

Notes on the theology of N.T. Wright's *Surprised by hope*

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1 Introduction

Wright (2007) addresses two questions (5):

1. What is the ultimate Christian hope?
2. 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', *away* from this world, the two questions appear unrelated. But if the Christian hope is God's new creation, 'new heavens and new earth', then there is every reason to join the two questions together, and Christian hope provides a coherent and energising basis for work in today's world (6).

Many practising Christians are muddled and misguided about these topics (6), as evidenced in the hymns they sing (27–30), and 19th- and early 20th-century poetry was similarly muddled (Tennyson's *In memoriam* (8–9), Shelley's *Adonais* (11–12), Rupert Brooke's *The soldier* (12).) Oddly Kipling's *When earth's last picture is painted* is theologically more accurate (9–10), while the much older Donne's *Death, be not proud* is spot on (22):

One short sleep past, we wake eternally,
And death shall be no more. Death, thou shalt die.

The creed refers to 'the resurrection of the body' (23), but some Anglican funeral prayers stray far from this concept (33–35).

A widely held view is of course that the saved go to heaven, the wicked to hell, but there is remarkably little in the Bible to support this (24–25). The picture in Revelation 4–5 of the 24 elders casting their crowns before the throne of God and the Lamb is not a picture of the last day (despite a great Wesley hymn): it is a picture of present reality, the heavenly dimension of the present, God's dimension. At the actual end, in Revelation 21–22, we do not find ransomed souls making their way to a disembodied heaven but rather the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven to earth, uniting the two in a lasting embrace (26).

A view of disembodied souls going to heaven separates Christians from this world (and becomes, as Marx said, the opium of the people), whereas a robust view of a bodily resurrection enforces a degree of continuity between this life and life after death. Wright observes

that evangelicals gave up their concern for justice (which earlier in the 19th century led to the emancipation of slaves) at about the same time as they replaced bodily resurrection with a neo-platonic heaven (37–38).

Much Christian tradition asserts that we have a ‘soul’ which needs ‘saving’ and which, if saved, will go to heaven when we die. There is little support for this in the NT, including the teaching of Jesus. The word ‘soul’ translates what is ultimately a Hebrew/Aramaic term meaning ‘personality’ (39).¹

‘Our task in the present ... is to live as resurrection people in between Easter and the final day, with our Christian life, corporate and individual, in both worship and mission, as a sign of the first and a foretaste of the second.’ (41)

2 Christian hope in its historical setting

The ancient world was adamant that dead people did not rise again—with the exception of some Jews, who did not believe that anyone *had* risen, nor that anyone *would* rise before the general resurrection (45).² There is also no ambiguity about the meaning of ‘resurrection’: it meant a new bodily life, not a disembodied life in heaven (47). So when early Christians said that Jesus had risen from the dead, there is no ambiguity about what they were saying, and they knew that they were saying that something had happened to him that had happened to no one else and that no one had expected (48).

Jesus shared the belief in the general resurrection. When the Saducees asked Jesus a question intended to make resurrection look silly, he gave them a traditional answer about the general resurrection (Mark 12:18–27, Matthew 22:23–33,³ Luke 20:27–40). Other than this, almost the only reference to resurrection in the gospels is in Jesus’ explanation of the parable of the sower when he says, ‘Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father’ (Matthew 13:43) (49). In Luke 14:14 Jesus makes a typically Jewish reference to the resurrection: ‘But when you host an elaborate meal, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Then you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.’ In John 5:28–29 Jesus speaks of the resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked: ‘Do not be amazed at this, because a time is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and will come out—the ones who have done what is good to the resurrection resulting in life, and the ones who have done what is evil to the resurrection resulting in condemnation.’ (50)⁴

Jesus also talked, but only to his own followers, about the fact that he would be killed and would rise again after three days. Scholars have thought that these were pseudo-prophecies, put on Jesus’ lips by the church, but Tom Wright has argued at length for the opposite view—that Jesus had every reason to foresee his own death and to invest it with saving power, as the

¹ Wright has written specifically about what happens after death in *For all the saints?*.

² For much more detail, see Wright (2003). Zoroastrians may also have believed in resurrection.

³ ‘At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven.’ (Matthew 22:30) (58, 313n19)

⁴ Other references to the resurrection by Jesus are: ‘Jesus said to them, “I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel ’ (Matthew 19:28).

Maccabean martyrs had done, and to believe that he would be vindicated by resurrection (50). When Jesus talked about his resurrection after the transfiguration, the disciples had no idea what he was talking about (Mark 9:10),⁵ because it was so contrary to Jewish belief. For this reason, the crucifixion dashed their hopes (Luke 24:21) (51).⁶

The early Christian belief in the general resurrection looks rather like that of Pharisaic Judaism, but with specific modifications.⁷ This comes out in the writings of people from Paul through at least to Tertullian and Origen at the end of the second century (53). Only on the late second century do we find people using the word ‘resurrection’ to refer to a spiritual experience in the present leading to a disembodied hope in the future (54).⁸ ‘Going to heaven’ is a temporary stage on the way to eternal resurrection. Jesus tells the brigand that they will be together in paradise (Luke 23:43),⁹ but this is obviously temporary as Jesus rises from the dead two days later. Jesus declares that there are many dwelling places in his father’s house: his word for ‘dwelling place’ is *monē*, denoting a temporary dwelling.¹⁰ Paul says that his desire is ‘to depart and to be with Christ’ (Philippians 1:23), but this is only a prelude to the resurrection (Philippians 3:10–11)¹¹ (52).

However, early Christian belief in the resurrection also reflects a mutation of Jewish belief. In second Temple Judaism, resurrection was important but not central, whereas in NT Christianity and the early Fathers it was clearly central (54). It entailed a physical body with new properties (55).¹² For early Christians, resurrection was ‘split into two’: first Jesus, then us (56). Precisely because the resurrection was assumed to entail new bodies on the present earth, there was a strong thread of belief that the Christian’s task is to work in the power of the Spirit to help Jesus prepare for the coming of the Kingdom by transforming the present in the light of the future (57). The metaphorical significance of the resurrection also changed. In Jewish writings, it stood metaphorically (Ezekiel 47) or metonymically (2 Maccabees, 4 Ezra) for Israel’s restoration,¹³ but in Christian writings from Paul onwards it is a metaphor for baptism. This is not a slide into a non-physical interpretation of the resurrection, as Romans talks of resurrection in both senses: baptism (Romans 6:4) and physical resurrection ((Romans 7:23) (58). The final and most important aspect of this mutation is that no Jew

⁵ ‘As they were coming down from the mountain, he gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. They kept this statement to themselves, discussing what this rising from the dead meant.’ (NET).

⁶ ‘We had hoped he was the one who would redeem Israel.’

⁷ Since Ezekiel 37 resurrection had also served as a metaphor for the great return from exile and the renewal of God’s covenant with his people, finally dealing with Israel’s sin (Wright 2009: 15–16).

⁸ See Wright (2003: 534–551).

⁹ Wright (p322, fn6) recommends Bremmer (2002) on the background to the word ‘paradise’.

¹⁰ Not sure why Wright infers this, as Balz & Schneider (1990: 2:439) only has this once in the NT (here), and the verb *monēn* is used in John 14:23 of God dwelling in us.

¹¹ ‘My aim is to know him, to experience the power of his resurrection, to share in his sufferings, and to be like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.’ (NET).

¹² Wright says that 1 Corinthians 15 is much misunderstood and mistranslated. The new body will not be a ‘spiritual’ body in the sense of a non-material body, and it can be demonstrated exegetically that Paul was clear about this (Wright 2003: 347–360) (55).

¹³ There are two references to this in the NT. The disciples ask the risen Jesus in Acts 1:6 whether he will now restore Israel; and in Rom 11:14–15 Paul speaks of the conversion of the Jews as resurrection.

expected the Messiah to be resurrected, but early Christians believed that Jesus was the Messiah *because* of the resurrection. This cannot be figurative, as Judaism had no concept of the resurrection of an individual (as opposed to the general resurrection): anyone proposing the ‘spiritual resurrection’ of Jesus would not have been understood (60–61). Furthermore, the belief that Jesus is Lord and Caesar is not came very early, with Paul (see Wright 2005: Ch.4) (62–63).

3 The strange story of Easter

Wright argues that the Easter stories in the gospels have certain (by NT standards) unusual features that provide evidence that they reflect very early, pre-Pauline, narratives:¹⁴

1. The four stories make no appeal to OT prophecy, implying that they were recorded (or became set pieces) before there had been time for Biblical reflection. It is very improbable that such reflections have been deliberately removed from all four stories to make them look old, as they do not share a source but appear to reflect different very early oral traditions (64–65).
2. Women were not reliable witnesses in the ancient world, yet no attempt is made in any of the four stories to reduce their significance. Again, this suggests unchanged early narratives (66).
3. If the stories had been composed later, we would expect Jesus to appear luminescent or glorified, shining like a star as Daniel suggests, but he doesn’t. He looks ordinary but clearly has a transformed body that can negotiate locked doors, and he disappears across the thin boundary which separates earth from heaven. There were no theological precedents for this (66–67).
4. There is no mention of the Christian hope of resurrection in connection with the stories. Had they been written towards the end of the first century, there would almost certainly be such references, as there are elsewhere in the NT (67).

The question for many people, of course, is whether the events of the resurrection could possibly have happened. Wright proposes a historical hypothesis: (i) the tomb really was empty, and (ii) the disciples really did encounter him in ways that convinced them that he was neither a ghost nor a hallucination (69). The second element is essential, as grave robbery was fairly common (70).

The ancient world knew well enough about ghosts and hallucinations and had language to talk about these. No one would have referred to them in terms of a resurrection (69).

The Jewish burial process entailed first wrapping up the body, then, after decomposition, putting the bones in an ossuary. So if Jesus had not been raised, the second installment would still have been necessary and no one would have referred to this as resurrection (69–70). Further, Jewish tombs, especially those of martyrs, became venerated and used as shrines. There is no evidence that anything like this happened to Jesus’ grave (73).

