THEOLOGY: WHY BOTHER?

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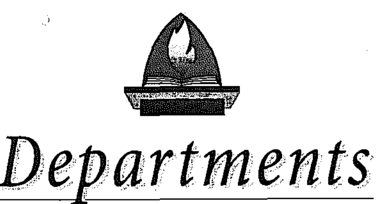


Departments

A Reformation & Revival Journal Interview with N. T. Wright

Part One

In early November one of our editors sat down with N. T. Wright in Washington, D. C., for a friendly chat. The discussion which followed was wide ranging, as you will quickly see from the first part of the interview. (The second half of the interview will appear in the next issue.) It touched particularly upon Wright's work in biblical theology. Tom Wright is one of the freshest voices within orthodox evangelical Christian thought today and is a major contributor to both the study of the historical Jesus and the theology of the New Testament. He is an unusual academic theologian because he is comfortable in the work of the parish as well as in the world of academic New Testament study. He serves as canon theologian of Westminster Abbey in London.

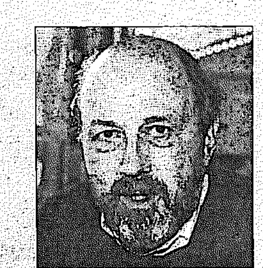
R R J —It has been said that you do not pay close enough attention to the confessions and creeds of the historic church and thus your interpretations, which sometimes break new ground in hermeneutics, are unsafe.

N T W —I find this to be a defensive attitude. It is one that

I've met it in all sorts of people, and is actually a Roman Catholic attitude. It's funny really, because it occurs in all sorts of conservative, Protestant circles. It says, "If something in the Bible really was that important then the church from earliest times must have understood that. Therefore, if we can't find the understanding that you're proposing in the great swathe of Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, or whoever, then we are going to be deeply suspicious." I know what Calvin would have said to that, "God's word is God's word. Come on." The seventeenth century writer John Robinson said, "God has more light yet to break out of his holy Word." I believe this is what I am saying. The sad thing is I've always thought evangelicals believed the same.

R R J —Your work has been called "orthodox yet strikingly original." We tend to think that orthodox means unoriginal and original is necessarily unorthodox. How can your work be *both?* How do you respond to critics who say that to the degree that your understanding of Jesus or Paul or early Christianity is new then it must be wrong?

N T W —I do not think orthodoxy is found in a book where you look up all the right answers, like a child learning mathematics. The child knows that all the answers are in the back of the book so he simply checks on whether he did the sums right. You really don't expect that by doing these sums you learn anything new. For me orthodoxy is more like doing research in higher mathematics. It is continually discovering new ways to move forward, while still holding to the accepted affirmations which are themselves central. Putting it back into theological terms, you have to go where the text leads you because the text is the text.



But there are certain massive signposts for an orthodox Christian thinker—the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Atonement, the Resurrection, the Holy Spirit—these are the basic ones for orthodox Christians.

But there are certain massive signposts for an orthodox Christian thinker—the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Atonement, the Resurrection, the Holy Spirit—these are the basic ones for orthodox Christians. If ten miles down the road you find that what has been a difficult and murky investigation leads you to break through to the light, and if the light that you then break through to leads you to say "My goodness, yes! God really is Father, Son, and Spirit and this really helps me to see even more clearly the importance of the truth that Jesus did really rise from the dead on the third day, etc." then you are seeing the orthodox truth in *new* light. For me orthodoxy has been like a black and white picture and the hard work of research and scholarship leads me back to the same picture but now it is in color. It's a little like that film *Pleasantville* where bits start to get colored in as the film goes along. That's rather how it's actually been for me as I've done my work over the years. It's the same picture as always but now I am seeing a flash of color over here, then a bit more over there. This has been wonderfully confirming. If one ended up saying, "Well, shucks, after all the work I've done, it really looks as though Jesus didn't think he was the Servant, or that he didn't think he was going to die for the sins of the world. In other words, if you end up sounding like Robert Funk and the Jesus Seminar, then I would have to say, "Sorry, something has gone wrong somewhere." And if I found myself seriously believing that, then I hope I would have the guts to say, "This is not the orthodoxy that I grew up in. I have changed." Maybe I would have to give up preaching. But that is not where I've been. Not at all.

R R J —You say in your book, *The Climax of the Covenant,* "We must consciously think our way out of anachronisms if we are to hope to understand Paul (or for that matter anyone else in the first century." How have you attempted to go about that—thinking your way out of anachronisms? Tell us a bit about the methodology you have used to study Jesus and the early church.

