

## *Concluding Remarks*

As I have explained, in producing this book to counter the teaching of N.T. Wright on propitiation, I have had no thought of influencing Wright himself, nor the many evangelical scholars who support him in his views, nor the seminary faculty who are teaching his doctrine, nor the would-be pastors who are imbibing it. But I would have been remiss if I had not done something to help the silent – and, I fear, unsuspecting (often unsuspecting) – majority of believers who, as always, are on the receiving end of false doctrine.

My purpose has been to try to point out to such believers some of the things they need to wake up to and think about, and think about very seriously. If the customers stopped buying Wright's wares, the dealers would stop selling them. As long as the market exists, however, so long will such doctrine thrive. And I fear that may well be for a very long time indeed. At the moment, the market seems particularly buoyant; 'a bull market'.

In this brief conclusion, I want to underline some of the leading points I have tried to raise. In the Introduction, I spoke of three areas which are suffering – and suffering disastrously – under Wright's teaching: the gospel, the life and ministry of the *ekklesia*, and the integrity of the Godhead. My concluding remarks are gathered under these three headings.

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*First*, the gospel.

Can anybody doubt that Paul wanted to see sinners saved? The apostle told us how anxious he was to preach the gospel (Rom. 1:15-16; 1 Cor. 1:17,23; 2:15; 9:16). And we know why. It wasn't that he liked the sound of his own voice. It wasn't that he liked to bounce on any passing rostrum to catch all the *kudos* that was going. Indeed, as he explained to the Corinthians, the prospect of preaching held a sense of terror for him (1 Cor. 2:3).

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No! It was the plight of sinners under the wrath of God that drove him on, and gave him his desperate sense of urgency. The wrath of God towards sinners – that’s why he wanted sinners saved, and that’s why he preached the gospel. It was because the gospel preached – in the widest sense of the term – is the means God uses to bring sinners to Christ and salvation (1 Cor. 1:18,21); that’s why he preached the unadulterated gospel; that’s what motivated him.

Take his heart-felt words about his fellow-Jews:

I am speaking the truth in Christ – I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit – that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh. They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen (Rom. 9:1-5).

Yes, the Israelites had been endowed with tremendous advantages, but, even so, the majority of them were heading for damnation! As the apostle explained:

Brothers, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes (Rom. 10:1-4).

That’s why the apostle was so eager to preach the gospel:

Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry in order somehow to make my fellow-Jews jealous, and thus save some of them (Rom. 11:13-14).

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Here we have a man who was at his wit's end to see sinners converted to Christ and so be saved. 'Necessity is laid upon me.'<sup>1</sup> Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!' (1 Cor. 9:16).

Nevertheless – what a word! – nevertheless, in light of all that, consider once again the way Paul opened his exposition of the gospel in Romans: he began with an extended section on the wrath of God (Rom. 1:18 – 3:20). *A man who was desperate to see sinners saved, began his exposition of the gospel with the wrath of God!* Let that sink in! A moment or so ago, I used the word 'nevertheless'. I did so deliberately. Deliberately? As I will show in the second area of concern, in today's evangelical world, speaking of the wrath of God, and speaking of it at such length and in such detail as Paul did when writing to the Romans, is considered counter-intuitive, counter-productive. It can only get in the way of appealing to sinners. Tell them about God's love, his love for them. Stress the positive! Concentrate on the goodies! It's love, love, love, stupid! That's the way! Don't put them off, or get their backs up, by using the 'wrath' word! Save that for later – when the fish are truly gaffed and in the keep-net.

### ***But not for Paul!***

When writing to the Romans, Paul started – started! – his exposition of the gospel with the wrath of God,<sup>2</sup> spelling out

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<sup>1</sup> He was 'compelled' to preach the gospel. He was a driven man, driven from within and without. Christ had specifically commanded him with regard to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15; 22:10,21; 26:16-18), and his love for fellow-Jews brought them into the picture.

