

Appendix 1: Wright Speaking for Himself

Well, this is going to be an appendix and no mistake! Wright has published so much in print and video that it would require a decent library to ‘let him speak for himself’. In any case, the internet is jam-packed with his material, so, in a sense, this appendix is superfluous. But, as I have explained, I am addressing the ‘average’, non-academe believer – one who, almost certainly, has never read or seen much of Wright’s work for him/herself, and I think it would be helpful for such a believer to get at least a taste of what Wright says on the theme of propitiation, and the doctrines clustered around it.

Let me start with what I hope have shown is the core doctrine; namely, the wrath of God. What does Wright understand by ‘the wrath of God’? Frankly, I am at a loss. I leave you, reader, to judge for yourself.

N.T.Wright on God’s wrath:

God’s wrath, properly, is an aspect of his love: it is because God loves human beings with a steady, unquenchable passion that he hated apartheid, that he hates torture and cluster bombs, that he loathes slavery, that his wrath is relentless against the rich who oppress the poor. If God was not wrathful against these and so many other distortions of our human vocation, he is not loving.¹ And it is his love, determining to deal with that

¹ There you have it. According to Wright, Christ came into the world and went to the cross to put a stop to torture and cluster bombs and other such ‘distortions’. How? Wright didn’t say. In any case, compare Wright’s view with Paul’s: ‘The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost’ (1 Tim. 1:15). As Christ said: ‘For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost’ (Luke 19:10). And do not miss the personal in Paul as compared to the global – ‘human vocation’ – in Wright.

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nasty, insidious, vicious, soul-destroying evil, that causes him to send his only, special son.²

The wrath of God is simply the shadow side of the love of God for his wonderful creation and his amazing human creatures. Like a great artist appalled at the way his paintings have been defaced by the very people who were supposed to be looking after them, God's implacable rejection of evil is the natural out-flowing of his creative love. God's anger against evil is itself the determination to put things right, to get rid of the corrupt attitudes and behaviours that have spoiled his world and his human creatures. It is because God loves the glorious world he has made and is utterly determined to put everything right that he is utterly opposed to everything that spoils or destroys that creation, especially the human creatures who were supposed to be the linchpins of his plan for how that creation would flourish. That's why, as Paul's argument progresses in this same letter [that is, Romans], he frames its central passage not with God's anger but with his powerful, rescuing love³ (Rom. 5:1-11; 8:31-39).⁴

The problem is not the general problem of human sin or indeed of the death that it incurs.⁵ The problem is that God made

² N.T.Wright: *Lent for Everyone*. Do not miss Wright's use of 'son' when speaking of Christ, the Son of God. Academe is never far below the surface.

³ Nonsense! It is not true that Paul 'frames' the central passage of Romans with love not wrath. As we have seen, he opens with Rom. 1:18 – 3:20, moves on through Rom. 4:15; 5:9; 9:13,22; 12:19; 13:4-5. I agree that God's love is in the centre of the argument (Rom. 5:1-11; 8:31-39; 9:13), but that core is surrounded by God's wrath.

⁴ N.T.Wright: *Simply Good News: Why the Gospel Is News and What Makes It Good*. A remarkable comment by Wright! The change from God's wrath to his love, from the negative to the positive, is patent. It's just what the modern evangelical wants to hear. However, starting with Rom. 1:18 – 3:20, everything in Romans is framed by God's wrath, not his love. See the previous note. The love comes in, as Wright says, in 'the rescue'. The rescue from what – if not the wrath of God? Or is that God gets us out of the mess we find ourselves in? Man-centred, not God.

⁵ Really? Then why does the Bible record begin, in detail, with the creation, followed by the fall, of Adam? Since being 'in Adam' means 'all die' (1 Cor. 15:22), how can that not be 'the problem'? In any case,

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promises not only to Abraham, but through Abraham to the world, and if the promise-bearing people fall under the Deuteronomic curse [Deut. 21:22-23], as Deuteronomy itself insists that they will, the promises cannot get out to the wider world. The means is then that Jesus, as Israel's Messiah, bears Israel's curse in order to undo the consequences of sin and 'exile' and so to break the power of the 'present evil age' once and for all.⁶ When sins are forgiven, the 'powers' are robbed of their power.⁷ Once we understand how the biblical narrative actually works, so as to see the full force of saying that 'the Messiah died for our sins in accordance with the Bible', the admittedly complex passage can be seen to be fully coherent.⁸

...the usual [that is, evangelical] reading of Romans 3:21-26 is therefore outflanked. It is a shallow reduction of what Paul is actually saying. Sin and God's dealing with sin in the death of Jesus are undoubtedly central, but these are set within the larger questions of both idolatry (and therefore of true worship) and God's commitment to rescue the world through Abraham's family, Israel. Neither Romans 1:18 – 3:20 nor Romans 4 is simply concerned with 'sin' and 'justification', as in the normal [that is, evangelical] reading. They are indeed concerned with both, but they frame both within the question of [creation?] and the question of covenant.⁹ If there are signs that Romans 3:21-26 is also about [creation?] and covenant, we should assume that this is what Paul thinks he is talking about.¹⁰

sin does not present man with a 'problem' but brings him into a 'plight'.