N T W —I suppose the biggest thing is my training as an ancient historian. That's what I did before I studied theology. I not only did ancient history, but also undergraduate level philosophy. For me, reading historical texts is a constant application, whether from Heidegger or whoever, of the hermeneutical circle. This is true whether you are reading Cicero, Seneca, Epictetus, Tacitus, or Josephus. It doesn't matter. I come expecting they will address certain questions because these are the questions I assumed people were interested in. Then I discovered that those questions are not the things that shaped their work. They have other issues. They have other agendas. And I have to be patient and learn from them and revise my opinion of what they were *really* talking about.

I suppose one of the most obvious examples is the Jews, in the first century. They simply were not discussing at great length what Christians have meant by the question, "How do we go to heaven when we die?" or something like that. They were, to the extent that they were discussing such matters at all, doing it in a way that was deeply bound up with political realities and agendas in a way quite foreign to a lot of evangelical Christianity since the Enlightenment and the Reformation. You have to understand that the Reformation was as political as it was theological. This is actually an example in the other direction. I did a study of John Frith, the early English Reformer, as my first research project. I did this before I really got into New Testament. I was constantly puzzled by the fact that Frith seemed to be as concerned about politics as he was about getting the English Bible into the hands of the ordinary people. The point is this—he realized that without a political reformation, theological reformation was simply not going to work. I had to screen this out because my post-Enlightenment style evangelicalism didn't have room for this approach. So I've had to get away from some pretty anachronistic eighteenth century assumptions in order to understand the Protestant Reformers. And I have also had to get away from some of the Reformation assumptions, which are basically late medieval assumptions, in order to understand the first-century and the New Testament.

R R J —You force your readers to continually rethink and rehear the meaning of very familiar phrases: "kingdom of God," "hell," "heaven," "repentance," "forgiveness of sins," "works of the law" and "justification." You argue that listening to those words with the tone and timbre of the first-century world will communicate a different message than what we perhaps have heard in dogmatic and systematic theology. What are some of the dangers you see in systematic theology, particularly in the theology of post-Reformation confessionalism?

N T W —Of course I have to say that I'm part of this too. Anglicans, at least notionally, have this thing called the *Thirty-Nine Articles,* which isn't quite like having the *Westminster Confession.* The genre is not quite the same but it's a similar, parallel phenomenon in an English setting. So it's a real internal question and not one that I'm merely looking at from the outside. I think that the critical thing is that the Reformation confessions always say the Scripture should remain normative. This at least implies a self-critical stance which, in effect, means we are saying under God "we don't think we are writing a new bit of Scripture but this is the best shot we make at the moment for saying what we think Scripture means today." I don't think it has always been articulated this way, but I've always taken this to mean that we stick with the Scripture as the basis and critique all our traditions, including my own.

What happened, of course, was that the biblical studies of the post-Enlightenment period were fairly destructive because they got caught up with the general Enlightenment project that

sought to undermine the historical roots of Christianity. As a result people argued about whether Jesus didn't do miracles, or Paul didn't write Ephesians, or whatever. These are all ways of chipping away at the structure. I want to say the Reformation confessions do have an in-built self-correcting mechanism to them and this needs to be honored in a way that we haven't always done it. As I say again and again in my works, a good old English saying hold true here: "The proof of the pudding is in the eating." When you read a passage like Luke 13, with Jesus saying, "unless you repent you will all likewise perish," you see my point. The way this text has been taken is generally as a threat about going to hell when you die. In Luke's context (integrating this word with so much else that is going on in Jesus' life), Jesus is actually referring to two very unpleasant incidents in Jerusalem, one with soldiers killing pilgrims and the other with a tower collapsing and falling on people. What Jesus is saying is this: "Well, that is the way you will all die unless you repent." And that gives both the threat and the meaning of the word repentance quite a different meaning from what we've normally assumed. It is quite shocking in actuality.

R R J —Some of your reviewers have criticized your reading of the New Testament's eschatological outlook. What do you see as still future?

