Review

Advancing the Christian Tradition in the Third Millennium

VOLUME 15 • NUMBER 2 • 2006

FINAL THOUGHTS

JOHN H. ARMSTRONG

THE LIFE AND WITNESS OF N. T. WRIGHT

Tom Wright, bishop of Durham since 2003, has served the church in many capacities over an already noteworthy career in ministry. From 1975–78 he was a junior research fellow at Merton College, Oxford, and a tutor in theology. He then served Cambridge's Downing College from 1978–81 as both a fellow and chaplain. In 1981 he came to North America where he taught at McGill University in Montreal, Canada, as an assistant professor of New Testament until 1986. It was during his years in Canada that some of his most productive writing began, as he gave much of his attention to furthering his New Testament research. This appointment in Canada was then followed by another period of academic teaching at Oxford (1986–93), this time as a New Testament professor at Worchester College. In 1994 he became the dean of Lichfield, where he remained until he was made canon theologian at the famous Westminster Cathedral in London in 2000. After several decades of academic life, and a pastoral teaching /research post at Westminster, his move to become bishop of Durham came as a considerable surprise to many.

Tom Wright was married in 1971 and has two sons and two daughters. His personal interests are broad, including music, the classical world, golf, hiking, poetry, and pastoral

psychology. He is an engaging man, warm in personality and very transparent. All who meet him find him gracious and pastoral.

The author of over thirty books, written for both scholars and popular level readers, Wright also continues to turn out new books each year. In addition, he is a frequent guest lecturer in schools and churches, both in Europe and North America. Radio and television broadcasts are common for Bishop Wright, thus he has been widely viewed in regard to the questions of research related to the historical Jesus and related New Testament subjects.

Born in Northumberland on December 1, 1948, Wright studied for the ministry at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, from 1971–75, after he had completed his first university degree at Oxford in 1971. He did graduate work at several Oxford colleges in the 1970s. Eventually, he studied under the famous scholar G. B. Caird, under whose supervision he did his doctoral work on the topic: "The Messiah and the People of God: A Study in Pauline Theology with Particular Reference to the Argument of the Epistle to the Romans." He was ordained an Anglican priest in 1976 and has thus always kept his academic career distinctly linked with his work as a minister of the gospel.

Wright is best known, among scholars, for his series on *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, a projected six-volume series published jointly by SPCK (United Kingdom) and Fortress (North America). This is the series through which many of us came to deeply appreciate Wright's creativity and sheer biblical genius. He is currently preparing the fourth volume in this series, a full-scale study of Pauline theology titled: *Paul and the Justice of God*. Given the debate about his work on Paul, this volume is eagerly awaited by many of his devoted readers. We have a foreshadowing of his thought in several books he has already written, especially his most recent work on Paul reviewed in this issue of *Act 3 Review*. He is also preparing a critical and exegetical commentary on Philippians for the revision of that volume in The International Critical Commentary Series.

The most appealing of all of Wright's work, at least for lay readers, is his eleven-volume series titled: The New Testament for Everyone. These are separate commentaries on each New Testament book written in much the same way as the famous New Testament commentary series, *The Daily Study Bible*, by the late William Barclay. Three volumes remain to be completed in this series. Eager readers continue to appreciate these works. Personally, I have given these books to friends, or recommended them, and found that time and again readers come back to me to say, "The Bible comes alive for me in reading these little books!"

WRIGHT'S JOURNEY IN FAITH AND LEARNING

In the highly respected British theological journal, *Themelios* (January, 1993, 18:2), Tom Wright shared a very self-revealing portrait of his own journey spiritually and theologically. His insights provide a good insight into how his mind developed and why he does the work that he does. Here is part of that story:

> Most theological students associate John Wenham with Greek grammar. Not me. I was in an undergraduate audience which he addressed in 1970. He urged Bible-loving Christians to consider theological study and a ministry of teaching and writing. His model was that of the stream from which Christians drink. The stream is polluted by bad theology. Our task is to feed in good theology. "Trickle-down" theories are risky, but I think this one works. I had been heading for parish ministry; from that day on I knew God was calling me to an academic, though still very much church-related, vocation.
>
> As so often, I attacked this vocation the wrong way. When I began theology, I assumed that all writers not published by the _____ Press, or perhaps the _____ of _____ Trust, were suspect.