⁶ How?

⁷ Really? How and Why?

⁸ N.T.Wright: *Day*.

⁹ N.T.Wright: 'Paul's vision of God's action in Jesus the Messiah and by the Spirit leads him from several angles to insist that the ultimate result is new creation, in which the old is set free from corruption and decay. This is accomplished, more specifically, not just through the covenant but through the renewal of the covenant' (N.T.Wright: 'Creation and Covenant', on ntwrightpage.com). In other words, we must stop thinking of justification and all the rest in individual terms, and think about global restoration. That's is what Rom. 3:21-26 is really all about. So said Wright.

¹⁰ N.T.Wright: *Day*. 'Paul *thinks* he is talking about?'

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Reader, the verdict is yours. I apologise for my interruptions, but I simply couldn't help myself. All I ask is this: Do you think that Wright has conveyed what Scripture so patently declares about God's wrath? Has he got close to what the Bible means by 'sin' and 'sinners', and the consequences of sin?

* * *

For the rest of this appendix, I have depended on the work of an evangelical who would strongly disagree with my thesis. Having noted the two pieces by Trevin Wax, both published in 2007 by The Gospel Coalition, I now quote from them (Wax's words are in italics; Wright's, regular).

Perhaps the best understanding of Wright's view of the atonement is found in his contribution to the New Dictionary of Theology:

[Jesus] would carry out Israel's task: and, having pronounced Israel's impending judgment in the form of the wrath of Rome which would turn out to be the wrath of God, he would go ahead of her and take that judgment on himself, drinking the cup of God's wrath so that his people might not drink it. In his crucifixion, therefore, Jesus identified fully (if paradoxically) with the aspirations of his people, dying as 'the king of the Jews', the representative of the people of God, accomplishing for Israel (and hence the world) what neither the world nor Israel could accomplish for themselves.¹¹

* * *

Wright denies the traditional Reformed terminology of 'imputation of Christ's righteousness'. He does not deny the concept of imputation, however, as is evident in the way he translates the New Testament [letters]. He translates pistis Christou not as 'faith in Christ', but as a subjective genitive, 'the faithfulness of Christ'.¹² Here, Wright avoids the language

¹¹ How and Why?

¹² I do not deny that both are possible translations of the Greek, but the weight of Scripture demands the sinner's trust in Christ; he is only united to Christ by his (that is, the believer's) faith. It is the sinner's

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of imputation while maintaining its content. Jesus is faithful to the covenant in place of Israel, who was unfaithful. It is through Jesus' faithfulness (obedience) that the sin (disobedience) of Adam is undone.

Furthermore, Wright speaks of Jesus' holiness as a robe which clothes the believer. Again, he makes this affirmation within historical context, but the theological truth is there just the same:

Jesus, the innocent one, the one person who has done nothing wrong,¹³ the one innocent of the crimes of which Israel as a whole was guilty, has become identified with rebel Israel who represents God's whole rebel world; with us who are rebels, unclean, unfaithful, unloving, unholy – so that he may take that sin as it were into himself and deal with it, and give us instead his holiness as a robe,¹⁴ his purity as a gift and a power.¹⁵

Though Wright would disagree with the traditional Reformed categories of imputation and Luther's 'Great Exchange', he affirms the concept again when he writes: '[Jesus]... takes human uncleanness,¹⁶ so that other humans can take his wholeness.¹⁷ He absorbs our impurity in himself so that it becomes lost without trace, and his own purity flows into us

own faith in Christ (or lack of it) which is the issue (John 3:18-19,36; 16:8-9).

¹³ I would add 'but was perfectly righteous'.

¹⁴ I prefer scriptural language: 'He has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness' (Isa. 61:10).