<sup>2</sup> Yes, he was writing to believers at the time, but the suggestion that he tricked unbelievers by avoiding the unpalatable is not to be entertained for a moment: 'Our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive, but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts. For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed – God is witness. Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others' (1 Thess. 2:3-6; see 2 Cor. 1:12; 2:17; Eph. 4:14). Such was the

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that wrath in such specific, personal, penetrating, convicting detail, and doing so – as he said – in his exposition of the gospel.<sup>3</sup> Only one conclusion is possible: without the wrath of God being made as clear as noonday, and right from the start, there is no gospel, and sinners will not be truly converted. Paul was desperately concerned – anxious – to see sinners saved. Nevertheless... But ‘nevertheless’ is the wrong word: it was *because* of the reality of God’s wrath, *because* of its severity, *because* of the desperate plight of unconverted sinners, that Paul was so anxious for the success of the gospel that sinners might be saved. And, knowing that the gospel is the only channel of salvation for sinners (1 Cor. 1:17-18,23; 2:1-5), the gospel must be maintained at all costs (1 Cor. 9:16). Jude was of the same mind (Jude 3). And integral – no, fundamental – to that gospel is the wrath of God. That is why Paul began – began, I stress again! – his exposition of the gospel with a detailed, personal and convicting exposition of the wrath of God.

I make no apology for belabouring this. Vital isn’t the word! Paul knew that sinners by nature stand in desperate need, and there is only one way of redemption or deliverance – the gospel. They are under the wrath of God until they come to trust Christ (John 3:18-19,36). And God in his love has sent his Son to die to redeem his elect (John 3:16; 1 Tim. 1:15), not to make them happy, not to give them a sense of well-being and fulfilment, but to deliver them from his wrath. But – and this is the point – the wrath of God is the absolute fundamental.

How often it can be seen throughout New Testament – as I hope I have made clear in my book. Without the wrath of God at the forefront, there can be no gospel, no evangelism. Indeed, there is no motive for evangelism.

In short, taking the wrath of God out of the picture, muting it, downplaying it, or whatever, spells the ruin of the gospel.

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apostle’s consistent ministry (Acts 20:24-27). I am sure he took Ezek. 3:17-21; 33:1-9 into account, seriously so.

<sup>3</sup> I have deliberately stressed the point: it so important.

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But this is precisely what N.T.Wright and his devotees are doing.

Christians awake!

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There is a *second* point: getting rid of the wrath of God, not only ruins the gospel and the motive for evangelism; it has a devastating effect on the life and ministry of the *ekklēsia* in its responsibility to aim for conversions. And it explains why all this discussion and determination about propitiation is vital today.

Alas, in our day, churches are desperate in wanting to attract people into attendance and holding them in it; this, for many, has become the be-all-and-end-all of church life. Consequently, for a preacher to start with the wrath of God, and to expand on it, would be a classic case of shooting oneself in the foot. Counter-productive doesn't come near it! God sends us to be fishers of men (Matt. 4:19), but to talk of wrath is a sure-fire way of driving away the fish.<sup>4</sup> Keep to the note of love. Emphasise the many therapeutic advantages of becoming a Christian. Get the attendees to join the process. Keep things cosily gentle. That, it seems to me, is becoming the dominant thought pattern in the evangelical world, the standard way to preach the gospel to sinners.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> An evangelical church leader once chidingly told me that was what my preaching did. He wanted to coax sinners – if not coach them – into Christ. Not to put too fine a point on it, he didn't want me 'spilling the beans' before they were converted. I quote a note from my *Secret*: 'This, of course, is based on a misunderstanding of the usual way of fishing in the New Testament. Soul-fishing is not there pictured as fly- or float-fishing – but, rather, as drag-net fishing, scooping up as many as possible. I am not saying skill is not required in the use of the drag net, but the notion of outsmarting the fish with subterfuge and stealth is far removed from the illustration'.

<sup>5</sup> See my *To Confront*.