The fact that the early church shifted its ‘sabbath’ to Sunday is hard to explain unless something striking happened on that day, nor is it likely that the disciples would have gone out and suffered for something about which they weren’t absolutely certain (73–74).

¹⁴ He discusses this in more detail in Wright (2003: 599–608).

Numerous explanations of the evidence have been offered, but none fits the reported facts. Ultimately, believing that Jesus was *not* raised from the dead because one believes there must be an alternative explanation to resurrection (even though one doesn't have it) is a choice (74). Thus believing in the resurrection entails a rejection of current paradigms of reality—it challenges both the historian and the scientist, based in the worldview of Hume and other Enlightenment thinkers (80)—and entails the adoption of a worldview that includes history and science but transcends them both, a worldview informed by faith in a loving creator God. The exemplar of this worldview is Thomas, who moved from skepticism to worship: “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28) (83).

4 God's future plan

Wright discusses two views of the future that have competed with the Christian hope and have influenced Christians' beliefs.

The first is that of progress, i.e. unfettered improvement leading to a Utopia, a view that has its roots in the Renaissance and was given its decisive push by the Enlightenment and received the support of some influential thinkers, among them Hegel. This is a parody of the Christian hope, asserting that we will become what we have the potential to be by education and hard work (94). It was convenient in the 19th century for those who wanted to justify their own massive industrial and imperial expansion (95). The best known Christian adaptation of this position was Teilhard de Chardin's (96). But the problem with the progress myth is that it can't deal with evil: it can't counteract evil, it can never solve its effects retrospectively,¹⁵ and it underestimates the power of evil and thus misses the vital importance of the cross (97–99).

The second myth is the Platonic myth of souls in transit (100). Since the Middle Ages, Western Christianity has been heavily influenced by Greek thought, with the result that the Christian's future hope has come to look like Plato's vision of souls departing to disembodied bliss (92). For Plato, as for Buddha, the present world is an illusion, and the real task is to get in touch with the reality beyond space, time and matter. Thus the only way to be happy is to get rid of our mortal body, a thing of decay and death. This strain of thought entered Christianity early, with the gnostics, for whom *gnosis* 'knowledge' was the way to enter a spiritual existence in which the real world no longer counts. In this view, creation itself is the Fall, producing matter, the true evil (100–101). The playwright and writer Stuart Holroyd, an unashamed apologist for gnosticism, lists Blake, Goethe, Melville, Yeats and Jung among others as representing this stream of thought in the modern West, even though their thought has often been crossfertilised with insights from other sources. A good many Christian hymns and songs wander unthinkingly in this direction, as in the spiritual 'This world is not my home, I'm just a-passin' through' (102).

Early Christians believed neither of these two myths. They believed that God was going to do for the whole world what he had done for Jesus at Easter (104). They believed in the goodness of creation, created by a loving God but separate from him (105). They believed in evil, but evil was not manifest in the transience of the world. The world's transience points not to a non-material world but to the world as it is meant to be. Evil consists in the rebellious idolatry whereby people worship bits of the created world rather than the God who created it, with

¹⁵ That is, people have suffered, and a future world without suffering offers no retrospective response to this.

the result that death—part of the natural transience of the world—gains a second dimension of ‘spiritual death’, and in some mysterious way the out-of-jointedness this causes becomes enmeshed with the transience of the good-but-incomplete creation (106). Redemption is not redemption from embodiment but redemption from sin, looking forward to a newly embodied life (107). Jesus is the moment all creation has been waiting for, when eternal wisdom becomes incarnate and rules the creation over which we have stewardship, and all creation is reconciled to God. This is the message of the hymn in Colossians 1:15–20, which carefully holds together creation and redemption (108).

In 1 Corinthians 15:20, 23 Paul writes ‘But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep ... But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.’ (NIV) ‘Firstfruits’ were connected in the Jewish mind with Passover and Pentecost, both celebrated as agricultural festivals as well as festivals of salvation history.¹⁶ Firstfruits presage many fruits, and Paul goes on to describe the resurrection of Christian believers with a transformed body like Jesus’ (109). In 1 Corinthians 15:25–28 Paul shifts the image to that of a king who defeats all his enemies and has complete dominion. The whole cosmos will be subject to the Messiah and will be transformed in an act of new creation (110). Paul’s theme in Philippians 3:20¹⁷ is the same. When Paul writes that we are citizens of heaven, he doesn’t mean that we will dwell there but that the saviour will come *from* there (ἐξ οὐ) to transform us (111–112).

In 1 Corinthians 15:28 Paul writes ‘God will be all in all’. He makes two points here: (i) this is in the future; and (ii) God will fill the earth, as prophesied in Isaiah 11:9, ‘for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea’, anticipating Isaiah 65:17ff: ‘Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth...’ (112–114). Wright points out that Romans 8:19–22¹⁸ has often been marginalised within the context of Romans 8 because exegetes want to assume that the chapter is about personal salvation and nothing more, but (mdr:) the immediate lead-up in Romans 8:17–18¹⁹ makes it clear that the glory we will ultimately experience is part and parcel of the renewal of creation (114–115). The images here are of liberation from bondage—the image of the Exodus—and of birth pangs—a Jewish metaphor for the emergence of God’s new age. Finally, Revelation 21–22 speaks of the new Jerusalem coming permanently to earth, not of us going permanently to heaven (115–117).²⁰

¹⁶ At Passover the first crop of barley was presented before the Lord, at Pentecost the firstfruits of the wheat harvest.

¹⁷ ‘But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.’ (NIV)

¹⁸ ‘The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.’ (NIV)

¹⁹ ‘Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.’

²⁰ Revelation 21:2–3: And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.

Other NT passages that speak of new creation include Hebrews 11–12, especially Hebrews 11:35, 2 Peter 3:10–13, Ephesians 1:15–23 (117). But it is only through metaphor and imagery that we can imagine God’s new creation, as in Colossians 1:15–20 (118).

5 Jesus, heaven and new creation

In early Christianity, the resurrection and the ascension were clearly two separate events, even though they are sometimes mixed by today’s Christians. Paul was very clear about the fact that Jesus had died, then been raised from the dead, then taken into heaven where, in the words of Psalms 110:1,²¹ quoted in Matthew 22:44, he has been seated at the right hand of God. Paul repeats this on a number of occasions, e.g., Romans 8:34,²² Ephesians 1:20–21,²³ and the separateness of resurrection and ascension is implicit in Jesus’ words, quoted by John 20:17: ‘Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, “I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God”.’ (120)

Wright sees earth and heaven as two dimensions of God’s creation, whereby the one who is in heaven can simultaneously be present anywhere and everywhere on earth, and whereby heaven is as it were the control room for earth.²⁴ (122)

The idea that Jesus the human being is in heaven in his embodied risen state is a shock to many Christians because of our Platonism, but the ascension invites us to think this way (122). The idea that Jesus has all authority on earth is also problematic, as (i) the world is a mess and (ii) attempts at theocracy have always failed. But there is a third option, namely that the *method* of the kingdom will match the *message* of the kingdom, and the church, in the power of the Spirit, ‘goes out into the world vulnerable, suffering, praising, praying, misunderstood, misjudged, vindicated, celebrating...’ (123) The church is not itself the kingdom and the church is not Jesus: ‘For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake’ (2 Corinthians 4:5). (124)

If we are able to grasp the fact of the ascension, this keeps us from certain errors. It enables us to celebrate the fact that a human being has gone ahead of us into God’s space, is already ruling the rebellious world and is interceding for us at the Father’s right hand. This equips us for the task of justice in the present (124). Jesus didn’t just ‘go back to being God again’ after his earthly life: he is a human being at God’s side, and the sacraments and the Holy Spirit both become important as they are the means by which Jesus is present with us (125–126).

However, saying this is easy. Envisaging it is not, and we have a strong tendency to slip back into ‘flat earth’ thinking when we think about Jesus: ‘he went **up** to heaven’. C.S. Lewis did a great job in the Narnia series of envisaging how two worlds could relate and interlock.

²¹ ‘The LORD says to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet”.’

²² ‘Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.’

²³ ‘... when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.’

²⁴ Matthew 28:18: Then Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.’

(127–128). There are admittedly passages in Paul that speak of us raised up with Jesus, but to take these passages as representing the end result of the Gospel is to neglect the NT's claim that the one who has gone to heaven will come back (128).²⁵

The Anglican Eucharist says, 'Christ has died; Christ is risen; *Christ will come again*', and the Creed says, 'He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.' Many Christians have little idea what this means (129), and the issue has become more difficult to address in the past century. There are two reasons for this.

The first is that the 'second coming' has become a hot topic in much of North American Christianity, accompanied by a belief that we live in the 'end times', to be followed by Jesus' return, the 'rapture' of true believers to live with him, then, after a period of ungodliness, returning with him to reign over the world for ever. This reached its height with Hal Lindsey's 1971 book *The late great planet Earth* and has been continued to a degree in the novels of Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, beginning with *Left behind*.²⁶ This has led among other things to a belief that we need not care for the environment as it won't be around for much longer, a position perhaps encouraged by certain areas of big business (131).

The second reason, at the opposite extreme, is the attempt by many in the western church to marginalise or weaken the second coming into meaninglessness (132).

6 The second coming

Before we can talk about the second coming, certain misunderstandings need to be got out of the way.

When Jesus talks of 'the son of man coming on the clouds'²⁷ he is citing Daniel 7:13, where the coming of the son of man refers to vindication after suffering.²⁸ There is good

²⁵ Ephesians 2:4–7: But God, who is rich in mercy, because of his great love for us even when we were dead because of our offenses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), raised us up with him, and seated us with him in the heavenly realm in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might display the limitless riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. (ISV)

Colossians 3:1–4: Therefore, if you have been raised with Christ, keep focusing on the things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Keep your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on the earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ your life is revealed, then you, too, will be revealed with him in glory. (ISV)

²⁶ A helpful critique is Craig C. Hill, 2002, *In God's time: The Bible and the future*, pp199–209 (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans).