¹⁵ Wright continually plays down individual salvation. But Paul exalted in the fact that 'the Son of God... loved me and gave himself for me' (Gal. 2:20). He included every other believer, of course: 'We are more than conquerors through him who loved us' (Rom. 8:37); 'The Lord Jesus Christ... gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father' (Gal. 1:3-4). I recall reading the puritan Paul Baynes, commenting on Ephesians 2: 'God pitches on persons'. See Acts 13:48; Rom. 8:26-39; Eph. 1:4-14; 2 Thess. 2:13; 2 Tim. 1:8-14. In the flood, God delivered the human race and the world animals in the ark – but it was individual men and women and individual animals that were delivered.

¹⁶ Weak; 'sin'.

¹⁷ Weak; 'righteousness'.

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instead'. Wright clearly affirms that Jesus is the innocent One, whose faithfulness substitutes for the unfaithfulness of sinful humanity.

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We look now to the question regarding the substitutionary nature of the atonement. Because Wright emphasises the Christus Victor theme,¹⁸ many have come to believe that there is no room left for the teaching of substitution. This is simply not the case. Wright's work is full of references to Jesus' dying in the sinner's stead. In his pastoral commentary on Matthew, Wright encourages us to see ourselves in Barabbas' place: 'Barabbas represents all of us. When Jesus dies, the brigand goes free, the sinners go free, we all go free'.¹⁹

He also affirms that Jesus' death is substitutionary even for the disciples. Jesus dies, so his people will not. 'His death is counted by God in place of theirs'.²⁰

Elsewhere, Wright affirms (within the first-century historical context) Jesus' substitutionary atonement. Jesus is Israel's representative, which means that 'what is true of him is true of them'.

Wright also affirms the sacrificial nature of Christ's death: '[Hebrews] offers us, above all, Jesus the final sacrifice; the one who has done for us what we could not do for ourselves, who has lived our life and died our death, and now ever lives to make intercession for us'. Wright's pastoral commentary on Hebrews backs up what Wright affirms elsewhere, that Jesus' death is the 'sin-offering' required by God.²¹

The reason Wright's views on substitutionary atonement are called into question stem from his constant grounding of this

¹⁸ Robert Kolb: 'Christus Victor is the element of the atoning work of Christ that emphasises the triumph of Christ over the evil powers of the world, through which he rescues his people and establishes a new relationship between God and the world' (Robert Kolb: 'Christus Victor' (The Gospel Coalition web page).

¹⁹ Yes, but from what – exactly – do such sinners 'go free'?

²⁰ Once again, what – exactly – does this mean?

²¹ But see the chapter 'Hebrews 2:17' for Wright's failure on the verse.

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doctrine in historical events. Wright does not express a view of substitutionary atonement that sounds like a non-historical transaction between the individual and God. For Wright, the doctrine of the atonement involves the very events that transpired to put Jesus on the cross. Furthermore, if one does not understand Jesus as the climax and fulfilment of Old Testament history and prophecy, one has not correctly understood the atonement. The judgment that Jesus pronounces upon Israel is precisely²² the judgment that he himself will endure at the cross. Wright elaborates:

Now the judgment that had hung over Israel and Jerusalem, the judgment Jesus had spoken of so often, was to be meted out; and Jesus would deliver his people²³ by taking its force upon himself. His own death would enable his people to escape.²⁴ In the strange justice of God, which overrules the unjust ‘justice’ of Rome and every human system, God’s mercy reaches out where human mercy could not, not only sharing, but in this case substituting for, the sinner’s fate.

Does Wright affirm the substitutionary nature of the atonement? The answer to our second question is yes.

* * *

We now turn to our final question, this regarding the penal nature of the substitutionary atonement. Was God’s wrath poured out on Jesus on the cross? Though this may be a controversial understanding of the atonement in some liberal circles, Wright defends it staunchly as historically and theologically true.

The Old Testament prophets speak darkly about the ‘cup of YHWH’s wrath’. These passages talk of what happens when the one God, grieving over the awful wickedness of the world, steps in at last to give the violent and bloodthirsty, the arrogant

²² Really? When sinners – whether Jew or Gentile – suffer the judgment of God it will not be for propitiation. Christ suffered the wrath of God in order to propitiate the Godhead.

²³ Does Wright mean ‘Israel’, or the individual elect, Jew and Gentile?

²⁴ Escape what?

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and oppressors, the reward for their ways and deeds.²⁵ It's as though God's holy anger against such people is turned into wine: dark, sour wine which will make them drunk and helpless. They will be forced to 'drink the cup', to drain to the dregs the wrath of the God who loves and vindicates the weak and helpless. The shock of this passage... is that Jesus speaks of drinking this cup himself.