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The conclusion is inevitable: those who make the attraction of pagans into ‘church attendance’, and are devoted to an all-embracing inclusivism in church life and preaching, are bound to be more than eager to grasp any teaching which weakens the doctrine of propitiation. This means that Wright with his doctrine on propitiation is shooting into an open goal, with ‘Welcome’ chalked on the turf. And as I said in the Introduction, the ‘keeper has quit the field and is relaxing in the entertainment lounge. Adopting Wright’s views, while proving a massive boon and a gigantic boost to the modern ‘re-engineers’ of the *ekklēsia*,<sup>6</sup> will prove to be a death blow to the gospel, will be a disaster for the unconverted, and, ultimately, will take the churches even further away from the pattern of the *ekklēsia* revealed in the new covenant.

Christians awake!

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The *third* – and, ultimately, the fundamental – point concerns the integrity and wisdom of the triune God himself; in short, his name and his glory, his very existence. This is why we must never concede any ground on propitiation. As we have seen repeatedly throughout these pages, all three persons of the trinity are involved in redemption. God the Father planned it; God the Son accomplished it; and God the Spirit is applying it. And propitiation sits at the centre of that plan: propitiating his wrath was the only way God could be both ‘just and the justifier’ (Rom. 3:24-26). Did ever an ‘and’ carry such weight? God just *and* God the justifier? It would appear that God could be one or the other, but not both. And so it would have been – apart from propitiation. But, of course, without both, God would not have been the God of the Bible.

The root issue is the wrath of God. The Bible teaches that God, in his holiness, is justly angry with sin and the sinner. In order to show mercy to sinners, and forgive them, to justify them, that

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<sup>6</sup> See my *Relationship*.

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wrath must be placated, God must be appeased, his wrath must be satisfied. A mere decree to forgive would betray his holy wrath. To damn the entire world would betray his love for the elect. Propitiation deals with the fundamental ‘why’ and ‘wherefore’.

Opponents of the biblical doctrine of propitiation invent caricatures, men of straw. They do so in order to play down the biblical sense of sin, and God’s wrath towards rebels.

Let me clear away some of these caricatures. Man does not make God willing to save. Man does not appease God. Not even Christ appeased his Father. God himself took the initiative: he planned, appointed, sent and manifested Christ as the propitiation – the one by whose death he appeased his wrath towards the elect. All on the basis of love. To eliminate another caricature: propitiation does not mean that a loving Christ had to appease his Father who is a bully, full of wrath: the Son is gentle Jesus meek and mild; the Father, the angry God. Rubbish! There is such a thing as ‘the wrath of the Lamb’ – what a seeming-oxymoron! At the opening of ‘the sixth seal’, John explained:

I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks: ‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?’ (Rev. 6:12-17).

Without propitiation, there is no way of maintaining the biblical integrity of the Godhead.

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Thomas Kelly (whose hymns I normally like, and like very much) wrote: 'We sing the praise of hymn who died/Of him who died upon the cross'. The second verse reads:

*Inscribed upon the cross we see  
In shining letters: 'God is love';  
He bears our sins upon the tree,  
He brings us mercy from above.*

While I certainly do not quarrel with Kelly in that the cross does speak – and speaks loudly – about the love of God, this is not all it speaks of. In Christ on the cross we see both the wrath and the love of God.

Much better than Kelly, Isaac Watts, having spoken of God's glory in creation, came to this:

*But when we view your strange design  
To save rebellious worms,  
Where vengeance and compassion join  
In their divinest forms...  
Here the whole Deity is known,  
Nor dares a creature guess  
Which of the glories brightest shone,  
The justice or the grace.*

Another:

*Nature with open volume stands,  
To spread her Maker's praise abroad;  
And every labour of his hands  
Shows something worthy of a God.*

*But in the grace that rescued man  
His brightest form of glory shines;  
Here, on the cross, 'tis fairest drawn,  
In precious blood and crimson lines.*

*Here his whole name appears complete;  
Nor wit can guess, nor reason prove,  
Which of the letters best is writ,  
The power, the wisdom, or the love.*