²⁷ Mark 13:24–27: (speaking to his disciples) "But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light; the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then everyone will see the Son of Man arriving in the clouds with great power and glory. Then he will send angels and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven....". (NET)

Mark 14:61–62: Again the high priest questioned him, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?" "I am," said Jesus, "and you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power and coming with the clouds of heaven." (NET)

²⁸ Daniel 7:13–14: 'I was watching in the night visions, "And with the clouds of the sky one like a son of man was approaching. He went up to the Ancient of Days and was escorted before him. To him was given ruling authority, honour, and sovereignty. All peoples, nations, and language groups were serving him. His authority is eternal and will not pass away. His kingdom will not be destroyed.' (NET)

I am uncertain about Wright's interpretation, given Daniel's reference to eternal authority.

reason to regard these sayings as authentic, as they are cryptic, yet clearly refer to Jesus' vindication by God through the resurrection and ascension and the destruction of the Temple in AD 70 (137, 139), and they are the language that the early church used of the ascension, i.e. of Jesus' arrival in heaven, not his return to earth.

The stories that Jesus tells of a master or king who goes away and leaves his subjects or servants to trade in his absence (Matthew 25:14–30, Luke 19:11–27) would have been heard by his hearers as stories about God himself, leaving Israel and the temple at the time of the exile and coming back at last as the post-exilic prophets had said he would.²⁹ Since these prophecies were fulfilled in Jesus, the stories refer to the first coming, not the second (although they were read in the latter way quite early in church history) (138). There is in any case nowhere in the NT where we are told that some believing Christians will be judged in the way that the wicked servant was judged for hiding his master's money in a napkin (139).

The concept of the 'second coming' is not present in Jesus' teaching as it is reported in the gospels, but was clearly part of Luke's belief, as he writes (140),

As they were still staring into the sky while he was going, suddenly two men in white clothing stood near them and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking up into the sky? This same Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven will come back in the same way you saw him go into heaven." (Acts 1:10–11)

But the primary witness is Paul. A certain amount of confusion has arisen from his use of the word *parousia* 'presence', which occurs in two key passages, 1 Thessalonians 4:15³⁰ and 1 Corinthians 15:23³¹ (140). In non-Christian discourse of the time, *parousia* had two senses. The first was the presence of a divinity, especially when revealed through healing. Josephus uses it when he talks about YHWH coming to rescue Israel. The second was 'royal presence', when a person of high rank visited a subject state. Paul uses the term in its first sense when he talks about the Jesus that the early church worshipped being present in spirit but not in body, and in the second sense when he talks in the verses above of Jesus one day again appearing in person in this world (141–142).

These meanings intersected with the Jewish background for the second coming, the Day of the Lord, when YHWH would defeat all Israel's enemies and rescue his people once and for all. The Day of the Lord is mentioned by Peter (2 Peter 3:10) and often by Paul as 'the Day of Jesus Christ' (1 Thessalonians 5:23, 1 Corinthians 1:8, 1 Corinthians 5:5, 2 Corinthians 1:14, Philippians 1:6, 1:10, 2:16,), all with clear forward reference (142). But the early Christians realised that in the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, God had done what he had promised (he had saved his people), that Jesus was already the world's true Lord (i.e. Jesus was Lord and Caesar wasn't), but he was present by the Spirit but not yet in body (142–143).

²⁹ Malachi 3:1: "I am about to send my messenger, who will clear the way before me. Indeed, the Lord you are seeking will suddenly come to his temple, and the messenger of the covenant, whom you long for, is certainly coming," says the LORD who rules over all. (NET)

³⁰ For we tell you this by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the **coming** of the Lord, will surely not go ahead of those who have fallen asleep (NET).

τοϋτο γαρ υμιν λεγομεν εν λογω κυριου οτι ημεις οι ζωντες οι περιλειπομενοι εις την **παρουσια** του κυριου ου μη φθασωμεν τους κοιμηθεντας (Byz).

³¹ For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. But every man in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ's at his **coming**. (κην).

ωσπερ γαρ εν τω αδαμ παντες αποθνησκουσιν ουτως και εν τω χριστω παντες ζωοποιηθησονται εκαστος δε εν τω ιδιω ταγματι απαρχη χριστος επειτα οι του χριστου εν τη **παρουσια** αυτου (Byz).

The passage that has caused problems in the last century or so is 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17:

For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a shout of command, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be suddenly caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will always be with the Lord (NET).

This immediately follows one of Paul's uses of *parousia* (footnote 30) in reference to Christ's return. The topic here is the same as in 1 Corinthians 15:23 (footnote 31), 1 Corinthians 15:51–54³² and Philippians 3:20 (footnote 17) (143). The trumpet occurs both here and in 1 Thessalonians 4:16. Jesus will return, death will be defeated—the dead will rise, and those still alive will be transformed. The apparent difference is that where in 1 Corinthians 15:51 and Philippians 3:21 Paul speaks of those still alive being *transformed*, in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 he speaks of them being 'snatched up' (143–144). The latter passage, in typically Pauline style, combines the image of the trumpet and loud voice from Moses' descent from the mountain, the story in Daniel 7 of the persecuted people of God being vindicated over their pagan enemy by being raised up on the clouds to sit with God in glory,³³ and the metaphor of the *parousia* of the emperor, whose people go out to meet him in the countryside and accompany him into the city. The people are not accompanying the emperor back to the capital—heaven—but into the city where he is arriving—the earth (144–145).

Paul's theology of resurrection and ascension is well summarised in Colossians 3:1–4 (146–147):

Therefore, if you have been raised with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Keep thinking about things above, not things on the earth, for you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ (who is your life) appears, then you too will be revealed in glory with him. (NET)

When heaven and earth are joined together in the new way God has promised, Jesus will appear. John has a remarkably similar passage (147):

And now, little children, remain in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink away from him in shame when he comes back... Dear friends, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet been revealed. We know that whenever it is revealed we will be like him, because we will see him just as he is. (1 John 2:28, 3:2)(NET)

7 Jesus the coming judge

For many in our present world, 'judgment' carries negative overtones, but throughout the Bible, not least in the Psalms, it is considered a good thing, a time when justice will reign.³⁴

³² We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a moment, in the blinking of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. Now when this perishable puts on the imperishable, and this mortal puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will happen, "Death has been swallowed up in victory." (NET)

³³ On the persecution of the Thessalonians, see 1 Thessalonians 1:6, 2:14, 3:3–5.

³⁴ For example, 'Let the sea and everything in it shout, along with the world and those who live in it! Let the rivers clap their hands! Let the mountains sing in unison before the LORD! For he comes to judge the earth! He judges the world fairly, and the nations in a just manner.' (Psalms 98:7–9)(NET)

However, nineteenth-century optimism has perhaps finally diminished before the huge systemic evil of the twentieth century, and theology has returned the theme of judgment, recognising that the biblical analysis of evil in Jesus' words in John 5:22–30 corresponds more closely to reality than did the optimistic view (150–151):

“...Furthermore, the Father does not judge anyone, but has assigned all judgment to the Son, so that all people will honour the Son just as they honour the Father. The one who does not honour the Son does not honour the Father who sent him. I tell you the solemn truth, the one who hears my message and believes the one who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned, but has crossed over from death to life. I tell you the solemn truth, a time is coming - and is now here - when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For just as the Father has life in himself, thus he has granted the Son to have life in himself, and he has granted the Son authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. Do not be amazed at this, because a time is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and will come out - the ones who have done what is good to the resurrection resulting in life, and the ones who have done what is evil to the resurrection resulting in condemnation. I can do nothing on my own initiative. Just as I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I do not seek my own will, but the will of the one who sent me. (NET)

The OT basis for this is in the prophecies that the Messiah will judge the world. In Daniel 7 the gentile nations are depicted as monsters, while Israel, or the righteous within Israel, are depicted as an apparently defenceless human being, ‘one like a son of man’. The setting is a great law court in which the judge, the Ancient of Days, takes his seat and finds in favour of the son of man against the monsters, and the son of man is then given dominion over all the nations (in a deliberate echo of Adam being given dominion over all the animals in Genesis 1–2 (151). In Isaiah 11 this leads to a world in which the lion will lie down with the lamb (cf Isaiah 2)(151).³⁵

In the NT we find Jesus taking the role of the son of man, suffering then vindicated, and receiving from the Supreme Judge the task of judging the world. This is clear in the conclusion of Paul's speech on the Aeropagus (152):

“...Therefore, although God has overlooked such times of ignorance, he now commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has set a day on which he is going to judge the world in righteousness, by a man whom he designated, having provided proof to everyone by raising him from the dead.” (Acts 17:30–31).

In Romans 14:10 Paul remarks that ‘we will all stand before the judgment seat of God’ (152).³⁶ This position is not limited to Paul: ‘[The gentiles] shall give account to him that is ready to judge the quick and the dead’ (1 Peter 4:5).