Notice how Wright maintains the 'cup of wrath' in historical context. This is the way he avoids the picture of God as a tyrant taking out his vengeance on his Son for others' mistakes. Wright sees the wrath of God in historical events. 'Jesus takes the wrath of Rome (which is... the historical embodiment of the wrath of God) upon himself...'. In fact, God has set Jesus forth as a hilasterion (propitiation).

It is because Jesus took upon himself the wrath of God in order to shield his people that he uttered his cry of God-forsakenness on the cross. In that moment in which Jesus was most fully embodying God's love, he found himself cut off and separated from that love. Furthermore, Jesus' taking upon himself the wrath of God against sin (through the Roman crucifixion) frees us from sin and guilt:

Jesus, the innocent one, was drawing on to himself the holy wrath of God against human sin in general, so that human sinners like you and me can find, as we look at the cross, that the load of sin and guilt we have been carrying is taken away from us. Jesus takes it on himself, and somehow absorbs it,²⁶ so that when we look back there is nothing there. Our sins have been dealt with, and we need never carry their burden again.²⁷

* * *

²⁵ Talk of 'the awful wickedness of the world... the violent and bloodthirsty, the arrogant and oppressors', yes – man to man. But what about the individual, personal responsibility for sin *as it really is* – rebellion against God and an offence to him?

²⁶ Christ 'somehow absorbs' sin?

²⁷ How? By propitiation? Not according to Wright! Wright sees 'human sin in general' in terms of man-to-man, but what about sin as it really is: rebellion against God?

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Again and again, Wright affirms the penal substitutionary view of the atonement...:

On the cross Jesus took on himself that separation from God which all other men know.²⁸ He did not deserve it; he had done nothing to warrant being cut off from God; but as he identified himself totally with sinful humanity, the punishment which that sinful humanity deserved was laid fairly and squarely on his shoulders... That is why he shrank, in Gethsemane, from drinking the ‘cup’ offered to him. He knew it to be the cup of God’s wrath. On the cross, Jesus drank that cup to the dregs, so that his sinful people might not drink it. He drank it to the dregs. He finished it, finished the bitter cup both physically and spiritually... Here is the bill, and on it the word ‘finished’ – ‘paid in full’. The debt is paid. The punishment has been taken. Salvation is accomplished.²⁹

One can clearly see an affirmation of the penal substitutionary atonement throughout the theology of N.T.Wright. Though Wright does not affirm this doctrine within the standard Reformed categories,³⁰ the concept of Jesus the Righteous One dying in the place of the sinner and thus taking upon himself the wrath of God is clearly espoused.³¹

* * *

There you have it. Wright himself, and Wax’s verdict. Reader, the ball is now in your court.

* * *

Later that same year (2007), Wax interviewed Wright (Wax is in italics; Wright, regular).³²

Could you give us a brief definition of ‘the gospel’?

²⁸ All men – being in Adam – are separated from God (Isa. 59:2), yes, but do they *know* it?

²⁹ By propitiation? Not according to Wright! My point throughout.

³⁰ Is that all?

³¹ Is it?

³² There is an exception in this section – where it was imperative that I break in and respond in the body of the text.

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I could try taking a Pauline angle. When Paul talks about ‘the gospel’ he means ‘the good news that the crucified and risen Jesus is the Messiah of Israel and therefore the Lord of the world’. Now, that’s about as brief as you can do it.

The reason that’s good news... In the Roman Empire, when a new emperor came to the throne, there’d obviously been a time of uncertainty. Somebody’s just died. Is there going to be chaos? Is society going to collapse? Are we going to have pirates ruling the seas? Are we going to have no food to eat? And the good news is, we have an emperor and his name is such and such. So, we’re going to have justice and peace and prosperity, and isn’t that great?!

Now, of course, most people in the Roman Empire knew that was rubbish because it was just another old jumped-up aristocrat who was going to do the same as the other ones had done. But that was the rhetoric.

Paul slices straight in with the Isaianic message: Good news! God is becoming King and he is doing it through Jesus! And therefore, phew! God’s justice, God’s peace, God’s world is going to be renewed.

And in the middle of that, of course, it’s good news for you and me. But that’s the derivative from, or the corollary of the good news which is a message about Jesus that has a second-order effect on me and you and us. But the gospel is not itself about *you are this sort of a person and this can happen to you*. That’s the result of the gospel rather than the gospel itself.

