¹⁶

What a very hard book to review. Although the bishop urges us to think clearly and coherently, I feel that I have been led on something of a merry chase. When he adheres to Scripture, he is wonderful; when he cuts loose from Scripture, he is enough to burn off one's eyebrows.

One thing Bishop Wright has helped me with is this: I have been trying to put a name to the British practice of speaking about a subject so as to completely blind one to as to what is actually being said. It is the practice of using rather *nice* words when one actually means *scathing* ones. It is the giving of one thing in tandem with the taking back of another. It fogs and blunts and confuses and muddles. Perhaps the bishop has named it for me: "Anglican fudge."

¹⁵ Mortimer Arias, *Announcing the Reign of God*, p. 55, xiii, xvii, 1,9, 85, 87

¹⁶ For All The Saints, p. 75