N T W —You're absolutely right, people do read my work in this way. One of my colleagues, after *New Testament and the People of God* was published, said to me in a seminar, "Tom, now that you have abandoned eschatology . . . " I said, "Excuse me. I have not abandoned eschatology. I am reading this stuff eschatologically from top to bottom. That's what it's all about." What he meant was really that I'd given up belief in the imminent *parousia* as the *dominant* thing in early Christianity. That's actually a stupid use of the word eschatology. But the evangelical complaint has been that I have taken key texts about the Son of Man coming upon the clouds, texts which have had such a huge role in contemporary evangelicalism and fundamentalism, and I've said, "Sorry, I want to read those biblically not traditionally."

In the biblical text (Daniel 7) the Son of Man is going upwards not downwards. All of this has nothing to do with the fact that there is from 1 Thessalonians onwards (and recall that I Thessalonians is one of the two or three earliest documents we possess in early Christianity) a very strong belief in the *parousia* as the royal presence. The word *parousia* means the presence of Jesus. This is modeled on various things: on Moses coming down the mountain having been up with God, on the arrival of the emperor to pay a state visit, etc. In 1 Thessalonians 4 there's lots of stuff woven into the text. It's quite clear that this has all been part of the package. You should put 1 Thessalonians 4, the last paragraph of it at least, alongside the last paragraph of 1 Corinthians 15. When you do you can see that Paul is actually talking about exactly the same thing. The trumpet shall sound. There are several elements of the same picture. He is talking about a day that is obviously still to come. This is so obvious that I find it laughable that anyone would think it otherwise. This is the day when that which began with the resurrection of Jesus as prototype will be finally completed.

The big picture is obviously in Romans 8:18-27. It is very interesting to me that a great swathe of the evangelical tradition—and indeed, what I suppose we in the English speaking world would call the non-evangelical Lutheran tradition (e.g., Bultmann)—have marginalized precisely this part of Romans. Romans is a book about me and how I get saved. And so we get this extraordinary thing about the creation being set free from its bondage to decay and Bultmann says, "Oh that just a bit of the flotsam and jetsam of Paul's apocalyptic background, you know. He's just got to drag a bit of that stuff in there." Without seeing that this really is the whole point; i.e., Romans 5:12-21 is about those who receive the grace of God and the gift of righteousness who will *reign in life*. What does it mean that they will reign in life? It means not only that Jesus is ruling but his people are ruling as they are intended to do. Then the creation itself will be set free. But that manifestly hasn't happened yet.

R R J —Alister McGrath says, when it comes to reading the Apostle Paul on "works of the law," that "if N. T. Wright is correct, Luther is wrong." You have said, "If you start from this approach to justification, you get the rest thrown in, in all its glory" (*What Saint Paul Really Said?*). So which is it? Is Luther still riding in the car with you or have you dropped him off at the last truck stop?

N T W —It's important to say I haven't seriously read Luther for about 20 years. I did some work on Luther when I was first reading theology. I did a special subject on early Reformation texts and did quite a bit of that type of thing then. But, it seems to me (this will make serious Lutherans furious) what Luther did was rather like what Aquinas did with the Eucharist. Aquinas came with the medieval question: "Is Christ present or absent in the Eucharist?" And if he is present, how is he present? Aquinas used a medieval cosmology based upon Aristotle to argue that he is present but he is not present in the same way that he was present when he was walking around with the disciples. So we can divide all of this neatly between the substance of the reality, which is inside things, and the accidents, which are the mere physical outside bits. And then we say that the substance of Christ that is present is not physical. It doesn't mean that there's a little bit of his fingernail, or whatever, here. So Aquinas is using a sophisticated cosmology to answer his particular question and thus comes up with transubstantiation. I want to say, if you ask that question, and this is the only cosmology you have, then that is the right answer. However, transubstantiation, gets us into all kinds of other problems, which the next five hundred years after Aquinas richly demonstrated.

Luther comes to the question, "How can I find a gracious God?" He approaches this question from his Augustinian framework. He was an Augustinian monk. Actually he claimed that he didn't understand Augustine that well until after he had been converted, which might not be the case. This we do know—his antithesis of grace/works, or faith/works, or faith/law, was very strongly conditioned by his own soul

struggles, the struggles to be an obedient monk and what he thought this all hinged upon. This was all rooted in the world of late medieval Catholicism. Luther, then, is reading Paul looking for the bits and pieces that will help him resolve this particular question. Very clearly there were thousands and thousands of other people at the time who were facing exactly the same question and were thrilled to hear there was a different answer than they had been given. And I want to say, as I said with regard to Aquinas, if you come with this question and you look at it within this worldview, this is the right answer! But, just like the matter of transubstantiation, the problem here is that this has led us down some pretty murky paths.