It’s very clear in Romans (Rom. 1:3-4). *This* is the gospel. It’s the message about Jesus Christ descended from David, designated Son of God in power, and then (Rom. 1:16-17) which says very clearly: ‘I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God *unto* salvation. That is, salvation is *the result* of the gospel, not the centre of the gospel itself.’³³

* * *

If the ‘gospel’ itself then is the declaration of Christ’s lordship, where does the doctrine of justification come into play?

The doctrine of justification comes into play because the whole plan of God is and has been right since the Fall to sort out the

³³ Do not miss Wright’s emphasis on the global, and downplay of the individual.

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mess that the world is in.³⁴ We British say ‘to put the world to rights’. I’ve discovered that that’s not the way Americans say it and people scratch their heads and say: ‘Funny... what does he mean by that?’ It means to fix the thing, to make it all better again.³⁵

And that is there because God is the Creator God, he doesn’t want to say: ‘Okay, creation was very good, but I’m scrapping it’. He wants to say: ‘Creation is so good that I’m going to rescue it’. How he does that is by establishing his covenant with Abraham.

The covenant with Abraham is designed therefore, not to create a little people off on one side, because the rest of creation is going to hell and God just wants this folk to be his friends, but to be *the means by which* the rest of the world get in on the act.³⁶ And that’s so woven into the Old Testament.

So that when we then get the New Testament writings, we find this sense that God has now done this great act to put the world to rights³⁷ and it’s the death and resurrection of Jesus that does that, which sets up a dynamic whereby we can look forward to the day when we will be fully complete (Rom. 8), when the whole creation will be renewed.

Then there is this odd thing that we are called by the gospel to be people who are renewed *in advance of* that final renewal. And there’s that dynamic which is a salvation dynamic. God’s going to do the great thing in the future, and my goodness, he’s doing it with us already in the present!

And then the justification thing comes in because within that narrative, we have also the sense that because the world is wrong and is out of joint and is sinful and all the rest of it, this is also a judicial, a law-court framework, and that’s the law-court language of justification.

So we say that the future moment when God will finally do what God will finally do, he will declare, by raising them from

³⁴ Once again, Wright puts the stress on the human, man-to-man, aspect of sin and its consequences. But the fundamental point about justification – and propitiation – is that sin is rebellion against God – and it is that that Christ came to ‘sort out’.

³⁵ Did Christ die under the wrath of God ‘to fix the thing, to make it all better again’, include the propitiation of the wrath of the Godhead against sinners and their sin?

³⁶ This is getting very close to universalism.

³⁷ Is this really what the New Testament teaches?

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the dead: ‘These people are in the right!’ That’s going to happen in the future.

And then justification by faith says: ‘That verdict too is anticipated in the present’. And when somebody believes in the gospel of Jesus Christ,³⁸ even if their moral life has been a mess, even if they’re not from the right family, they didn’t go to the right school, they have no money in their pockets... God says: ‘You are my beloved child. With you I am well pleased’. The verdict of the future is brought forward into the present on the basis of faith and faith *alone*, and faith is the result of God’s grace through the gospel of Jesus crucified and risen. Now, of course, there are so many different things which cluster around justification. The debates of the last four hundred years have swirled around. But *that* is the shape we find in Paul. Paul is the beginning of the real exposition of this. And that’s where I always go back to.³⁹

* * *

You have said in many of your books that justification is not how one becomes a Christian but a declaration that one is a Christian. What language do you use to explain how one becomes a Christian?

Let’s be clear about this because many Christians in the evangelical tradition use words like ‘conversion’, ‘regeneration’, ‘justification’, ‘born-again’, *etc.* all as more or less synonyms to mean ‘becoming a Christian from cold’. In the classic Reformed tradition, the word ‘justification’ is much more fine-tuned than that and has to do with a verdict which is pronounced, rather than with something happening to you in terms of actually being born again. So that I’m actually much

³⁸ ‘And when somebody believes in the gospel of Jesus Christ’ is not what Scripture means by believing in, trusting, Christ; it is Sandemanianism, something which is very commonly preached by evangelicals today. See my *Secret*.

³⁹ Again ‘the global’ with a feeble token nod at ‘the individual’. Incidentally, do not miss Wright’s emphasis on Paul: ‘...we find in Paul. Paul is the beginning of the real exposition of this. And that’s where I always go back to’. The tone of this note will recur, and it has an important bearing on the intervention I feel moved to make in a few pages time.

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closer to some classic Reformed writing on this than some people perhaps realise.