³⁵ Isaiah 11:1: A shoot will grow out of Jesse's root stock, a bud will sprout from his roots. The LORD's spirit will rest on him - a spirit that gives extraordinary wisdom, a spirit that provides the ability to execute plans, a spirit that produces absolute loyalty to the LORD. He will take delight in obeying the LORD. He will not judge by mere appearances, or make decisions on the basis of hearsay. He will treat the poor fairly, and make right decisions for the downtrodden of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and order the wicked to be executed. Justice will be like a belt around his waist, integrity will be like a belt around his hips. A wolf will reside with a lamb, and a leopard will lie down with a young goat; an ox and a young lion will graze together, as a small child leads them along. ... (Isaiah 11:2–6) (NET)

³⁶ And again in 1 Corinthians 5:10: ‘For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be paid back according to what he has done while in the body, whether good or evil.’ (NET)(152)

Wright says that the future judgment is actually the **basis** of Paul's theology of justification by faith: the point isn't that God ceases to care about our behaviour, but that justification by faith happens in the present, anticipating the future verdict when God judges the world.³⁷ Showing how the two depend on each other requires a thorough exposition of Romans and Galatians,³⁸ but this anticipation is present in the communion: we confront the one who is judge as well as saviour (155).³⁹

Scholars have attempted to interpret Jesus' discourse in John 5:22–30 as referring to a present 'eternal life' rather than to a future one.⁴⁰ But the rest of the NT simply doesn't permit this interpretation (153–154). The second coming isn't something bolted onto the rest of the gospel as an afterthought. It is central to it: Jesus is the one to whom 'every knee shall bow' (Philippians 2:10–11) and the one 'who took the form of a servant and was obedient to death on the cross' (Philippians 2:6–8), and he is the former **because** he did the latter (155–156). His coming will bring about the transformation of the world and of ourselves in it. Death and decay will be overcome and God will be all in all (1 Corinthians 15:28) (156).

Our task meanwhile is to build **for** the kingdom. All we do in faith, hope and love in the present will be enhanced and transformed at his appearing,⁴¹ and the 'day' will disclose what we have done (157).⁴² People who believe that Jesus Christ is already Lord and that he will appear again to judge the world are called and equipped to think and act quite differently

And in 2 Timothy 4:1: I solemnly charge you before God and Christ Jesus, who is going to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: ... (NET)(153)

³⁷ This matter is discussed in greater detail in Wright (1997: ch.7, 2005: ch.6) and in other sources (see 321fn4).

³⁸ See Wright 1992: chs.7–8, 10, 13, the various volumes of *Paul for everyone* and Wright's *Romans* in vol. 10 of the *New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002:393–770).

³⁹ For this reason, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. A person should examine himself first, and in this way let him eat the bread and drink of the cup. For the one who eats and drinks without careful regard for the body eats and drinks judgment against himself. That is why many of you are weak and sick, and quite a few are dead. But if we examined ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned with the world. (1 Corinthians 11:27–32). (NET)

⁴⁰ John 5:22: "...Furthermore, the Father does not judge anyone, but has assigned all judgment to the Son, so that all people will honour the Son just as they honour the Father. The one who does not honour the Son does not honour the Father who sent him. I tell you the solemn truth, the one who hears my message and believes the one who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned, but has crossed over from death to life. I tell you the solemn truth, a time is coming - and is now here - when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For just as the Father has life in himself, thus he has granted the Son to have life in himself, and he has granted the Son authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. Do not be amazed at this, because a time is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and will come out - the ones who have done what is good to the resurrection resulting in life, and the ones who have done what is evil to the resurrection resulting in condemnation. I can do nothing on my own initiative. Just as I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I do not seek my own will, but the will of the one who sent me.

⁴¹ So then, dear brothers and sisters, be firm. Do not be moved! Always be outstanding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labour is not in vain in the Lord. (1 Corinthians 15:58) (NET).

⁴² For no one can lay any foundation other than what is being laid, which is Jesus Christ. If anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, or straw, each builder's work will be plainly seen, for the Day will make it clear, because it will be revealed by fire. And the fire will test what kind of work each has done. If what someone has built survives, he will receive a reward. If someone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss. He himself will be saved, but only as through fire. (1 Corinthians 3:11–15) (NET).

from those who don't (158).

8 The redemption of our bodies

There is no agreement in the church today about what happens to people when they die, yet the NT is crystal clear on the matter: 'we ourselves also, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we eagerly await our adoption, the redemption of our bodies' (Romans 8:23) (159).⁴³

As mentioned earlier, when Paul says that we are 'citizens of heaven' he doesn't mean that we shall retire there for ever when our work here is finished, as in the next lines he speaks of Jesus coming **from** heaven to transform our bodies Philippians 3:20 (footnote 17) (160–161). The risen Jesus is both the model for the Christian's future body and the means by which it comes about. Similarly in Colossians 3:1–4 (p.8) 'when the Messiah appears, you too will appear with him in glory.' Similarly in the oft overlooked passage in Romans 8:9–11.⁴⁴ This conceptualisation is not limited to Paul (161):

Dear friends, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet been revealed. We know that whenever it is revealed we will be like him, because we will see him just as he is. (1 John 3:2) (NET)

Jesus' own words in John 5:25–29 (p.11) hark back to Daniel 12, Isaiah 26 and Ezekiel 37 and paint a similar picture, but with the difference that they see the resurrection as being for everyone, whereas Paul perhaps sees it as for believers alone (162).

Jesus words in John 14:2, 'There are many dwelling places in my Father's house. Otherwise, I would have told you, because I am going away to make ready a place for you' are often taken to refer to eternity in heaven, but Wright says that *monai* is regularly used in Greek for a temporary halt on a journey to somewhere else (see p.2 and footnote 10) (162). Similarly when Peter writes (1 Peter 1:3–5)⁴⁵ of an inheritance 'kept in heaven for you', he does not necessarily mean that one must experience that inheritance in heaven, but only that it is preserved for us in God's space (163–164). When he speaks in 1 Peter 1:9 of 'the salvation of your souls' (ψυχῶν) he is not talking about a disembodied part of us but about the transformation of our whole person through the resurrection of Jesus.⁴⁶

The NT writer who has the most to say about resurrection is Paul, in 2 Corinthians 4–5 and in 1 Corinthians 15. These chapters are analysed in detail in Wright (2003: chs.6–7).

⁴³ Wright deals with this in depth in Wright (2003).

⁴⁴ You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, this person does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, but the Spirit is your life because of righteousness. Moreover if the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead lives in you, the one who raised Christ from the dead will also make your mortal bodies alive through his Spirit who lives in you. (NET).

⁴⁵ By his great mercy he gave us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, that is, into an inheritance imperishable, undefiled, and unfading. It is reserved in heaven for you, who by God's power are protected through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

⁴⁶ ...because you are attaining the goal of your faith - the salvation of your souls./...κομιζομενοι το τελος της πιστεως υμων σωτηριαν ψυχων.

Wright comments that if we only has the closing verses of 2 Cor 4,⁴⁷ we could argue for a Platonic view of eternity, but in ch.5 Paul is clearly speaking of a new ‘tent’.⁴⁸ (165) This calls for a huge leap of the imagination for Westerners who are conditioned to think that anything permanent must be without a body, whereas Paul is claiming that the new body will be something beside which the present body is a mere shadow (165–166). But it was a leap of imagination for Paul’s earliest readers too: ‘for we live by faith, not by sight’ (2 Corinthians 5:7) (166). He says (i) that we will need a new body to appear before the judgment seat,⁴⁹ and perhaps (ii) that the wicked will also be raised (167).

The climax of Paul’s talk of the resurrection is in 1 Corinthians 15, but his terminology has caused much confusion: ‘it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body’ (1 Corinthians 15:44). The contrast here is not between ‘physical’ and ‘spiritual’ but between the present, corruptible, decaying, mortal body and the future, incorruptible, undecaying, undying body (167). The Greek words are *psychikos* and *pneumatikos*. But adjectives in *-ikos* do not describe the material out of which things are made but the power or energy that animates them.⁵⁰ The present body is animated by the human *psychē* ‘soul, personality’, the life-force in our present life, and the future body will be animated by God’s *pneuma*, his Spirit (168). This underlies the remarkable concluding verse, 1 Corinthians 15:58, ‘So then, dear brothers and sisters, be firm. Do not be moved! Always be outstanding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.’ In other words. know that what you do in the present body will be reaffirmed by the power of the Spirit in the eventual future (168–169).

Apart from a small corpus of gnostic and semi-gnostic writings, belief in a bodily resurrection continued strongly in the early fathers at least as far as Origen. Ignatius of Antioch, Justin Martyr, Athenagoras, Irenaeus and Tertullian all stress bodily resurrection (169), as did many leading theologians down to the mediaeval period, including Gregory the Great (540–604), Anselm (1033–1109) and Hugh of St-Victor (d. 1142) (170).

Wright notes that half the human beings who have ever lived are alive now (171).

One of the few modern writers who has tried to help us imagine bodily resurrection is C.S. Lewis, especially in *The great divorce*, but elsewhere too (172). John Polkinghorne (2002) also offers such a vision (175). Wright points out that immortality is something that only God possesses by nature, but which he shares as a gift of grace with his people.⁵¹ Although

⁴⁷ Therefore we do not despair, but even if our physical body is wearing away, our inner person is being renewed day by day. For our momentary, light suffering is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison : because we are not looking at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen. For what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal. (2 Corinthians 4:16–18) (NET)

⁴⁸ For we know that if our earthly house, the tent we live in, is dismantled, we have a building from God, a house not built by human hands, that is eternal in the heavens. For in this earthly house we groan, because we desire to put on our heavenly dwelling, if indeed, after we have put on our heavenly house, we will not be found naked. (2 Corinthians 5:3) (NET)

⁴⁹ For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be paid back according to what he has done while in the body, whether good or evil. (2 Corinthians 5:10)

⁵⁰ That is, this is not like a distinction between a wooden ship and an iron ship, but like one between a steam ship and a sailing ship.

⁵¹ He alone possesses immortality and lives in unapproachable light, whom no human has ever seen or is able to see. To him be honour and eternal power! (1 Timothy 6:16) (NET).

it is perhaps unclear exactly what it means, the NT writers talk of us ‘reigning’ after the resurrection (173).⁵² Wright views this as a ‘reward’ in the sense that working at a friendship or a marriage brings a ‘reward’ (174).

When will the resurrection occur? Paul says ‘at his coming’ (1 Corinthians 15:20, 23, 6). Wright has difficulty with the idea, proposed by some, that we go straight from death to resurrection, pointing to Revelation.⁵³

9 Purgatory, paradise and hell

Wright spends part of this chapter (178–183) debunking the concept of purgatory, for which, he says, there is no Biblical warrant and which several modern Catholic theologians have also abandoned. Instead, he says, the period of refinement is the present life: this is where sufferings occur (183).