*Here I behold his inmost heart,  
Where grace and vengeance strangely join,*



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*Piercing his Son with sharpest smart,  
To make the purchased pleasures mine.*

*Oh! the sweet wonders of that cross,  
Where God the Saviour loved and died!  
Her noblest life my spirit draws  
From his dear wounds and bleeding side.*

*I would forever speak his name,  
In sounds to mortal ears unknown;  
With angels join to praise the Lamb,  
And worship at his Father's throne.*

And the psalmist spoke of the union of the attributes of God:

Surely his salvation is near to those who fear him, that glory may dwell in our land. Steadfast love and faithfulness meet; righteousness and peace kiss each other. Faithfulness springs up from the ground, and righteousness looks down from the sky (Ps. 85:9-11).

Barnes commented:

It is only in the divine government that this has been accomplished, where a true and perfect regard has been paid to truth in the threatening, and to mercy toward the guilty by an atonement. It is true, indeed, that this passage does not refer to the atonement made by the Redeemer, but there can scarcely be found a better illustration of that work than occurs in the language used here.

Gill, likewise:

Righteousness and peace have kissed each other; as friends... 'Righteousness' may intend the essential justice of God, which will not admit of the pardon and justification of a sinner without a satisfaction; wherefore Christ was set forth to be the propitiation for sin, to declare and manifest the righteousness of God, his strict justice; that he might be just, and appear to be so, when he is the justifier of him that believes in Jesus; and Christ's blood being shed, and his sacrifice offered up, he is just and faithful to forgive sin, and cleanse from all unrighteousness (Ex. 34:6; Rom. 3:25), and thus the law being magnified, and made honourable by the obedience and sufferings of Christ, an everlasting righteousness being brought in, and justice entirely satisfied, there is 'peace' on earth, and

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good will to men: peace with God is made by Christ the peacemaker, and so the glory of divine justice is secured and peace with God for men obtained, in a way consistent with it (Luke 2:14), and Christ's righteousness being imputed and applied to men, and received by faith, produces a conscious peace,<sup>7</sup> an inward peace of mind, which passes all understanding (Rom. 5:1).

A footnote in Calvin's *Commentary*:

Mercy and truth are very generally applied by commentators to God; and the passage is understood as the celebration of the harmony of the divine attributes in the salvation of man. The description is one of great beauty and sublimity... Adam Clarke: 'This is a remarkable text, and much has been said on it: but there is a beauty in it, which I think has not been noticed. Mercy and peace are on one side: truth and righteousness on the other. Truth requires righteousness; mercy calls for peace. They meet together on the way; one going to make inquisition for sin, the other to plead for reconciliation. Having met, their differences on certain considerations (not here particularly mentioned) are adjusted: their mutual claims are blended together in one common interest; on which peace and righteousness immediately embrace. Thus righteousness is given to truth; and peace is given to mercy. Now, where did these meet? – In Christ Jesus. When were they reconciled? – When he poured out his life on Calvary'.

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In short, for all three reasons – the gospel, the *ekklēsia*, and the integrity of the Godhead – we must keep a firm grip on the doctrine of propitiation.

Christians awake!

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Going back to the first paragraph of my Introduction, I ask the question I started with: Reader, have I being concerning myself with a peanut, and inviting you to do the same?

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<sup>7</sup> Or a peaceful conscience?

## *A Short Hymn*

I drew my title from a part-remembered hymn. I close by tentatively offering this attempt to set in verse what I have been trying to say in the book. It can be sung (with some vocal agility) to the tune Finlandia:

*Why was he there – by God and man forsaken –  
The Son of God to shed his blood in death?  
Why was he there? Ah, yes there is an answer:  
For God in love – his awful wrath to bear –  
Sent him to die upon that cruel tree.*

*Why was he there? Praise God, there is an answer:  
To satisfy the wrath of God Most High,  
To free his people, Jesus came to die.*

*Why was he there – to die alone that he  
His blood could shed to set his people free.*