Let me put it like this. In Paul (and this is really a Pauline conversation, after all),⁴⁰ what happens is that the word of the gospel is announced. That is to say, Jesus Christ is proclaimed – one-on-one or in a large meeting or out on the street or whatever, and even though that message is crazy (and Paul knows it's crazy; he says it's folly to Gentiles and a scandal to Jews), some people find that it grabs them and they believe it: 'This is bizarre. I shouldn't be believing this. A dead man got raised from the dead and he's the Lord of the world. I really shouldn't believe this, but it does make sense. And it finds me and I can feel it changing me'.⁴¹ Paul's analysis of that is that this is the power of the word (he has a strong theology of the word), and another equal way of saying it for Paul is that this is the Holy Spirit working through the gospel. He says, no one can say that Jesus Christ is Lord except by the Holy Spirit.

So, the Holy Spirit is the One who *through* the Word does the work of grace which is the transformative thing, and the first sign of that new life is faith.

Now then, the point of justification is not God *making* you right.⁴² The irony is that some of my critics at this point have accused me of a sort of semi-Pelagianism. But that's precisely what I think I'm *not* doing. The verdict of justification is God saying over faith: 'This really is my beloved child'.

Now part of the difficulty we face is that because different Christian traditions have used the word 'justification' to denote either different stages within that process or sometimes the whole process itself. (Hans Kung's⁴³ book on justification is really a book on how to be a Christian from start to finish. And so for him, justification means the entire process: from being a total pagan to being a finally saved Christian, and that's really not helpful in Pauline terms, but there's been a lot of slippage). So when people say: 'He says that justification is *this*, but I've

⁴⁰ See the previous note about my intervention.

⁴¹ Sandemanianism again. 'Believing the gospel', believing facts, rather than 'trusting Christ as my redeemer, receiving him as my propitiation'. See my *Secret*.

⁴² See my *Four* for my response.

⁴³ Hans Kung (1928-2021), a Swiss, a Roman Catholic priest, theologian and writer who rejected papal infallibility. He published on dialogue between Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism.

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always thought it was *that* it's probably because we're denoting a different point in the process.

My only agenda here is to be as close as I can possibly get to what Paul actually says.⁴⁴ And I really don't care too much what the different later Christian traditions say. My aim is to be faithful to Scripture here.

* * *

You have been a firm defender of the doctrine of penal substitution as one of the important atonement motifs found in Scripture, especially in your comments regarding Isaiah 53. Yet, it is puzzling to many conservative evangelicals that you recommend a book by Steve Chalke that seems to deny penal substitution, while calling a book that upholds the doctrine, the book Pierced for Our Transgressions 'disturbingly unbiblical'.⁴⁵

I suppose the question I'm slowly getting around to is: how do you define the doctrine of penal substitution and what is its significance for the church today?

Let me comment on those two books because I was surprised by the reaction against Steve Chalke. See, there's a little bit of history here. When Steve was working on that book, he had seized upon my book *Jesus and the Victory of God* and absolutely ate it up and came and talked to me about it. That was the first time I met him. And it was very exciting to meet, to have somebody with all that energy for youth work and young people's evangelism, *etc.* taking seriously a book which is basically about the kingdom of God and the Gospels and all of that.

Then, when I saw his book, and he asked me if I would write a blurb for it, I read it through quite quickly. And page after page after page, he's just got it. He's going in the right direction.

⁴⁴ See the previous note about my intervention.

⁴⁵ Wright corrected Wax's 'unbiblical' to 'sub-biblical'. But The Gospel Coalition web page added an Editor's Note: 'Though Wright sought to qualify my quotation of him in this interview, despite his protest, in *The Cross and the Caricatures*, Wright labels *Pierced for Our Transgressions* both "hopelessly sub-biblical" and "disturbingly unbiblical"'.⁴⁵

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And the one-liner which he drops in was not, in its origin, a way of saying: ‘I don’t believe in penal substitution’. It was a way of ruling out of court to one side a distortion of penal substitution which he has heard, which I have heard – the idea of God simply wanting to punish somebody and not caring too much who it was. ‘Oh, well, here’s an innocent man. Let’s punish him and that will be alright, won’t it?’. Sadly, there are many Christians who preach the doctrine like that.⁴⁶

Steve knows, from his experience on the street, that that just doesn’t do it. People just don’t get it.⁴⁷ And if a rather careful conservative evangelical comes back and says: ‘Well that’s because the gospel is always offensive...’ Is it the gospel that’s being offensive? Or is it your distortion of it that’s being offensive? And that’s the question.⁴⁸

I know... I then phoned Steve Chalke and asked last February or March sometime and I said: ‘Steve, we haven’t talked about this since all the furore, but I’ve just re-read your book and I came to that one line, and it seems to me that you were saying: “I’m not going with that distortion” but that you weren’t ruling out the kind of thing that I say in chapter 12 of *Jesus and the Victory of God*, which is a massive demonstration that Jesus had the whole agenda of Isaiah 53 present to his conscious vocational mind’.