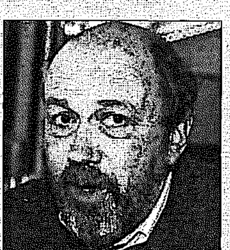
The way that I came into this is a bit interesting. I grew up as a somewhat typical middle-Anglican with a strong dash of evangelicalism, or put the other way around, I grew up in a Lutheran evangelicalism which left me with a strong antithesis between law and grace. I found this all profoundly unsatisfying until I met Calvin and Calvinism. I began to think, "Whew . . . the law is a good thing. It is holy and just and good. It is right and it has been fulfilled, not abrogated, in Christ." All of that is right. So, if you are faced with a choice between Luther and Calvin, you simply have to choose Calvin. I think a lot of the evangelical debates in North America, at the moment, are still right around that axis although they don't come right out and actually say so. What I then found, and believe me I tried very hard to do this, I couldn't make the Calvinist reading of Galatians actually work. I was reading C. E. B. Cranfield on Romans and trying to see how it would work with Galatians, and it simply doesn't work. Interestingly, Cranfield hasn't done a commentary on Galatians. It's very difficult. But I found then, and this was the mid-seventies *before* E. P. Sanders was published, before there was such a thing as a "new perspective," that I came out with this reading of Romans 10:3 which is really the fulcrum for me around which everything else moved: "Being ignorant of the righteousness of God and seeking to establish their own."

In other words, what we have here is a covenant status

which is for Jews and Jews only. I have a vivid memory of going home that night, sitting up in bed, reading Galatians through in Greek and thinking, "It works. It really works. This whole thing is going to fly." And then all sorts of things just followed on from that. I mean Sanders was a great boost but he didn't start this for me and he hasn't given direction to what I did or was doing. It was more like Sanders was saying, "Actually first-century Judaism never was like what Luther said it was."

R R J —What is your take on the "new perspective," the place of the discussion right now, and how do you see your recent lectures (The Manson Lecture Series) on the "fresh perspective" as advancing the discussion?

N T W —I have been doing versions of this material here and there and it has been rather fun. The "new perspective" hasn't run out of steam. It's actually assumed now by probably three-fourths of British and North American Pauline scholars. But the phrase, "the new perspective," which is James D. G. Dunn's phrase is clearly a very, very broad brush. Those of us who live a bit closer to the canvas know that there are lots of different paint strokes that have to be taken account of. So I certainly don't want to be labeled as a clone of Sanders and Dunn. Far from it. There is a very complicated story of the relationship between my work and that of Dunn and Sanders. But that's a whole other issue, in terms of our own mutual scholarly debates. I've actually never thought that Sanders reading of Paul was particularly good. In fact, part of the difficulty on Paul is that Sanders book was really much more about religion. The subtitle was *A Comparison of Patterns of Religion*. And it's really a very thin view of religion. It's asking the question, "How does religion work in terms of getting in and staying in?" You know, that is almost as bad as coming to the Eucharist with Aquinas' either/or: "Is it this or is it that?" It makes certain key points and then it says, "Well there we are. Let's go on and do something else." That's the point at which I want to say, "You may be right about this thus far, but religion



What we mean by the word "religion" and what we mean by the world "politics" has been so heavily influenced by eighteenth century assumptions. Then in America it is all very different since you have this eighteenth century split between religion and politics. It's very difficult for Americans to think out of that box. Happily some are trying to but it's a struggle.

is simply not the whole story." We've also got theology here, which Sanders is not that interested in. There is also spirituality and patterns of how people's spiritual experience actually fits. For example, how do you get an *ordo salutis* out of this and what does it actually do to people? Sanders doesn't really address that. And, in particular, you have this whole area of what we today call the interface between religion and politics. We have to realize that most people in the world today, and nobody in the world until the eighteenth century, would have made this distinction in that way. What we mean by the word "religion" and what we mean by the world "politics" has been so heavily influenced by eighteenth century assumptions. Then in America it is all very different since you have this eighteenth century split between religion and politics. It's very difficult for Americans to think out of that box. Happily some are trying to but it's a struggle.

