

# For All the Saints?

## Remembering the Christian Departed

## 2. Rethinking the Tradition

Sunday, April 10, 2005  
10 to 10:50 am, in the Parlor.  
*Everyone is welcome!*

*St. John in the Wilderness*

**Glorious Lord of Life,  
we praise you,  
that by the mighty resurrection of your Son,  
you have delivered us from sin and death  
and made your whole creation new;  
grant that we who celebrate with joy  
Christ's rising from the dead,  
may be raised from the death of sin  
to the life of righteousness;  
through him who lives and reigns  
with you and the Holy Spirit,  
one God now and for ever.**

A New Zealand Prayer Book, p. 592

# FOR ALL THE SAINTS?

Remembering the Christian Departed



N. T. Wright



## **For All the Saints? Remembering the Christian Departed.**

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Chapter 2. “Rethinking  
the Tradition”



- N. T. Wright taught New Testament studies at Oxford, Cambridge, and McGill Universities for 20 years.
- Recently Canon Theologian of Westminster Abbey.
- Currently Bishop of Durham, England.
- Has written numerous academic and popular works, notably the three volumes (and still unfinished) series “Christian Origins and the Question of God.”

# **Rethinking the Tradition: Introduction**

# Introduction

## Questions

- What has happened to those whom we have loved, who are now dead? Where are they *now*?
- What will happen to us personally when each of us dies? What is it that we should look forward to? What is our ultimate hope as Christians?

# Introduction

## Questions

- Such questions can arise:
  - out of the wellsprings of human grief and love for another.
  - from our human need for solace and hope.
  - amid personal despair that can be assuaged only by knowing the purpose and goal of life's journey.
- They are not idle or selfish questions.

# Introduction

## Review

- Last week we reviewed the traditional ideas in the Western Church about what happens after death.
  - Much of our liturgy, hymns, and popular thinking assume these traditional ideas.
- In tradition formalized in medieval times, at death:
  - the “souls” of those who have lived extraordinarily holy lives go directly to heaven. They live within the bliss of the “beatific vision” of the glory of God.
    - We celebrate them on **All Saints Day** on November 1
    - We may pray *to* them to as our “friend in heaven” to “put in a word for us” to God.

# Introduction

## Review

- In tradition formalized in medieval times, at death:
  - the “souls” of those who are relatively good but still sinful are akin to country bumpkins approaching the king’s castle. They wear shabby clothes and muddied boots and *want* to get cleaned up before they enter heaven, the court of the Kingdom of God.
    - The place where they get “cleaned-up” and “purged” is called **Purgatory**
    - We honor these “souls” on **All Souls Day**, November 2
    - We pray *for* them, as they are still waiting to enter heaven.

# Introduction

## Review

- In tradition formalized in medieval times, at death:
  - The souls of those who have been evil go directly to hell.
    - A place of eternal torment, and from which there is no return.
- In this medieval tradition, our goal is to “**go to heaven**” when we die.
- The tradition also acknowledges that, at the end of time
  - there will be a general judgment
  - all souls will be re-united with their resurrected bodies –but if this is mentioned at all, it is in the manner of a footnote.

# Introduction

## Our Goal This Week

- To review and discuss N. T. Wright's views on:
  - the problems with the tradition.
  - what we can say on the basis of Scripture about what happens after death.

# Our Ultimate Destiny

# Our Ultimate Destiny

## Going to Heaven?

- In the New Testament, “going to heaven” when we die is *not* our ultimate destiny.
- Our destiny is to be “bodily raised into the transformed, glorious likeness of Jesus Christ” (p. 21) and live in a new or transformed Creation, the “New Jerusalem,” where God will reign.
- “Going to heaven” is just the *first* of two stages – and the far less important stage – that we go through after death.

# Our Ultimate Destiny

## Bodily Resurrection

- The final stage and the ultimate destiny, **bodily resurrection**, is still *in the future* for everyone, living and dead:
  - ... for as we all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. But each in his own order; Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. (1 Corinthians 15:22-23, NRSV)

# Our Ultimate Destiny

## Bodily Resurrection

- But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself. (Philippians 3:20-21 NRSV)

# Our Ultimate Destiny

## Bodily Resurrection

- This is the official, orthodox theology of all mainstream Christianity: Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant:
  - In the Nicene Creed we say: “We look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.”
  - We do *not* say: “We look forward to going to heaven.”