And Steve said: ‘Of course, I’m agreeing with that. I was just ruling out the distortion’. The trouble is, Steve is not a theologian.⁴⁹ So, when he gets interviewed, he is an engaging,

⁴⁶ Wright may be right, but I have never met one.

⁴⁷ Wright seems surprised. Even when – especially when – it is the truth which is preached, the natural man will not, cannot, ‘get it’: ‘The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing... In the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, [but] it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe... We preach Christ crucified... [even though it is] folly to Gentiles’ (1 Cor. 1:18,21,23). ‘The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned’ (1 Cor. 2:14). See John 3:3-8.

⁴⁸ Speaking as ‘a rather careful conservative evangelical’, I refer to my *To Confront*.

⁴⁹ The world of the theologian – academe in other words. To put it bluntly, the implication is the *hoi polloi* need not bother their heads about such things. All they need to do is accept what they are told.

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extrovert, outgoing guy. So he sends sentences winging off into the unknown this way and that, and people then collect them and say: ‘There you are! He’s denied it again, *etc.*’. So I’ve had people come back to me and say: ‘This really won’t do’.

Actually, this is displacement activity. The people going after Steve Chalke... the real problem, I really want to stress this, is that we’re looking at an evangelicalism that has forgotten what the Gospels are there for.

And that’s why I want to say *Pierced for Our Transgressions* is sub-biblical. I preached at Oak Hill as Mike Ovey’s guest just a few weeks ago. He’s a good guy. I get along well with him. He’s heard that criticism and I think he’s wanting to do business with it.

Fancy writing a book, a big fat book, on what the atonement is really about and giving no space at all to Jesus’ own understanding of his own death. But that’s because the whole evangelical tradition has been Paul-based rather than Gospels-based, and it’s been a shrunken Paul-base which has insisted on reading some bits of Paul, privileging them, and simply missing out what the Gospels are really all about.



Here is the exception and the intervention I spoke about.

I break in at this juncture because Wright is making what seems like a very weighty point, a devastating point, but he is, in fact, guilty of committing a dreadful *faux pas* (or worse) by not listening to Christ’s teaching. Why do evangelicals take the post-Pentecost Scriptures so seriously? Should we not be Gospels-based rather than post-Pentecost-Scriptures-based? So Wright claims.

There is something else. Before I respond, I take up the notes I have made regarding this intervention. My opening note in this matter went like this: ‘Incidentally, do not miss Wright’s emphasis on Paul: “...we find in Paul. Paul is the beginning of the real exposition of this. And that’s where I always go back

Indeed, they should not – they cannot – be expected to understand. Leave it to the experts. Nothing less than the dogma of the Roman curia, thinly disguised.

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to”’. It seems to me that Wright does the very thing he criticises in evangelicals!

But to answer his call to give more weight to the Gospels, I quote from my *Upper*:

Taking Christ at his word to his disciples in the upper room: ‘...when the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you’ (John 16:12-15)... and being convinced that the post-Pentecost Scriptures are the lasting fulfilment of that promise...⁵⁰

And:

Even in the upper room, Christ took pains to assure them [that is, the disciples] that all would become clear. And he told [the disciples] how they would come to understand; and he told them why. After his ascension, he would pour out his Holy Spirit, and with the bestowal of the Spirit they would come fully to understand and appreciate what he had been saying and doing; they would be given the Spirit who would enable them to grasp the full import of it all... (John 14:25-27; 15:26-27; 16:4,12-15). In short, in accordance with Christ’s own promise, the Holy Spirit would guide the disciples into, and enable them to set out, the full implications of Christ’s life, death and resurrection, and his teaching – all in fulfilment of the prophets. It would have been far too much for them to take in at that time, as Christ had told them (John 16:12), but after Pentecost, all would be changed. And, by the Spirit, the inspired writers would fully flesh out and finally delineate the one-and-only gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, the fullness of the riches of the new covenant.⁵¹

That is why Wright is wrong. Christ himself told us that the full revelation of the gospel is to be found in the post-Pentecost Scriptures. Wright, by drawing principally from the Gospels for

⁵⁰ My *Upper* p9.

⁵¹ My *Upper* pp51-52.