If I read the right books I would find the "answers." Fortunately, after two years of soaking myself in the Bible itself, I was so gripped with the excitement of exegesis, and the new horizons it opened up that I didn't worry so much about "sound" answers. I continue to respect the Reformers, and men like Charles Simeon, of 200 years ago, John Stott, Jim Packer and Michael Green, at whose feet I was privileged to sit, and whose work in a variety of ways created space for me to do things differently. Where I disagree with them it is because I have done what they told me to: to read Scripture and emerge with a more biblical theology. The evangelical tradition at its best encourages critique from within. It sends us back to the Scripture which stands over against all traditions, our own included.

I went to Canada in 1981 to teach NT studies at McGill, and to be involved with the Anglican College in Montreal. The combination was superb: out of the lecture room, into chapel. My view of the Eucharist, which had started at a rock-bottom low as an undergraduate, had received an upward jolt through reading Calvin (yes, try it and see), and had been nurtured through my early years as a chaplain. It finally came together and started to approach that of Paul. . . . Passages I'd not understood before came alive. So did the joy of participating in the richest of all Christian symbols. Alone, I continued to read the NT in Greek and the OT Hebrew day by day, constantly finding a combination of personal address and intellectual stimulation which I have never been able to separate. (I was once advised to keep separate Bibles; one devotional and one "academic." Fortunately I took no notice.)

During my second year at McGill, I plunged into the deepest depression I've ever known. I wrestled in prayer, searched the Scriptures, examined my conscience, and fell apart. I told my wife about it one night; the next morning, a letter arrived from a Christian psychotherapist who had felt an inexplicable but irresistible urge to write. I still have that letter. Over the next year I learned more about myself and my emotions than I had thought possible. If today I manage to function as a pastor, it is not least because I know something about pain. I know, too, that healing of memory and imagination is not just wishful thinking.

Of all the teaching of N. T. Wright, none of his ideas have provoked more opposition among Reformed and Lutheran Christians than his teaching on justification. Wright has responded to these concerns in a number of venues and forums, answering questions regarding his doctrine of justification. In response to professor and author, Paul Barnett, in the essay, "The Shape of Justification" (2001), he wrote the following explanation:

> Justification in the present is based on God's past accomplishment in Christ, and anticipates the future verdict. This present justification has exactly the same pattern.
>
> (a) God vindicates in the present, in advance of the last day, all those who believe in Jesus as Messiah and Lord (Romans 3:21–31; 4:13–25; 10:9–13). The law court language indicates what is meant. "Justification" itself is not God's act of changing the heart or character of the person; that is what Paul means by the "call," which comes through the word and the Spirit. "Justification" has a specific, and narrower, reference: it is God's declaration that the person is now in the right, which confers on them the status "righteous." (We may note that, since "righteous" here, within the law court metaphor, refers to "status," not "character," we correctly say that God's declaration makes the person "righteous," i.e., in good standing.)
>
> (b) This present declaration constitutes all believers as the single people, the one family, promised to Abraham (Galatians 2:14–3:29; Romans 3:27–4:17), the people whose sins have been dealt with as part of the fulfilled promise of covenant renewal (Jeremiah 31:31–34). Membership in this family cannot be played off against forgiveness of sins: the two belong together.
>
> (c) The event in the present which corresponds to Jesus' death and resurrection in the past, and the resurrection of all believers in the future, is baptism into Christ (Galatians 3:26–29; Romans 6:2–11). Baptism is not, as some have supposed, a

"work" which one "performs" to earn God's favor. It is, for Paul, the sacrament of God's free grace. Paul can speak of those who have believed and been baptized as already "saved," albeit "in hope" (Romans 8:24).

MORE WRIGHT THAN WRONG

Though Bishop Wright has been at the center of discussions and controversies in some conservative circles (and also in a few liberal ones as well), it would be a huge mistake to think of him as anything other than an orthodox Christian thinker. His ministry, as well as his theological and moral conclusions, merits this designation beyond any reasonable doubt. Indeed, he has openly linked himself, at least in broad categories, to the Reformed emphasis of Protestant theology. What is troubling to me is the way some have gone about trying to discredit his work. But in the world both of academic scholars, and in most evangelical contexts, he has been regularly praised, at least by those who bother to read him at all.