The only NT passage that points to any differences among us is 1 Corinthians 3:10–15 (181),⁵⁴ but the major point being made here is not about the afterlife: it concerns the fact that we can only build the Kingdom in Jesus’ strength, not our own (Wright 2009: 40). Paul’s whole theology opposes the idea of post-mortem punishment for the believer (182).⁵⁵

Wright takes it that the dead believer goes into Jesus’ presence: Paul speaks of his ‘desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far’ (Philippians 1:23). Wright notes that this state isn’t called ‘heaven’ in the NT, but sees no harm in using the word in this way. He also sees nothing wrong with praying for the dead, that they will be refreshed and filled with God’s joy and peace, but he notes that the Reformers opposed prayer for the dead because it was associated with the doctrine of purgatory. He sees no warrant for the idea that those present in paradise are interceding for us or that we should pray to them (184). Indeed, he

⁵² Romans 5:17, 1 Corinthians 6:2–3, 2 Timothy 2:12, Revelation 1:6, Revelation 5:10, Revelation 20:4, Revelation 22:5, and perhaps Luke 19:17,19.

⁵³ Now when the Lamb opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been violently killed because of the word of God and because of the testimony they had given. They cried out with a loud voice, “How long, Sovereign Master, holy and true, before you judge those who live on the earth and avenge our blood?” Each of them was given a long white robe and they were told to rest for a little longer, until the full number was reached of both their fellow servants and their brothers who were going to be killed just as they had been. (Revelation 6:9–11) (NET).

⁵⁴ According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master-builder I laid a foundation, but someone else builds on it. And each one must be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than what is being laid, which is Jesus Christ. If anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, or straw, each builder’s work will be plainly seen, for the Day will make it clear, because it will be revealed by fire. And the fire will test what kind of work each has done. If what someone has built survives, he will receive a reward. If someone’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss. He himself will be saved, but only as through fire. (NET)

⁵⁵ There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the life-giving Spirit in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death. (Romans 8:1–2) (NET).

Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is the one who will condemn? Christ is the one who died (and more than that, he was raised), who is at the right hand of God, and who also is interceding for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? ... For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor heavenly rulers, nor things that are present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:33–39) (NET)

sees it as a denial of the believer's immediate access to God through Jesus Christ (185). He perceives the concepts of beatification and canonisation as a continuation of the late Roman panoply of deities and other supernatural beings (186).

The NT tells us very little about 'hell'. In fact Jesus talked about Gehenna, the rubbish dump outside the SW corner of Jerusalem. Jesus was not telling his hearers that, unless they repented in this life, they would go to Gehenna in the next: his message was about the present life—unless they turned back from the hopeless and rebellious goal of establishing God's kingdom on their own terms, and especially by armed revolt against Rome, then the Roman juggernaut would destroy them (for more, see Wight 1996: ch.8) (188).⁵⁶ Similarly, the parables that are sometimes supposed to address the afterlife directly are actually about insisting on justice and mercy in the present life (Luke 12:35–59, and especially Luke 16:19–31, which uses the stock Jewish imagery of 'Abraham's bosom' to make a point about our present conduct). In fact, apart from references to his own resurrection, Jesus says little that goes beyond Jewish first-century perceptions, which, however, clearly included judgment and justice (Matthew 25:31–46). The same is true of the epistles, but when the theme does occur, it is clearly an integral part of the writer's belief (for example, Romans 2:1–16)(189–190).

The belief in liberal optimism and universalism which remained prevalent into the closing decades of the twentieth century has diminished with the horrors of the Balkans, Rwanda, the Middle East and Darfur (mdr: not to mention the Holocaust), and theologians find themselves where Karl Barth did after the first World War, furiously rejecting a liberal theology which had nothing to say about the perpetration of evil and insisting that there is a difference between good and evil that invites judgment (without which there is only chaos)(190–191, 192–193). Evil has to be identified and dealt with by repentance before there can be reconciliation (Volf 1996, Tutu 2000) (191).

The primal fault is idolatry, worshipping that which is not God as if it were, which results in missing the mark of full, free and genuine humanness—this missing-the-mark is what the NT calls *hamartia* 'sin'. This dehumanisation of the self and others only stops if there is a deliberate turning away from it (192), and without the turning away God will eventually say, as C.S. Lewis puts it, 'Thy will be done.' (192–193)

Wright identifies three current views of what will happen to these people (193):

1. Traditional: they will be consigned to eternal torment.
2. Conditionalist: they will cease to exist, as eternal life is given by God's grace.
3. Universalist: God will be merciful to everyone.

Wright's view is tentative: he says we don't know much about this. He says that a primary law of human life is that you become like what you worship, reflecting it outwards to the world around. Those who worship money increasingly define themselves in terms of it and treat other people as creditors, debtors, partners or customers rather than as human beings. Parallel statements can be made about sex and about power. Those who continue down this road, refusing all whisperings of good news and glimmerings of true light finally become

⁵⁶ Now there were some present on that occasion who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. He answered them, "Do you think these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered these things? No, I tell you! But unless you repent, you will all perish as well! Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower in Siloam fell on them, do you think they were worse offenders than all the others who live in Jerusalem? No, I tell you! But unless you repent you will all perish as well!" (Luke 13:1–5)

beings that were once human and now are not, creatures that have ceased to bear the divine image at all. With the death of the body they pass beyond hope and beyond pity, existing in an ex-human state (195). Revelation is clear about who is outside the city (196–197).⁵⁷

But Paul's emphasis in Romans 11 falls on the fact that no one is in principle beyond rescue this side of the grave (196, 197).⁵⁸

Wright believes that we are told little about what happens after death simply because this isn't the central framing question that centuries of theological tradition have supposed. The NT, like the OT, insists that the central framing question is that of God's purpose in rescuing and re-creating the whole world, and the point of being saved in the present is to play a role in the fulfilment of that purpose (197–198).

10 Rethinking salvation

As Jesus was to Israel, so is the church to be to the world. How can we challenge people today as Jesus summoned his Jewish contemporaries? (Wright 2009: 43) Human beings know in their bones that they are made for each other, made to look after and shape this world, made to worship the one in whose image they are made. But like Israel, we get it wrong. Our relationships, stewardship and worship become distorted into will for power, exploitation of the world as a gold mine or an ashtray, and exploitation of other human beings. Marx, Nietzsche and Freud describe a fallen world in which money, power and sex have become the norm. However, journalists present us with a post-Christian version of original sin, a world full of fallen people. Our task, filled with the Spirit, is to announce redemption and healing to a world that has discovered its fallenness, to proclaim love and trust to a world that only knows exploitation, fear and suspicion (Wright 2009: 44–45). The human race has been in exile, and our job is to announce in word and deed that the exile is over, to find symbolic ways of doing things differently, and when people are puzzled, to find fresh ways of telling the story of the return of the human race from its exile (Wright 2009: 46–47).

Jesus said that following him means taking up the cross. Sometimes when things are difficult, it is because we have taken the wrong way, but often it is because Christian witness means being at the place where the world is in pain. This perspective is deeply rooted in the NT, and especially in Romans 8, where Paul speaks of the whole creation groaning together in travail. The church cannot sit smugly on the sidelines. We groan too, longing for renewal, for final liberation. And where is God in this? Sitting in heaven, wishing we could get our act together? No, says Paul Romans 8:26–27, God is groaning too, present in the church at the place where the world is in pain. God the spirit groans in us, calling in prayer to God the Father. This prayer will often be inarticulate—a groan, not a thought out analysis of the problem (Romans 8:51–53),

⁵⁷ 'But to the cowards, unbelievers, detestable persons, murderers, the sexually immoral, and those who practise magic spells, idol worshippers, and all those who lie, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur. That is the second death.' (Revelation 21:8)

Outside are the dogs and the sorcerers and the sexually immoral, and the murderers, and the idolaters and everyone who loves and practises falsehood! (Revelation 22:15).

⁵⁸ Just as you were formerly disobedient to God, but have now received mercy due to their disobedience, so they too have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. For God has consigned all people to disobedience so that he may show mercy to them all. (Romans 11:30–32)

When people saw Jesus saving people from sickness and death, this was part of his message: it was what he promised to do long-term, into the future. And what he promised for the future wasn't saving souls for a disembodied eternity but rescuing people from the corruption and decay of the way the world is now so that they could already in the present enjoy the renewal of creation that is God's ultimate purpose (204). A striking point in 1 Corinthians 15:58 is that at the end of a discussion of the resurrection of the body, Paul doesn't say, 'OK, sit back and relax' but 'Therefore, my beloved ones, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.' (204–205) The present bodily life isn't valueless because it will die. What you do in the present will last into God's future (205).

So what is salvation? For most western Christians it is 'going to be with Jesus in heaven when you die' (206), but this isn't what the NT teaches (209). 'Salvation' means 'rescue'. What are we being rescued from? Most Christians would say 'death', but we aren't rescued from death. We die (206). Modern Christian belief on this subject is dangerously near to second-century gnosticism: the present world is evil and the only solution is to escape it and go to heaven instead. As long as we see salvation in terms of going to heaven, the main work of the church will be seen in terms of saving souls for the future. But when we see salvation as the NT does in terms of God's promised new heavens and new earth and our promised resurrection to share in it, then the main work of the church here and now must be rethought (209). The Christian Aid slogan 'We believe in life before death' comes into its own. The NT is full of hints that we can begin to enjoy salvation here and now (albeit partially, as we still have to die), genuinely anticipating in the present what is to come in the future. Salvation is past tense: 'For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope, because who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with endurance.' (Romans 8:24–25) (210).

When the woman with the issue of blood is healed, Jesus says, 'Your faith has saved you.'⁵⁹ Balz & Schneider (1990: 3:320) point out that Jesus continues, "Go in peace, and be healed of your disease",⁶⁰ implying that 'save' means more than 'heal'. And Matthew 9:22 adds 'and the woman was saved from that moment on'.⁶¹ Other instances of Jesus using 'save' in this way are Mark 6:56, Mark 10:52, Luke 8:36, Luke 8:50, Luke 17:19, Luke 18:42, Acts 4:9,⁶² Acts 14:9, Acts 16:30–31.