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his understanding of the atonement is mistaken. And his advice to others to copy him is disastrous.⁵²



Having answered Wright's point, now to let him continue:

Part of that, I'm afraid, is a political thing... that if we take the Gospels seriously, we will be forced to take the kingdom agenda seriously. And people say: 'Oh, that's all that old social-gospel stuff'. No, you can't get off the hook that easily! This is about answering the Lord's Prayer, God's Kingdom coming on earth as in heaven, and until we take the Gospels seriously, we haven't really got any right to be having this discussion. So that's what I think is at stake with the Steve Chalke book.

So I come back to it and I say, as I understand Jesus and his mindset as he goes to the cross, I believe that he was aware as a deep vocational calling from the One he called Abba Father, that he had to be the one through whom the whole agenda of Isaiah 40 – 55 (which is a kingdom agenda) would come to pass.

Isaiah 53 ('pierced for our transgressions' and so on) is the means by which Isaiah 52:7-12 is accomplished. Isaiah 52:7-12 is about the defeat of evil, the return of YHWH to Zion and the exiles being set free. And the result of Isaiah 53 is the renewal of covenant in Isaiah 54 and the renewal of creation in Isaiah 55 and the invitation to the whole world to join in.

If you expound Isaiah 53 so that it isn't about the kingdom, it isn't about covenant renewal, it isn't about the renewal of creation, then you have simply taken a little bit of Scripture to suit a scheme of your own, rather than the great scriptural scheme. Jesus didn't do that. You can see he's got the whole agenda present to his mind.

So we have to understand the doctrine of penal substitution within the scriptural framework, within which it makes sense, rather than within this very low grade thing that I've been a naughty boy, God wants to punish me, and for some reason, he

⁵² John's Gospel is more akin to the letters and treatises from Romans on.

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punishes someone else, so phew! I'm alright.⁵³ OK. For a five-year-old, that's fine. That'll maybe do it. But, actually let's grow up! We're not talking about five-year-olds here; we're talking about grown men and women who ought to know better, to be honest.

Part of the difficulty then is political. Part of it is a failure to read the Gospels as what they are. Part of it is actually a failure to see that in Paul as well, Paul mentions the cross a thousand times, and each time he mentions it, he's coming through from a different angle because he's making a subtly different point. They all do tie up, but if you screen out all that stuff about *Christus Victor* and about representation, and so on, then you not only lose those elements, you lose key elements of penal substitution itself. I could go on about this all day.

* * *

So how would you share all of this with an individual in the evangelistic task, if an individual were to come up and to say: 'What must I do to be saved?' 'How can I become a part of this...'

I would want to know a lot about where they were coming from. I mean, if I had two minutes, I would tell very, very simply the story of Jesus.

I once on a train was approached by a Japanese student who saw me reading a book about Jesus. He didn't know much English. He said: 'Can you tell me about Jesus?' I was about to get off the train. I simply told him (he didn't know the story) that there was this man who was a Jew. He believed that God's purposes to rescue the whole world were coming to fulfilment. He died to take the weight of evil upon himself. He rose to launch God's project and to invite the whole world to join in with it and find it for themselves. How long did that take me? 35 seconds? That's more or less it.

However, when I think of the real people that I meet, I think both of bright university students in Durham University, and of unemployed mineworkers in the pit village five miles down the road. Total, total disjunct. And I really believe...

⁵³ In my experience, this is a travesty, a caricature. Wright, it seems to me, is over-stating his case. It smacks of desperation.

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Look at what Paul does in Acts. No two speeches are alike. OK, he will have repeated himself here and there, but he says it the way these people need to hear it.

And though the story is very simple... If someone were to say: ‘What must I do to be saved?’ I’d be inclined to say: ‘Are we talking about rescuing your mortgage or your marriage or your eternal salvation or what?’ because people have layer upon layer upon layer of things to be saved *from*. We can deal with all of them, but we have to find where the shoe pinches for them and then that’s the point of entry into an authentic grounding of the gospel in their reality.⁵⁴

* * *

Reader, I have allowed Wright to speak for himself, clearly supported by an evangelical. Once again, I have found it difficult not to chip in at times, but I think it is fair to say the I have given Wright a fair crack of the whip. The verdict – your verdict, reader – is now yours.

⁵⁴ Paul was asked the very same question as Wax put to Wright on how to be saved. You have read Wright’s answer. I invite you to compare Wright’s statement with the response of Paul and Silas: ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’ And they said: ‘Believe in [that is, trust] the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved’ (Acts 16:30-31). In the scriptural record, I see no support for Wright’s argument – did Paul bother to find out where the jailor’s boots were too tight?