So the "new perspective" is a way of saying, "Hey guys, there has been something quite remarkable happening in the last twenty years in Pauline scholarship but let's not imagine

that this is anything other than a call to wake up and read the text a bit better. When we do that as historians we find that there is an integration being proposed between not only religion and theology but also between politics and spirituality and lots of other stuff besides." This is explosive. This is Paul for the postmodern world. And Sanders' thing is very much a late modern thing. And personally I've found Dunn's *Theology of Paul* very chewy and not very stimulating. Some of the attempts to turn the clock back and say, "What a wicked thing this 'new perspective' is," are extraordinary. There is a level of misunderstanding here which is quite disturbing. Peter Stuhlmacher's book, which just came out from InterVarsity in late 2001, is an example. Then there is this new book edited by D. A. Carson and others which is published by Baker. We will have to see what all of this means in time.

R R J —I am waiting on these same books and would like to read them carefully.

N T W —I don't doubt that there are things to be said against both Sanders and Dunn, and quite possibly against me. There are things that we all need to take account of I am quite sure. But the idea that you can simply say, "Oh, it was all a big misunderstanding so now we can just go back to doing things the way we always did before." I wonder what is at stake here for these writers? Is it an ecclesiology? Are they frightened that if I am right about the "new perspective" then I would conclude that they all ought to become Anglicans? I don't know. I find it all rather odd.

R R J —Well, I think there is the practical question of people who are in subscription to confessional standards. The "new perspective" comes in and makes you ask, "Is that a denial of the imputation of Christ's righteousness?" That's practical. I think maybe even behind this idea, and arrogant is probably too strong a word to use here, is the question again that we have all of a sudden been able to decode the code 2,000 years later.

N T W —But you see the joke is this—that is precisely the question Martin Luther faced in his time. It was the big question throughout the 1517 to 1530 period. "Where have you been for the last 1500 years?" If that's what Paul meant, why didn't the church notice it before now? Luther was saying, "God's Word. God's Word. Here I stand." And thousands of people were saying, "Yes, yes, yes." So, this is always the puzzle. Then it's back to this methodological issue. I do think that God has new light to break out of Holy Scripture. But it's not new light in the sense of throwing away all that's good in the past. People are always frightened that a reformation, or a proposal for a new way of doing things will go this way. My aim here is freshness, something even better than what we've got.

The imputation of Christ's righteousness is one of the big sticking points for sure. I think I know exactly what the doctrine is about and I believe you don't lose anything by the route I propose. The force of what people have believed when they have used the idea of imputation is completely retained in what I have tried to do. Why? Because in Christ we have all the treasures, not only of wisdom and knowledge (Colossians 1, and also I Corinthians 1), but in whom we have the entire package, meaning sanctification and wisdom, as well as righteousness. So Paul's theology of being in Christ gives you all of that. But the fact that it gives you more than that does rock you back on your heels a bit and prompt you to ask, "Have we made too much of this one thing called righteousness?" The key text, which is 2 Corinthians 5:21, has been read for generations, ever since Luther at least, as an isolated, detached statement of the wondrous exchange. When we do this we forget that the entire passage, for the three chapters that led up to it, and the chapter and a half that follow it (chapter six and the beginning of seven) are about apostleship. These are all about the strange way in which the suffering of the apostle somehow is transmuted into the revelation of God's glory. In the middle of this the statement occurs that God "made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." After this I started to read *dikaio-*

sune theou ("the righteousness of God") as "covenant faithfulness" in Romans. I then suddenly thought, "wait a minute." What about 2 Corinthians 5:21? And then I realized that the whole thing here is 2 Corinthians 3, the new covenant. God has made us ministers of the new covenant. We are embodying the covenant faithfulness of God. I can see how frustrating it is for a preacher who has preached his favorite sermon all these years on the imputation of Christ's righteousness from 2 Corinthians 5:21 to hear that this is not the right way to understand it but I actually think that there's an even better sermon waiting to be preached. You can always preach one on 1 Corinthians 1:30 so long as you do wisdom, sanctification, and redemption, all three.

R R J —Give us a preview of your Romans commentary, which is not yet published. Take, if you would, Romans 4. What is the *righteousness*, which is credited to Abraham's children? Is it God's own covenant faithfulness?