When God 'saves' people in this life, by working through his Spirit to bring them to faith and by leading them to follow Jesus in discipleship, prayer, holiness, hope and love, such people are intended to be a sign and a foretaste of what God wants to do with the entire cosmos (212–213). But they are intended to be more than a foretaste: they are part of the means by which God makes this happen in the present and the future. Paul says that '...the creation eagerly waits for the revelation of the sons of God' (Romans 8:19), i.e. for the unveiling of those redeemed human beings whose stewardship will bring creation back into the wise order

⁵⁹ But almost every English translation translates ο δε ειπεν αυτη θυγατερ η πιστις σου σεσωκεν σε (Mark 5:34) as 'He said, "Daughter, your faith has made you well".' (NET) The usual word for 'heal' is *therapeuein* θεραπευειν.

⁶⁰ υπαγε εις ειρηνην και ισθι υγιης απο της μαστιγος σου.

⁶¹ και εσωθη η γυνη απο της ωρας εκεινης, but translated 'And the woman was healed from that hour.' (NET)

⁶² Note that Peter continues to talk about salvation in Acts 4:12. The word is the same.

for which it was made. Since Paul has asserted a few verses earlier ‘... all who are led by the Spirit of God are the sons of God’ (Romans 8:14), this stewardship must begin in the present, not in some ultimate future (213).

Salvation, in other words, is (1) about whole human beings, not disembodied souls; (2) about the present, not just about the future; and (3) about what God does *through* us, not just what God does *in and through* us (213).

When the risen Jesus appears to his followers at the end of Matthew’s gospel, he declares “All authority in heaven *and on earth* has been given to me.” (my italics) (Matthew 28:18). This is the fulfilment of the hope of Israel (Isaiah 52:7–12) whereby God at last becomes king, exile is ended, evil defeated and Israel’s God returns to Zion (214). This was a major theme not only of his public ministry but of his own interpretation of his death, explored in Wright (1996). Faced with his creation in rebellion, God longed to set it right, to re-establish his sovereignty, and this meant a great act of healing and rescue (214–215). This did not entail declaring that the inner dynamic of creation was a mistake, nor that the inner dynamic of his covenant with Israel was a failure, but by fulfilling both. This is what Paul’s letter to the Romans is all about (215) (see Wright 2005).

One of the greatest problems of the western church, at least since the Reformation, is that it hasn’t really known what the gospels were there for. Imagining that the point of Christianity was to enable people to go to heaven, most western Christians have supposed that the mechanism by which this happened was one they found (with the stress on *they found*) in Paul’s writings and that the four gospels simply provided back-up information about the life of Jesus, his teaching, his moral example and his atoning death. This tradition has screened out the possibility that when Jesus spoke of ‘God’s kingdom’ he wasn’t talking about heaven but about something that was happening right then on this earth, through his work, then through his death and resurrection, then through the Spirit-led work to which his followers would be called (215).

11 Building for the kingdom

Wright insists that what we do in this world as God’s children is accomplishing something that will become part of God’s new world, even if this is as hard to believe as the resurrection itself. This does not of course mean that we can build the kingdom in our own strength: it is that God works through us by his Spirit (218–219). The logic of God’s mission is that he began the recreation of his wonderful world through the resurrection of Jesus and that as we live in the risen Christ and in the power of his Spirit, what we do in the present isn’t wasted (219). Wright says he has no idea what this will mean in practice, but he knows that God’s new world of justice, joy and hope was launched when Jesus came out of the tomb and that he calls his followers to live in him and be new-creation people here and now, bringing signs and symbols of the kingdom to birth on earth ‘as in heaven’ (220). We are like the stonemasons creating pieces for a mediaeval cathedral, with almost no idea what the cathedral will look like or where our products will fit when the cathedral is complete (220–221). The stonemasons are building *for* the cathedral; they are not themselves building the cathedral, but when their work is in place in the new building, it will be enhanced and ennobled by its place in the whole. The difference, of course, is that God’s new creation will be an act of transformation by the Architect himself (221).

It is always possible to fall into the error of worshipping the world God has made—this is idolatry—rather than worshipping the Creator. But the proper response to idolatry is not to turn our backs on this world but renewed worship of the creator who made it—and this worship provides the proper context for our enjoyment of the created order (223).

The church is called to a mission of implementing Jesus resurrection and thereby anticipating the new creation. What does this mission look like? (224). Wright discusses three topics under this rubric: justice, beauty and evangelism.

Regarding justice, i.e. God's setting the world to rights, he says that if we believe in God's new creation beyond the resurrection, then we are unstoppably motivated to work towards that new creation now. We [pray, 'may your kingdom come, may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven' (Matthew 6:10)]. There are two corruptions in the church of this view of justice. One, the liberal, tries to build God's kingdom now with its own hands but doesn't believe in a future resurrection and new creation (226). The other, the conservative, says that the forces of evil are so entrenched that we can do nothing until the Lord returns. We may perform some sticking-plaster operations for those at the bottom of the heap, but we will do nothing about the structures that put them there. Neither position does justice to Paul's injunction in 1 Corinthians 15:58: 'So then, dear brothers and sisters, be firm. Do not be moved! Always be outstanding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.' We need to recognise, as the second view does, that the final putting everything to rights must wait until the last day, and therefore avoid the triumphalism of the first view (227). But we cannot ignore what for Wright is the world's greatest moral problem, the massive problem of unpayable Third World debt (228–230). Ironically, those American churches that protest most vocally against the teaching of Darwinism in schools connive in a kind of economic Darwinism, the survival of the fittest in world markets and in military power. This conservative view is dualistic: the 'supernatural' is the real world, the 'natural' world is secondary and largely irrelevant and to be concerned about it is 'liberal' (231). Wright asks what you would say to someone who said rightly that God would make them completely holy at the resurrection, and, since they cannot attain complete holiness until then, there is no point in even trying to live a holy life now (232–233). You would press for some form of what theologians term 'inaugurated eschatology'. You would insist that the new life in the Spirit in obedience to the lordship of Jesus should produce radical transformation of behaviour in the present life, anticipating the life to come. A parallel argument applies to injustice in the world: insist on a transformation of the worldwide community, anticipating God's eventual justice (233).

With regard to beauty, what Wright actually talks about is creation, He compares the beauty of the fallen world to the beauty of a chalice or a violin, all the more hauntingly beautiful because we know the quality of what it can be filled with or of what will be played on it. He suggests that since we are made in God's image, creativeness is part of our being. Art is a response to the beauty of creation, itself a pointer to the beauty of God (234). A Christian artist needs to avoid the sentimentalism of pretending that we live in the Garden of Eden, when we don't, and the brutalism of much modern art that depicts the world as the artist sees it—without hope. Creation is good, but it isn't God. It is beautiful, but transient. Wright hopes that artists will come forth who will be able to depict the pain of the world and the promise of new creation (235–236).

Evangelism means conveying the good news that God, the world's creator, is at last becoming king, and that Jesus, whom this God raised from the dead, is the world's true Lord

(238). The powers of evil have been defeated, there is forgiveness for the past, God's new world has begun, so there is a destiny in God's future and a vocation in the present. This announcement, stated as a fact about the way the world is, rather than as an appeal about the way you might like your life, your emotions or your bank balance to be, is the foundation of everything else. If the church is already working on these issues—seeking justice in the world, celebrating God's good creation and its rescue from corruption, and demonstrating new creation in its internal life—then the gospel makes good sense. When people really believe the gospel, then they fire up within themselves and find it transforming the way they think and feel about the world around them, and find that the presence of Jesus is suddenly a reality for them, and they can't get enough worship and fellowship (239). Such a person is a living, breathing bit of new creation—new creation that began in the resurrection and will be complete when God finally makes the new heavens and new earth and raises us to share in it. As Paul says (2 Corinthians 5:17) 'So then, if anyone is in Christ—new creation' (ὥστε εἰ τις ἐν χριστῷ καινὴ κτίσις) (240).

Stating the matter like this avoids three problems into which evangelism can run. First, it makes it clear that the Christian is not to say 'no' to the good world that God has created, even though we are to turn our back on the corruptions into which it has fallen. We are not to forget earth and concentrate on heaven (240). Second, seeing evangelism in terms of God's kingdom and Jesus' lordship and of consequent new creation avoids a suggestion that the new Christian has entered into a purely private relationship with Jesus (240–241). Third, it avoids the situation in which the Christian thinks that Christian behaviour is an optional extra or simply a matter of getting your head around new rules and regulations. If Jesus is Lord, then we *follow* him.

Wright believes that the mission of the church must be shaped by these things. The church must be concerned with righting injustices that have occurred in its locality, and with fostering creativity in the community, and evangelism will flourish most in a community where the church is giving itself to works of justice and beauty (243–244).

12 Reshaping the church for mission: Biblical roots

12.1 The gospels and the Acts

The resurrection marked the beginning of the new world. Jesus declares, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.' (Matthew 28:18) and then commands his disciples to go and be the agents of God's kingdom: 'Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.' (Matthew 28:19–20). Mission is based on Jesus' lordship over the world (247).⁶³ Luke emphasises the fact that the resurrection is what the Hebrew scriptures have pointed forward to. The Emmaus Road events make it clear that Jesus' resurrection isn't just a happy event for one person: it is the event that causes the old promises to come true—of David's unshakeable kingdom, of Israel's return from the greatest exile of them all, and that all the nations would be blessed through the seed of Abraham (248). Luke insists that, since Jesus

⁶³ Wright recommends C.J.H. Wright (2006) on biblical missiology, which he had not read when he drafted this chapter (245, 326fn1).

really was raised from the dead, the scriptures must be read as a story that reaches its climax in Jesus and will produce its proper fruit in Jesus' followers and through them throughout the world. This is why Jesus expounds the scriptures when he appears in the upper room in Luke 24:44–48.⁶⁴

John uses imagery that conveys the resurrection as the dawn of the new creation. He twice makes it clear (John 20:1, 19) that Easter is the first day of the week. His gospel is so ordered that there is a sequence of seven signs, climaxing in the cross on the sixth day and resting in the tomb on the seventh. Easter functions both as the beginning of the new week and the new creation (250). It is the prototype of what God will accomplish in the rest of the world. Mary supposes Jesus is the gardener (John 20:15) : this is right because he is the new Adam. Jesus announces the new era: : "Just as the Father has sent me, I also send you." (John 20:21). What Jesus was to Israel, the disciples must be to the world (251).