**No Different  
Categories**

# No Different Categories

## The Intermediate State

- The ultimate destiny of all Christians is **bodily resurrection**, which lies in future.
- Those who have died are therefore still in an “intermediate state.” (which we may call “heaven” if we like)

# No Different Categories

## The Intermediate State

- Wright argues that:

**“there is no reason in the foundational documents of Christianity to suppose that there are category distinctions between Christians in this intermediate state. All are in the same condition; and all are ‘saints’.” (p. 21)**

# No Different Categories

## Argument for No Categories

- In the New Testament, *all* Christians are referred to as “*saints*.”
- For example, Paul addresses the muddled and sinful Colossians as heirs to same promises as himself:
  - [Joyfully give] **thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.** (Colossians 1:11-14 NRSV)

# No Different Categories

## Argument for No Categories

- In other words, by virtue of our baptism and confession of Jesus as risen Lord, all Christians:
  - without distinction,
  - regardless of how far along they have traveled in their journey toward holiness,
  - whether they are Paul or any of the Colossians he is writing to,
- have:
  - the **“inheritance of the saints.”**
  - been rescued **“from the power of darkness”**
  - been **“transferred ... into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom [they] have redemption, the forgiveness of sins”**

# No Different Categories

## Argument for No Categories

- The passage in the New Testament that, more than any other, seems to make a clear distinction between the fate of different Christians is 1 Corinthians 3:10-17. Paul is speaking to the Corinthians:

**<sup>10</sup>By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds.**

**<sup>11</sup>For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. <sup>12</sup>If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, <sup>13</sup>his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. <sup>14</sup>If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. <sup>15</sup>If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.**

**<sup>16</sup>Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? <sup>17</sup>If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple. (1 Cor. 3:10-17 NIV)**

# No Different Categories

## Argument for No Categories

- As Christians, we are building for God on this earth.
  - Some of us are using good materials: gold, silver, precious stones.
  - Some of us are using bad materials: wood, hay, straw.
- Those who use the bad materials may suffer loss when their work is revealed and is consumed in the fire of judgment.
  - Yet they will still be saved, just like those who built with good materials.
  - They will still be saved, albeit not gloriously, but, with loss, and “by the skin of their teeth, with the smell of fire still on them.” (p. 26)
- However, there is still no *temporal* distinction between those who are saved gloriously and those saved “only as one escaping through the flames.”
  - All are saved, and become Saints, awaiting the Resurrection.

# No Different Categories

## Argument for No Categories

- That there are not different categories of “saints” in the intermediate state of “heaven” should not surprise us.
  - Recall the workers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16)
  - Those who worked all day got the same wages as those who worked one hour at the end of the day.
  - **“Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous? So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”** (Matt. 20:15-16 NRSV)

**No Purgatory**

# No Purgatory

## Purpose of Purgatory

- No different categories in particular means *there is no Purgatory*.
  - No Purgatory in the medieval sense of Purgatory as a place or state distinct from “heaven” where souls spend time.
- The purpose behind the idea of “Purgatory” was twofold:
  - (1) *Penal*: to provide punishment for sins that were not punished during this life.
  - (2) *Cleansing*: to cleanse or purge away our sinful attitudes and dispositions.

# No Purgatory

## 1. Punishment for Sin

- Purpose (1), punishment for sin is unnecessary, for that has already been dwelt with *on the cross of Jesus*.
- **God ... by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, ... condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirements of the law might be fulfilled in us (Romans 8:3-4 NRSV)**

# No Purgatory

## 2. Cleansing

- It is a common and worthy Christian instinct to feel that when we die, it is likely we will still be filled with sinful urges, and will have barely begun to climb up the mountain of spiritual growth to holiness.
  - So surely we will still require some kind of cleansing or purging of our sinful propensities after death.
- But bodily death, Wright suggests, finishes off the propensity to sin “at a single go.” (p. 32)

# No Purgatory

## 2. Cleansing

- Our “cleansing” from the propensity to sin occurs in two stages:
  - (A) Through baptism and the word of the gospel.
  - (B) At death.
- (A) Quotes on cleansing through baptism and the word of the Gospel:
  - Jesus: **“You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you.”** (John 15:3 NRSV)
  - Jesus: **“One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet.”** (John 13:10 NRSV)
    - The feet: the part of us that stands on the muddy ground of this earth

# No Purgatory

## 2. Cleansing

- (B) Quote on cleansing at death:
  - **For whoever has died is freed from sin.**  
(Romans 6:7 NRSV)

# No Purgatory

## The Glorious Good News

- That we:
  - Have been forgiven our sins by Jesus' death on the cross,
  - Are freed from sin at our death,
  - Will live with Christ after our death,
  - Will someday be resurrected as Christ was resurrected,

is all part of the glorious good news that Paul is writing about in Romans 6:6-11:

**If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin – because anyone who has died has been freed from sin.**

**Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. (Romans 6:6-11 NIV)**

# No Purgatory

## The Glorious Good News

- Or as John puts it:
  - **Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. (John 11:25-26 NRSV)**

# No Purgatory

## Nothing will separate us from God's Love

- The last paragraph of Romans 8 leaves little room for the idea of Purgatory:
  - Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died - more than that, who was raised to life - is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ... For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:33-39 NIV)

# No Purgatory

## Nothing will separate us from God's Love

- Wright: “And if you think that Paul might have added ‘though of course you’ll probably have to go through purgatory first,’ I think with great respect you ought to see, not a theologian, but a therapist.” (p. 34)

# No Purgatory

## The Thief on the Cross

- We should also remember the thief on the cross beside Jesus in Luke 23.43
  - That thief was surely still full of many sinful urges.
  - Yet Jesus tells him: **“Truly I tell you, *today* you will be with me in Paradise.”** (NRSV)
    - Not “in a week,” “or in a month,” or “after a short time in Purgatory,” but *today* you will be with me in Paradise.
    - Paradise = heaven, the intermediate resting place between death and the resurrection of the body and the life to come in the New Creation.

# No Purgatory

## A Projection of the Present to the Future

- Wright suggests the concept of Purgatory appeals to the imagination because it is an allegory, a projection from the present to the future.
- The sufferings of this life, not some future life, function as purgatory.
  - **“... we are passing right now through the sufferings which form the gateway to life.”**  
(p. 35)

# No Purgatory

## No Purgatory in Modern Catholicism

- Wright in effect suggests “purgatory” occurs in this life and at our death.
- Alternative 20<sup>th</sup> century Catholic views (both radically different from medieval concept of Purgatory as a place or state):
  - Karl Rahner: “Purgatory” is the purification effected by the realization of the soul, more closely united with the cosmos, of the effects of its sins on creation.
  - Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger: “Purgatory is the “fire” of that moment when Jesus judges us and conforms us to our new glorious resurrected body.

# The Saints in Heaven

# The Saints in Heaven

## Heaven

- After death, all Christians enter into an “intermediate state” of restful happiness, without distinction between them, that we may call “heaven.”

# The Saints in Heaven

## Sleeping in Christ?

- Paul sometimes suggests the Christian dead in this intermediate state are “sleeping in Christ”
  - 1 Corinthians 7:39, 11:30, 15:6, 15:18, 15:20, 15:51
  - 1 Thessalonians 4:13-15
- The probability is this is a strong metaphor rather than a description of unconsciousness.
  - Otherwise, why would Paul say to the Philippians, that **“my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better,”** than living in this life (Philippians 1:23 NRSV)

# The Saints in Heaven

## Sleeping in Christ?

- In addition, in Revelation, we have the picture of the martyrs under the altar of God, at rest, conscious, asking God how long before justice is to be done. (Rev. 6:9-11)

# The Saints in Heaven

## The Communion of Saints

- Because we on earth and those in heaven are both in Christ, we all share in the **Communion of Saints**.

# The Saints in Heaven

## Praying *with* the Saints

- We may pray *with* the Saints, for we are all members of the Communion of Saints, and the final consummation of God's purposes for creation remains unfulfilled.

# The Saints in Heaven

## Praying *for* the Saints

- We may pray *for* the Saints, not because they are in Purgatory waiting to go to heaven, but because they still await the resurrection of the body and the life of the world to come.
  - We can pray they be refreshed and filled with God's joy and peace.
  - We can hold them up, in our love, before God.

# The Saints in Heaven

## Praying *to* the Saints

- However, praying *to* the Saints to intercede for us with God seems to deny the clear message in the New Testament that we always have immediate access to God through the Holy Spirit.

# The Saints in Heaven

## Summary

- Instead of a three-fold medieval vision of the Church:
  - **The Church Triumphant** (The Saints in Heaven)
  - **The Church Expectant** (The Souls in Purgatory waiting to go to heaven)
  - **The Church Militant** (Those of us on Earth)
- Wright proposes a two-fold Church:
  - **The Church Triumphant and Expectant** (The Saints in Heaven awaiting the final consummation of God's purpose for creation, the Resurrection of the Dead and the life of world to come in the "New Jerusalem.")
  - **The Church Militant** (Those of us on Earth)

# Next Week

Body and Soul

Hell