N T W —No, it's not God's own covenantal faithfulness. The righteousness word has two particular *metaphorical* sets of resonances. One is the covenant and the other is the law court. And it's not accidental that they go together. It's not just two metaphorical resonances out of nowhere. This is something that traditional evangelical scholarship has been very bad on seeing—the Israel-rootedness of Paul's metaphors. Leon Morris will say that Paul has all these metaphors for redemption and atonement. There's the slave market and the law court. It's just as though Paul is ransacking all possible metaphors. But it's much more focused than that. Romans 4 is the classic case where this comes. I can't remember all that I've said about Romans 4 in the commentary since I wrote it two years ago and I haven't been back to revisit it recently. The key thing is that God chose Abraham and his family in order that through him the problem of the world might be addressed and solved. The way in which you address the problem of evil is through God's justice in the law court. So the covenant was always about how God's justice is going to embrace the world.

I am now more happy to use the word justice because of what I've seen in what I've called the "fresh perspective." You see, this really is justice, by which I mean God putting the world to rights. So what happens when people believe is this—they are deemed to be part of the Abrahamic family. The means by which God is putting the world to right is on the basis of the death and resurrection of Jesus, and it is also the early indication, foreshadowing, or prototype of what God does with us in justification, i.e., reckoning us as his people and declaring that we have been put in the right. This is a sign of what he is going to do with the whole world. That's the terrific thing. That's why there is this line from Romans 4 right through to Romans 8 as I articulated in my article on the *festschrift* for Gordon Fee.

So the puzzles that we have over translating *dikaiosune* which remain. How do you really translate this stuff? It's very difficult honestly. The puzzle is really about the fact that our language systems in contemporary English don't reflect the nuances that were there for Paul when he was talking about the covenant and when he's talking about God's aim to put the world to rights. You know we haven't soaked ourselves in the Old Testament. That's what this is all about if we have tried to do it without screening out all the bits about doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with your God. We've screened out all the bits, all the meaning of Second Isaiah. Second Isaiah is not just a nice framework within which you get the Suffering Servant. No, Second Isaiah is about how the people of God are in captivity and how God is going to defeat the pagan gods and rescue them. The Suffering Servant is in the middle of all that.

R R J —Time and time again you are pulling us into the ancient worldview through worldview analysis and narrative analysis. This results in a real historicized reading of the text. What does this all assume about the way we read the Bible in the ongoing life of the church? Take a matter like eschatology. You can imagine people saying, "Well, if this has already been fulfilled, am I simply reading history

here?" So how does biblical reading open up in light of another day and age?

N T W —Sometimes when I was dean at Lichfield I got the odd comment at the end of the sermon where someone would say, rather wryly, "Thanks for the history lesson." I would say, "Yeah, you needed it, didn't you?" Because, and this is an extremely important point, I really do believe that the world was redeemed in the first century A.D. I really do believe that something which really happened on the face of this earth within human history was the redeeming event, namely the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. I do not believe that this was an example of, or a hint about, a timeless thing which can happen to anyone anywhere so that all we go back to the past for is some hints about the present. We go back to the past because this is where God acted decisively and uniquely.

The irony is this too was a fundamental Reformation insight. Think about it. What is it that the Reformers insisted was wrong with the Catholic theology of the Mass? They believed that in the Mass people believed the priests were sacrificing Christ again and again. The Reformers said, "No way. It happened once for all, uniquely." So all I'm saying is that essentially the same Reformation insight—namely, the uniqueness of Christ—means that we have to take the ancient history of this far more seriously than they did.

Actually Calvin was pretty good at this. Calvin was a humanist scholar you will recall. He knew his history. He knew his sources. He knew his Seneca. He knew what was what as well as anyone in those days did. He was drawing on that stuff. And you see, we have to think back to the world he was coming from. He was in a world where the Vulgate had been the text. And there were Catholic writers who had spoken of the Vulgate—I think somebody published an edition, a Triglot edition of the Old Testament, with Hebrew, Greek and Latin in the middle. There was some Catholic thinker who said it was like Christ being crucified between two thieves because the pure wonderful Vulgate was between the Hebrew, the language of the accursed Jew, and the Greek, the language of the wicked Orthodox church that had separated from the Western Church. So we have to think back to the huge steps that Luther was taking to say, "I'm going to translate this from the Greek into modern German." And that, itself, is what I'm attempting to do. I am trying to go back to the original behind the other stuff. Every translation is a work of ancient history. If it isn't, it's not really a translation; it's just musings.

R R J —What are some of the things that have broken the logjam (I have in mind Sanders, of course, in 1977)? What other things have converged to make conditions ripe for the modern rereading of Paul?