Wright says that Jesus calls his followers to a new mode of *knowing*, an epistemology of love. We have traditionally thought of knowing in terms of subject and object, and struggled to attain objectivity by detaching our subjectivity. Postmodernism has demonstrated that this can't be done. The resurrection calls and equips us for a knowing in which we are self-giving, not self-seeking, subjects (251). When doubting Thomas is confronted by Jesus, his blustering turns to belief and confession: 'My Lord and my God!' (John 20:28) (251–252). Then similarly Jesus asks Peter, 'Do you love me?' as the prelude and precondition to his command 'Feed my sheep' (John 21:17) (252).

John 20:21–23 is one formulation of the great commission (253).⁶⁵ (mdr:) The NET Bible note here comments that Jesus' breathing on the disciples and John's use of ἐμψυσάω 'breathe' recalls Genesis 2:7 in the LXX, where 'the Lord God formed man out of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.' It also recalls Ezekiel 37:1–14, where the Son of Man is told to prophesy to the 'wind-breath-Spirit' to come and breathe on the corpses, so that they will live again. In Ezekiel 37:14 37:14 the Lord promised, 'I will put my Spirit within you, and you will come to life, and I will place you in your own land.' This looks forward to the regeneration of Israel immediately prior to the establishment of the messianic kingdom. John saw in what Jesus did for the disciples at this point a partial and symbolic fulfillment of Ezekiel's prophecy.

This is followed in John 21:4–14 by the fishing expedition where Jesus helps the disciples make an enormous catch. This is not only symbolic of the great commission, but is immediately followed by Jesus' commission to Peter (253).⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds so they could understand the scriptures, and said to them, "Thus it stands written that the Christ would suffer and would rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. (NET).

⁶⁵ So Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. Just as the Father has sent me, I also send you." And after he said this, he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you retain anyone's sins, they are retained."

⁶⁶ Jesus replied, 'Feed my sheep. I tell you the solemn truth, when you were young, you tied your clothes around you and went wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and others will tie you up and bring you where you do not want to go.' (Now Jesus said this to indicate clearly by what kind of death Peter was going to glorify God.) After he said this, Jesus told Peter, 'Follow me.' (John 21:17–19) (NET).

Wright comments that much of the present-day church focusses on fishing rather than on shepherding. For Wright ‘shepherding’ includes working in partnership with the wider world to do things better (253). Jesus’ threefold question ‘Do you love me?’ hearks back to Peter’s threefold denial, and Peter’s change from fisherman to shepherd comes through his recognition of his own sin and his receiving forgiveness (252–253).

In Acts 1:6 the disciples, still uncomprehending, ask, “Lord, is this the time when you are restoring the kingdom to Israel?” Jesus’ response, the last thing he says on earth, was “You are not permitted to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the farthest parts of the earth.” (Acts 1:7–8) Commentators often assume that this means ‘No’, but Wright says it is rather ‘Yes, but it won’t look like you imagine it to be, and you are to tell the whole world that I am Lord’, i.e. the messianic prophecy *is* being fulfilled (254–255).

The book of Acts sees this being worked out not in religious but in political terms, i.e. the lordship of Jesus is central. In the first half, up to ch. 12, Jesus is announced as the Messiah. King of the Jews, under the nose of the authorities, and especially the Herod family. This culminates in the sudden death of Herod Agrippa, who had had James killed, when he sees himself as divine (Acts 12:21–24),⁶⁷ an event also recorded by Josephus.⁶⁸ In the second half of Acts, Paul travels through the Roman empire declaring that Jesus is Lord and ends up proclaiming it right under Caesar’s nose in Rome (255).⁶⁹

In Acts 4:2 Luke writes that the Sadducees were annoyed because the apostles were ‘proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead’. Wright comments that this announcement, often weakened in translation, is not simply that others can be raised to life because of Jesus’ raising, but that with Jesus’ resurrection the new era culminating in the resurrection of the dead had already begun (256).

12.2 Paul

Paul clearly believes that the new era has dawned and that Jesus is Lord: no one could accuse him of being unaware of the paradox in his claim, as some of his most striking statements were written from prison. In 1 Corinthians 15:12–28 Paul is battling to get the concept of the new world that started in Jesus’ resurrection into the heads of the ex-pagan Corinthians, some of whom clearly hadn’t understood what the gospel said about Jesus’ resurrection. The crucial argument is in 1 Corinthians 15:12–17.⁷⁰ If the Messiah hasn’t risen, then you are still

⁶⁷ On a day determined in advance, Herod put on his royal robes, sat down on the judgment seat, and made a speech to them. But the crowd began to shout, “The voice of a god, and not of a man!” Immediately an angel of the Lord struck Herod down because he did not give the glory to God, and he was eaten by worms and died. But the word of God kept on increasing and multiplying.

⁶⁸ *Antiquities* 19:434–450.

⁶⁹ Paul lived there two whole years in his own rented quarters and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with complete boldness and without restriction. (Acts 28:30–31)

⁷⁰ Now if Christ is being preached as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is futile and your faith is empty. Also, we are found to be false witnesses about God, because we have testified against God that he raised Christ from the dead, when in reality he did not raise

in your sins (v17). The forgiveness of sins is not just a private experience: it is a fact about the cosmos. Sin is the root cause of death; if death has been defeated, then sin has been dealt with. But if the Messiah hasn't been raised, we are still in a world where sin reigns, and sin hasn't been dealt with (259).

He goes on to argue that the Jewish expectation of the resurrection as been split into two: first the Messiah, already raised, then those who belong to him at his final appearing (259–260).⁷¹ But notice v25, 'For he must reign...': in other words, he is already reigning, even though we don't yet see the full results of that reign.⁷² The same point is made more explicitly by the writer to the Hebrews (Hebrews 2:8–9).⁷³ Sometimes it is difficult for us to conceive this reign. We are inclined against triumphalism in the light of the connivance of many churches in twentieth-century atrocities, but we should not let this prevent us from seeing the extraordinary achievements of the church in the past and present. The Wilberforces and Tutus are real and they count, and this is Paul's message to each of us (260–261).

However, for Paul the resurrection isn't just about public activity: it is also about the resurrection life to which each of us is called, i.e. about baptism and personal holiness. This is very clear in Romans 6:1–6.⁷⁴ We were planted with the Messiah through this death—our old identity has been crucified with him—and have been raised with him to new life. Many have projected this into the future, but Paul insists in Romans 6:10–11⁷⁵ that it is for now: we are to make the calculation ('consider') and recognise that we are 'dead to sin' (261–262). The same point is made in Colossians 2:11–13.⁷⁶ Baptism corresponds to the Jewish circumcision, i.e. it is the mark of entry into God's covenant people, and by being buried with him we are

him, if indeed the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is useless; you are still in your sins. (NET).

⁷¹ But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep (1 Corinthians 15:20)... But each in his own order: Christ, the firstfruits; then when Christ comes, those who belong to him. (1 Corinthians 15:23).

⁷² Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, when he has brought to an end all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. (1 Corinthians 15:24–25) (NET).

⁷³ For when he put all things under his control, he left nothing outside of his control. At present we do not yet see all things under his control, but we see Jesus, who was made lower than the angels for a little while, now crowned with glory and honour because he suffered death, so that by God's grace he would experience death on behalf of everyone. (NET)

⁷⁴ What shall we say then? Are we to remain in sin so that grace may increase? Absolutely not! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Or do you not know that as many as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him through baptism into death, in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too may live a new life. For if we have become united with him in the likeness of his death, we will certainly also be united in the likeness of his resurrection. We know that our old man was crucified with him so that the body of sin would no longer dominate us, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. (NET)

⁷⁵ For the death he died, he died to sin once for all, but the life he lives, he lives to God. you too consider yourselves dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

⁷⁶ In him you also were circumcised—not, however, with a circumcision performed by human hands, but by the removal of the fleshly body, that is, through the circumcision done by Christ. Having been buried with him in baptism, you also have been raised with him through your faith in the power of God who raised him from the dead. And even though you were dead in your transgressions and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, he nevertheless made you alive with him, having forgiven all your transgressions.

also raised with him. That this has behavioural consequences is clear from Colossians 3:1–10 (262–263).⁷⁷ and Ephesians 4:21–5:20.

Wright says there is an issue here that needs to be addressed head-on, namely that this talk seems to reduce resurrection to a present spiritual experience, and this to return us to Platonic dualism. He says, no, this is a result of the way we have been conditioned by dualistic thinking. We need to visualise earth and heaven as overlapping and interlocking worlds: this is the achievement of the incarnation. We can screen out the heavenly dimension or we can choose to live in it as Colossians 3:5–9 (footnote 77) suggests. One of the results of these interlocking worlds is the church transcending cultural and ethnic boundaries.⁷⁸ Our current physical reality is shot through with the life of heaven (264).

Thus the message of Easter is that God's new world has begun and that we're invited to belong to it. This means bringing the power of the resurrection to bear on the present world—as it has been with the abolition of Soviet Communism and of apartheid. There are many parts of the world we can do nothing about except pray, but there is one part of physical reality I can do something about, and that is myself (265–266).