Just a few months ago Wright made headlines when he announced to the press, on December 1, 2005, the very day that the first civil partnership ceremonies took place in Britain, that he would be likely to take disciplinary actions against any clergy who registered as civil partners or blessed such partnerships as consistent with church teaching.

For those who would like to study Wright further I strongly urge you to read his books. You may also visit the Wright page on the Internet at *www.ntwrightpage.com*. There is a Web site for the Bishop of Durham at *www.durham.anglican.org /bishop.htm*. A Yahoo chat group can be found at *http://groups. yahoo.com/group/Wrightsaid* and The Paul Page has articles about Wright, pro and con, at *www.thepaulpage.com*. There is more than enough to be read and discussed for a lifetime. One thing is for sure, this man is a major force for biblical

exegesis and the renewal of the church in our time. I for one have come to deeply appreciate the work of this wonderful Christian man. I can't keep up with his prodigious work, but I urge you to dip into this well at some point and see if you don't find fresh encouragement to know your Bible better and to love Christ more.

THE GRACIOUS RESPONSE OF BRIAN MCLAREN

In our quarterly issue, 14:3, we did an extensive critique of Brian D. McLaren's book, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Zondervan, 2004). McLaren is the much sought-after speaker and the popular author of a number of books that represent a large segment of what is now called "emergent" Christianity. Because of his growing influence in the church, we thought it best to offer insightful criticism of his call for "generous orthodoxy." We discovered, in the process of preparing and publishing our critique of McLaren, that there is a positive way to interact with current Christian thought that invites further dialogue and deeper thought, without *ad hominem* arguments or misrepresentations.

In the second edition of *A Generous Orthodoxy* McLaren includes an epilogue in which he comments on various criticisms that were offered to the first edition. He notes that friends asked him if "redemptive dialogue" with critics took place following the publication of the book. He writes: "Sadly, though, we have asked for dialogue with a number of critics who have either ignored us or turned us down" (345). McLaren notes, in this same epilogue, that one thoughtful interaction with his work was done in this journal. He says: "Thanks to John H. Armstrong for creating space for particularly thoughtful interaction in the pages of *Reformation & Revival Journal* (www.reformationrevival.com)."

McLaren's response gratifies me since our editorial goal in

the journal has always been to offer a fair and even-handed interaction. An editor can't hit a home run every time at bat, but if the person being critiqued in a publication responds in this manner to an analysis of their work, then the editor can at least feel the interaction was "thoughtful," thus the purpose of the journal was properly served. And "thanks" to Brian for interacting with our three writers who respect you very much, while at the same time they wanted to foster a dialogue that might lead us all to a better understanding of the truth as revealed in Christ.

ACT 3

MODERN INTERNET HUMOR

I am not sure who comes up with some of the social humor of our time, but the following Internet joke has made the rounds. Somebody with a clever mind worked overtime on this one.

The Evolution in the Teaching of Math Since the 1950s

1. Teaching Math in the 1950s: A logger sells a truckload of lumber for $100.
   His cost of production is 4/5 of the price. What is his profit?

2. Teaching Math in the 1960s: A logger sells a truckload of lumber for $100.
   His cost of production is 4/5 of the price, or $80. What is his profit?

3. Teaching Math in the1970s: A logger sells a truckload of lumber for $100.
   His cost of production is $80. Did he make a profit?

4. Teaching Math in the 1980s: A logger sells a truckload of lumber for $100.
   His cost of production is $80 and, therefore, his profit is $20. Your assignment: Underline the number 20.

5. Teaching Math in the 1990s: A logger cuts down a beautiful forest because he is selfish and inconsiderate and cares nothing for the habitat of animals or the preservation of our woodlands. He does this so he can make a profit of $20. What do you think of this way of making a living? Topic for class participation after answering the question: How did the birds and squirrels feel as the logger was cutting down their homes? (Note: There are no wrong answers.)

6. Teaching Math in 2006: *Un hachero vende una carretada de maderapara* $100. *El costo de la producciones es* $80. *Es verdad. Muchas gracias.*