N T W —That's interesting. I think it's much, much bigger than Sanders. I think the whole postmodern turn has struck us in several different ways that people have started to realize that our traditional readings of Paul have been part of a limited way of construing reality. This differs from Germany to England, and it differs from Europe to America. It differs from first world to third world. And we haven't taken account of third world reading of Scriptures yet within the scholarly guild or within the European and American churches. God willing, we will do that. I think particularly of the work of people like Richard Horsley, who is both a colleague and a friend, yet somebody I criticize quite strongly. I do this because Horsley, by discovering and highlighting the political aspects in Paul, continually implies that we can discount the theology and the spirituality of Paul because this is a call to arms for a particular political thing. That seems to me to perpetuate the Enlightenment either/or distinction and to simply swing from one side to another. No, there is something much bigger than that. But at least, and this is my point in answering your question, the fact that the postmodern academy sees questions like this bubbling up in fresh ways means those of us who do want to be holistic about how we read the text can say there are some insights here that we've got to factor in. We won't go with a newly limited way of doing this but we'll take

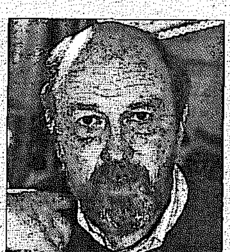
all their insights and put them in the larger pot and see what we sort of meal we can make out of it.

R R J —You place a good bit of emphasis on symbolic action, thus raising the whole question of praxis—this has really opened my eyes up to the way that symbolic praxis operates in the real world. I tend to think of Ariel Sharon walking into the Temple precincts and then all hell breaks loose.

N T W —Oh, absolutely! Symbolic praxis. And that was done with one aim and one aim only, to become prime minister. And it worked. It really worked. Scary really.

R R J —You have called for us to think in integrated ways with regard to religion and politics. How has your study of ancient Christianity informed your reflection on the events of September 11th?

N T W —Good question. I need to start before September 11 to show you where I am really coming from here. Three years ago when I was still in Lichfield I helped to host a seminar on the Jubilee 2000 movement for debt remission in the third world. I did the biblical stuff on Jubilee. We had African bishops. We had bankers. We had economists. We had a government minister, etc. We had a wonderful seminar. And I may say, in the Anglican context, whatever you do, you end up having Choral Evensong at the end of the day. When you go in to evensong and listen to the Magnificat—"He has put down the mighty from their seat and has exalted the humble and meek"—having spent all day talking about third world debt your eyes stand out on stalks. It's like, "My goodness. We sing this every evening and have we ever thought about what we're talking about? And that, in turn, grew out of my work on Jesus. The more I put Jesus in his historical context the more I found that when he said "on earth as in heaven," he really did mean that. I mean, the Lord's Prayer is just stunningly full of stuff about how God's kingdom transforms the present world.



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The trouble is we've been fooled by the fact that early in the last century there was this social gospel movement that tried to translate out the gospel into simply having better drains, better pay for workers, and this and that and the other. We struggled hard to do that. We did some of it but not all. But isn't there something else about the gospel? The answer is, of course there is. But because the social gospel movement got it so thin and truncated and flattened out, it doesn't mean that there isn't a message there that is right and that needs to be heard.

Then, coming forward, over the last three years, I've written a book about the millennium, which you may know, has some stuff about the task of the church in the modern world. I have asked myself, because of my own worldview model in *New Testament and the People of God*—what is our praxis? What is our story? Where are we coming from? How do we subvert

what the modern and the postmodern world is doing? How does the gospel impinge on it?

Over the last year, two things happened. First, my work on Paul has developed in ways that you know through what I have cheekily called the "fresh perspective" in my Manson Lecture and various other things I have been doing. (I did the Truett Lectures at Baylor University a few weeks ago on this same subject.) Second, I have read quite a bit about contemporary macroeconomics and globalization. This year my youngest son, who is an undergraduate at Cambridge, had a summer vacation job which came to an end earlier than he planned. I hired him for a month, effectively as a research assistant, to read the top fifteen books on globalization and the American empire. I asked him to summarize what he read. It's not his field—he is reading English—but he found it absolutely fascinating. I haven't read all of the books he researched but I have been overwhelmed a bit by them. This was through August. Through the first week or ten days of September he had finished the project. We had been talking almost every day about the way in which the rest of the world sees Europe in general and America in particular. I do not mean to bash Americans at all. We are very, very involved in this in Europe, particularly Britain.