12.3 Celebrating Easter and creation redeemed

Wright believes that the kind of ultra-protestantism that eschews liturgy, the church calendar, church buildings and in some cases even the sacraments is ultimately dualistic, i.e. other-worldly. The church is the manifestation in the present world of living between resurrection and new creation and instead of abandoning it we should seek to breathe new life into its practices. We need in particular a far more robust celebration of Easter as the first day of the week and a reminder that it is the first day of God's new creation (267–276).

12.4 Resurrection and mission

The mission of the church is the outworking in the power of God's Spirit of Jesus' bodily resurrection and thus the anticipation of the time when God will fill the earth with his glory, transform the old heavens and earth into the new and raise his children from the dead to populate and rule over that redeemed world (277). This means we need to be able to move straight from worship to making a difference and effecting change in the world beyond (278). Evangelism occurs as the world sees that the people who worship God are the ones who have extra resources of love and patience in caring for others (278–279). Paul's advice to the Philippians, even when they were suffering for their faith, was upbeat: '...whatever is true, whatever is worthy of respect, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if something is excellent or praiseworthy, think about these things'

⁷⁷ Therefore, if you have been raised with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Keep thinking about things above, not things on the earth, for you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ (who is your life) appears, then you too will be revealed in glory with him. So put to death whatever in your nature belongs to the earth: sexual immorality, impurity, shameful passion, evil desire, and greed which is idolatry. ... But now, put off all such things as anger, rage, malice, slander, abusive language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another since you have put off the old man with its practices and have been clothed with the new man that is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of the one who created it. (NET).

⁷⁸ Here there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all and in all. (Colossians 3:11) (NET)

(Philippians 4:8) (279). Where there are good things going on in the wider world, we must join in, but remain on the lookout lest we are asked to do something that goes against the grain of the gospel. Where there are wicked things going on in the wider world, we must stand against them and avoid retreating into a dualism that says these things aren't our concern (280–281). Jesus said, 'I am sending you out like sheep surrounded by wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves'"(Matthew 10:16) (282). There is ultimately no justification for private piety that doesn't work out in actual mission, just as there is ultimately no justification for social, cultural or political activism that allows us to avoid challenges within our own lives (282–283).

12.5 New birth and baptism

One of the most striking mentions of new birth is in 1 Peter 1:3–5 (283):

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he gave us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, that is, into an inheritance imperishable, undefiled, and unfading. It is reserved in heaven for you, who by God's power are protected through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

Wright stresses that baptism is closely allied with Jesus' resurrection. He considers that baptism is the gateway to membership in the new family: it is one of the points, established by Jesus himself, where resurrection life appears in the midst of the old, where heaven and earth interlock (285).

Similarly in the eucharist we become for a moment the disciples sitting around the table at the Last Supper. When the Jews celebrate Passover, they see themselves as the same people as those who were brought out of Egypt. We do not celebrate a long-dead Jesus but our present, risen Lord who has gone on ahead into the new creation. The future comes to meet us in the present. We can understand the eucharist as an anticipation of the marriage supper of the Lamb when heaven and earth are made new. This attributes more to the Lord's Supper than the Reformers, who simply saw it as a symbol and an opportunity to meditate on the fact that Jesus died for our sins (286–288).

12.6 Prayer

Wright comments that the two cultural extremes with regard to prayer are the performance of pagan rituals to make things happen and the nature mysticism that tries to open up to the beauty and power of the world around us. The prayer life of ancient Israel lies somewhere between the two. The Psalms celebrate the goodness of creation, but they celebrate intimate union not with creation itself but with the creator God: 'the heavens declare the glory of God'. And the Psalmists refuse to believe, when nothing seems to happen, that God has gone away: they remind him of his great acts on behalf of Israel and of his personal love. Like Job, they say, 'Even if he slays me, I will hope in him' (Job 13:15:) (289–290).

In the Farewell Discourses of John 13–17, Jesus talks of the new relationship that the disciples will have with the Father as the result of his going away. They are encouraged to ask for what they want in Jesus' name.⁷⁹ God's intention is thus to draw humans into more

⁷⁹ Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive it, so that your joy may be complete. (John 16:24) (NET)

intimate fellowship with himself (291).

Revelation 4 and 5 stands out as the moment when the church is gathering up the praises of all God's creation and presenting them before God's throne. But the created order is out of joint: no one in heaven or earth is worthy to break open the scroll of God's purposes and to read it.⁸⁰ But the Lion who is also the Lamb æhas conquered; thus he can open the scroll and its seven seals.' (Revelation 5:5) With that, worship breaks out in a new way (292):

Worthy is the lamb who was killed
to receive power and wealth
and wisdom and might
and honour and glory and praise! (Revelation 5:12) (NET)

This vision is not of our heavenly future: it is the heavenly dimension of our present reality (294).

In Romans 8 Paul comments that as Christians we are caught between creation and new creation and this shows in how we pray and what we pray for.⁸¹ We have glimpsed in Jesus the birth of new creation and have felt something of its power by the Spirit in our own lives, but this hasn't given us a simple, easy answer to the problems we face. Rather it has given us the privilege of sharing the intimate life of the triune God himself. The Spirit calls from the pain deep within us, and with the answering love of the Father we are conformed to the image of God's son, who shared the world's suffering in order to become its intercessor (291).⁸² The inner life of God himself comes back to meet us from God's future to where we are in the present, living in an unredeemed world but touched by the future that burst upon it at Easter. 'They kingdom come *on earth as in heaven*' (293).

12.7 Scripture

We read scripture to discover the story so far and our place in that story . We need to understand the story of how God's kingdom was established on earth through Jesus, thereby fulfilling Israel's great story, defeating the power of evil and launching God's new world. We live somewhere between the end of Acts and the closing scene of Revelation (293–294).

⁸⁰ And I saw a powerful angel proclaiming in a loud voice: "Who is worthy to open the scroll and to break its seals?" But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or look into it. (Revelation 5:2–3) (NET)

⁸¹ For I consider that our present sufferings cannot even be compared to the glory that will be revealed to us. For the creation eagerly waits for the revelation of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility - not willingly but because of God who subjected it - in hope that the creation itself will also be set free from the bondage of decay into the glorious freedom of God's children. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers together until now. Not only this, but we ourselves also, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we eagerly await our adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope, because who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with endurance. (Romans 8:18–25) (NET)

⁸² In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how we should pray, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with inexpressible groanings. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes on behalf of the saints according to God's will. And we know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose, because those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that his Son would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he predestined, he also called; and those he called, he also justified; and those he justified, he also glorified. (Romans 8:26–30) (NET)

We also need to understand the OT as the long and winding story of how God chose a people to take forward his plan to rescue his creation (294–295).

12.8 Holiness

If the future is breaking into the present, and our bodies will one day be glorified, then we should glorify God in our bodies by holy living now (1 Corinthians 6:16–20) (296). It is one thing to be lured into sin, but it is quite another to invert the moral compass and to call good evil and evil good (Romans 1:32)⁸³ (297). This is what Paul means when he tells us not to be conformed to this world.⁸⁴ When Paul inveighs against the Corinthians' behaviour in 1 Corinthians 5–6, he is not simply providing a list of rules: this is inaugurated eschatology. It is what the future looks like when it comes back into the life of the present. We live this way because of the resurrection (297).⁸⁵

12.9 Love

Paul's poem on love ends in an unexpected way. Having asserted that love is the greatest thing in God's world, Paul confronts us with the fact that our experience of love—as of everything else that matters—is decidedly incomplete.

For we know in part, and we prophesy in part, but when what is perfect comes, the partial will be set aside. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. But when I became an adult, I set aside childish ways. For now we see in a mirror indirectly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know in part, but then I will know fully, just as I have been fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love. (1 Corinthians 13:9–13)

The way we are now is only partly what we are meant to be: Paul urges that we should live in the present as people who are made complete in the future, and the sign of that future wholeness is love (298–299). Love is not our duty, it is our destiny. It is the language Jesus spoke, and we are called to speak it so that we can converse with him. This is the message that underlies the gospel command of forgiveness. Forgiveness is God's way of life and God's way to life, and if we close our hearts to it, then we close our hearts to God's life. This is the message of the terrifying parable of Matthew 18:23–35 of the slave who was forgiven millions but dragged a colleague to court to settle a debt of a few cents. This is why we pray 'forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us'.

⁸³ Although they fully know God's righteous decree that those who practise such things deserve to die, they not only do them but also approve of those who practise them.

⁸⁴ Therefore I exhort you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a sacrifice - alive, holy, and pleasing to God - which is your reasonable service. Do not be conformed to this present world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may test and approve what is the will of God - what is good and well-pleasing and perfect. (Romans 12:1–2) (NET)

⁸⁵ Clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch of dough - you are, in fact, without yeast. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. (1 Corinthians 5:7)

Some of you once lived this way. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. (1 Corinthians 6:11) (NET).

13 Notes from a lecture by Wim Rietark, President, L'Abri Fellowship International, at the ACT Legislative Assembly Building, 25 March 2010

Rietark contrasts the stances of what he calls the 'reformed' and the 'revivalist' branches of the church. By 'revivalist' he appears to mean 'pietist', in that he includes e.g., the Brethren, as well as the pentecostal-charismatic movement. The reformed branch of the church has become what Bonhoeffer called 'shamelessly at home' (schamlos zu Hause) in the world, whereas the revivalist branch has tended to be other-worldly and detached. Rietark believes that we need to bridge the two. He points to Abraham, who lived as a sojourner in the land that he would one day possess, farming it against the day when his people would be at home in it.⁸⁶ Similarly we need to live in the land as sojourners, involved in its activities but not at home in it, aware that one day when Jesus returns it will become our home. We are not builders but heralds of the kingdom of God, living between D-day and V-day. The world remains under alien power, and we cannot impose God's kingdom ourselves, but God will multiply our pilot projects—our firstfruits—when he recreates the world.

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⁸⁶ By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with firm foundations, whose architect and builder is God. (Hebrews 11:9–10), (κτν).

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