I sat there on the afternoon of September 11 and was numb. One of the things which made me doubly numb was the way I had been thinking that those twin towers and how they symbolized, for much of the world, enslavement, not freedom and democracy. Bin Laden is a highly rich Saudi, many of whose followers are western educated. So it isn't that these terrorists were exactly the third world striking back. They haven't got the resources to do that. But there was a huge irony. And I then found—and I'm a little scared about talking about this really over here—it's very difficult to say anything of this without people thinking that you are just slamming America, which I am not doing. But I think this is a much, much more complicated thing than saying there are evil people out there with a capital "E" and that this is simply a war against evil, as though there is a finite number of people out

there who are called "terrorists" and when we have found them and killed them that will solve it. I just don't think that will do. Shortly after September 11, I was proofreading my little commentary on Matthew and I came to those parables and warnings of Jesus against the temple. It struck me again and again that he was using coded language. He was saying devastatingly hard things that his society did not want to hear because they had such a heavy political agenda. He was saying, "Don't go that route. You have to think more seriously. God isn't going the way that you think." I found myself saying, "We have to think like that too." That is not to say that we don't have to go after Bin Laden and bring him to justice. But let's bring him to justice. Because if it's perceived as vengeance by B-52 bombers then we will perpetuate the problem.

R R J —I think even C. S. Lewis, in his *Reflections on the Psalms*, and a few other places, talks of the need for people who have given offense to think what may have aroused such antipathy and hostility that it has led to this. This is really just asking the harder questions, not exempting somebody from necessary judgment.

N T W —I preached last Sunday in Westminster Abby on Zacchaeus, which was the reading for the morning out of Luke 19:1-10. Here you have someone who was rich and exploitative, someone who was bleeding the rest of his contemporaries dry. When we read this story we're all on the side of the people on the street thinking, "Here is this creep who is in every bad shape. And he is doing all the wicked things." When Jesus goes and eats with him, people say, "He has gone to eat with a sinner." But then look what happens to Zacchaeus. It's very interesting because Jesus does not affirm Zacchaeus by saying, "I'm coming to eat with you. You're a good guy really. It's O.K. Don't worry." There is a moral challenge here that reaches to the very heart of the sort of person that Zacchaeus has spent his life being. Zaccheaus has to repent and change. But Jesus doesn't go with the cheap shots of the people on the street. Envy can pump itself up like a balloon until it claims

the high moral ground when it is really standing on the moral ground of its own puffed up envy. So the duress of the two-thirds world I think I got right. Debt remission is absolutely basic. The third world has paid back our original loans many times over in interest. To keep them enslaved now, and thus to force them to grow the wrong crops, because they desperately need exports to get foreign money to service their debt destroys their own economies and farms.

I'm afraid I'm giving you a whole sermon but let me give you one more line here. When Jesus says, "You know how to read the skies; why can't you read the signs of the times?" it never struck me before what he was talking about when he said the winds are from the south and thus you say it's going to be hot. When you see clouds coming from the Mediterranean you say it's going to be rain. I mean it does not take a Ph.D. in meteorology to figure this out. It's quite obvious if you're in Palestine that this is the way the weather works. The signs of the times do not take a Ph.D. in macroeconomics or theology. You just have to look and say, "How come ten per cent of the world has ninety per cent of the wealth and ninety per cent of the world has ten per cent of the wealth? Was that really the way that God intended it to be?" Then when you start to probe, and say, "What's happened the last fifty years?" it prompts you to finally say, "Sorry guys, this is not a good thing."

R R J —That's very helpful. You've probably heard the phrase that "terrorism is the poor man's atomic bomb." Is that part of what you mean?

N T W —Sure it is. I sense there is a hugely self-critical Jewish movement within both Israel and British Zionism. One of the leading members of Parliament in Britain, an Orthodox Jew who has supported Zionism all along has said publicly that Sharon was a war criminal who ought to be prosecuted at the international tribunal. He has publicly said that he will not visit Israel until Sharon has been toppled. Now this is not a Palestinian terrorist saying this type of thing. This is a man

whose Jewish credentials are impeccable lifelong. In the same way, I hear a lot of people in America, and not just wild people on the left but serious, sober, Christian commentators saying, "We have to hear what the rest of the world is saying." It simply won't do to say, as people in Britain and America are prone to say, "Why do they hate us because all we ever do to them is good?" It's as if they hate us for our virtues. There's much more to it than that.

Editor's Note: This extensive interview will be concluded in Volume 11, No. 2, 2002.